

Part 2: Art stories

This second part of the series deals with art stories and includes two lesson plans. The first lesson plan examines the story behind a piece of art and practises passives. The second lesson plan involves listening and text reconstruction activities and focuses on the story depicted by a piece of art.

Like fish and chips or coffee and a crossword, words and pictures are a perfect marriage. When we combine them in the classroom, the whole learning experience may become more enjoyable, memorable and productive.

One of the most simple and effective ways of doing so is by starting with an engaging image and moving on to the story behind it. There are at least three types of story that could be used in connection with a piece of art:

1. The story behind a piece of art

Students might like to read an account of the theft of the *Mona Lisa*, or hear the story of *The Hands Resist Him*, a painting which was sold on eBay with the claim that it was haunted. The story can be read at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hands_Resist_Him. The first lesson plan uses the story of a missing Van Gogh.



John William Waterhouse: *The Lady of Shalott*
© Tate, London (2009)

2. The story that a piece of art depicts

This could be a piece of history such as that which is captured by Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, the story of which can be read here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Raft_of_the_Medusa. Alternatively, it could be a folktale or legend. The second lesson plan makes use of *The Lady of Shalott* (left), a painting by John William Waterhouse that was inspired by an Alfred Tennyson poem.

3. Imaginary narratives

What's going on here? This is certainly a peculiar-looking couple. Why do they seem to have small amphibian-like fins instead of arms? It looks as if he is about to say something to her. He seems a bit nervous about it. Does he know her or is this the first time they have met? What is he going to say and what will she reply?

I must have walked past this pair a thousand times. I have my own ideas about what's going on. Perhaps my students do as well.

Art can be an effective springboard for story-writing or story-building in the classroom.

One possibility is to use two or three pictures by the same artist and ask students to invent a story that links the subjects and the situations in them.



Photo: Jamie Keddie (2010)

Part 2: Art stories

Lesson plan 1: A millennium in the life of a Van Gogh

Level: Pre-intermediate upwards

Type: A reading activity

Aims: To learn about the story of a missing painting, to practise passive structures

Time: One hour

Preparation

Make photocopies of the following text for your students:



A

But perhaps the painting was no longer his to burn. With a lot of debt, it is possible that Saito had used the Van Gogh as part of a collateral agreement. By the time of his death in 1996, it was not clear if it had been passed to his creditors or his heirs.

B

12 years later, both ownership and location of the painting remain a mystery. Some believe that it has simply disappeared into the darkness of the international art market. Tokyo, Europe and the USA are all rumoured to be Dr Gachet's current residence. But until the work resurfaces, some may like to imagine that Saito did actually take Van Gogh's physician to his grave.

C

Exactly 100 years later, the painting went on sale at Christie's auction house in New York. The art world was stunned as the work was sold for over \$80 million to a Japanese businessman called Ryoei Saito. This made it the most expensive painting ever sold, a record that it held for 14 years.

D

The painting was shipped to Japan and stored in a secret location somewhere in Tokyo. A few years later, Saito shocked the art world a second time when he is reported to have told friends that the portrait should be burned at his cremation. He later said that this was a joke.

E

The year is 1890 and Vincent Van Gogh is spending the last weeks of his life in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris. He is being treated for depression by a French physician called Paul Gachet who becomes one of the Dutch painter's last subjects. Van Gogh refers to the portrait as "sad but gentle, yet clear and intelligent".

Part 2: Art stories

Procedure

1. Show students the *Portrait of Dr Gachet* (a copy of this painting is attached at the end of the article) and ask them the following questions about it:
 - Can you identify the artist?
 - If so, what do you know about him?
 - When do you think it was painted?
 - Who do you think the person in the painting is?
 - The painting was in the Guinness Book of Records for 14 years. Can you guess why?



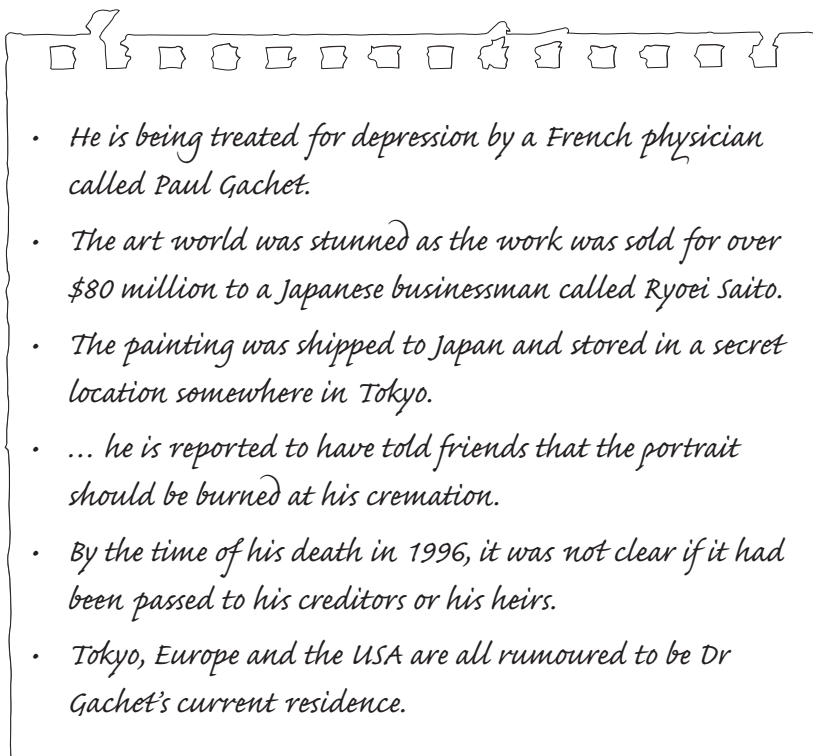
Vincent van Gogh: *Portrait of Dr Gachet*
© Bridgeman Art Library (2009)

2. Give out copies of the text and ask students to arrange the five paragraphs into the correct order. Go over any new or problematic words or language whenever students ask you about them (or give access to dictionaries).
3. Let students pair up and check their answers before conducting feedback.
Answer: E, C, D, A, B
4. Write the statements below on the board and ask students to decide whether or not they agree and why. (They should do this in pairs or small groups.)

