

HILBERT MUSEUM

OF CALIFORNIA ART • AT CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

Seeing with Intent: Exploring the Elements of Art

A Resource Guide for Visiting The Hilbert Museum

About this Guide

This guide contains information and activities that will help you prepare for your students' visit to The Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University. This guide includes:

- **Selected works of art with information, questions, and prompts:** These examples represent the kinds of art, the type of discussion, and the activities that your students will experience in the galleries. The artworks are subject to change and updates to the guide will be done when possible.
- **Pre-visit Activities:** As you prepare for your visit, you may want to use the works and discussion questions in tandem with the activities listed in the 'Before your Visit to the Museum' section below.
- **Post-visit Activities:** After your visit, continue to develop students' learning with the activities recommended in the 'After Your Visit to the Museum' section below.
- **Related California Standards:** All Hilbert Museum tours for students address Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and other California state standards.

About the Museum

The Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University opened in 2016 and is the home of one of the world's largest collections of California narrative art.

Founded through the ongoing generosity of art patrons and philanthropists Mark and Janet Hilbert, it represents the only museum in the world committed to tracing the rich, iconic history of the Golden State from the late 19th century to the present day through works by leading California Scene artists, Hollywood studio artists, and animators.

About Hilbert Museum School Tours

Our museum tours invite students to engage in a thoughtful, open-ended exploration of art. Teachers are encouraged to begin by inviting students to spend a brief moment in quiet, focused observation of a selected painting. This pause allows students to slow down, look closely, and engage with the artwork on their own terms before discussion begins. The experience emphasizes both careful viewing and the process of meaning-making. Rather than leading students to a single “correct” interpretation, this approach encourages them to develop their own ideas through observation and discussion.

More Details

What does it really mean to see? This introductory guide invites students to move beyond a casual glance and develop the skills to truly observe and interpret works of art. Through guided conversation, close looking, and critical thinking, students explore how visual elements combine to communicate ideas and create meaning — uncovering the intentional choices artists make in every composition. By the end, students will have a new set of tools for reading the visual world around them. This guide is framed around one central question: What is the language of art, and how do you learn to read it?

Before Your Visit to the Museum

To prepare students for their tour in the galleries, you may wish to complete the following activity:

Learn the Language of Art

Just as writers rely on words to tell stories, artists use the elements of art as their vocabulary — the fundamental principles behind every creative decision. Introduce students to these core elements: line, shape, form, space, color, and texture. Split the class into six small groups and assign one element to each. Ask groups to scan the classroom and identify as many real-world examples of their element as they can find. Have each group record their observations and present their findings to the class.

After Your Visit to the Museum

Not every element carries equal weight in a work of art — artists make certain choices about which elements and principles to highlight.

After your gallery visit, choose five elements or principles that came up during your tour and write each one on a separate index card. Provide students with reproductions of three artworks, such as the featured works highlighted in this guide. Ask students to match each index card to the artwork that best reflects the dominant element or principle at work, explaining their reasoning and supporting their choices with visual evidence.



MILLARD SHEETS (1907–1989)

Symphony Under The Stars

1956

Watercolor on paper

The Hilbert Collection

Symphony Under the Stars

About the Work of Art

Millard Sheets was "a farm boy drawn to painting, then to watercolors, teaching in art school while still a student." His mother passed away when he was young, and he was raised by his grandparents, typically on farms, in his hometown of Pomona. When he was 15, his uncle entered him into an LA County fair, and he won first place. After that, he would continue to enter juried shows until he declined a scholarship to Pomona College to attend the famous Chouinard art school, where many of his classmates would go on to work for Disney. He made ends meet by helping his cousin raise rabbits while attending school, often trekking an hour each way.

Millard Sheets would go on to pioneer the watercolor movement in Southern California, as well as be the leading inspiration for future artists who were capturing California landscapes. Here, Millard Sheets uses his signature precisionist watercolor technique to capture a symphony performance. His command of sharp, distinct lines, balanced with the blended nature of watercolor, creates an atmosphere that pulls you into its subject. We can't know for sure, but one can theorize that this very event was the blockbuster concert 'Jazz at the Hollywood Bowl,' which featured Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson plus his trio, and Louis Armstrong with his own Orchestra.

Sources

- McClelland, G. (2010). *Millard Sheets- The Early Years (1926 - 1944)*. The California Regionalist Art: Information Center.
- Millier, A., Armitage, M., & Alexander, H. B. (1935). *Millard Sheets*. Dalzell Hatfield.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

Observation

- What is the first thing you notice? What draws your eye there?
- Where does your eye go next? And after that?

