

Teacher's Orientation Pages to:

Three Chicago Painters: Cast of Characters – Gertrude Abercrombie, Emil Armin, and Julia Thecla

Collection

The painting collection of the Illinois State Museum is fortunate to contain a body of artworks by three painters who worked in Chicago from the 1930s to the 1970s. We chose to present these artists in this Art Web site because they

- are a strong part of the collection,
- reflect the independence of Chicago artists of the era
- approached their subject matter in a unique way

The design of this sub-module will allow the museum to add to the number of artists featured as time goes by.



Exhibit

Each of these artists has had an exhibit of their work at the Illinois State Museum. There are catalogs on Abercrombie and Thecla. For this online exhibit, the curators wanted to show a comparison among the artists regarding their very personal treatments of similar subjects. The topics chosen were

- self-portraits (insight into individual people)
- the use of space in compositions (how different artists handle one element of art)
- the idea of canvas as a stage set (to explore one way painters may present narratives).

The purpose of showing just a few works is to encourage viewers to look in depth into them for meaning and interpretation. In just these nine paintings, there is wealth of thought and discussion.

- Emil Armin painted landscapes and people of the Chicago area. His work may resonate most with viewers who live in or have visited this city.
- Gertrude Abercrombie presented an image of herself in almost every one of her paintings; yet she always refused to comment on their meaning.
- Julia Thecla presented a dream world in many of her paintings, many of which featured her, pets, and portraits of friends.

Text

The questions accompanying the images just begin the conversation. We have provided a short list of visual thinking questions in an offline activity for talking about art. It can be used with not only this sub-module, but with any work of art. This activity is also a good one to use prior to a class tour or a personal visit to a museum to prime viewers to look closely into works of art to which they are drawn (not necessarily these same works of art). It can help prevent the museum burnout caused by trying to look at every work of art in the museum on a single trip.

Grade Levels of Activities

The offline activities were designed to investigate the three themes of self-portrait, use of space, and composition as a stage set.

- The staff has taught self-portrait painting to students from the age of six to the age of seventeen, varying the amount of motivational discussion about characteristics and self-expression (as needed for each age group). Early elementary students may concentrate on the location of the facial features on the head and how these features alter with expressions of emotion (smiling for happy, frowning for anger or worry). Late elementary students could look at how realistic (or abstract) some portraits are and what details tell them that a painting is realistic (or abstract). Then they will think about and create realistic (or abstract) details their own portrait. The discussion is of utmost importance in motivating a student to learn a new artistic concept and be able to show his/her learning through production of a work based on that concept. The combination of the viewing of art, discussion, and production produces sustained learning in all four categories of the study of art. Creative expression with media alone does not do this.
- The idea of perspective and space is one that interests students starting in about the sixth grade, when students want to represent things in art 'as they really are,' three-dimensionally and at various distances. However, lower grades are able to understand and use overlapping to show perspective, making faraway objects smaller, and using lighter, duller colors or values to create distance.
- A Web site that discusses perspective is part of a course on Western Technology
<http://www.uwgb.edu/dutchs/190outln/perslide.htm>
- Leonardo's Perspective Web pages investigate aerial and linear perspective with shockwave interactivity and paintings.
<http://www.mos.org/sln/Leonardo/LeonardosPerspective.html>
- The stage set activity was tested successfully on a local seventh grade class. To explain the concept of stage, a trip to the school stage would be appropriate to discuss the different areas and how they relate to a flat canvas or paper when creating a representational painting. An example of an interdisciplinary unit is a class studying the Renaissance in sixth grade. A group could make a model Elizabethan stage and arrange characters on it in conjunction with looking at how Renaissance painters used this concept. Students could then create their own paintings using the stage set composition.