A Comparison of Paintings - The Renaissance and Impressionism

This unit is different from previous discussions in which we discussed a single artist and focused on his or her life and artistic style. We will now put aside “personalities” for a moment and focus on an example of a collective artistic theme or movement. (One could use examples of fashion styles or musical styles that the children are familiar with.) We will define compare - to find similarities between two things and contrast - to notice what is different between two things. Perhaps it would be helpful to write down three things from each period that make the period unique. Please focus on using the word “realistic” not Realism, which is a different art movement during your discussions.

The Renaissance 1400-1600

The Renaissance is defined as the revival or rebirth of the arts. Beginning in Italy in 1400, it spread throughout Western Europe, lasting until 1600. The main elements of the Renaissance were:
- Oil paint was used for the first time. Prior to this point, egg tempera was the medium of choice.
- Both symbols and life events were represented together in the same art work.
- Chiaroscuro (the balance of light and dark was for the first time shown within a picture by using shadows rather then blocky outlines).
- Balanced compositions. The arrangement of things like lines, colors and form were seemingly “correct”.
- Ancient Roman ideals were the inspiration for many works in Italy.
- Dutch works of art (Brueghel) began to show hints of daily life (hunting and farming) rather than religious themes.

The Renaissance artists painted to create a very realistic picture of a scene or an object. In the early Renaissance, the paintings often showed Greek or Roman myths or religious events. Later in this period, Northern Renaissance, the paintings showed ordinary people and the world in which they lived. Renaissance artists used dark rich colors and the objects in their paintings were very lifelike. They used light and dark colors instead of sharp outlines. The new vision of the artists was to project a believable picture of man and the world in which he lives.

Impressionism – 1865 – 1880

Impressionism is perhaps the best known and best loved of all artistic styles, celebrated for its bright color and fresh, informal vision of the world. However, in its original contexts, in Paris in the 1870’s, this art was viewed as provocative and controversial; it was considered to threaten the values that fine art was meant to uphold. The artists aimed in their paintings to convey the immediate visual effect of the world around them.

The Impressionist artists painted to create a general impression of a scene or an object. They liked to paint pictures of landscapes and scenes from everyday life. Unlike the Renaissance artists, they did not paint every little detail. They wanted to capture a moment in time and the quick reflections of light. The Impressionists used unmixed primary colors and small strokes to add light to their paintings. They often used thick dabs of paint and they did not mind if the brush strokes could be seen.

“Nothing is seen without light,” and while the ancient masters were aware of the role of light in establishing the existence of objects and determining their forms and colors, it had never occurred to the Renaissance artist that light might also function in the opposite way to deform, denature and dissolve objects.
Scituate – Docent Art for Children

Pieter Brueghel “The Harvesters’ Meal” and Georges Seurat “Bathing Place at Asnieres”

Grades Kindergarten, First, & Second

Bathing Place at Asnieres (1883-84) – A heavy summer haze covers the Seine and the grassy bank of this bathing place a short distance from Paris. Figures, water, land and sky are fixed in a dream world, real yet not quite real. Details are blurred, but flesh gleams like pearls while a thousand colors shine beneath the mirror-like surface of the water. In this painting, Seurat created a heavy breathless atmosphere, an August silence, and all the silent laziness of outdoor summer pleasure. The dots of his Divisionist techniques swim before our eyes and hang in the air like dust motes, suspending time, removing sound, and projecting us into a space made entirely of color, into a moment of many summer days merged into one.

Please refer to the book, “Getting to Know the World’s Greatest Artists, George Seurat” by Mike Venezia.

Georges Seurat is probably best known for inventing Pointillism. Pointillism was George’s method of putting little dots and touches of different colors of paint next to each other. Instead of mixing up red and yellow paint to make orange, for instance, Georges would put dots of red and yellow next to each other. That way, your eye would mix the color right on the canvas. Georges Seurat believed this method would make his colors appear more natural and real looking – almost like colored light.

Harvesters’ Meal – This landscape with figures first attracts our attention by the circular composition in the foreground. This group of hearty eaters seems to be taking its noontime meal hurriedly, for there is work to be done. The sun shines pale in a misty sky, and the harvest is not completed. Rhythm is visible in the sharp pattern cut into the standing grain and in the movement of the three peasants carrying the sheaves off to storage. Bright and glowing in color, the golden grain reflects upon the wide, dark green landscape; it is made more golden by this contrast as it is by the clear reds and leaf greens of clothing, heightened by white aprons, shirts, cloths, and kerchiefs.

Discussion Questions

- In which painting can you best see the brushstrokes? (Do you remember what other artists had obvious brushstrokes? Van Gogh)
- In which painting can you see real details of the people’s clothes (snaps, seams, wrinkles)? Which one is more realistic?
- Discuss the two periods of style – Renaissance and Impressionism
- What are the people doing in the paintings? Does the picture tell a story?
- What time of year is it? How can you tell?
- Which painting is more realistic? Sharp and detailed instead of blurry an pretend-like
- (Brueghel) What kinds of movement do you see?
- Are these realistic movements or made up movements like the wind in van Gogh’s “Starry Night”?
- (Seurat) Is there movement in this painting or is it still?
- What is the boy with the red hat doing?
- (Both paintings) In which dog can you see where the ears end and the head begins? How about where the legs stop and the body begin?
- Look at the faces. In which painting can you see all the features (eyes, noses, wrinkles, etc)?
- (Seurat) Can you see the eyes, mouths or ears? But do you know they are there?
Jan van Huysum, “Vase of Flowers on Socle” and Pierre Auguste Renoir, “Mossy Roses”

Grades Third & Fourth

Vase of Flowers on Socle – This painting is typical of van Huysum’s work although it is painted with an unusually dark background coloration. Punji figures adorn the vase, which is almost obscured by the profusion of blossoms that radiate out from the center. Dramatic lighting – golden highlights on the left side of the painting, dramatic shadows on the right – illustrates van Huysum’s use of Baroque techniques. The careful detail of the blossoms attests to his meticulous study of nature.

