

Preserving Identities through Art

Introduction

This ten-day unit, targeted to secondary school students, spotlights two women artists of the Holocaust: Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and Charlotte Salomon. In December 1942, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis was ordered to Terezin (Theresienstadt), a ghetto internment camp run by Nazis. While there, she realized that artistic expression was a vehicle to balance the chaos and horror of concentration camp life. Using hoarded materials such as cardboard, scraps of paper, and office forms, Friedl trained over six hundred children at Terezin in art fundamentals freeing the children to expose their feelings in the art and poetry they created under her care. Raja Engländerová, one of Friedl's students who survived, recalled, "I remember Mrs. Brandeis as a tender, highly intelligent woman, who managed - for some hours every week - to create a fairy world for us in Terezin..." The caretaking and nurturing skills of Jewish women such as Friedl Dicker-Brandeis played an important part during the Holocaust by alleviating some of the daily struggle and strife. Dicker-Brandeis used artwork to preserve and cherish the individual in a moment in time.

Under her tutelage, the children of Terezin created about five thousand artistic expressions. Dicker-Brandeis was deported to Auschwitz on October 6, 1944 and died in Birkenau, but her students' artwork from Terezin has survived. Packaged in two suitcases and entrusted to a former student of the artist, the drawings were eventually exhibited and have been seen by millions of people throughout the world.

The book *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* edited by Hana Volavkova includes many of the drawings and poems created by the children of Terezin. Nurtured, guided,

and instructed by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and other teachers, the children of Terezin challenged the Nazis' efforts to reduce their identities to anonymity. Instead, they used art to preserve, honor, and cherish their lives and their sense of selfhood.

Life? Or Theatre?: A Play With Music was created by German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon while living in exile in France during World War II. It is composed of 769 gouache (opaque watercolor) paintings. Salomon's work combines painting with music and text. It interprets the suicides of the women in her family as evidence of the difficulty of being a woman in the pre-war period. Despite Nazi oppression, despite exile to France, Charlotte Salomon used painting as a strategy to save her own life, as well as restoring life to her mother, grandmother, aunt and mother's cousin by portraying the significance of their lives as well as their deaths.

Born in Berlin on April 16, 1917, Charlotte Salomon was the only daughter of a prominent surgeon, Albert Salomon, and his wife, Franziska Grunwald. Charlotte fled Berlin for the French Riviera in 1939, and she lived there for three years as a refugee. She married and was four months pregnant with her first child when, in October 1943, she was deported. She died in Auschwitz on October 10, 1943; she was probably gassed within one hour of stepping off the train.

During her years of exile, Salomon painted 1,325 notebook-sized gouaches; from these, she selected 769 paintings, arranged them into acts and scenes, and titled them ***Life? Or Theatre?: A Play With Music***. Her work is a key to her existence and a testament to the power of memory and survival. As she was about to be deported, Charlotte bundled up ***Life? Or Theatre?: A Play With Music*** and gave the package to her friend, Dr. Moridis, a local physician.

Learning Goals

- Students will learn about Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and Charlotte Salomon by relating the events of their lives to the chronology.
- Students will comprehend the importance of art by discussing art as documentation, art as escape from reality, and art as a connection with the outside world.
- Students will apply their knowledge about technology, such as the software program Photoshop, by manipulating information while maintaining the cultural and historical context of a piece of art.
- Students will analyze the paintings of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, Charlotte Salomon, and the children of Terezin by examining the time period and its effect on the artists.
- Students will achieve synthesis of their knowledge of the artists and the Holocaust by creating a story called “My Perspective,” in which they will place themselves into a work of art by Dicker-Brandeis, Salomon or the Terezin children, and then detail the story behind the picture.
- Students will evaluate the unit by assessing the connections they can make between themselves and the artists.

Timeline

Pre-discussion activities

1-2 days

Web research on the artists and the Holocaust

Research/ Study of the art selections 2 days

Student selection of the painting from ***I Never Saw Another Butterfly.***

Discussion of the mood in the painting and climate of the Holocaust era

Student photographs 1 day

Placement in the painting using Photoshop

Essay Development 2-3 days

Writing “My Perspective”

Class presentations 2 days

“My Perspective”

Further Enrichment Activities

Listen to and discuss Charles Davidson’s CD, I Never Saw Another Butterfly.

View and discuss the documentary film The Journey of Butterfly, directed by Robert E. Frye.

Preserving Identities Through Art

Name: _____

Painting Analysis Worksheet

Artist:

Title of painting: _____

Using the following guide questions, relate your impressions of the artwork you have chosen to connect with in “My Perspective.”

What immediate reactions do you have when you initially view this painting?

Describe all the details in the painting.

What art techniques, such as texture, shape, and color, did the artist employ?

What mood does the painting render to the viewer? What makes you feel this way about the painting?

Using the information you have learned about the artist and the Holocaust, what message do you think the artist is trying to relay to the viewer?

What mood will you depict when you place yourself in the painting? Where will you place yourself in the canvas? Why?

Teacher Directions: “My Perspective”

Before you photograph each student, it is important that you brainstorm and discuss the following considerations:

What would it be like to be transported into a painting?

Why would it be important that you have some knowledge of the history of the era of the painting?

How would it help to know something about the beliefs and morals of the people who existed during the time period your painting represents?

How can you tell the mood of a painting?

What facial expressions convey various moods?

What mood will each student convey in the painting he or she has chosen?

What does the position of the details in a painting tell the viewer?

Where will each student place himself or herself in the painting?

Photoshop

After taking each student’s photograph, the Photoshop graphics software can be used to meld the photograph of the student into the chosen artwork of Charlotte Salomon, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, or the children of Terezin.

Name: _____

“My Perspective”

Artists relate messages. Write the message that your painting is trying to convey by creating a fictional piece of writing in which you will share “My Perspective.” Imagine what you are doing in the scene, while remaining historically accurate to the time period of the painting. Use the notes you have compiled on the Painting Analysis Worksheet as a guide for expressing the tone and mood you want your reader to experience as they share your connection with the artist and the painting.

Name: _____

Assessment

Introduction

1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4

Story development and details

1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4

Usage

1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4

Spelling and punctuation

1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4

Conclusion

1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4

Total points: _____

Grade: _____

Comments:

Grading:

23-25: A; 20-22: B; 18-19: C; 15-17: D; 14 and below: F