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Lesson Plans: Grades 9-12

Search By Standards

What's in a Picture? An Introduction to Subject in the Visual Arts

Introduction



"Boys in a Dory" by Winslow Homer (American, 1836–1910).

Credit: Image courtesy of American Memory at the Library of Congress.

When you visit an art museum and enter one of the halls filled with paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures your eye falls on the image closest to you and you wonder *what is that picture about?*

This lesson plan focuses on helping students to answer that question by investigating the *subject* of works of art. This lesson plan will provide a guide for gathering clues embedded in works of art, as well as an introduction to searching for the underlying meaning and messages that are present in many works of art. Students will work, step by step, through the layers of meaning, delving more deeply into these layers with each work as they progress through the lesson.

Guiding Questions

What is the *subject* in a work of art?

Learning Objectives

Define *subject* in the visual arts

Research and analyze subjects beyond the objects and figures which appear in the image

Explain how a close viewing and a close reading of the image contribute to the successful viewing of the art work

Preparation Instructions

This lesson plan will concentrate primarily on viewing two-dimensional art, such as painting and drawing, although much of what is discussed here is also pertinent for three-dimensional works of sculpture. This lesson is by no means meant to be a complete explanation of how to view art, but is meant to provide an introduction

to this kind of close viewing for students who may not have had the opportunity to experience this kind of deeper visual investigation.

The subject of a work of art may be more or less clear and accessible depending on how old the piece is and how specialized the knowledge behind its subject matter is. For example, most 21st century viewers probably will not recognize the identity of Roman portrait sculpture portraying politicians and military figures who might have been quite famous in their day. The search for clarity and context of the subject matter of an artwork has comprised a significant component of art history over the course of the discipline, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While the average middle school or high school student may not know the full story behind the works of art he or she will encounter in a museum, online, or in this lesson, they can begin to search the image for clues that will help them understand and appreciate the work. For example, by viewing a Delacroix portrait of Napoleon students may not immediately recognize who the image depicts, or what battle he is heading towards, or whether or not that battle was victorious, but they will probably be able to ascertain that the figure is an important and powerful person and that he is at the height of his powers. This information can be gleaned from the positioning of the figure, the vantage point of the painter, the way in which the figure is dressed, and other visible information. By viewing closely and analyzing what they see students will be able to gather significant information about the subject- as well as the location and time period.

If you would like more information on the background of some of the artists discussed in this lesson there are brief biographies on Edgar Degas and Pieter Bruegel the Elder are available from the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Lesson Activities

Activity 1. What is it About? Come Closer!

Activity 2. What is it About? Come a Little Closer!

Activity 3. What is it About? A Little Closer Still

Activity 1. What is it About? Come Closer!

One of the first questions that most people ask when they see a work of art is *what is it about?* The objects contained in the image and the underlying story or idea referenced by those figures and objects is the subject of the work. The *subject* of the work is what the painting, drawing or sculpture is about.

In the next three activities students will investigate the *subject* of several paintings on display at the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This exercise will begin with surface observations, and will delve deeper into the subject with each image.

Ask students to look at the following impressionist painting without identifying the painter or the title. Students should be looking for clues that tell them about where, when, who and what they are seeing in the image. Ask students to spend several moments letting their eyes move around the image. They should take notes of everything they observe.

A larger version of this image is also available with the painter's name and information on the work from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

After they have had a few moments to take in the image, ask them to answer the following questions. These questions are also available as a PDF. If your classroom is connected to the internet students can also answer these questions using our online interactive, which will allow them to refer to the image as they write their answers.

Who is depicted in this image?

How many figures?

What are the genders of the figures?

How are they dressed?

What action(s) are occurring in this image? By whom? Between whom?

What is the setting of this image- where does it take place?

What time of day is it? (Day, evening, night?)

When students have completed these questions ask them to discuss their answers with the class. What do they think is happening in the picture? What were they able to infer from examining the image? Next, explain that the image was created in the late 19th century by the French artist Edgar Degas, and shows a dance class being conducted in Paris. Degas is perhaps best known for his pastels, paintings and sculptures of the theater, and of ballerinas in particular. During the time in which Degas was painting these images viewing the ballet and the opera were very fashionable forms of entertainment, particularly among the bourgeoisie. Knowing this information, is there anything in the image that indicates to students the time period or the location of this dance studio?

Ask students to focus on the group of women in the upper right hand corner of the image. If your classroom has Internet access you may wish to use the Metropolitan Museum's zoom tool to move in for a closer look. Ask students to look particularly at the clothing that the women are wearing. Does this help them to place the general time period of the painting? What about the clothing worn by the male instructor on the right side of the canvas? Is there other information that you can gather from focusing on these figures, such as whether or not the ballerinas come from families that are rich or poor, rural or urban?

