

Connections: History, Art and Artists

by
Hester Menier



“New arts destroy the old.” —Emerson.

This quotation by American lecturer, poet, and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, describes how many teachers and art teachers in particular, feel about the use of computers in their classrooms. However, when we consider the educational possibilities technology presents, it is apparent that traveling the information super highway is one of the best ways to spread the word about visual arts. This medium allows people to visit places they may never otherwise encounter and to gain experiences that would be simply outside their reach. I have found that by just turning on a computer, a whole new world is open to my students.

The Internet can be used effectively in the art room to help students experience history in several ways. A wealth of valuable information is available on the Web including biographical sites providing specific information about particular artists and their work. Other Websites provide virtual tours of art museums and important collections of art that most students would never see firsthand. Other Websites allow students to use computer technology to interact with artists and students of art. I have always tried to allow my students to experience art in a whole new way using the abundant resources found on the Internet.

However, there were times when I couldn't find a Webpage that perfectly met my needs. I needed to find a variety of activities to challenge and motivate my 6th grade students while learning art history. Predictably, this topic was dry and uninteresting when not taught in a way that engaged them. What could I do? After some thought and exploration, I decided to develop my own Website. I created CONNECTIONS: HISTORY, ART AND ARTISTS. It can be found at (<http://www.gulfcoast.net/connections/>). This Webpage is interdisciplinary in its approach combining research, writing, art making and speech into a project approach to the study of art. When taught in cooperation with the regular classroom teacher, I found this project to be easy to conduct.

After a brief introduction informing students of the purpose behind the project, they were given a task. Students entered a fictional world in which they became art historians commissioned by a major museum to design a tour program introducing average people to the lives and times of several major artists. The "art historians" must in a simple and concise way, inform museum visitors about the artists, their artwork and the historical events of the time that influenced the artwork. Tours were structured around five-minute stops at each of ten historical periods, each represented by three artists.

After the mission had been presented, students received a list of research questions and sources of information. Sources included art-related Websites, encyclopedias, timelines, book titles and CDs that contained art-related information. These provided students with a wide range of sources to use as they uncovered interesting and motivating facts about artists and their work. A wide variety of sources makes it easier for

students with no computer access to work outside of school if necessary. This information was quite simple to locate for some artists but for others it required some digging. Either way, art history quickly came to life when students discovered Vincent Van Gogh cut off his own ear, Hieronymus Bosch was obsessed with mythical man-eating creatures and some artists choose alternative lifestyles.

When research was completed, each group built a cube that displayed the artwork and related information about the three artists and the period of time in which they lived. This material was presented on the museum tour in a concise visual format. Each cube focused on the connections between the artists and linked them to the historical time period in which they worked.

Without a single lecture or dry and passive teacher-centered history presentation, students connected famous paintings with the historical events surrounding their creation. From Francisco Goya's bloody and violent scenes of war to the effect the Catholic Church had on the art of the Middle ages, students discovered learning history to be easy, motivational and painless.

The finished project was a wonderful way to spread the word about art and its historical connection. A final "tour" was given when each group presented their cube to the museum "visitors". Through the use of the technology that so many thought would destroy art, each student shared the interesting material discovered through online research. In the end, this application of technology helped students present an appreciation of art and the world that helped shaped it. Students also discovered a new research tool that was as varied and informative as any library.

Biography

Hester Menier is currently a K-3 art teacher in the Wentzville R-IV School District and has spent the last 4 years teaching elementary art in the U-46 School District outside Chicago. She graduated from the University of Northern Iowa with a degree in art education with an emphasis on art history. During her college summers she traveled overseas running day camps and collecting multicultural ideas.