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The Art of Christmas Teacher's Guide

Students: May be modified for any grade. *Advanced Examination* for grades 5 and up.

Materials:

- Seven versions of "Adoration of the Christ Child."

Instructional Goals:

After the lesson, the student shall be able to:

- State why paintings were so important for thousands of years;
- State at least three groups of people who used paintings to communicate ideas;
- Select the name of the artist who most revolutionized painting;
- Select the period (years) of his works;
- Name at least three ways that he showed other artists to improve their paintings;
- When shown a series of paintings, the student shall be able to identify those painted before Caravaggio and those that were painted after.

Lesson Plan – Before Visiting Gallery

Background: Before going to the gallery to view the paintings, students should be fluent with the following facts:

1. For thousands of years, paintings were the main way of communicating.
 - A. Movies, television, and photographs are all very recent inventions. The first cameras in general use appeared only 150 years ago, movies appeared about 80 years ago and television began about 50 years ago.
 - B. So for most of history - for thousands and thousands of years – pictures had to be hand-painted by an artist to communicate ideas, tell stories and help teach moral traditions.
 - C. Also for most of history, most people could not read or get books.
 - D. Therefore ***painted pictures were one of the only ways of passing along information because most people could not read and there was no TV or Internet.***
2. Making a painting was very expensive – hiring the artist and his assistants, paints, materials, etc. Only rich leaders could afford to have paintings made.
 - A. ***Kings*** and queens could have paintings made of themselves to hang in their palaces to show how great they were.
 - B. Famous ***generals and military leaders*** could have their paintings done to hang in their castles or forts to show how brave they were.
 - C. ***Rich business men*** and could be painted to hang in their stores to show how successful they were.
 - D. ***Religious leaders*** could buy paintings to hang in their churches to tell about their religion.
3. Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity. We will see how the religious leaders got paintings to tell the people about his birth. They would have these large paintings hung in the churches to help tell the story of the religion. Remember – there was no TV, movies, or photos.
 - A. You will see 7 paintings and they will be arranged by the order in which they were painted.
 - B. The oldest painting you will see was painted in 1475 which was over 500 years ago.
 - C. The most recent painting was painted in 1690 which was 300 years ago.
 - D. So these paintings were done by different artists over a 200 year period.
 - E. They all were painted to illustrate the same passage in the Bible that tells how shepherds or wise men (known as “Magi”) came to see the baby Jesus when he was born in a stable in Bethlehem. So all of the paintings are trying to communicate the same story. Art historians call these painting scenes “Adoration of the Shepherds” or “Adoration of the Magi.” The word “adore” comes from two Latin words “ad” meaning “to” or “towards” and the word “orare” meaning to talk respectfully. So to “adore” someone or something means that you will talk respectfully to them. The shepherds and the Magi have come to the stable to talk respectfully to Mary and the baby Jesus.
4. Art techniques changed with time and culture.
 - A. When you go in to see the paintings, look first on the left at the oldest painting, then look at each painting to see how the methods and techniques of the artists improved over this 200 year period.
 - B. We will look at each painting and discuss its artist and look at how he painted the picture.
 - C. We will compare each of the paintings to the next one in line.

Lesson Plan – During Gallery Visit

5. Brief Review in the Gallery
 - A. Ask “Why were paintings made and why were they so important in olden times?”
Ans: Before the recent invention of TV and Photographs, paintings were the main way of communicating.
 - B. Ask “Who could have paintings made?”
Ans: Because paintings were very expensive, only Kings, generals, rich business men and religious leaders could afford to have paintings done
 - C. Ask “Who were these paintings done?”
Ans: The paintings you see were commissioned between 1450 and 1690 AD to hang in churches.
 - D. We are here to examine how painting techniques changed over the years.
6. Survey – first let us just briefly look at each painting and identify the central figures
(Beginning at the left, go to each painting and point to the baby Jesus and Mary.)

Botticelli, 1475



Botticelli 1475

Botticelli

The first painting is by an Italian named Botticelli (**Bot-ah-chell-ee**).

A. Name: **Bot-ah-chell-ee**.

Boys and girls, Let's all say Botticelli! Get Ready. (Signal)

Repeat until firm.

