

Italian
Renaissance
Learning
Resources

In collaboration with
the National Gallery of Art



Time and Narrative:
Activities

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1. Analyzing a Narrative Painting

Part 1

PURPOSE: to analyze a painting through description, interpretation, and speculation

MATERIALS: a narrative Renaissance painting (either an original [if conducting activity in art gallery] or a reproduction), a large sheet of paper, tape, pen, one **worksheet** for each student.

Note: If you will be using the evidence sheet on the martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist for Parts 2 and 3 of this activity, work from a painting of the same theme in Part 1. Examples include Master of the Apollo and Daphne Legend's *The Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist* [fig. 1] and Benozzo Gozzoli's *The Feast of Herod and the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* [fig. 2].

PROCEDURE:

1. Hang the large sheet of paper on the wall and distribute the worksheets.

2. Ask students to study the painting and complete the statements in the worksheet. Their responses should build from objective observations to deductive conclusions and end with speculative conjectures or questions that remain unanswered. Worksheet statements:

- “I see...” (Describe as specifically and objectively as possible some effect or element you see in the painting.)
 - “I think...” (Draw some conclusions about why the painter included the element you have described. What purpose does it serve? Hints: The function may be formal [having to do with the arrangement of color, line, or shape], thematic [bearing narrative or symbolic significance], or naturalistic [contributing to convincing effects in nature or figures]).
 - “I wonder...” (What ideas or questions do your observations raise? What more would you like to find out about the picture?)
3. Allow students to share their statements with the class and post them on the wall.
 4. As a class, work through the rest of the painting. Ask for a description (“I see”) that has not been offered yet and invite the class to propose additional “I think” and “I wonder” statements. Write responses on the large sheet of paper attached to wall.

1. Analyzing a Narrative Painting Image Reference



Fig. 1 Master of the Apollo and Daphne Legend
The Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist, c. 1500
Paint on wood, 59.7 x 94.3 cm (23 1/2 x 37 1/8 in.)
Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection



Fig. 2 Benozzo Gozzoli
The Feast of Herod and the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, 1461–2
Tempera (?) on panel, 23.8 x 34.5 cm (9 3/8 x 13 9/16 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection
Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art

1. Analyzing a Narrative Painting

Part 2

PURPOSE: to compare the treatments of narrative in texts and images.

MATERIALS: evidence sheet with information relevant to the narrative represented in the painting (The instructor may produce the text or use the provided **evidence sheet on Saint John the Baptist.**)

PROCEDURE:

1. Decide whether to conduct the activity as a class or in small groups. Prepare and make copies of the evidence sheet.

2. Distribute the evidence sheet and ask students to read it.

3. Ask students to consider whether the information sheds new light on their “I see/I think/I wonder” statements from Part 1 and to revise the statements as they feel necessary or add new statements that may occur to them.

4. Conduct a discussion, asking:

- How did reading the text alter your understanding of the painting?

- Do you feel that additional knowledge added to, detracted from, or had no impact on your appreciation of the painting?

- Based on your experience, how much knowledge of the narrative do you think the artist assumed on the part of his viewers? What does your answer tell you about the knowledge base of Renaissance viewers compared with our own?

Make the point that Christian stories were nearly ubiquitous in Renaissance culture. Images of biblical incidents were found everywhere, from shrines on urban street corners and along rural lanes to the walls and furnishings of town halls, private homes, and churches.

- What advantages does the written narrative have over the pictorial?

Responses might include vividness of characterization and the ability to see all the evidence unfolding simultaneously. Bring up the three purposes that paintings served in churches: provided a pictorial Bible for the illiterate; stirred up emotions; prompted memory of the stories.

- What advantages does the pictorial narrative have over the written?

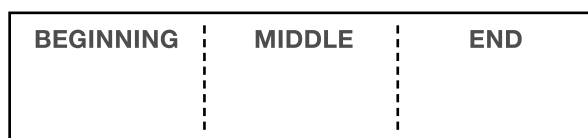
1. Analyzing a Narrative Painting

Part 3

PURPOSE: to distinguish chronological and thematic approaches to storytelling while considering the choices artists make when condensing a narrative (or portion of a narrative) into pictorial form.

