Exploring Impressionism: A Three Week Painting Unit Plan

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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# Table of Contents

Purpose of Thesis..........................................................1

Broad Intended Learning Outcomes.......................................2

Rationale.............................................................................4

Unit Plan.............................................................................5

Reflective Journal.............................................................14

Sample Visuals....................................................................33
Purpose of Thesis

This thesis consists of a three-week unit plan on the Impressionist movement and the art of painting and a follow-up journal, reflecting on the difficulties and successes acquired while teaching the unit. The unit plan was developed using a discipline-based-art-education philosophy, demonstrating the importance of teaching aesthetics, art criticism, and art history, as well as art production. The reflective journal, included at the end of the unit plan, explores those areas of the unit plan that seemed truly beneficial to the students and those areas of the unit plan that could somehow be improved if using the same plan in the future.
Broad Intended Learning Outcomes

Art Production

Every human being has feelings, thoughts, and ideas that they want and/or need to express. One viable outlet for this expression is painting. Painting has allowed countless artists to communicate these thoughts, feelings, and ideas. The goal of this unit is to provide students with the necessary skills, knowledge and techniques to express their personal knowledge about life, nature, and the world around them.

Art History

Painting was one of the first forms of art, and much can be learned from looking at the work of our predecessors. By studying art history, we learn not only about a painting, but about the artists and the world in which they lived. Building our knowledge base about such things will, in turn, affect our own work. The goal of this unit is to broaden the students' knowledge base of art history particularly French Impressionism, in order for the student to better understand what the Impressionist painters thought and the skills that they invented. This understandably will inform the students about possible directions for their own work.

Art Criticism

Art criticism skills are extremely important in the understanding and evaluation of current artwork. They are
necessary in order to gain meaning from the art around us and to clearly express our own ideas. The goal of this unit is to teach students about the expressive use of elements, principles, subject matter, and painting techniques. Students should then be able to apply their knowledge to present-day artworks, their own artworks, and the artwork of their peers.

Aesthetics

Every human being has questions. There are many questions to be answered in art, and a lot of them are aesthetic questions. What is art? Why do we need art? Is process more important than product? These are all aesthetic questions which students must answer for themselves in order to truly appreciate their own work and the work around them. The goal of this unit is to get students to begin asking, "Why?" and to support their answers with solid reasons. A direct result of this will be the strengthening of their abstract thinking skills.
Rationale

Every student has the ability to think and feel and create. It is the purpose of this unit to strengthen and encourage those natural abilities which every student possesses. By teaching the students about aesthetics, art criticism, and art history, we will be challenging and nurturing their thinking processes. In addition, by teaching the students to paint, we will be providing them with an outlet for their emotion and a new media with which to create. Once the students become confident in their abilities, their attitudes, their abstract thinking skills, and their artworks should improve.
Unit Plan

15 hours

I. Exploring Impressionism: An Introduction to Painting

This unit is designed to introduce the students to the era of painting known as "Impressionism," and will provide them with the knowledge of basic painting skills and techniques.

II. Introduction

This unit will be introduced to the class with the aesthetic question, "What makes a good painting?" A discussion should follow on things, such as: subject matter, paint application, realism, creativity, etc. Upon determining what the class believes to be the qualities of good paintings, Impressionism will be introduced. The qualities of works will be weighed against those chosen by the class to distinguish good paintings. Finally, the class will learn about the disdain with which Impressionism was initially received, because the works were said to look unfinished and considered poor paintings. These topics will provide a solid foundation for what is to be learned in the remaining portion of the unit.
III. Objectives

A. Students should know how to paint with acrylics; students should be able to:

1. mix pigments to achieve the desired color.
2. apply paint in a variety of ways to achieve various effects and textures.
3. translate what they have learned about acrylic paints and Impressionism into a final artwork.

B. Students should understand the concept of "Impressionism;" students should be able to:

1. identify the major ideas of Impressionism.
2. paint an Impressionistic painting.
3. analyze the work of an Impressionist painter.

