

Part 3: Focus on the artist

This third part of the series focuses on the artist and includes lesson ideas based on artists' quotations, interviews, photographs and biographies.

“

Every artist dips his brush in his soul, and paints his own nature into his pictures.

”

Henry Ward Beecher

Human beings are fascinated by other human beings and art inevitably leads to curiosity and speculation about the artist. In the classroom, a piece of art can serve as a discovery channel to its creator's character, beliefs, biography, culture and lifestyle.



Henri Rousseau in His Studio © Edimédia/CORBIS

In this article, we will look at five practical ideas for using the artist as a resource.

1. Who said what?

Quotations can be thought-provoking, humorous, memorable, short and autonomous in meaning. All of this makes them ideal for the language classroom.

With internet access, quotations are easy to find using sites such as www.quotationspage.com or www.artquotes.net. Search engines, such as Google and Altavista, provide another good way of finding quotations by specific artists. Simply type the name of the artist (in quotation marks) and the word *quotations* into the search window. For example:

- “Paul Klee” quotations
- “Gustav Klimt” quotations
- “Paula Rego” quotations

Use this technique to find a few quotations by two or three artists. The following quotations come from either Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo or Marc Chagall. Can you work out who said what?

Part 3: Focus on the artist

a. "There are painters who transform the sun into a yellow spot, but there are others who with the help of their art and their intelligence, transform a yellow spot into the sun."

b. "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."

c. "I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them."

d. "I am not sick. I am broken. But I am happy as long as I can paint."

e. "I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best."

f. "My painting carries with it the message of pain."

g. "If I create from the heart, nearly everything works; if from the head, almost nothing."

h. "Great art picks up where nature ends."

i. "All colours are the friends of the neighbours and the lovers of their opposites."

Answers: a-c: Picasso; d-f: Kahlo; g-i: Chagall

This activity can be done with students: Turn your classroom into an art gallery of work by the artists in question and ask students if they can tell you (or guess) anything about the represented artists.

Dictate the quotations to your students and then ask them to decide who said what.

2. Using interviews

It is easy to find interviews of well-known twentieth-century or contemporary artists online. For example, run a search of any of the following:

- "Marcel Duchamps" interview
- "Louise Bourgeois" interview
- "Damien Hirst" interview

Part 3: Focus on the artist

Use the interview to create an activity sheet for your students in which they have to match the interviewer's questions with the artist's answers.

Turn your classroom into a gallery of images of the artist's work and, before giving your students the exercise, ask them to think of their own questions that they would like to put to the artist. Whenever possible, you could also use this process as an opportunity to introduce any vocabulary that students will need during the reading.

Note: Video-sharing sites, such as YouTube, are also a good source for interviews

3. Email an artist

The vast majority of working artists are accessible people. There may be one exhibiting work in a café or gallery near you. Or perhaps you have an artist friend who would let you take a few photographs of his or her paintings or sculptures.

Introduce your students to the work of such an artist and ask them to think of as many questions as possible that they would ask if they could meet him or her. These can be questions about the artist or questions about the art. Send the questions to the artist via email and wait for a reply.

4. Guess the work

For this activity, you will need to think of a piece of art that your students are familiar with. A local piece of public art will work well for this, especially if students do not know what the artist looks like.

Find a photograph of the artist.



French Sculptor Louise Bourgeois © Catherine Cabrol/Kipa/Corbis

Show students the image and ask questions about the individual. For example:

- Does anyone know who this woman is?
- Where do you think she is from?
- Where do you think she lives?
- How old do you think she is?
- What do you think she does?
- (After establishing that she is an artist:) What sort of art do you think she creates?

Part 3: Focus on the artist

Note: If anyone can identify the artist you have chosen, you will have to ask him or her to keep quiet.

Tell your students that the artist created a piece of work that they all know. Get them to ask you closed questions (i.e. questions to which you can answer only 'yes' or 'no') to identify the work in question.

Note: Louise Bourgeois, the artist in the photograph, is probably best known for her spider sculpture, *Maman*, a nine-metre-high stainless steel structure which is part of the Tate collection. Bronze versions of the work stand in various cities around the world including Bilbao, St. Petersburg, Tokyo, Seoul, Havana and Paris. To see pictures of the sculpture, go to [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maman_\(sculpture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maman_(sculpture))

5. Artist's biography

Prepare a short text about an artist's life, similar to the example below. Show students a picture of the artist and ask if anyone can identify him or her. If so, find out how much is known. If your students don't know the artist, get them to guess about the person in the picture. You can use the example questions from the previous activity.

Dictate the prepared biography.

Henri Rousseau's friends called him Le Dounanier (the customs officer). Despite the fact that he was actually only a tax collector, this nickname would stay with him for his whole life. He lived in Paris and loved to paint. Claiming that nature was his only teacher, Rousseau is best known for his jungle scenes: wild animals, exotic birds, green plants, blue skies, the tropical moon. The truth was, however, that the painter never left France or saw a jungle. His inspiration came from books, stuffed wild animals and the glass houses in the botanical garden in Paris. Rousseau's flat, childish style attracted many critics and his work was often ridiculed. But others saw sophistication in his technique. Perhaps the most famous of these was Pablo Picasso, who went to meet Rousseau after seeing one of his paintings being sold on the street as a canvas to be painted over.



Finally, use an image search site to find images of the artist's work for your students.

The next article will look into engaging students with concepts, themes and issues.



Henri Rousseau in His Studio © Edimédia/CORBIS

INTEGRATED SKILLS IMAGE



French Sculptor Louise Bourgeois © Catherine Cabrol/Kipa/Corbis