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Engine House and Bunkers, 1934
August Mecklem

INDUSTRY

Writing Descriptive Poems about Trains

Arts Integration: Visual Arts and English/Language Arts

Target Audience: Grades 4-12

Description: Students respond to a work of art, writing poetry based on the observations they make.

Curricular Objectives:
Visual Arts: The student assesses, evaluates and responds to characteristics of art.
English/Language Arts: The student develops and demonstrates creative writing.
The student will used prewriting strategies to generate ideas and formulate a plan.

Lesson Logistics:
Materials: Image by Austin Mecklem: *Engine House and Bunkers,* 1934
http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=17274

Paper and pen or pencil
Poem worksheet(s)

Space: Classroom (no particular arrangement)

Vocabulary:
Visual Arts: setting, foreground

English/Language Arts: cinquain (a five line poem that does not rhyme), triplet (a three line poem that rhymes), simile, verb, noun, adjective
Ekphrastic poetry (poetry inspired by an artwork)

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Social Studies/History: Engine house, bunker (tanks for fuel storage), tarriers (railroad workers who drill)

Lesson Strategy:

Starting the Lesson:

- What do you feel when you hear a train whistle or watch a train going by?
- Many of us think fondly of the railroad, so much so that some people build model train sets at home.
- We usually see trains traveling down the track. In his painting, Austin Mecklem shows some of the operational aspects of running a railroad that we don't normally see.

Building the Learning Experiences:

- Begin exploring Mecklem's painting by making observations about the work. To begin, these observations should be statements of fact, not interpretation. Ask, "What do you see?" As students respond, follow up by asking, "What makes you say that?" Encourage the students to find evidence in the art that supports the main idea. Then ask, "What else do you see?" to help develop observation skills. Often factual observations lead to interpretation. Some additional questions to consider asking that prompt interpretation are:
    - What is the setting for this painting?
    - What did the artist put in the foreground of this painting? Why do you think he did that?
    - What did the artist do to direct our eyes toward the locomotive?
    - What is the mood of this painting? What did the artist do to create that feeling?
    - How does the artist show the importance of industry? Why do you think the railroad is located so near factories?

Elementary Schools

- After discussing the painting, ask students to write a poem about the painting. Divide students into pairs, and give each pair the Poem Worksheet for cinquains and triplets found on pages eight and nine . You may assign both kinds of poems, or choose one or the other to complete. A cinquain is a five line poem that does not rhyme. A triplet is a three line poem that does rhyme. Sample poems are provided on the worksheet. As a pre-writing strategy, have students fill out the top descriptive portion of the worksheet together, drawing on the previous discussion of the painting. Their descriptions should be helpful in writing the poems.
- When the students finish writing their poems, have them select one to share with the class. Discuss how the poem reflects what is observed in the painting.

Secondary Schools

- As you discuss *Engine House and Bunkers*, have the students take notes on the observation worksheet, writing key ideas and phrases for later use in writing a poem.
- Ask students to look at the painting independently and add additional information to their observations on the Poem Worksheet provided on page ten. Then ask them to circle the words that are the most meaningful and might work in a poem.

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- Review some of the techniques that poets use, such as personification (seen in the Emily Dickinson poem "The Railway Train" referenced in the "On Another Day" section), metaphor, and simile. Other techniques, such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, and repetition of phrases can also be helpful.
- Then have the students write a ten line Ekphrastic poem (which is a poem inspired by an artwork). It can be a free verse poem, or one that rhymes. Some strategies for writing this kind of poetry are:
    - Write about your experience looking at the artwork, but try not to use the word painting or artwork.
    - Approach the poem as if two people are discussing it.
    - Have the elements in the artwork talk to each other (building to building, color to color, etc.)
    - Write about what you think might be happening here, or what might have happened before this moment, or after.
    - Write a poem of questions. For example, you might ask the artist questions such as, Why did you make the weather gray? Were you listening to train whistles when you wrote this? Are you angry about the pollution from factories?
- When the students finish writing their poems, select some to share with the class. Discuss how the poem reflects what is observed in the painting.

Assessment:

- Students are able to write a poem that reflects the mood or meaning of the Mecklem's *Engine House and Bunkers.*

Summary:

- Artists tell stories with visual pictures. Poets use words to help draw visual pictures in the reader's mind.

Documentation:

In English/Language Arts, we wrote cinquains and triplets about trains.

or

In English/Language Arts we wrote Ekphrastic poetry, which is poetry inspired by an artwork.

