

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Do- It- Yourself

### Reading Paintings

### Key Stage 3, 4 and 6<sup>th</sup> Form

This is one of our range of DIY teaching sessions, the aim of which is to offer teaching structures for teachers leading their own sessions in the galleries. We hope that the following teaching ideas include some which are suitable for your needs. As we do not know your pupils or the specific aims of your visit, the ideas may need adaptation, but we hope they will act as a springboard for your teaching. Each idea includes, sign post sequences all of which point to pupil interaction with the exhibits, *example prompt questions written in italics* and information. Many are followed by suggested extension activities that can take place in the galleries. The following teaching ideas are tried and tested. Each idea introduces students to a specific element of visual language.

### Aims of the Reading Paintings session

- To help your pupils engage actively with real paintings.
- To know, through their own reactions, that paintings communicate many sorts of thoughts and feelings.
- To understand decisions that artists take in order to communicate clearly.
- To enjoy the paintings and to want to see more.
- To stimulate a desire to make paintings themselves.

### Galleries used in this session

Galleries 1, 2, 7 and 8

### You will need to bring:

- One clipboard for each pupil.
- Paper and a pencil for each pupil.
- Rubbers and sharpeners for the class.

## Introductory Teaching Idea - Why Images?

To introduce the prime function of paintings – communication. This sequence can be developed in many ways using a wide range of images, the main aim is that students understand how people use colour, line and shape to communicate many aspects of experience and that paintings are but one use of this visual language.

Approximate timing: 10 minutes (we have found it is time well spent and recommend students are introduced to these types of ideas before they interact with the paintings)

Location: Any free gallery space.

*Before we go and look at some paintings lets spend a few minutes thinking about what images are and how they work.*

*Why is it that when you open a magazine it's full of images? Why do politicians use images in election campaigns? Why do we use maps and diagrams? Open up discussion about a range of images used for various functions. Let's think about a world map (very helpful if you bring one) what does this image do and how does it work? Can we ever see the planet looking like this? Analyse the use of colour, symbols, etc. Aim for students to understand that a map is an amalgam of knowledge communicated through visual conventions - only useable by people who understand those conventions.*

*So humans make images of things they can't see, they use visual conventions to communicate knowledge and thoughts. Some paintings work rather like this map but they communicate something completely different.*

## Teaching Idea - Painting the Invisible



Introduces images made to communicate and inspire belief – images that encapsulate abstract ideas. Helps students move beyond the figurative content to the abstract structure of a painting.

This teaching process is demonstrated here with a particular painting but is transferable to most figurative, religious images.

Approximate timing: 30 minutes

Location: Gallery 8

The Annunciation

Bernart van Orley (attr.) c.1492-1542

No.98

This is a small painting, you will need to seat the students carefully, they need to sit close to the image.

### The Content

Help the students see everything in the painting, this may take longer than you expect. Help direct their eyes. *What can you see in the far background of the painting? What sort of building is this? Tell me about the building in the foreground. Who are the main characters, etc. Repeat everything offered so all observations are shared.*

Continue until the students have discovered:

- the church
- the palatial setting of the main action
- the figure chopping wood, the angel and Mary
- the lilies
- the dove
- the basket and linen
- the cat
- the shears
- the lectern and book
- the candle burning beneath the book
- the statues of Moses, Roman Soldier and Pope
- the bed and the window above the bed

## Reading Symbols

Once the content has been absorbed the students can piece the meaning together. Do not assume familiarity with the story of the annunciation you may need to fill in the basic outline. Help movement towards the meaning with questions such as:

*Do you think this is an arbitrary collection of objects or do you think they hold particular meanings? What does this woman's body language tell us, look at her hands and the angle of her head. What was she doing, why has she stopped. Who is the other being, where is he pointing, where has he come from. Look at his feet, is he taking off or landing? What are they both looking at, do you think the lilies have a specific meaning? (virginity) If this is Mary, a peasant girl, why has she been painted in a Renaissance palace? What is the painter telling us about her? .....What else in the painting is white? Dove, cloth, pillow, move the students towards reading the meanings, dove - holy spirit, cloth - swaddling bands and shroud, one pillow - purity, cat directly beneath dove and between central characters and church - the devil. Who is the figure chopping wood and why is he outside? Joseph separated from immaculate conception, Why is there a bed and why is it separate from the central action ..... and so on.*

Broaden discussion to help students appreciate how they are absorbing meaning through the use of symbols, the meaning of which is widely shared within and between cultures.

