

Make It Your Own: The Art of Retelling

Throughout history, artists have created visual images inspired by stories. Each new version is at once personal and universal, innovative while still connected to tradition, and unique in the way that it reflects the artist's influences. This lesson guides students to look closely at two works of art that depict scenes from the same archetypal story in significantly different ways and to analyze how each artist reinterprets the story to make it his own.

Grade Level

Grades 6–12

Common Core Academic State Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.9](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.2](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

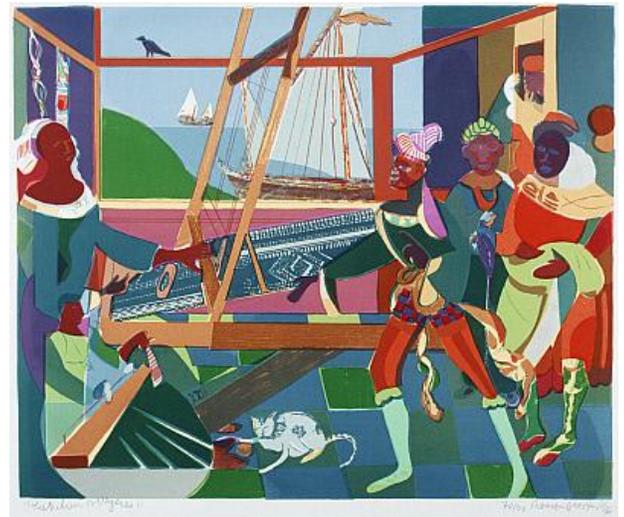
Art Images Required

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.

- [The Trial of the Bow](#), 1929, by N. C. Wyeth
- [The Return of Ulysses](#), 1976, by Romare Bearden
Artstor search: "bearden ulysses"

Alternate Images

- [Penelope with the Suitors](#), about 1509, by Pintoricchio (The National Gallery, London)
Artstor: NG911
- [Woman in Blue](#), 1937, by Henri Matisse
Artstor search: matisse "woman in blue"
- [Resist-Dyed Textile \(Ndop\)](#), early 20th century, Cameroon
- [Boats on Canal, Mansoura, Delta, Egypt](#), 1959 (negative); 1960 (print), by Paul Strand
- [Abdin Dahbi Ibriham, Aswan, Egypt](#), 1959 (negative); 1960 (print), by Paul Strand



The Return of Ulysses, 1976

Romare Bearden (American)

Color screenprint

18 3/4 x 22 3/4 inches (47.6 x 57.8 cm) Sheet: 22 5/8 x 30 1/8 inches (57.5 x 76.5cm)

Gift of the Brandywine Graphic Workshop, 1977

1977-19-2

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Lesson Objectives

Through participation in this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Describe the similarities and differences between two artists' approaches to the same subject.
2. Analyze how artistic expression is influenced by cultural context and life experiences.
3. Reinterpret a well-known story or a work of art, making new meaning through personal memories and experiences.

Lesson Process

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. Assess prior knowledge of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Provide a short synopsis and background information if needed. (This website from Missouri State University is an informative and accessible starting point for teachers: [Odyssey: The Classic Epic](#))
2. Explain to students that the story of Odysseus comes from a long tradition of oral storytelling in ancient Greece, which means that it was retold and reinterpreted many times before it was ever recorded in writing. It has inspired many retellings for thousands of years, from ancient vase- and wall-paintings to modern movies.
3. Explain that in this lesson, we will be looking at two modern artists' interpretations of related scenes from *The Odyssey*: when Odysseus finally returns home to Penelope and her suitors and must convince them of his identity. Our goal is to observe, describe, and compare as many details as we can from the two paintings and to analyze the artists' creative choices in the process.

GUIDED PRACTICE

1. First, display an image of Wyeth's *The Trial of the Bow*. Give students, and yourself, quiet time to look at the image. After a few minutes, model the process of observing and describing by thinking aloud about some of your own observations. Ask students to record what they see. Encourage them to describe only what they can observe, such as details about the characters' appearance, actions, and their setting, and to hold off telling what they *think* about the painting. Ask students to share their observations.
2. Repeat this process with Romare Bearden's *The Return of Ulysses*. After giving students an opportunity to share what they notice, display the two paintings side-by-side so that students can make a direct comparison.
3. Work together to record students' thoughts about how the two paintings are similar and how they are different using a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer. Encourage them to look closely for observations about style and composition.
4. Before giving students any information about the two artists, ask them discussion questions to scaffold inferences based on their observations: Do you think the paintings are set in ancient Greece or in another time period and place? What details give you clues about the setting? Do you think the characters in the paintings look like ancient Greek characters? What details help you understand the characters? Are the paintings still telling the same story even though they are so different?

5. Finally, provide students with some basic background information about each artist and his work. How do you see the artist expressing himself and making new meaning through creative choices? Is it okay for an artist to appropriate a story and make it his or her own? Why or why not? Which painting do you like more? Why do you like it?

Assessment

1. Romare Bearden's artwork reflects a profound personal interest in envisioning the canon of Western art and literature through an African American lens. In fact, *The Return of Ulysses* was directly inspired by, and also comments on, a painting from the Italian Renaissance (*Penelope with the Suitors*, by Pintoricchio).

Learn more about Bearden's life and his artistic and cultural influences, and then come back to *The Return of Ulysses*. Using *Penelope with the Suitors* and the other supplemental images, ask students to find and describe connections between Bearden's diverse influences and the creative choices we see in his painting. How does he pay homage to an earlier work of art? How does his interpretation diverge from Pintoricchio's?

2. Provide students with a folktale, myth, or other story with universal themes. Ask them to retell the story, or perhaps just a scene from the story, in a way that is meaningful and personal to them. This can be done through writing, drawing, or both. Encourage students to think carefully about how the story speaks to them and how they might transform it to make it their own.

Supplemental Activities

1. Play a game of Telephone as a class to demonstrate how words and phrases can very quickly change as they are repeated. What factors contribute to those changes?
2. Display a simple narrative piece of art for the class. Ask each student to copy the picture, choosing just one detail to change. Students may change anything about the picture, but they must be able to explain their choices. Share the completed drawings and have students discuss their choices.