What is the location of this image? First and foremost it is a dance studio, and practicing dance is the immediate subject that comes to mind when viewing this image. Ask students to focus on the reflection of the small window that is visible in the mirror on the left side of the picture. While it may not be possible to identify the exact location of this image, students should focus on what can be gleaned from what is visible through the window. Is this dance studio in the country or city? Where might that city be? Looking closely at the view one can see what appears to be smokestacks in the distance. In the late 19th century many Western cities were in the process of industrialization—however most cities around the world were not. The smokestacks of industry that may be in the background may not make it possible to identify Paris, but it does tell us that the location was most likely either Western Europe or the northeastern United States.

You may wish to have students read The Metropolitan Museum of Art's description of the painting, in which the women in the upper right hand corner who are not dressed as ballerinas are noted to be the mothers of some of the dancers, and the man standing on the right is described as a ballet master overseeing an examination. Next have students read the section entitled Subject Matter and Stylistic Characteristics available from Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Once students have read a little about the subject matter that was often the theme of Degas' work ask them to think about what information is revealed in this image.

Does this painting convey something about what life was like in Paris in the 1870s? What does it convey? Explain.

Does this painting tell us something about what captured the interests of Parisians during this period? Explain.

What is the theme—the *subject*—of this image?

Activity 2. What is it About? Come a Little Closer!

Next, students will be examining a 16th century image by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In this lesson students will investigate not only the initial understanding of the subject, similar to the level of investigation of the Degas painting, but also one of the underlying symbolic meanings of this painting. You may wish to have students review the definition of symbolism that is available through the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource Internet Public Library.

Ask students to look at the following painting without identifying the painter or the title. Students should be looking for clues that tell them about where, when, who, and what they are seeing in the image. Ask students to spend several moments letting their eyes move around the image. They should take notes of everything they observe.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1565 painting, *The Harvesters*.

A larger version of this image is available from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

After they have had a few moments to take in the image, ask them to answer the following questions. These questions are also available as a PDF. If your classroom is connected to the internet students can also answer these questions using our online interactive, which will allow them to refer to the image as they write their answers.

Who is depicted in this image?

How many figures?

What are the genders of the figures?

How are they dressed?

What action(s) are occurring in this image? By whom?

What is the setting of this image—where does it take place?

What time of day is it? (Day, evening, night?)

What do they think is the theme—the *subject*—of this image?

When students have completed answering these questions you may wish to ask them to discuss the subject that can initially be read from viewing and taking note of the figures, landscape and objects contained in this image. Students will probably note the agricultural setting, and that the image contains a number of figures in groups engaged in a variety of activities, from eating to napping, and from cutting wheat to bundling it. Students will likely identify the subject of the image as being one of farming, of working in the fields, or of harvesting. All of these identifications will certainly match the subject that Bruegel himself gave to the work by giving it the title *The Harvesters*.

By combining close observation of the image with contextual information students can continue to investigate additional subjects contained within this image. Explain to students that this image is a 16th century painting by the Dutch artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It is entitled *The Harvesters*, and is one of six paintings depicting times of the year completed by Bruegel. One of the six paintings has been lost, however five paintings, including *The Harvesters* still exist. The remaining four paintings are entitled *The Gloomy Day*, *Hunters in the Snow*, *The Return of the Herd* and *Haymaking*. Have students look at the titles of these paintings. Can they discern a theme in the titles? Have students concentrate on the details of the image as they try to ascertain what season or time of year is being depicted.

Is there anything in the image that indicates to students the time of year depicted in this image?

What is the evidence that tells the viewer in what season this image takes place?

What do the plants and trees in this image tell you about the season?

What about the clothing the people are wearing?

What about the activities that are being depicted?

Ask students to compile this information to identify the season or time of year shown in this image. Next ask them to think about whether or not the season depicted here is just a backdrop, or whether or not it plays another role in this image. You may wish to have them read the brief description of the painting and its place in the seasonal cycle that is available from the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In 16th century Europe the cycle of the year was delineated by the activities and chores that needed to be completed around the farm or in the house, which were in turn governed by the weather and seasonal climate changes. Thus, winter could easily be signified by the daily activities practiced by people in pursuing their living during that time of year—such as hunting in the snow, one of Bruegel's other pieces from this series of paintings. This kind of symbolism is similar to the way certain images—such as a pumpkin, orange and red leaves, rabbits, or snowflakes—might signify particular times of the year to us today. When we see the image of a snowflake or a pumpkin it is often so laden with associations of experiences and traditions in our minds that it is hard to see them only as pumpkins and snowflakes and not as reminders of costumes, family gatherings and the brisk winds of winter. For anyone who lives by the agricultural calendar, as did many Europeans at the time Bruegel painted this image, paintings depicting specific agricultural duties would have been as clearly symbolic of particular times of the year as a pumpkin is symbolic of autumn for many Americans today. An investigation into the subject of this painting should lead students initially to the depiction of harvesting, and then to the time

of year for which that harvest was symbolic: late summer. After having gathered all this information you may wish to ask your students to discuss:

What is the theme—the *subject*—of this image?

