

# Understanding Images and Their Power

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
Intermediate Visual Art

**Keywords:** visual literacy, images, art criticism, narrative, communication, interpretation, analysis, description, art history, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, design, portraiture, proportion, global themes, symbols, self-portrait, value, shading, hatching, cross-hatching, scumbling, contemporary art

**Teaching Standards:** See <u>Appendix 1</u> for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

**Synopsis:** In this unit I hope to give students the tools they need to examine visual media in a purposeful way in order to gain more meaning from the images they see. Students will begin by generally exploring how images have been used throughout history. We will then narrow our scope to portraiture and explore how this genre has been used to convey meaning. Students will learn basic technical drawing skills of proportion, shape, light, and shadow. They will then apply these skills to a self-portrait using design to communicate at least two internal aspects of their personality. We will conclude by examining contemporary portraiture both formal and informal in the genres of painting and Instagram.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 70 students in Intermediate Visual Art grades 9-12

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#### **Rationale and Content Research**



Pictures are no longer precious; there are just too many of them. Once collected and preserved as art, or to document memories, they are now emerging as a new language, one that promises to be both more universally understood and accessible to anyone... They have become a visual shorthand that is at once more emotionally resonant and more efficient than the words I might once have used to express the same ideas. This shift in the nature of communications will have a substantial effect on culture, business, and politics. (Hempel 2014)

"Every two minutes Americans alone take more photographs than were made in the entire nineteenth century" (Mirzoeff 2016). Images are powerful tools, which are increasingly becoming the way that we communicate in our society but students are not being taught how to critically analyze the information. Ansel Adams once said, "A photograph is usually looked at—seldom looked into." Visual communication is an important skill: "Someone who is visually literate is capable of accommodating multiple interpretations, understanding that you can generate multiple interpretations, and is much more forgiving of other people's interpretations of exactly the same thing"(Levine 2015). To be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students need to be able to analyze and interpret the images they see on a daily basis for meaning and intent. Too often our students take images for fact or reality, passively consuming without exploring how and why they are being presented in a particular way.

The purpose of this curriculum unit is to help students understand and communicate through images by gaining a stronger understanding of visual literacy. For students to be able to read and create contemporary, meaningful images they have to understand how images have been used historically. In *The Art of Seeing*, Paul Zelanski and Mary Pat Fisher state that: "The word 'art' cannot be found in any English dictionary before 1880 and even when it did appear it was used primarily with reference to painting. Few cultures have a word corresponding to this definition, for the skillful production of things is entirely interwoven with life itself" (Zelanski 2011). It is interesting to think that art and design were once so incorporated into life that there was no unique word for them. Then at some point, we began to separate it out, exclude it, and put it off to the side as an "elective," something unnecessary to daily life. Today art has woven its way back into everything that we do but we have lost the ability to recognize it when we see it. When asked "what is the purpose of art?" most of my students respond that it is a means of self-expression. Many students do not connect the terms art and images. They see art as paintings and

images as graphics, photographs, or snapshots somehow separate from their definition of art. While they recognize that an artist has thoughtfully constructed a painting they do not bring that same understanding of motive to what they perceive as mere images. I want my students to explore the many reasons other than expression that have driven people to create images throughout time. Often in my high school art courses, we focus on technical skill and design principles to create visually pleasing artwork. While this is important and included in this unit, my main goals are for my students to begin creating work that has meaning and recognizing that intent in the images/messages/information they encounter daily.

The Visual Experience (Hobbs, Salome, Vieth 2005) lays out a critical method for looking at art. The critical method is broken down into four steps sometimes referred to as a four-step critique method. Through this process, students begin by describing what they see, the subject matter, the setting, the artist's use of elements of art (line, shape, color, value, texture, space) without drawing conclusions or giving opinions. Next, they analyze the composition in terms of the artist's use of the principles of design (emphasis, contrast, unity, variety, movement, pattern, balance, rhythm, and proportion). In other words, how has the artist arranged the image? What design choices have they made? In this section, they are still recording facts about the artwork. Only after they have critically described and analyzed the artwork do they begin to interpret meaning based on their findings. Lastly, students evaluate the merits of the work in terms of quality, originality, and composition. When using this method in the past I have focused heavily on the first two more concrete sections. Through this unit, I want my students to explore the process of interpretation more thoroughly, starting with narrative art.

