

Art Reflection Method (ARM)

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Abstract

The Art Reflection Method (ARM) is a joint initiative between Nationalmuseum, Sweden, and DNP Museum Lab, Japan. Rooted in the belief that dialogue through art can foster empathy, creativity, and psychological safety, ARM is a facilitation method designed to make art appreciation more inclusive, especially outside the traditional museum context. Using high-quality digital images and widely accessible technologies, ARM encourages participants to engage deeply with artworks, articulate their feelings and thoughts, and listen to others – creating a "culture of dialogue."

ARM promotes intangible cultural heritage by centering emotional and intellectual responses to art. The reflective model has shown promise for empathy-building and promotes collaborative learning. ARM workshops have been tested across Sweden, Finland, and Japan in diverse settings: with elderly communities, in schools, at business trainings, and in regional libraries and museums. Now entering its fifth year, the project continues to evolve through cross-cultural collaboration.

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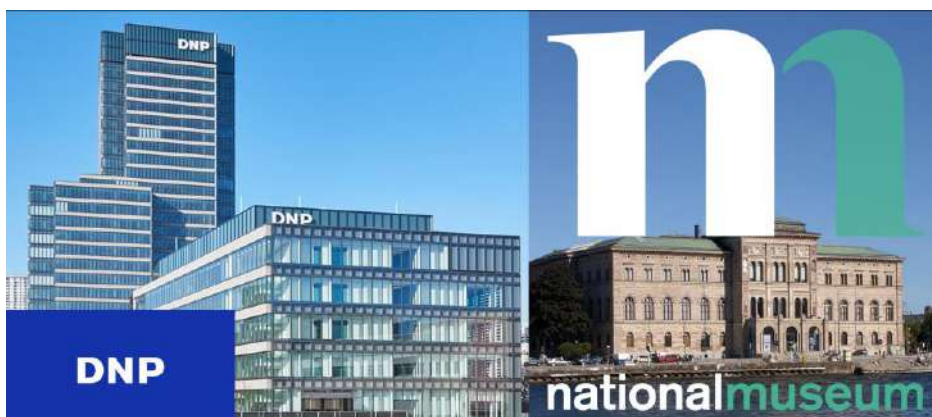


Image 1: Presentation of collaborative partners DNP and Nationalmuseum: Dai Nippon Printing Co., Ltd. (DNP) is one of the world's largest printing and information technology companies, founded in 1876 and headquartered in Tokyo. Their DNP Museum Lab, launched in 2006, as a cultural initiative which collaborates with major museums to enhance visitor engagement and appreciation of art. Nationalmuseum is Sweden's museum of art and design, founded in 1792, with collections spanning paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, applied arts, and design from the early Middle Ages to the present day, housed in a beautifully preserved 19th-century building on Stockholm's Blasieholmen peninsula.

Keywords: art appreciation, emotions based, dialogue, facilitation, digital images, cross-cultural collaboration

1. The conception and planning of the programme

The ARM method has been developed through a long-term, iterative process grounded in collaboration and professional expertise. The foundation was laid between 2017–2019 through preparatory work by the Finnish National Gallery, Ateneum, in partnership with DNP Museum Lab. Building on this, Nationalmuseum in Sweden initiated a development phase in 2020 to refine and simplify the facilitation steps, while also re-defining target groups and long-term goals.

During the first phase of the ARM project (2017–2019), a series of workshops were carried out and an initial questionnaire was developed, focusing on emotions and subjective responses. Art-based dialogues were conducted and evaluated in both Finland and Japan. In parallel,

neuroscientist Dr. Hideaki Kawabata was connected to the project to contribute a scientific perspective. Drawing on these early results, the DNP Museum Lab team began shaping a standardized model for art dialogue, with the goal of creating a method that could be shared more widely using digital tools.

