

Finding Messages in Art



Art and Modern Languages pre-service educators use the sticky note activity to interpret messages found in the paintings of Philip C. Curtis at the Phoenix Art Museum.

Pam Stephens

During the summer of 2011, *SchoolArts* editor Nancy Walkup and I hosted a group of teachers and university students in Venice, Italy. One focus of the trip was the Arte Biennale, an event most easily explained as the world's fair of contemporary and postmodern art. Some of the artwork conveyed subtle messages and subtext not readily interpreted by the casual observer.

A room filled with red and black modeling clay invited viewers to participate in art-making. Another gallery exhibited life-size candles of realistic objects, each lit, slowly burning, and eventually creating wax pools where the artworks had been. An eye-catching outdoor exhibit on the Grand Canal showed large religious images appropriated from van Eyck paintings. As the viewer approached the artworks, however, it became apparent that images were created from hand-painted wooden eggs. According to the artist statement, "...the work breaks down as if it were a digital file of egg pixels."

Some of the students in our group later chatted with me about how to approach these complex and sometimes puzzling works of art. The answer is simple: Be a good observer and act as if you are an art detective. Here is one activity that helps to achieve these goals.

Sticky Note Activity

You will need the following:

- sticky notes or any small pieces of paper, at least a dozen per small groups of students
- pencil
- reproductions of artworks (postcards or posters)

Instructions

1. Place students in small groups.
2. Assign a recorder and a reporter for each group.
3. Provide sticky notes, a pencil, and one artwork.
4. Ask students to carefully look at the artwork for at least two or three minutes.

5. Instruct students to generate words or phrases about the artwork. The recorder will write these words and phrases on the sticky notes.
6. When all of the sticky notes have been used, review the traditional parts of speech (verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections).
7. Ask students to sort their sticky notes by the parts of speech.
8. Guide students to construct a sentence or two based upon the words and phrases they have written. At this point, additional words might be needed. This is often when prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections are generated so that complete sentences can be constructed.
9. When sentences are completed, ask the reporter to read the sentences aloud.

The Results

Because the sentences from this activity are derived specifically from clues found within works of art, the result will be an interpretation. It is this sort of clue-finding that assists students with the development of careful observation that ultimately results in interpretation that can be supported through visual evidence.

I encourage you to try this with your students whether in the classroom or at an exhibition. This is also a good activity to present at teacher workshops. Since the emphasis is on finding meaning, the door is open for multiple correct responses.

Do you have an activity that encourages students to slow down and look for art clues? Please join us on Facebook to share your results from the sticky note activity, or any other interpretative activity that you successfully implement. 

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