

LEVELED Book • Y

# THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



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Written by Elizabeth Jane Pustilnik

# THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



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## Focus Question

Why is art important? Why do we display art in museums?

# Words to Know

abstract

expressionism

canvas

cavity

conventional

facade

galleries

inaccuracies

medieval

sanctuary

sculptures

sketch

tapestries

Front/back cover: The Metropolitan Museum of Art is the largest art museum in the United States.

Title page: A view of the museum from Central Park.

Page 3: Vincent van Gogh's *Self Portrait with a Straw Hat* is one of thousands of famous works of art shown at the museum.

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## Table of Contents

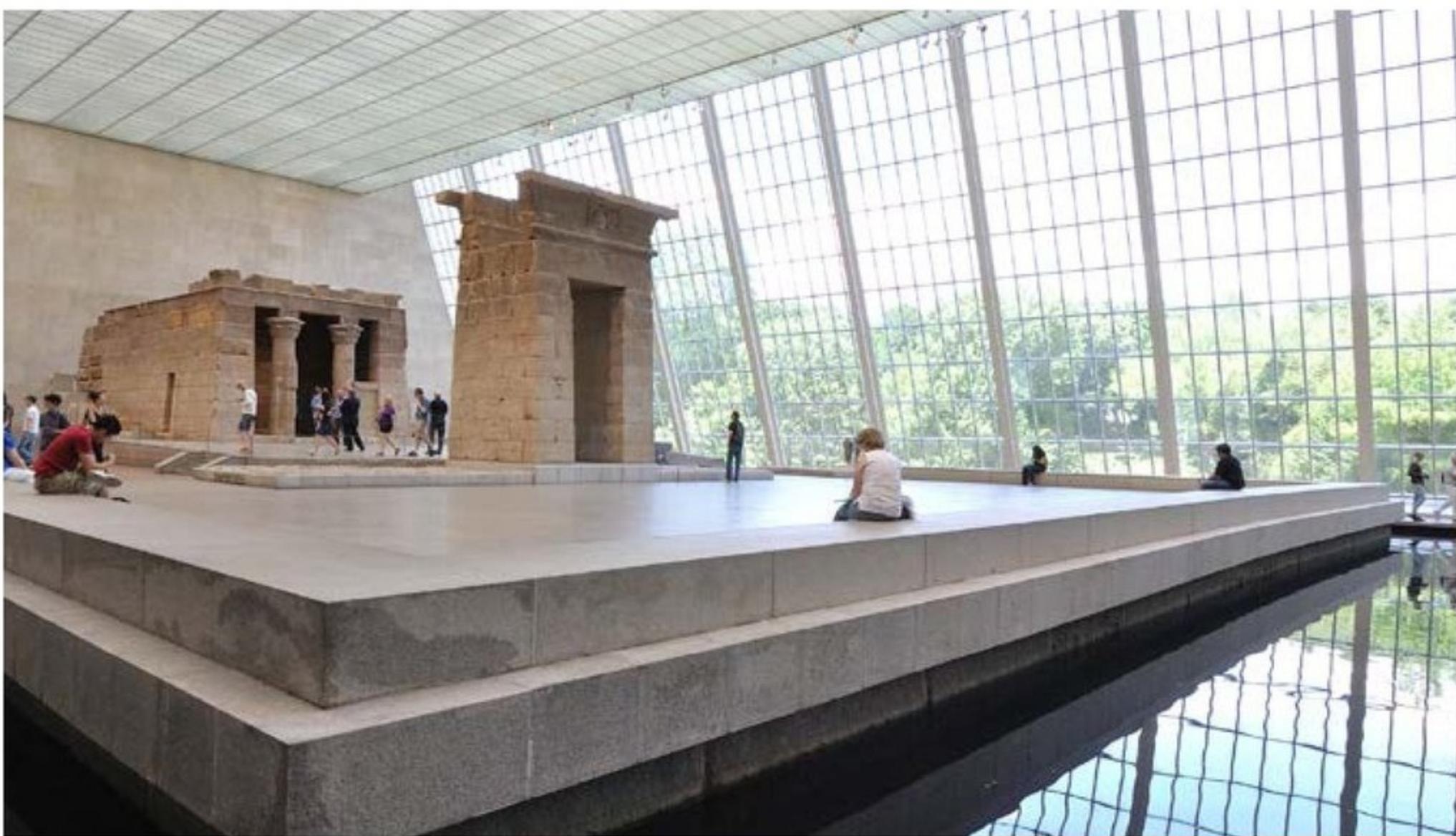
Introduction to the Museum .....	4
Egyptian Art .....	5
American Art .....	7
Arms and Armor .....	9
Greek and Roman Art .....	10
Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas ....	12
Modern and Contemporary Art .....	14
Conclusion .....	15
Glossary .....	16

