Lesson Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class: Year 7</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual Arts Practice: Art Critical/Art Historical</td>
<td>Lesson Topic: Still Life: Symbolism in Art – Vanitas</td>
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**Recent Prior Experience:** Students have explored a range of Still Life artworks to inform their art making practice (still life drawing exercise). They have completed a Critical and Historical study of van Gogh’s “Sunflowers” using the cultural frame, in which the students were introduced to identifying links between the artist and world. Now that the students have an elementary understanding of the role of the artist and the thought behind the decisions they make in their artistic practice, this lesson encourages students to recognise the power of the artist in creating meaning through their intentional use of symbols. Students have also begun to write paragraphs critically analysing aspects of artworks using the frames.

**Syllabus Outcome(s):**

- **4.8** explores the function of and relationships between the artist – artwork – world – audience

- **4.9** begins to acknowledge that art can be interpreted from different points of view

**Indicators of Learning**

By the end of this lesson, the students will:

- Investigate the ways that **artists** use **symbols** to create meaning for their **audience**.
- Explore the ways that **audiences** understand/decode ideas and derive meaning from **symbols** that **artists** insert into their work.
- Explain verbally and in short written accounts the ways that **artists** create meaning for their **audience** using symbols and signs.

**Assessment:**

**Verbal Responses & Short Writing Task**

Using one artwork, students apply their understanding of symbols in Vanitas artworks to complete structured questions that:

- examine how the **artist** has used **symbols** to create specific meanings for the **audience**.
- consider the ways in which **audiences** respond to the **artist**'s use of **symbols**, and how it influences their understanding of the work.
- create links between **artist** intention and technique and **audience** response.

**OH&S considerations and risk assessment**

- ensure all schoolbags are out of aisles to minimise tripping hazard.

**Resources:**

- *Lesson Outline* Overhead/PP slide
- *Symbols in Vanitas* information handout
- Image of Harmen Steenwyk’s *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* on colour overhead/PP slide/Smartboard file
- *Vanitas Symbols* worksheet
- Printouts of Audrey Flack’s *Wheel of Fortune* and Ricky Swallow’s *Killing Time* (enough for one artwork per student)

*These resources were prepared using the following texts:*


*NB: A full bibliography may be found in Appendix B.*
Lesson Plan and Resources prepared by Belinda Coniglio
Please ask for permission before using any part of this lesson.

Lesson Content/ Indicators of Learning | Time | Teaching Strategies/ Learning Experiences | Resources and Organisation
--- | --- | --- | ---
**INTRODUCTION**

Review of Prior Knowledge | 5 min | The teacher leads informal class discussion about where this lesson fits in student’s study of ‘Still Lifes.’

A pre-prepared Powerpoint slide or overhead gives the students a brief lesson overview to aid in their direction and understanding of how the lesson will flow. The descriptor outlines the key learning activities that will be undertaken in the lesson, as well as what is hoped students will gain from the activity (Advance Organiser: Phase 1)

Introduction of Frames Concept – Structural: Symbols in Vanitas | 5 min | **Introduction of Frames Concept – Structural: Symbols in Vanitas**

Using the information handout *Symbols in Vanitas*, the teacher is to explain the saturating use of semiotics in Vanitas Still Lifes, making reference to the following points:

- Defining symbols as ‘a word or object used to represent something another word or object’.
- Drawing a link between the use of symbols in non-art related life. ’...For example, a rose may represent love or passion, or a cross may represent Christianity.’
- Vanitas as highly symbolic art; originally mostly Dutch 17th C.
- Themes of life and death. Introduce term ‘transience.’
- The ‘warning’ against vanity/consumerism: we can’t take our fancy objects with us when we die.

Teacher asks students to respond to core questions:

- In order to ‘de-code’ the artwork as a whole, do we need to know what the artist meant each of

PP slide or overhead of Lesson Outline

Information sheet on *Symbols in Vanitas*
the objects depicted in the artwork to represent?
- Do the objects in the painting become a sort of ‘language’ that the artist speaks, and the audience must interpret?

