

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative 2014 Volume I: Understanding History and Society through Images, 1776-1914

Dramatizing Art: Tableaux Vivants

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Introduction

Young students love to hear and tell stories. This statement is, of course, no surprise to anyone, as we were all young once and likely can recall being drawn into a riveting tale or deeply intriguing image. Exposure to wonderful literature opens the eyes, and in turn the world, to developing minds and sparks a desire to place events and experiences in context, not an easy task with a limited frame of reference. Picture books, and pictures themselves, enrich a child's experience as they learn from the stories they hear. Quite easily and readily, they begin to ask questions to fill in the blanks with missing information. This eight-week history unit for second graders is designed to provide an experience for children to ask and answer questions as it integrates art, social studies, writing and theater through trips to local art museums, stories from history, journals for writing and sketching, and opportunities for dramatic representation.

Rationale

The Edgewood staff is committed to teaching our students through visual literacy. Edgewood Magnet School's vision is to utilize an arts-integrated curriculum and partnership with the community to provide a positive learning environment that encourages inquiry, self discovery, and independent thinking. This approach to visual learning inherently allows, supports and encourages cross-curricular teaching and embraces all types of learners. Our neighborhood/magnet school setting is a rewarding environment, with students coming to school each day from a variety of home circumstances and with differences in academic levels. As a result of these variables, the children have differing levels of background knowledge and life experiences. Teaching through the arts opens the doors and minds to learning opportunities.

We are fortunate to have a partnership with the Yale Center for British Art and it is this alliance that I would like to use, as well as other museums and historic sites in New Haven, to support a curriculum unit that uses tableaux vivants, living pictures, as a strategy for teaching history and historic events. The students will recreate paintings, posing in costume as the subjects in the paintings. Although specific paintings are identified as the teaching platform for this unit, the bigger idea is the method and approach used to reach students through art. These particular paintings support the themes and standards, as students learn the similarities and differences between society as it seems in the historical images and society today. Students will use their learning to create stories and plays.

Objectives

It is difficult for young minds to understand the concepts of time and space and this often proves a challenge as I cover historical themes or times through literature or conversation. My hope is that this hands-on approach to learning about our past will encourage my second-graders to develop an understanding of the idea of then and now. Pictures and picture books are a standard in most primary classrooms and can serve as a vehicle to help set the stage for learning through visual experiences. Throughout this unit, the student will be working toward the following goals:

- enjoying the opportunity to view authentic pieces of artwork in museums;
- gaining an appreciation of art, both authentic and reproduced, through exposure to both;
- expanding their vocabulary through observations of art;
- developing critical thinking skills and recognizing change over time;
- connecting the past and present and determining similarities and differences;

- creating a narrative, inspired by an authentic piece of art and brought to life through tableaux and playwriting;

- creating one's own artwork to illustrate the story by the authentic piece of artwork.

Tableaux Vivants

Tableaux vivants are one of the most innocent, entertaining, and instructive amusements for the young, engendering a love for and appreciation of art. ¹

Tableaux vivant is often referred to as a playful pastime, but it has also served significant educational and recreational purposes in the cultural history of the United States. Translated from French, tableaux vivant means 'living pictures.' ² The genre peaked in popularity between 1830 and 1920. During a performance of tableaux vivant, a cast of characters represented scenes from literature, art, history, or everyday life on a stage. After the curtain went up, the models remained silent and frozen for roughly thirty seconds. Particular emphasis was placed on staging, pose, costume, make-up, lighting, and the facial expression of the models.³ Sometimes a poem or music accompanied the scene, and often a large wooden frame outlined the perimeter of the stage, so as to reference the frame of a painted canvas.⁴

The tableaux vivant was a new fad in the America of the 1840's. It had vague, distant origins in the pageants of medieval royal processions and in Christmas nativity scenes.