B. Date: Botticelli painted this in 1475

C. Subject: You may recall that the baby Jesus was visited both by shepherds and by three wise men called Magi. Botticelli chose to paint the Wise Men in his painting instead of the shepherds, so this is called "Adoration of the Magi."

D. Now let us examine the painting.

- i. The walls of the stable are removed so the scene can be *evenly lighted* from all around
- ii. All the people are finely dressed in clothes of that day and *posed like models for compositional reasons*.
- iii. Mary, Joseph, and the baby are raised in the center above the crowd balanced *level* and equally on the right and left.
- iv. The man in yellow on the right is a self portrait of Botticelli
- v. There are more than 3 men aren't there? The painting represents 3 kings AND their royal courts. That many people adds to the complexity of the painting as well.

E. Advanced examination.

- i. The Adoration of the Magi theme was popular in the Renaissance Florence. The work was commissioned by Gaspare di Zanobi del Lama, a banker of dubious origins and morality connected to the House of Medici, for his chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella (now destroyed).
- ii. This painting also represents historical portraits of important people of that time. The Medici family: Cosimo de' Medici (the Magus kneeling in front of the Virgin, described by Vasari as "the finest of all that are now extant for its life and vigour"), his sons Piero (the second Magus kneeling in the centre with the red mantle) and Giovanni (the third Magus), and his grandsons Giuliano and Lorenzo. The three Medici portrayed as Magi were all dead at the time the picture was painted.
- iii. In his *Lives* Vasari describes the *Adoration* in the following way: "The beauty of the heads in this scene is indescribable, their attitudes all different, some full-face, some in profile, some three-quarters, some bent down, and in various other ways, while the expressions of the attendants, both young and old, are greatly varied, displaying the artist's perfect mastery of his profession. Sandro (Botticelli) further clearly shows the distinction between the suites of each of the kings. It is a marvellous work in color, design and composition."
- iv. The attention to details, such as the garments rendering, show the acquisition by the Florentine artist of the influences from the Flemish (Dutch) school at this point of his career.
- v. This painting is housed in the Uffizi of Florence.

Di Lorenzo, 1490



Di Lorenzo

The next painting is by an Italian named Di Lorenzo

A. Name: dee low-**REN**-so.

Boys and girls, Let's all say Di Lorenzo! Get Ready. (Signal)

Repeat until firm.

B. Date: Di Lorenzo painted this in 1490, 15 years after Botticelli

C. Subject: This is an example of an early "Adoration of the Magi."

D. Now let us examine the painting.

i. Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus are outside the stable while the angels are inside the stable.

ii. There is no strong single light source so the scene is *evenly lighted* from all around

iii. All the people are finely dressed in clothes of that day and *posed for a symmetrical composition*.

iv. Mary, Joseph are lowered in the center with the baby Jesus nearly at the bottom (kind of floating) with the crowd of angels balanced *level* and equally above on the right and left. The three shepherds are on the left balanced by the ox and the donkey on the right.

v. See how the right and left side are almost a mirror image? This is called symmetry.

E. Advanced examination.

i. There is probably no other Italian master of importance of whose life and work so little is known. In fact the whole edifice that modern scientific criticism has built around his name is based on a single signed and dated picture (1487) in the Pinacoteca of Perugia (Art gallery of Perugia, Italy).

ii. Fiorenzo's authentic works are remarkable for their sense of space and for the expression of that peculiar clear, soft atmosphere.

iii. Fiorenzo di Lorenzo was an important master of the Umbrian school, a Renaissance school of Italian painting developed in Umbria in central Italy in the 15th century.

iv. This painting is a fresco painting, which means it was painted directly to plaster on the wall of the Pinacoteca where it is still preserved today.

Ghirlandaio, 1482



Ghirlandaio

The next painting is by an Italian nick-named Ghirlandaio which means “garland” in Italian.

A. **Name:** gurr-LAND-ee-oh.

Boys and girls, Let’s all say Ghirlandaio! Get Ready. (Signal)

Repeat until firm.