## Introduction to the Museum

A huge staircase lies before me. I sigh as I look up at the entrance of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. My English teacher, Ms. Kessler, gave us an assignment to take a guided tour of the museum. We have to write an essay describing three works of art we see there. It sounds pointless, though. After all, isn't art just paintings on a wall?

I drag my feet, but I finally make it up the stairs and into the entrance, the Great Hall. People of all ages and backgrounds are everywhere around me, speaking many different languages. Groups of adults and children **sketch** versions of the fine art before them.

I join a group of people gathered around a young woman who's introducing herself as Chloe, an art history student at a nearby college who also works in the museum as a tour guide. Chloe informs us that the museum, which opened in 1870, is four city blocks long and contains more than two million objects spanning from ancient times to the present. Chloe will lead us around the entire museum on a one-hour tour and will show us just a few works of art out of the millions there. Chloe seems pretty cool. I am curious to know why she is so excited about art.



The Temple of Dendur was built around 15 BC.

## Egyptian Art

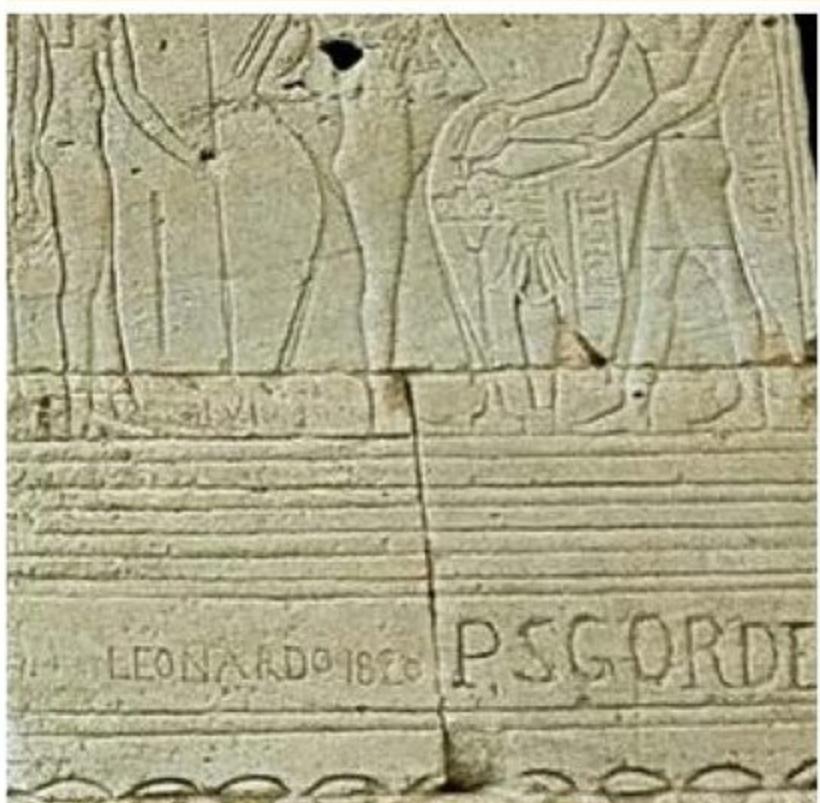
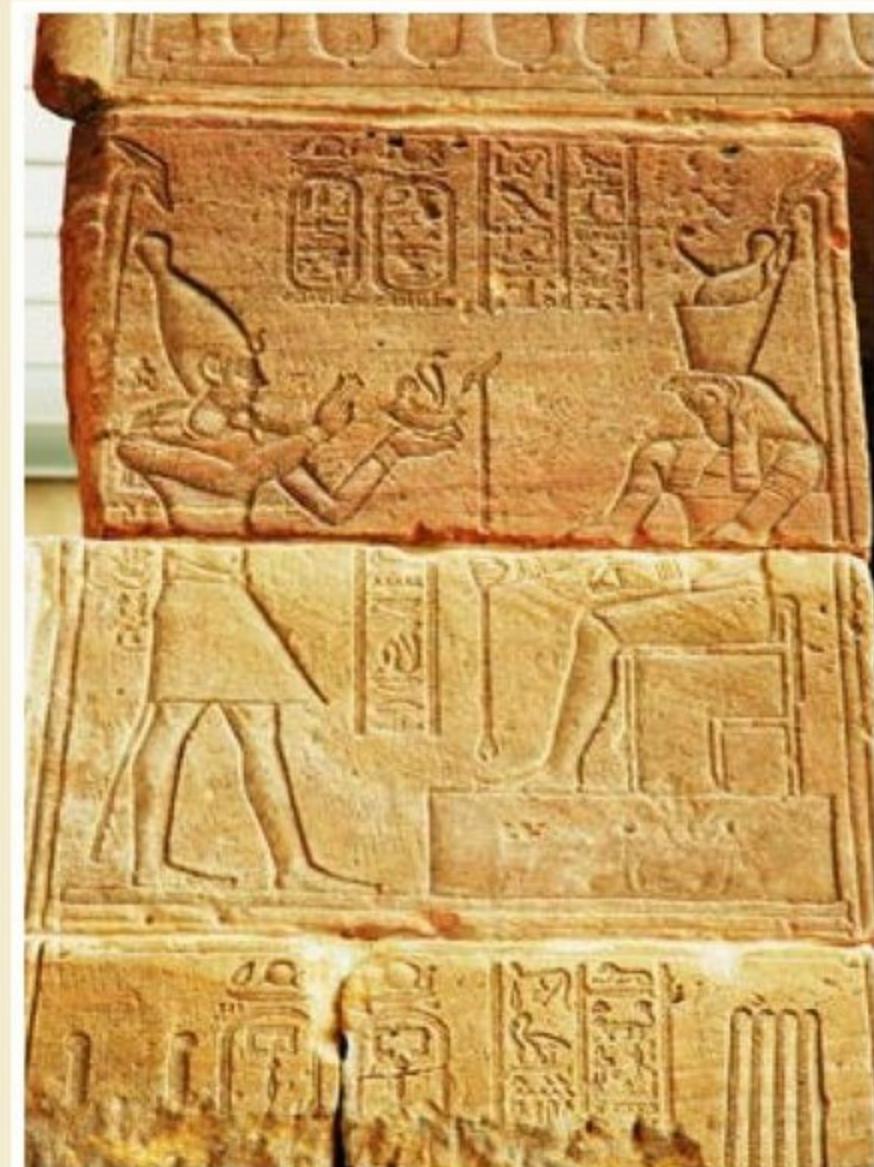
The first **galleries** we walk through are filled with Egyptian art. Chloe leads us past glass cases filled with mummies. Entering an enormous room with high ceilings, I see a real stone temple set upon a raised platform. Surrounded by a pool of water, the Temple of Dendur is lit up by a huge wall of windows.

Chloe explains that the raising of the Aswan Dam in 1933 caused massive flooding on the Nile River. The flooding sank the temple for part of each year, threatening to destroy it. In the 1960s, the rebuilding of the Aswan Dam permanently threatened the site. In an effort to preserve its history, the Temple of Dendur was taken apart. Then it was shipped to New York and put back together inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Chloe tells us that a chieftain dedicated this temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis and to his two sons, who drowned in the Nile. Chloe points out hieroglyphs—Egyptian writing in the form of pictures—on the building's **facade**. The pictures show princes, and even the pharaoh, offering gifts to gods and goddesses.