MATERIALS: large piece(s) of paper (one per class or group), tape, markers

PROCEDURE: Decide whether to conduct activity as a class or in small groups. Hang a large piece of paper lengthwise on the wall and draw a timeline divided into three sections: Beginning, Middle, and End.



Instruct students as follows:

1. Select three events described in the evidence sheet that, in your view, constitute the beginning, middle, and end of the narrative. Write them down under the appropriate heading on the large sheet of paper. Draw a line underneath to serve as your timeline.

2. Look again at the painting. Is the focal event one of the three episodes you recorded on the timeline? If yes, mark with a star. If not, record it on the timeline and mark with a star.

3. Continue to work through the painting to identify other elements that may pertain to the narrative. They may be explicitly represented or symbolic and allusive (perhaps expressed through details of costume, setting, iconography, use of color, or light, shadow, and weather). If students generally agree on an element, mark it on the timeline.

4. Conduct a discussion about how verbal narratives are translated into pictorial form. Questions might include:

- How much of the overall narrative did the artist include in the painting?
- In what ways did the artist deviate from or embellish the verbal narrative?
- Why do you think the artist chose to focus on a particular episode? How—and why—did the artist incorporate into the painting allusions to other episodes?
- Do you feel other aspects of the narrative should have been included? How might the artist have incorporated them into the painting?
- What other episodes described in the evidence sheet might make good subjects for a picture? What pictorial strategies would lend themselves to the representation of that narrative? How might that painting look?

2. Narrative Paths: A Visit to an Art Gallery

PURPOSE: to analyze the techniques artists employ to guide a viewer through a painting, and to compare the sequencing of events in pictorial and verbal narratives.

MATERIALS: a Renaissance narrative painting (preferably continuous narrative) in an art gallery setting, pen, paper (or white board and markers if permissible in the gallery)

PROCEDURE:

1. Seat students before the painting. Ask students to close their eyes for ten seconds and then open them.

2. Give them a minute or two to look at the painting. Say nothing about its subject; allow students to pursue their ideas and questions in the discussion that follows:

- What was the first area of the painting that caught your eyes when you opened them?

Write answers on the paper or white board.

By a show of hands, establish the top two or three choices for further discussion.

- How do you think the artist attracted your attention to that passage? Be specific in describing what you see in the painting.

If necessary, prompt the students to consider visible attributes, such as the relative size and position of objects, placement and intensity of color, and areas of extreme darkness or brightness.

- What reasons might the artist have had for drawing your attention there?

Follow up on vague responses by asking for supporting visual evidence. Encourage students to consider how this passage relates to the actions, emotions, thoughts, and incidents portrayed in other sections of the painting.

- Where did your eyes go next?

Write answers on the paper or white board. By a show of hands, establish the top two or three choices for further discussion.

2. Narrative Paths: A Visit to an Art Gallery (Continued)

- How do you think the artist attracted your attention to that passage?

As above, prompt students to consider the formal methods (such as treatment of color, line, shape, light, shadow, size, and placement) used to create visual connections.

- How does “reading” this painting differ from reading a story in a book?

Compare the predetermined, sequential order of a verbal narrative with the relative freedom with which the eye can roam through a pictorial narrative. Topics for discussion include: the ambiguity in the representation of cause and effect; the thoughts and feelings conveyed; the artist’s selection of the scenes; the sequence of scenes (before and after); and the implied rather than explicit connection between the scenes.

- Do you see any elements in the painting that contribute to the narrative in a way that would be difficult to match in words?

Students’ answers may have to do with the immediacy of visual perception—that is, the capacity of images to communicate instantly, at the viewer’s first glance, copious details that would take many words to describe.

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative

Part 1

PURPOSE: to learn about various formats used for narrative paintings during the Renaissance.

