A passionate debate is raging among a group of 8th grade students in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s European Paintings galleries. The students are discussing Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting Esther before Ahasuerus, which depicts Jewish heroine Esther at the dramatic moment when she appeals to her husband to save her people from being massacred. In their English language arts classroom, these students are reading Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, and their spirited conversation weaves together strands from the play’s narrative, details from the painting, and stories from students’ own experiences. Their teacher has selected this work of art to deepen and extend the students’ engagement with a central question of Shakespeare’s play: Are our lives determined by fate, or do we have free will? As students share their responses, the class informally splits between those who argue that people must take responsibility for their own actions and those who believe that individuals are powerless against the pull of fate.

After their discussion about this painting, the students will visit two other works of art at the Met
that align with this theme. They’ll engage with the art by sketching, role playing, and taking part in inquiry-based discussions. Upon returning to the classroom, students will write an essay that argues whether life is defined by fate or free will, incorporating evidence from the literature and art they’ve explored together.

Snapshots at the Museum
On another day, a class of 18–21-year-old students enrolled in an alternative diploma program is carefully sketching La Capresse des Colonies, a 19th century marble and bronze bust of a glamorous woman of African descent. Their teacher has chosen this object to illuminate themes of freedom, self-concept, and race in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye. After completing their sketches and sharing their observations with one another, students write a letter from the statue’s subject to Pecola, the traumatized young black girl in Morrison’s novel. In their letters, students encourage Pecola to love herself and be comfortable in her own skin, reminding her that “black is beautiful.”

This rich conversation continues as students examine the next object, a painting by Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas titled Let My People Go. The class draws parallels between the exodus of enslaved people in Egypt and the struggle for freedom that black people faced in America. Students identify symbolic imagery in the painting and consider how these symbols play into the overall theme of the work. As the class shares thoughtful interpretations, one student enthusiastically comments, “The more we look at art, the deeper it gets!”

The same can be said as a 6th grade social studies teacher invites her students to look closely at Jonas Lie’s 1913 painting The Conquerors (Culebra Cut, Panama Canal), which documents the construction of the Panama Canal. The teacher’s goal for this lesson—as part of a unit on citizenship and public policy—is for students to explore how artists engage in social activism. After examining details of the painting through a rolled-up sheet of paper, students share their initial ideas. In small groups, they examine historical documents that detail the positive and negative impacts of the canal’s construction and synthesize this information with their observations of the painting. Together, they speculate about the artist’s intent and the larger meaning of the work of art. Following the museum visit, students will identify community issues, brainstorm ways to solve those problems, and create persuasive artworks to advance their causes.

These diverse approaches to integrating art into curriculum and instruction are just a few ways that educators
from the Astor Educator professional learning community are using the Metropolitan Museum’s collection to enliven their teaching practice and inspire students. Through object-based inquiry discussions, these teachers invite students to make connections among their lives, the curriculum, and works of art from across time and place. Their lessons fulfill the Common Core’s demands for rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills, while also inspiring joy, curiosity, and imagination.

About the Program
The Astor Educator Initiative is a three-year, grant-funded project supporting K–12 educators and students in low-income communities, special education schools, and alternative schools in New York City. Through this initiative, we seek to leverage the unique context of the museum and the skills of classroom educators to increase student learning in underserved schools. Our professional learning community includes social studies, English language arts, visual arts, and special education teachers.

Using the museum as our laboratory, we collaborate to generate, test, reflect on, and refine object-based teaching strategies that deepen critical-thinking skills and illuminate classroom curriculum. We advance our teaching practice through peer coaching, video-based reflection, and analysis of student data gathered during class trips to the museum.

Over the course of this project, we plan to develop a toolkit that educators can use to support teaching and learning from works of art.

The Pyramid of Inquiry
One of the products of our collaboration is a framework for planning arts-integrated lessons. The Pyramid of Inquiry is a flexible tool that can be used with any work of art to facilitate inquiry experiences that develop critical-thinking skills. The pyramid is based on data collected during 60 hour-long student museum visits that I observed over one year (15 classes each participated in four hour-long visits).

By listening carefully to students’
conversations about works of art and tallying and categorizing their thoughts, we identified the arc of an object-based inquiry discussion from initial observation (“I see a person”) to evidence-based inference (“He looks sad because his head is hanging down”) to interpretation (“I think this work is about the suffering of mankind”). From this data, we mapped backward to identify the types of questions and activities teachers employed to elicit each of these types of responses. We then generated a framework that can help educators plan successful object-based inquiry discussions. The conversation can be structured as follows.

The foundation of the pyramid is observation. After being asked an open-ended prompt (such as “What do you notice?”), students begin by looking closely at the object or taking a multimodal approach like sketching the object. This is a crucial first step because the information gathered will support the development of inferences and interpretations that are grounded in visual evidence.

The next level of the pyramid is evidence-based inference. Teachers might prompt students with a question along the lines of “What’s going on in this painting?” Or students might participate in a movement activity that imitates the pose of a painting’s character and then infer how the character feels, using evidence from the artwork.

Finally, the conversation builds to the interpretation phase. The teacher could ask a big question (for instance, “What do you think the artist’s message or intent is?”) or engage students in an art-making activity that expresses the meaning of the artwork in another way.

Note that information about the object can be inserted at any point during the conversation to give context about the work of art and to scaffold students’ understanding as they form interpretations.

How to Plan with the Pyramid
Although the Pyramid of Inquiry was developed as a lesson planning tool for a museum visit, teachers can also use this approach to plan lessons for the classroom.

Step One: Begin with the curriculum, and select works of art. Choose a topic, theme, or essential question from your curriculum. For example, art by developing your own questions, researching, and engaging in the inquiry process that students will undergo. You will need to know some basic information about the objects to facilitate meaningful discussion with students. (Museum websites often provide rich resources for the study of objects.)

A caveat about the role of information in an inquiry-based lesson: The information you share with students should deepen the discussion by providing context and additional

Teachers paired provocative topics with visually captivating objects. This combination led to deep engagement and critical thought among students—and teachers.
Aaron Douglas painting Let My People Go, the teacher used the pyramid of inquiry to scaffold her students' experience of the work, guiding their thinking from observation to interpretation. She facilitated their investigation of the painting with "I See, I Think, I Wonder," a simple tool for gathering ideas. Using this strategy, students divide a paper into three columns and list their observations, inferences, and questions about the painting in each column. They then identify symbolic elements in the painting and infer what larger ideas the elements might represent, supporting their inferences with visual evidence from the artwork. Finally, the teacher guides the conversation to the interpretation level by asking, What do you think is the overall message of this painting?, prompting students to synthesize their observations and inferences.

Learning through Art
Integrating art into the curriculum has been transformative for students and teachers taking part in this program. Christine Sugrue, a middle school social studies teacher in an arts-integrated co-teaching classroom, says, "I've moved toward focusing instruction around an artifact or work of art, and allowing students to be the driving force behind what they explore. As a result, students are more invested in learning for learning's sake versus just looking for the right answer."

As teachers like Christine have found, the benefits of incorporating art into the curriculum are manifold. I encourage teachers of all disciplines to adopt the Pyramid of Inquiry framework to revitalize their practice and deepen student learning through art.

Nicola Giardina (Nicola.giardina@metmuseum.org) is the Astor Fellow for K–12 Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a former K–5 art teacher in the South Bronx, New York.