



INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART

VIRGINIA B. FAIRBANKS ART & NATURE PARK

OLDFIELDS – LILLY HOUSE & GARDENS

## What is VTS?

Visual Thinking Strategies, or VTS, is a sequenced curriculum of art images for grades K-5 that includes one museum field trip each year. VTS employs a special kind of facilitated discussion and extends to other activities across the curriculum, especially writing. Students practice critical thinking and logical argumentation in the discussions; over time, they develop important skills for dealing with new and complex information in many subject areas. Research at several VTS schools around the country links improved scores on standardized tests to student participation in VTS discussions.

VTS employs open-ended and rigorous questions. While looking at a new work of art, *“What’s going on in this picture?”* is the opening question. When students make interpretive comments, the facilitator asks, *“What do you see that makes you say/think that (for example, that the man might be sad)?”* This question asks that opinions be grounded in visual evidence, visible to all. Student comments are paraphrased by the facilitator, allowing everyone to hear, understand and confirm its meaning. The paraphrase also allows the teacher to model language. The facilitator draws the group’s attention to related ideas: *“So you’re raising a different idea than the one proposed by Mary. You see this figure as sad, rather than angry.”* As students explain their observations and insights, they listen to each other, change their minds and develop ideas that go beyond their original ones.

Art is by definition multi-layered and often ambiguous in meaning. There are many “right” answers – in fact, the more possibilities the group shares, the richer their understanding of the work. This kind of meaning-making activity with visual art exercises a viewer’s intellect and emotions and draws on personal experience. The thinking processes encouraged in VTS are authentic; they are the same ones that experts use when faced with complex, unfamiliar material, whether in the arts or another field. Engaging in this kind of thinking, as well as in the exchange of ideas with peers, helps students develop skills that transfer easily to other subject areas and activities. Teachers frequently report observing this transfer; it is being carefully documented in on-going research at several sites. This work promises to provide substantial argument for the continued importance of the arts in education.

VTS is the creation of Harvard-trained psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine. Housen has spent over twenty-five years studying how people approach looking at art and construct meaning from it. Her research has yielded a developmental stage model for aesthetic development which is the basis for VTS teaching strategies in both schools and museums. Her studies have also provided museums with valuable insights into the needs of their most typical visitors: non-expert, inexperienced viewers. Yenawine’s concern about the marginalization of art in our society and education system led him to look critically at the kinds of programs art museums offer to schools and teachers. He was concerned that even well-liked teacher programs did not change teachers’ abilities to introduce art into their curricula in meaningful ways. Together Housen and Yenawine have provided research and created strategies that are changing the way museums serve their general visitors and school audiences.

*For more information on VTS, visit the website of Visual Thinking Strategies at: [www.vtshome.org](http://www.vtshome.org).*