By mid-century theatrical representations of art by person or group posed silently and motionless became widely know in the United States. Tableaux appeared on the public stage but the private parlor or home provided greater freedom. ⁵

During the later part of the 19th century, tableaux vivant spread throughout the country via the publication of how-to manuals, elaborate instruction for staging performances, but only in the large houses of the wealthy could these have been followed to the letter. As galleries were few, the tableaux played an important role in expanding the visual awareness of Americans. ⁶

The genre was primarily used by young adults as a way to discover their group and individual identities. The historian David Glassberg explained how tableaux vivant was used in local pageantry. Small towns and cities would often host parades featuring floats carrying women in tableaux vivant, reenacting pilgrim scenes or allegorical scenes such as "Columbia," or "the Thirteen Original States." ⁷ Monika Elbert focused on how the growing middle class of women used tableaux vivant to alter their personal identities. She explored how women used the genre privately to try on new costumes and characters, some of which were controversial, as a way to merge their public and private self. In both cases, the action of creating tableaux vivant allowed people to explore new phases of their identity. ⁸

When thinking about the benefits today's students, tableaux vivants offer a playful, interactive way to spark discussions based on participation in elements of the painting. In the words of Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: Multiple Intelligence Theory* (1985 page 239), tableaux speak to the tactile-kinesthetic in all of us and can extend comprehension techniques, such as free writing and free drawing on one's interpretation of the picture. As tableaux is a team effort, participating can build self-esteem in shy children, as many may feel less anxious about taking part in a silent group activity than about interpreting orally in front of peers. In this way, tableaux address our interpretsonal (working with others) and intrapersonal (learning about ourselves) intelligences. ⁹

Additionally, tableaux vivants also offer a concrete reference to spark discussion and writing, as children describe the scenarios depicted and use the information to be creative thinkers and writers. Recognizing the moment frozen in time by the painting allows the students to begin to think about what might have been occurring in the time just before or the moments directly after the image in the painting. ¹⁰

Museum visits offer an opportunity for students, with guidance from teachers and docents, to begin the adventure of investigating some of these themes through tableaux vivants:

Identity: In front of a sculpture or painting, invite students to slowly take on the pose and facial expression of the subject. Have them freeze for a few seconds and guide their awareness to various parts of their body to make adjustments based on what they see. Break from the pose and look back at the painting or sculpture. Discuss how the pose and facial expression reveal clues to the subject's identity. Try another tableau vivant, but this time, have students change their pose and facial expression. What would they change or do differently?

Character: The addition of props and costumes can instantly help a student take on a character. Split the class up into actors and directors. Have the actors freeze in a scene from a painting or sculpture, while the directors instruct their poses and facial expressions using the work of art as reference. While the actors remain frozen, have the directors discuss new aspects of the work of art that were revealed to them in the process of creating the tableau vivant. Have the actors break their pose and share their new insights about the work of art now that they have become the character.

Narrative: Break students up into small groups. Invite each group to create a tableau vivant (perhaps using directors and actors depending on numbers). Then, ask each group to create a before and after tableau vivant scene. Have each group share their three tableau vivant scenes and then discuss which parts of the painting or sculpture influenced their narratives.

Politics: Briefly describe the genre of tableaux vivant to students and explain how a piece of literature was often read to an audience during the performance. Invite students to create a tableau vivant of a painting or sculpture. While students remain frozen, read a text that provides contextual information for the work of art, such as a historic speech or a quote from the artist. Look back at the painting or sculpture and discuss their new insights. ¹¹

For the purposes of this unit, the paintings selected are two related styles, conversation painting and genre painting, both in this case showing children and adolescents in various circumstances. These choices are meant to evoke narratives.

Certainly there are endless possibilities with the current options for viewing fine art through digital access from museums around the world. The advantage to choosing a local museum, of course, is access to the real thing, the actual painting. Many museums have outreach programs or education departments that can support teachers and student visitors by planning visits, tours and extended activities.

The Art and Artists

Conversation Piece

A typical 18th century conversation painting often shows an elegant, social gathering thus creating enduring images of polite society. These paintings were about ideals, not realities, a type of social portrait. Produced on a small scale to suit more intimate-sized rooms, conversations pieces were generally full-length portraits showing members of a family, dressed informally in modern clothing and often with their possessions of note, such as furniture, pets and property. They would often show the families of some financial means, such as a prosperous merchant, who wanted to demonstrate their knowledge and skill in appropriate etiquette. These images of proper behavior were one way of confirming that they had "arrived." ¹²

In Joseph Van Aken's *An English Family at Tea*, c.1720, a family is shown as it wished to be seen, a statement of gentility rather than a portrait of real life. Two elegant ladies are seated at the small table a servant stands nearby and pours the tea. Several men are standing properly and proudly with objects in their hands, hats and canes, as they wait to be served. All of this takes place in a grand parlor setting which includes an impressive statue, arched entryways and marble floors. Everyone appears to be quite proper and elegant, but conversation pieces such as these were "as likely to be a fictional scene as well as a group portrait." ¹³

