

PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS:

How to Approach Nudes in Art

While your School Tour will not focus on images containing nudity, students may see a number of images of the nude body as they walk through this exhibition. It may be helpful to talk with students before your visit about images of the nude in art and encourage them to examine their own responses to the work and to think about why an artist might choose to include a nude body in a work of art.

Mixed Reactions: From Hilarity to Discomfort

A good place to begin is in simply informing students that some of the works of art they will see when they visit the Gallery will contain images of nude bodies.

When people visit the Gallery, they have all kinds of responses to artworks showing nudes. Some people laugh, others feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. All of these responses are normal.

But why? Why is the body so humorous and/or embarrassing? Ask your students whether they fall into hysterical laughter when they are in the shower or bath. Probably not.

Part of the shock of seeing a nude figure in a museum is just that: we are accustomed to our nude bodies only in private. To see one in public is a shock. Artists know this too. In showing the nude body, artists remind us that the human body can mean many things.

Nudity can be a symbol of:

- **Privacy:** The artist observes a very private moment when the person in the artwork is alone or with someone he or she loves.
- **Innocence:** Christian religious images over the last 500 years often include images of angels figured as nude babies, and the Christ child is often depicted nude. Like all babies, these figures are innocent, unaware of their nudity.
- **Bravery:** When Michelangelo sculpted his famous statue of David, he spoke of David's nudity as a symbol of bravery. David faced a giant

without any protection on his body, relying on his faith and his skill to protect him.

- **Vulnerability:** Nudity can be a symbol of lack of defences—a person who has nothing and nowhere to hide.

What are you wearing?

Another way to approach this topic is to think about clothing instead of nudity. What do clothes tell us about a person? Clothing can send messages about:

- the time in history,
- age and culture,
- wealth and style,
- **the wearer's profession,**
- stereotypes and expectations.

Some artists and art historians suggest that the nude figure is set free from all of this "distracting" information provided by what we wear, and, when shown in the nude, the figure becomes just a human being, from any time, place or background.

Feminism's relationship with the nude body

Many feminist artists during the 1960s and '70s used the nude female body to challenge the dominant ideology. Some were reclaiming female nudity—literally—from the hands of the male-dominated art world, and questioning its symbolic value. Some wanted to make visible hidden secrets; some were challenging the unquestioned influence of the media on constructions of identity; and some simply wanted to shock viewers out of their complacent acceptance of gender stereotyping.

The reasons were many, and the results were electrifying—these artists changed what was permissible both in and outside the art world.