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# Art about Writing and Pictures

**Writer:** Jill Taylor, NCMA Educator

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Related Big Picture Concepts:** Subjectivity, Communication, Variation, Meaning

**Subject Areas:** English Language Arts, Visual Arts

**Essential Question:** How does meaning change through interpretation?

**Abstract:** Students explore the topics of interpretation and intertextuality by investigating and creating texts and works of art inspired by other texts.

**Duration:** 3–6 class periods

**Focus Works of Art:**

[](http://68.169.57.134./sites/default/files/Pseudo%20di%20Francesco,%20The%20Nativity%20and%20the%20Adoration%20of%20the%20.jpg)

Pseudo-Jacopino di Francesco (Italian, active 1320-1350)

***The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi*, circa 1325-1330**

Tempera and gold leaf on panel

20 3/4 x 31 5/8 in. (52.7 x 80.3 cm)

[**www.artnc.org/node/440**](http://www.artnc.org/node/440)

**North Carolina Standards Correlations:**

Visual Arts: B.V.3.2, B.CX.1.4, B.CX.2.2, I.V.1.3, I.V.1.4, I.CX.2.2, P.V.3.3, A.V.2.1, A.V.2.3, A.V.2.3, A.CX.1.1, A.CR.1.1

English Language Arts: 9.RL.1, 9.RL.7, 9.RL.9, 9.W.1, 9.W.4, 9.SL.2, 10. RL.1, 10.RL.7, 10.RL.9, 10.W.1, 10.W.4, 10.SL.2, 11.RL.1, 11.RL.7, 11.W.1, 11.W.4, 11.SL.2, 12.RL.1, 12.RL.7, 12.W.1, 12.W.4, 12.SL.2

**Student Learning Objectives:**

* + - Students will describe a purpose for creating works of visual art by discussing how artists use literature as a source.
    - Students will analyze print and nonprint texts to interpret meaning.
    - Students will investigate the relationship between images and source texts through discussion, writing, and art making.

**Activities:**

1. Show students *The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi* by Pseudo Jacopino di Francesco (refer to the Art about Writing (and Pictures) topic for full discussion). Tell students that this is a painting that the artist based on a pre-existing text: the gospels of Luke and Matthew, in addition to other writings. Give students the source text:

*Luke*, Chapter 2, Verse 7: And she brought forth her first born son and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger: because there was no room for them in the inn.

*Matthew*, Chapter 2: When Jesus therefore was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of King Herod, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem … And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him: and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Have students consider:

*What similarities and differences can you find between the painting and its source text?*

*What tools does the artist use to tell a story without words?*

1. Facilitate a discussion about intertextuality and interpretation.

Intertextuality [see below for more info]

Introduce the concept of *intertextuality*, in which texts (written or visual) respond directly or indirectly to other texts. *The Nativity and the Adoration* is a fairly direct example of intertextuality because the painting keeps the same subject matter and uses details drawn from the text. An example of intertextuality that is indirect in its adaptation of the source text into a new work is Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, which borrows a plot structure and some character names from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* but introduces many new details to the story. Ask students for more examples of intertextuality from movies, novels, television, art, and comic books.

Interpretation

Explain that the art included in this lesson represents an artist’s interpretation of the original text. *What is an interpretation?* Have students suggest or look up definitions of *interpretation*. *How do the concepts of meaning and subjectivity play a role in interpretation?*

1. Tell students that they will be assigned a work of art that is intertextual (an artistic depiction of a source text), but they will not receive the source text (see Artwork and Source Text document). Students will interpret the works of art based on visual information. Assign each student a work of art from the handout (marked A, B, C, etc.). Make sure that students see only the work of art that they will use to start the project. Follow this pattern when assigning works over the course of the project, as students will exchange work with each other:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | In Step 4 | Step 5 | Step 6 |
| Student 1  will: | Write about Gandolfi | Create art based on Student 3’s writing on Long | Write about Student 3’s art |
| Student 2  will: | Write about Roman | Create art based on Student 1’s writing on Gandolfi | Write about Student 1’s art |
| Student 3  will: | Write about Long | Create art based on Student 2’s writing on Roman | Write about Student 2’s art |

1. Have students speculate about the source text by writing a brief version of what they think the source text may be. Begin by asking students to investigate the visual evidence offered by their work of art. Students may recognize the source text based on prior knowledge and use that prior knowledge when completing the assignment. Have them consider questions that help interpret visual information, such as:

*What is going on in the picture? What do you see that makes you say that?*

*What story is depicted here?*

*Who are the people? What does their appearance (clothes, faces, etc.) tell you about them? What are they doing?*

*Where are they (location and time period)?*

*What is the most important part of the painting? How do you know?*

*What conclusions can you draw from this work of art?*

Tell students to write a reflective entry in their process journal to create a record of their thoughts at this point in the project.