B. **Date:** Ghirlandaio painted this in 1482, 7 years after Botticelli

C. **Subject:** This is an example of an early “Adoration of the Shepherds.”

D. **Now let us examine the painting.**

- i. The walls of the stable are removed so the scene can be *evenly lighted* from all around
- ii. All the people are finely dressed in clothes of that day and *posed like models for the composition*.
- iii. Mary, Joseph, and the baby are lowered in the center though the sides are not symmetrical.
- iv. Notice the stone water trough behind the baby. It has a garland carved on it to symbolize the artist’s name.
- v. Also, the shepherd that is pointing to the baby with his left hand is pointing to himself with his right. This is a self-portrait of the artist posed as if to say “Look at the baby. It is I who has painted him!”

E. **Advanced examination.**

- i. Ghirlandaio was an Italian Renaissance painter from Florence, Italy. Among his many apprentices was Michelangelo.
- ii. There is more emphasis on the depth of field in this painting: shepherds in the foreground on the right; and arriving people in the background coming down the road on the left. There is even a town in the far background.
- iii. He painted this painting in tempera also known as egg tempera, which is a permanent fast drying painting medium consisting of colored pigment mixed with a water-soluble binder medium (usually a glutinous material such as egg yolk or some other size).
- iv. The Sassetti Chapel in Florence, Italy is consecrated to the birth of Christ. The altarpiece Ghirlandaio’s Adoration of the Shepherds is the chapel’s key work not only in subject, but also in artistic merit. This composition was so successful that other artists frequently repeated it.
- v. The classical sarcophagus in the picture is not just a manger for the ox and donkey. It also has an iconographical significance indicated by the Latin inscription along its front: “While Fulvius, augur of Pompey, was falling by the sword in Jerusalem he said: the urn that covers me shall bring forth a god.” This is an ancient prophecy by Fulvius. The animals’ manger will serve as a crib for the Christ Child. In his Adoration of the Shepherds, Ghirlandaio combines this reference to the Roman classical age with knowledge of Flemish art and turns them into an integrated whole.

Caravaggio, 1609



Caravaggio

The next painting is by an Italian named Caravaggio

A. Name: care-ah-**VAG**-ee-oh.

Boys and girls, Let's all say Caravaggio! Get Ready. (Signal)

Repeat until firm. *Repeat until firm.* **Repeat until firm.**

B. Date: Caravaggio lived around 1600 AD painted this scene in 1609, over a hundred years after Botticelli

C. Subject: This example "Adoration of the Shepherds" illustrates a new age in painting.

D. Now let us examine the painting.

- i. The scene is totally inside the stable and all the light comes *from a point source* through a window out of view to the left. There are many shadows and many highlights. The scene is *not* evenly lighted.
- ii. All the people are *roughly dressed and posed in natural positions*. You even see the *shepherds' dirty feet and sun-weathered faces*.
- iii. The high-lighted features *are not level* but slant upwards from the bottom left with the rag on the basket up to the top right of the last shepherd's shoulder.
- iv. Mary and the baby are lower left and off-center with Joseph next and the shepherds rising upward. The first shepherd with his hands in prayer is a self-portrait of the artist.

E. Advanced examination.

- i. A Franciscan simplicity pervades this painting: in the wooden barn a donkey and an ox stand patiently at the back, there is straw on the floor and in a basket the Holy Family have a loaf of bread, the carpenter's tools of Joseph and some pieces of cloth. Joseph (in red) introduces the shepherds, in brown and grey, to the young Virgin Mother, whose dress is a brighter red. Mary cuddles her baby peacefully and, apart from two haloes, only the bare-shouldered young man, who kneels with clasped hands, gives the moment of the child's discovery a hint of its meaning. God became man as one of the poor. Ironically, for this canvas Caravaggio received 1000 scudi, the highest amount mentioned in any accounts of his career.
- ii. This Baroque painting is a great example of chiaroscuro (**KEY**-are-as-**CURE**-o) painting. Chiaroscuro is an Italian word literally meaning "light to dark" and is characterized by strong contrasts between a single light source with bold contrasts affecting a whole composition.
- iii. Caravaggio had a genius for painting directly from life; he set up his models in the studio as for a photo shoot, then painted them one by one. It was an inspired shortcut, eagerly imitated by other talented but untrained painters, and criticized by others.
- iv. The use of light embodies the manifestation of the spiritual within the material world. This is Caravaggio's deepest subject. It is why he uses the worn-out, the aged and the poor as his models: not just out of sympathy but to emphasize the shocking and unexpected way the spirit appears within the banality of the everyday.

