

Discovering the Arts

Rembrandt: His Life and Times

Teacher's Guide



Grade Level: 9–12

Curriculum Focus: Fine Arts

Lesson Duration: Two class periods

Program Description

Rembrandt was a master at manipulating light and shade. Explore the paintings of this 17th-century artist who created intense characters and scenes.

Onscreen Questions

- How did Rembrandt use light to express human emotions in his paintings?
 - What types of artwork did Rembrandt create?
 - What does *The Night Watch* reveal about the history of the Netherlands?
 - How did Rembrandt create “the perfect illusion”?
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Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Review important facts about the famous 17th-century Dutch painter Rembrandt.
- Compare two of Rembrandt’s self-portraits and discuss the style of each.
- Explore other Rembrandt paintings and curate an imaginary exhibit of his work.
- Create an exhibit guide describing the overall theme of the exhibit and the works within it.

Materials

- *Discovering the Arts: Rembrandt: His Life and Times* video
- Computer with Internet access
- Color printer
- High-quality photocopies of two Rembrandt self-portraits, one etching and one painting

Procedures

1. Review basic facts about Rembrandt van Rijn. Where and when did he live? What types of artwork did he create? What were some of the subjects he painted? Why was his work so famous? How did his work represent the history of the Netherlands?

See the following Web sites for background information on the artist:

- National Gallery of Art: Rembrandt van Rijn
<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pbio?26200>
- The Getty: Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn
<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=473>

2. Next, show students prints of two Rembrandt self-portraits:

- *Self-Portrait* (1659)
<http://www.wga.hu/art/r/rembran/painting/selfport/sp1659.jpg>
- *Self-Portrait, Staring* (also called *Self-Portrait, Wide-Eyed*) (1630)
<http://www.wga.hu/art/r/rembran/graphics/other/sp1630.jpg>

Make available several high-quality photocopies that students can observe in small groups. Or, print out one large copy and give students time to observe each painting closely.

3. Ask students to describe the styles of these two self-portraits. How are they alike? How are they different? Tell the class that Rembrandt has been described as an “imaginative realist.” Ask students to discuss what they think this term means, referencing the above works as examples. How was Rembrandt an imaginative realist? How did he evoke feeling in his work?
4. Next, tell the class that they are going to curate their own exhibit about Rembrandt. As curators, their job will be to tell a story about Rembrandt using 10 to 15 different works. The exhibit will consist of the works they choose, the order in which they present the works, and their descriptions of the works.
5. Once students have decided on a theme for their exhibit, ask them to make a list of Rembrandt works and decide how they will be organized. For example, they may choose to organize Rembrandt’s works chronologically, by subject, or by type of work. Then, ask each group to produce an exhibit guide with pictures and supporting text to describe the overall theme and organization of their exhibit.
6. Students may highlight some of the works in the video, or they may discover others in their research. The following works are featured in the video:
 - *The Night Watch*
 - *The Syndics of the Clothmakers’ Guild*

- *An Artist in His Studio*
- *The Prophet Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem*
- *Self-Portrait, Wide-Eyed*
- *The Sermon of John the Baptist*
- *The Feast of King Belshazzar*
- *The Prodigal Son*
- *Man in Oriental Clothing*
- *Landscape with Stone Bridge*
- *Hundred Guilder Print*
- *Bathsheba with King David's Letter*
- *Titus at His Desk*
- *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*
- *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis*
- *The Jewish Bride*
- *The Suicide of Lucretia*
- *An Old Man*
- *Simeon's Song of Praise*
- *Homer*

7. Students will find many Rembrandt works online. The following Web sites include some of his works:

- Rijks Museum: Rembrandt
http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/aria/aria_artists/00016943/
- Rembrandt 400
http://www.rembrandthuis.nl/cms_pages/index_main.html
- Web Gallery of Art: Rembrandt
<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/r/rembran/index.html>
- Complete Catalog of Rembrandt's Paintings
http://www.rembrandtpainting.net/complete_catalogue/complete_catalogue.htm
- Web Museum: Rembrandt
<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/>
- Olga's Gallery: Rembrandt
<http://www.abcgallery.com/R/rembrandt/rembrandt.html>

8. Each exhibit guide should include small color images of the 10 to 15 works they selected, in the order in which they would appear in the museum exhibition. The guide should also include supporting text that describes the significance of the works and how they fit in with the theme of the exhibit.
9. Have students share their imaginary exhibits and exhibit guides with the class.

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students showed a strong understanding of Rembrandt's work and style; produced a thoughtful, complete exhibit and guide highlighting 10 to 15 works; used images and text to clearly describe the overall theme of the exhibit.
- **2 points:** Students showed a satisfactory understanding of Rembrandt's work and style; produced an adequate exhibit and guide highlighting about 10 works; used images and text to adequately describe the overall theme of the exhibit.
- **1 point:** Students showed a poor understanding of Rembrandt's work and style; produced an incomplete or unclear exhibit and guide highlighting less than 10 works; did not use images and text adequately to describe the overall theme of the exhibit.

Vocabulary

claire-obscur

Definition: An artistic technique in which light and shadow highlight emotion and drama

Context: With the refinement of the claire-obscur style, Rembrandt achieved the typical illusion of space and atmosphere, the trademark of a true Rembrandt.

etching

Definition: A graphic technique in which a metal plate is engraved, coated with ink, and then printed on paper with a press

Context: Rembrandt's etchings are intensely realistic. With brilliant economy and confident use of line, they offer an immediate view of fields, branches, and trees.

history painting

Definition: A painting that illustrates scenes from the Bible, mythology, or historical events

Context: Because he had an appreciation for history paintings, Rembrandt painted very few landscapes.

palette

Definition: The colors that characterize an artist's work

Context: Rembrandt substituted a palette of brown tones for his earlier palette of bright colors.

tronie

Definition: A character study that features the head of a particular type of person, like an elderly man

Context: *Man in Oriental Clothing* is an example of the tronie style. It illustrates Rembrandt's ongoing interest in exotic and evocative faces.