Jan van Huysum (1682-1749) was a flower painter who followed the mainstream of the Dutch flower-painting tradition. Among Dutch artists of this time, specialists in still lives, landscapes, portraits or genre scenes were quite common. His paintings are characteristically marked by a technical perfection and love of detail.

Mossy Roses – Renoir’s delight in form and subject matter may be enjoyed in his many flower studies. He always painted his flowers at the moment of full bloom, just before the petals begin to drop. In this work the roses are so velvety and so round that we long to touch them or to inhale their scent. They are bright and warm against dark leaves in a crystal vase that catches all the light. These are not hothouse blooms on stiff, unbending stems but moss roses from a southern garden, naturally beautiful and made more so by the touch of Renoir’s brush. The composition is all curves beginning with the round base of the vase and culminating in the rounded white edge of the table.

Discussion Questions

- Look at both paintings, are the subjects similar? How?
- The subjects are similar – both depicting flowers, yet they somehow “feel” different. Describe the difference.
- Notice the use of color. Does one seem to use more colors? How is the use of color the same? How is it different?
- Does one seem more “real” than another? Why?
- Both styles of painting think the presence and use of light is very important. Can you see differences in the use of light? Does one side of the flower arrangement seem to be facing the light more than the other? How can you tell?
- One of these paintings shows great detail. If possible have the children come up and examine the painting close up and name a few specific details van Huysum included. Why would an artist do that? Note- drops of dew, bugs, thorns, leaves etc.
- Renoir does not show that level of detail. Any guesses as to why? Does this give you any clues as to what is or is not important to him as an artist?
- Look at the Renoir. Where is the light on this arrangement? How can you tell?
- Look at the use of brush strokes. Do you see any similarities? Differences?
- Which painting would you like for your own home?
- Which painting would you like to be able to paint?
- If you could read the artist’s mind, what do you imagine Renoir would want you to understand or feel after seeing his painting? What about van Huysum?
MONEYLENDER AND HIS WIFE (1514) – The painting is a vignette of sixteenth century life. The money lender and his wife are surrounded by a wealth of fascinating objects – medieval instruments, books, old glass, Renaissance crystal and a book of illuminations. The outside world has been brought into the room by the reflection in the convex mirror. The little room in which they sit is thus opened twice, once through the mirror’s reflection and once in the background glimpse of a courtyard. Color is subdued but dazzlingly brightened by the woman’s white coif and red gown. The entire painting is profuse in detail, delicately painted, highly realistic and humanistic in the artist’s approach to his subjects as individuals.

Quentin Metsys (1466-1530) was born in the Flemish University town of Louvain, then the center of humanism in the North. His art included portraits, religious works and genre scenes and forms a transition between the religious spiritualism of the fifteenth century and the humanistic secularism of the sixteenth. Metsys influenced an entire generation of Flemish painters and his realistic, detailed genre works influenced nearly two hundred years of Dutch painting.

STILL LIFE WITH BASKET (1888-90) – The fruit, sugar bowl and teapot in the foreground of this painting are deliberately placed on the same eye level as the basket filled with fruit in the middle ground. The table is crooked, the teapot stands at an angle, and no visible support exists for the large heavy basket. Cezanne deliberately distorts in order to increase the decorative aspect of his work. We see everything from two points of view, from above and head on. Striking color accents – warm rusty red, soft green, and golden yellow– add the feeling of warmth, of hominess, of beauty in everyday objects. The resulting sensation is one of sunshine burnishing wood and highlighting the dark shadowy corners.

Discussion Questions

- Which painting do you think is from the Renaissance period and which was painted by an Impressionist? What clues do you have to determine the period?
- Which of these two paintings looks more like a photograph (something the artist saw) versus an imagined scene. (Renaissance art projected a believable picture of man and the world in which he lives while Impressionism focused on the effects of light on objects.
- Compare and contrast the use of color in the two paintings. How are the colors the same and how does the use of color make the styles different? (Note, that many of the same colors can be found in both paintings.)
- What are the different ways that the artists show depth? How are their techniques typical of their respective art movements?
- Discuss the use of light in both paintings. Where is the source of light? Can you see it in the shadows?
- Is there a sense of balance in these paintings? (Metsys is very balanced: the man vs. the woman, the table vs. the hutch, the book vs. the money; there is an endless list of balanced objects in this picture. The same is not true for the Cezanne. Look how the basket seems to float at the end of the table; the teapot is sitting crooked, what balances the objects in the top left of the painting?)
- Where do you think the artist was standing when he painted each of these pictures? (In the Cezanne piece you are looking at objects both head on and from above while in the Metsys you are strictly looking head on.)

- Compare the pottery and glassware in each picture. Compare the fruit (there is an orange on the shelf behind the money lender). This is a good opening for a discussion of the level of detail used in the two periods.

- Discuss how the pictures would be different if the artists switched the subjects. If Cezanne painted the money lenders and if Metsys painted the still life. Think of Van Gogh's self portraits and of the Postman.