## Into the Abstract

The central meaning of the painting is the moment that the Trinity comes into being. The Trinity is represented by the dove (the Holy Spirit) the conception of Christ God the Son, the angel pointing to God the father. The whole painting is constructed around triangles which time and again reinforce the message. Help the students towards this new layer of perception.

*You have decoded many of the symbols but the meaning goes further. Tell them about the Trinity if need be. If you were asked to represent the Trinity with any shape which would you choose? Can you see any actual triangles in the painting. floor, porch 3 columns and triangle on the floor pointing towards the church, Mary is triangular, Mary's hands. Imagine this is a dot to dot puzzle and the objects in the painting are the dots, can you see any triangles formed if we join the dots? There are too many to list, but just as a few examples, dove to lilies to cloth - dove to angel to Mary - church to Mary to angel - and so on.*

## **Extension Idea for *Painting the Invisible***

**An activity to extend understanding of compositional structure.**

**Approximate timing: 10 minutes**

If you print off black and white reproductions of the painting before your visit, the students can draw in the compositional structure. They can then extend this analysis to other works to heighten perception of how composition can be a communicative force. The following are works in the collection with compositions that are fairly easily analysed.

The Bradyll Family, Sir Joshua Reynolds: Gallery 2, PD.10-1955

On the Brink, Alfred Elmore: Gallery 2, PD.108-1975

## Teaching Idea - Painting Narratives



PD. 108-1975

Introduces narrative paintings and stylistic decisions made to clarify meaning. Encourages imaginative interaction through careful observation of content and style. This teaching process is demonstrated here with a particular painting but is transferable to most narrative images.

Approximate timing: 30 minutes

Location: Gallery 2

On the Brink, 1865

Alfred Elmore, 1815-1881

### The Content

Seat the students carefully, check they can all see the whole painting. First encourage the students to concentrate on just the content, holding back on interpretations until everyone has seen everything.

*What has the painter decided to put in this painting, tell me about everything you can see.* The students may need help to travel beyond the obvious content and to see the details in the painting such as:

- the torn paper on the ground in the front of the painting
- the empty purse in the woman's hand
- the bandaged hand of the shadowed man leaning through the window
- the couple in the middle space holding hands
- the gambling in the background
- the passion flower and the lily intertwining up the wall

Help them see by leading their eyes with questions such as:

*Look at the hands in the painting, do you notice they are arranged in a vertical line, they are all significant? Keep going until you are confident the content has been absorbed. Repeat all offered observations so the whole group hears everything.*

## **The Meaning**

Move on to think about what is happening in the painting.

*Let's start thinking about the woman in the foreground. Tell me about her. Tell me about her status. What is she feeling, look at her face and her posture. Why is she feeling so desperate? Is it anything to do with anyone else in the painting?*

There is usually no difficulty in stimulating stories that weave together the main strands of the narrative: the gambling, the desperate woman, the empty purse, the sinister or sympathetic (depending on their reading) shadowed man, the intense couple in the midground.

## **Style**

Introduce the idea of contrast. *This painting is full of contrasts, can you tell me about some of them?*

Inside – outside, clearly demarked by window – shadowed man forms a bridge between the two. Cool moonlight outside, warm gaslight inside, again shadowed man forms a bridge. Happy couple facing each other in midground, unhappy couple facing away from each other in foreground. Action and 'noise' in background, stillness and 'silence' in foreground. Warm colours inside, cool colours outside. *Why is contrast such an important idea in the painting? We can see all the contrasts you have observed but there are invisible contrasts too, can you think about these? Good/bad, innocence/experience, before/ after etc.*

*As so often in paintings the invisible core content is made visible through the way the artist manipulates colour, light, composition and all the elements of the visual language.*

## **Extension Idea for *Painting Narratives* - Give them a Voice**

**A creative writing activity**

**Approximate timing: 20 minutes**

Each student should select one of the main characters from the painting. Their task is to get inside that character's head, at the moment frozen in the painting and to give voice to the character's thoughts. This can be developed later at school into many types of writing or drama.

