

Restor(y)ing paintings

Pippa Couch, art educator and Jim Grant, nursery teacher

The images and texts in this article represent some of the work created by nursery children at Earlham Primary School in the London borough of Newham. The children and their families were part of a project funded by the United Kingdom Literacy Association led by Pippa Couch and Jim Grant in summer, 2012.

Background

Earlham Nursery is situated in a school where 91% of the children have English as an Additional Language and a predominance of families are of low socioeconomic status which might suggest there could be challenges in accessing the 'dominant' culture. Interest piqued by a presentation on talk and dialogue given by Dr Wayne Tennant at a UKLA conference, we considered how art might be used in a nursery context to engage children in verbalising thought and reasoning. We decided on a path where they would be given the opportunity to explore painting through personal experiences and understandings of the world, enabling alternative narratives of paintings to be constructed.

In his book *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Grant H. Kester notes how national art institutions present paintings and objects within a specific social, cultural and historical context. This, he argues, means that the 'story' associated with each exhibit is prescribed, leaving no room for any alternative perspective or interpretation. In the culturally and socially diverse society that we live in, it could be considered that these exhibits may be rendered irrelevant and result in social marginalisation and a sense that the institutions associated with national art collections are 'off limits' to some. Thus by validating personal interpretations of works, we hoped to develop children's confidence to critically engage with the institution of the National Gallery and its collection.

National Gallery in the nursery

In the initial stages, a display of many National Gallery paintings was created in the nursery. This involved the corridors and also the existing role play house, which became a mini National Gallery. Here, the children were observed to see which images they were attracted to and appeared to be most interested in so that a selection could be made for subsequent work. Next, the more popular images were shared and discussed during story time and postcard representations accompanied children home in book bags. Talk centred on ideas about character, landscape, weather and anywhere else that the children's discussion led. The postcards were a catalyst for home-school communication both in terms of the learning and work of the nursery and also in a reciprocal exchange of ideas. Parents were invited not only to discuss the paintings with their children, but also to create their own stories, recorded in home languages and shared back in the nursery.



Yusrah comments on Canaletto's *Stone Mason's Yard*:

'How comes there are yellow clouds? I don't like yellow. I don't have yellow clouds. (You don't have yellow clouds?) I don't like yellow, do you like yellow clouds? (Umm yellow clouds? what colour should they be?) That they should be blue. You need blue white skies in here. Ok? I don't like all blue. You tell the grown-ups to give you paint he got some magic wand to go to give paint then you can put some whites in the sky.'

The children's talk was insightful, intriguing and extremely fruitful, leading as it did to role play, puppet making, collage and dressing up in a bid to explore, develop and relate the stories that they conceived in the paintings. Here, intertextuality between pictures emerged with narratives synthesizing images that from an adult point of view seemed very disparate.



Yusrah talking about two paintings (Verrocchio's *Tobias and the Angel* and Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*) created an intertextual tale from the two images:

'Two angels carrying the fish to the water.
The dragon is trying to kill the Prince.
He is cold in the water.
The water up there.'

Ellie's reading of Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*:

'The lady has got a lemon hat on her head and the man has got a black hat on his head. The lady is sitting on the bench and the man is standing with his dog, there is a tree behind them.'

Zahi explaining his ideas about *Mr and Mrs Andrews*:

'A girl and a boy, they're looking. They are outside. They are waiting for the Dad. He has gone to get milk from the shops. They are going to drink the milk.'

Written work produced was astonishing and thoroughly challenged our expectations of what the children could achieve.

Samiha discussing Ucello's *St George and the Dragon*:

'The forest is flying away in the painting, in the plane. The horse, the 2 horses live in the forest. (Why?) They're going to find the writing board. The forest bird is going to eat the horse... no, fly the horse and take it to the doctors' because all bleeding on the hand. The forest bird is there.'

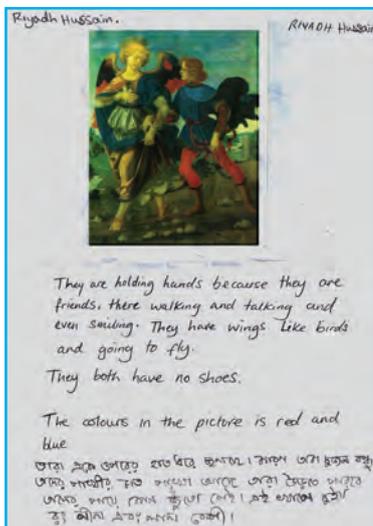


Figure 1: Riyadh's comments on Verrocchio's 'Tobias and the Angel'

The relationships between image and stories/histories were further explored by the children. They formed historical accounts around their own paintings either orally or through their written text.



Riyadh developing a critical account of his painting:

'They jumped to the helicopter and they shut the helicopter door. The help wasn't moving. They locked the door and got another helicopter and put 5 helicopters and 5 planes inside the helicopter. It was bare full. They drive it drive it. They messed inside the helicopter with food. The good people, mum, she came out and went inside the help, they police came and arrested everyone.'

Visiting the National Gallery

The culmination of the project was a visit to the National Gallery itself. Pippa read the children's interpretations in front of the paintings using puppets and other props the children had made. This was a powerful experience with children eagerly engaged as they experienced their stories/critical histories being shared in front of the original paintings. None of the children or parents had visited the Gallery before, and even for a seasoned visitor, the vast hushed galleries of grand paintings can have a silencing effect. However, both the adults and children actively engaged with the paintings, bringing to the images accounts and reflections of their own complex identities - identities that have changed and continue to change as did their understanding.



The evidence clearly shows how the children's comprehension, expression of ideas and the relationships between them had developed during the project. Many boxes of achievement were ticked and could even be used to argue the inadequacy of the EYFS map of progression with regard to reading and writing. Future developments of the project may involve a slightly differing 'art' choice - perhaps sculpture or contemporary art. After all, Carl Andre of the controversial *Equivalent V111* (the pile of bricks purchased by the Tate Modern in 1972) recently said: 'I find that I have a very good audience with small children, because they don't ask what it means.' (Radio 4's *Today* programme, 2013).

Plenty of scope for the imagination, personal interpretation, talk and writing!

Reference

Kester, G. H. (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. University of California Press.