MATERIALS: images of Renaissance narrative paintings such as those cited below

PROCEDURE:

As an introduction, familiarize students with the various formats used for depicting narratives in Renaissance painting, using examples from this unit. These include:

- Multipartite structures, such as polyptychs, in which narrative episodes are related in hierarchical fashion (e.g., *The Crucifixion with Scenes from the Passion and the Life of St John the Baptist* attributed to Lippo di Benivieni **[fig. 3]** and *The Aldobrandini Triptych* by a follower of Bernardo Daddi **[fig. 4]**)
- Predella panels in which the narrative is presented in serial form (e.g., Benvenuto di Giovanni's altarpiece for the monastery of Sant' Eugenio **[fig. 5]**)
- Single pictures with a monoscenic narrative and embedded allusions to earlier and/or later episodes (e.g., *The Entombment of Christ* attributed to Fra Angelico **[fig. 6]**)
- Single pictures using continuous narrative (e.g., *The Journey of the Queen of Sheba* by Apollonio di Giovanni and workshop **[fig. 7]**)

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative PART 1
Image Reference / page 1



Fig. 3 Attributed to Lippo di Benivieni

The Crucifixion with Scenes from the Passion and the Life of St John the Baptist, c. 1315–20
Tempera on wood panel, dimensions by panel: 63.5 x 17.5; 63.5 x 34.3; 61 x 16.5 cm
(25 x 6 7/8; 25 x 13 1/2; 24 x 6 1/2 in.)

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Collection



Fig. 4 Master of the Apollini Sacrum

The Death of Julius Caesar, late 15th century
Tempera on wood, 47 x 150.43 cm (18 1/2 x 59 1/5 in.)

Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Samuel H. Kress Collection

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative PART 1
Image Reference / page 2



a)



b)



c)

Fig. 5 Benvenuto di Giovanni

a) Altarpiece for monastery of Sant'Eugenio,
Ascension of Christ [main panel], 1491
Tempera on wood
Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena

b) *The Agony in the Garden*, probably 1491
Tempera on wood, 44.8 x 47.9 cm (17 1/16 x 18 7/8 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection
Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art

c) *The Resurrection*, probably 1491
Tempera on wood, 43.5 x 49.7 cm (17 1/8 x 19 9/16 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection
Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative PART 1
Image Reference / page 3



Fig. 6 Attributed to Fra Angelico

The Entombment of Christ, c. 1450

Tempera on panel, 88.9 x 54.9 cm (35 x 21 5/8 in.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art



Fig. 7 Apollonio di Giovanni and workshop

Journey of the Queen of Sheba, c. 1464–5

Tempera on panel, 43.2 x 176.2 cm (17 x 69 3/8 in.)

Birmingham Museum of Art, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative

Part 2

PURPOSE: to experience some of the challenges and choices artists faced in translating verbal narratives into pictorial form.

MATERIALS: **evidence sheet** with account of the death of Julius Caesar, drawing supplies

PROCEDURE:

Distribute evidence sheets to students and explain that they will be planning their own narrative paintings on the subject of the death of Julius Caesar. Instruct students to:

1. Read the evidence sheet and think about how they would like to present the story. Ask students to think about which events they consider necessary to the purpose of telling their version and have them underline the relevant passages.

2. Decide which of the four pictorial strategies discussed in Part 1 they wish to use for their painting (hierarchically structured polyptych, predella panel in serial form, monoscentic narrative with allusions to earlier and/or later incidents, or continuous narrative).

- 3.** Create a drawing or diagram of the proposed painting and write a two- to three-page description. Students should specify:
- the event(s) and character(s) they have chosen to represent, and why.
 - the narrative technique they have chosen to employ and the limitations and advantages of that technique in relation to their subject.
 - the design of their composition
- Invite students to report their ideas to the class. Display the compositional drawings on the wall. Note recurring events, themes, and pictorial strategies, as well as points of difference.

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative

Part 3

PURPOSE: to analyze the treatment of narrative in a specific Renaissance painting.

