SENIOR PHASE
NARRATIVE
CREATIVE THINKING AT ABERDEEN ART GALLERY

Welcome. This pack has been put together by our experienced learning team to help you explore the building and the collection with your pupils. Every artwork tells a story, giving an insight into a particular culture, society or time in history. Exploring the collection will encourage curiosity, imagination and problem solving.

About Aberdeen Art Gallery

The opening of Aberdeen Art Gallery on 7 July 1885 was made possible by financial contributions from local businessmen including granite and flour merchants, art collectors and civic-minded individuals. The people who paid for this building also donated many of the older paintings that you see on display today. They were philanthropists who wished to give something back to the community by establishing a public venue for the enjoyment and appreciation of art.

Before your visit

You may want to begin with a picture of Aberdeen Art Gallery and ask your learners to set some questions about the gallery and what they might see there. This will help to de-mystify what an art gallery is, who it’s there for and hopefully have them looking forward to their visit.

How to use the teacher’s notes

In order to make these notes work for you, we have chosen artworks and activities that are age appropriate. Primary is divided in to Lower and Upper and Secondary is divided in to Junior and Senior phase.

This resource provides you with suggested activities and background information on selected artworks. There are six themes that will direct you to at least three gallery spaces, but you can of course look at more artworks along the way.

As these teacher’s notes will be available to download from our website, some images of the artworks are copyright protected and cannot be included in the pack.

Visit our website at www.aagm.co.uk to see images of all the artworks featured in this pack as well as many others from the collections of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums.
On arrival
Go to the welcome desk and staff there will tell you where to store your coats and bags.
They will also point out where the toilets and lifts are.
Our staff will provide you with any equipment you have booked in advance of your visit.
If you have booked our Learning Centre to use for a snack or lunch, please let our staff know. Eating and drinking in the gallery spaces is not allowed.

Around the Gallery
Explain to your learners that they must not touch any of the art on display (oily hands can damage artworks) unless a label invites them to touch.
You are welcome to sketch with pencils in the Art Gallery but please make sure your learners are creative on their paper only, not on any other surfaces!
Please supervise your pupils appropriately at all times and ask them to be considerate of other visitors.
We really hope you enjoy your visit to Aberdeen Art Gallery and we welcome any feedback on how to improve the experience for others.

THEME FOR THIS PACK: NARRATIVE
All art stems from a strong narrative. From the earliest drawings on cave walls to contemporary public art, the artist’s motivation is to share their stories and experiences. This language of art is shown throughout our collection in many ways, some are easy to interpret while others require further exploration. The narrative embedded in an artist’s work is the hook which draws the viewer in and creates a connection between the creator and the audience.
GETTING AROUND THE ART GALLERY

Ground Floor
- Cowdray Hall
- Remembrance Hall
- Sculpture Court
- Learning Centre
- Entrance

First Floor
- McBey Library
- Cowdray Hall Balcony
- Seminar Room

Second Floor
- West Terrace
- South Terrace

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SETTLER ACTIVITY

Bring the class together in the ground floor Sculpture Court

The size and needs of your class may determine how many learners are around an artwork at a time. You may want to split your class into smaller groups, with each group starting in a different area of the building.

When moving between galleries, ask learners to look out for examples of what they think is Scottish art, this could be in a variety of formats such as painting, ceramics, sculpture, drawings, prints, photography or digital media.

This is a good way to settle into critical thinking and allow learners to feel part of the gallery space.

Freeze Frame
Come together in a circle. Have a look at the space around you and think about a type of person that would visit a gallery. It could be an artist, an art student, a parent/carer with children, a school pupil, a business person, tourist or anyone you like.

Think about why people visit a gallery. What motivates them to explore artworks, the stories behind the art and the artists that created them.

Now make your way to Gallery 4: Human Presence.
Ask learners to look out for artworks that have a narrative as they move through the rooms.
Stephen Bird was born in Stoke-on-Trent, England in 1964 and has lived in Australia since 1999. Bird studied painting at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee, but his work has also been strongly influenced by the ceramic traditions of his birthplace. Bird takes decorative ceramic techniques and combines them with his imaginative and playful expressions of big artistic themes such as love, death, religious iconography and the human condition. His work has been internationally exhibited and challenges public perception of narrative in painting and pottery.

Bird has been influenced by Hindu mythology and folk art after spending some time in India. *Age of Kali* depicts a time of destruction, when humans will be released from their ego and the world will be destroyed and reborn. To people overly-attached to their physical form, she will appear fearsome but to those whose spirit is ready to be released from its human form, she will appear affectionate and compassionate. Her garland of skulls and skirt of limbs symbolise the souls she has already liberated. She holds aloft a sword and the severed head of either a demon or newly-released human soul. In her other hands she offers gifts of wisdom and insight, asking humans to renounce their earthly attachments in exchange for spiritual freedom.

The goddess Kali has been wrongly used as a symbol of sex and violence in western culture, an aspect of which we can see in Bird’s *Age of Kali*. In the same way the ritual of communion symbolically drinks the blood and eats the flesh of Jesus Christ, Kali is symbolic of the end of physical attachment and the beginning of enlightenment. With her flowing hair, full form and eyes wide open, Kali is a figure of defiance who challenges the human obsession with physical form.