El Greco, 1619



El Greco

The next painting is by a famous artist called “El Greco” which is Spanish for “the Greek”

A. Name: el-**GREC**-oh.

Boys and girls, Let’s all say “El Greco”! Get Ready. (Signal)

Repeat until firm.

B. Date: “El Greco” painted this in 1619, ten years after Caravaggio

C. Subject: This example “Adoration of the Shepherds” illustrates the new age in painting introduced by Caravaggio.

D. Now let us examine the painting.

- i. The scene is totally inside the stable and all the light radiates *from a point source* that seems to be the baby Jesus, himself. There are many shadows and many highlights. The scene is *not* evenly lighted.
- ii. All the people are *roughly dressed* and *posed in natural positions*. Again, you see the *shepherds’ dirty feet and sun-weathered faces with scraggly beards*.
- iii. The high-lighted features *are not level* but slant upwards from the bottom left up through to the cloud mid-way up on the right and back up leftwards to the angels.
- iv. The elderly shepherd kneeling before the baby is a self-portrait of El Greco.
- v. The painting was designed to hang high above the altar in the church where El Greco was to be buried.

E. Advanced Examination

- i. The Adoration of the Shepherds is a painting of the traditional subject which was painted during the last year of El Greco's life. The painting is a smaller version of a work which the artist made to hang over his own tomb in the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo. El Greco's signature, in Greek may be seen in the lower left corner.
- ii. Extreme distortion of body characterizes the *Adoration of the Shepherds* like all the last paintings of El Greco. The brilliant, "dissonant" colors and the strange shapes and poses create a sense of wonder and ecstasy, as the shepherd and angels celebrate the miracle of the newly born child. The infant Christ seems to emit a light which plays off the faces of the barefoot shepherds who have gathered to pay homage to his miraculous birth. A rhythmic energy animates from the painting, expressed in the dance-like motions of the figures.
- iii. From the very outset of his career El Greco had been interested in the problem of light. When he painted The Adoration of the Shepherds, light was no longer used for its own sake but as a means to convey an idea.
- iv. In contrast with his earlier interpretations of the same subject, El Greco seems to forgo any attempt to achieve balanced proportions, harmonious coloring and comprehensible space, transforming the scene into a transcendent and spiritual happening depicted in bright and contrasting colors.

Velazquez, 1620



Velazquez

The next painting is by the famous Spanish artist Velazquez

A. Name: ve-**LA**z-quez.

Boys and girls, Let's all say Velazquez! Get Ready. (Signal)

Repeat until firm.

B. Date: Velazquez painted this in 1620, eleven years after Caravaggio

C. Subject: This example is an "Adoration of the Magi" but nevertheless illustrates the new age in painting introduced by Caravaggio.

D. Now let us examine the painting.

- i. Although not completely inside the stable, all the light radiates *from a point source* from the left that shines over the kneeling Magi's right shoulder to illuminate the baby and Mary. There are many shadows and many highlights. The scene is *not* evenly lighted.
- ii. All the people are *posed in natural positions*. But Velasquez uses his wife to model Mary and he paints himself as the young Magi with the blue cloak. His tutor and father-in-law is the older Magi by his left shoulder. Velasquez cannot resist idealizing his family's images.
- iii. Again, the high-lighted features *are not level* but slant upwards from the bottom left up to the upper right.