MATERIALS: images of *The Death of Julius Caesar* by the Master of the Apollini Sacrum [fig. 8], evidence sheet with excerpts from Pliny's account of the death of Julius Caesar

PROCEDURE:

1. Show students *The Death of Julius Caesar*. Ask them to review the Evidence Sheet and circle the passages from Pliny's account that they believe match the episodes depicted in the painting. These include:

- "Upon the report which the priests made to him, that they had killed several sacrifices, and still found them inauspicious, he resolved to send Antony to dismiss the senate." (Note the shrine with a golden idol and animal carcasses in the painting.)
- "Caesar received [Artemidorus's account of the conspiracy] and tried several times to read it, but was still hindered by the crowd of those who came to speak to him."
- "Tillius, laying hold of his robe with both his hands, pulled it down from his neck, which was the signal for the assault. Casca gave him the first cut, in the neck."

- "...the multitude could no longer contain themselves within the bounds of tranquility and order, but heaped together a pile of benches, bars, and tables, which they placed the corpse on, and setting fire to it, burnt it on them."

2. Ask students how they went about identifying the events. Ask them to refer to specific details in the painting. Elicit students' reactions to the painting with the following questions:

- How many episodes did you find? Which ones?

Discuss and make reference to the passages quoted above.

- What kind of narrative structure did the artist employ?

He employed continuous narrative.

- Why do you think the artist was drawn to those four episodes? Why do you think he chose them in particular?
- Would you add, exclude, or substitute any events? How would that affect the painting?

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative

Part 3 (Continued)

- How did the artist call attention to Caesar in each of the scenes?

Caesar wears the same distinctive red tunic with blue sleeves in each scene.

- How did the artist create a sense of dramatic pacing? How did he call attention to the climax of the narrative?

Note the way that space undulates back and forth, in and out of depth, subtly altering the effect of each scene. The Senate building physically dominates the composition through its size and prominent placement near the front of the picture plane. The two foremost columns frame and add emphasis to the focal murder scene. The gap in the low wall opens a direct path from the viewer's space to Caesar.

- How would your impression of the painting change if there were a flat backdrop behind the figures?

The setting would be less theatrical and monumental. The viewer's attention would focus on the figures. The separation of episodes would be less clear, causing the narrative to be less clear.

3. Picturing a Historical Narrative Part 3 Image Reference



Fig. 8 Master of the Apollini Sacrum
The Death of Julius Caesar, late 15th century
Tempera on wood, 47 x 150.43 cm (18 1/2 x 59 1/5 in.)
Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Samuel H. Kress Collection

4. All the News That Fits: From Painting to Newspaper **Part 1**

INTERMEDIATE

PURPOSE: to analyze the subject of a painting.

MATERIALS: image of a Renaissance narrative painting with copious details (preferably continuous narrative or multiepisodic), large sheets of paper, tape, markers

PROCEDURE: Ask students how many different story lines they can identify in the painting. Encourage them to speculate on some possible narratives, backing their speculations with reference to:

- actions and gestures
- facial expressions
- interplay between figures
- size of figures
- placement of figures (consider both two-dimensional and three-dimensional space)
- placement of highlights and shadows
- placement and intensity of color

4. All the News That Fits: From Painting to Newspaper Part 2

PURPOSE: to use powers of deduction as and imagination to translate a multi-episodic pictorial narrative into a newspaper format.

MATERIALS: image of a Renaissance narrative painting with copious details (preferably continuous narrative or multiepisodic), current newspaper (or news website), large sheets of paper, tape, markers

PROCEDURE:

1. Lead a discussion about the front page of a current print or online newspaper. Talk about the decisions that go into creating the layout, for example:

- articles on the front page vs. interior pages (primary vs. secondary content)
- size, length, and placement of articles on the front page (above vs. below the fold)
- relative sizes of typeface
- illustrations
- teasers directing attention to interior (secondary) features

2. Ask students to imagine they are reporters covering the stories represented in the painting. Ask them to design the front page of a printed newspaper or the home page of an online newspaper, considering the following:

- How will the major headline read?
- What other stories (if any) will appear above the fold? Provide a headline for each.
- What stories would appear below the fold? Provide a headline for each.
- What teaser lines would you include to refer to articles in inside sections?
- Based on what you see, write a brief article for each story, illustrated with details from painting if desired.

3. Follow up with additional questions:

- Do you agree with the way the artist prioritized incidents in the painting?
- What would you make more (or less) prominent (either in the painting or the newspaper)?
- Why do you think the artist structured the painting as he did?