C. Students should be familiar with the work of Impressionist painters; students should be able to:

1. recall information, such as: artist, title, and the extrinsic factors that affected the work, about specific paintings.
2. analyze the Impressionistic aspects of specific reproductions.
3. interpret artworks based on their knowledge of artist, time period, and extrinsic circumstances.

D. Students should be able to discuss aesthetic questions; students should be able to:

1. ask aesthetic questions.
2. answer aesthetic questions, giving reasons for their opinions.

IV. Subject Matter Content

(Curriculum Outline)

I. Introduction

A. Aesthetics case - "What makes a painting good?"

B. Introduction of Impressionism

1. new style of painting
2. not readily accepted

II. Light and Atmosphere

A. Played major role in Impressionists' paintings
- Assign 4 sketches - same
  subject, different conditions.
  Due soon:
  a) rainy day
  b) foggy day
  c) at sunset
- Allow 2 library days for
  group reports

- Assign color wheel:
  12 colors (primary,
  secondary, & tertiary)
  2) "Impressionistic" technique
     - see Fig. 3a

- Use reproductions to show
  color examples
  - see Fig. 3b

- B. Open-air
  painting/landscapes

III. Color

A. Blend with the eye
   rather than the brush

B. No black shadows
   (complementary colors
    used instead)

C. Color wheel
   1. primary,
      secondary, &
      tertiary colors
   2. complementary
      & analogous colors
   3. hues, shades,
      & tints

IV. Space

A. Overlapping

B. Atmospheric perspective
V. Application of paint

A. Short, choppy brushstrokes

B. Juxtaposition of color

V. Materials, References and Resources

A. Books:


B. Reproductions:

1. The Loge, Cassatt
2. The Gulf of Marseilles, Cezanne
3. The House of Pere Lacroix, Cezanne
4. La Montagne St. Victoire, Cezanne
5. The Vase of Tulips, Cezanne
6. Dancer Bowing with Flowers, Degas
7. Dancers in the Wings, Degas
8. Four Dancers, Degas
9. Woman with Chrysanthemums, Degas
10. Cathedral in the Morning, Monet
11. Field of Flowers in the Morning, Monet
12. Haystacks (series), Monet
13. Impression Sunrise, Monet
14. Sunflowers, Monet
15. Mixed Flowers in an Earthenware Vase, Renoir
16. Moulin de la Galette, Renoir
17. *The Wave*, Renoir

18. *Church at Aiers*, Van Gogh


20. *Sunflowers*, Van Gogh


22. *View of Arles with Irises*, Van Gogh

C. Supplies:

1. acrylic paint

2. brushes (a variety of sizes and shapes)

3. 14x18 canvases

4. palette knives

5. palettes

6. paper for painting exercises

7. watercolors

8. tempera paints (red, yellow, & blue)

9. glue sticks

10. scissors

11. compasses

D. Resources:

1. art classroom

2. area for outdoor sketches

3. school library

4. school greenhouse
VI. Special Learning Activities:

A. group reports on assigned artists
B. watercolor light and atmosphere exercise
C. color wheel assignment
D. outdoor sketching
E. final painting using Impressionistic techniques

VII. Evaluation Techniques:

A. Criteria for group reports:

1. adequate research
2. clear, organized presentation
3. use of visual aid
4. evidence of equal effort by group members
5. creative presentation
6. interpreted a work by that artist and supported that interpretation effectively
7. included information on artist's background, subject matter, and technique

B. Criteria for final painting:

1. clear use of Impressionistic ideas
2. good craftsmanship, for example: careful, bold, and original application of paint
3. put forth effort

C. Sample test questions for art production knowledge and art history concepts:

1. Name 3 Impressionist painters. Beside each painter's name, give the title and a brief description of one of that artist's works.
2. Which of Claude Monet's paintings is said to be the first Impressionist painting?
3. Describe two major ideas of Impressionism.
4. What is atmospheric perspective? How is it used?
5. Why was the work of the Impressionists not readily accepted when first introduced?
6. Describe how an Impressionist would apply paint. How is this different from technique of the Realists?
7. Name two complementary colors.
8. What is the difference between a shade and a tint?
9. What is an analogous color?
10. Explain how Monet's Haystack series embodies one of the major ideas of Impressionism.

