

Design Your Life!

Developed By	Victoria Baldwin- Thomas
Suggested Length	Four lessons: approx. 2 periods each
Suggested Grade Level(s)	10, 11, 12
Subject Areas	Social Studies, Visual Arts, Language Arts

Overview

This unit may be used to introduce students to design elements that comprised the interior environments of Victorian Canadians, and how those elements provide socioeconomic information about individuals and their society.

Links to Curriculum Outcomes

Students will (be expected to)

- compare and evaluate the distribution of power in societies and the sources of authority in the lives of citizens (social studies)
- identify the criteria that one might use to judge the health or success of the economy (social studies)
- analyze and create art objects where emotions, feelings, and experiences are used as a symbolic non-verbal means of expression and communication of ideas (visual arts)
- demonstrate a commitment to the skillful crafting of a range of writing and other representations (language arts)

Links to Telling Stories: Themes / Key Words

- Design

Art Works

- *Ante-Room of the Atelier Bonnat, Paris*, Robert Harris, CAG H-77
- *Untitled*, Robert Harris, CAG H-1009
- *The Lonely Hours That Harbour Quiet Thoughts*, Robert Harris, CAG H-15
- *His Honor The Recorder*, Robert Harris, CAG H-525
- *Bessie in the Studio at Bolton's, London*, Robert Harris, CAG H-92



Lesson #1: Who's in Charge?

Objective Students will deconstruct three pieces of art and identify the power structures that are revealed by the figures and their environments.

Related Art Work(s)

- CAG H-1009
- CAG H-525
- CAG H-77

Materials

- pen
- paper
- color printer

Activities

1. If possible, display art works and photos of powerful figures from the Victorian era in Canada. Discuss with students who held the power in Canada during the Victorian era, having students take notes on class responses:
 - What types of occupations suggested power during this time period?
 - How was power distributed amongst citizens?

Students identify citizens who were in a position of authority and those who were subject to this authority.

2. Organize students in groups of three or four and have them analyse the three related art works in this lesson. Each group views the works at a computer (or refers to copies that have been distributed) and answers questions similar to the following:
 - Describe the occupations of the individuals in the pictures. Rank them from most to least powerful. (Suggest that all may not be as it appears at first glance. A successful artist has the power to shape and reflect culture. A businessman who has made a serious mistake may have his career ruined. A well-established engineer may fail to solve a problem, thus destroying an excellent reputation.)
 - What visual clues regarding one's position in society do interior environments offer?
 - What visual clues about the subject's thoughts are revealed through body language?
 - Imagine the figures without their backgrounds or in different backgrounds.
 - How might this change your interpretation of their status in society?
 - How do the interior design elements of these pictures affect the viewer's interpretation of the individual(s)?

Ideas for Assessment

Students challenge the suggestions of others and defend their own conclusions during a wrap up activity.



Lesson #2: For Richer or Poorer?

Objective Students will evaluate the distribution of wealth in the Victorian era and derive conclusions concerning the health of an economy by inspecting pictorial representations of interiors

Materials

- scissors
- glue sticks
- magazines
- color copier
- black paper

Activities

1. Provide students with a copy of one of Harris pieces. (Students next to each other should have different pieces.)
Students analyse their pieces and note interpretations, concentrating on socioeconomic status of the figure(s), by asking themselves questions such as:
 - What is happening in this picture?
 - What emotions do you feel for the figure(s)?
 - What is their social and economic status in the community?
 - How did Harris use light, color, and composition to achieve this effect?
 - How much time do they spend in this room?
 - What are their occupations?
 - How much buying power do they personally have?
 - How much of your information was drawn from the objects and interior design of the room?
2. Students cut out the figure and place it on a piece of black paper. This serves to reinforce the impact of interiors as a design element in artwork. Now that the figure is no longer constrained by his / her environment, encourage students to make new assumptions about the individual.
3. Students imagine the figure in an environment which changes his / her socioeconomic status. They cut out various elements from

magazines that comprise a new environment, creating a collage with the figure and the magazine clippings.

4. Collect collages and randomly redistribute to other students.

Ideas for Assessment

Students assess the creations of their peers using the same method they did for the Harris works. Reconvene to share thoughts on how design elements in artwork offer clues to the economic health of a society.



Lesson #3: Time Traveler

Objective Students will derive information from the Harris works regarding lifestyles in the Victorian era and place themselves in this environment by recreating the piece.

Materials

- acrylic paint
- canvas board
- brushes

Activities

1. In class discussion analyse the referenced Harris works, having students make assumptions about the differing economic conditions portrayed.
 - Consider the various lifestyles, and professions of the Victorian era.
 - Who had social status in the community?
 - How does the treatment of the interiors affect the viewer's interpretation of the subjects?
 - Discuss the objects and use of color.
 - What do the physical positions of the figures reveal about their thoughts and emotions?
 - List emotions you feel for the subject.
 - How did Harris use design to evoke your feelings?
2. Each student refers to a photocopy of one of the pieces, noting their opinions of the subjects and their lifestyles. Ask students to adopt the emotions of the subject.
3. They reproduce the work as a sketch, replacing the subjects with themselves (dressed in period style clothing), and block out the image on canvas board.

4. Striving to maintain the emotional content of the picture, students work in the painterly style of Harris, paying special attention to the use of lighting.
5. Note the attention Harris has given to details, without using high realism. A flick of color on fabric allows the viewer to be an active participant in the work by determining the texture of the fabric. Remind students that cotton, wool, velvet, leather, and taffeta all reveal different connotations to the viewer.
6. Encourage students to share ideas and help each other with the technical aspects of their work.
7. Display finished works, and have students to share their thoughts on Victorian society as a whole and the different socioeconomic classes that made that society.



Lesson #4: Poetry in Art

Objective Students will write a highly descriptive poem or short story that conveys the emotions in Harris' pieces, and read their work to community members with vision loss.

Materials

- color printer or computer access
- pen
- paper

Activities

1. In a class discussion consider how one can use the tools of complex yet concise writing to accurately describe pieces of art.
Together review the process of analysing artwork.
 - Referring to a Victorian style painting similar to the Harris pieces (e. g., *The Daughters of Edward D. Boit*, John Singer Sargent):
 - Search for clues indicating the subject's socioeconomic class.
 - Evaluate interiors, clothing, objects, light, color, and composition.
 - Speculate on the subject's experiences, education, and place in the community.
 - Determine the emotions of the subject and what caused them.

2. Students analyse one of the Harris pieces (computer image or photocopy) following the same process, taking detailed notes of their observations for use in their writing.
3. Students create a poem or prose description using rich language that accurately describes the emotions of the piece. They write with the intention of revealing their experience of the artwork. They read their work aloud for others who have not seen the work, soliciting their input.
4. Once students have succeeded in recreating a sense of time, place, and emotion in their writing, they arrange to visit an individual with vision loss in their community and read their work to that person. Their writing will open the "minds eye" allowing others to experience art.
5. Applaud their efforts to enhance the lives of others in their community

Suggested Resources

- *Sargent* (Carter Ratcliff, 1982, ISBN 0-89660-014-9)
- His works may also be found on line – key word: **john singer sargent**

