Joslyn Art Museum
Comprehensive Study Lesson Plan

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CHILDREN IN ART

Focus: William Sidney Mount, The Blackberry Girls

Objectives – Students will:
• Create a portrait of children or a stop motion animation project.
• Respond to the notion of authentic voice and national pride.
• Present videos of their stop motion animation project.
• Connect creating “selfies” with understanding foreground, background and atmospheric perspective.

Suggested Materials: William Sidney Mount teaching poster; Pinterest Resource Board, see detailed lesson plans for additional materials.

Vocabulary: atmospheric perspective, background, estimate, foreground, genre, illustration, memory-mining, portrait, symbolism

Procedure:
• Engage: What is everyday life or genre? Using strips of paper, have students write down their ideas of what would be depicted by an artist in this category. Then take the strips to create a collaborative artwork organizing similar themes together.

• Art Talk: Genre & History. Talk about how the wealthy citizens and military officers would have their portraits commissioned. Then transition to how Mount was inspired by Dutch genre paintings – creating compositions celebrating everyday life. This gave him the opportunity to tie in his notion to have an authentic voice.

• History: Who was William Sidney Mount? Refer to resources in the Teacher Support Materials for additional information. http://goo.gl/BTkzcF

• Aesthetics: Foreground/Background/Atmospheric perspective. Use Mount's The Blackberry Girls to review this terms. Make the connection to selfies (fuzzy background).

• Production 1: ANIMAGINATION: Sightseeing from the Blackberry Boat. Discover the rich opportunities for re-inventing the ordinary through observation, memory-mining and simply messing around with materials under a camera. Refer to the lesson plan presented by Becky Hermann and Peggy Reinecke at Thursdays for Teachers.

• Production 2: Children in Art. Have students compare and contrast portraits of children and adults. Then have them use what they observed to create a portrait of children. Refer to the lesson plan presented by Tafadzwa Ndoda at Thursdays for Teachers.

• Other: Death portraits. Mount was frequently commissioned to create portraits of children who passed away. He struggled while working with the corpses. Discuss how this may have contributed to his spiritualism and participation in séances – perhaps he needed an escape. This topic is for high school students.
• **Close:** What does it mean to be American? Mount did not go to Europe as he felt it would affect his national pride. Ask students if there is anything they have not done for fear it would affect who they are. Then ask if they done something that changed who they are.

**Extensions:**

- **Cultural Connections:** Mount created artworks full of symbolism that people in his time knew what these caricatures meant but today have scholars perplexed. Have students study this aspect of his artworks and research images or artworks from today may provide the same “mystery” for scholars in 150 years.

- **Fine Arts:** Study how music played a significant role in Mount’s artworks and how he connected African Americans to music in his artworks.

- **Language Arts:** Create a back-story for these girls in Mount’s portrait *The Blackberry Girls*. It is not known who they are so students should be encouraged to use their creativity in this project.

- **Math:** Estimate distances. How far away is the background from the girls in the portrait. Do the same calculations using real locations – utilize Google maps in this project. For younger students, show them objects and have them estimate the size then measure them.

- **Science:** Blackberries symbolized hope and growth. Have students create scientific illustrations of the fruit. Have students research meanings for other fruits during this time period.

**Academic Standards & additional resources:**

Available on online version at [www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/thursdays-for-teachers](http://www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/thursdays-for-teachers)

[select Lesson Plans, then American]

**About the Artwork:**

William Sidney Mount focused on children in his most famous genre paintings. Patrons were interested in the subject because images of young people represented an optimistic outlook for America’s agrarian future. After the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861 people were drawn to images of children, especially in the countryside, because it reminded them of a time that they thought was pure and innocent.

From the 1830s to 1860s Mount painted many children and engaged in the highly profitable business of painting death portraits. The child mortality rate was extremely high, and parents wanted to find a way to preserve the memories of their loved ones. Death portraits were in high demand, but they were not easy. Corpses smelled awful, and Mount felt uncomfortable around a lifeless body that he charged twice the amount that he would have for a portrait of a live model. He wrote that the extra money was not even worth "the anxiety of mind I have to undergo to make my efforts satisfactory to the bereaved."

These long hours spent with dead bodies and a 19th century preoccupation with death may have inspired Mount's interest in spiritualism, the belief that spirits of the dead can communicate with the living. Mount frequently attended séances and claimed that he was in contact with the spirit of Rembrandt van Rijn, (1606-1669) one of the most famous Dutch painters from the 17th century. Through a medium called “automatic writing” Mount believed that Rembrandt was passing on knowledge and advice to him. "You are the best national painter of your country," reads one letter.

Mount’s interest in earlier Dutch artworks extended beyond séances, and his paintings show that he studied Dutch paintings carefully, pulling different elements into his own work. *The Blackberry Girls*, painted in 1840, shares qualities with paintings from the Netherlands that Mount may have seen in prints, such as the sharp contrast between the highly detailed focus of the foreground and the idyllic pastoral landscape behind it. Mount may have borrowed the idea of placing the horizon line lower on the picture plane, which makes the sky seem huge and awe-inspiring. This idealized background reflects national pride and agrarian optimism, qualities that are also present in landscapes by artists like Rembrandt.