*Other questions will be added based on the information presented in the group reports.
Reflective Journal

October 13, 1994

Introduction

Today I began teaching my Impressionism unit in Basic Art. I started by asking the question, "What requirements must be met to make a painting good?" Each person in the class gave one requirement, and we determined that what is good to one person, may not be good to another. We also determined that that was okay.

From our discussion, I lead the students into an introduction of Impressionism, explaining that the critics of the late nineteenth century did not think that Impressionists' works were good paintings. I gave reasons why, and we discovered that those requirements which the students gave were very different from those of the art critics during that time-period. We discovered that artwork that was not considered good at one time, could be accepted as good at another.

I think that this was a good way to introduce Impressionism, because it got the students to think about what was important to them in an artwork. It also developed an understanding of why Impressionistic artworks were not readily accepted when they were first introduced. Finally, it provided a good introduction to the basic concepts of Impressionism, and allowed the students to form their own opinion as to whether or not Impressionistic paintings were good.
I followed the discussion with some slides of Impressionists' works. I wanted the students to get an idea of how an Impressionistic painting might look. I did not go into much detail when speaking about the slides, because later the students will be doing group reports on individual artists to further involve them in the development of the concept of Impressionism.
October 14, 1994

Light and Atmosphere

Today I taught about the Impressionists' use of light and atmosphere. I discussed artists such as Monet and Seurat, explaining how each attempted to depict light and atmosphere in their artworks. To further the students' understanding of how color changes in different light and weather conditions, I had them do three sketches. The first sketch was to be an exact representation of the scene that they saw outside the window. Since the day was cloudy, I instructed them to imagine how the colors would change in the same subject on a bright, sunny day. This was to be their next sketch. The final sketch was to depict how they would imagine that subject to look during a sunset.

One thing that I would change about this exercise in the future is the amount of time devoted to the practice sketches. I allowed ten minutes per sketch, which was far too short a time to complete such sketches. I think, given enough time to work, the results of this exercise would be extremely successful. As it was, the students did not have enough time to develop the concept. I think that providing a half hour for the sketches would be more acceptable.
Group Reports

Today in Basic Art, the students were given a library day to work on research for their group reports. There are five groups of three people, each group reporting on a different artist. The artists that I assigned were Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh, Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt, and Paul Cezanne. I chose these artists, because they all can be linked to Impressionism but each has a different style of painting.

One problem that I saw with group work and allowing class time for research was that of absence. One girl was the only member of her group present. I am unsure of how to account for that in the final grade. I think I will probably have to assign both a group grade and an individual grade. I had originally planned on only giving a group grade.

One thing that surprised me was how different groups worked together. I allowed the students to choose their own groups, but there were three people left over, who I grouped together. It was this group that was the most on-task, and whom seemed to work the best with one another. In the future, I would like to try assigning all of the groups, to see if that affects the work habits of the students.
Group Reports

In my Basic Art class, the students have been assigned group reports. They have spent the last two days in the library and were supposed to be prepared to give their reports at the beginning of next week. Three of the students have informed me that there is a field trip on the day that the reports were supposed to begin. Because I want all of the students present for the report, I decided to move the reports up to the end of this week. Instead of having a report everyday for the first ten minutes of class, all of the reports will be given on Thursday and Friday of this week. I also reduced the time of the reports from ten minutes to five to seven minutes.

I was worried that moving the reports up would rush the students, but most of the groups completed their preparation in the library today. Also, the students might be more relaxed when giving their reports. Now, the students will still have their research fresh in their minds when they give their reports, and they will have no assignments about which to worry over the weekend.

I think that having all the reports before we begin painting will probably be better for the students anyway. They will have some idea of several different styles of paint application before they begin painting themselves. This will give them a solid base of knowledge about Impressionistic techniques from which to develop their own personal style.
Color Wheel

Today I introduced the color wheel to my Basic Art class. I was expecting it to be a review, but was surprised to find that most of the students had never worked with a color wheel before or had simply forgotten what they had learned. Many of the questions that I asked, the students were unable to answer. This made my presentation longer, because I had to go into greater detail about the topic.