Anticipated responses could include:

**Yes** – *We can’t know what an artist intends for us to gather from their artwork if we do not know their ‘language.’ It is important to de-code each object in the artwork so that we can understand or ‘get’ the artwork and all the meanings and messages that the artist has left there for us.*

**No** – *We can appreciate an artwork without knowing what the artist intended for the audience. We can make our own meaning without knowing why the artist used each symbol. We can interpret an artwork from a personal perspective.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEVELOPMENT/ SEQUENCED LEARNING ACTIVITIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application of concept to specific example:</strong> Harmen Steenwyck’s <em>Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life.</em></td>
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</table>
| **Teacher hands out Vanitas Symbols** | **Steenwyck artwork on overhead OR Notebook 10 file; SmartBoard.**  
**Vanitas Symbols worksheet** |

*A completed mind map should include the identification of the following objects:*
- Skull
- Silk
- Pocketwatch
- Shell
- Books
- Musical Instrument
- Sword
- Jar
worksheet and goes through it with students. Students are to complete part 1 (& 2) independently.

(Part 1 & 2 of the worksheet ask students to complete a ‘cut and paste’ exercise matching images of the objects within Steenwyk’s work with descriptions of their symbolic meanings)

Teacher leads class in ‘checking’ their answers.

Students picked by teacher to respond to following questions (anticipated answers in italics):

- Why did Steenwyck choose to include these objects in his painting? What does he want the audience to do?
  
  Steenwyck choose to include these objects as a code for us to crack. He wanted the audience to understand exactly what he ‘meant’ in creating this painting so that we could match well-used symbols with meaning.

- What do you think Steenwyck is trying to tell us by using these symbols? What meaning is Steenwyck attempting to create for his audience?
  
  Steenwyck has used symbols that explore the transience of life and make comments on vanity. He is attempting to get his audience to think about their lives as something precious, yet short.

- Do you think that Steenwyck thought his audience would know what all the symbols represent? Why would he want the audience to understand the work?
  
  Steenwyck might have known that the audience at the time would have known many of the symbols as they would have come across them in other artworks. He would have wanted them to understand so that his meaning was understood particularly in a time of extravagance and opulence.

- Why is it important for us (as the audience today) to try and decode the meaning that
Steenwyck has ‘hidden’ in his artwork?
Many of the meanings behind Steenwyck’s artwork are still relevant today. It is important for us to decode his artwork so that we can fully understand his intentions.

**CLOSURE / REVIEW**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applying concept to different artworks to create meaning: <em>Audrey Flack and Ricky Swallow</em></td>
<td>15min</td>
<td>Teacher presents Flack and Swallow artworks, without any explicit detail towards the artists or works. It will be up to the students to create meaning purely through their understanding of symbols, without knowing the context of the artworks. Teacher reads aloud Steps 3 and 4 of the <em>Vanitas Symbols</em> handout and asks if there are any questions regarding the task. Once students completely understand the task, students are asked to complete steps 3 and 4. (Steps 3 &amp; 4 ask students to pick either Flack or Swallow’s artwork as the basis of an investigation of symbolic meaning. They are to paste the image in their VAPD and around the image, list each symbol they can see and annotate it with two words that best describe what they think the symbol is representing). Think, Pair, Share – Teacher instructs students to share their mind map with the students sitting next to them (irrespective of artwork choice). Teacher calls on individual students to present their mind map to the class and elaborate on their understood meaning of chosen symbols. Teacher extends Students’ answers with questions such as:</td>
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<td>Flack and Swallow artwork image printouts. <em>Vanitas Symbols</em> worksheet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linking Ss Ideas to Artist-Artwork (Conceptual Framework) Relationship</td>
<td>5min</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Linking Ss Ideas to Artwork-Audience (Conceptual Framework) Relationship</strong>&lt;br&gt;Reviewing questions from introduction:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How important is it for us to know the artist’s intended meaning of the symbols within an artwork when we are viewing it?</td>
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<td>- If we didn’t know what the objects represented, would we still gain meaning from the artwork?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher asks students to write a short paragraph (4-6 lines) in response to EACH question under the work completed this lesson in their VAPD.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students have scaffolded responses to frames questions in previous lessons and should be directed to those scaffolds to help them complete this task for homework.</td>
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<td>The responses may include the following thoughts (expanded)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>It is very important for us to know the artist’s intended meaning of symbols for the audience as it provides us with a deeper understanding of the image overall.</em></td>
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</table>
We (as the audience) are still able to gain meaning from any artwork without knowing the full intent of the artist, however knowing what symbols mean give us a more rounded understanding as we are able to make our own judgements, as well as have critical knowledge.
Appendix A
Lesson Resources
This Lesson...