Element Focus: Line

- What kinds of lines do you see — straight, curved, zigzag, thick, thin?
- Do any lines seem to be moving? Where does that movement take your eye?
- If you traced the lines with your finger, what would your hand do?

Interpretation & Personal Connection

- What mood or feeling does this artwork give you? Which lines do you think create that feeling?



WILLIAM THEOPHILUS BROWN (1919–2012)

Painting #1 (Smokestacks)

1988

Acrylic on canvas

Gift of The Hilbert Collection

Painting #1 (Smokestacks)

About the Work of Art

Born in 1919 to a family of intellectuals in Moline, Illinois (his great-grandfather had been friends with both Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, while his father was an inventor and chief designer at the John Deere Company). He studied music and painting at Yale University in the late 1930s. Soon after graduating, he enlisted in the US Army a few months prior to America's entry into the war.

After the war, he studied in Paris under well-known cubist masters, and upon his return to New York, he became engrossed in the emerging school of Abstract Expressionism. However, after a few months, he abandoned this and instead moved to a more realist approach based on human presence. Brown eventually settled in California, marrying artist Paul Wonner, who was one of his fellow artists in the Bay Area figurative movement. They moved to Santa Monica before their eventual passings in 2012 and 2008, respectively.

Sources

- Jones, C. A. (1990). *Bay Area Figurative Art, 1950-1965*. University of California Press.

- Stern, J., & Hilbert, M. (2023). *Windows in Time II - The Post-War Era: California Art from the Hilbert Collection*. California Scene Press.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

Observation

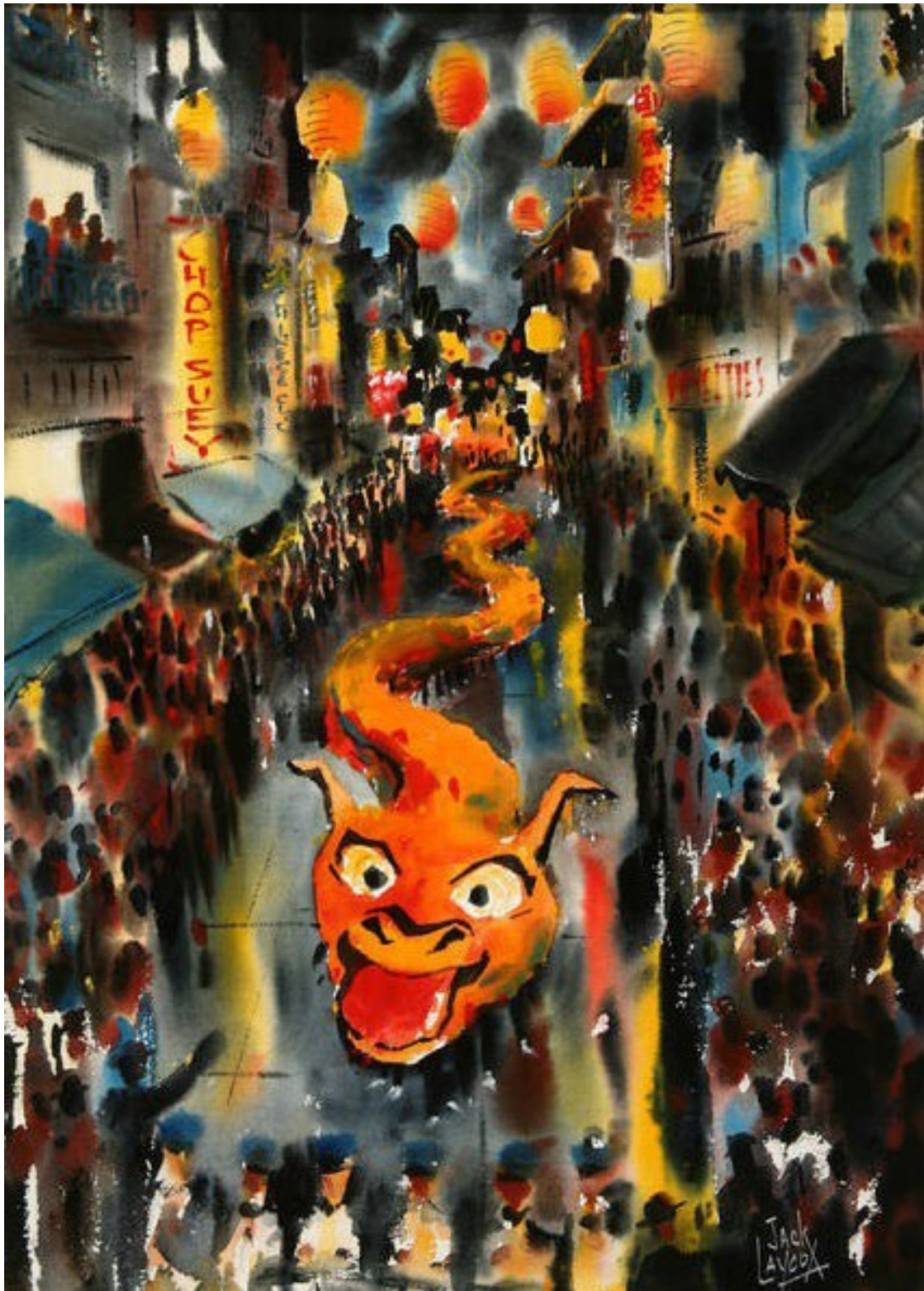
- Spend 30 seconds looking in silence. What do you notice that you didn't see at first?
- What questions does this artwork make you want to ask?