Following the presentation, the students were to paint patches of color to later be assembled into a color wheel. Instead of simply mixing the colors, the students were to paint "Impressionistically," placing strokes of pure color next to one another for the eye to blend, rather than the palette knife. At first, many of the students were confused about how to mix colors "Impressionistically," but after talking with each student, they all produced fine examples.

In the future, I would try to explain more clearly what the students should be doing, so that every student does not have the same questions. Overall, I think that the practice on the color wheel will help the students to achieve better results on their final Impressionistic painting. They will have some experience with an Impressionist technique of blending before tackling their final project.
October 20, 1994

Color Wheel

Today in Basic Art, I had the students finish painting their color patches for their color wheels, and they also began their group reports. Because there was an activity period scheduled, the class was shortened, and we only had time for one report. Tomorrow will now be devoted entirely to reports, so the class will have Monday to finish up the color wheels. This puts us a day behind schedule. However, I think this will work out well, because Thursday and Friday the students have fall break. Now, Tuesday and Wednesday will be devoted to preparatory sketches for their final painting, providing a good stopping point before break.

I plan to have the students go outdoors to sketch, as many of the Impressionists did. I am hoping that the weather will be nice. If there is poor weather, I plan to bring in plants and fruit to set up two still-lifes. I also have still-lifes painted by various Impressionists to show as examples. I think that the students would gain a better understanding of the importance of light and atmosphere by painting outdoors, however.
Group Reports

Today was the final day for group reports in Basic Art. I was very disappointed in the quality of the reports given by the students. One of the requirements that I wrote on the chalkboard for the students was that the presentation must be creative. As art students, this should not have been a difficult requirement. However, every group presented their material simply by reading information from their research notes. There were no activities for the remainder of the class upon completion of the reports and no unique ways of presenting the material. I do not think that this is because the students did not have enough time to prepare; during the two library days, many of the groups finished early. They also knew all of the objectives of the report before they began researching.

I think that in the future, I need to monitor the work completed by the groups during library time. Perhaps I could require an outline of their presentation the day before the group report is to be given. This way, I can make suggestions for improvement before they are being graded. Also, I should give examples of creative approaches students have used in the past. For example, in another class, one group pretended to interview the actual artist, while another group passed out Skittles in order for the students to "paint" a Van Gogh painting. It is my hope that, given a better idea of my expectations, the students will produce finer results.
October 24, 1994

Color Wheels

Today in Basic Art, my class finished its color wheels. A few did not finish, and four students were on a field-trip, so approximately fifteen minutes of class time tomorrow will be devoted to completing the color wheels. Those students not finished at that time will have to take the project home to be completed.

The color wheels have ended up taking longer than I had planned, but the results have been impressive. I was unsure of how well the students would do painting "Impressionistic" patches of color, but all of the students picked up the concept fairly well. The completed color wheels show the students' knowledge of the color wheel as well as Impressionism.

I think that this was a good exercise to teach the students the basics of color. It also provided valuable practice of painting "Impressionistically" before the students begin their final painting. I think that this practice will make the final painting less intimidating. Although Impressionism is very difficult, all of the students will have successfully used it at least once before attempting their final painting.
Today I had planned on taking the students outdoors in order to do preparatory sketches for their paintings. Unfortunately it was too cold, so I had to move to a back-up plan. Some of the students were absent yesterday, so they finished up their color wheels. The rest of the students glazed ceramic pots which were recently bisque-fired. These activities are things which needed to be done and which kept the students on-task. It is hoped that tomorrow we will be able to sketch outside, but if weather does not permit, we will finish glazing pots. If, after break, we are still unable to go outside, I will bring in potted plants and flowers for the students to sketch. I will show examples of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and *Iris*, and Monet's flower still-lifes, as well as works by other Impressionists. I will try to spotlight the flowers as if natural sunlight were pouring down upon them. However, I think the students would benefit more from sketching outdoors. In the future, I would probably plan this unit during a warmer season, such as spring or summer.
Outdoor Sketching

It was cold outside again today, so I had the students finish glazing their ceramic pots. We are behind on the painting unit now, but I think it would be better to start something new after break. If I had had them start sketching today, I think that it would be difficult for them to get back into their sketches after a four-day weekend. (The end of the week is fall break.) I think that their paintings will be much better composed if they can think an idea all the way through, without a large break in the middle.

