

Lesson Unit: Art as Storyteller

by Sara Mark Lesk



Grade: 5 - 8

Time Required: Seven, 45-minute periods to complete all lessons; optional class field trip to museum or gallery.

Overview

How do paintings tell stories? Visual artists, like authors, make art to communicate. While authors use words to tell a story, visual artists use a wide variety of materials (or media). By reading biographies and picture books about famous artists and carefully examining their work, students learn to “read” the story in a painting. In this unit, they research and write the art history of a painting and then write a creative story based on details in the artwork. Finally, through immersion in an artist’s work, students create a painting in the artist’s style. By the end of the unit, each student will be an expert on an artist and one of his/her works.

Learning Objectives

After completing this unit, students will be able to:

- Recognize one artist’s work and write and speak fluently about the artist.
- Examine a work of art for an artist’s style, intent, and background.
- Research and write the “art history” of the art work.
- Write a creative story prompted by a painting.
- Orally present an artist and painting in an interactive format.
- Create their own “storytelling” painting in their chosen artist’s style.

Vocabulary

- Media
- Narrative
- Foreground, middle ground, background
- Iconography
- Elements of art: color, line, shape, texture
- Parts of a story: setting, character, plot, climax, resolution, theme

Materials

- Art posters that emphasize paintings with “stories.” (The best narrative paintings will have recognizable backgrounds as settings, people or animals as characters, and a plot or action. See the list of recommended artists at the end of the lesson.)
- A wide selection of illustrated books on artists and biographies of artists.
- Computers/online access for artist research (optional).
- Poster board or other sturdy paper to “support” student artwork; poster paint or acrylic; paintbrushes; other media (colored pencils, pastels, collage materials, depending on media used by selected artists).

Session One: Introduction (1-2 class periods)

Directions

Classroom set up: Gather picture books and art history books about artists and prop them open to colorful painting spreads on counters, desks, and tables. Hang art posters on walls. Create and hang a banner announcing the unit: ART AS STORYTELLER.

1. Tell students you will be doing an extended unit on artists and stories in art. Begin by asking students: How can a painting tell a story? Encourage students to look around the room at the posters and art in picture books and ask several times, “How do these works of art tell stories?” Record student responses on chart paper before focusing on one work of art as a class.
2. Select one painting from a picture book or poster—the bigger, the better—so that students can look carefully at the details in the work. You will use this work of art to model several aspects of the lesson, so choose an artist you like (and want to do research on) and a painting that has plenty of narrative potential. Begin with a realistic work that includes a recognizable background or setting, living creatures (either people or animals), and some action. (See recommended artists at the end of the lesson.)
3. Now ask students to tell you everything they see in the selected painting. Continue to ask, “What else do you see? What else is happening? What about the colors? What’s in the foreground? Why did the artist use such heavy lines? Why is the person doing that? How big is the actual painting and how does that affect its meaning, etc ...,” until you have discussed everything in the work of art.
4. Now ask students to think about the painting in terms of a telling a story. What is the painting’s setting? The characters? Is their explicit action or implied action in the work? Is this the beginning, middle, or end of the story? Or is there just enough in the painting to launch a story in your imagination? (Extension for older students: Can an abstract painting tell a story? How about a still life or landscape? Look at examples and challenge students to create a story based on the work.)
5. Optional: Have each student quickly write a paragraph-long story about the painting.
6. Finally, play docent with the chosen painting. Tell students you have read a biography and a picture book on the artist and done some research on the painting. Give a brief biography of the artist, show some other works, and talk about why the artist created the painting the way he/she did. (Be as creative as you wish: become the artist, dress up, tell relevant anecdotes, and/or tell your own brief, creative story based on the painting.)
7. Tell students that in the next two lessons they will select one artist and a painting to “master.” They will be writing about their paintings and making their own artwork based on the artist’s style. They may also create an oral presentation. Ask them to begin doing research at home, at the school or local library, or on the Internet to get ideas about different artists. (See Art as Storyteller example flyer to send home.)

Session Two: Artist Research

Directions

Review with students the scope of the Art as Storyteller unit. Explain that they will become an expert on an artist of their choice, write the history of their selected artwork, write a creative story based on a work by their artist, and make an artwork based on their artist's style. They may also do a creative oral presentation on their artist in class or at a local museum or gallery.

In Lesson 2, students will:

- Do research in print at the library and online to select an artist who interests them. (Be sure to approve student's choices.) Advise students to consider: Which museums have their artist's paintings in their collection? If your school is in or near a city, tell students to consider selecting an artist represented in a local museum so they can visit their artist's work.
- Read one biography of the artist and one art or picture book on the artist's work. Reading may be completed during class and/or at home.

Session Three: The art history of an artwork

Directions

Have students select one work of art by their artist.