Genre Painting

In contrast to conversation portraits, genre painting shows ordinary people doing ordinary things. Sir David Wilkie dominated the British art world in the early 19th century with paintings showing everyday life. He depicted authentic rural life in his native Scotland showing domestic and low-life scenes. In *The Penny Wedding*, 1818, a poor Scottish couple has their simple, rural wedding in a barn. The painting's dominant color is brown for the earth, the wood and the straw. ¹⁴

Genre paintings gave a more sentimental view of life in the lower classes. Often seen as bourgeois art, genre painting appealed to the tastes of the common, everyday man. Painted in a natural style, it was considered the low-life counterpart to high style history painting. Its focus was detail and often depicted a romanticized view of country living or urban working class men and women, such as traders and sellers depicted in Francis Wheatley's series *The Cries of London*, 1793. ¹⁵



Figure 1: Thomas Webster, A Study of the Schoolroom, 1820, Yale Center for British Art

Thomas Webster was born in London in 1800 and educated as a chorister. He entered the Royal Academy Schools to study painting where he won a gold medal in 1824. ¹⁶ He had great success with his subject pictures, scenes of village life, which often included children in school and in other aspects of their daily lives. His work was influential and much admired and became popular through engravings. ¹⁷

The painting in Figure 1, *A Study of the Schoolroom*, was created before Webster's success with the genre began. Although there is little information available on this piece, it depicts Webster's thoughts or, possibly,

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memories of a schoolroom of boys in the early 1800's. The students, all boys of course, are engaged in a variety of actions and, although exact expressions are not clear, viewers can certainly make some determinations about what might be happening.

This is certainly a recognizable scene for students today. School is such an important part of their lives and Webster has given them an opportunity to make comparisons between a "typical" classroom from almost 200 years ago and to a classroom of today, their own. This is a great premise for rich vocabulary their lives as students, what is meaningful to them and what things, if any, have changed about school.

Francis Wheatley was born in London in 1747. He was successful painting both portraits and landscapes early in his career, which included a number of conversation pieces. ¹⁸ Wheatley shifted his interest later in his career to rural landscapes with rural figures in scenes of pastoral life. ¹⁹ This style is shown in the series that includes *Morning* (Figure 2). *Four Times of the Day* (1799) presents a typical day in the life of a farmer's family and includes *Noon* with the entire family gathering for an alfresco picnic in the fields, *Evening* with the farmer returning from the fields and being greeted outside by the family, and *Night* as the tired farmer slumps over the table and the family finishes some indoor chores. Although the family members seem content enough and the children seem well fed and are neatly dressed, life is probably much harder than it looks. ²⁰



Figure 2: Francis Wheatley, Morning, 1799, Yale Center for British Art

There will be an obvious difference in family life for the students as they observe this painting. The idea of then and now may center on clothing and home but the butter churn in the center of the image would be a rich basis for discussion. Learning about family chores and responsibilities has changed over time and this painting can be a springboard for more research of life during the 19th century. An excellent literature connection would be the eight books in *The Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, in which she explains, from a child's point of view, the trials and tribulations of living and working on a farm, and what family life looked like.



Figure 3: Philippe Mercier, The Sense of Sight, 1744-1747, Yale Center for British Art

Philippe Mercier (1689-1760) was a French Huguenot, who was trained in Berlin and came to England in the 1720's. Frederick, Prince of Wales made him his principal painter as the conversation piece style was coming into vogue. ²¹ Mercier moved on to being a successful portrait painter, but he also began producing a number of fancy pieces that included literary illustrations, domestic scenes, groups of children and sets of paintings,

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for example, the Seasons, the Times of Day and the Senses. ²²The Sense of Sight is one in the series of four paintings showing each character engaged in a sensorial experience. This series is in the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art and also includes The Sense of Touch, The Sense of Taste and The Sense of Hearing.

Although *The Sense of Sight* does not include young children, the content is quite accessible and relatable to students with objects, the map, the mirror and the telescope as props. This image is inviting and engaging with the possibility of students able to generate ideas and create many stories as they experience this painting. What is each person seeing and why is it so interesting? What can we say about then and now as we view this piece? Who are the characters, where are they from and what do you think their lives might be like compared to yours? These questions can prompt the students to consider what they see in the painting but also what they do not see, an important connection to the subject of the work.



