

# To See Is to Think

## Exorcising Anxiety

**Overview:** After completing this activity, students will be better able to use a visual vocabulary to communicate ideas about their inner lives and the lives of others.

**Age Group/Grade Level:** 14-17 years, grades 9-12

**Subject Area:** Visual Arts

**Duration:** approximately 45 min.

### Background

Artist George Tooker grew frustrated while trying to obtain building permits for a house he bought in Brooklyn Heights, New York. Several images by Tooker from this time depict anonymous government workers and defeated people caught in a bureaucratic purgatory.

The clinical interior of *The Waiting Room* recalls the conformity of the 1950s and emphasizes the pale, drawn expressions on the figures. The people stand in numbered boxes, evoking the ways standardization can force individuals into predefined categories. The man on the left appears to be in charge of the “sorting,” creating a sinister view of government scrutiny.

*“The Waiting Room is a kind of purgatory—people just waiting—waiting to wait. It is not living. It is a matter of waiting—not being one’s self. Not enjoying life, not being happy, waiting, always waiting for something that might be better—which never comes. Why can’t they just enjoy the moment?”*

—George Tooker

### Discussion

Share George Tooker’s *Waiting Room* with students. Consider posing the following questions:

- What kind of waiting room is this? Who are these people?
- The artist said that the people in this painting cannot be themselves. How has he shown that in his work?

Explain that Tooker began painting just after World War II, a time when Americans felt anxious: they knew the great evils that humans were capable of. He said that he painted the world as he saw it, but he didn’t always like what he saw.

- What emotions does this artwork evoke?
- How might these emotions reflect the national sentiment of the time?



George Tooker, *The Waiting Room*, 1959, egg tempera on wood, 24 x 30 in., Gift of S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., 1969.47.43.

Share that George Tooker spent nearly 50 years making art about the experiences of being human, including the joys and anxieties of everyday life. Tooker was inspired by psychologists like Sigmund Freud who talked about the thoughts behind our thoughts—our hidden, secret minds.

In this artwork, Tooker recalls the process of trying to get a building permit for his house in Brooklyn Heights, New York.

- Based on what you see, how was the artist treated during his dealings with the local government? What in the artist’s composition makes you say that?
- How has the artist removed each figure’s individuality? Sense of power?
- Can you tell what these people are thinking? Feeling? What effect does this seem to have on these people’s ability to change their situation?

### Activity

Challenge students to create an artwork depicting the psychological effect of everyday interactions. Guide their planning process with the following questions:

- What is human nature? What experiences (positive or negative) are universal, due to this nature?
- How might you express these ideas in a way that reflects your life and times?

For a full-size image of George Tooker’s *Waiting Room*, visit:  
[https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1969.47.43\\_1](https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1969.47.43_1)