

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Do- It- Yourself Reading Paintings Key Stage 2

This is one of our range of DIY resources, which aim to provide you with what you need to teach your pupils 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, these ideas may need adapting, but we hope they will act as a springboard. Each idea includes signpost sequences all of which point to pupil interaction with the exhibits, *example prompt questions written in italics*, and information. Each idea introduces pupils to a specific part of the language of paintings. Many are followed by suggested extension ideas that can take place in the galleries. 'Into Action' sheets, which are linked to these teaching ideas, are available for pupils to use in the galleries.

### 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

Gallery 1, 2 and 7

### 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 - One Head to Another

To introduce the prime function of paintings- communication. We recommend children are introduced to these types of ideas before they interact with the paintings.

Approximate timing: 15 minutes

Location: a free central space in any gallery

Establish where the children are, what sort of museum they are in and what they are going to look at.

*So why have we come to look at paintings, what do you think paintings are for? It's easy to say what a bed is for but what about paintings. Who were the first people to make paintings? What did they paint? Their food (animals), the most important thing in their lives. Why? As a hope, a wish, a prayer, the images were magical.*

*There is much more to making paintings than decorating walls. Paintings send messages. Let's see how. First I am going to try and send an idea from inside my head into all of your heads.*

Choose a simple object, for example an apple, do not tell the children what object you have chosen. In a sequence, try sending the object by telepathy, and then try spelling it out in sign language, spell it in Morse code, say it in French, try to communicate it in lots of languages that the children don't understand.

*Not getting the message? Let me try again.* Now draw a simple outline picture of your object and show the children. *So finally the message got from my head to yours, but why?* Help the children think about why pictures communicate so well - direct link to visual memory, everyone can recognise it, no special language needed. Move on to think about how your picture really works. *Does it really look like an apple, what is missing?* Colour, tone, correct size, shape, third dimension, smell, texture, etc. *What is actually there?* Just lines. It's a sign, made of lines that your brain recognises.

*So lines and shapes communicate really well. Lets see how well.* Draw a tick. *What does this line mean?* Draw a X. *What do these two lines mean? How many meanings can you think of for the X.* Multiply, letter x, poison, cross roads, kiss, IO in roman numbers, do not (smoke, enter, etc). Encourage the children to think about how they know when an X means multiply and when it means a kiss - context.

*So lines and shapes can communicate many meanings. Painters start with an idea in their head and get it into your head by using lines, signs, shapes and colours. So let's go and see some paintings and see how they work.*

## Teaching Idea – Paint Me A Story



PD.I08-1975

Introduces how narrative paintings work, the decisions artists make to communicate. 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 children carefully; check they can all see the whole painting. Before the children can think about the painting they have to see it, this often takes longer than you might expect. *What has the painter decided to put in this painting? Tell me about everything you can see.* The children usually 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 passionflower and the lily intertwining up the wall

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

*Look at the unhappy woman's hand, what is she holding? Look at the man in the shadow, look at his hand, what do you notice? What is that on the ground?*

Keep them going until you are confident they have seen everything. If any child offers something unexpected, accept their interpretation as interesting and valid, ask the others if they see it that way too. Repeat everything that each child offers so the whole class can hear and share everything.

## The Storyline

When the class have seen everything in the painting move them on to think about what is happening in the painting.

*Let's start thinking about the woman in the foreground of the painting. Tell me about her. Is she rich or poor, look at her clothes carefully. What is she feeling? Look at her face... Why is she feeling so desperate? Is it anything to do with anyone else in the painting?*

The children won't need much encouraging to start linking the main strands of the narrative together: the gambling, the desperate woman, the empty purse, the sinister or sympathetic (depending on their reading) shadowed man, the intense couple in the midground. The difficulty is keeping track of their story lines. It helps a lot if the class give the four main characters names.

## Style

Introduce the children to the idea of contrast. *Tell me a colour that contrasts with white, tell me a mood that contrasts to happy- 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. All these can be accessed by the children with prompt questions to direct their thinking such as *Where would you rather be in the painting inside or outside? Why is that? Lighting - colour - action - warmth. Why has the painter put in so many contrasts? What is he trying to get us to think about? Is there one really important contrast? How would you sum it up?* Good/bad, innocence/experience, before/ after etc. As the children unpick the painting, try to communicate how an artist makes deliberate decisions which all add to the power and clarity of the image. Just as with a piece of writing, the content is only the start, it's the style that really counts.

