Outline for “Learning to Look” Seminar

This six-week seminar will help you to navigate the mysteries of the art world, and develop your knowledge, appreciation and comfort level when viewing and discussing art. The course will highlight works from the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, with reference to works from other prominent collections. Each week we will consider a different theme:

**Week 1: Who am I? A Closer Look at the Art of Portraiture**
The way we present ourselves, or choose to be portrayed, is very revealing. In this week we will look at how artists have captured their subjects in sculpture, painting and photography, and what this tells us about the artists and the times in which they lived.

**Week 2: The Changing Nature of Landscape Art**
We will examine how artists have depicted landscapes over the centuries, from symbolic approximations to the picturesque, the sublime, and unblinking examinations of contemporary realities. How have artists faced the unique challenges of depicting the Canadian landscape, from early to more contemporary views? We will explore the work of artists with different perspectives, including the sketches of the first European settlers, to the Group of Seven, and our Indigenous artists, past and present.

**Week 3: Whose History is it Anyway?**
Before the invention of photography and cinema, the depictions of historical events could only be understood through oral and visual representations, which were open to the interpretation of storytellers and artists. With a focus on Benjamin West’s famous 18th century history painting, *The Death of Wolfe*, we will look at how a seminal moment in Canadian/European history was depicted and shaped through the artist’s choices. We will also look at some portraits of significant figures in history from the National Gallery’s collection, who were witnesses to, and makers of our history.

**Week 4: Hidden Meanings in Still Life**
Artists will often use symbols to express hidden meanings in their work. We will look at works inside and outside the National Gallery’s collection that use subtle and not-so-subtle symbols to send a message to the viewer. We will learn to decode images that may be obscure to us now, but were seen as deeply textured works in the eyes of our ancestors.

**Week 5: Photographs – Capturing the Moment**
With the advent of photography in the 19th century, it was no longer necessary for artists to create exact representations of subject matter. We will look at some examples of early photographic art, and consider how it evolved through the 19th and 20th centuries, with its influence over other art forms including the Impressionist, Post-Impressionists and others. We will also touch on how photography continues to evolve today in a multi-media and multi-dimensional environment.

**Week 6: “My kid could do that!” The Perils of Abstraction**
When the *Voice of Fire* was exhibited in the National Gallery of Canada after the building opened in 1988, a storm of controversy ensued. What is it about Abstract art that infuriates the public? How do we approach works of art that seem so simple, and not wonder whether the artist is ‘having us on’? We will look at abstract paintings and sculptures from the early 20th century to the present day, to decode the artist’s message and its meaning for us.