

Spot the Leaf: Identifying Plants in Works of Art

Objective: Students will become more aware of how artists use leaves as design motifs and as subjects of art. By identifying the leaves with online leaf identification tools or guide books and by discussing the theme and interpretation of the artworks with regard to the artist's inclusion of leaf motifs, students will improve their visual thinking skills. Pretest students by asking them to identify the leaves in the artworks and explain why they might be there. Students will improve their online search skills using keywords in browsers to find symbolism and traditions in design motifs and tree distribution. This research and analysis can go as deeper as the age and skills level of the students increases.

Grade Level: Upper Elementary to Middle School

Time Required: one 60-minute period. (15 minutes for tree i.d.; 15 minutes for online research on the leaf and its meaning as a design motif; 15 minutes to write up findings; 15 minutes to present all findings.)

Works of Art included:

Frank Sadorus, *Catalpa Blossom in Bloom*, black and white photograph, circa 1910.

Frank Sadorus, *Still Life with Maple Leaves*, black and white photograph, circa 1910.

Julia Thecla, *Self-Portrait* (oak leaves), opaque watercolor, 1936.

Abraham and Thomas Fehr, *Coverlet* (oak leaves), cotton and wool, circa 1848-60.

Helen Gilchrist, *Applique Coverlet* (Tulip Poplar), cotton, 1848.

Motivation:

Some artists and artisans choose to portray elements of nature, such as leaves, in their works of art. Some leaf designs are traditional, handed down through generations, while others are original with the artist. By learning to notice and identify natural elements in works of art, viewers can think about the significance of the element to the artist, to the culture, to a religion, and to himself. May have the artist thought the leaf, in this case, was so beautiful that he or she just had to capture it? Is the leaf a symbol of something in the culture, such as patriotism, royalty, beauty, longevity, etc.? Did the artist create a design based on but not identical to a real leaf? Was a particular leaf a popular motif of the time or season?

Materials:

Printout of artwork question sheets

Leaf identification book or online tool

<http://www.sd22.bc.ca/hillview/treeid.htm> Hillview School's Tree I.D. site in Canada.

<http://www.cnr.vt.edu/dendro/dendrology/ident.htm> Virginia Tech's leaf and twig I.D. site

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Pages/tree/> Iowa State University's Tree I.D.

Procedure:

Review leaf identification procedures and terminology. Use an online tool with the whole class on a sample leaf.

Students or groups of students can choose or be assigned an artwork to analyze and interpret of the ones presented in this lesson.

Group can assign tasks of leaf identification, researching meaning of the artist or meaning of motif in culture to group members. They proceed with research, discuss findings, come to a consensus, write it up, and present it to the class.

To research possible meanings of motifs, search the Web using Google.com with keywords such as "(palm leaf) symbolism," "(oak) leaf as symbol." They should also check the habitat of the tree, as to whether it was a common tree in the part of the country where the artist lived, another reason the artist might have included it in the artwork.

Each group will present their findings to the class and all will discuss it, led by the teacher. See below for assessment criteria. Viewers of art bring their knowledge of their culture and other information, as well as their emotions, to works of art. By looking carefully at details, viewers can find cultural and visual information in the work of art that may have meaning for them.

Extension: Students search for works of art featuring leaves in the Internet, in books, and in galleries and analyze them in similar ways, looking for both artistic elements and interpretive elements.

Extension: Students will create a work of art in the media of their choice. The work will feature a leaf or leaves in any style they choose. For example, they could design a quilt top, take a photograph, design and draw a furniture motif, paint a still life, decorate a pottery piece, etc. with a leaf or leaves as the subject or focus. The student will present the piece to the class and lead a discussion of the design and interpretation of the leaf or leaves in the composition. (Does it follow a tradition? Is it an abstract design motif? Is it symbolic? What meaning does it have for the artist? For the viewer?)

Assessment:

Students will be able to identify the name of the tree from which their artwork's leaf came. (10 points)

They will also be able to find information on the use of the leaf as a design motif, either in the same type of artwork, or through history within the same culture (Examples: which leaves were commonly depicted in coverlet weaving; the oak as a symbol of strength and symbolic of a sacred grove in early European history). (10 points or less)

They will be able to find information on the species and its distribution, relating it to the location in which the artwork was made (given label information). (10 points or less).

Discussion will clarify the purpose of the artist and the perceptions of today's viewers. (10 points or less).

Illinois State Board of Education Goals:

Science: 12.B.2b Identify physical features of plants and animals that help them live in different environments.

Art: 27.B.2 Identify and describe how the arts communicate the similarities and differences among various people, places and times.

27.B.3 Know and describe how artists and their works shape culture and increase understanding of societies, past and present.

Artwork #1:
Abraham and Thomas Fehr
Emmaus, Pennsylvania
Coverlet, circa 1848-60
cotton, 92" x 83"
Illinois State Museum Collection
(746562)
Gift of Benjamin and Evangeline Hunter



1. Identify the leaves highlighted in the box. What tree species are they?
2. Is this tree common in Pennsylvania? Is the tree a symbol of something?
3. Why do you think this leaf makes a good design motif?
4. Did the weavers include or design other motifs from nature in this coverlet design? Are they realistic or stylized? How do you know?



Artwork #2

Julia Thecla, Chicago, Illinois
Self-Portrait, 1936
Opaque watercolor
Illinois State Museum Collection

1. What species of tree are these leaves?
2. Does this species live in northern Illinois?
3. What season of the year is it?
4. What reasons could Thecla have had to include such leaves in this self-portrait?
5. What feeling does it give to you?



Artwork #3

Helen Gilchrist

Applique coverlet, 1848

made in New York State

cotton, 93" square

Illinois State Museum Collection

Gift of Mrs. Fred J. Crilly, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin (1966.16)

1. What species of tree is shown on this coverlet?
2. Does this tree grow in New York State, where Helen was at finishing school? Helen Gilchrist was from central Illinois. Could she have seen this tree there in 1848?
3. Name some other motifs and symbols that appear on this coverlet. Which ones are from nature?
4. Compare Helen's motifs to those in the Fehr coverlet, which was made in the same year. Are there any similarities in style?
5. Helen made this when she was in school at age seventeen. She would put it away in her hope chest for when she married, when she would use it as a bedcover. What memories would she have whenever she looked at it years later?



Artwork #4

Frank Sadorus, Sadorus, Illinois
Still Life, circa 1910
Black and white photograph
Illinois State Museum Collection
Gift of Raymond Bial

1. What species of tree is shown in this still life?
2. Does this tree grow in eastern Illinois?
3. This photographer picked the leaves and set them in this vase to photograph. Why do you think he did this?
4. Read about Frank Sadorus at http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/art/htmls/dd_bio.html#
What about his life and location would prompt him to photograph nature?
5. This arrangement of the leaves and seeds looks different than they do as they grow on a tree. What impression does this arrangement give you as your eye wanders over it? What do you notice about the leaves and seeds here that you might not have noticed on the tree?



Artwork #5

Frank Sadorus, Sadorus, Illinois
Catalpa Blossom in Bloom, circa 1910
Black and white photograph
Illinois State Museum Collection
Gift of Raymond Bial

1. What species of tree is shown in this photograph?
2. What artistic effect is shown by having the flower and leaf pinned against the rough bark?
3. How can a black and white photograph of a colorful subject focus the viewer's mind? What do you focus on here?
4. What time of year was this photograph taken? How do you know?
5. How does the lighting from the left make the picture more dramatic?