Step 3: Research
Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the label printed on the back of this brochure. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at the object.

When you have finished reading the label, consider the following:

In what ways did the information in the label reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own? In what ways did it surprise you? This process is not about getting all the “right” answers. It can be easy to misread art from another culture or time period because its visual language and symbolism differs from your own.

Did the label mention anything you did not see or think about previously? What?

How would your experience of this object have been different if you read the label first?

Step 4: Interpretation
Interpretation involves bringing your close observation and any additional information you have gathered about an art object together to try to understand what a work of art means. There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this object might include:

What does this work tell us about the role of art in this culture?

How is it similar to or different from the role of art in American culture?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response
This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment involves questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art.

Do you think the people for whom this sculpture was created would think it was successful and well done? Why or why not?

This sculpture was designed to provoke an emotional response. What is your response to it?

We hope this approach enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this sculpture. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each object:

What do I see? (Close Observation)

What do I think? (Analysis)

How can I learn more? (Research)

What might it mean? (Interpretation)

How do I feel about it? (Critical Assessment and Response)

This brochure was written by Vivian Ladd, Museum Educator, and Alex Berrollo, former Assistant Curator, Special Projects.

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A Closer Look

As a teaching museum, the Hood Museum of Art is committed to helping visitors develop visual literacy skills—the ability to construct meaning from all that we see. One way it does this is through a method called Learning to Look. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art they encounter.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Background Information

This sculpture is an nkisi, or power figure. It was made in the nineteenth century through a collaboration between an artist and a diviner, or ritual expert, of the Kongo Peoples of Central Africa. The artist carved the figure and the diviner adorned it with objects and materials of great spiritual strength. The nkisi played a role in maintaining the balance of law and order within a community.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at the sculpture from a variety of angles.

What do you see?

What materials were used to create it?

What do you notice about the figure’s pose? Consider the arms and hands, the feet, and the tilt of the body.

How is this figure proportioned?

What parts of the body are emphasized?

What do you notice about the head?

The face of the figure?

Its expression?

What do you notice about the navel?

What objects are hanging from the figure’s back?

How would you describe the carving of this figure? Consider in particular the nose, eyebrows, ears, and feet. How would you describe the surface of the rest of the figure?

Step 2: Analysis

Without reading the label, think about what you have observed.

Why do you think this figure is studded with nails and blades?

What might be missing from its hand?

What do the figure’s expression and pose suggest?

Why do you think its navel is so large and protruding?

What might be the purpose of the objects hanging off its back?

As you consider these questions, look to the sculpture for clues to support your ideas.