

VISUAL ART LESSON PLAN

James Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket" 1875

Objective: To encourage students to think about why visual artists create and to introduce students to artists including James McNeill Whitmore and Al Hirschfeld

Materials: [Harold and the Purple Crayon](#) (Weston Woods and HBO both have animated versions of this book); ["Nocturne in Black and Gold"](#) replica; George Gershwin [caricature](#) replica; crayons and drawing paper; optional PowerPoint slideshow available for download [HERE](#).

Procedures:

1. Read [Harold and the Purple Crayon](#) by Crockett Johnson

- Why did Harold draw? What did Harold need besides his purple crayon?
- How many of you like to draw? Why do you draw?
- Why do you think people who call themselves visual artists draw?

2. Introduce James McNeill Whistler

- He was moody, short tempered and often sick. His parents found that drawing settled him down. At 9, he moved to Russia where his father worked on the railroad. He had formal art lessons and at 15 knew he wanted to be an artist. When his father died, his family returned to the U.S. where he studied to be a minister but he liked his art classes best. He learned to draw maps and got a job doing that but he kept drawing pictures on the edges and finally decided to be a full time artist.
- You may recognize his most famous painting, nicknamed "Whistler's Mother" but its actual title was "An Arrangement in Grey and Black." He liked to give his paintings music titles. Early in his career, people thought his drawings were telling a story but for him it was all about how he used the color and lines. He believed Art is for Art's sake and that is why he named his paintings that way.
- Facilitate a discussion about whether art needs to tell a story in order to be art.

3. "Nocturne in Black and Gold"

- Ask volunteers what they see. Then ask, "Do you think people in 1875 liked this painting? Why or why not?" Share art critic John Ruskin's comment.
- Divide students into two groups: those that agree with Ruskin and those that do not. In each group come to a consensus as to why they have that opinion. Each group shares their discussion with the class.
- "If you were James Whistler, would you give up?"

4. Introduce Al Hirschfeld

- He is considered to be one of the most influential artists of the 20th century due to his unique style of using a pure line with black ink. In 1924 he traveled to Paris and London to study painting, drawing and sculpture. He is best known for his caricatures of famous people. Share some that your students might recognize from his [website](#) ending with one of George Gershwin.
- Is Hirschfeld's style more like Crockett Johnson's or James Whistler's? Discuss the similarities and differences.
- Show the first minute of Disney's interpretation of Rhapsody in Blue from Fantasia 2000 and ask students which of the two artists was the likely influence of this animation. Recall again the title of this composition.

5. One Title with Multiple Interpretations

- Compare and contrast some of these artworks: Miguel Covarrubias (1925), Arthur Dove (1927), Earl Horter (1928), Diana Ong, and Michael Humphries (2001). To facilitate your discussion, a PowerPoint slideshow of these works is available to download at this [link](#).

6. You and Your Crayon

- Encourage your students to create their own visual art interpretation of “Rhapsody in Blue.” They might choose to imitate one of the styles they experienced during this lesson.

7. Making Connections

- Share that Gershwin’s brother Ira attendance at an exhibition of **James McNeill Whistler**’s work gave him the idea that George’s American Rhapsody should include a color similar to most of Whistler’s painting’s titles.
- **Crockett Johnson** grew up in New York at the very same time the George Gershwin was hearing music while roller skating past the penny arcades in that city.
- Just as Gershwin studied in Paris to learn from the great composers there, **Al Hirschfield** also visited Paris in 1924 where he developed his unique artistic style. That style was the inspiration for the animated version of “Rhapsody in Blue” created by Disney for Fantasia 2000. Watch carefully near the end of that segment for an animated version of his caricature of George playing the piano!
- **Michael Humphries** was art director for Disney’s animation of “The Steadfast Tin Soldier,” also for Fantasia 2000.

Lesson plan created by Judy Meyer Hays.

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