

Frames of MIND

A painting forces us to ask questions about the story held within, so let children discover it for themselves by piecing together the bigger picture...

If television had been around in Victorian times, *Eastenders* would have gone down a storm; the intimate details of ordinary people's lives, the rich cast of exaggerated characters, the decidedly black-and-white morals. It's Dickens without the happy endings. But while the Victorians might not have had TV, they certainly had narrative paintings that brought Dickensian Britain to life and caused mini-riots in art galleries.

The Magic Lantern (magiclanternart.org.uk) team specialises in using art in a cross-curricular way. We believe that you can learn almost everything through art, and that art is for everyone. Yes, it can be something beautiful to look at on the wall. But it can do so much more.

In a typical one-hour workshop we show a handful of artworks linked to a topic (chosen by the class teacher). We use art to open up history, geography, science, RE, maths and, of course, art and design. By being involved all the way through the session, children are able to develop a range of skills including critical thinking, confidence, communication and observation.

The painting we are looking at today is not the happiest of images. A couple stares out at us from the crowded deck of a boat in choppy waters. In the background is a clue to why the artist, Ford Madox Brown, called the painting *The Last of England*. A close examination can help children learn more

about the Victorians, class differences, childhood in the past, immigration and emigration, gender roles, geography and travel. They will try to get into the heads of the main characters, put themselves in the picture and see the enduring power of art.

Today you will...

- > Step inside a famous Victorian painting
- > Enhance the class topic, whether it's Victorians, childhood, travel, vehicles, self-portraits, weather, stories or relationships
- > Explore how art can be used to tell stories and convey feelings

Starter activity

This may sound obvious, but the best way in to a painting is just to look. And look. And look. When we visit art galleries now we tend to look at lots of paintings very quickly. The Victorians would target a few – the 'star' paintings of the day – and stand in front of each one for maybe up to an hour. Victorian paintings are full of detail, so it's not hard to imagine a small group of people looking at *The Last of England* for ages, working out what the story is and piecing together the clues.

The first thing is to turn the class into Victorian gallery-goers. They need to imagine that they have heard about a controversial work by a young,



up-and-coming artist and are dying to see it for themselves. The first few minutes of the lesson should consist of the class looking closely at the painting on the whiteboard in silence. The children can then get together with their talk partners or in small groups to exchange their initial ideas.

Main activities

Artistic intent

1 Once they've discussed their ideas with each other, the teacher asks the children a range of questions to build up a vivid picture of the story and characters. It's crucial that this is an open, collaborative discussion, not a closed right-or-wrong session. Sample

questions could include the following, but there are many more you could ask to probe further observation:

- > Where are these people? Is it a luxury cruise or another type of ship?
- > Who are they? How do their clothes help tell us about them?
- > What are they doing? Going on holiday or something else?
- > Why are they doing it? What is the weather like? And the temperature?
- > How do they feel about the journey? And each other?
- > Do they have any family with them?
- > What is the 'last' of England mentioned in the title?

By the end of this part of the lesson the children will know that we're looking at a down-on-their-luck Victorian family who are so desperate for a better life that they have decided to risk everything on a gruelling several-month long journey to Australia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Sanders is the director of educational charity Magic Lantern. To find out more and to see whether Magic Lantern operates in your LEA, please visit magiclanternart.org.uk or email info@magiclanternart.org.uk.



2 Step inside the painting

Looking closely at the couple's faces, the children are asked which words best describe their feelings. 'Sad' and 'miserable' are a great start, but how about a range of emotions including 'apprehensive', 'afraid' and 'resolute'?

Attach a thought bubble to the whiteboard above either the man or woman's head and ask the children to 'become' them, expressing one of their thoughts. Stress that they should use the first-person rather than say, "He might be feeling upset." Take this one step further by asking the children to suggest the first line or two of the man or woman's diary that night, and to say it aloud to the rest of the class as if they were really there. "Dear Diary, I've had better days..."

3 Picture this

One of the exciting things about looking at paintings is that the audience has to do part of the work. A painting



forces us to ask questions about the story such as 'What came before?' 'What will happen next?' and 'What's outside the frame?'. And then there are the senses – what we would hear, smell, feel, even taste, if we were able to step inside?

Focusing on the sense of hearing, the final activity is to build up a soundscape of the painting. Ask the class what sounds we would hear if we could turn up a volume switch.

The answers might include crashing waves, pouring rain, seagulls, a boat horn and the chatter and shouts of the passengers. The children then all choose one of the sounds and make them at the same time to bring the painting to life in sound. This invariably shows how exciting and alive a seemingly old and silent work of art can be.

Extending the lesson

> Ask the children to think about places in the world where emigration is high and paint a 21st-century version of *The Last of England*. They can change whatever they need to make it look as if it's happening now but they should try to keep the overall composition and emotions the same.

Or, for a literacy exercise, each child can choose to be the man or woman in the painting and write a letter home to a loved one still in England. They need to think about how they feel about leaving, who and what they have left behind, where they are going, what they might find there and what their journey is like.



> How does a painting tell a story or express feelings in a different way to film or television?

> The artist painted a made-up story, but very much based on real events of the time. Does it matter that he made it up and does it lose any of its power because of that fact?

> Why did Ford Madox Brown choose to make the painting circular in shape? Does it affect the story?

> Madox Brown chose to set the painting at the start of the couple's journey. At what point in their story would you have set it?

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