



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1987 Volume III: Writing About American Culture

How Do Artists Get Their Ideas? Culture and Environment as Sources of Ideas

Guide for Curriculum Unit 87.03.05
by Diane Pressler

This unit is designed to: 1) increase students' ability to generate their own ideas for art images; 2) help students realize the effect environment and cultural background have on the way artists and they themselves view life; 3) introduce students to ways of looking at and finding meaning in art work; and 4) help students develop their verbal, written, and art skills.

This unit exposes students to the lives and creative works of American artists with cultural backgrounds both similar to and different from their own. It is divided into three sub-units that can be taught separately or in sequence. It includes a Black artist, Jacob Lawrence; a White artist, Andrew Wyeth; and Native American art of the Plains Indians. The sub-units were designed to be used in art classes by middle school students in grades five through eight. Each sub-unit contains a brief biographical/historical account on each artist/group, lesson plans, teaching strategies, and a detailed step-by-step description of art instruction for a particular lesson.

Four art concepts are explored in the lessons: "Composition"—the arrangement of objects on a page (stressing the relationship between parts to parts, and parts to the whole); "Space"—the relationship between figure/ground; "Balance"—symmetrical and asymmetrical balance; and "Meaning/Expression" in artwork—learning to look at and for the expressive qualities inherent in artwork (famous work and their own efforts).

I have worked with students using the approaches I have mentioned with a lot of success; however, the teacher is warned that in the Andrew Wyeth unit "drawing what you see" is very difficult for students, so a lot of encouragement has to be given.

(Recommended for General Art classes, grades 5-8)

Key Words

Art American African and Native Drawing Art Instruction Composition and Inspiration

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