READ A WORK OF ART AS YOU WOULD READ A BOOK

Art is a powerful pathway into the Hawai‘i Common Core

Observe
Look closely and quietly.

Describe
What do you see?

Interpret
What do you think this painting is about and what makes you say that?

Connect
What does this remind you of? Why? What more do you want to know? Why?

Learn more at HawaiiPublicSchools.org
Hubert Vos
American (1855–1935)
Study of Hawaiian Fish, ca. 1898
Oil on canvas
36 1/2 x 72 7/8 in.
(92.5 x 184.5 cm)

The Artwork:
A Study of Hawaiian Fish
On April 26, 1898, the Pacific Commercial Advertiser reported that Hubert Vos was working on a “large painting of Hawaiian Fishes represented in various positions on a marble slab.” He purchased actual marine specimens from the Honolulu Fish Market and made detailed renderings of the 87 varieties of fish and crustaceans that can be identified in his painting. They are labeled on the corresponding key.

Beyond painting in accurate detail, the artist’s goal was to capture traditional life in Hawai‘i, even as it was changing due to Western intervention.

An academic realist painter, Vos adapted his Hawaiian subject to the Dutch or Flemish tradition of still life painting. Realism in Dutch painting can be traced back to the Northern Renaissance (1430 to 1580), a time when vibrant international trade created a wealthy middle class who commissioned (paid artists to create) artwork for them. At the same time, Dutch artists perfected the use of oil paint, using layers of paint to create translucent, jewel-like tones. These techniques helped them paint everyday life in astonishing, realistic detail.

Common Core Teaching Ideas
Have students imagine what the man in the painting might say to them if they could jump into the painting.

Who might the man in the painting be? What do you think he will do with all of the fish? Are there any fish you can recognize and name?

Discuss the traditional Hawaiian implements in the painting (i.e., calabash, lauhala basket, net).

Have students research one of these traditional artifacts and write a short informative paragraph about the artifact, to include what they know from both what they have read and from the depiction of the artifact in the painting. Access other media such as photographs or video to add to the students’ understanding of the implements.

Ask students to identify a fish in the painting, research that fish, and write an informative paragraph integrating the information found with that from the painting and the key.

What information does the key add to the painting? What does the painting capture or share that the key alone does not? How do the painting and key complement each other to provide a more complete understanding of the marine life?

Connecting to Standards
Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Hawaii Content and Performance Standards III Fine Arts–Standard 1: Visual Arts
Understand that science, technology, and society are interrelated.

Hawaii Content and Performance Standards III Science–Standard 2: The Scientific Process: Nature of Science

Honolulu Museum of Art
The museum offers:
Free guided school tours
Teacher resources
Lending Collection
Outreach programs
Art School classes
To learn more, go to honolulumuseum.org and click on Learn

Observe, Describe, Interpret, Connect (ODIC)
Four simple steps to engage with art:
The key to this looking strategy is to prompt students to describe and report as much as they see, with evidence from within the artwork.

You may be surprised by what they come up with given the opportunity to just look.

The hardest part is allowing time to look on their own—resist the urge to share what you see or what you think they should see.

OBSERVE: Start by taking a minute or two to do some silent, close looking.

DESCRIBE: Have students describe what they see, using evidence from within the artwork.

What is the first thing you notice? Where do you see that? How is the artist showing you that? What more can you find?

INTERPRET: Have students interpret what they see, by thinking about the time, place, mood, intention, and content of the painting.

What is the story? How do you know that? Who are the main characters? What is the mood of the painting? Where is the story taking place? Could this be taking place today or is it a long time ago? What might be going on just beyond the edge of the frame? Where does the story go next? Are there clues in the painting that make you think that?

CONNECT: Have students connect the artwork to their own lives to make it relevant.

Does this remind you of something from your own life? Can you relate to what’s going on in this picture? What more do you want to know? If you could ask the artist one question about the image, what would it be? If you could change one thing about this work of art, what would it be and why?