

## STUDYING AMERICAN CULTURE AND EVERYDAY LIFE THROUGH ART

Studying the paintings of the artists from different centuries can give us a vivid picture of the life style of people: what they were wearing, what they were busy with, their concerns and problems.

**Key words:** paintings, critical and creative thinking, historical events.

Изучение картин художников разных веков может дать нам яркое представление о стиле жизни людей: то, что они носили, чем они занимались, их заботы и проблемы.

**Ключевые слова:** картины, критическое и творческое мышления, исторические события.

If we ask our students how often they visit art galleries, the answer will probably be ‘not often’ or even ‘two or three times’ throughout their life. But why not to bring art to our classes and use it for studying American culture. Unlike reading materials, the pieces of art have visual images which can give a vivid picture of history and people’s lifestyle.

Being a creative form of expression paintings may provoke critical and creative thinking. As every person perceps art in his own way, the same painting may be interpreted differently by different people. Even a simple question “What do you see?” can be answered in many different ways.

One more reason for using paintings during English language lessons is that paintings are authentic materials. Students may have the feeling that they are taken out of the classroom. This feeling can help students not to think about accuracy but develop fluency of speaking.

For my lesson I selected nine paintings of American painters from different centuries; starting from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and finishing with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The criteria for the paintings selection were the following: in the paintings there must be people in their common environment

leading their usual way of life, or people shown during some big historical events.

Here are the paintings and photos that were selected:

1. ‘Pilgrims Going to Church’ by George Henry Boughton
2. ‘Rapaalje Children’ by John Durand
3. ‘Home in the Woods’ by T. Cole
4. ‘Tenement Room’ by Jacob Riis
5. ‘The Picnic Grounds’ by John Sloan
6. ‘Freedom From Want’ by Norman Rockwell
7. ‘School’s Out’ by Allan Rohan Crite
8. ‘Flag-raising’ Photo by Thomas E. Franklin
9. ‘The Game’ by Deborah Hamon

The following activities may help learners to explore American culture, history, and everyday life of people.

### Activity 1

In groups of four students put the paintings and photos in chronological order. While doing this activity students use their background knowledge about the US history. After they finish doing it, one member of each group stays near the pictures; all the rest go around the classroom to see the results of the other groups. The student that stays

near his group's pictures should explain the reason for having this chronological order of the paintings when the representatives from the other groups come up to him. This activity gives the opportunity for discussion. After students have compared their results with the results of the other groups, teacher can tell what chronological order is correct.

#### Activity 2

Students are given a Handout 1 with the brief historical background of each painting but without the names of the painters. The information about the paintings and photos is given in a random order. The task for this activity is to match the pictures and the background information about the pictures. (The handouts 1 and 2 are attached at the end of the article). After students have finished doing this task and compared their result with the other groups they get a Handout 2 with the correct answers and the names of the painters.

#### Activity 3

Students work in pairs. They are asked to choose one of the paintings and discuss the following questions:

- a) What do you see?
- b) What are the people doing?
- c) How are they dressed?
- d) What was their everyday life like?

While doing this activity students pay closer attention to the details. The knowledge of the historical background helps them to imagine how people were living at a definite period of time. Art gives a great opportunity for discussion here.

#### Activity 4

Students work in pairs. They are to choose one of the characters from any of the paintings and to tell about his/her usual day from the point of view of this character.

The final question to discuss during this lesson may be the following: If you were to live in one of the previous centuries, which one would you prefer to live in? Why?

These creative and critical thinking activities involve students' imagination.

As a follow up activity students are suggested to find in the Internet and print out a painting that they like and write down brief background information about it to share with their classmates.

#### Conclusion

The preparation for this lesson, I mean the selection process of the paintings, may be time-consuming for a teacher, but there are many student benefits to using art in the English

language classroom. Some of these benefits may be the following: development of students' creativity, imagination, and critical thinking; increased motivation to speak fluently; increased confidence during discussion. The benefit in language studying is that all four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) are developed. One more advantage of using paintings in the classroom is that students can experience the pleasure of art perception which may develop their inquisitiveness and desire to see some more pieces of art.

#### Handout 1

This image looks like a contemporary view of an athletic girl living in a middle class suburb. She is not practicing basketball with friends, she is alone. It could possibly represent the interpersonal skills that young people lack today because they are addicted to their phones and computers.

This artist was one of the most prolific artists in early American history. His work represents the concept of manifest destiny and Americans' desire to conquer the "wild" west of North America. Throughout the 19th century Americans ventured west in search of wealth and land.

The Pilgrims were devoted to their church and attended every week, no matter the weather, in North America. Despite their unshakable faith, they were always wary of unfriendly Native Americans who also resided in the area. The Pilgrims were considered a strongly paternalistic society.

This image represents the lower and middle classes celebrating over Memorial Day. This was a time when these classes did not benefit from unions and worked 6 to 7 days per week, 12-16 hours per day, to make ends meet. Thus, any holiday was cause for a major celebration.

An American photographer best known for his photograph 'Raising the Flag at Ground Zero', which depicts firefighters raising the American flag at the World Trade Center after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The flag-raising photo was made shortly after 5 p.m. on September 11, 2001. He was standing under a pedestrian walkway across the West Side Highway, which connected the World Trade Center to the World Financial Center at the northwest corner.

This image was created by a Massachusetts artist who wanted to tell the story of the African American during segregated times. Although the American Civil War ended slavery in the 1860s, it

wasn't until the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that public schools were desegregated.

This artist is one of the key figures in the Progressive Era at the turn of the 20th century. His photographs in his book, *How the Other Half Lives*, influenced politicians to provide more programs for immigrants and the poverty-stricken.

This image from the 1700s exhibits the early wealth in the British colonies. These children were born to a wealthy merchant from New York. The wealth in the northern colonies developed the modern cities like Boston, New York and Philadelphia. The southern colonies' wealth were much different; mostly from large plantations.

This image is one in a series of four that this artist produced in 1943. This particular painting represents "Freedom From Want." The other three are freedom from fear, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The concepts were taken from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's State of the Union address in 1941, the year the U.S. got involved in World War II.

#### Handout 2

*Pilgrims Going to Church*, George Henry Boughton

The Pilgrims were devoted to their church and attended every week, no matter the weather, in North America. Despite their unshakable faith, they were always wary of unfriendly Native Americans who also resided in the area. The Pilgrims were considered a strongly paternalistic society.

*Four Freedoms, Freedom From Want*, Norman Rockwell

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*School's out, 1936*, Allan Rohan Crite

This image was created by a Massachusetts artist who wanted to tell the story of the African American during segregated times. Although the American Civil War ended slavery in the 1860s, it wasn't until the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that public schools were desegregated.

*The Game, 2008*, Deborah Hamon

This image looks like a contemporary view of an athletic girl living in a middle class suburb. She is not practicing basketball with friends, she is alone. It could possibly represent the interpersonal skills that young people lack today because they are addicted to their phones and computers.

*Raising the Flag at Ground Zero*, Thomas E. Franklin (born 1966)

An American photographer best known for his photograph *Raising the Flag at Ground Zero*, which depicts firefighters raising the American flag at the World Trade Center after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The flag-raising photo was made shortly after 5 p.m. on September 11, 2001. He was standing under a pedestrian walkway across the West Side Highway, which connected the World Trade Center to the World Financial Center at the northwest corner.

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