1. Put the students in groups of three to exchange their stories. Remember that students should be familiar only with the work of art that they were assigned, not the ones their peers were assigned. Have students create a work of art based on their peer’s writing. Drawings, collage, and computer imaging programs can be used to create the works of art depending on the students’ comfort level with various media. Ask students to reflect on the process of creating art in their process journal.
2. Tell students to exchange their work of art with the third member of the group. Repeat Step 4 using the students’ work of art instead of the original work.
3. Display printouts of the original works of art on the wall or a bulletin board with the actual text from the handout. Have students place their stories and art with the original work. As a class, compare the different versions of the stories and art. Discuss:

Comparing the source text with original work of art and writing from Step 4

*How did the original artist choose to interpret or depict the source text?*

*How did those decisions influence the way that you interpreted the art?*

*How similar or different were the first student stories from the actual text?*

Creating a work of art

*What decisions did you have to make to create a work of art based on your peer’s story?*

For example: *Which characters did you show? How did you dress them or select their hair color? How did you determine what parts of the story you could tell visually? How did you show actions? What were the most effective tools for telling a story visually? How are these choices subjective? How did the choices affect meaning and interpretation?*

Compare the second student story with the works of art and texts

*How similar or different were the second student stories from the previous texts?*

*How do texts change as they are interpreted multiple times?*

1. As a conclusion, have students look over their entries in their process journals from the course of the project. Ask students to write an entry summarizing how their thinking developed over the course of the project.

**Assessments:**

* + The discussion, writing, and art activities may be used to determine students’:
    - understanding of literature as a source for artists.
    - comprehension of the content of a work of art and written text.
    - ability to make decisions about what to create.

**Resources:**

Vocabulary:

Intertextuality

interpretation

Lesson Resources:

Art and Source Text Handout

Intertextuality Info Handout

Davis Salle, *The Emperor*

<http://collection.ncartmuseum.org/collection11/view/objects/asitem/id/3707>

**Art and Source Text Handout**

Ubaldo Gandolfi, *Mercury About to Behead Argus*, circa 1770–1775

<http://collection.ncartmuseum.org/collection11/view/objects/asitem/id/858>

Prometheus and Io

She gave Io into the charge of Argus, an excellent arrangement for Hera’s purpose, since Argus had a hundred eyes. Before such a watchman, who could sleep with some of the eyes and keep on guard with the rest, Zeus seemed helpless … At last, however, he went to his son Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and told him he must find a way to kill Argus. There was no god cleverer than Hermes. As soon as he had sprung to earth from heaven he laid aside everything that marked him as a god and approached Argus like a country fellow, playing very sweetly upon a pipe of reeds. Argus was pleased at the sound and called to the musician to come nearer … He played and then he talked on and on, as drowsily and monotonously as he could; some of the hundred eyes would go to sleep, but some were always awake. At last however, one story was successful … The little story does not seem especially tiresome, as such stories go, but Argus found it so. All of his eyes went to sleep. Hermes killed him at once, of course, but Hera took the eyes and set them in the tail of the peacock.

--Adapted from “Prometheus and Io” in Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*

Hercules and the Nemean Lion

Roman, after Hellenistic original *Herakles*, 2nd Century

Setting out on such a seemingly impossible labor, Hercules came to a town called Cleonae, where he stayed at the house of a poor workman-for-hire, Molorchus. When his host offered to sacrifice an animal to pray for a safe lion hunt, Hercules asked him to wait 30 days. If the hero returned with the lion's skin, they would sacrifice to Zeus, king of the gods. If Hercules died trying to kill the lion, Molorchus agreed to sacrifice instead to Hercules, as a hero.

When Hercules got to Nemea and began tracking the terrible lion, he soon discovered his arrows were useless against the beast. Hercules picked up his club and went after the lion. Following it to a cave which had two entrances, Hercules blocked one of the doorways, then approached the fierce lion through the other. Grasping the lion in his mighty arms, and ignoring its powerful claws, he held it tightly until he'd choked it to death.

Hercules returned to Cleonae, carrying the dead lion, and found Molorchus on the 30th day after he'd left for the hunt. Instead of sacrificing to Hercules as a dead man, Molorchus and Hercules were able to sacrifice together, to Zeus.

Story Source: Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Herakles/lion.html>

McKendree Robbins Long,

*Apocalyptic Scene with Philosophers and Historical Figures*, about 1959

<http://collection.ncartmuseum.org/collection11/view/objects/asitem/id/3668>

*The Divine Comedy*

From Canto III

And I: “What is it, master, that oppresses

these souls, compelling them to wail so loud?”

He answered: “I shall tell you in few words.

Those who are here can place no hope in death,

And their blind life is so abject that they

are envious of every other fate.

The world will no fame of theirs endure;

Both justice and compassion must disdain them;

Let us not talk of them, but look and pass.”

From Canto V

There dreadful Minos stands, gnashing his teeth:

examining the sins of those who enter,

he judges and assigns as his tail twines.

I mean that when the spirit born to evil

appears before him, it confesses all;

and he, the connoisseur of sin, can tell

The depth in Hell appropriate to it;

as many times as Minos wraps his tail

around himself, that marks the sinner’s level.

From Canto XII

Now with our faithful escort, we advanced

along the bloodred, boiling ditch’s banks,

beside the piercing cries of those who boiled.

I saw some who were sunk up to their brows,

and that huge Centaur said: “These are the tyrants

who plunged their hands in blood and plundering.