**Activity for Age of Kali**

This artwork is a good way to introduce how to consider the narrative behind iconography from other cultures and how it can, at times, be misappropriated.

Although the image of Kali can appear terrifying at first, there are clues to her protection of the human soul.

Ask learners to pair off and discuss the following:

- What clues are there to show Kali as the mother of time (Kala) sent to free a person from their physical form?
- Why do you think Bird chose to make this artwork a ceramic piece? What impact does it have on the subject matter?
- What clues or symbols are there to Kali’s reputation as the goddess of destruction?
- How would you like the narrative of your own nature to be depicted in an artwork? Standing strong like the girl in Kenny Hunter’s *Feedback Loop* or in everyday objects like Callum Colvin’s *Brief Encounter*.
Calum Colvin was born in Glasgow in 1961. He studied sculpture at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee before graduating from the Royal College of Art, London in 1985. He was awarded an OBE in 2000 and is Professor of Fine Art Photography at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design. Colvin has developed a process of art which combines everyday objects and painted imagery to create photo-pieces which evoke the drama and illusion of a stage set.

He creates a large-scale still life in his studio, using furniture and bric-a-brac, which he then paints over with iconography from classical literature, pop culture and children's stories to create a tableau (motionless figures representing a scene from a story). The whole set is carefully posed and theatrically lit and photographed from a fixed perspective to capture the optical illusion. The set-pieces are photographed on film, digitized and printed onto paper or canvas so that they can be displayed as large-scale prints. These prints invite the viewer to decode the symbols and themes hidden in the artwork. Brief Encounter is a triptych of prints and with the centre print being the larger of the three, it is reminiscent of early Christian altar paintings. In Brief Encounter we can see symbols for the figure of Christ, Adam and Eve, natural evolution, Scottish national dress, comic book excerpts, classical art, childhood and love.

Colvin has said of his work ‘The visual illusions are intended to draw the viewer into a creative dialogue as the images are interpreted, touching on themes of gender, art, history and national identity.’

Activity for Brief Encounter

Don't give any information about the artwork straight away – ask learners to look closely first. They could make a viewfinder with their hands to focus on one area.

‘Notice’ not ‘know’

This can sometimes be rushed but taking time to notice and comment on the artwork removes the need for ‘right’ answers and encourages observation. Ask learners to tell you what they see – they don't have to explain their thoughts at this stage, just point out as many things as possible in the artwork.

Extend the observation

As learners point out their observations ask what they think those objects and images may symbolise. Again, there are no ‘right’ answers, just open ideas.

Background story

Once the learners are engaged and curious about the artwork, tell them a bit about the artwork and the artist. Point out that these are created in a studio and end up as large-scale photo-pieces. This will engage learners further in discussion about how an artist uses different media.

Social & cultural context

Ask learners to discuss and feedback why they think the artist made certain choices: objects, images, tone, colour and composition. Why did the artist choose this subject matter? Why is it important?
IN THE GULF THEY DREAM OF SEA AND ICE
Joyce Cairns, 1991

Joyce W Cairns was born in Edinburgh in 1947. She studied painting at Gray’s School of Art in Aberdeen and the Royal College of Art in London from 1966 to 1971. After some time spent in London she returned to Aberdeen in 1976, where she taught Drawing and Painting at Gray’s. In 2004 she retired from tutoring to focus on completing a large body of work for her collection War Tourist.

Cairns is renowned for her figurative compositions of biographical and psychological themes of war, loss and memory. Her work has been influenced by her visits to the concentration camps of Europe and her time spent in Bosnia after the civil war. Cairns also followed her father’s footsteps through Tunisia where he was a Cameron Highlander on active service during the Second World War. Her love for museums and historical artefacts helped to link together her father’s memorabilia, the places she had visited and her sense of place at Footdee, Aberdeen’s fishing community at the mouth of the harbour, to create vivid and emotive compositions. Her first major body of work came in 1984, after her mother’s death and items relating to her father’s war experience came to light. These events, combined with the metaphoric images of the harbour, sea and people of Footdee, inspired Cairns to explore her family history in the wider context of global conflict.

This allows us, the viewer, to time travel with Cairns through scenes surrounded by the sea. Cairns includes herself in her paintings as if she is the narrator or, as she calls herself, a ‘war tourist’. The thinly applied oil paint on board, almost like watercolour in places, contrasts with opaque areas to create structured and colourful forms. This painting depicts the soldiers deployed overseas during the Gulf War and how they dreamed of the cooler climates back home.

Activity for In the Gulf They Dream of Sea and Ice
Form, content, process, mood, context.

• What do you think is happening in this artwork? How has the composition been arranged?
• Has any part of the composition been focused on? Why do you think the artist has done this? What action is in the background?
• How has the artist used colour in this artwork?
• What do you think the theme of the work is? What story does this artwork tell us?
• What clues are there about Cairns’ life and her memories of her father?
• What words come to mind when looking at this artwork?
• How do the things you’ve mentioned contribute to the mood of the artwork?

