

An Exercise in Reverie: Finding Meaning in Art

According to philosopher John Armstrong, "Reverie is the state of giving ourselves up to the flow of associations. This state of letting something happen—a species of relaxation—is one we need to cultivate when we look at paintings or buildings. . . . Reverie is a mode of introducing personal material into a picture or building: it brings an abundance of thoughts and feelings into play. It also frees us from merely following routine assumptions. . . . Reverie operates at the root of thinking: it is essential to the creative process in which we come to make thoughts for ourselves."

In this lesson, students are encouraged to contemplate art and make associations to prior experiences and memories in order to construct meaning that is both personal and original. Through writing, students record their ideas and understandings to be shared with others. Arriving at these ideas for oneself is important, as Armstrong concludes, "The value of a personal discovery lies in the fact that not only do we arrive at a helpful conclusion, but that we have experience of how the conclusion was reached. We gain acquaintance with the process of coming to see." (Excerpts from: Armstrong, John. *Move Closer: An Intimate Philosophy of Art*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000. Page 78.)

Curricular Areas

English Language Arts, Visual Arts – Aesthetic Response

Grade Level

Adaptable to all grade levels

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Writing.CCRA.W.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Writing.CCRA.W.10](#)
- [CCRA.SL.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Speaking and Listening.CCRA.SL.4](#)

National Visual Arts Standard

- Artistic Process: Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning. Anchor Standard: Perceive and analyze artistic work (Essential question: How do life experiences influence the way you relate to art?) Art Images Required



Untitled XXI, 1982

Willem de Kooning, American

Oil on canvas

6 feet 5 inches × 7 feet 4 inches (195.6 × 223.5 cm)

Partial and promised gift of Dennis Alter, 1994

1994-158-1

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Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are also available in the Artstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. (NOTE: The images in this lesson plan are from Museum's modern collection, and some are not available in the Artstor database. Suggestions are given below.)

- *Untitled XXI*, 1982, by Willem de Kooning
Artstor search: not available, but a search for "de Kooning" in the Creator field will yield several alternatives
- *Torches Mauve*, 1960, by Franz Kline
Artstor search: "torches mauve"
- *The Hermitage*, 1924, by Joan Miró
Artstor search: "miro, hermitage"
- *Hydrangeas Spring Song*, 1976, by Alma Thomas
Artstor search: not available, but a search for "Alma Thomas" in the Creator field will yield several alternatives

Lesson Process

1. Observe: Spend several minutes looking closely at the work of art.
2. Respond: Consider what the painting reminds you of.
 - a. First, write about what emotion the painting reminds you of. Describe the emotion in as much detail as possible. Describe a moment when you felt that particular emotion.
 - b. Next, write about a place that the painting reminds you of, either real or imaginary. Describe what the place looks like.
 - c. Next, write about a memory that the painting reminds you of. Let your mind escape to that experience, and write as many details as you can about it.
 - d. Finally, write about a person that the painting reminds you of. What is it that you see that reminds you of them? What memories of that person come to mind? Record as much as you can about them.
 - e. Alternative: If you are in a gallery setting or can display the image at a large size in the classroom, have students change seats after each period of writing. This allows them to gain a new perspective on the work.
3. Analyze and Discuss: As a large group, share the observations, thoughts, and questions you have about the work of art—first about the emotions, then places, memories, and people. Look back at the painting together and discuss the thoughts and interpretations as a group. Did anyone have similar thoughts? Did the shapes, lines, or colors evoke very different memories or ideas?
4. Connect and Explore: Share questions that the painting prompted and ask the group to contribute ideas that address these questions. The facilitator can also share information about the artwork or quotes from the artist. Reflect on the work again after this new information is shared. What new thoughts and questions arise?

5. Compare: Repeat the exercise with a work of art of a similar type, genre, or medium. (NOTE: Some possible choices are listed under Art Images Needed, or use something of your own choosing.) After exploring the second work, discuss the similarities and differences between responses. Use a Venn diagram to record the ideas if you like.

Assessment

Think of a vivid memory. Write about what you remember about the experience—how you felt, what you saw, smelled, touched, and tasted. Brainstorm the colors, lines, and shapes that capture that memory and create an abstract work of art that represents this memory. A written statement can accompany it.

Enrichment

Repeat the activity above with a different work of art. (NOTE: Some possible choices are listed under Art Images Needed.) After coming up with your own ideas and arriving at a personal meaning with the work, conduct research about it. Research the title, date, size, and information about the artist and time and place in which it was made. What other kinds of work did the artist make? What have people said about what this work of art is about? What was the context (personal, cultural, historical) of when the work was made? After collecting this information, compare the two kinds of information that you now have about this work of art—your personal understanding of it and the art historical facts about it. How are these two sets of information different? How is each one useful? What do you think you will remember about this work of art a year from now? Why do you think so?