In the second phase, a new partnership was started between Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and DNP Museum Lab. The first digital meeting took place in autumn 2019. A key figure in initiating this collaboration was Susanna Pettersson, then Director General of the Nationalmuseum, who had previously led Ateneum and was instrumental in linking DNP and Nationalmuseum. As Head of Education at the museum, Lena Eriksson joined the project and with Kyoko Ishibashi, from DNP Museum Lab and Hiroko Sakomura as intercultural mediator and translator formed the core of the project's working group. In response to the conditions set by the COVID-19 pandemic, the model was simplified and made more flexible, with a focus on online digital art dialogue with senior participants. From 2020 to 2022, volunteer participants from across Sweden were recruited via social media and met online to discuss selected Japanese and Swedish artworks. In Japan, participants were recruited from retired employees of the company and the general public. A sub-theme in this phase focused on cultural differences between the two countries, and in 2021 joint sessions were held with participants from both Sweden and Japan.

The third phase of the project began in 2023, as pandemic restrictions eased and in-person meetings resumed. While ARM is well-suited to fully digital contexts, the opportunity to conduct art dialogues in person remains essential. The core objective – fostering connection and a culture of dialogue through art – benefits from physical presence and shared experience. Building on earlier phases, the method was refined and the target groups broadened. It became important to adapt the method for different contexts – intergenerational groups, schools, workplaces, or senior citizens. Since the method is designed to be easily used outside of museums, access to high-quality digital reproductions is vital. Nationalmuseum has made more than 6,000 of its most popular artworks available as high-resolution digital images, free to download from Wikimedia. This is a key resource for the

development of the ARM project. Alongside exploring practical considerations like image rights and digital access, aesthetic quality has been a priority – complex, layered artworks are essential to stimulate meaningful conversation.

In 2023, a major project was carried out in Japan in collaboration with a week-long program in the Nagano prefecture included school workshops for various age groups and several seminars for museum professionals, university faculty, educators, and cultural policy makers. Working across languages using translation, gesture, and visual cues, combined with professional exchange, proved both intellectually and emotionally rewarding. The project received widespread media attention in Japan, including national TV coverage and press features.

In 2024 the planning for two larger collaborations began, one in Sweden with Stockholm's public libraries to design an outreach program for suburban libraries and a project in Japan together with Toyama Glass Museum with workshops and seminars. Both these projects are carried out during 2025.

2. Carrying out the programme

The method, with a focus on emotion, a set of questions, and tools for facilitation of the conversation are a central component of ARM. However, to fulfil the project's overall aim — reaching people who do not actively seek out art or museums for experiences and exchange — it is equally important to collaborate with strong and committed partners. These partnerships are essential in creating the conditions needed for meaningful encounters to take place.