"Narrative Art tells a story. It uses the power of the visual image to ignite imaginations, evoke emotions and capture universal cultural truths and aspirations. What distinguishes Narrative Art from other genres is its ability to narrate a story across diverse cultures, preserving it for future generation." (Lucas). If you look at the cave paintings of Chauvet or Lascaux even without context, you can see a story being told. Even in pre-historic times, i.e. prior to written history, people were using images to document their lives. We will begin by looking broadly at how artists have used narrative artworks to communicate their ideas through images. Then we will shift our focus to portraiture. "A portrait is typically defined as a representation of a specific individual, such as the artist might meet in life. A portrait does not merely record someone's features, however, but says something about who he or she is, offering a vivid sense of a real person's presence" (Sorabella). At the intermediate level, my students need structure in the design process as they are still working on learning basic technical skills. They will be challenged to communicate visually through the genre of self-portraiture.

In "On Instagram and Identity" Ben Romero challenges whether Instagram is art or not. I want to pose this question to my students as we look at how they, product brands, and celebrities use Instagram to communicate visually.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists. – Marcelle Duchamp

These words were spoken long before the digital age but seem to aptly fit in our Insta-world where people rate the value of their posts on the number of likes they receive and even delete posts that don't get enough, essentially further editing their already highly curated narrative. We will explore the possibilities of Instagram as art and discuss the effects of its filtered reality on the way that we behave and experience our world.

Instagram makes portraiture easy. We can communicate so much through a few clicks and filters. This begs the question: why bother with traditional art media at all? Creating a painting is so much more time consuming than Instagraming your message. Are there things that a photograph cannot convey? How are contemporary artists communicating through traditional means?

The presidential portraits wing of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery is lined with paintings of very powerful and equally pasty men. Its walls, filled with bowties, powder wigs and pursed lips, speak two wellknown truths at once: Both the history of American politics and the history of Western art are blindingly white.- Priscilla Frank

The National Portrait Gallery just announced that former president Barack Obama has chosen contemporary portrait artist Kehinde Wiley to paint his official presidential portrait. Wiley is known for his large scale portraits of African American men in the style of the old masters. He often appropriates poses and props from historical European paintings of powerful white men and replaces the subjects with African American models in modern attire. "Wiley imbues his sitters with a gravitas and glory historically reserved for patrons, nobles and saints. His works build upon the centuries-old relationship between portraiture and power, using the canonized language of art history to exalt a new kind of subject" (Frank 2017). In this selection America's first African American President is not only choosing the first African American portrait artist to be featured in the gallery but one who specifically draws attention to the lack of African Americans in art history and positions of power. He is making a statement that the status quo will no longer stand, and change is happening. This is not the first time that Obama has used contemporary art to communicate his message. Students will likely be familiar with Shepard Fairey's *Hope* portrait of Obama from the 2008 campaign, a propaganda-esque collage that was used to inspire a grassroots movement for change in Washington, an American President building on an established history of using powerful images to convey his message to the people.

# Demographics

I currently teach visual art grades 9-12 at Hough High School located in Cornelius, North Carolina, a rural suburb of Charlotte. Hough is one of 30 high schools in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School system. It has a student population of 2695. 74% of students are white, 9% African American, 11% Hispanic, Asian: 2.8%, Multi-Racial: 2.6%, Other: 1%. 16% of our student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch.

Our school offers 25 AP courses as well as courses in engineering as part of the Project Lead The Way (PLTW) program. This year, we are starting our AP Capstone program with sophomores and juniors. We have over 1000 students enrolled in one or more AP classes for a total enrollment of 2697. Last year, our AP pass rate was 63%. We also offer courses in visual arts, interior design, Spanish and French, and a wide variety of elective courses. Last year, we had a 93.8% graduation rate with students earning over 12 million dollars' worth of scholarships, which was \$3 million more than the previous year.