## **Extension Idea for *Paint Me A Story* - Give them a Voice**

**A creative, verbal activity**

**Approximate timing: 20 minutes**

Working in pairs, ask each pair to select one of the main characters from the painting. Check that there is a fair coverage of the four main characters. The children's task is to get inside that character's head, at the moment in the story captured in the painting, and to give voice to the character's thoughts. The children can write or just talk. They can perform their mini scripts in front of the painting, which can be developed later at school into many types of writing or drama.

## **Extension Idea for *Paint Me A Story* - Just One Change**

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

**Approximate timing : 10 minutes**

Working in pairs the children have to select one aspect of the painting they would change in order to make the whole image give a different message, 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 of the pairs describe their changes, get the rest of the class to respond with how they think the changes alter the message.

## **Extension Idea for *Paint Me A Story* - Make it Yours**

**An activity to develop visual analysis and visual memory**

**Approximate time: 10 minutes**

Help the children draw a diagram of the painting. Draw an oblong, divide it in half horizontally and vertically, block in the essential shapes and how the lighting effects work. If you think this is too difficult for the children, they can tell you what to include and you can draw the diagram. Then time the class as they look at the painting for one minute. Get them to turn round, shut their eyes and recreate the painting in their minds. They can turn back to check it, then try again. After a few goes the painting will be theirs forever.

## Teaching Idea – Signs and Symbols



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 other images constructed with symbols.

Approximate timing: 30 minutes

Location: Gallery 7

L'umana Fragilita (Human Frailty) 1656

Salvator Rosa 1615 - 1673

PD.53-1958

### The Content

The content and message of this painting, the transience of human life, may appear to be too sombre or difficult for children, 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 children carefully so they can all see the painting. However careful you are you will find that as the teaching progresses some children 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 children 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 children are sitting they will, quite literally, see different things.

Help the children search for the content with starter questions. *What can you see? What has the painter put in this painting?* The children will 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 that each child offers so that the whole class can hear and give verbal directions to others as to where to look. Allow children to move if need be. Keep going until the whole class 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 four 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, but do not assume that the children will understand this. Help them towards this new level of understanding by questions such as: *We have seen all the things the painter has put in the painting, do you think this is a normal collection of objects or are they extraordinary? Do you think the painter chose these objects deliberately or did he just put any old thing that came to mind into the painting? Do you think the painter actually saw this scene or has he made it up?*

When you think the children understand that the content is carefully chosen, that the scene is constructed and based on the painter's imagination, help the children unpick the meanings of the symbols and the construction of the painting. The following is a suggestion of the sorts of questions that can help children decipher the symbols. *What are the most important objects in the painting?* The skeleton, the mother and child. *How has the painter made sure that this is what we think?* Central, big, well lit, against the dark background. *How are these three connected?* The skeleton is holding the baby's hand and helping/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 will happen to the bubbles.* They will pop. *What has this got to do with the skeleton, the baby and the mother?* Bubbles last a short time, life is short. *What about the other baby, what is he playing with?* A

burning torch, he is literally and metaphorically playing with fire. Continue exploring the symbols until you feel the children have absorbed enough to make sense of the painting.

When the content has been thoroughly explored, try to bring the children 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 children will interpret the image in many ways. It is very important that their readings, their understanding, is taken as absolutely 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 Ideas for *Signs and Symbols* - The Message**

**A creative writing activity**

**Approximate timing: 10 minutes**

Working in pairs or individually the children can write what they think the baby is scribbling in the painting.

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

**Activity to extend understanding of many elements of the visual language in an imaginative context**

**Approximate timing: 15 minutes**

Imagine this painting was one of a pair.

The second painting was not about death, it was all about life. What symbols would the painter have included? What colours would he have used? Children could begin this in the gallery and then refine and execute their ideas at school.



## 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 1

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 children move towards understanding how these qualities create the true content of the image.

### The Content

Help the children 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 the children 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 children 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 children in building up their reactions to a painting.

## Style

Help the children 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

Approx 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 'Into Action' sheets are available from the Education Department:

Code Breaker

Think Colour

Do You Like the Dark?

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)