Figure 4: Agostino Brunias, Market Day, Roseau, Dominica, 1780, Yale Center for British Art

Although not much is known about the life of Agostino Brunias, including his exact name and nationality, records show that he became a student at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome around in 1748. He earned a living by painting souvenir pictures for rich European travelers. Brunais' drawing skills impressed Robert Adam, one of Britain's most celebrated architects, who hired him as a draftsman to document classical

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architectural detail as they traveled around Italy. ²³

He tired of being "a brush for hire" and, in 1770, traveled to the West Indies with the first governor of the island of Dominica, likely in an effort for fair pay and credit for his work. As a talented colorist, he used vivid hues to capture life on the island. His work as a whole represents interesting documentation of the British colonization of the West Indies in the second half of the 18th century, providing visual records of Dominican costume, customs and environments. ²⁴

Students using this image can likely make a connection to an outdoor market they may have experienced or seen. The contrast of then and now can be examined through the clothing and structures in the image and our own clothing and homes. Young children appear in the market place and students can discuss what role these children may have in the image. The shoppers and sellers are what students might consider "elaborately dressed" with layers of clothes and wearing various headdresses. There is also quite a bit of activity going on in the background and foreground that can be discussed. Who are they and what might they be doing? Noticing the trees and building design may lead students to recognize that the setting is in a warm environment.

Teaching Strategies

Visual literacy strategies will be the foundation for the students to begin their understanding of the unit. Students will learn to "read a picture" to build focus and skill at looking at the whole painting. They will be looking carefully at works of art to discover clues about the people who made them and the world in which they lived. Students will learn to slow down, look closely, and think about what they see as they prepare to dramatize a work of art.

In staging their tableau vivant, the students will choose from a number of paintings that represent events that align with the classroom learning. They will look carefully and become characters in the paintings, silently holding their poses. This strategy reinforces the idea that looking at art is an active, not passive, experience and understanding a work of art takes time and effort to create and has a story to tell its viewers.

Students will then be challenged to determine the storyline of the image - what were the people in the painting doing before that moment and what might they have done after. They will work in small groups to create a story line.

Classroom Activities

The activities are listed in a general format as opposed to specific number of days or lessons. The following is a sequence or process that will guide the students through the objectives listed above to their final performance of their tableaux vivants.

Discussing a Painting

This introduction is a whole group activity. Students can benefit from discussion by listening to others and building knowledge from each other's responses. Introduce the students to vocabulary that will help them discuss paintings and so the rest of the class will know the part of the painting is being discussed. Model this strategy through examples, such as "I see that the lady in the center of the painting is wearing a long, white dress and holding the striped part of her dress up so it is out of the dirt."

The students should brainstorm words that might be helpful in their discussions. Encourage them to think of colors, shapes, sizes, location words and texture words, all of which might be ways students can express their observations and thoughts as they ask questions or comment on the painting as a whole or a specific area of the piece they may be "zooming in on." These terms should be charted in categories for easy reference and should be visible for students to use on a regular basis.

Practicing this approach to commenting on art will be instrumental when the students visit the museum where, of course, they will not be able to walk up and point to a spot as they comment or ask questions.

Introducing the Paintings

The selections of paintings are all available digitally through the Yale Center for British Art. The images can be introduced by projecting slides for viewing and discussion. Because there are four paintings, it might be advisable to view one or two per day and to prepare charts of the comments and observations that the students to make as they experience each image. By making note of levels of interest by student, it will inform the choices when groups are made for the tableaux vivants, matching students with paintings that seem to be of greater interest to them.

This is the point that the strategy of tableau is introduced to the class in general. Students, as volunteers, can start to create the scenes they see projected and discuss what the characters might be thinking about in their poses. Discussions about feelings, plans, and ideas can begin to form the plans students will be making.

Visiting the Museum

Scheduling a visit to the museum should take place well before the beginning of the unit. Organizing docents and parents is an important component of the trip and will likely take time and all need to be planned ahead for a successful experience. Visiting the museum prior to bringing the students and meeting with a museum contact are advisable steps for many reasons: locating of the paintings, navigating the museum, determining gathering places, knowing the details of the spaces the students will be using for their "research."