Today I spoke with the agriculture teacher, so that if weather does not permit outdoor sketching next week, plants can be checked out of the greenhouse. Although I think that outdoor sketching is an important part of the Impressionism unit, I am quickly learning that you must always have a back-up plan. If weather conditions make outdoor sketching impossible, then there still is something to be learned from studying natural subjects, such as plants.
Preparatory Sketches

Today in Basic Art, the students began preparatory sketches for their final paintings. Unfortunately it was raining, so the final painting will be of flowers instead of an outdoor scene. I found several examples of Impressionists' works to show the students, including works by: Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh, Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, and Paul Cezanne. I let the students set up two still-lifes from the plants which I checked out from the greenhouse. This gave them a little more control over their composition and allowed them more involvement in the final painting. I asked that each student do two sketches of their subject matter, getting the first approved by me before starting the second. This allowed me to make suggestions to improve the composition. Many students needed to enlarge the subjects which they were drawing. Another problem was the tendency to center the subject, with no attention given to the negative space. After speaking with each student, their second sketches improved greatly. For this reason, I would continue to ask for multiple sketches in the future. I think it is much less frustrating for the students to make compositional mistakes in a practice sketch than in the final painting.
Final Painting - Washes

Today the students began painting their Impressionistic paintings. Before starting, I demonstrated how to blend acrylic colors, how to paint a wash, and how to clean the brushes. The students were then instructed to choose the sketch from which they wanted to work. Having chosen the sketch, they were supposed to apply washes to their entire canvas and block in the major forms. Many of the students had trouble with this idea. They wanted to start right in with the detail work, not comprehending that the washes were under-painting and would be totally covered later.

I think that starting with washes is a good idea, because it gives the students a definite starting point and makes the idea of painting a finished piece not quite so overwhelming. Also, I think that it is important for the students to learn to build up the entire painting at once, rather than finishing one area before moving to the next. In the future, I will try to better explain how to apply washes and talk more about the importance of under-painting. Once every student understood what I was asking him/her to do, he/she worked well and had a positive starting point for his/her painting.
Final Painting - Washes

Today was a continuation of yesterday's lesson. The students in Basic Art finished applying their under-painting to their Impressionistic paintings. Some students have small areas left to under-paint while a few advanced to building up the detail of the subject matter. For the most part, the class is moving at a steady pace towards the completion of their project.

Before I allowed the students to begin their studio work, I explained more clearly what I expected of them when I asked them to "block in" the color for their piece. I explained that if they drew a solid line around the outer edge of the major shapes in their composition then filled the resulting shapes with a base color, that was "blocking in." I also painted an example in watercolor to further the students' understanding of the concept.

In future units, I would like to give more clear directions before the students begin painting. Also, I think a time limit needs to be set for the wash, to keep the students working at similar paces. Some students are simply spending too much time on their washes. Tomorrow I will review the techniques which the Impressionists used, since one of the objectives of this assignment is to make the painting look Impressionistic.
November 4, 1994

Final Painting - Detail

Yesterday I was ill, so Mrs. Robinson taught Basic Art for me. The students were simply continuing their studio work on their Impressionistic paintings. Today when I began class, most of the students had already begun some of the detail work of their paintings. I am estimating that the majority of the class should be able to complete their paintings, given three more days of studio time. This is longer than I had planned to spend on the unit, but the extra days can be accounted for when considering the extra days spent glazing ceramic pots.

