The Half-Minute Look

How much time does the average museum visitor spend looking at an individual artwork? Would you believe only thirty seconds? This activity demonstrates what kind of information you can (and cannot) obtain by spending only a half minute looking at an artwork.

Pick an artwork that contains a lot of activity, such as:

- The Death of Germanicus by Nicolas Poussin
- Six Scenes from the Tale of Genji (detail)

- Instruct students to look at the artwork for thirty seconds. Make sure to keep track of time!
- Once the thirty seconds are up, have students turn around so they can no longer see the artwork.
- Ask questions that will require students to recall what they saw by writing down their answers.

Suggested questions could include:

How many people are in the artwork?
What is the setting for this artwork? How can you tell?
What is the subject of the artwork?
What time of day is it? What clues tell you this?
What time period is this artwork from? How can you tell?

Once all of the questions have been asked, have students turn around and repeat the process, but give students more time to look at the artwork. Discuss the questions, this time highlighting how much more one can learn from an artwork the more one spends time looking at it.