## Dendur's Hieroglyphs

Hieroglyphs, or picture writing, appear in two forms on the temple. The hieroglyphs on the exterior walls are carved in a style called *sunken relief*, in which the pictures are carved into the walls. The hieroglyphs on the interior walls are carved in a style called *raised relief*, in which the pictures actually stick out from the walls. While we rely on electricity today, in ancient times only the Sun, candles, and oil lamps provided light. Raised relief would have been easier to see and feel inside the dark room.



The temple also has examples of graffiti written in English. Travelers from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries carved their names into the temple's walls long before there was spray paint!

## American Art

Chloe guides us down a darkened hallway that leads to the wing with American art. We enter an enormous room lit up by a three-story wall of stained glass windows. To reach the galleries with American paintings and furniture, we climb a beautiful set of stairs.

Chloe tells us that even this staircase has a history. It was taken from the Chicago Stock Exchange Building, one of the first American skyscrapers, which was built in 1894. I stop to look at all the colorful windows on the walls of the large gallery.

Entering another gallery, I recognize the enormous painting before me. *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, by Emanuel Leutze, was painted in 1851. It shows George Washington and his troops crossing the icy Delaware River on Christmas night in 1776.

I remember learning about this painting in American history class. George Washington led his troops in a surprise attack on a camp of British supporters.



This stained glass window was made in the famous Tiffany Studios in 1923–1924.

The painting is huge. Chloe explains that it contains several historical **inaccuracies**. She points out one of the most obvious errors: Leutze included the American flag, which had not yet been adopted when that battle took place. Also, the uniforms and boats are wrong. If George Washington had stood up in a boat of that size, it most certainly would have capsized!

Chloe says that Emanuel Leutze made these choices so that we'd have a stronger reaction to the painting. Chloe recommends that we view all art with what she calls a "critical eye." She says we shouldn't take art at face value. Instead, we should question its content and understand its history.



*Washington Crossing the Delaware* is 12.4 x 21.5 feet (3.78 x 6.47 m).

## Arms and Armor

We walk for ages and enter a long hall where armored knights on armored horses appear to charge toward us. Chloe leads us to a glass case holding a large French suit of steel armor dating from around 1600. Yellow silk still lines the helmet, and the red leather straps look almost new.

Chloe explains that the suit was worn in battle. This suit also had a matching saddle and *chanfron*, the piece of armor worn on a horse's head. I can't imagine walking around in this outfit, let alone fighting in it. It looks so heavy—and it is. Altogether, it weighs 77 pounds (34.9 kg)!

Next, Chloe leads us into a room filled with helmets from Japan worn by samurai warriors. The helmets are all so different from one another in material, size, and shape. I am drawn to one that has a bright red flame with a tiny figurine holding a sword. Chloe explains that it's from the sixteenth century. The figurine at the top represents a Buddhist guardian of wisdom. Knowing the hidden history of these objects gives me a better understanding of their purpose.



Kings wore armor in battle and for tournaments.



The Greek and Roman art collection holds more than seventeen thousand works of art (top). A marble statue shows an Amazon warrior woman wounded in battle (right).