Read what we thought!

Post a reproduction of Mecklem's painting along with poems that describe the painting

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Social Studies/History Extensions:
All Schools

Analyzing Visual Images
The exhibition features many paintings with trains. Looking at all of them helps illuminate the purpose of railroads. Compare and contrast the different paintings on the list below. Think about what the intent of the artist was in these paintings. In which painting is the railroad the main feature? In which painting is the railroad a minor part of the story? Why is the railroad included if it is relatively unimportant to the composition of the picture? Use the table on page eleven for your comparisons.

Arnold Ness Klagstad, *Archer Daniels Midland Elevator*
http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=13817

Dewey Albinson, *Northern Minnesota Mine*
http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=215

Carl Redin, *A Madrid Coal Mine, New Mexico*
http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=20644

Karl Fortess, *Island Dock Yard*
http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=8486

Elementary Schools

Compare and Contrast Literature
- A folktale is usually a fictional story about an ordinary person with an extraordinary talent or skill. "John Henry" is a folktale about a man who worked on the railroad. John Henry swung a hammer very fast, and suggested that he could work faster than a new steam drill. Henry won the race but his heart gave out after the competition. New research suggests that John Henry was a real person who worked on the railroad while he was a prisoner in Virginia. This research is shared in *Ain't Nothing but a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry* by Scott Reynolds Nelson. Compare Nelson's information to the traditional story about John Henry, told in the Caldecott Award winning book, *John Henry,* by Julius Lester and illustrated by Jerry Pinckney. What is different about the versions of the story? Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the two versions. Which version is probably closer to the truth? Why do you think so?

Critical Thinking and Analysis
- Trains affected the lives of many different types of people. Some people were for the railroad, some people did everything they could to stop it, some people helped build it. Consider the impact of the railroad on the following people: pioneers moving west, gold miners, military men, Plains Indians, Chinese railroad workers, cattle ranchers, entrepreneurs, farmers, and the federal government. What do you think their attitudes would be? Why?

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Research

- Research and report on the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. The Central Pacific and Union Pacific companies were racing each other to see who could complete the most miles. They were paid $48,000 a mile for the work they completed, so each wanted to build the most possible miles. Who won? The Union Pacific company started from Council Bluffs, Iowa and worked westward. The Central Pacific started in Sacramento, California, and worked eastward. What kind of territory did they cover? What kind of problems did they encounter? How was the completion of the transcontinental railroad celebrated? Create a timeline that shows their progress and notes the challenges they faced.

Secondary Schools

Research

- Railroad usage dropped after 1920 as automobiles and airplanes became alternative ways of moving people and goods. The Great Depression further impacted the economic health of railroads. There were bright spots in the 1930s, however, as streamliners were introduced. Research what a streamliner is, and how it impacted railroads.
- Research the impact of the transcontinental railroad. What were the positive and negative results of building this line? Of trains moving people and goods from coast to coast?
- The Transcontinental railroad was built primarily by immigrants. In the East, many Irish immigrants were employed, while in the West, Chinese immigrants were the primary workers. Research the kind of work that was required to construct the railroad. What were the working conditions, pay scales, benefits, etc? How were the Chinese and Irish treated in comparison to non-immigrant workers? How did conditions differ at the Central Pacific and Union Pacific companies?

Create a Plan

- Today thousands of miles of railroad track have been abandoned as trucking and airplanes carry more freight and automobiles carry more people. Research the constructive uses that are being found for these miles of empty track. Create a plan for what to do with abandoned tracks in Central Florida. You can find information about Rails to Trails programs at http://www.railstotrails.org/ourwork/wherewework/floridaandsoutheast/index.html

Analyze

- Florida is currently investigating adding rail lines for high speed passenger trains that would go between cities and commuter rail. Is this a good idea or not? Why do you think so? What other transportation options are there? Draw up a plan that you think would serve the State's growing need for viable transportation, keeping in mind the nation's long range goal of cutting back on the use of fossil fuel, and the debate about what regions need enhanced transportation services.

Arts Experiences for Another Day:

Elementary Schools

Making Comparisons with Music and Visual Arts

- A famous train wreck was immortalized by Thomas Hart Benton in his *Wreck of the Ole '97,* 1943. http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_ttlSBKNDLqA/TUbgmioFScI/AAAAAAAAAEo/DvQLYrx8CV4/s1600/hn0829_102.JPG. The painting was based on a 1923 ballad about the crash. Listen to a 1925 recording of this song by Kelly Harrell doing the vocal part and Henry Whitter on guitar at this website: http://www.blueridgeinstitute.org/ballads/old97song.html. (The lyrics are also available here.) How does Benton's painting compare with the story the ballad tells?

