

## **Tips to Museum Educators on Responding to Viewers of Sexual Imagery**

1. Prior to your tour, obtain as much information as you can about the artwork. The more info you have the better equipped you are to speak in a non-judgemental way. What are you looking at? Why did the artist take an interest in this subject? Does the artist have a personal investment in this subject? Does the sexuality portrayed exist in a culture with shared meanings and behaviours?
2. Research your institution's policies on speech that is homophobic or intolerant, and its policy on a respectful workplace. Is there a sentence you can draw from these policies to use in a tour if intolerance is shown by an audience member?
3. Prior to touring, and once you've done your research, establish your personal limits in a tour situation. Doing so will prevent you from getting into a discussion you're not willing to have. What are you prepared to talk about? What are you not willing to discuss? Do you need to discuss your limits with your supervisor? How will you establish with a viewer or group that you're not willing to discuss a certain subject?
4. If a viewer voices difficulties with an artwork, try to ask questions. A negative reaction can stem from a variety of sources. Ask why the viewer voiced their concern, to obtain a specific response. You want to better understand that person's perspective.
5. Acknowledge you've heard the viewer's opinion. You'll be better able to engage in a discussion if the viewer feels his or her voice is being heard and respected.
6. Try to provide a variety of interpretations of the piece, drawing on your research, and frame your information in these terms. Phrases like "Another way of looking at this piece might be..." You don't have to persuade him or her to change his/her mind, but you can provide additional info, and convey the message that there are diverse meanings and understandings of such imagery.
7. Don't feel you have to take personal responsibility for the artwork. You're not there to defend it, only to explain it as best you can. A negative reaction can be developed provided it's not abusive or hateful speech; your aim is to generate discussion, and allow viewers to feel they can look closer and interpret the work. Focus the discussion as much as you can on the connection between the viewer and the artwork. If you feel you're being cornered, smoothly bring the discussion to an end rather than taking a defensive stance. Close by suggesting that one's views can be in a feedback site. A viewer who feels a sense of recognition and respect will generally leave satisfied.
8. Similarly, avoid taking a therapist's role. A negative reaction might stem from a difficult personal history, one which you're not qualified to analyze. If such a reaction occurs, acknowledge this individual's difficulty and suggest he or she discontinue looking at the images.