## **Extension Idea for *Painting Narratives* - Through Their Eyes**

**An imaginative drawing activity**

**Approximate timing: 10 minutes**

Each student should select one of any of the people in the painting, this time it does not need to be one of the main characters. The task is to draw the scene from that person's view point. This can be done initially as a diagram which just blocks in the objects and people, the areas of light and dark that would fall into that person's span of vision.

## **Extension Idea for *Painting Narratives* - Just One Change**

**An activity to extend understanding of the visual language**

**Approximate timing: 10 minutes**

Each student can select one aspect of the painting they would change in order to make the whole image give a different message and tell a different story. They can change anything they want: colour, lighting effects, relative sizes, composition, the way people are facing, the gender of one of the main characters. They can record their changes in anyway you choose. Let some students describe their changes, get the rest of the class to respond with how they think the offered changes alter the message.



## Teaching Idea - Signs and Symbols



PD.53-1958

Introduces symbolism and demonstrates how painters use this aspect of the visual language as a communicative tool. Introduces paintings based on imaginative images. Encourages careful observation leading to imaginative interaction. This teaching process is demonstrated here with a particular painting but is transferable to images constructed with symbols.

Approximate timing: 30 minutes

Location: Gallery 7

L'Umana Fragilita (Human Frailty) 1656

Salvator Rosa 1615 - 1673

### The Content

The content and message of this painting, the transience of human life, may appear to be too sombre or difficult for some students, but we have found the opposite to be true. The conversations around this painting are often long and deep and frequently it is the adults who have to draw them to a close.

Seat the students carefully so they can all see the painting. However careful you are you will find that as the teaching progresses some students will need to move in order to be able to see certain aspects of the content.

This painting has layers of meaning but before the students can begin to unravel it they need to see all the content. The painting is dark and complex and seeing it takes some time. Many paintings like this one give up their content gradually and according to where the students are sitting they will, quite literally, see different things.

Help the students search for the content with starter questions. They may need help to see the detail of the painting. Guide their eyes with questions such as *What is that baby standing in? What sort of plant is down in the left hand corner?* Repeat everything offered so the whole group can hear and give verbal directions to others as to where to look. Allow students to move if need be. Keep going until everyone has seen all the many details such as:

- the knives on the ground
- the butterflies near the cauldron
- the owl in the corner
- the bubbles
- the 4 carvings on the obelisk
- the crown of roses
- the message written on the parchment
- the skeleton grasping the baby's hand

## Deciphering the Meaning

This painting is a prime example of how painters use symbols to communicate meaning. Help them with questions such as *What are the most important objects in the painting?* The skeleton, the mother and child. *How has the painter directed our thinking?* Lighting, scale, composition. *How are the main three characters connected?* The skeleton is holding the baby's hand and is making him write. *How is the mother reacting?* She isn't. *What would a normal reaction be? Why isn't she reacting? How do you think she is feeling?* What are the two other babies doing? *Blowing bubbles. Where are the bubbles landing? By the knives and the thistle. What has this got to do with the skeleton, the baby and the mother.* Fragility of bubbles, fragility of life. *What about the other baby, what is he playing with?* A burning torch, he is literally and metaphorically playing with fire. *Is the torch the light source in the painting or is there another? How might the meaning of the torch change if we read it as light rather than fire?* Continue exploring the symbols until you feel the students have travelled as far as they can go.

When the content has been thoroughly explored, bring the students towards the central message of the painting. *So how could we sum up the meaning of the painting? What do you think the baby is writing? ... If you had painted this, what title would you give it?*

The students will interpret the image in many ways. It is important that their readings are taken as valid and built upon. There is no right interpretation, we all bring ourselves to images and read them through the lens of our own experience.