The faculty consists of 152 certified staff members, including the principal, four assistant principals, one dean of students, seven counselors, a media specialist, a career development coordinator, an instructional coordinator, an instructional accountability facilitator, a technology facilitator, and a psychologist. We have a student- teacher ratio of 20:1. 44% of our faculty holds advanced degrees. Nearly 62% of our staff has more than 5 years teaching experience.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools provides Arts Education to all students in elementary schools, K-5, in weekly art education classes. In the sixth grade, students participate in an arts education rotation to further explore the various art forms. Additionally, students in middle school may elect to study more visual arts in specific visual arts courses. Students in intermediate level visual art must have completed 8 years of visual arts education in CMS or a beginner level visual arts course in high school. Depending on their background some students have had more experience with close reading of artwork than others. I plan to begin this unit as the second project of the year in late September so this will be the first time we do a formal critique of artwork in this course.

All of our visual art courses at Hough are yearlong and meet every other day for 90 minutes. We offer beginner, intermediate, proficient, and advanced levels of visual art, contemporary craft and design, ceramics, and digital photography. Proficient and advanced levels are honors courses and are usually combined. We also offer AP studio art: drawing, 2D design, digital 2D design, and 3D design. Most of our students have computer and internet access at home as well as a class set of Chromebooks for in class research and planning.

# Objectives

This unit is designed for High School Intermediate Visual Art courses following the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Below is a brief description of objectives for each activity within the unit.

Through individual and small group critiques of narrative work, portraits, and Instagram images, students will use art vocabulary as a tool of art analysis. Using the 4-step critique model, students will deconstruct images, both the components and their meaning, interpreting visual arts from personal, cultural, and historical contexts. Students will make connections between design choices and artistic expression and be able to explain the influence of contextual knowledge on aesthetic responses to art.

Through viewing *History of Ideas* students will explore the use of global themes, symbols, and subject matter in art. They will use visual arts to explore concepts of civics and propaganda. They will gain an understanding of the role of visual arts in United States history as well as globally, both as a means of interpreting past eras within a historical context and of understanding the role of visual art in documenting history.

Through the creation of a self-portrait and personal photographs, students will use experiences and observations to create content for art while generating innovative solutions to artistic problems. They will demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between personal expression and applied design.

# **Instructional Implementation**

# **Teaching Strategies**

- Direct observation- students will describe, analyze, and interpret various artworks.
- Think-pair-share/cooperative learning- students will share their findings in small groups and then with the whole class.
- Oral discussions- conversations about design plans and critiques in groups or one-on-one with a peer or a teacher
- Modeling- teacher will model techniques and design solutions.
- Sketching to learn- students will practice techniques modeled by the teacher.
- Project based learning- students will apply their understanding of techniques and concepts through the creation of unique products.
- Differentiation- teacher will guide students in choosing compositions and portrait angles that align with student skill levels.
- Conferencing- teacher will meet with each student to review sketches.
- Informal feedback/re-looping- teacher will monitor technique and assist students to achieve mastery.
- Progress monitoring- teacher will give students daily goals to keep them on track for completion.

• Informal feedback- concrete informal feedback through the use of technique and planning rubrics.

#### Lessons/Activities

Activity 1- Art history background (10-15 minutes)

This unit will begin by exploring how images have been used throughout history. Generally I have found that my students have had limited exposure to art history in context. To give them some background we will watch the short video <u>History of Ideas – Art</u> (School). It gives a condensed history of art from prehistoric to modern times and gives examples of how art has been used to document human experiences, as religious and political propaganda, for aesthetic purposes, and for protest. It also discusses how these themes have changed and evolved over time. We will brainstorm as a class for modern examples of art being used as a tool.