Activity 3. What is it About? A Little Closer Still

The third painting in this lesson is the French artist George de la Tour's 17th century painting *The Fortune Teller*. The investigation of this painting will begin, as with the Degas painting, with an accounting of who or what is contained within the visual field. Next, students will take a second, deeper look at what is actually happening in this image- which may be more than it at first seems. Students will then learn what well known story this image is referencing, and then what that story in turn symbolized.

Ask students to look at the following painting without identifying the painter or the title. Students should be looking for clues that tell them about where, when, who and what they are seeing in the image. Ask students to spend several moments letting their eyes move around the image. They should take notes of everything they observe.

Georges de la Tour's painting of the early 17th century, *The Fortune Teller*.

A larger version of this image is also available.

After they have had a few moments to take in the image, ask them to answer the following questions. These questions are also available as a PDF. If your classroom is connected to the internet students can also answer these questions using our online interactive, which will allow them to refer to the image as they write their answers.

Who is depicted in this image?

How many figures?

What are the genders of the figures?

How are they dressed?

What action(s) are occurring in this image? By whom?

What is the setting of this image- where does it take place?

What time of day is it? (Day, evening, night?)

What is the theme—the *subject*—of this image?

When students have completed answering these questions you may wish to ask them to discuss the subject that can initially be read from viewing and taking note of the figures contained in the image. This image differs from the previous two images in this lesson in its focus and intimacy. While the Degas image shows much of a large and lively dance studio, and the Bruegel shows a sprawling landscape that literally extends to the sea, the de la Tour image brings the viewer into the close space inhabited by the five figures of the painting.

If students did not note in the picking of the young man's pockets in their initial viewing of the image ask students to return to the painting.

What do they think is the relationship between the figures in this image?

Where is the attention of each of these figures directed? Students should note the direction of each figure's eyes.

What are the woman on the far left and the woman in the center doing?

What does the body language of the young man indicate to you? Does he seem aware of what is going on?

What does the way he is dressed tell you about him?

Explain to students that this is a 17th-century genre painting by the French artist George de la Tour entitled *The Fortune Teller*. A definition of genre painting is available through the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource Internet Public Library. Ask students to return to the painting to answer the following questions.

Which figure is the fortune teller?

How are the women in this painting related to each other?

Who is the young man?

The story of the young, naive man who thinks he knows best and is subsequently swindled is a common theme in literature and in the visual arts—particularly in parables. In this image a foppish young man wearing flashy clothes is having his fortune read by an elderly woman while her accomplices cut his watch from its chain and pull his purse from his pocket. He is too busy showing his knowing skepticism towards the old woman's reading of his future to realize that it is a future freed from the burden of his wealth.

As with many works of art, *The Fortune Teller* probably contains an allusion to a well known story that would have come to the minds of most 17th century viewers. Many European works of art, particularly prior to the 19th century, took Biblical themes as their subject. In the case of this de la Tour painting, it appears to allude to the Biblical episode often referred to as the parable of the *Prodigal Son*. An explanation of this parable is available through the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource Internet Public Library. Ask students to read this explanation of the parable, and then to answer the following questions.

Is this a direct depiction of the parable? Why or why not?

Does this specific scene take place in the narrative of the story?

Why do you think this picture is often connected to this parable?

Have students read the definition of allusion that is available through the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource Internet Public Library. Have them return to de la Tour's painting.

How does this painting *allude* to the parable of the Prodigal Son?

What are the details of the painting which might have reminded viewers familiar with the story of the parable?

Why do you think that the painter created an image that alluded to the parable instead of depicting it?

Ask students to think about the parable of the Prodigal Son. As a parable it has as its purpose the conveying of a lesson. What is the lesson behind this parable? As explained in the reading above, the lesson of the parable has two parts. The story conveys the emphasis found in the literary source for this story—the Gospel of Luke—on the “theology of unconditional love and the grace of God,” which is symbolized by the welcome and love extended to the good for nothing son upon his return. However, the parable also emphasizes that both repentance and a return to the right track are necessary. You may wish to help students to think about what message is being conveyed by de la Tour's allusion to this story.