## **Extension Idea for *Signs and Symbols* - Creating a Pair**

**Extends understanding of many elements of the visual language in an imaginative context**

**Approximate timing: 20 minutes**

Imagine this painting was painted as one of a pair. The subject of the second painting was not death, but life. What symbols would the painter have included? What colours would he have used? What sort of composition might have been used as the structure? The students can either think in the style of the painter or in their own style, drawing their ideas in note form. This activity can also be tackled verbally as a creative writing exercise. Which ever medium is used this work can begin in the gallery and be refined and executed later.

## **Extension Ideas for *Signs and Symbols* - A Map of Meaning**

**Extends understanding of the power of composition**

**Approximate timing: 10 minutes**

Students can draw a blocked in diagram of the painting and use this to work out the composition of the work. If they start by finding the centre of the painting they will discover this is a black void. The composition is based on an X, our eye mainly directed by lighting effects.

For an animated analysis of this work see its entry on Pharos on the Museum's website.

## Teaching Idea – How Is What



Introduces the marriage of content and style and how the style of a painting is its central communicative force. The teaching process is demonstrated with a particular painting but is transferable to all paintings.

Approximate timing: 20 minutes

Location: Gallery I

The Convalescent, c.1923-4

Gwen John, 1876-1939

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PD.24-1951

Children are finely tuned readers of style, advertising and fashion have done a fine job in training their receptivity. This teaching sequence enables your pupils to develop this visual sensitivity and use it in a new direction. All paintings, like all writing, are marriages of content and style, of the what and the how. As with the written language, the style determines what is communicated.

The colour range, subdued light, dry paint, tightly framed composition and small scale of this painting all add to its intimate, quiet, intense atmosphere. The following type of questions will help students move towards understanding how these qualities create the true content of the image.

### The Content

Help the students become engaged with the content of the painting with questions such as, *Tell me about this woman, how old is she? What about her status, is she rich or poor? Where is she sitting, tell me about the room and the furnishings? What is the weather like outside and how can you tell? Do you think a fire is burning in the grate? How is she feeling? What is she reading? Is anyone else in the room? What can she hear? Is she taking any notice of anything she can hear?*

Many of these questions demand that students access qualities of light and colour rather than objects. The weather and the time of day can be deduced from the absence of any direct light or warmth in the room. Others ask students to build on the scant content, the type of furniture, the enclosed feeling, to build a picture beyond the frame. Introducing other senses, such as possible sounds, is often useful in this process of involving students in building up their reactions to a painting.

## Style

Help the students to unpick Gwen John's decisions by opening up aspects of how the painting is put together. *What do you think about the size of the painting, would it make you feel the same if it was bigger? What about the colour range she has used? Why has she chosen to use these colours? The light in the painting is very hazy, there are hardly any shadows, why do you think she has chosen this type of light? Why do you think she has included so little of the room?*

### Extension Idea for *How Is What* - Word Pictures

Extends understanding of many elements of visual language in an imaginative context

Approximate timing: 20 minutes

Working in pairs, ask each pair of students to focus on one aspect of the painting, the woman, the colour of the wall, the pink cup, the quality of light etc. Ask them to freely associate four other objects which, for them, describe that one aspect of the painting as exactly as possible. For example, *the ballet shoe, lipstick, Barbie, sweetie associated with the pink cup; the elephant, filing cabinet, cloud, slush associated with the grey wall*. Invite pairs to read out their phrases, work as a class to make them fit the image perfectly.

### Extension Activity for *How Is What* - The Reply

A creative writing activity

Approximate timing: 20 minutes

If you have agreed as a class that the woman depicted is reading a letter, having absorbed her mood and reactions, the students can work in pairs drafting how she might reply to the news she has just received. The work the students have done analysing the style of the painting and the personality of the sitter can now feed through into the tone and voice of their writing.

# Resources for Reading Paintings

The following Factsheets are available from the Education Department:

Gwen John: The Convalescent

Alfred Elmore: On the Brink

Salvator Rosa: Human Frailty

Further information about many exhibits is available on our new website, Pharos – [www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos). You will also find a detailed discussion of The Annunciation on this site.