Brainstorming Themes That Connect Art and Ideas Across the Curriculum

BY DONOVAN R. WALLING

Art resides at the core of human endeavor. Since the first humans picked up tools, there has been art. We may not know for certain the purposes of the Paleolithic bulls and bison painted in the caves at Altamira, Spain, or Lascaux, France; but we do know that these artworks, dating from 15,000 to 10,000 years B.C., were somehow connected to the lives of ancient people.

Some art, as we suppose was the case with these prehistoric cave paintings, serves ritualistic purposes, from ancient magic and later religious symbolism to modern counterculture iconography. Two- and three-dimensional images, in other cases, represent or describe reality, fantasy, and all points in between, from the mundane to the sublime. Art provides the currency of ideas.

Through the centuries, connections between art and ideas have been ever present. The purpose of this article is to suggest an instructional approach to exploring connections between the visual arts and “ideas” that cut across the school curriculum. The approach involves a kind of brainstorming, a freeform association of art and ideas, rather than a sort of cookie-cutter approach to curriculum that has become all too common in our test-driven age. My contention is that if “art and...” were a question, the answer would be “everything.” Thus such “ideas” become themes for learning.

This is not to say that art is not important in itself and singularly worthy of study; Art as idea. We do well to remember Swiss painter Paul Klee’s admonition: “Art does not reproduce what is visible; it makes things visible.” Art has the unique quality of being simultaneously
communicative and significant both in itself and beyond itself. For example, Pablo Picasso's famous mural *Guernica* is a compelling painting for its composition—the use of line and texture, shape and volume—its artistry, in other words. But it also conveys and connects to "ideas," such as Picasso’s outrage at the bombing of the Spanish city of Guernica and, from a perspective of art history, to the place of Picasso’s work in the pantheon of modern art. Composition, technique, symbolism, history—all are connections between art and ideas.

A great deal has been written in the past few years about connecting the arts and the intellect. Elliot Eisner (2005) commented recently, "No decision is of greater importance than determining what to teach and toward what ends" (p. 8). Articles by Davis, Siegesmund, Bresler, Ross, and Soep in a special section, edited by Eisner, of the September 2005 issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan* provide examples of current thinking from the viewpoint of connecting arts and ideas on a broad scale.

To illustrate how teachers might use the visual arts to teach both about art and about other "ideas" in the curriculum, that is, to make those important decisions about what to teach and to what end, I explore two sample themes: conflict and the commonplace. Think of the following sections as brainstorming on paper. Out of these brainstormings a myriad of starting points for study and student engagement can emerge.

**Art and Conflict**

Conflict—good versus evil, war and its consequences—is the stuff of drama, whether on stage, paper, or canvas. A dramatic starting point for this thematic exploration is the large oil painting by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) called *Guernica.* The northern Basque village of Guernica was targeted for bombing practice by Hitler’s army. As townspeople ran from their homes in terror, machine guns cut them down. Some 1,600 civilians were killed or wounded on April 27, 1937. By the next month, the massacre was common knowledge. Few were more outraged than Picasso, who was then living in Paris.

Picasso’s response was to paint the mural *Guernica,* which was exhibited in the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition that same year. The painting faced strong criticism initially but over time came to be recognized as perhaps Modern Art’s most powerful antiterror statement. The mural is neither romantic nor realistic. It is abstract, figurative art that resonates with viewers regardless of their preferred artistic style.

Another Spanish artist provides an earlier example of artistic reaction to conflict. Francisco José Goya (y Lucientes) (1746–1828) was a court painter early in his career. But, like Picasso, who would follow him, Goya did not confine his talent to painting. He also produced many drawings, engravings, and frescoes. Although he began in the Rococo style, he later worked in the emerging Neoclassical style, which featured less ornamentation. He also painted everything from portraits to genre paintings. During the Napoleonic invasion and the war for Spanish independence, Goya served as a court painter to the French. His 1814 painting, *The Shootings of May Third 1808,* which portrays an execution by firing squad, and his series of etchings, *The Disasters of War,* mark this dark period. Both were controversial. The etching series, in fact, was not published until 1863, long after Goya’s death in 1828.

