

LESSON PLAN FOUR

DIFFERENT BRUSH STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

In this lesson, students begin to reflect on their visit to the museum and to investigate the nature of aesthetic evaluation—that is, what makes something “good art.” First, they have a chance to review the tour and remember significant Dalí stories and favorite paintings that they hadn’t been introduced to in Lessons One, Two, or Three. By focusing on *why* they think the stories are significant and *why* they find the paintings to be appealing or not, they begin to articulate a basic personal aesthetic and to recognize multiple criteria in aesthetic evaluation. Then they are given a short essay to read which will use Dalí’s work to discuss three different ways of attributing significance to a piece of art (and, by extension, to a piece of literature, historical event, etc.). Finally they are asked to write about their own favorite piece from the Dalí collection, using the theory introduced in the reading.

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

- Reproductions of Essay on Evaluating Art
- Posters/Reproductions of: *Port of Cadaques* (Night); *Still Life: Sandia*; *The Weaning of Furniture-Nutrition*; *Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy (The Three Ages)*; *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*; *The Hallucinogenic Toreador*

ACTIVITY

1. Review & Reflection

This portion of class is initially intended to give students a chance to talk about their visit to the museum. Even more importantly, however, this lesson asks them to actively evaluate and think critically about the stories they heard and the paintings they encountered. As your students remember favorite stories from the tour or memorable paintings from the collection, make sure to ask them why those stories are important in regards to Dalí’s work or life, or what, exactly, makes the paintings memorable or accomplished. While the students are talking, it might be helpful for you to record (on the chalkboard) the various reasons students are giving. Do the stories merely entertain? Instruct? Provide special insight into the artist’s work? Are paintings memorable for their styles? Colors? Subject matter? Historical significance? Class will be successful today if students have, by the end of the period, a basic understanding that different people have different criteria for judging the success of works of art and that one piece of artwork can be successful in a whole variety of ways.

2. Reading

As you can see from class discussion, there are different reasons why people might like different stories about Salvador Dalí. Sometimes a story is important because it can help us better understand Dalí's artwork. Sometimes it can teach us a lesson, and sometimes it's valuable simply because it's good entertainment and makes us laugh. In the same way, people like Dalí's paintings for different reasons. Some like how he painted—his style. Others like the colors he uses. Still others like what he seems to be talking about in the work and what his paintings mean. You and the person sitting next to you might like the same painting but for totally different reasons!

The following essay identifies a number of reasons why someone might like a work of art. As you read, think of a painting by Dalí that you like and why you like it. Does the essay hit on your reasons? How so? If not, what would you add to the essay if you had the chance to rewrite it yourself?

Taste Test: What Do We Like About Art?

When Eleanor Reese Morse and her husband A. Reynolds Morse first saw Salvador Dalí's Surreal artwork, they were immediately impressed, and in 1943 they bought their first painting by Dalí called *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening—Hope!* The purchase of this painting began a friendship with Dalí that would last for forty years, but it also started the collection that ultimately became the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. In 1943, Dalí was known for his Surrealism—for odd juxtapositions and transformations, for dream-like scenes, and for his explorations of the subconscious mind. And *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening—Hope!* certainly was Surreal. It showed a horse being shot out of a cannon, and an airplane and a body wilting like unwatered plants. But what the Morses liked the most wasn't necessarily the painting's Surrealism. Rather, they liked the way Dalí painted the landscape of Spain—the way the flat plains disappeared in the distance, and the way he painted the sky so that it looked like it was always almost twilight or dawn.

Mrs. Morse once said that she and her husband didn't pay much attention to what people said about Dalí's work—they just bought the paintings that they liked. But a walk through the museum today reveals how different the paintings are from one another, and you can't help wondering just what, exactly, Mr. and Mrs. Morse liked about each one of them. But this isn't just a question that we could ask them. It's a question that we could ask other people too. And it's a question we can ask ourselves. As we walk through the collection, why do we like the paintings we do? And if we think about it, our answer would usually fall into one of three categories.

We know that prehistoric peoples painted beautiful pictures of buffalo and birds and suns and moons on the walls of their caves—just the way that we hang paintings and posters on our living room walls and in our churches today. Ever

since human beings were making arrowheads to hunt with and bags to carry food home in, they've also been making art out of some basic need to be surrounded by beauty. People want beautiful dishes and blankets. They wear jewelry to make their bodies into pieces of art. They write poems and sing songs and play musical instruments. People may have different ideas of what is beautiful—Mrs. Morse's father, for example, never could understand why his daughter liked *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening*—but one thing's for sure: they all want to make beauty part of their lives. While Mrs. Morse thought the landscapes were beautiful in Dalí's work, others love the colors he uses. Still others like the shapes he makes or how the pieces of the pictures have been put together. Even others think the strangeness and uniqueness of his paintings are beautiful. While people's tastes may change, and while one person's idea of beauty may be different from another's, there's no denying the role that beauty plays when it comes to the art we like.

But oftentimes beauty isn't the most important thing. Sometimes we want the art we're looking at to make us think, or we want to see what's going on in the artist's mind. If you have something you want to say, the most important thing may be what you have to say, not how beautiful it is. In artistic terms, we want to focus more on a painting's *content* and less on the beautiful *form* it takes. Some people might think that the most important thing about *Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy (The Three Ages)* is the idea that it poses—that we are possibly young, middle-aged and old all at the same time. That is, no matter who we are, we are all combinations of three things: 1) who we were in our youth (Infancy), 2) who we currently are (Adolescence), and 3) who we one day will become (Old Age). It's a sophisticated idea, but we might like that idea more than whether or not the painting is beautiful.

Do you know how Dalí got the idea for the melting clocks that you see in *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*? Some people might not care—the most important thing for them might be the painting itself and not when it was painted, or where, or other stories behind it. But for other people, this is the most important thing. While the landscape in *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening* might appeal to Mrs. Morse, it might be more significant to learn that Dalí painted it during World War II; the wilting body then becomes a symbol of war's destruction. There are all sorts of important and not-so-important parts of a painting's history—where it was painted, by whom, what was going on in that person's life at the time, etc. Maybe we like *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* more when we learn that Dalí got the idea for melting clocks when he looked at a piece of melting cheese!

Very often, when we like a painting it's not just because we think it's beautiful, but because we think it's beautiful *and* we like its message *and* we understand some of the stories behind it. The Morses were probably first attracted to the landscape in *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening—Hope!* But it didn't stop there. Once they thought about what it had to say, and once they learned its history, *then* they decided to buy it—even if Mrs. Morse's father would never understand why!

WRITING (In Class or as Homework)

Consider the essay we just read and think back to all the paintings you've seen at the museum or in class these past couple of days. Select one painting that you like, and make a list of everything you like about it and the reasons why. Then write a letter to a friend or family member (or even an art critic!) which explains or justifies why you like that work in particular. Remember to be as specific as possible. If you think the painting is beautiful, then show where and explain why. If you like its message, then explain what you think the message is and why you think that. And if you think the most interesting things are the stories behind the piece, then by all means tell what those stories are and how they perhaps shed light on what Dalí painted. And if you like the piece because it's beautiful, and because it has a cool message, and because it has interesting stories behind it, then you'll surely convince the person you're writing to that your painting is worth his or her time and attention.