Element Focus: Shape & Form

- What shapes can you find — circles, triangles, rectangles? Are they geometric or more freeform?
- Are any shapes repeated?

Interpretation

- What is one thing you see now that you didn't notice when you first looked?



JACK LAYCOX (1921–1984)

Chinese New Year

1960

Watercolor on paper

The Hilbert Collection

Chinese New Year

About the Work of Art

Jack Laycox was born in Auburn, California. He studied art at the University of California, Berkeley. During WW2, he was a technical illustrator at the Atomic Energy Commission in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where the materials for the first atomic bombs were developed. After he returned to school at SF State College, he graduated and worked on art projects for various corporations, including designing travel posters for Delta Airlines.

Throughout his life, he participated in various art shows and won prizes, including best of show and second prize.

Few watercolor artists have ever used black paint, as it was considered antithetical when working with a transparent medium like watercolor. He defied this expectation and produced some incredible pieces. He would even flood the paper with water before painting the images, resulting in soft edges that, in less proficient hands, would have turned into a massive mess.

Sources

- McClelland, G. T., & Last, J. T.

(2002). *California Watercolors: 1850-1970 - An Illustrated History & Biographical Dictionary*. Hillcrest Press.

Stern, J., & Hilbert, M. (2015). *Windows in Time: California Scene Paintings from the Hilbert Collection*. California Scene Press.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

Observation

- What is the first thing you notice? What draws your eye there?
- What questions does this artwork make you want to ask?

Element Focus: Color

- What color do you notice first? Why do you think your eye goes there?
- Are there colors that repeat? What does that do to your experience of the artwork?
- Has the artist used any dark colors? What about any light ones? Does that change how you feel?

Interpretation

- What mood or feeling does this artwork give you? Which colors do you think create that feeling?
- If you were going to make an artwork about something important to you, which colors would you use? Why?



HENRIETTA BERK (1919–1990)

Picnic

C. 1962–64

Oil on canvas

The Hilbert Collection

Picnic

About the Work of Art

Berk was a typical housewife of the 1950s until she wasn't. Commonly nicknamed "Hank," she enrolled in the California College of Arts and Crafts part-time while raising two kids and supporting her husband. She noted that there were many barriers to women entering the world of art at this time; hence, she often signed her name H. Berk. She became a local star as she was attractive, fashionable, and witty. Her career only really took off in her 40s.

Bay Area figurative artist Richard Diebenkorn influenced her early style, though she did not strictly adhere to it—as all great artists develop their own unique approach. Born to immigrant parents, Henrietta 'Hank' Berk faced great adversity. After her father left her mother, she and her siblings were placed in a Jewish orphanage. She gravitated towards artistic expression as a means of relief.

When she began to paint as an adult, she enrolled in evening classes, even taking a class under Diebenkorn, and steadily gained popularity.

Not much is known about this artwork or its subjects, though it has often been theorized that the painting depicts Jackie and John F. Kennedy. The painting was started during his tenure as president and completed only a year after his assassination. Here is Berk's famous use of thick brushwork and palette-knife swatches of paint—she wanted to engage both the figurative aspect of the work and the abstract, opting for emotion over detail.

Sources

- Johnson, N., Stern, S., & Solon, D. (2020). *In Living Color: The Art and Life of Henrietta Berk*. Cool Titles.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

Observation

- Spend 30 seconds looking in silence. What do you notice that you didn't see at first?
- Where does your eye go next? And after that?