1. With this artwork, students will research the subject matter, style, and technique used by the artist. Teachers should model how to research a painting, using the painting discussed from Lesson 1. Show, and read aloud from, your written source about the artwork and make notes on chart paper.
2. Now guide students to find explanatory passages on their artwork in art history books or picture books on the artists. Students should make notes on their findings, and then write a paragraph telling the meaning of each part of the painting and how it relates to the artist's life. (many paintings don't relate to the artist's life & are not autobiographical)

Session Four: Write a creative art story

Directions

Students will use their paintings as creative writing prompts. Tell students that all stories should:

- include details and references from the painting (setting, characters, mood, theme, action); and
- develop the painting's iconography into a complete story. Remind students that the painting may serve as the beginning, middle, or end of their story.

Session Five: Be the artist, bring the painting to life.

Directions

Have students interactively present the painting and artist to the class. First students should write an outline, get teacher approval, and practice at home with family members.

For interactive presentations, students may:

- take on the role of the artist as they talk about the painting
- ask classmates to examine the painting closely for clues to its meaning (asking repeatedly, "What is going on in the painting? What else do you see? What clues make you interpret the painting that way?")
- act out the painting with props, puppets, or classmates as actors.

Sessions 6 & 7: Make art in your artist's style and write a story to go with it.

Directions

- Provide a variety of art materials for students to create a work of art in the style of the artist.
- Optional writing extension: Have students write a short story using their artwork as the prompt.

Extensions & Modifications

Field Trip

Viewing real artwork is invaluable to understanding an artist's style and intent. If your school is located in or near a city with a museum, find out about the museum's collection before you begin this lesson. Call the museum and/or search its Web site to discover works at the museum by famous artists who have had picture books or biographies published, then plan to visit the museum as the lesson's culmination. Encourage several students to focus their research, writing, and art making on the museum's artists. When you visit the museum, have these students be the "docent" for their artist. They should be prepared to present the artist's biography and aesthetic. Then the "docent" should repeatedly ask his/her classmates to help interpret the painting by asking, "What do you see in the painting? What else is happening, etc.?" until all details have been discussed. Then have students tell a story based on their discussion of the painting.

If your museum has "lesser known" artists, have students try researching them on the Internet before you visit. Give "extra credit" to students who volunteer to research and serve as docents for these artists at the museum.

Student Exhibition

Create a student story/art exhibition. Have each student mount his/her finished artwork on poster or foam board and write a label that includes: title of work, student artist's name, date made, place made, media used, the name of the artist the work is based on.

Additional story label: Have the student write, edit, and mount below their painting their short story based on their work of art.

Class Publishing Project

Compile student “art” stories into a classroom book. Select several students as the book design team, responsible for creating a template for student stories and paintings. Each student must provide digital files of his/her painting and story to the design team. Book designers will compile all images and stories into an Art/Story book and create a book cover. Print out several copies of the book to display in the class, the office, and the library. If the budget allows, print a color copy for each student.

At-Home Extension

Send home a flyer asking family members to help research the artist and select art work. They may show students examples in their home library; take students to local library; and/or encourage online research.

Students should also practice their oral presentations at home with family members.

Assessment

This extended lesson provides the following student products for evaluation:

- Art history paragraph about selected art work;
- Creative story based on selected artist's work;
- Interactive oral presentation on artist and painting;
- Painting in the selected artist's style; and
- Creative story based on student's painting.

Resources

Recommended artists:

The artists listed below often include characters, setting, and action in their work. For this assignment, avoid: portraits, still life paintings (flowers, fruits, objects on surfaces), and abstract work.

Consider using: Romare Bearden, George Bellows, Thomas Hart Benton, George Caleb Bingham, Pieter Brueghel, Edgar Degas, Thomas Eakins, Paul Gauguin, David Hockney, Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, William Johnson, Frida Kahlo, Jacob Lawrence, Henri Matisse, William Sydney Mount, Horace Pippin, Frederic Remington, Faith Ringgold, Diego Rivera, Norman Rockwell, or Henri Rousseau.

Artist Picture Book Series:

Many published books series on artists focus each volume on one artist. Try to gather a broad selection from the school and local library to have in the classroom for students to browse.

Book series on artists include:

Adventures in Art

Great Artists' Series (ages 9-12)

Abrams First Impressions Books

Artists in Their Time

Smart About Art

Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists

First Impressions, Introductions to Art

A Weekend with ...Winslow Homer (Rousseau, Velazquez, Rembrandt, Renoir, etc.)

Students may also find excellent individual titles by searching the library catalog by an artist's last name.

Sample Flyer

**Get involved with your student
in this interactive visual art/writing unit!**

Art as Storyteller

Five easy ways to extend the class art/story program at home:

- Who are your favorite artists? Share your interest in specific artists with your student: look through art books at home, at the local library, or search for artists online together.
- Talk about what kinds of art you like and why. Pick a painting from an art book and try telling a story on the spot, based on what you see. (Realistic paintings with people, places, and some action will work best.)
- Put up posters, postcards, or color prints of favorite paintings.
- Challenge your child to select an artwork to tell you (and his/her siblings) a story about.
- Visit the local museum or art gallery with your child and practice your art observation and storytelling skills in front of the works of art. Have your child choose a favorite painting and tell a story about it. Before you leave the museum, let your child purchase a postcard of his/her favorite work to take home.
- Make artwork alongside your child at home, based on your favorite artist's work.
- Use your imagination and have fun together!