



THOMAS EAKINS: SCENES FROM MODERN LIFE

Lesson 4: Photographs as an Artist's Tool

Estimated Time: (2) 45 minute sessions,
Student time to photograph and complete artwork

Introduction

Thomas Eakins incorporated photography into his work method and used photographs almost exclusively for some of his paintings. This lesson will introduce students to the artist and his use of photography in painting. Students will apply Eakins method and create their own paintings or drawings.

Grade Level

9-12

Please Note: The video program contains a scene featuring black and white archival photographs of nude male models.

Subject Area(s)

Studio Art

Art History

Objectives

- Students will learn about Eakins use of photography as a tool for painting
- Students will apply use of photography in their own painting or drawing
- Students will incorporate time of day, composition and positioning of human subject in their own painting or drawing

Estimated Time

(2) 45 minute sessions

Student time to photograph and complete artwork

Materials

- VHS or DVD-*Thomas Eakins: Scenes From Modern Life*
- VHS or DVD Player and TV monitor
- Print of Eakins' painting, *Mending the Net*, 1881
- Print of Eakins' painting, *Shad Fishing at Gloucester on the Delaware River*, 1881
- Digital or film still camera (s)
- Ability to print or obtain prints from camera (s)
- Drawing materials (pencil, charcoal, ink, paper)

How did Eakins use photography?

(Answers: He made his own sequential photographs of moving humans and animals to improve his students' understanding of locomotion. He used his students as models and assistants in experiments of his own that recorded multiple images on a single negative. He photographed people and placed them in landscapes.)

What issues, do you think, arose for Eakins with his use of photography in painting?

(Answers: Student and teacher opinions)

Why would Eakins be drawn to photography?

(Answers: Student and teacher opinions)

6. Show students two Eakins paintings where he used photography

-*Mending the Net*, 1881

-*Shad Fishing at Gloucester on the Delaware River*, 1881

- Point out the people in each painting and explain how individuals or groups of people in the composition were derived from photographs
- Emphasize that the photographs of the people were often taken in a completely different location and later integrated into the landscape

7. Tell students that they are going to apply Eakins' technique by photographing people and placing them in a landscape

8. Give students the project handout and explain the process and grading/assessment criteria

Please note: The photography portion of the project can occur as a group field trip or as a student assignment.

Project Handout

1. Plan your composition

- Decide on a landscape you wish to use
- Decide on the time of day for the landscape
- Decide on a typical weather condition for the landscape
- Decide on the actions of individuals or groups of people who will be placed in your composition. What event is taking place?

2. Photography

- Take photographs of the landscape during the time of day and typical weather conditions you planned for
- Take photographs of individuals or groups in the action you planned for (you may need to pose people for these purposes)
- Select and print photographs for your composition

3. Implementation

- Place prints from your photographs where you can see them to use as a reference during your painting
- Sketch out your composition for placement of people within the landscape
- Pay attention to how people are sized in relation to the landscape (Are they in the foreground, middle ground or background? How much detail can you see? Are the contrasts distinct or muted by distance and atmosphere?)
- Make sure the people are solidly placed on a surface in the landscape and their position makes sense with the contours of the surface (In reality would they fall over or lose their balance?)
- Make adjustments to the landscape or placement of people to ensure the composition reflects the reality of physical laws of gravity
- Pay attention to the light source and shadows. Make sure all shadows would occur from the same light source

Your artwork is due _____

Grading/ Assessment

- Composition is completed when due
- Composition uses individuals and/or groups of people in a landscape
- Composition reflects the reality of physical laws of gravity
- Composition captures event based on reality
- Composition conveys a mood or evokes an emotion
- Composition shows a unique perspective of a common event

Session 2- Follow-Up Discussion (45 minutes)

After students have finished their paintings, facilitate a critique of their work and pose these questions:

- In general, how did working from photographs feel?
- What limitations does the use of photography impose upon the artist?
- How did working from photography affect the way you composed your artistic expression?
- How would an attempt at capturing the scene you depicted in your artwork differ if you hadn't had photographs to work from?
- What did your picture gain by having photographs? What did it lose?

- What new, not yet created innovations/inventions could enhance the capturing of human activity in artistic expression?

Assessment Recommendations

- Composition is completed when due
- Composition uses individuals and/or groups of people in a landscape
- Composition reflects the reality of physical laws of gravity
- Composition captures event based on reality
- Composition conveys a mood or evokes an emotion
- Composition shows a unique perspective of a common event

Extension Ideas

Is Tracing Cheating?

Projecting photographs directly onto canvas and tracing the image was a technique used by several painters during Eakins time. Students can apply this technique in a work of art. As part of the critique discussion, ask students if this method is less valid than other preparatory methods such as observation and drawing studies. What is the role of creativity in your work? Is your composition an accident of what the camera captured, or are you in charge of subject and placement?

In and Out of Focus Study

Conservators who have studied Eakins paintings noted that some of the figures in his paintings derived from photographs are not as detailed as others. The conservators think one possibility for this could be that the photographs Eakins was working from were out of focus. As part of your class study of using photographs as a reference for painting, have students do a series of studies based on the same image with different focus clarities. The results may help students notice nuances of light and form and lean more towards impressionism than realism.

Recommended Resources

Thomas Eakins

By Darrel Sewell, Thomas Eakins, Kathleen A. Foster
Philadelphia Museum of Art; ISBN: 0876331428; (September 2001)

Note:

Pp. 235-238 Essay: *Photographs and the Making of Paintings*, Mark Tucker and Nica Gutman

Pp. 128-145 show photographs and paintings that used photographs

Related National Standards

- Students apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artworks
- Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes they use
- Students communicate ideas regularly at a high level of effectiveness in at least one visual arts medium
- Students initiate, define, and solve challenging visual arts problems independently using intellectual skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation
- Students demonstrate the ability to compare two or more perspectives about the use of organizational principles and functions in artwork and to defend personal evaluations of these perspectives
- Students compare the materials, technologies, media, and processes of the visual arts with those of other arts disciplines as they are used in creation and types of analysis

Source:

National Art Education Association and the National Committee For Standards in the Arts

http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/professional_resources/standards/natstandards/standards_912.html