



Huntington and Scott Gallery Programs

EDUCATION OF THE ARTIST

An Investigation into the Ideas that Defined a Generation of Artists in late Eighteenth-Century Britain



Grades 9–12

I. Introduction

The Royal Academy of Arts in London was established by King George III in 1768. In its own day, it radically changed the nature of art education and also, through the writings of its first president, Sir Joshua Reynolds, contributed to the unfolding discussion on art's purpose. The Royal Academy, still operating today, is important to this set of lesson plans, and to any visit to the Huntington, because many of the paintings displayed at the museum were created by artists who studied at the Royal Academy at the time of its founding, in the late 18th century. By studying these works, and reading primary source material, Reynolds' own *Discourses on Art*, students can begin to appreciate the theoretical underpinnings of the art, and measure the distance, intellectually, between that moment and ours. Reynolds believed art should, and could be universal. Do the messages of his paintings still resonate today, with your students? Reynolds believed artists should mine the past for ideas to explore in their own art. Does this approach to art education match our notion of artistic genius, and our belief in art as unique to an individual artist?

II. Objectives

- ◆ Students will explore the training of artists and learn that they are professionals, earning a living through their art. Like other professionals, artists train for their jobs. Some serve as apprentices. Others enroll in art schools. Some learn on their own.
- ◆ Students will identify the many different types of jobs that require art training.

- ◆ Students will be introduced to the Royal Academy of Arts, founded in 1768, and discover why it is an important example of an art school. Many of the artists featured at the Huntington studied at the Royal Academy, which is located in London.
- ◆ Students will learn about Sir Joshua Reynolds who was the first president of the Royal Academy. He is an important person in history, as a painter and a theorist on art and art education. His writings, assembled in *Discourses on Art*, provide students with primary source material.

III. Standards Assessed

Visual Arts Standards

California Department of Education

Standard 1.0

Artistic Perception: Processing, analyzing, and responding to sensory information through the language and skills unique to the visual arts.

Standard 2.0

Creative Expression: Creating, performing, and participating in the arts.

Standard 3.0

Historical and Cultural Context: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and culture.

Standard 4.0

Aesthetic Valuing: Responding to, analyzing, and making judgments about works in the visual arts.

Standard 5.0

Connections, Relationships, and Applications: Connecting and applying what is learned in each art form to learning in other art forms, subject areas, and careers.

IV. Background Information

Sir Joshua Reynolds

Sir Joshua Reynolds was born in 1723, the son of a schoolteacher. Steeped in literature and ideas as a child, he entered his adult life ready to combine art theory with his own natural artistic talents. He studied in Italy, making sketches of ancient and Renaissance works of art. In 1768, after achieving fame in England as a painter, he was elected to the Royal Academy and chosen as the institution's first president, an office he held until his death in 1792.

Remembered today primarily for his portraits, Reynolds placed the greatest value on history painting—works that extolled great achievements from the past, including the mythical past. Between 1769 and 1790, he delivered regular addresses to students and faculty (academicians) at the Royal Academy. These have been collected and published as *Discourses on Art*. The following passages

encapsulate key ideas of his: that dependence on natural talent limits an artist, who must also learn from the past; and also that artists must constantly strive after the impossible—grand art that ennobles the public, whose members strive for an equally elusive goal, virtue.

The greatest natural genius cannot subsist on its own stock: he who resolves never to ransack any mind but his own, will be soon reduced, from mere barrenness, to the poorest of all imitations; he will be obliged to imitate himself, and to repeat what he has before often repeated. When we know the subject designed by such men, it will never be difficult to guess what kind of work is to be produced.

It is vain for painters or poets to endeavour to invent without materials on which the mind may work, and from which invention must originate. Nothing can come of nothing. (*Discourse VI*, 203f.)¹

The art which we profess has beauty for its object; this it is our business to discover and to express; but the beauty of which we are in quest is general and intellectual; it is an idea that subsists only in the mind; the sight never beheld it, nor has the hand expressed it: it is an idea residing in the breast of the artist, which he is always labouring to impart, and which he dies at last without imparting; but which he is yet so far able to communicate, as to raise the thoughts, and extend the views of the spectator; and which, by a succession of art, may be so far diffused, that its effects may extend themselves imperceptibly into publick benefits, and be among the means of bestowing on whole nations refinement of taste: which, if it does not lead directly to purity of manners, obviates at least their greatest depravation, by disentangling the mind from appetite, and conducting the thoughts through successive stages of excellence, till that contemplation of universal rectitude and harmony which began by Taste, may, as it is exalted and refined, conclude in Virtue. (*Discourse IX*, 71f.)²

Background information on Reynolds' painting, *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, c. 1784

Sarah Siddons, like Reynolds, was an important member of London's cultural elite. She was a stage actress, admired by royalty and intellectuals alike for her dramatic roles. This painting was exhibited in 1784, and demonstrates Reynolds' goal of combining sources from the past to create a timeless image of a person from his own day.