Goya and Picasso both reacted strongly to events associated with conflict by creating artworks as antiterror statements. But other artists, mainly before the 19th and 20th centuries, sometimes painted the glories of war and the nobility of soldiers. Greek warriors, for instance, often were portrayed in noble battles on temple friezes, as freestanding statues, or on vessels such as amphorae and kylikes. In more recent times, the tradition of glorifying war has lived on largely in propaganda art. But there also have been war artists who viewed themselves simply as chroniclers, neutral observers and recorders. An example by Campbell Taylor (1874–1969), whose work is mainly documentary in character, is *Herculaneum Dock, Liverpool,* a 1919 work done in ink and watercolor on paper.
Not all art depicts real battles. Think of mythology, another source of conflict art. An example is *Fight, with Athena and Hermes Watching* (c. 525-520 B.C.), an amphora attributed to the Andokides Painter. Two armored warriors attack one another with spears as the goddess Athena and the god Hermes, flanking the warriors, look on.

During the great periods of biblical art, notably the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, many of the Bible's conflicts were rendered in art. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) provided numerous examples in his engravings and woodcuts, such as *St. Michael's Fight Against the Dragon*, a woodcut from 1498. The image is from a series of woodcuts illustrating the Revelation of St. John. There also is implicit conflict—that is, conflict about to happen or just ended. For example, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) and later Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) both sculpted the biblical David. Michelangelo's *David* (1501-04) from the Renaissance period is brooding and still, readying himself for battle with the giant Goliath. Bernini's *David* (1623-24), on the other hand, is from the Baroque period and shows David in action at the very moment when he is about to launch the stone that will kill Goliath.

Sports, with their controlled forms of conflict, have provided art of a different sort. American painter George Bellows (1882-1925), for example, created a number of works about prizefighting. A well-known image is *Stag at Sharkey's* (1909), which shows two fighters locked in battle. Sports conflict of a different sort can be seen in the horse racing images of Impressionist Edgar Degas (1834-1917), such as *Before the Race* (c. 1882), which has the same sort of implicit conflict as Michelangelo's *David*, the jockeys on their mounts anticipating the contest ahead.

Another dimension of conflict is inner turmoil, or torments of the soul. Austrian Expressionist Egon Schiele (1890-1918) provides an example in his painting *Sitting Woman with Legs Drawn Up* (1917). The woman seems to be deep in thought, and her thoughts do not seem to be happy ones. The Norwegian Expressionist Edvard Munch (1863-1944) provides another example in his famous portrait of existential anguish, *The Scream* (or *The Cry*, 1893). Viewing this work, one can almost hear a horrible cry coming from the gaping mouth of the figure who clutches his skull-like head with both hands. Both of these examples come, appropriately enough, from German or Nordic Expressionism, a style that developed in the late 19th and early 20th century, and a period marked by numerous conflicts in Europe and elsewhere. Many Expressionist artworks portray some form of conflict, often emotional in character.

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Finally, the art of English painter Francis Bacon (1909-92) offers many examples of this Expressionist approach to conflict and existential angst extended into the Modern period. An example is his tortured *Self-Portrait* (1971), which may be compared to some of the self-portraits drawn and painted by Egon Schiele sixty or seventy years earlier. Bacon's work has been characterized as hallucinatory, sometimes satirical, sometimes horrific. The same can be said of much of conflict art.

The preceding ramble through artists, artistic periods, and styles illustrates a kind of brainstorming and offers multiple entry points for studying aspects of history, literature, sports, and other subjects. These ideas lead naturally to instructional questions. Following are three examples:

1. **Conflict in one form or another is a central theme** in literature and drama. Many of the conflicts found in novels and plays could be or have been illustrated in works of art. Given a particular piece of literature, what scenes might be chosen to illustrate the central conflict? Are there multiple scenes? Consider, for instance, in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* the fight scene between Romeo and Tybalt or the final scene of Juliet's emotional despair at finding Romeo dead.

2. **Art often has been used to make powerful statements about the nature of conflict,** whether the issue is civil rights or global war. Some celebrate conflict; others deplore it. In addition to visual images, how else have humans responded to conflict? Think about music, dance, the spoken word, and other forms of expression.

3. **Sports competitions usually are forms of controlled conflict.** Individual against individual, team against team. Whether on the chessboard or the playing field, sports often provide a metaphor for war. How have sports been used in place of actual combat? Consider sports in various historical periods—for example, jousting in the Middle Ages or the modern Olympics.
Art and the Commonplace

Moving from the heroic or potentially heroic in conflict, by way of contrast let us now examine another brainstorm, this time focusing on “the commonplace.” Even the most mundane artistic subjects can offer thematic starting points for studying important topics. Artistic expression is not always elitist. Certainly many artists throughout history have idealized their subjects and concentrated on painting or sculpting noble subjects and grand designs. At the same time, a vast number of artists, many unnamed, produced and continue to produce art of the everyday and the mundane. Particularly since the Renaissance, many artists, in fact, have raised the commonplace to High Art, such as Pop artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987).