A brief description of the method

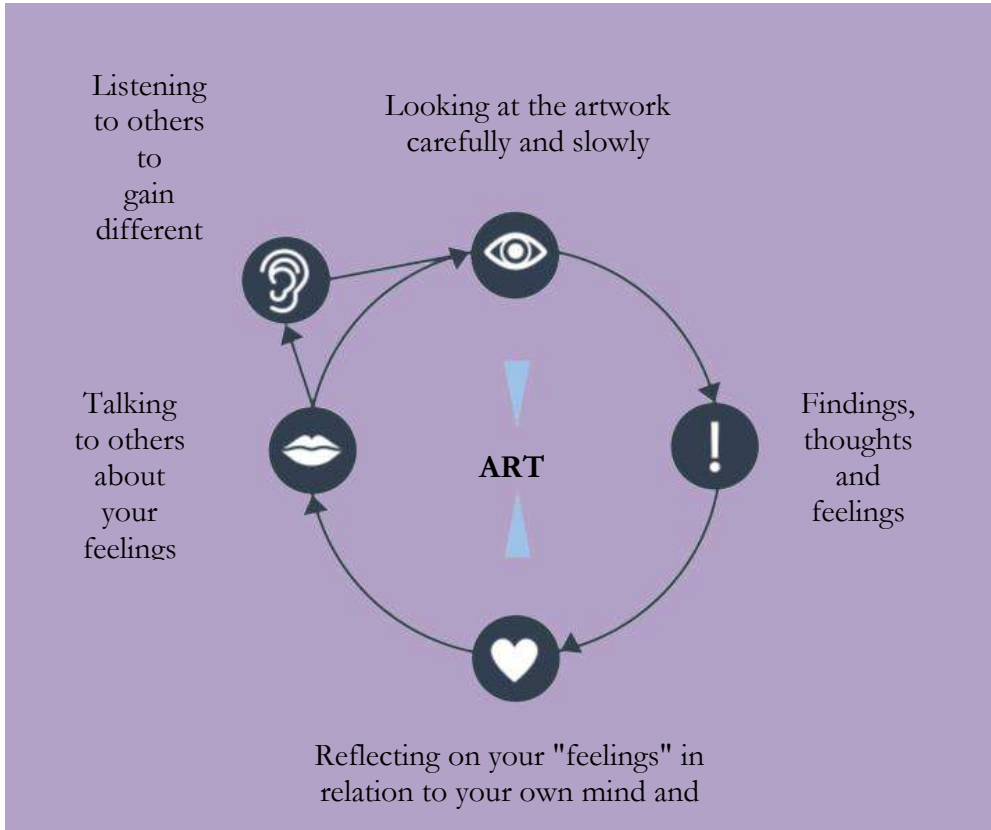


Image II: Graphic model of ARM: At the core of ARM is a focus on questions that connect to subjective memories and emotions, encouraging personal engagement with the artwork. The questions are open-ended and serve primarily as support for the conversation. Talking about different emotions – the words we use for them and how they are expressed – is inspired by the basic emotions identified in affect theory.

Each session with a group is based on a small number of artworks — no more than two to four. The number of participants is also preferably limited to 8-16, but the group size needs to depend on the collaboration and what is most suitable. Whether the group meets in a physical space or in a digital setting online, special attention is given to creating a welcoming and calm atmosphere. The structure of the session is introduced through an

icebreaker exercise designed to reflect some of the key themes found in the artworks the group will be discussing.

Another central part of the introduction is to explain to the group that all questions and discussions about the artwork will be based entirely on the feelings and memories the artwork evokes in the participants. The goal is to see more together — and to talk about what we see. Facts and information about the artwork, the artist and the period are limited and shared after a lengthy discussion.

Elements of slow looking are included: taking time to observe details, starting with pure description, and following up participants' reactions with reflective questions such as, "What in the image makes you feel that way? The key point of ARM is to encourage participants to look at artworks with full attention, recognize their own feelings and express them with their own words.

Mediation Tools

ARM uses a flexible and low-tech mediation model adaptable to various settings. Tools and formats include:

- Video conferencing platforms (e.g. Zoom, Teams) for remote workshops
- Digital presentations on screen or projector for physical meetings with participants outside museums
- Simple discussion prompts and reflection sheets
- Feedback and self-evaluation forms for participants and facilitators

Some examples of target groups and collaborations

Improving the well-being of the elderly people: between 2017 and 2022 several trial workshops for elderly people were conducted in Japan, Finland and Sweden. Collaboration with senior citizens organizations in Sweden and Finland helped bring together group participants, as did cooperation with care homes in Japan.



Image III: Screenshot from Online workshops with participants from Sweden and Japan 2021-2022. The artwork in focus is the Swedish artist Carl Larsson watercolour Mamma's and the Small Girls' Room, 1897

The overarching themes included topics such as ‘Childhood’ and ‘Social Change’. Introductory icebreaker exercises were designed around these themes, and artworks were selected to reflect them.

Workshops in Nagano prefecture 2023 was a cooperation aiming at improving children and young adults’ ability to empathize and collaborate. Extensive preparatory work had been carried out, both through Nagano Prefecture’s long-term investment in culture within education for children and young people, and through the Shinbism project, supported by DNP Museum Lab. Thanks to this thorough groundwork and relationship-building, workshops with 230 elementary and junior high school students were held in just 3 days, as well as two seminars for adults. For the younger children, the overarching theme was connected to the concept of ‘Play’, while for the young adults, the artworks and overarching questions were linked to the concept of ‘Family’.



*Image IV: Workshop in a Nagano elementary school, with an in-depth examination of a painting by the Swedish artist Bruno Liljefors, *Sledding*, 1882. To discover closely, to describe, and to talk about the feelings of snow and winter was part of the workshop.*

As part of the design of these intercultural art conversations, we looked at both Swedish and Japanese artworks. To bridge language barriers and introduce a physical, embodied element of expression, we used images of facial expressions (emojis). Participants were invited to "vote with their feet" by walking to and standing next to the symbol they felt best represented the emotion the artwork evoked in them. We also used symbols to represent other qualities in the image, such as light and darkness, colours, and the sensation of warmth or cold.



