

## Letters to the Artist

### Introduction:

On the audio tour we've explored the idea of friendship, and we have seen the different ways artist depict, explore, and define friendships. Throughout history people have always found ways to connect to people they are close with. Now you might get ahold of a friend through a social media platform or through a simple text. Before technology was as accessible as it is today, people often carried out vibrant correspondences through the "snail mail". Letters provide historians excellent research material, because letters often (but not always) provide insights into the thoughts and feelings of individuals historians seek to study. Artists leave behind the objects they create that can provide insights into their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, but often we want to know more! In this activity you will have the opportunity to write a letter to an artist and ask them about the world they lived in when they were creating the fantastic pieces you saw on the tour.

### Activity:

For this activity you will have the opportunity to write two letters; the first letter will be *from you* to one of the four artists whose work you saw on the tour. In this first letter you will ask them a questions you have about either a social, political, or economic event that occurred during their lifetime. Then you will create a second letter. The second letter will be one in which you reply to your first letter, *as if you were the artist*.

### Directions:

1. **Artist Choice:** Choose one of the four artists from the tour to write to:



Levitt



Boubat



Liftin



Thomas

- **Helen Levitt** (Brooklyn, New York, 1913 - 2009, New York, New York)  
<https://www.akronartmuseum.org/collection/?artist=950>
- **Édouard Boubat** (Paris, 1923 - 1999, Paris)  
<https://www.akronartmuseum.org/collection/?artist=763>
- **Joan Liftin** (Teaneck, New Jersey, 1935 - )  
<https://www.akronartmuseum.org/collection/?artist=949>
- **Mickalene Thomas** (Camden, New Jersey, 1971 - )  
<https://www.akronartmuseum.org/collection/?artist=1343>

2. **Initial Research:** Once you have chosen the artist you would like to write to you need to do some research about them. In the list from step one, there are links to the Akron Art Museum’s profile of each of the artists; this is a great place to start! You need to find a social, political, or economic issue/event that the artist lived through.
  - *Example:* Édouard Boubat was born in France in 1923. So, Boubat lived through World War Two. This would be a good social/political topic to research and ask Boubat about!
3. **Question Brainstorm:** Now that you have picked out an artist and researched them, and chosen a social, political, or economic issue/event that occurred during the artists life, you are ready to start thinking of questions to put in your letter. These questions should attempt to link the artist with issue/event, and reveal the thoughts and feelings of the artist on the issue/event.
  - *Example:* I might ask a question to Boubat dealing with his experience living through World War Two like this “Mr. Boubat, did your experiences in wartime Europe have a strong effect on the type of subjects you chose to photograph?”
4. **Writing Letter One:** You’re ready to write your first letter. The letter is a stylistic form that allows you to put all your questions together. Your letter should have a tone that is not too formal or too clinical. Get creative with your salutations, really put your identity on the page!
  - *Suggestion:* To make your letter more personalized spice it up with stationary. Embellish the paper you write on, add monograms with stamps and ink. You could even sketch decorative borders to add a very personal touch!
5. **Preparing for the Reply:** After you’ve written letter one, you can start preparing to write a reply. To do this, you need to delve further into your research. See if the artist ever made a direct quote about the issue/event you chose. This is your chance to dive deep into the mind of your chosen artist, after all letter two needs to be written in their voice.
6. **Writing Letter Two:** This is the most creative step of this activity, you get to put yourself into the mind of the artist, and write a reply to letter one. This second letter should address and answer the questions from your first letter. But remember you are writing this second letter as if you are the artist you chose. As mentioned in the previous step if you can find direct quotations from your artist about your issue/event, then it would be amazingly authentic to include it.

- *Suggestion:* Just as you personalized letter one with embellishments and details personal to you, try to decorate your second letter to match your artist's personality. You could stain it with teabags to make it appear older, you could type it on a typewriter if you have one, or type it on a computer with a typewriter-esque font! You could even decorate the stationary with signature materials from the artist, like rhinestones for Mickalene Thomas! The sky is the limit for how creative you can make it!

### Questions for Further Thought:

- 1) What was the most difficult part of the process? What made it a challenge, and how were you able to overcome it?
- 2) Do you feel closer to the artist than you did after you listened to the audio tour? In what ways do you feel yourself connected to the artist?
- 3) While researching did anything surprise you? Was it about the artist, the issue/event, or both? Why was it surprising?
- 4) Do you think that this activity was worthwhile? Did it foster a greater connection between you and people from the past? If you could do the process again, and choose any historic figure, who would you choose and why?