

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

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New Research Reveals that Children Learn to Think Critically by Learning to Look at Art

Research study at Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum reveals a strong correlation between the museum's "School Partnership Program" and improved critical thinking skills in children

Results released at a public event and press conference—"Thinking Through Art"—on Thursday, March 8, 4-6 PM

MARCH 8, 2007, BOSTON • Can learning to look at art stimulate learning and critical thinking skills in children? Can museum educators and arts education programs serve as a resource for the K-12 school community to enhance classroom learning? Can programs focusing on learning to look at art build transferable skills and enrich a lifetime of learning in children? *Absolutely!* according to a recent "Thinking Through Art" research study conducted by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

The study is part of a larger nationwide initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE)'s *Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination* grant program to examine the value of arts education in strengthening academic achievement and learning in elementary and middle school students, and to identify and assess best practices. The Gardner Museum was awarded a grant of \$750,000 in 2003 to fund a three-year study on the impact of its multi-visit museum arts education program on the development and use of critical thinking skills in urban elementary students in grades 3-5. Building on the strengths of the *School Partnerships Program*, "Thinking Through Art" studied how learning to look at art helped participating students master basic thinking skills important for success across the curriculum. The Gardner was one of 34 organizations – including just four museums – selected to participate in the DOE's first nationwide arts education and research initiative.

Results of the study will be formally released at a **"Thinking Through Art" public event and press conference** at the Gardner Museum on **Thursday, March 8th, 4:00-6:00 PM**. Museum educators and research collaborators will present findings from the ground-breaking research alongside participating teachers and administrators. The event will also premiere a 20-minute documentary film capturing *School Partnership Program* students' thought processes as they work together to understand and interpret works of art.

KIDS + ART = CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

"Thinking Through Art" research findings reveal a significant positive impact of arts education on critical thinking and learning in elementary students in grades 3-5. As part of the "Thinking Through Art" study, researchers created a definition for what critical thinking looks like in a museum setting, identifying the primary skills that students used in their discussion of artworks. When looking at and talking about works of art in the Gardner collection, *School Partnership Program* students used five of the identified critical thinking skills (observing, interpreting, associating, problem-solving, and flexible thinking) more often than non-program students. Gardner students spent twice as long as other students did in talking about each artwork, and were significantly more likely to offer evidence for their ideas.

"There is a lot of talk in the education world about preparing young people for the 21st century workplace," says Burchenal, the National Art Education Association's 2002 "Museum Art Educator of the Year." "I can't think of a better way to do that than 'thinking through art.' In talking about art with their peers, students learn to think creatively and independently and to respect the ideas of others, to provide evidence for their ideas, to remain open to multiple possibilities, and to trust their own abilities to find meaning in the unfamiliar. The Gardner's *School Partnership Program* provides students, and teachers alike, with an approach for grappling with new problems – because every work of art presents a new 'problem' to be solved." "As a museum educator, I marvel at the amazing ideas students generate as they discuss works of art," adds Burchenal. "While some people still think of a museum visit as just a day away from school, this research demonstrates that art museums may be one of the *best* places for students to learn important thinking skills."

"Art has an amazing capacity to advance learning by 'learning to look', and our study proves it" says Anne Hawley, *Norma Jean Calderwood Director* of the Gardner Museum, who shares founder Isabella Stewart Gardner's vision of

the museum as a place of ongoing enrichment and learning, and who brought in-depth, object-based learning to students through the creation of the *School Partnership Program* in 1996. “Watching these young students engaged in intense discussions and great conversations involving narratives and meanings about some of the world’s great works of art is a magical thing. This important research shows just how vital arts education is in arming kids with the skills they will need for a lifetime of learning. We also hope it will empower other museums and educators to think more seriously about arts education.”

The *School Partnership Program* at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is a multi-visit arts education program that pairs Gardner Museum educators with teachers and students in grades 3-5 at five neighboring Boston and Brookline public schools to enrich classroom learning through the arts. *School Partnership Program* schools who participated in the “Thinking Through Art” study were the Farragut School and Tobin Elementary and Middle School. Three other Boston public schools served as control schools for the study. “Relationships for inner-city children with museums – places that stimulate their minds – are invaluable,” says Farragut School Principal Rosemary Harmon, on the impact of the *School Partnership Program* on her students. “It’s part of teaching the whole child; it’s part of their learning. The partnership with the Gardner teaches children how to look carefully, how to notice details, and that makes them sharper observers and helps with their language by trying to put into words what their eyes see.”

“Thinking Through Art” was conducted using a quasi-experimental design, focusing on student interviews and analyses of student conversations captured while looking at reproductions and actual works of art in both in-classroom and in-museum contexts. Gardner educators collaborated on the study with researchers from the Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI) and consultants from Visual Understanding in Education (VUE), which has pioneered research on how thinking skills developed through art transfer to other situations and whose VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies) art discussion curriculum is a basis for the museum’s program.

Researchers also analyzed test scores from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and Stanford-9 tests; the study found no statistically significant differences between performance levels of program and non-program students on these tests. “There are important indicators of learning that are not captured by standardized tests, but are essential to building the foundation kids need for a lifetime of learning,” says Burchenal. “Standardized test scores capture students’ abilities to decode information presented to them, but do not indicate students’ use of critical thinking skills – including observation, problem solving, and flexible thinking – in the same way this study does, so we are not surprised by this lack of correlation. There is also a possibility of a delayed ‘gestation period’; studies show that it is possible for this kind of learning to take some time to show up in standardized test scores.”

Visual arts research typically traces the impact of art-making activities on student development; “Thinking Through Art” instead focuses on the value of *looking at* and *talking about* works of art. At a time when educators are concerned about the narrowing of the curriculum under the pressure of high-stakes testing, the study shows the value of art museums as a resource for the K-12 community. Dissemination of the “Thinking Through Art” findings online (www.gardnermuseum.org) and via publications and professional conferences will further contribute to a growing body of evidence on the value of visual literacy in developing skills that form the building blocks for learning.

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM • Modeled after a 15th-century Venetian palazzo surrounding an ever-changing interior courtyard garden, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum houses one of the most remarkable art collections in the world, featuring masterworks by Rembrandt, Titian, Raphael, Botticelli, Degas, Sargent, and others, personally arranged by Isabella Stewart Gardner to fire the imagination of all who visit. Contemporary and historic exhibitions, America’s oldest museum music program, lectures, special performances, an Artist-in-Residence program, and innovative school and community partnerships continue to enrich the permanent collection and provide ongoing inspiration for visitors.

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EDITORS’ NOTE: The results of this study will be released on March 8th at a public event and press conference at the Gardner Museum, from 4-6PM. Advance interviews and access are available by request. Free parking available with advance RSVP to 617/278-5107.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION AVAILABLE:

- “Thinking Through Art” complete research report;
- Executive summaries of study details and key findings;
- Formal “critical thinking skills” rubric;
- “Thinking Through Art” documentary film showcasing kids’ critical thinking skills at work;
- Bios and access to the research team, participating teachers and students, and additional experts and resources on the topic; and
- “Thinking Through Art” dedicated website at www.gardnermuseum.org/education/tta/tta.html – featuring additional details about the study; key findings by year; “Thinking Through Art” documentary clips; an online tool kit including sample lesson plans; and the complete “Thinking Through Art” research report (as of March 8th).