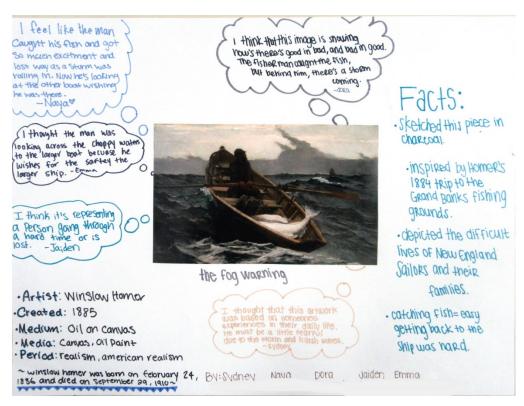
# Activity 2- Visual Literacy (2 days)

# Day one

Using this lens of looking at art as a tool to communicate ideas we will analyze a selection of narrative artworks. I have chosen a variety of images for students to choose from, a list of which are included on the last page of this document as well as a link. I made sure to include some very realistic, straightforward options such as Winslow Homer's Fog Warning, which depicts a sailor trying to reach his ship before the fog sets in. There are also more ambiguous, abstract pieces like Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, a cubist political painting about the German bombing of a small Spanish town during the Spanish civil war. Amy Casey's City Blocks, speaks to the importance of neighbors and community through a stylized cityscape of unsteady buildings. Guernica and City Blocks, are much more open to interpretation without additional contextual information. This differentiation allows students who are unsure to choose a piece that they can interpret successfully while allowing more confident students to challenge themselves. Each student will initially investigate their image with no additional information. I uploaded the image files to google classroom without titles so that student could access whichever artwork they chose from their Chromebooks. You could also print color copies. I always have students begin by sketching the image. This gets them to take the time to focus on the details visually first before they begin to try to describe them. They will use the visual literacy worksheet (see appendix) to describe, analyze, and interpret their chosen work. At the intermediate level it is necessary to stress the importance of explaining how they are coming to conclusions. For example: if they state that the boat is the focal point of "The Fog Warning" this seems obvious but why? How do you know? Is it because it is the largest thing in the composition? Is it because it is in the foreground? Are there leading lines that point to it? In Amy Casey's City Blocks there is a feeling of instability. What about the image creates this feeling? If students have not done this type of close reading of an artwork before, it would be beneficial to do one together as a class first.

I will group students together based on which artwork they chose. Each group will discuss their assigned artwork and develop their own interpretation. Then students will be given the artist's name and title of the work to research further. They will work together to create a poster that addresses: what their interpretations were, the visual clues they used from the artwork to come to that conclusion, and the artist's intent. Then they will present their information to the class, first giving their initial interpretation and what clues they used, then opening up to class discussion and interpretation, and concluding with sharing evidence that they found regarding the artist's intent. We will discuss how they were able to gain meaning from the artwork without any written description or label information.

# Student examples-group poster



# initial thoughts

We originally thought the painting depicted a negative view of chies, that they're messy and chaotic. We thought the artist was painting a representation of herfear of buildings falling on her.

The painting was made to represent the importance of neighbors, and the artist's love of chies (and now cities bring people together. Amy Casey's paintings represent the resiliance of life and people's ability to been going in the face of ever shifting circumstances.

Malik



A woman in an old swimsuit is thoating in the water surrounded by Haura and Launa. This ceems to create a contrast between land and sea (water). It seems like she is in touch with notture because the Donitrols I weatheres are all very close to Wer. The usoman teems very dreamy and almost as if one is in a lost of pardice because of all the different types of birds and plants and bugs. The eyes in the

I see a woman floating in water, in a place that looks similar to a pond. It gives out a colon/relaxing Pelling because of the Unice of colors and the positions of the woman and animals.

Bottom raif of the pointing are also relaxed + distance, so this could even be a dream.

Christina Toro is a Puerto Pican Artist who makes nontraditional felf-postraiture with implied morement and Change. The depicts portions of her life with these comostly) acrylic masterpie les in an indirect and symbolic way. "The Night Swimmer" By Cristina Toro

she paints dissolving landscapes, pools of water, belaved dojects, flora and fawna, and her own body with a spirit of force and deep devotion to detail.