Seated on a throne, which seems to float above the clouds, the figure reminds many viewers of Michelangelo's sibyls (female prophets), featured in his paintings for the Sistine Chapel in Rome, which he completed between 1508 and 1512. The shadowy figures in the background—one holding a knife (on the left) and the other

¹ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 99.

² Reynolds, 171.

a cup—may have been inspired by the personifications of Pity and Terror, as created by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The deep brown tones, the thickly painted surface, and the use of light and shadow to create a mysterious mood may have been inspired by the 17th-century Dutch painter, Rembrandt.

Reynolds and his contemporaries would have known these references, and would have appreciated their combination here. They result in an image of a contemporary actress whose talents placed her above and beyond the ordinary world of the late 18th century. Even the choice of clothing—which is not typical of the day—places her outside time.³

Reynolds promoted art that could convey timeless subjects. He believed that themes focused on human and divine achievement could be admired by all people, in all times. This was his definition of universal art. In this painting of *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, he expressed it through his unique combination of influences, which range from the classical to Renaissance and Baroque inspirations.

³Robert R. Wark, *The Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Art: Ten British Pictures, 1740–1840* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 2001), 39–53. This chapter is devoted to a discussion of the painting.

V. Lesson Activities

A. Pre-visit activities for the classroom

1. Display a reproduction of *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (www.huntington.org/ArtDiv/HuntingGall.html). Without providing any background information or leading questions, simply have your students describe the painting fully. Ask them to develop a hypothesis on what meaning the painting conveys. Each student can have a different idea. During their museum visit and, later in the post-visit activity, they will test their ideas against visual information and historical facts.
2. Distribute copies of Reynolds statement, from his ninth *Discourse* (provided above). Which part of this passage refers to the role of the artist? What does Reynolds believe is the goal of the artist? What is the purpose of art, when it enters a public arena? What can it accomplish there, according to Reynolds?

B. Museum visit

1. Have students make mental notes, related to the passages discussed from Reynolds' *Discourses*. Which details in paintings support his ideas? Which do not relate?
2. Reynolds believed art had universal appeal, containing messages beneficial to the moral underpinnings of society. Which paintings communicate universal truths to you? If some works don't communicate to you, why not?

C. Post-visit activities for the classroom

1. Distribute copies of Reynolds statement, from his sixth *Discourse* (see above). Using *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse* as an example, have students explain how Reynolds achieved his own goal of creating something new from elements of the past. Conclude the essay with the student's own definition of art. Is art the singular product of a genius? Or is it, as Reynolds argues, the result of combining many elements into something new?
2. The Royal Academy of Arts is still in operation. Visit the website (www.royalacademy.org.uk), and review the brief history of the Academy and also the requirements for admission today. Have the students write a letter to Sir Joshua Reynolds, describing the institution today and explain what has survived of his original vision, what has changed, and why they think these changes reflect the world of art today.

Vocabulary

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| Academicians | artists who are elected by members of an art school, or academy, to become lifetime members and typically teachers |
| Background | the most distant part of a scene |
| Balance | the arrangement of elements to create equilibrium, typically through symmetry (an equal distribution of elements) or asymmetry (with a cluster of elements in one area of the composition) |
| Commission | to order (and agree to pay for) a work of art |
| Composition | the organization of elements in a work of art |
| Diagonal lines | lines that are at an angle |
| Discourse | the name given to lectures presented by Reynolds at regular meetings of the Royal Academy |
| Foreground | the nearest part of the scene |
| Horizontal lines | lines that run side to side |
| Masterpiece | major work of any great artist |
| Middle ground | the area between the foreground and the most distant part of a scene |
| Painting | a picture created with paint |
| Portrait | a painting or sculpture of a particular person |
| Royal Academy of Arts | a school of art founded in London in 1768 by King George III |
| Style | the characteristic expression of an individual artist, or group of artists |
| Texture | the tactile (touchable) quality of the surface of an art object |
| Vertical lines | lines that are straight up and down |