

BEN SHAHN: PASSION FOR JUSTICE LESSON PLAN

Lesson I: Painting the News

ART CONNECTIONS STANDARD & BENCHMARKS

Standard 1: Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines

VISUAL ART STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts

Standard 2: Knows how to use structures (e.g., sensory qualities, organizational principles, expressive features) and functions of art

Standard 3: Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and potential ideas in the visual arts

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Standard 5: Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others

LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS & BENCHMARKS

Writing: Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Listening and Speaking: Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

Viewing: Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

Media: Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media

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OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will

- Conduct visual research by identifying an image that affects them in a visceral or emotional way from the visual news media (newspapers, photographs, videotapes of television news, or printed images from the internet).
- Write a brief statement reflecting on how and why the image affects them.
- Create a tempera or acrylic painting using this photographic or still video image as a compositional or emotional reference (they will not create a photo-realist painting of a photograph).
- Analyze and discuss the ways in which their paintings differ from or are similar to the

images used to inspire them.

SUPPLIES/ RESOURCE MATERIALS

- Newspapers, magazines, videotaped newscasts, printed internet images
- VHS of Ben Shahn: Passion for Justice
- Books with paintings and photographs by Ben Shahn and other politically involved artists (see bibliography)
- Gessoed masonite boards 15"x22" (12 can be cut from one 4'x8' sheet)
- Quick-drying paint medium (tempera or acrylic)
- Pencils, brushes
- Sketchbooks, paper

TEACHING:

Step 1: Introduction

Have the students discuss how images in the news have affected them personally, recently and in the past. Show examples of photographs from various periods in history (Matthew Brady's Civil War photos, Holocaust images, footage from Vietnam, Gulf War coverage, September 11th video, etc.) to open up the discussion. View VHS of Ben Shahn: Passion for Justice. Discuss the differences between Shahn's earlier and later paintings, and how he used photographs as source material for each. Assign research:

- Find an image in the news media that affects you emotionally or viscerally in some way.
- Write a paragraph on how and why it affects you, including both content and formal visual reasons (include citation for image: where it was found, content, date).

Step 2: Production

In a class discussion, review the found images together. Ask each student to identify an emotion or feeling he or she would like to explore further in a painting. Using their photographic images as starting points, have the students create thumbnail sketches in their sketchbooks. They should be brainstorming possibilities for the final painting. Gesso the masonite boards, and then have the students create sketches on the gessoed masonite boards. Have students create paintings, encouraging them to explore the emotional impact of color in addition to imagery (see Shahn's *Allegory* (a mostly red painting) tc: ; or *Brothers* (a mostly blue painting) tc:).

Step 3: Assessment/Review

In a final group critique, have students discuss the emotional impact of the paintings as well as their compositional strengths and weaknesses. Have them analyze the similarities and differences between the original images and the finished paintings. The review should include discussion of the concepts of universality, documentary, and communication. Evaluate students on their individual progress and on how well they fulfilled each step of the project, including research, effort, creative thinking, craftsmanship, use of time, and grasp of concepts.

Extension Activity

Hold an exhibit for the school. Create a display featuring each student's original image, their descriptive paragraph about the image, and their final painting with a title that reflects their emotional goal.

Fred: Since each lesson plan will have its own PDF file, the Bibliography should be repeated — right? Obviously, I'm still working on it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY/ REFERENCES

To be completed...

Library of Congress FSA/OWI files website

Shape of Content, chapter:

Documentary Expression in America

FSA book

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Gordon Parks

Dorothea Lange

Diego Rivera

Goya