Go to Gallery 14: Art of Empowerment to see different type of artwork inspired by water.
According to legend, Undine is a water nymph who becomes human when she falls in love with a man. If he is unfaithful to her she is doomed to die. An alternate version of Undine's story is that she has to marry a man and bear him a child in order to gain her soul. The character lives on in modern literature and art through such adaptations as Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*.

Carrier-Belleuse created a variety of sculptures ranging from monuments to domestic ornaments. His naturalistic style was in direct contrast to the idealisation of Neoclassicism, which favoured static idealistic poses. In Carrier-Belleuse's workshop students learned the value of making a series of sculptures, with variations, alongside unique Salon submissions. Elements from the past were combined with new technologies and the process of mass production. He was one of the founding members of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and was a tutor to the acclaimed sculptor Auguste Rodin.

Carrier-Belleuse's bronze sculpture depicts Undine's sensual nature with fleshy, sinuous curves emerging from tall water reeds. Carrier-Belleuse revives the story of Undine, which many view as antiquated, portraying the female form as natural and powerful. Her organic curves and dynamic pose make her look as if she were about to come to life. The changing views of women's bodies and advancements in sculptural techniques continue to challenge how artists depict the female form and Carrier-Belleuse's *Undine* is a fine example of the ever-evolving medium of sculpture.

**Activity for Undine**

The *Art of Empowerment* gallery is a good space to open a discussion on the depiction of the female form in visual art and how the narrative has developed since the creation of the sculpture of *Undine*.

Begin with questions relating to the artwork and life at the time.

- How does this woman seem to you on first impression? Describe her pose and expression.
- How does this artwork express the narrative of Undine?
- How does the media, scale and detail contribute to the success of the artwork?
- We can then consider what this suggests about the era and the questions it poses:
  - How could this narrative be changed to reflect women's roles in a contemporary society?
  - What aspects of this sculpture could still be relevant to women today?
  - What are your thoughts and opinions about the use of the female form in sculpture?
  - What are your thoughts and opinions about storytelling through sculpture?
Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a British poet, illustrator and painter whose work is characterised by its romantic themes and realist style. He co-founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais who, in turn, influenced William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. The Brotherhood was opposed to the Royal Academy's promotion of modern styles. Instead, they preferred the art of the late medieval and early Renaissance period, up to the time of Raphael, which was characterised by luminous colours and attention to detail. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood believed in art of a more natural realism inspired by literature and poetry, particularly dealing with love and death.

Poetry and imagery are closely linked in Rossetti's work and he often wrote sonnets to accompany his artwork. These were inspired by his muses, especially Jane Morris who was his lover and the model for Mariana. The subject of the painting is a character from Shakespeare's play, Measure for Measure. Rossetti's heroine is seen in subdued reflection after being deserted by her betrothed, Angelo. The rich colour palette adds a sense of theatre while Jane's real-life problems with her husband, the artist William Morris, provided a realistic sense of melancholy.

This artwork encapsulates the emotive subjects the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were known for. Although the Pre-Raphaelites were, at the time, trivialised and lambasted for their obsessive themes, their work and lives continue to intrigue viewers.

Activity for Mariana

Before revealing any facts about the painting ask a few speculative questions to guide learners into looking closely at the artwork. This encourages critical analysis through imaginative thinking.

- When do you think this artwork was created? 5 / 50 / 100 years ago? What clues are there to the time period – could the content be deceptive in placing it in history?
- What do you think the woman is thinking about? If she could talk to us, what do you think she would say?
- What mood do you get from the artwork? What is creating that mood, is it colour / composition / style / expression / tone?
- Why do you think Rossetti chose a play by Shakespeare as a narrative for his work?
FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Complete back at school

Inspired by the different narratives seen on their visit to Aberdeen Art Gallery, learners can create their own narrative through their chosen subject matter and resources. This can be a stand-alone exercise or inform a starting point for expressive folio work.

- Learners will produce analytical drawings and related investigative studies in response to stimuli
- Learners will analyse the impact of social, cultural and other influences on artists’ work and practice

National 5 / Higher Course Specification

Follow-up activity

This activity will take one period. Materials needed: A3 or A2 cartridge paper, tonal pencils, handwriting pens, paints (watercolour, acrylic or block paints will do). You will also need a selection of objects, either chosen by the learners or from the classroom and images chosen by the learners which mean something to them (this is optional).

- Learners are to choose three objects and their chosen image to create a visual narrative. They will create a series of quick studies in a variety of media and link them together to express a narrative.
- It is important that these are quick studies with the emphasis on developing thoughts and ideas through a narrative.
- Learners can annotate their work to analyse the visual narrative and how their choice of media, colour, tone and style can inform this.
- It may be useful for learners to reflect on the work of artists they saw on their visit and how they combine media, technique, visual elements and storytelling to create an artwork driven by narrative.
In the Gulf They Dream of Sea and Ice, Joyce Cairns, 1991. Artist © Joyce Cairns (2005)
Undine, Albert Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, 1875-1899
Mariana, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1870