

# ART OF SEEING ART: VARUJAN BOGHOSIAN

Teacher Resource: 6th-8th Grades



Varujan Boghosian (American, born 1926), *Swan and Serpent (detail)*, collage, 2011. Lent by Artist

This resource will allow you to lead your students through close looking exercises to enable them to describe, analyze, and interpret what they see in *Serpent + Swan* (2011) by Varujan Boghosian (American, b. 1926).

This approach to looking at art is based on the Art of Seeing Art method created by the Toledo Museum of Art. It is discussion-based and will help you and your students explore works of art in the Museum's special exhibition *Varujan Boghosian* (VAR-zhan Bo-GO-zhen), on view at the Museum from December 13, 2013–May 25, 2014.

### **How to use this resource:**

- Print out the document for yourself.
- Read through the document carefully as you look at the image of the work of art.
- When you are ready to engage your class, project the image of the work of art on a screen in your classroom using an LCD projector. Use the questions provided below to lead the discussion.

This exercise is meant for use in the classroom. There is no substitute for seeing the real work of art in the exhibition at the Toledo Museum of Art. We are open Tuesday and Wednesday 10 A.M.–4 P.M., Thursday and Friday 10 A.M.–9 P.M., Saturday 10 A.M.–5 P.M., and Sunday noon–5 P.M. and Docent-led tours are available free of charge.

Visit <http://www.toledomuseum.org/learn/tours/> to schedule.

### **Common Core Standards related to Visual Literacy:**

The Common Core State Standards were designed to help teachers provide knowledge and foster skills in students that are necessary in order for them to successfully navigate the contemporary world. The following Common Core State Standards relating to Visual Literacy are covered in this lesson.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7:** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.1

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2:** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

## **Ohio State Standards:**

**Grade Seven Social Studies: Content Standard 2:** The civilizations that developed in Greece and Rome had an enduring impact on later civilizations. This legacy includes governance and law, engineering and technology, art and architecture, as well as literature and history.

## **Background Information:**

This background information will give you some context for the work of art you will be discussing with your students. We suggest not sharing this information with your students until after they have engaged in close looking and describing. Waiting to share this contextual information allows the students to think creatively about the image and fosters critical thinking.

Varujan Boghosian has said, “I work with the mystery of myth and the ambiguity of form.” He often draws on symbols from mythology, literature and history in his work. One myth that Boghosian frequently references is the Greek myth of Orpheus.

Orpheus was the greatest poet and musician of Greek myth. His songs could charm wild beasts and move the trees and rocks. Orpheus used his music to save Jason and the Argonauts by preventing the crew from hearing the Siren’s deadly song.

Orpheus loved his wife Eurydice very much. When she was killed by a serpent bite, he was distraught and traveled into the Underworld to bring her back. Orpheus’s songs were so beautiful that Hades, the lord of the dead, agreed to let him bring Eurydice back to the world of the living on one condition: Orpheus must not look back at Eurydice until both were back on the surface. As Orpheus stepped out of the cave into the light of day, he forgot himself and looked back at Eurydice, but she had not yet crossed out of the Underworld and was pulled back into the darkness, lost to him forever.

The Greeks believed that after his death, Orpheus was placed in the sky as the constellation Cygnus (the swan).

## **Vocabulary:**

**Collage:** a work of art created by adhering various different materials such as photographs and pieces of paper or fabric onto a backing.

**Orpheus (OR-fee-uhs):** The greatest poet and musician of Greek myth.

**Eurydice (yoo-RID-uh-see):** The wife of Orpheus.

# Close Looking

## Describe

Before telling them any information such as the name of the artist or title of the work, ask your students to look carefully. Have them look closely for at least three minutes. This close looking allows students the time to observe details and explore the image beyond their initial reaction to it.

Ask the students to describe what they see. Start the questioning with broad, open-ended questions with attention to the Elements of Art.

What is going on in this work of art?

Where do you see lines in this image?

Where do you see smooth lines? Where do you see jagged or rough lines?

Where do you see lines used to show fine details? Where do you see thick lines?