Element Focus: Texture

- If you could touch this artwork, what do you think it would feel like?
- How did the artist create the feeling of texture — through marks, patterns, brushstrokes, paint thickness?

Interpretation

- What is one thing you see now that you didn't notice when you first looked?
- Have you ever seen or felt textures like these somewhere in your own life?



BEN ABRIL (1923–1995)

3rd St. Tunnel and Angels Flight

C. 1960

Oil on canvas

The Hilbert Museum of California Art at Chapman University

Gift of the Hilbert Collection

3rd St. Tunnel and Angels Flight

About the Work of Art

Abril was born in 1923 in Los Angeles to Ventura and Sarah Abril. He served in the air force during World War 2, whereafter he studied briefly at the Glendale School of Allied Arts. He worked night shifts at a post office to paint during the day. He also studied architectural rendering at Chouinard Art Institute, where many of Southern California's greatest artists received their formal education. Abril illustrated children's books, specifically those about railroads, a common theme that would recur in his choice of subject matter.

One of his works, capturing the San Fernando Mission, is currently housed in the Vatican.

Abril was known for spending a long time at each site, taking upwards of 400 photos a week across various sites. He often wanted to feel a connection to his subject before he even started painting, looking at something long enough so that he felt he would become the very thing he was attempting to capture.

Any Angeleno will instantly recognize this iconic cultural landmark, billed as the world's shortest railway. Angel's Flight was built in 1901 to connect the Bunker Hill neighborhood with Downtown Los Angeles. It was initially called the 'Los Angeles Incline Railway' before receiving its official name. When it first opened, you could take a ride for about a penny. Its original location operated for 68 years before closing due to the redevelopment of Bunker Hill. It was relocated half a block south to California Plaza, reopening as a tourist attraction where it still resides today. It is estimated that the small cars (named Sinai and Olivet) have transported over 100 million people.

Sources

- *History of Angels Flight*. (2022). Angels Flight® Railway. www.angelsflight.org/history

- *Who's Who in American Art*. (1988). Rr Bowker LLC.

Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

Observation

- What is the first thing you notice? What draws your eye there?
- Spend 30 seconds looking in silence. What do you notice that you didn't see at first?

Element Focus: Space

- What is closest to you in this artwork? What is furthest away? How can you tell?
- Is the space crowded or open? How does that make you feel?

Interpretation

- What mood or feeling does this artwork give you? How does the space the artist created contribute to that?
- Knowing what you now know about how the artist used space — does that change what you think they were trying to say or show?

California Arts Standards for Visual Arts

Grade 3

- **VA: Cr1.1:** Elaborate on an imaginative idea.
- **VA: Cr1.2:** Apply knowledge of available resources, tools, and technologies to investigate personal ideas through the art-making process.
- **VA: Cr2.1:** Create personally satisfying artwork using a variety of artistic processes and materials.
- **VA: Cr3:** Discuss, reflect, and add details to enhance an artwork's emerging meaning.

Grade 4

- **VA: Cr1.1:** Brainstorm individual and collaborative approaches to a creative art or design problem.
- **VA: Cr1.2:** Collaboratively set goals and create artwork that is meaningful and has purpose to the makers.
- **VA: Cr2.1:** Explore and invent art-making techniques and approaches.
- **VA: Cr3:** Revise artwork in progress on the basis of insights gained through peer discussion.
- **VA: Pr6:** Compare and contrast purposes of art museums, art galleries, and other venues, as well as the types of personal experiences they provide.

Grade 5

- **VA: Cr1.2:** Identify and demonstrate diverse methods of artistic investigation to choose an approach for beginning a work of art.
- **VA: Cr2.3:** Identify, describe, and visually document places and/or objects of personal significance.
- **VA: Cr3:** Use art vocabulary to describe personal choices in artmaking and in creating artist statements.
- **VA: Pr6:** Cite evidence about how an exhibition in a museum or other venue presents ideas and provides information about a specific concept or topic.

Grade 6

- **VA: Cr1.1:** Combine concepts collaboratively to generate innovative ideas for creating art.
- **VA: Cr1.2:** Formulate an artistic investigation of personally relevant content for creating art.
- **VA: Cr2.1:** Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.
- **VA: Cr3:** Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Grades 3–6)

Reading

- **R.1:** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- **R.7:** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Speaking and Listening

- **SL.1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **SL.2:** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- **SL.4:** Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.