Making Comparisons using Music

- Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Hank Williams and Johnny Cash have all recorded *Wreck of the Ole '97.* Compare and contrast one of their recordings to the one by Harrell and Whitter. What changed? Which interpretation do you prefer? Why?

Describing Music

- Listen to the ballad of John Henry by as sung by Mississippi Fred McDowell. You can watch him play at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54GNI2K3-ec&feature=related. How would you describe the song? Is it sad or upbeat? What makes it sound that way? One version of the lyrics can be found here: http://www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/folk.html

Describe and Illustrate

- In the late 1800s, artist Thomas Moran created many paintings of Castle Butte in Wyoming http://www.omart.org/collections/american-art-1945-2/thomas-moran-castle-butte and George Inness painted *Lackawanna Valley,* 1855, a Pennsylvania scene. http://faculty.smu.edu/sweisenb/Inness,%20The%20Lackawanna%20Valley,%201855.jpg These two artists created paintings as advertisements for railways. What kind of advertisement could you create that would entice people to ride the railroads in 1934? Write descriptive copy to accompany your illustration.

Compare and Contrast Paintings

- Many artists painted trains. Just five years after Mecklem painted *Engine House and Bunkers,* Charles Sheeler painted *Rolling Power,* which focuses on the running gear of a locomotive that could haul passenger cars at speeds up to 100 mph. http://www.smith.edu/ams/sheeler.html Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the two paintings.

Secondary Schools

Creative Writing Analysis

- Read Emily Dickinson's poem XVII, (The Railway Train). How does she use personification? What is her attitude about trains? The poem is at http://www.cyclopspress.com/emilydickinson.htm.

Critical Thinking using Visual Arts

- Austin Mecklem was one of a number of artists who painted what was called the American scene.

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Look at paintings by the following artists featured in the exhibition. How do they reflect the nature of America in 1930s? Have students find the images by doing a collection search at http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/. (Type the name of the artist and title of the painting in the appropriate boxes.)

Sam Berman, *River Front*
Ilya Bolotowsky, *In the Barber Shop*
Leo Breslau, *Plowing*
Tyrone Comfort, *Gold is Where You Find It*
Julia Eckel, *Radio Broadcast*
Lily Furedi, *Subway*
Martin Hennings, *Homeward Bound*
Millard Sheets, *Tenement Flats*
Ray Strong, *Golden Gate Bridge*
Agnes Tait, *Skating in Central Park*

Reflect and Draw

- Anne Prentice Wagner wrote in the catalogue for the exhibition that paintings done by artists involved in the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) "told us who we were, who we had been, and who we might become." [i] Reflecting on Wagner's statement, draw a scene with the theme of industry, work, or labor that shows something about the character of the American people either then (1934) or now.

Create a Storyboard

- There are many songs about the railroad. The rhythmic nature of the songs fit the rhythm of the work, which might be lining the track, pounding steel, or drilling. "Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill" is a song that reveals a great deal about the relationship between the crew of working men and the boss. (Tarriers are workers who blast through rock.) "Take this Hammer" has associations with prison work gangs, but railroad crews that drove steel adapted it; with each "huh!" they would hit the steel nail with their hammer. Installing or replacing heavy steel rails required the rail to be lined up and forced into position with crowbars. "Linin' the Track" helped synchronize the work. "Poor Paddy Works on the Railway" focuses on the feelings of weariness felt by the Irish immigrants who worked on the railroads. (See the Resources section at the end of the lesson for websites that have the lyrics for these songs.) Create a storyboard to illustrate what happens in the song. Then write a storyline that explains the history of what is happening in each drawing.

Create Lyrics

- Write your own work song. You might consider using a song you already know and changing the lyrics, or writing something entirely new. Think about how the rhythm of the song reflects the rhythm of the work you describe. Which lyrics will you emphasize?

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POEM WORKSHEET: A Cinquain and Triplet Inspired by *Engine House and Bunkers,* 1934 by Austin Mecklem

Name_____ **Grade/Session**_____

Artworks can inspire feelings that can be difficult to express. Writers use poetry as a way of sharing *feelings* about what they see. They paint pictures with their words.