The Pop Art movement began in 1950s and was the dominant art style of the 1960s. The movement’s practitioners emphasized the depiction of objects or scenes from everyday life and employed the techniques of commercial art and popular illustration to do so. Along with Warhol, leading Pop artists include Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925) and Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997). Pop artists looked at the consumer culture and treated it as High Art in paintings and sculptures. Warhol’s 1962 drawing Roll of Bills seems particularly appropriate as an example. The image is simply a roll of currency held with a rubber band. Warhol became well known for his silk-screened images of everyday objects from ordinary Campbell soup cans to iconic figures of the day, such as Mao Tse Tung and Marilyn Monroe.

Roy Lichtenstein, a Warhol contemporary, abandoned Abstract Expressionism in 1961 to produce Pop images, one of his first being an oil painting titled Kitchen Stove (1961-1962). It shows an ordinary kitchen stove with the oven door open to display various baked goods. The painting's palette is limited to yellow, white, and purple, exemplifying another characteristic of Pop Art, the use of flat, bright colors.

The Pop Art movement was not the first expression of the commonplace to gain acceptance by society’s elites. Indeed, the tradition of still life painting stretches back almost to prehistory. Still lifes have always presented everyday objects in ways that allow the viewer to see them with new meaning. At a distance of time, the viewer also can gain insights into past historical periods. For example, it was popular during the Roman era to decorate homes with wall paintings and mosaics. While many of the artworks that still exist show mythological or heroic scenes, a large number are still lifes that show the kinds of objects Roman homes held and the foods Roman families ate.

The depiction of ordinary objects can be used to trace daily life and culture across the centuries. To give another example, in the 18th century a leading still life painter was Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779), whose works documented the lives of the Paris bourgeoisie. He used objects of daily life—pipes, pitchers, goblets—rendered with uncanny realism, and was called the grand magician by his critics for this outstanding ability. An example is his oil painting titled The Silver Tureen (c. 1728), which depicts a silver soup tureen next to a freshly killed rabbit and a dead fowl, various types of fruit, and, humorously, a curious cat.

A related type of art that focuses on the commonplace is genre painting. Genre painting (sometimes called petit genre) usually tells a visual story or anecdote and usually shows an interior scene. The setting in a genre painting or print almost always is an ordinary home or a business, such as a mill or tavern. Chardin also was known for his genre paintings, such as The Return from Market (1739), which depicts a burdened housewife who clearly has just returned from a tiring shopping trip.

Genre painting is, over the course of time and in practical terms, a subcategory of a broader type: narrative painting. Storytelling depictions of everyday activities can range from play and sporting events to daily work. For example, American painters Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and Winslow Homer (1836-1910) created scenes of boys sailing, rowing, and running. Illustrator Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) popularized a form of genre painting by crafting everyday, often humorous scenes as illustrations for stories or advertisements in magazines, such as the Saturday Evening Post and McCall's. His images include restaurants, schoolrooms, barbershops—every imaginable domestic or commonplace setting. An example is Surprise, painted for the cover of the Saturday Evening Post in 1956. It depicts Rockwell's favorite eighth-grade teacher being greeted by her class on her birthday.

One can carry the theme of art and the commonplace in many directions. Almost all have something to do, at a historical distance, with how we come to understand ordinary life in past times and cultures. This entry point into history does not come only from objet d'art (a French term referring to objects of artistic merit), but also from objects of daily use, from mirrors, combs, chairs, pots, pans, and other household objects to trade tools and agricultural implements. Every historical museum holds common objects, the oldest found by archeologists, the newest taken straight from store shelves. All of these objects point to aspects of the cultures that made them, held them, and used them.
Again, it may help to frame some thematic questions to set in motion the wheels of instructional innovation. Following are three examples based on this brainstorming about the commonplace:

1. **Artistic beauty can be found in everyday objects**, whether they date from ages past or are part of daily life today. They embody culture, place, and history. Other common things serve similar functions in other fields of study. For example, a diary, such as one written by Samuel Pepys or Anne Frank, can attain the status of literature. What are other ordinary things that take on added meaning when studied with an eye to history, literature, art, or culture?