Here they lament their ruthless crimes; here are

both Alexander and the fierce Dionysius,

who brought such years of grief to Sicily.

Alighieri, Dante. “Inferno.” *The Divine Comedy*. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Everyman’s Library, 1995.

**Intertextuality Information**

[](http://68.169.57.134./sites/default/files/Pseudo%20di%20Francesco,%20The%20Nativity%20and%20the%20Adoration%20of%20the%20.jpg)

Pseudo-Jacopino di Francesco (Italian, active 1320-1350)

***The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi*, circa 1325-1330**

Tempera and gold leaf on panel

20 3/4 x 31 5/8 in. (52.7 x 80.3 cm)

How do artists use written texts as a subject or inspiration?

This painting from an altarpiece, a painting or group of paintings placed at an altar in a church, depicts two events discussed in the New Testament of the Christian Bible—the nativity and the adoration of the magi following the birth of Jesus. The events as described in the gospels of Luke and Matthew and other writings became the subject of many paintings, and the specific details of the scenes became artistic conventions, or traditional modes of representation, that were absorbed by the culture of the time. Based on this familiarity, an artist would not need to read, or even know how to read, in order to depict a scene that was first described in writing. The practice of using another text, directly or through cultural familiarity, as a source for a written or visual work is an example of intertextuality. Intertextuality is a phenomenon that occurs when a work refers to other texts produced by a culture. In this painting, the depictions of the scenes from the text appear on the same panel, a tactic called simultaneous narrative. The nativity takes place on the far left. The second figure of Mary with Jesus (on the right) signifies the new scene of the adoration of the magi.

*What tools does an artist use to tell a story without words? How does an artist tell a story differently from a writer?* Compare the nativity scene to its textual source in an English translation of the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible (this is the version of the Bible that people in 14th-century Italy probably used): “And she brought forth her first born son and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger: because there was no room for them in the inn” (*Luke*, Chapter 2, Verse 7). *What similarities and differences can you find between the painting and its source text?* The figures of Mary and Joseph pray in front of their tightly swaddled newborn son. He rests in a container that may or may not be a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Two animals, an ox and a donkey, peek at the baby from a crevice in between rocks, while three angels look on with bowed heads. The devotional aspect of the scene is not mentioned in the version of the text above, nor are the animals. Yet, the artist did not invent these details. Instead they come from the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, an eighth-century text that fills in details from the story of Mary’s life and Jesus’s childhood. The text from the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (Chapter 14) is as follows:

And on the third day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most blessed Mary went forth out of the cave, and entering a stable, placed the child in the stall, and the ox and the ass adored Him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by Isaiah the prophet, saying: The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib. [2] The very animals, therefore, the ox and the ass, having Him in their midst, incessantly adored Him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by Abacuc the prophet, saying: [3] Between two animals thou art made manifest. In the same place Joseph remained with Mary three days.

By the 14th century, the ox and donkey had become a conventional aspect of the scene when artists depicted the nativity. The depiction of the three wise men, or magi, as kings is another artistic convention, or standard mode of representation, that became popular by the medieval period. They wear crowns in this image, which implies they are kings. Compare the artist’s depiction to selections of text from Matthew, Chapter 2:

When Jesus therefore was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of King Herod, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem … And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him: and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The text does not specify the number of wise men, but the Golden Legend, a 13th-century collection of traditional lore about saints, describes the men as three kings. Scholars have suggested that the naming of three gifts results in the inference that three wise men gave one gift apiece.

Why do artists use written texts as inspiration?

In this case, the subject matter of the paintings is just one aspect of the work that the artist’s patrons dictated in discussions or a contract. The amount of gold leaf and the use of specific pigments would also be included in the business agreement between artist and patron. In the medieval period, art was not created for its own sake; it had a purpose, or purposes. By commissioning an altarpiece, patrons told the rest of the world about their piety and their economic status. The particular scenes selected for an altarpiece had a devotional purpose and significance to the patron (an individual, family, or a religious order) and church organization where the altarpiece was found.

*Were these images a substitute for or illustration of written text?* In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great wrote, “What writing (*scriptura*) does for the literate, a picture does for the illiterate looking at it, because the ignorant see in it what they ought to do; those who do not know letters read in it.” Over time, this quote was simplified and interpreted as “art is the book of the illiterate.” The viewers of this painting would have had prior knowledge about scripture to help them interpret this painting; it once belonged to one of the most prominent families in Bologna, Italy. The images of a person kneeling in prayer, a halo surrounding heads, and a child wrapped in swaddling clothes would be familiar signifiers, or clues, about the scene depicted. The image reinforced what they already knew and helped focus their worship.

While it is likely that the well-to-do patrons of this work were literate, it is not necessary to suggest that the value of art pales in favor of writing because the viewers had knowledge of written scripture. In the 13th century, the Venetian historian Martin da Canal said, “events live, thanks to paintings and oral accounts and writing.” Each medium has strengths in how it communicates. Refer to the comparisons of scripture and the work of art above. *How does each medium tell the story of the nativity and adoration? When is writing more effective, and when is art more effective?*