- If someone pays \$80 million for a painting, they should be allowed to do whatever they want with it.
- The painting was a good buy for the Japanese businessman.
- The Japanese businessman must have been an art lover.

Part 2: Art stories

5. Tell students to hide their texts and dictate the following excerpts, all of which contain a passive structure:



- *He is being treated for depression by a French physician called Paul Gachet.*
- *The art world was stunned as the work was sold for over \$80 million to a Japanese businessman called Ryoei Saito.*
- *The painting was shipped to Japan and stored in a secret location somewhere in Tokyo.*
- *... he is reported to have told friends that the portrait should be burned at his cremation.*
- *By the time of his death in 1996, it was not clear if it had been passed to his creditors or his heirs.*
- *Tokyo, Europe and the USA are all rumoured to be Dr Gachet's current residence.*

6. Let students check what they have written by comparing their sentences with those in the original text.

7. Ask students to translate the six sentences into their own language. Then, ask students to translate the sentences back into English from memory (i.e. without the texts or the dictated sentences).

Notes

- Saito actually bought two paintings when he was in New York: Two days after buying *Portrait of Dr Gachet*, he bought Renoir's *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* for \$78 million, making it the second-most expensive painting ever sold.
- There are actually two versions of Dr Gachet's portrait. The other hangs in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and can be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Dr_Gachet.
- A list of the most expensive paintings ever sold can also be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most_expensive_paintings.

Part 2: Art stories

Lesson plan 2: The Lady of Shalott

Level: Elementary upwards

Type: A listening and text reconstruction activity

Time: One hour

Preparation

1. Make copies of the following John William Waterhouse paintings which depict scenes from the story of the Lady of Shalott:

- *The Lady of Shalott Looking at Lancelot*
- *"I Am Half-Sick of Shadows," Said the Lady of Shalott*
- *The Lady of Shalott* (a copy of this painting is attached at the end of the article)

These three paintings can be seen at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lady_of_Shalott.

2. Familiarize yourself with the story of the Lady of Shalott. Learn the story off by heart. The main points are summarized below.

The Lady of Shalott

Her real name is Elaine

She is beautiful

She lives alone in a grey tower on an island in the middle of a river that flows to Camelot

She is a prisoner, trapped in her room by a curse

It does not allow her to leave or even look out of the window

No one ever sees her or knows she exists

Sometimes the reapers hear her sing a beautiful song but they think that she is a fairy

She can only see the world reflected in a large mirror

She weaves tapestries of the things she sees through it:

The moon above

The barley fields

The red cloaks of market girls

The knights who ride by

People in love

She starts to become sad

And then Sir Lancelot rides past her window towards Camelot

He looks good in his shining armour

She stops weaving and takes three steps across the room towards the window

She looks out directly at Lancelot

She has forgotten the curse

The mirror cracks

She leaves her room and goes down to the river

She finds a boat and sails towards Camelot

She sings her last song

The curse starts to work its magic

The boat lands on the shore of Camelot

People run to see the sight of this beautiful girl lying dead

Lancelot steps forward

He looks at her and says that she has a lovely face

He asks God to have mercy on her soul

Part 2: Art stories

3. Copy the text above (the summary of the story) and paste it into the window at <http://www.wordle.net/create>. Click on 'Go' to make a word cloud like the one below. Print off copies for your students.



Procedure

1. Show the paintings one by one and ask students questions that will engage them with the story such as:
 - What do you think she is looking at?
 - Does she look happy or sad in the boat?
 - What do you think is on her mind?
2. Also use the paintings to elicit and teach vocabulary that is relevant to the story such as:
 - *to weave a tapestry*
 - *a mirror*
 - *a room in a tower*
3. Tell the story in your own words and ask as many questions as possible that will make the storytelling process as interactive as possible. For example:
 - She is a prisoner in her room in the tower. Can anyone guess why?
 - One day she sees a reflection in her mirror that changes her life. Can you guess what it is?
 - What do you think happens next?
4. Give out copies of the word cloud and ask students to use it to reconstruct the story. You might want to let students do this in pairs or small groups.

Variations

- Record yourself during the story telling and put the audio on YouTube along with the images of the paintings.
- Give students an art webquest: Show them the paintings of the Lady of Shalott and ask them to find out about the story for homework.
- Give the word cloud prior to the storytelling and ask students to predict the story. This also gives an opportunity to go over unknown words.

The next article will include ideas on how to focus on the artist in class.



Vincent van Gogh: Portrait of Dr Gachet © Bridgeman Art Library (2009)

INTEGRATED SKILLS IMAGE 2



John William Waterhouse: *The Lady of Shalott* © Tate, London (2009)