

Real & Unreal

Overview: Students will interpret works of visual art and literature.

Goals: This lesson will

Support concepts & skills: expression of ideas in non-literal ways, analysis connected to interpretation and evaluation.

Fulfill Learning Standards: ELA 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 11; Visual Arts 3, 5, 6, 8, 10.

Practice: analysis and interpretation, group discussion, defending opinions.

Familiarize students with: realism, exaggeration, distortion



White Writing
Mark Tobey

Objectives for Students: Students will

Be able to: examine works of art and literature to identify the main idea, message, theme, and relevance to their life; examine works of art and literature to compare and contrast their authenticity, use of realism and exaggeration or distortion.

Understand: that a work of art can communicate something real even if it is not realistic; that it is important to evaluate the authenticity and realism of any message or source.

Key Questions (to be answered by students):

1. Is this work trying to tell me something about real life? What? How?
2. How are realistic works different from unrealistic ones? Which do I like better, and why?
3. How do some authors / artists blend real and unreal to get the effect they want?

Museum Objects: A range of objects from many galleries will work well for this lesson. Many of the portraits and landscapes are of real people or places, such as *Mrs. Sarah Clayton* by Joseph Wright, oil on canvas, 1769 (?), (1953.1). Some works that deal with non-real content are the object shown, Mark Tobey's *White Writing*, gouache on paper, 1942, Gift of Mrs. Carl Pickhardt (1994.1), Morgan Russell's *Synchromism (Eidos)*, oil on canvas mounted on board, about 1922-23, and the Greek objects portraying mythic figures.

Pre-Museum Visit – Ask the students to define “real” and “unreal,” and discuss how those terms are related to “true / false,” or “fiction / non-fiction.” How can you tell when something (a photograph, a story, a description of an event, something you see in the papers, on a website, in the movies, an autobiography or biography) is real? Are there times when the real and the unreal are blended?

At the Museum – Ask students to work in pairs, look through the galleries (you may want to limit which ones they have to choose from) and look for a work of art that seems to you to be more about the “real” world, or one that seems to be more about the “unreal” world? Choose one work of art to focus on. Write the name of the work, and whether you are nominating it for the “Real” or the “Unreal” category. Defend your choice.

When the students have finished writing, bring everyone together and ask students to make their nominations. See if you can convince your fellow students why they should vote for this object

as the most or least real. Debate the evidence, and lobby for your candidate. If you think another student has a stronger case you can withdraw your nomination. Take a vote and see which object has won.

Did you see any work of art that blends the real and the unreal? Or that blends the actual and the fantastical? Discuss how this blending was accomplished.

Post-Museum Visit – Discuss: “Where else in your school subjects do you have to distinguish between the real and the unreal? Why and when is it important to know if something is real or unreal?” Look at literature, mythology, folktales, historical fiction or poetry (whatever you are focusing on at the time), and discuss the ways in which this work is real or unreal. There are many ways to be “real.” For example: The person or event is known to be a historical fact. The people and events are realistic but did not really exist or happen. The story (poem, play movie) tells a moral truth or a psychological truth that is real, but the people and events do not exist.

Documentation and Assessment Options: How well were the students able to defend their ideas while listening respectfully to others’ ideas? Keep track of what you notice in their debates and discussions. The students will get better over time in identifying main ideas and themes in literature and in art. Keep track of what percentage of them are able to immediately, eventually, or never recognize the main idea or theme through the year.

Other Works of Art in the Museum that can connect to this lesson:

Works that deal with real content, but present it in a non-realistic manner: *The Artist’s Mother Pouring Water Into a Carafe* by Vuillard, *Cactus* by Webster, *Full Moon, Barbados* by Stella, and African objects. The paintings of Egyptian reliefs by Joseph Lindon Smith are an interesting example, because they are exact replicas of wall paintings found in Egypt, and thus are ultimately very “real.” However, the content shows some distortion, exaggeration, and also mythological subjects.

Links to Other Curriculum:

See also the Theme Unit, Truth: Myth, Fact, and Fiction on this CD-ROM.

ELA: Fiction vs. non-fiction – “In what way is each real and unreal? Is poetry more real in some ways? How would you characterize poetry?” Works that blend real and unreal: historical fiction, the Latin American tradition of magical realism. Theater: A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Media literacy.

Art: Impressionist painting, photography, compare historical photography to computer-manipulated photography (which looks real but is not), realism in painting and in photography, and surrealism. Creating their own works of art that blend the real and the unreal.

History: Whose account is more real? What kind of reality do you get from an encyclopedia, a journal, a movie, a biography, etc.?

Author of the lesson: Anne Rhodes