At this point, most of the students seem to understand the concept of Impressionism. They are using short, quick brushstrokes and trying to place colors next to each other for the eye to blend rather than blending every color on the palette. They are also using a very bright palette of colors. These are signs that the students have successfully acquired the concept of Impressionism. They are also demonstrating a knowledge of how to paint with acrylics. I think that this project has been a good capstone to the Impressionism/painting unit, allowing the students to demonstrate their understanding of both concepts.
Final Painting - Progress

The students in Basic Art had another studio-day today. Most of them are nearing completion and should only need one or two more days of class time to finish their Impressionistic paintings. I took a progress grade at the end of the period. Only one student was hurt by this grade; the rest of the students received an "A-" or better. The student who scored low has been told several times that she needs to stay on-task. I talked to her about her grade, why it was low, and what I expected from her in the future. I also told her that I would take another progress grade in the next day or two. I thought that this would give her something to work towards, and she did say that she would give her painting more effort.

I think that taking an effort/progress grade at this point in time was a good idea. Those students who have been using their time wisely in class got an extra "A" in the gradebook, boosting their six-weeks grade. It also gave me an opportunity to talk to each student about what was successful and what needed improvement in their paintings. For the most part, the students were rewarded for their efforts, but in every case, the students were given some incentive to continue their good work or to improve.
November 8, 1994

Unit Evaluation

Today the students continued working on their Impressionistic paintings. Most of them were near completion, but there was a common problem that I observed for the majority of the students. They were having trouble depicting space. To remedy this problem, I spoke to the entire class about atmospheric perspective, showing them examples of how Impressionists used it and how the students could use it. I used the plants themselves to demonstrate how light and shadow could be seen and should be seen in the paintings.

Tomorrow will be the last day for the students to paint in class. From what I have seen so far, this unit has been extremely successful. The students are demonstrating that they are competent in using the acrylic medium and that they understand the concept of Impressionism.

Some of the things that I think contributed to this success were the light and atmosphere exercise, the Impressionistic color wheel, and the group research of various Impressionists. Another thing that I think was very important was the one-on-one interaction with the students. It was during this interaction that many ideas were clarified and suggestions for improvement were made.

Though the unit was successful, there were improvements that should be made. In the future, I would use this unit during a warm season, when it would be more likely that the students
would be able to sketch outdoors. Also, I would allot more time for the practice assignments, such as the light/atmosphere exercise and the color wheel. Before starting the final painting, I would review how each Impressionist applied paint and what were the major ideas of Impressionism. Finally, I would try to be more clear in all of my visual examples and my written and oral directions for assignments. I think that all of these things can be improved, and with practice, the results of the unit will be better and better.
Art Criticism

All of the students completed their paintings today, so we had a self-evaluation and a group discussion on the success of the works. All of the students evaluated themselves, based on the criteria given at the beginning of the project. The paintings were to be well-designed, Impressionistic, and well-crafted. Some things that the students considered when evaluating themselves against these criteria were: point-of-view, paint application, and creativity. During the class discussion, I asked each student to talk about his/her painting, telling what he/she did to make it look Impressionistic, what he/she felt was successful in the painting, and upon what he/she needed to improve. I also asked the rest of the class for comments on each individual painting.

I think that it is good for the students to participate in art criticism exercises, because it teaches them to look at and talk about artwork. I also think it is important that the students do not give a negative connotation to the word "criticism." That is why I requested that the students talk about their successes as well as those areas that needed to be improved. One problem that I noticed was that students were reluctant to comment on the artwork of their peers. In the future, I would like to try this same approach, but ask the students to talk about a work other than their own. I think that this helps to provide closure to the studio projects.
Sample Visuals

Figure 1. View of Arles with Irises, Vincent Van Gogh
Figure 2. Two Haystacks, Claude Monet
Figure 3a. Color Wheel, Student Work
Figure 3b. Self-Portrait, Vincent Van Gogh
Figure 4. Four Dancers, Edgar Degas
Figure 5a. Wash Demonstration
Figure 5b. Impressionistic Technique Demonstration
Figure 5c. Water Lilies Claude Monet
Figure 5d. detail Sunflowers, Vincent Van Gogh
Figure 6. Final Paintings, Student Work