All of her works are large in

# Activity 3- portraiture introduction and project assignment/planning (1 day)

In this activity, we will narrow our scope to focus on portraiture/self-portraiture and how artists can communicate information about the subject through this genre. I will introduce a brief history of portraiture through a PowerPoint presentation. We will begin by looking at Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. In contrast to the narrative works that the students looked at in activity 2, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is a very stark composition. We will look for specific design choices that the artist has made such as facial expression, lighting, wardrobe, setting, framing, and color and discuss their possible significance. We will discuss some historical functions and traditions of portraiture and look at examples. I will then explain the project requirements. Students will apply their understanding of proportion and portraiture to create a monochromatic self-portrait using colored pencil on gray paper. They will convey at least two attributes of their personality through the design of their self-portrait and a frame or border.

### Activity 4- artmaking

# Day one- Proportion practice

Students will use the video tutorial "How to draw the Head" (WeiWorks) to learn basic facial proportions and practice drawing facial features from frontal, profile, and three-quarter views. I put a link to the video in google classroom so that students can follow along at their own pace and re-watch sections as needed. Students will then apply these generic proportions to life drawing by partnering with classmates to practice their skills. Those who do not have time to partner with a classmate will complete a practice life drawing of someone at home. For homework, students will make a list of 10 attributes that describe them.

# Day two- Shading practice

As a warm up, students will brainstorm in small table groups how they might use design elements, facial expression, lighting, wardrobe, setting, symbolism, and framing to represent each of their 10 attributes. We will review different types of shading and their pros and cons. We will also discuss how color, line quality, and shading style could be used to convey meaning. I will demonstrate how to layer black, white, and one color effectively using basic blending, hatching, cross-hatching, and scumbling on gray toned paper. Students will practice these shading techniques and decide which will be most effective for them. Next, they will choose one of 4 images of classical sculptures to recreate on their gray paper to practice shading. Using the classical sculptures rather than student images at this stage will make the process easier. They are all one color so students can focus on how the light reflects and bends around features and the features are exaggerated so students will have to pay close attention to the source image.

# Student examples- shading practice



For homework, students will take source photos of themselves with specific consideration of facial expression, lighting, wardrobe, setting, framing, and color. Then they will upload these to google drive so that they can view them on the classroom Chromebooks.

#### Day 3

Students will continue working on their practice shading assignment and framing design while I conference with individuals about their source photos. Common issues are images not being in focus and poor lighting, which reduce the clarity of information and make it difficult to use a reference. Many students will need to reshoot their photos before beginning the final artwork. Students will turn in their shading practice at the end of class. I will assess their shading based on the technique rubric (included in the resources section) and re-loop with students who need more practice.

# Day 4

I will review student sketches for their frames, using the planning rubric (included in the resources section) and give design feedback and further suggestions for improvement. After revisions, students will then begin applying their frame design to their gray final paper lightly in pencil. Next, they will sketch in the basic proportions of their self-portrait.

# *Days 5-7*

Once students have accurately sketched themselves onto their final draft they will apply their chosen shading technique and color to their final artwork, creating a full range of value. Final products will be graded using the summative rubric (included in the resources section.)

Student examples- self-portraits







Activity 5- Contemporary Digital Media- Two Sides of the Story

Our students use Instagram daily for self-portraiture and to keep a running narrative of their life. I want them to consider the ways in which they interact with the social media platform. What is it for? How do they use it? How do others use it? Is it art? I will pose these questions to my students and then I will display a personal Instagram photo and invite students to interpret. What is the artist trying to convey? What compositional choices are being made? What feeling is being evoked?



"Hiking with Wild Ponies!"

I will then show students photos from a another angle that reveal a very different reality.



We will discuss how often they alter reality in their own images and how framing and symbolism are used by brands, celebrities, and the news. How does this manipulation of reality affect us in the choices that we make and in the way that we remember events? I will have them read "On Instagram and Identity" (Romero 2014) and continue the discussion of how we use social media. Students will analyze celebrity/corporate Instagram posts for meaning and underlying purpose and then create their own photographs that distort the reality of a moment. Students will upload their images and a description of what they were trying to convey to Google Classroom.