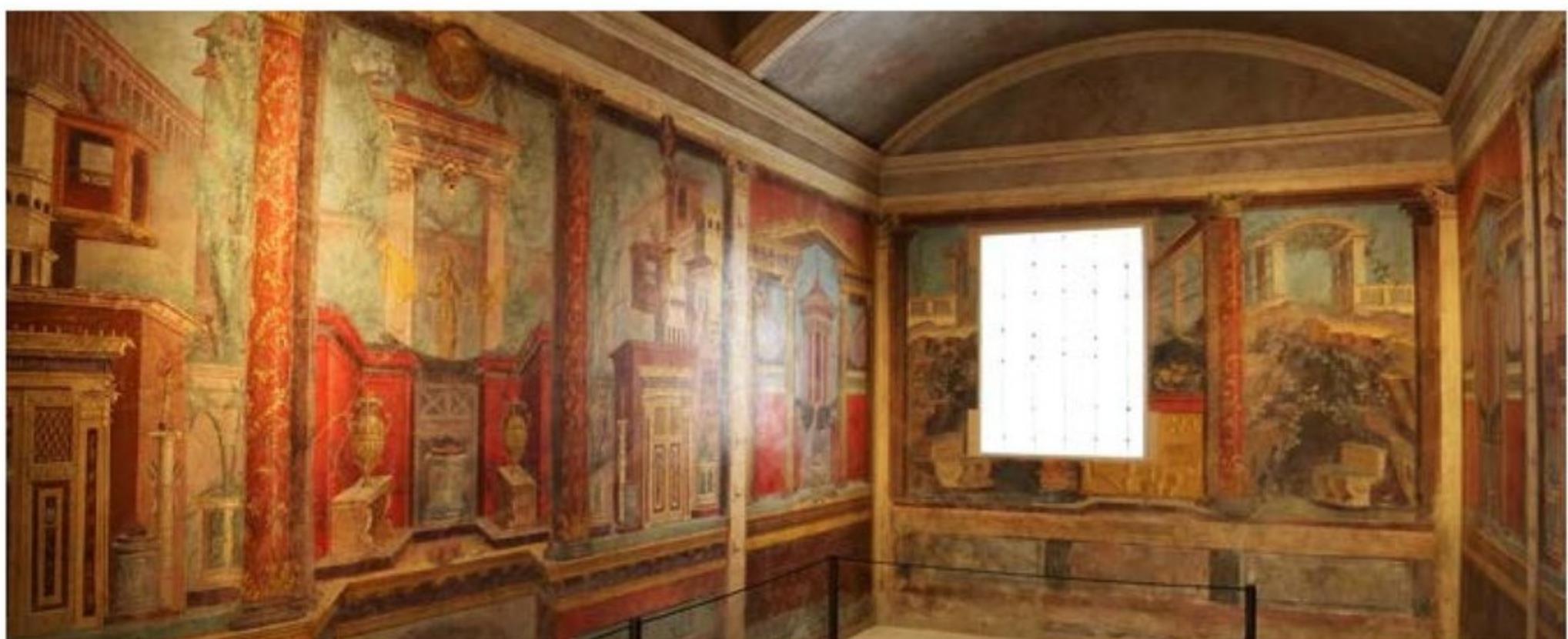
## Greek and Roman Art

Next, we walk through galleries filled with paintings and **tapestries** from the **medieval** period. We head into the Greek and Roman art galleries, down a long hallway lined with shiny marble statues. Chloe explains that most of these statues are Roman copies of Greek **sculptures**, made several hundred years later. The original sculptures were metal since bronze was plentiful back then. Many, however, were melted down to make weapons or coins, so they're rare today.

Chloe also says that marble sculptures wouldn't have been as white as these statues are today. Ancient marble statues and temples were painted in bright colors, such as reds, blues, and yellows.

Leading us into a small room called a *cubiculum* (the Latin word for “bedroom”), Chloe explains that the painted walls in the room were brought to New York from the Italian village of Boscoreale (boh-skoh-re-AH-le). She points out the wall paintings in brilliant colors that show pictures of an outdoor **sanctuary**.

Chloe then talks about the events of August 24, AD 79, when Mount Vesuvius, a famous volcano in Italy, erupted. The eruption released enormous amounts of ash that covered nearby villages, causing massive death and destruction. Romans in the middle of everyday life were buried under layers of ash. The ash also preserved entire cities and the buildings and artwork within them—such as the walls in the cubiculum—forever. Chloe tells the group that these paintings date back to 70 BC—over one hundred years before the disaster.



Artists decorated the cubiculum's walls by applying paint directly on plaster.



The art in this gallery is from Oceania, a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean.

## Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

We leave the cubiculum and enter galleries with art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Everything is different in these galleries—the light, the sounds, even the smell. Giant wooden boats hang from the ceiling. Masks of all different shapes, colors, and materials line the walls.