Aims

- Learn about the ways artists use symbols to create meaning for their audience.
- ‘Decode’ some of these symbols so that we can apply our understanding of the way artists use symbols to specific artworks.

How Will We Get There?

1. Look at Vanitas Still Lifes as an introduction to Symbols in art.
2. Explore a Vanitas artwork to make a list of symbols.
3. Complete a cut and paste activity to find out what those symbols mean.
4. Use the symbols from the traditional Vanitas work to find meanings in contemporary Vanitas artworks.
5. Write a response to create links between the artist’s role as the producer as symbols, and the audience’s task as decoders.

What Do We Already Know?

- Symbols are images or objects that represents (or remind us of) something else. Symbols are all around us in everyday life. Think about the last time you went to Church. What symbols do we use in mass?
- We can make links between what the artist does and their world in Still Life paintings (Van Gogh’s Sunflowers)
Symbols in Vanitas Still Lifes

**Symbol:** A word or object used to represent something another word or object. For example, a rose may represent love or passion, or a cross may represent Christianity.

Vanitas is a type of highly symbolic art that uses objects to explore themes about life and death. Most Vanitas Still Lifes were produced by the Dutch in the 17th Century. These paintings depict very realistic interpretations of fine china, crystal glasses, expensive material and lace, rare and exotic fruits and vegetables, which were usually arranged on a table. All these objects were considered an indicator of wealth in the 17th Century; the people who could afford such things were of a high class and were very wealthy. Because of their wealth, they were also often very materialistic (obsessed with objects and money, rather than with other important things in life). Vanitas paintings are warnings that we shouldn’t be concerned with material objects and wealth that we gain in life, because we cannot take those things with us when we die.

Sometimes, the artists chose to paint the fruit rotting, or the glasses overturned. This shows that the artists are commenting on about the way these people live their lives. The symbols in the artworks give us clues to decode the messages that the Vanitas artists have left in their artworks for us to find.
### TASK
1. Cut out the descriptions below to complete the table on the following pages.
2. Cut out the completed table and paste it into your VAPD.
3. Collect a printout of either Ricky Swallow’s sculpture *Killing Time* or Audrey Flack’s painting *Wheel of Fortune* and paste it into your VAPD.
4. Around the image, list the symbols you can see, and write one or two words to describe what you think the symbol is representing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Symbol Represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Vanitas paintings, these objects depict the transient (<em>passing/fleeting</em>) nature of life. Hint: Life is as short as your favourite song.</td>
<td>This object is a symbol of wealth. Only a rich collector would own such a rare object from a distant land. Sometimes, this symbol is also used to represent birth and fertility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is the universal symbol of death. In Vanitas paintings, it is often seen as a reminder of human morality; the certainty in life that everyone will one day pass away. Sometimes, this same idea was represented with the symbol of <em>rotting fruit</em>.</td>
<td>This symbol is important because of what the object would have held in it; water or oil – two elements which symbolise the sustenance of life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A symbol which represents two things simultaneously: military power and superior craftsmanship. These razor edged swords, which were handcrafted to perfection by skilled artisans, were both beautiful and deadly weapons.</td>
<td>An object of luxury, in real life and in symbol! The colour is royal, too. It represents lavishness and opulence (<em>richness</em>).</td>
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<tr>
<td>When this painting was created, literacy was not common; therefore this object represents the luxury and indulgence of human knowledge.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### SYMBOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>IMAGE from “An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life”</th>
<th>SYMBOLIC MEANING IN VANITAS PAINTINGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skull</td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image of Skull" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pocket-Watch and Oil Lamp</td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image of Pocket-Watch and Oil Lamp" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shell</td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image of Shell" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td><img src="image4.jpg" alt="Image of Books" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Instruments</td>
<td><img src="image5.jpg" alt="Image of Musical Instruments" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk</td>
<td><img src="image6.jpg" alt="Image of Silk" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sword</strong></td>
<td>![Sword Image]</td>
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<td>-----------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Jar/Stoneware</strong></td>
<td>![Jar/Stoneware Image]</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Appendix B

Bibliography