



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2001 Volume II: Art as Evidence: The Interpretation of Objects

Look Before You Think: How to Appreciate a Painting

Guide for Curriculum Unit 01.02.03
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The primary objective of my curriculum unit, entitled “Look Before You Think: How To Appreciate a Painting,” is to facilitate my third-graders’ enjoyment of and response to fine arts specifically, paintings. Every year we make visits to both the Yale Art Gallery and the British Art Center. The students are always so enthusiastic about these museum visits that I see a wonderful opportunity to further stimulate and enhance their art appreciation experiences. To this end I have created a teaching tool that will help my students to become more closely engaged with particular paintings on exhibit at these museums. I have focused on paintings by four well-known artists from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries: Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Night Café* (1888); Salvador Dali’s *The Persistence of Memory* (1931); Pablo Picasso’s *First Steps* (1943); and Edward Hopper’s *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (1958). Each painter will offer us the opportunity to more closely “study” a different aspect of art. With Picasso we will look at his expressive use of lines and shapes. We will consider how Hopper is able to create moods and suggest ‘stories’ in his scenes of modern life. We will examine Van Gogh’s distinctive feeling for color and we will explore Dali’s imaginative expression of ideas. My unit begins with a brief and simplified presentation of the history of painting. After that, we explore the craft of painting to give the students an idea of what painters do and the materials they use. Using the four selected paintings, we will learn about basic art elements such as color, perspective and light, and discover how they are employed in these art works. Following this is a section of questions specially designed to help my young students to look at each selected painting and analyze it, moving from first impressions to a more detailed examination. In the final section of the unit I have provided my students with opportunities to explore how artists use color and to experiment with what they learn in creating artworks of their own using various media on paper. The curriculum unit is interdisciplinary with a strong emphasis on literacy, and so I plan to immerse the children in readings about the lives and works of the selected artists whom we are studying. For this purpose I will use biographies by Mike Venezia, who has written (and illustrated) an excellent children’s series entitled, *Getting to Know the World’s Greatest Artists*. I teach third-grade in a self-contained classroom at Lincoln-Bassett Community School. My students are primarily of African-American descent, a heterogeneous group with varying abilities in the 8-10 age range. Although I have designed this unit with them in mind, I am confident that it could easily be adapted by teachers to suit the K-3 grades, if not older. (Recommended for Reading, Writing, and Art, grades 2-5.)

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