

What does Art Sound Like?

An exploration of Art through Sound.

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Suggested Grade Level(s): 1 –3

Suggested Length of Class Time: One 60-minute class

Subject Areas: Visual Art, Language Art

Rationale

When it comes to artwork, there is generally a lot of focus on “looking with our eyes” but much can be gained by entering further into the creative experience through sound. In this lesson students will study a piece of art and interpret it as an audio experience, adding a whole new creative layer. Children love creating Soundscapes and will enjoy the ingenuity and imagination necessary to “hear” a painting. This is truly a creative group experience in which everyone’s input is valuable. During the creation of the Soundscape there will be a lot of discussion around sounds using descriptive vocabulary, which the students can then draw upon as inspiration to create short written narratives.

Logistics:

Classroom setup – group class work, individual work at desks

Materials – image of one or more paintings, large enough to look at as a class, sound recorder, or device capable of recording sound.

Suggested resources/images – online image banks from various art gallery and museum sites; art reproduction posters, individual art postcards, etc. Some suggestions for types of images are landscapes, seascapes, crowd scenes or an image rich in action.

Suggested Outcomes:

Students will be expected to:

- Explore a variety of sound sources
- Work together in group music and art making
- Experiment with language choices in imaginative writing and other ways of representing
- Share writing or other representations with others and seek feedback
- With assistance, experiment with technology in writing and other forms of representation
- Select, organize, and combine (with assistance) relevant information to construct and communicate meaning

Introduction:

As a class, look closely at an image and examine every part. Explore the basics of the setting and what is going on. After an initial exploration, ask questions to prompt the children to look even more closely.

Suggestions for Teaching and Learning:

The Soundscape:

Ask the children to imagine what the painting SOUNDS like. What do you hear? Do some brainstorming together and take note of all ideas. As a child identifies a sound they might hear, encourage the others to use language to describe the sound. For example, “I hear the wind blowing, whistling, rustling, howling....” Make notes on the board.

Ask the children how they can make that sound and have them make it together as a group. You may wish to establish an ON/OFF “switch” to keep things under control. Some sounds may be obvious. Continue brainstorming until you have several sounds. You will want almost as many sounds as children for the next step, although doubling up on some sounds will also be appropriate.

After brainstorming, begin building a Soundscape, by assigning sounds from the small background nature sounds to those that are more dominant. For example: wind blowing, leaves rustling, stream gurgling, water dripping... a horse walking, children laughing, and a person singing. You may wish to make note of the sounds and who is offering them on the board, though it is not strictly necessary. After each few sounds, “try out” the Soundscape by turning it on and off. Children can rearrange themselves in the class to group different types of sounds together. For example, you may have all the weather-related sounds together. Encourage children to negotiate this themselves.

When your Soundscape is complete, the teacher may do some sound mixing, or balancing, by pointing at certain students and using a volume control dial to turn them up or down. To create a surround sound effect, have the children stand or sit in a circle. Make a recording of the Soundscape and play it back.

Composing a short narrative:

Back at their desks or tables, children can compose a short narrative to accompany the examined image and Soundscape. Encourage the creative description of sound by revisiting notes on the board. Be sure that the image of the painting is still available. Midway through the writing process, take a break, turn the lights off and have the children put their heads down on the desk. Play the recorded Soundscape so that it is fresh in their minds.

Extension of ideas:

- Use the brainstorming notes to compose poems and have a spoken word performance with the Soundscape as a background
- Working as a class, select pieces of different narratives to create a group narrative for one person to read. Practice and perform a finished Soundscape and narration to another class.

- Take your Soundscape further by exploring possibilities for sound effects using different objects. Try found objects, rhythm sticks, combs, sandpaper and more.
- Make a recording of a distinctive Soundscape (playground, beach, rainstorm) and encourage the children to use the Soundscape as a starting point for a painting or drawing. Can they “work backwards” to produce the artwork for the Soundscape?
- Collect small art reproductions and have children create individual or small group Soundscapes after choosing from the selection.

Suggestions for Assessment:

- Note student’s participation in brainstorming
- Look for the inclusion of sound related words in the student’s narrative
- Create “spontaneous” Soundscapes for other paintings or book illustrations. Note the ability to spot possible sources of sound in the image as well as the confidence to identify and create the sound individually.
- Have the students work together in small groups to design a Soundscape. Children should follow same steps – looking at the work, brainstorming sounds and assigning sounds, before it is performed. Note their recall, ability to organize themselves and create a Soundscape consisting of various sounds and reflecting the source.
- Asses the student’s ability to work in a large group, being responsible for his or her sound, respect towards others and the parameters set by the teacher (ON/OFF switch)