Students will need a lesson on museum etiquette and expected behavior in addition to the general rules for all field trips. It is helpful to practice and model exact expectations in the classroom in a mock gallery walk, using student artwork or the projected images as examples.

This trip is for the students to experience the art first hand. They have seen the images on slides at school but now they are headed to see the real thing. Students should come prepared with their sketchbooks or journals and pencils. During their visit and observation time they should be thinking, drawing and writing about what they see, any similarities and differences from the classroom images to the real work, how are the children and people in general different from then to now. They should be given time to sketch and time to practice posing in front of the painting as they prepare for their tableaux vivants.

Creating the Story

Students will work in their groups to begin planning and writing out their scripts. They will use the information gathered from the museum trip, determine which character they will each portray and create dialogue to show the conversation that occurs in their interpretation of the painting. They will need time to plan their scripts and practice saying their lines to each other, which can be done during a writer's workshop sessions. Within each group there should be one member selected to introduce the painting, identifying the title, artist and year it was created.

Each student is responsible for their own part, writing one or two lines to say in the "before" portion of the play and one or two lines for the "after" portion. Because the painting itself is being performed as a tableau, the students should be silent as the hold the painting pose.

During this phase of the project, students (and teachers and parents) can begin designing and gathering costume components for each character. Discussions should center on answering questions: How are the clothes in the painting different than your clothes? Why do you think the clothing was different then? What would it look if the painting was created now? How different would it be you just were your own clothes to do the play? How can wearing different clothes help you be the person in the painting?

Extension activity: Character profile

Each student can write a story line that tells the life of their character. Encourage students to think about their own life story to provide some foundation for students as they create their character's life and background. Have them begin with the fundamentals that second graders, and most primary-level students, care about as they invent their stories. Who is their family? Where do they live? What does their house look like? What do they do when they are not in school? What are some of their favorites – colors, foods, friends, pets? These questions provide a launching point for students to begin and have them share additional thoughts and questions with their classmates.

Presenting Tableaux Vivants

As tableaux vivants is a performance art, it is important that the students be able to present their work to an audience. The culminating event for this unit includes the presentation of the painting coming to life as well as the stories the students have created to show their interpretations. Through their learning about children "then" compared with children "now," students will present their understanding of history through their writing and acting.

Students will need several class periods to practice with their group. This time should be spent perfecting their painting pose first. Once they are comfortable with their positions, they next need to practice their "before" positions and lines and then transitioning, as a group, into the tableau. This process should be repeated until they feel prepared and then they can begin to practice the "after" positions. Students (with help) should block out the location for each movement so they all know where they stand or sit or pose for each transition. Groups should present their work during a dress rehearsal for their classmates preferably in the location that will be used for the performance. Ideally, each presentation should be about two to three minutes with the tableau, of course, held silently for at least 15 seconds, which is quite a long time for second graders.

During the presentations, the appropriate digital image should be projected for the audience to see as each group presents, next to the performers or at least very near.

Resources

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Appendix

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

CCR Anchor Standards for Reading:

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: RL.2.7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and format, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCR Anchor Standards for Writing:

Text Types and Purposes: W.2.3.Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details and clear event sequences.

a.Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.

b.Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters in situations.

CCR Standards for Speaking and Listening:

Comprehension and Collaboration: SL.2.1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on Grade 2 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly; SL.2.3. Ask and answer questions about information from a speaker, offering appropriate elaboration and detail.

CCR Standards for Language:

Conventions of Standards English: L.2.1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing and speaking.

Notes

¹ Hale, 472		
² Murphy, 1		
³ Elbert, 237		
⁴ Lewis, 287		
⁵ Lewis, 280		

⁶ Lewis, 282

- ⁷ Glassman, 16
- ⁸ Elbert, 236
- ⁹ Tortello, 207
- ¹⁰ Tortello, 208
- ¹¹ Murphy, 3
- ¹² Vaughn, 50-51
- ¹³ Vaughn, 51-52
- ¹⁴ Vaughn, 151
- ¹⁵ Vaughn, 152-154
- ¹⁶ Parkinson, 297
- ¹⁷ Parkinson, 297
- ¹⁸ Webster, 413
- ¹⁹ Webster, 414
- ²⁰ Johnson, 88
- ²¹ Vaughn, 53
- ²² Ingamells, 856
- ²³ Bagneris, 11-14
- ²⁴ Bagneris, 17-18

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