



Lesson Title: Art in a New Age

Grades: 7–12

Time Required: 2 class periods

Subject Areas: Visual Art, Social Studies

Lesson Overview: Students will examine an artwork by the American artist Robert Rauschenberg and discuss the artist's use of popular images. Students then create a composition that documents our contemporary lives using a layering technique, juxtaposition, and color.

Common Core Academic Standards

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.4](#)

National Core Art Standards

VA:Cr2.3.7a

Apply visual organizational strategies to design and produce a work of art, design, or media that clearly communicates information or ideas.

VA:Re.7.2.7a

Analyze multiple ways that images influence specific audiences.

VA:Re8.1.7a

Interpret art by analyzing artmaking approaches, the characteristics of form and structure, relevant contextual information, subject matter, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

VA:Cn11.1.7a

Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Relate a work of art to its contemporary context
- Understand the use of juxtaposition and symbolism to create multiple meanings in a work of art
- Use imagery from other media to create a work of art that comments on today's society

Materials

- Projector and screen/SMART Board, or equivalent
- Sheets of tagboard or Bristol board
- Glue sticks
- Magazines, old catalogs, newspapers, any other collage materials of your choice
- Paint or similar media
- Optional: disposable cameras

Artwork in Focus:

Click on the link below to access this image through the Wadsworth's Public Portal. Once on the portal, click on the image to view the object information. Click on the image again to download a jpeg version of the work.

NOTE: Works of art used in this lesson may not currently be on view at the museum.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Retroactive I*, 1964



Lesson Procedures:

Part One: Guided Looking

1. Project *Retroactive I* and lead a class discussion analyzing the work using the questions below as prompts:
 - What feelings are evoked when we look at the work? Why?
 - Can you tell how the work is made? What are the materials used?
 - How is the work organized? Why do you think the artist chose to organize it this way?
 - Do you recognize any of the images? Are there any that you do not recognize? [Note: allow students to first observe and interpret, then share with them additional information about the painting from the *Background Information* section]
 - Where has the artist added color? How does this affect the mood of the work?
 - What ideas do you think the work represents? Does the work have a message? What in the work makes you say that?
 - Why do you think the artist picked these specific images?
 - What are some possible **symbolic** meanings of these images?
 - What meanings are made by **juxtaposing** these images?
 - This work was created in 1964, shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy. How does this work respond to this event? How does the assassination change our reading of the work?
 - The title of this work is *Retrospective I*. What does this title make you think of? Does it make you view the work any differently?
2. Based on student knowledge, discuss other events from the 1960s. Can they find any other connections to contemporary events in this work? [Note: you can expand the discussion of 1960s events according to your class/art room curriculum. You may want to use the extensive PBS timeline to supplement student knowledge: <http://www.pbs.org/opb/thesixties/timeline/index.html>]. Possible connections include: the space-race, the threat of nuclear war, the civil rights movement, the explosion of television, etc.
3. Conclude by asking students to think of some of the images from today's world that would be important. What would they include?

Part Two: Art-making Activity

1. Ask students to reflect on their daily routines and environments. Have them think of commonplace images they may include in their compositions and how those images may relate to images from the media when they are placed next to one another.
2. Have students collect images from magazines, newspapers, catalogs, the Internet, or other sources of contemporary culture. [Optional: Give each student or group a disposable camera. They can be instructed to take photos in and around the school or around their neighborhoods.]
3. Encourage students to look through the images they have collected and start juxtaposing and layering the images in different ways without gluing them down to see what works best in their composition.
4. Once the students have decided on an arrangement, have them glue the different images to the surface of the tagboard or Bristol board. Students should continue to layer the images until none of the original surface is showing.



5. Finally, have students introduce color to some of the images or spaces by using paint or a similar medium to enhance the composition or draw focus to a certain area. Ask them to think about using color and brushstrokes expressively to convey certain emotions.
6. As a class, students should share compositions and discuss the students' choice of images for their compositions. Also discuss how the students decided on the arrangement of the images in each work.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Art Historical Context

Contemporary art, literally, is the art of our time. In art historical usage, it covers the period from 1945 to today. Given this broad time frame, contemporary art is characterized by its extreme diversity and apparent lack of any unifying traits. In fact the only common thread within contemporary art is confronting more traditional art forms and questioning past definitions of the word "art." Pop art began as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism. Pop artists felt that Abstract Expressionism was overly intellectual, subjective, and divorced from reality. Through their art, Pop artists hoped to embrace the environment of everyday life and close the gap between life and art. Their work utilizes imagery from mass culture, such as beer bottles, soup cans, comic strips, road signs, and other objects, and at times the actual object was included in their paintings, collages, and sculptures. Technology also played a large role in Pop art with the invention of new media: plastics, urethane foam, and acrylic paints. Artists during this time adopted fabrication methods used in commercial mass production. For example, Andy Warhol used the mechanical technique of silk-screen printing to create several copies of the same image.

The Artist

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) was born in Port Arthur, Texas, in 1925. Like many artists of his generation he served in the military during the 1940s and used the G.I. Bill to attend college. Rauschenberg was keenly interested in the iconography of American popular culture. He rejected the emotional style of the Abstract Expressionists without losing its expressiveness by developing a style that stressed collage and used atypical materials like house paint, as well as techniques such as painting with a tire dipped in ink. He expanded his collages by incorporating three-dimensional objects, which he referred to as "combines." This groundbreaking technique contributed to the course of modern art and creative expression. Rauschenberg's fascination with popular imagery and his anything goes aesthetic indisputably influenced Pop art, which would mimic the look of popular culture as opposed to Rauschenberg's more subjective renderings.

The Painting

Rauschenberg used images of current events gathered from magazines and newspapers for his 1964 collage *Retroactive I*. A large press photograph of John F. Kennedy speaking at a televised news conference was the source for this screen print on canvas. He juxtaposed the image of Kennedy with another photo silkscreen of a parachuting astronaut. Most of the other images that Rauschenberg included are less clear. The red area at the bottom right-hand corner of the painting is a silkscreen enlargement of a photograph by Gjon Mili originally published in *Life* magazine. Showing successive frames of a single figure in movement, Mili's work was a parody of Marcel Duchamp's Cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*; but the image has also been compared to the figures of Adam and Eve expelled from Eden in Masaccio's fifteenth-century Italian frescoes. Other imagery includes a glass of what may be water or milk, a box of fruit—possibly oranges, and a grainy photograph of what looks like construction workers. The ambiguity of the images allows multiple readings of the work. The overlapping, and seemingly disparate, composition creates a colorful visual commentary on a media-saturated culture struggling to come to grips with the television era. The work was begun before Kennedy's assassination and completed shortly afterward, changing the work's meaning in relation to current events.



Robert Rauschenberg
Retroactive I, 1963
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas
84 x 60 inches (213.4 x 152.4 cm)
Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut
Gift of Susan Morse Hilles
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