Compare the use of horizontal, vertical and curved lines in the image. How are these types of lines used in the collage?

Continue to guide your students' eyes around the work of art with more close looking and describing questions, such as:

What images do you see that you can identify?

How are the serpent and the swan different? What qualities do they have that are similar?

### Elements of Art

**Line:** A continuous mark with width and height, but no depth, made with a moving point.

**Shape:** An enclosed area defined by other elements of art, such as line or color.

**Color:** The full visible light spectrum (rainbow) and black and white, plus all possible combinations.

**Space:** The area around or within objects; the arrangement of components on the surface.

**Texture:** Refers to the tactile quality of an object, whether real or perceived.

Visit [vislit.org](http://vislit.org) to learn more about the Elements of Art.

## Analysis

### Principles of Design

**Emphasis:** The point or points of focus in a composition.

**Balance:** Relates to the sense of visual equilibrium in a work of art; how components of an image are arranged around a focal point.

**Proportion:** The relative scale of objects and shapes in an image to one another and to the viewer.

**Harmony:** The way the elements work together to create an overall appealing effect.

**Rhythm:** The path along which the eye follows a regular or repeating arrangement of motifs (such as colors or shapes) around a composition.

**Movement:** The way shapes, lines, colors and forms direct the eye around a composition or interact with each other to suggest motion.

**Variety:** The use of different, often contrasting, elements that provide visual interest.

**Unity:** The wholeness that is achieved through the effective use of the Elements of Art and Principles of Design.

Once the students have completed listing everything they observed in the print by close looking, begin to ask simple analytical questions that will help to deepen their understanding of the work of art. Examine how the artist has applied the Principles of Design.

What are some of the qualities you associate with swans? What does this swan seem to be doing? What do you see that makes you say that?

What is the relationship between the serpent and the swan in this work of art? Do they fit together? Or do they seem to be opposites? What do you see that makes you say that?

If we were to look at this collage as a snapshot in time, what do you think will happen next?

How has the artist used texture and color to create variety in this collage?

How has the artist used repeated lines and shapes to create unity?

# Layering of Information

(Background Information/Research)

**Share the background information provided above regarding the artist and the collage. This is information that a viewer cannot get simply by looking at the work of art. Once you have shared the information, your students will be ready for deeper analysis and interpretation.**

# Interpretation

Interpretation brings the close looking and describing questions, analysis, and background information together to aid in better understanding the work of art.

What elements of the Orpheus story has Boghosian included in his collage? Who might the swan represent? Who or what does the serpent represent?

Why do you think the serpent has a human skull for a head?

Does your understanding of the Orpheus myth change how you feel about the relationship between the serpent and the swan? Why or why not?

Look at the serpent in this work of art and think about other serpents you have seen in pictures or read about in stories. You might think about the snakes in Medusa's hair, the python Kaa from the *Jungle Book*, or the Basilisk from *Harry Potter*. What are some of the ideas that this serpent might symbolize? How does the inclusion of the skull shape your interpretation? Why?

Overall, what does this work of art mean to you?

# Activity

This activity will encourage students to apply what they have learned through looking by creating their own work of art inspired by Greek mythology.

**Supplies:**

- old magazines, newspapers, scraps of colored paper and other collage materials
- scissors
- glue sticks
- construction paper or matte board to serve as a background

Ask students to use the internet or library to research a myth from Greek mythology. You may want to provide students with a list of popular myths to choose from. Have them write down a list of the main characters in the myth and a short summary of the plot.

After they have finished, ask the students to look through the magazines and other materials to find images of objects or animals that might symbolize each of the major characters. Have them cut those images out.

After they have chosen their images, ask the students to use their images to create a collage which symbolically recreates a scene or major theme from the myth. Remind students that color can also have symbolic meaning and suggest they think about how color may be used as an element of their design. Encourage them to experiment with various ways of arranging their compositions before gluing.

Once they have finished their collages, ask students to give their artwork a title and ask them to write a gallery label that describes how their work uses symbolism to express the myth. You may want to allow time for students to share their collages with the group or hold an exhibition of your Varujan Boghosian inspired works.

