

## LETTER WRITING

Inspired by the painting by Seymour Joseph Guy

GRADES

4 – 8



## INTRODUCTION

In this painting from the Museum's collection, a young woman stands on the edge of a walkway or platform and leans forward. She is accompanied by a small dog who looks out at us as if we have interrupted something. Slightly below her and seated on the back of a donkey is a younger boy. The two figures are exchanging a letter. Is she handing him the letter to deliver on her behalf, or has he just arrived and is bringing the letter to her? What do you imagine the letter might say? (Hint: the artwork's title gives you a clue.) Notice the way they are dressed. Does this seem like a scene from the present or an earlier time? How does this method of letter delivery differ from what we might do today?

## REFLECT

We often use the phrase the art of writing letters. Notice the word art is used to describe this form of communication that many consider old-fashioned. No emails, no texts, but letters written by hand on paper and meant to be sent. Before cellphones, computers, or even typewriters, letters were written by hand. They communicated important news, messages of love, joy or sorrow, and daily updates to family and friends. They could be used to encourage, to forgive, to send love to those far away, or deliver invitations to those nearby. Sometimes they were meant to thank, to praise, or to inquire.

When was the last time you wrote a letter to be delivered? To whom did you write it? Why did you write it?

## ACTIVITY

Write a letter to someone you miss or someone to whom you are grateful. Use a pen or pencil and write the letter by hand. Once complete, the letter can be put in an envelope with a stamp and sent through the mail, or you can hand deliver it to someone special in your own household. If you like, include a drawing along with your message.

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## INSPIRATION

Letters and tools for writing them are featured in another painting from SBMA's permanent collection. Look at the objects in *The Secretary's Table* by William Michael Harnett. Which of the objects are used to write? Can you decipher the message written on the notepad? Where do you think the red drip comes from? What do you see that makes you think that?

## ACTIVITY

As you get ready to start school, what are the items on your desk or table? Make a sketch of your work area or write a brief description using lots of detail to help the reader picture it.



IMAGE ON FRONT: Seymour Joseph Guy, *The Love Letter*, 1860-1870s. Oil on canvas. SBMA, Gift of Charles C. and Elma Ralphs Shoemaker.

IMAGE ON BACK: William Michael Harnett, *The Secretary's Table*, 1879. Oil on canvas. SBMA, Gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton for the Preston Morton Collection.