2. **Pop artists, such as Warhol and Lichtenstein, used oversized scale as a way to draw attention to commonplace objects and images**. Other artists have used the opposite, making miniatures that force the viewer to look closely. Consider doll houses, for example, or miniature portrait paintings. In what other ways has scale—making something very big or very small—been used to change how some ordinary thing is regarded?

3. **Tracing the history and development of modern technology can foster understanding** not only of the roots of that technology but also of the direction it might take in the future. Choose an everyday machine, such as a dishwasher, a hair dryer, or a lawn-mower, and trace its development. For instance, what did the lawn mower look like 20, 50, or 100 years ago? What were the key design features? How did it work? Then speculate on what the lawn mower will look like and how it will function 20, 50, or 100 years from now.

**Summary**

Ideas are starting points—for thought, discussion, reading, viewing, writing, and making. These two brainstorms on paper illustrate how taking an idea and examining it from an artistic point of view can generate thematic starting points to help teachers and students connect the visual arts to ideas that ripple across the school curriculum.

Most of these starting points can be used in more than one subject. For example, ideas that draw on the work of French writer, artist, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau can be used in related not only to drama, theater, or film, but also to a range of subjects, from literature and mythology to religious expression and history. Performance techniques and theater technology are other connecting points. Another example is Margaret Bourke-White's post-World War II photographs, which can be starting points for studying history, war, biography, and portraiture, in addition to photographic technique.

Teachers and students alike can use a central idea, stimulated by a particular artist or artwork, as a theme around which to build one or a series of lessons or projects. And teachers of various subjects can use the same starting points to structure different learning journeys. The necessary tools are merely a lively interest and access to resources—ideas and images—many of which, like those listed here, can be found on the World Wide Web.

**Online Images**

*Before the Race* (Degas)

*David* (Bernini)
http://www.thais.it/scultura/image/sch00006.htm

*David* (Michelangelo)
http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/micheldavid/frontdet.jpg

*Fight, with Athena and Hermes* (Greek)
http://www.goddess-athena.org/Museum/Paintings/Troy/Athena_Hermes_fight_Andocides_f.htm

*Guernica* (Picasso)
http://www.mala.bc.ca/~lanes/english/hemsgway/picasso/guernica.htm

*Hercules in the Dock, Liverpool (Taylor)*
http://www.art-ww1.com/trame/054text.html

*Kitchen Stove* (Lichtenstein)
http://www.nga.gov/International/Detail.cfm?IRN=115724&ViewID=3

*The Return from Market (Chardin)*
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/chardin/market.jpg

*Roll of Bills (Warhol)*

*St. Michael's Fight Against the Dragon* (Dürer)
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/durer/st-michel/st-michel.jpg

*The Screamer (Munch)*
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/munch/munch.screamer.jpg

*Self-Portrait* (Bacon)
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bacon/selfport.jpg

*The Shootings of May Tbird 1808 (Goya)*
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/goya/goya.shootings-5-5-1808.jpg

*The Silver Tureen* (Chardin)
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/chardin/tureen.jpg

*Sitting Woman with Legs Drawn Up* (Schiele)
http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/schiele/schiele.sitting-woman.jpg

*Stag at Sharnley's* (Belows)
http://www.mystudios.com/gallery/discoveries/belows_paints.html

*Surprise* (Rockwell)
http://www.normanrockwellvt.com/Big.jpg/surprise.jpg

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RESOURCES


ENDNOTE

1 Most of the artworks mentioned in this article are available as online images. Their URLs are listed at the end of this article.

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**ART EDUCATION**

Nominations are requested for the *Art Education* Editorial Board and Review panel to replace five current members who will soon complete their terms of service. Nominees should be active art educators who are willing to review approximately 10-12 manuscripts per year.

The Editorial Board and Review Panel should consist of "NAEA members representing each division and region of the association." Following NAEA policy, each member should be willing to serve a 3-year term beginning at the 2005 NAEA conference in Chicago.

Nominees should be familiar with current trends and issues in art education and should be able to make positive, concrete suggestions that the editor can use to help writers strengthen their submissions to the journal. Willingness to evaluate and return manuscripts in a timely manner is vital.

Please send the nominee's name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, resume or brief description of relevant experience, and a statement from the nominee that he/she has agreed to serve in this capacity to: Pamela G. Taylor, Associate Editor, *Art Education*, 105 Franklin Terrace, Department of Art Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, P.O. Box 843084, Richmond, VA 23284

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A list of recommended appointments, based on nominations received by February 15, 2006 will be forwarded to the NAEA Board of Directors for ratification at its spring 2006 meeting.