Chloe stops and asks us to consider our own ideas of **conventional** beauty. Many objects in this museum were created for specific purposes. Simply looking pretty was not their main purpose. Yet each is beautiful in its own way.

At 14 feet (4.3 m) tall, this slit gong is one of the largest musical instruments in the world.

In one of the African art galleries, a figure of a man stands before me. It seems large, even though it is only about 3.5 feet (1.1 m) tall. Chloe says this wooden sculpture is an African power figure.

Covered in nails, he's leaning forward with his hands on his hips in a threatening pose. His mouth is open as though he's shouting commands. Chloe explains that the big hole in his stomach was once filled with plants, feathers, snakeskins, animal teeth, and claws. These materials were believed to give the figure its power.

Once the **cavity** was filled, it was then used in ceremonies under the command of a ritual leader. The leader would ask spirits for their guidance in settling disagreements over land, marriages, and treaties. Each time an important agreement was reached, another nail was hammered into its body.



African power figures were made by special sculptors and ritual leaders.

## Modern and Contemporary Art

Next, Chloe shows us the Modern and Contemporary Art galleries, with art dating from 1900 to the present. We walk upstairs and stop in front of a large **canvas** that looks as if a kid had a paint-throwing tantrum. Chloe introduces it as a famous work by American artist Jackson Pollock, who helped establish a modern art movement called **abstract expressionism**. She explains that Pollock and other abstract expressionists rejected the usual subject matters and artistic methods. Pollock poured, splattered, and threw paint on canvases laid on the ground, not placed on an artist's stand.

Chloe tells us that pretty landscapes and realistic-looking people are not what makes good art. She says that seeing where the art comes from, what inspired it, and what effect the art has can help us decide what we think about it.



*Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)* was painted by Jackson Pollock in 1950.



The museum's steps are a popular resting spot for visitors.

## Conclusion

By now, my legs are getting pretty tired. Chloe leads us past works by famous artists, such as Vincent Van Gogh and Claude Monet, before we head down the giant staircase. Then we're back in the Great Hall, and the tour is over. I'm amazed by how much I've just seen and learned. It's as if I've traveled around the world and back in time in a one-hour tour. Up until now, I had completely misunderstood why art is so important.

As I exit the museum, the sights, sounds, and smells of New York City overwhelm my senses. I decide to take a break and sit on the great steps in front of the Met. I want to jot down some ideas for my writing assignment while they're still fresh in my mind. Now comes the real challenge. How will I choose which pieces of art to write about when they were all so amazing? One thing's for sure. I'll come back, but next time for longer—and for *me*.

## Glossary

<b>abstract expressionism</b> (n.)	a style of painting that uses nontraditional means, such as shapes and patterns instead of people or things, to express emotion or attitude (p. 14)
<b>canvas</b> (n.)	a piece of heavy cloth stretched across a frame and used as a surface for painting (p. 14)
<b>cavity</b> (n.)	an empty space inside a solid object (p. 13)
<b>conventional</b> (adj.)	common, traditional, or accepted by most people (p. 12)
<b>facade</b> (n.)	the front, or face, of a building (p. 6)
<b>galleries</b> (n.)	rooms or buildings that house works of art for public display (p. 5)
<b>inaccuracies</b> (n.)	details that are incorrect; mistakes or errors (p. 8)
<b>medieval</b> (adj.)	of or relating to the Middle Ages, the time period in European history from AD 500 to 1500 (p. 10)
<b>sanctuary</b> (n.)	a safe place; the protection given by such a place (p. 11)
<b>sculptures</b> (n.)	three-dimensional works of art made of flexible or hard materials (p. 10)
<b>sketch</b> (v.)	to make a rough drawing or outline of something (p. 4)
<b>tapestries</b> (n.)	thick pieces of cloth with patterns or scenes woven into them, generally used for display (p. 10)

# The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A Reading A-Z Level Y Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,642

## Connections

### Writing

Complete the writing assignment given to the student in this book: Write an essay comparing and contrasting three different works of art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

### Social Studies

Choose and research one artist whose work is displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Write a biography about the artist that focuses on his or her art.



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