Does this image emphasize both of these messages? Just one? Explain your answer.

Why do you think the painter has chosen to show the young man in the process of losing his money rather than returning home (a common theme in Western visual art)?

The symbolic meaning or message of a work of art is also thought of as one of its subjects. How many kinds of subjects have you found in this painting? What are they? Explain your answer.

Assessment

As students have completed this lesson they have delved deeper and deeper in the subjects and meanings of each piece. For this assessment students should bring together all of the skills in close viewing and close reading that they have practiced in this lesson to assess the three paintings discussed here as a group. What do Edgar Degas' *The Dance Class*, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Harvesters* and Georges de la Tour's *The Fortune Teller* have in common? Ask students to begin by answering these questions about the paintings as a group:

What is similar about the settings of these images?

What is similar about the figures or characters in these images?

At first it may be difficult to see much similar in these images. They are painted in three different centuries, in three different settings with three different groups of people. Next, ask students to look at the following images:

Jacques-Louis David's 1787 painting, *The Death of Socrates*

An explanation of the background and story behind this painting is available from the EDSITEment-reviewed web resource The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Next, ask students to look at this image:

Andrea Mantegna's painting from the 1450s, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*

Finally have students look at this image:

Girard de Laresse's 1671 *Apollo and Aurora*

Have students read the description of the painting available from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, including the indication of the work's mythological basis.

Ask students to concentrate on the subject of these works, beginning with the title.

In what ways are the physical settings of the paintings from the lesson different from each of these paintings?

In what ways are the temporal settings of the paintings from the lesson different from each of these paintings?

In what ways are the figures contained in each of the paintings from the lesson different from these three paintings?

How is this subject matter of these images different from each of the three paintings looked at in this lesson?

As students begin to view the paintings from the lesson and their subject matters as a group they may start to think about the settings reflect the time and place of the artist—such as the backdrop of 1870s Paris for Parisian Edgar Degas. They may also begin to see that the way in which the figures are dressed, and the pursuits in which they are depicted engaging are also part of the world that the artists themselves inhabited. Even *The Fortune Teller*, while alluding to a Biblical theme, is set within de la Tour's world of 17th century France. By contrast students may see that the additional works put forward in this assessment are focused on their historical, religious and mythological subject matter, rather than on their immediate surroundings.

Have students write a brief essay explaining what overarching subject can be found in the three paintings viewed in the body of this lesson.

Extending The Lesson

As an introduction to investigating the subject in the visual arts, and to progressing through deepening layers of meaning this lesson plan has focused on examples of Western art. Once students have completed this lesson they will have gained one of the tools for looking that will allow them to pursue similar investigations into art in a wide variety of media and styles from around the world. You may wish to extend this lesson by having students pursue investigations into the subject of additional works of art. The EDSITEment-reviewed web resource The Metropolitan Museum of Art provides images and descriptions of thousands of works of art. You may wish to have students explore the site and choose images to research and write about. Some suggested pieces for investigation might include the following:

Angkorian Period bronze sculpture from Cambodia of the Buddhist bodhisattva *Avalokiteshvara*

Romare Bearden's 1971 painting, *The Block*

Mayan vessel with mythological scene from the 8th century

Emmanuel Leutze's image of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

Relief of Nebhepetra Mentuhotep from Egypt's Middle Kingdom period

Krishna holding Mt. Govardhan from Mughal India

Chinese Northern Song Dynasty painting attributed to Du Qing entitled *Summer Mountains*

Iyoba pendant mask from Benin dated to the 16th century

Edward Hopper's 1929 painting, *The Lighthouse at Two Lights*

Grade Level

9-12

Time Required

3 class periods

Subject Areas

- Art and Culture > Medium > Visual Arts

Skills

- Critical thinking
- Interpretation
- Logical reasoning
- Visual art analysis

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Activity Worksheets

What's in a Picture? An Introduction to Subject in the Visual Arts:
Worksheet 1

What's in a Picture? An Introduction to Subject in the Visual Arts:
Worksheet 2

What's in a Picture? An Introduction to Subject in the Visual Arts:
Worksheet 3

Student Resources

What's in a Picture? What is it About? A Little Closer Still Interactive

What's in a Picture? What is it About? Come a Little Closer! Interactive

What's in a Picture? What is it About? Come Closer! Interactive

Media



"Boys in a Dory" by Winslow Homer (American, 1836–1910).

Credit: Image courtesy of American Memory at the Libray of Congress.