Academic Standards

National Art Education Association

The National Art Education Association has developed national guidelines for what students should know and be able to do in the arts. To view the standards online, go to artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teach/standards.cfm.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
- Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Visual Arts – Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures; Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others
- Arts: Art Connections – Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines

DVD Content

This program is available in an interactive DVD format. The following information and activities are specific to the DVD version.

How to Use the DVD

The DVD starting screen has the following options:

Play Video— This plays the video from start to finish. There are no programmed stops, except by using a remote control. With a computer, depending on the particular software player, a pause button is included with the other video controls.

Video Index— Here the video is divided into sections indicated by video thumbnail icons; brief descriptions are noted for each one. Watching all parts in sequence is similar to watching the video from start to finish. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the remote for TV playback; on a computer, click once to highlight a thumbnail and read the accompanying text description and click again to start the video.

Curriculum Units— These are specially edited video segments pulled from different sections of the video (see below). These nonlinear segments align with key ideas in the unit of instruction. They include onscreen pre- and post-viewing questions, reproduced below in this Teacher's Guide. Total running times for these segments are noted. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the TV remote or click once on the Curriculum Unit title on a computer.

Standards Link— Selecting this option displays a single screen that lists the national academic standards the video addresses.

Teacher Resources— This screen gives the technical support number and Web site address.

Video Index

I. Rembrandt's Life (12 min.)

During his lifetime, Rembrandt enjoyed both commercial success and personal tragedy. Learn how Rembrandt became one of our most prestigious painters.

II. The Rembrandt Gallery (15 min.)

View Rembrandt's most famous works and examine the talent and skills that made him a great artist.

III. The Night Watch (9 min.)

The Night Watch captures a glimpse of the Netherlands during a golden age. Study a Rembrandt work that is considered a defining example of Netherlands history.

IV. Painting, Etching, and Restoring (13 min.)

Look at artistic techniques and procedures used during and after Rembrandt's time and see how professionals go about restoring delicate works of art.

Curriculum Units

1. Rembrandt's Early Career

Pre-viewing question

Q: What do you think it takes to be a great artist?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What was Rembrandt recognized for in his early career?

A: Rembrandt achieved recognition in his early career for his representations of biblical and mythological scenes. Rembrandt and another young artist, Jan Lievens, specialized in the *tronie*—a character study that featured the head of a subject, like an elderly man. Rembrandt was also recognized for his ability to convey the emotions of the subjects in historical works.

2. Rembrandt's Life in Amsterdam

Pre-viewing question

Q: Name some famous artists.

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What personal tragedies did Rembrandt experience in Amsterdam?

A: While Rembrandt enjoyed professional success in Amsterdam, he endured personal tragedy as well. His first three children died shortly after birth. The only child to reach adulthood was his youngest son, Titus. But Titus did not outlive his father. Rembrandt's wife Saskia died at the young age of 30. Rembrandt also experienced financial difficulties and had to declare bankruptcy when he was unable to make house payments.

3. An Overview of Rembrandt's Works

Pre-viewing question

Q: Which Rembrandt works of art do you know?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How many works did Rembrandt create?

A: Rembrandt created more than 600 paintings, 300 etchings, and 2,000 drawings in his lifetime. In his collection, Rembrandt produced a total of 68 self-portraits.

4. Human Forms, Religious Works, and Drawing Technique

Pre-viewing question

Q: What do you think would be difficult about painting human figures?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How did Rembrandt's human forms differ from those painted by other artists of his day?

A: In contrast to prevailing artistic conventions, Rembrandt presented his models realistically. Without embarrassment, he showed the imperfections of the human body.

5. Etching and Artistic Development

Pre-viewing question

Q: Do you think works of art always reflect the life experiences of an artist?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How did Rembrandt portray beggars in his works?

A: Rembrandt made many studies of beggars and vagrants. In his works, he showed these people in a respectful manner, without a hint of irony, focusing on the giving of alms.

6. Capturing a Moment in History: *The Night Watch*

Pre-viewing question

Q: What works of art do you consider historically important?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What do you think are the most interesting details in *The Night Watch*?

A: Answers will vary.

7. Achieving a “Perfect Illusion”

Pre-viewing question

Q: Have you ever seen a painting or drawing in which objects or people appeared lifelike?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How did Rembrandt’s style change during his career?

A: Seventeenth-century artists used two styles of painting to create realistic images. The first was the refined painting style. With even brush strokes, artists recreated form and volume on the canvas. Artists also used a coarser style, where a seemingly careless application of paint created a convincing representation of reality. Rembrandt strived for refinement in his early years, but by the end of his career, he painted in the coarser style. Rembrandt’s later paintings appear unfinished. Only when they are viewed from a distance can their subjects be properly understood.

8. Restoring Rembrandt’s Works

Pre-viewing question

Q: Why might a piece of art require restoration?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: Describe the process used to restore a painting.

A: Before restoring a painting, restoration experts remove a painting’s overlayer and apply a layer of varnish to the original paint. This saturates the original paint so that they can remove any retouching during subsequent restorations. On the new varnish coat, they fill in the gaps with a mixture of chalk and lime to bring the surface back to its original look. Then they retouch the filler. To achieve reconstruction, they mix separate pigments with synthetic resin, which fades more slowly and is easier to remove than oil paint. To assist future restorers, they carefully document every step in the restoration process. After they finish retouching, they varnish the painting once more.