

THE REAL SPIRIT WITHIN EXPRESSIONISTIC PORTRAITS

ART AND SOCIAL STUDIES

GRADE LEVEL: 6–12

BASED ON

Georges Rouault, *The Clown*, 1918–22, Bequest of Mary E. Johnston, 1967.1120

OBJECTIVES

Students will learn about the art and life of Frenchman Georges Rouault as they examine the Museum's painting *The Clown*.

Students will recall influences on art and culture in Europe in the early twentieth century, including World War I and World War II.

Students will learn about the Nazi campaign against modern art, including the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937.

Students will apply Rouault's stylistic black outlines, dynamic colors, and geometric shapes as they attempt to capture the "inner spirit" of an individual.

VOCABULARY

Expressionist
Realism
avante-garde
National Socialists or Nazis
Degenerate Art

MATERIALS

9 x 12 in. mat board pencil
India ink glue
chalk or oil pastels

CONCEPT

"Everything you do is religious, even your clowns." ~From a letter to Rouault by his friend and poet, Andre Soares (Courthion, p. 348)

As students study Georges Rouault, they will learn about one of the true masters of modern art. Despite living in France through the Prussian War, World War I, and World War II, Rouault did not focus on the war itself in his artwork. Instead, he painted emotional images of Christ, biblical scenes, and portraits of "God's children" (clowns, prostitutes, and circus performers) surviving in a decadent modern society. Ironically, the art of this religious artist would be classified as degenerate by the "purity" seeking Nazis. In the Museum's painting *The Clown*, Rouault demonstrates his technique of encasing color in bold, black lines, echoing his early training as a stained-glass artisan. Through the figure's symmetrical placement, cradled arms, closed eyes, and simplified geometric forms, the subject seems to suppress his own sorrow in a moment of divine reverence. Using *The Clown* as an example, students will create an expressionistic portrait, which attempts to capture the "inner spirit" of an individual.

INTRODUCTION

Show students a picture of *The Clown* by Georges Rouault. Ask them, *What do you think the artist was trying to communicate in this painting?* Explain that the French painter of this piece lived through three conflicts with Germany: The Prussian War, World War I, and World War II. Briefly discuss the causes that led to these wars. Explain that the casualties of war included the poor, children, women, and outcasts of society.

Return to the photo of *The Clown*, which was painted at the end of World War I (1918–1922). Explain to students that Rouault was a religious man, who often painted portraits of people struggling to survive in a world filled with manmade evils. Instead of painting the wars around him, he used dynamic line, bold color, and geometric shapes to express the real spirit of people. "His kind of realism is in no way realism of material appearance; it is realism of the spiritual significance of what exists (and moves, and suffers, and loves and kills)." (Maritain, p. 12) Rouault believed that "we are all more or less clowns", and that the "cheap pathos of the life of a clown is raised to a perennial motif of superior sadness... the sadness of an individual living on the outskirts of the human community." (Cinotti, p. 20)

Provide students with information about the Nazis' Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937 in Munich. Discuss why the Nazis would classify Rouault's *The Clown* as degenerate.

CLASS EXPERIENCE

Visit http://cincinnatiartmuseum.org/greatart/provence_listofworks_r.shtml for other Georges Rouault works in the Museum.

PROCEDURE

1. On mat board or heavy construction paper, use a pencil to lightly sketch the outline of an individual, focusing on the head, shoulders, and arms. Using geometric shapes, such as circles, ovals, triangles, and squares, draw the face and body.
2. Next, trace over the lines with a mixture of glue and India ink. Allow drawing to dry completely.
3. Now, fill in the geometric shapes with layers of chalk or oil pastels. Don't be afraid to mix or blend colors to capture the inner spirit of the person.
4. Add color to the background to finish the piece.
5. When completed, the teacher (or older students) will spray chalk pastel drawings with hairspray or a workable fixative. A high gloss finish can be used for oil pastels.
6. Create an exhibition of your expressionistic drawings and then discuss, which pieces the Nazis might have selected for their degenerate art exhibition.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. In 1944, Anne Frank wrote in her diary, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart." How does her opinion of humanity compare to that of Germany's Third Reich? How does her statement compare to Rouault's religious philosophy?
2. Rouault's grandfather Alexandre Champdavoine greatly admired the works of Daumier, Courbet, and Manet. Could Rouault's work be classified as Realism? Now, compare *The Clown* to the Museum's *Seated Woman* by Alexej von Jawlensky and *Dodo with a Large Fan* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. What similarities can you find to these Expressionist pieces?
3. In the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937, much of the art was displayed without frames, hung crookedly near photos of disfigured individuals and included slanderous comments by Nazi officials. What were the Nazis trying to achieve by displaying the art in this manner? Did they succeed?
4. In 1989, Cincinnati's Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition included explicit photographs labeled "pornographic" by some city officials. How did this controversy, and the subsequent publicity, affect attendance at the exhibition? Compare this attempt at censorship to the Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich.

ASSESSMENT

Students will recall influences on Rouault's art and culture, including World War I and World War II. They will create an Expressionistic portrait of a person, attempting to capture the spirit of the individual by using black lines, dynamic colors, and geometric shapes like Rouault. As an extension, students may create their own exhibition of expressionistic portraits and discuss which pieces might have included in the Degenerate Art exhibition.

REFERENCES

- Barron, Stephanie. *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991.
- Cinotti, Mia. *Rouault*. Navara, Italy: Uffici Press, 1954.
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- Maritain, Jacques. *Georges Rouault*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962.
- Stewart, Gail B. *Hitler's Reich*. San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1994.
- Thompson, Wayne C. *Western Europe*. Harper Ferry: Stryker-Post Publications, WV, 2004.

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