Image V: Children voting with their feet during a workshop at an elementary school in Nagano. Adults participating supported the activity by carrying the signs.

Adult Professional development: ARM workshops have also been tested as icebreakers in professional development settings, based on the idea that art reflection can foster psychological safety among colleagues. Early trials suggest that these workshops encourage open dialogue and self-expression, helping participants communicate more freely regardless of age, role, or position within their organisation. If possible, we will look into this as one theme for further development.

Building partnerships together with regional museums: The ARM method aims to reach individuals who rarely or never visit art museums. At the same time, we see museums as important communal resources and strive to promote them as inclusive spaces for gathering and community building. Collaborating with regional museums is central to this vision. So far, most of the museum collaboration has taken place in Japan, including the workshops in Nagano 2023 where the Maruyama Banka Memorial Museum in Tomi City and the Koumi-machi Kōgen Museum of Art near Lake Matsubara were vital partners. A new partnership is planned for 2025 with the Toyama Glass Museum in the Chūbu region. A core focus of the project has been to organise events outside traditional museum spaces. Most regional museums are part of festivals and communal activities that offer

good opportunities to offer ARM workshops in diverse contexts. Through this approach, we aim to open new pathways into the museum experience and lower the threshold for participation.

However, reaching those who have never visited a museum or who feel disengaged from art remains a significant challenge – one that requires ongoing learning and development in outreach strategies.

3. Evaluation and remedial process

The ARM method, as previously mentioned, is evolving through a long-term, iterative process grounded in collaboration and professional expertise. Learning, sharing experiences, and working together to create more and better opportunities for spreading encounters with art are built-in elements of the working process. During the project's first year, two major seminars were held, both of which are documented in written reports.

Dr. Hideaki Kawabata, Associate Professor of Psychology at Keio University in Japan, with a research focus on emotional psychology and cognitive neuroscience was connected to the project the first years. He investigates the cognitive and emotional effects of art appreciation. One key finding is that viewing art activates the orbitofrontal cortex—an area of the brain associated with pleasure and reward. In the joint project with DNP and Ateneum, Kawabata focused on the potential of art appreciation to support cognitive health, and the research suggested that especially emotion-focused art engagement may positively influence working memory and reaction times. Kawabata's work underlines that art is not only culturally enriching but also neurologically and psychologically beneficial. His findings support the idea that engaging with art can be a meaningful intervention to maintain cognitive vitality and emotional well-being.

In the phase when Nationalmuseum in Sweden became involved, the expertise and experience of the museum's educational staff contributed significantly to the ongoing development of the method and the refinement of its goals. A professional dialogue referencing discussion-based approaches such as *Socratic dialogue* and *Visible Thinking* – especially in the

museum-adapted format developed by Claire Bown – has served as a valuable intellectual resource and point of reference.

The part of the project conducted during the pandemic, which included online workshops with older participants, was summarised and presented orally to museum colleagues at the CECA conference in Denmark in 2022. During the presentation, we shared key insights and participant feedback. Warm-up activities using colours, shapes, and emoji symbols proved effective in supporting focus and engagement, while beginning with detailed observations of the artwork stimulated curiosity and encouraged deeper looking. Meeting with the same group more than once made it possible to build trust, and several participants noted that they felt a sense of connection—even though they had never met in person before the digital sessions. Overall, participants described the workshops as meaningful and positive. Some mentioned the challenge of articulating emotions, while many were surprised by how much more they noticed in the artworks compared to their usual experiences.

In 2023, workshops were held in Nagano for children and teenagers. Alongside this, professional development workshops were organised in the region for both museum professionals and schoolteachers. An academic seminar was also held in Tokyo, bringing together museum staff and university researchers. The aim was not only to share and disseminate knowledge, but above all to raise awareness of and advocate for the importance of expanding access to meaningful encounters with art across all sectors of society.

In 2025, the work with participant groups will continue, and as the ICOM conference in Dubai approaches in November, the working group looks forward to meeting colleagues, presenting the project, and gaining further insights to help expand the method and inspire others to adopt similarly outreach-focused approaches.

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