E. Advanced Examination

- i. The Adoration of the Magi is a 1619 Baroque painting by the Spanish artist Diego Velázquez now held in the Museo del Prado.
- ii. Velázquez was a pupil in Pacheco's workshop when he embarked upon this, his first large work, The Adoration of the Magi. This painting also reveals a marked striving for plasticity in the figures and balance between the different elements of the composition.
- iii. The Madonna is depicted as a beautiful Andalusian peasant girl, her face glowing with maternal pride, the Infant is well observed, charming with no hint of idealization.
- iv. The masterly effects of light and shadow, as well as the direct observation of nature, make inevitable a comparison with the work of the Italian painter Caravaggio. Velázquez's religious paintings, images of simple piety, portray models drawn from the streets of Seville, as Pacheco states in his biography of Velázquez. In Adoration of the Magi, for example, the artist painted his own family in the guise of biblical figures, including a self-portrait as well. The main characters are thought to be portraits: the young king is a free self-portrait of the artist, while the kneeling king behind him has the features of Pacheco and the Virgin Mary those of Pacheco's daughter Juana, married to Velázquez.
- v. Can you tell how many light sources there are? (A. 2 don't forget the background sky has light as well)
- vi. One of the greatest and most prolific painters that ever lived, Velazquez was sometimes called "the painter of the truth" .

LeBrun, 1690



LeBrun

The next painting is by a French artist named LeBrun

A. Name: le-**BRUN**.

Boys and girls, Let's all say LeBrun! Get Ready. (Signal)
Repeat until firm.

B. Date: LeBrun painted this in 1690, 81 years after Caravaggio

C. Subject: This example is an "Adoration of the Shepherds" and, again, illustrates the new age in painting introduced by Caravaggio.

D. Now let us examine the painting.

- i. Is the scene evenly lit all over or are there many shadows and high lights?
(shadows and highlights)
- ii. Are there point sources of light, and if so, where are the sources?
(hole in roof upper right and fireplace on floor lower left)
- iii. Do the people seem posed naturally and in rough, natural clothes?
- iv. All the people are *posed in natural* positions and rough clothes, but there is a rather dramatic scene with throngs of shepherds and servants. LeBrun was the official painter to King Louis the 14th of France and thus paints a rather grandiose and flamboyant scene.
- v. Are the highlighted features level across the painting or do they slant?
The high-lighted features *are not level* but slant upwards from the bottom left up to the upper right.

E. Advanced Examination

- i. This painting represents an Other-worldly experience. This picture shows how clever Le Brun was at composition, at mingling the world beyond with earthly life and at controlling the fantastic effects of the light.
- ii. Can you tell how many light sources there are? (A. 7 points of light! See if you can find them all.)
- iii. The virtuous young Virgin Mary is often depicted wearing blue and this painting is no exception. Also note that the earthly realm and the heavenly realm are almost evenly split between top and bottom.
- iv. Charles Le Brun may be identified as the leading painter of the Late Baroque period. Le Brun, charged by Louis XIV with governing the style of all French art, oversaw most major works of sculpture, painting, and decorative arts for several decades. The style he molded (which prevailed throughout the Late Baroque period) may be described as a classical-Baroque.
- v. The Council of Trent (1545-63), in which the Roman Catholic Church answered many questions of internal reform raised by both Protestants and by those who had remained inside the Catholic Church, addressed the representational arts by demanding that paintings and sculptures in church contexts should speak to the illiterate rather than to the well-informed. Due to this Baroque art tends to focus on Saints, the Virgin Mary, and other well known Bible stories

Summation

At any point, you can ask a student to go to one of the paintings and point out the features that you wish to emphasize. “Show where the light source is in Velasquez’s painting.”

Or, “Show how the highlights are arranged.”

1. So which artist dramatically changed the way light is used in painting?
(“Caravaggio” and let them point to his work)
2. When did this artist live?
(Around 1600 AD)
3. What did we identify as the common features of paintings before Caravaggio?
(flat, evenly lit scene without many shadows or highlights)
(idealized, perfect-looking people and clothes)
(balanced, level compositions)
4. What are common features of paintings after Caravaggio?
(single point light sources with deep, dramatic shadows and highlights)
(realistic people with dirty feet and torn clothes)
(slanted, more interesting arrangement of main features)

Art Project Ideas:

- **In the classroom, turn out the lights and use a flashlight as a point source of light to shine from the side onto an object to see the shadows and highlights.**
- **Have the students color pictures with shadows and highlights and have the highlighted objects arranged in different ways in their compositions.**