Before you write, **look** at ***Engine House and Bunkers,*** 1934 by Austin Mecklem. List some descriptive words for:

The setting (where is this place) _____

The action (what is happening) _____

The mood (how it would feel if you were in this place) _____

A **cinquain** is a five-line poem that does not rhyme. Here is an example.

Engine
Large, black
Puffing, chugging, chomping
Like a horse going back to the barn
Locomotive

Write a cinquain about ***Engine House and Bunkers*** on the lines below using the parts of speech indicated. You might find it helpful to use some of the descriptive words you listed above.

One noun _____

Two adjectives _____

Three verbs ending with "-ing" _____

Simile (a comparison that uses *as* or *like*) _____

Synonym for the word on line one _____

Now title your poem.

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A **triplet** is a three line poem that rhymes. Here is an example.

Locomotives, black and old
Puff into the engine house as they are told.
I wonder what secrets they hold.

Write a triplet about ***Engine House and Bunkers***:

_____

_____

_____

Now that you have written two poems, choose one to share with the class.

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POEM WORKSHEET: Ekphrastic Poetry Inspired by *Engine House and Bunkers,* 1934 by Austin Mecklem

Name_____ **Grade/Session**_____

Artworks can inspire feelings that can be difficult to express. Writers use poetry as a way of sharing *feelings* about what they see. They paint pictures with their words.

Before you write, **look** at the image of the painting.
Write down the first words you think of when you see this painting. _____
_____
_____

Describe the setting; what color are the buildings? How many buildings are there? What can you see around you? What surrounds the train yard? What time of day do you think it is? _____
_____
_____
_____

What is happening in the train yard? Outside the train yard? _____
_____
_____
_____

What might have happened before or after the moment captured in the painting? _____
_____
_____

If you were in this place, what would you hear? Smell? Feel? _____
_____
_____

What is the mood of the painting? (How it would feel if you walked into this train yard?)
_____
_____
_____

What is the main idea of this painting? _____
_____
_____

Review what you wrote. Circle words and phrases that might be appropriate for a poem about this painting. You want to choose words and phrases that will help paint of picture of what you see and feel.

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COMPARE AND CONTRAST TRAIN PAINTINGS

Engine House and Bunkers, 1934 Arthur Mecklem	*Archer Daniels Midland Elevator,* 1934 Arnold Klagstad	*Northern Minnesota Mine,* 1934 Dewey Albinson	*A Madrid Coal Mine, New Mexico*, 1934 Carl Redin	*Island Dock Yard*, 1934 Karl Fortess

↘ ↘ ↓ ↙ ↙

HOW ALIKE?

HOW DIFFERENT?

Engine House and Bunkers	***Archer Daniels Midland Elevator***	***Northern Minnesota Mine***	***A Madrid Coal Mine***	***Island Dock Yard***

Resources:

Railroad History:

An overview of railroad history is available here: http://www.american-rails.com/railroad-history.html

Music:

Lyrics for the railroad songs can be found at these websites:

"Poor Paddy Works on the Railway" http://ingeb.org/songs/oineight.html

"Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drill,_Ye_Tarriers,_Drill

"Take this Hammer" http://www.lyricsvip.com/Harry-Manx/Take-This-Hammer-Lyrics.html

"Linin' the Track" http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johndenver/liningtrack.html

(Note: There is speculation that the line about Eloise is incorrect; southern dialect for "see how we'se gonna line that track" was probably misunderstood.)
This song can be ordered for $8.95 from the Library of Congress archive of folk recordings. http://www.loc.gov/folklife/folkcat.html#AFSL61. See the section of Railroad Songs and Ballads.

You can see many of the songs performed on YouTube. The lyrics many not always be the same, but you will get a sense of the melody and rhythm of each song.

"Classic Railroad Songs" by Smithsonian Folkways is available from Amazon.com.**Books:**

Ain't Nothing but a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry by Scott Reynolds Nelson suggests that John Henry was a real, not fictional person.

John Henry, by Julius Lester and illustrated by Jerry Pinckney is a Caldecott Award winning book that tells the traditional fictional tale of John Henry. The book is good for more elementary readers.

John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend by Scott Reynolds Nelson provides new research about who John Henry really was. This is a secondary level book.

Photo Credit from page 1:

Engine House and Bunkers, 1934
Austin Mecklem
Born: Colfax, Washington 1894
Died: Kingston, New York 1951
oil on canvas 38 x 50 1/4 in. (96.5 x 127.6 cm.)
Smithsonian American Art Museum Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor
1964.1.46

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[i] Wagner, Anne Prentice. *1934: A New Deal for Artists.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 17.