Student examples- two-sides of the story









### Activity 6 – Contemporary portraiture through traditional media

The unit will conclude by returning to look at traditional media with a contemporary twist. We will compare and contrast Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* with Kehinde Wiley's painting of the same name. Both artists have made strategic compositional and presentational choices. David presents Napoleon on a rearing white stallion, powerfully leading the charge, while in reality the trip took a few days and Napoleon did not lead but actually followed the troops on a rather less impressive mule (Khan). Wiley further changes the narrative by replacing the expected pale Frenchman with an anonymous African American model in contemporary clothing and a bold patterned background. We will discuss the announcement of Kehinde Wiley as the painter of Barack Obama's official presidential portrait and what message that painting, its subject, and its creator might convey to its viewers in the halls of the National Portrait Gallery.

#### Assessment

#### Informal Assessments

- Direct observation through note taking
- Checklist for completion:
  - o visual literacy worksheet
  - o group poster
  - o proportion practice
  - o shading practice
  - o initial sketches
  - o revised sketches
  - o two sides of the story
- Oral discussion
- Informal feedback for revision of proportion, shading, and initial sketches
- Technique rubric for proportion and shading
- Planning rubric for revised sketches

#### Formal Assessments

• Formal project rubric for self-portrait

# Appendix 1

# NCSCS objectives

#### **Intermediate:**

# I.V.1 Use the language of visual arts to communicate effectively.

- I.V.1.1 Use art vocabulary to critique art. group critiques of narrative work
- I.V.1.2 Understand how design influences artistic expression. creation of a self-portrait and *contemporary media activity*
- I.V.1.3 Understand the use of global themes, symbols, and subject matter in art. *viewing History of Ideas, analysis of narrative and design work, creation of personal work*
- I.V.1.4 Analyze images through the process of deconstruction (the components of the image and its meaning). 4 step critique of narrative artwork

# I.V.2 Apply creative and critical thinking skills to artistic expression.

- I.V.2.1 Generate innovative solutions to artistic problems. *creation of personal self-portrait* and personal photographs.
- I.V.2.2 Use experiences and observations to create content for art. *creation of personal self-portrait and personal photographs*.

# I.CX.1 Understand the global, historical, societal, and cultural contexts of the visual arts.

- I.CX.1.1 Use visual arts to explore concepts of civics and economics, such as systems, functions, structures, democracy, economies, and interdependence. *viewing History of Ideas, analysis of narrative artworks that relate to historical events*.
- I.CX.1.2 Understand the role of visual art in documenting history. *-viewing History of Ideas* I.CX.1.4 Explain the influence of contextual knowledge on aesthetic responses to art.-
- discussion after analysis of narrative artwork and contemporary media.

# Suggested Narrative Artwork for Critique

This sample list of artworks covers a broad range of approaches for students to choose from.

- City Blocks by Amy Casey
- The Fog Warning by Winslow Homer
- Christina's World by Andrew Wyeth
- The Sources of Country Music by Thomas Hart Benton
- The Night Swimmer by Cristina Toro
- Ruby Loftis Screwing in a Breech Ring by Dame Laura Knight
- Guernica by Pablo Picasso

#### History of Ideas – Art

This video gives an overview of art history in context, explaining a variety of purposes for which art has been created.

# Visual literacy worksheet

This worksheet is designed to guide students through the process of critique.

### Introduction to portraiture presentation

This PowerPoint presentation gives a brief overview of portraiture through history and has examples of completed student work.

#### Shading practice presentation

This PowerPoint presentation shows examples of different shading techniques and has sample sculptural images to use as reference photos for initial shading practice.

# <u>Informal technique and sketch rubrics</u>

These general rubrics are designed to be used as informal data points in the planning/practice stage of the project.

#### Formal rubric for self-portrait

This is a summative rubric for the self-portrait in activity 4.

# Two Sides of the Story

This PowerPoint has images for discussion and examples for activity 5- contemporary media.

#### "On Instagram and Identity"

This article raises questions about the artistic merits of Instagram and its effect on our lives.

# "Artist Reimagines Classic Paintings With a Modern Twist"

This links to a CNN article by Mick Krever with background information and images of Kehinde Wiley's work, including a side-by-side comparison of Wiley's and David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*.

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