Guidance notes for teachers
Take One Picture
Brighton Pierrots

ASHMOLEAN
MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

'Brighton Pierrots' c. 1915
by Walter Sickert (1860-1942)

oil on canvas, 64 x 76.8 cm

A zoomable image of this painting is available on our website to use in the classroom with an interactive whiteboard or projector.

www.ashmolean.org/education/takeonepicture

Starting questions

The following questions may be useful as a starting point for developing speaking and listening skills with your class:

- What can you see? What do you think is happening?
- What colours can you see?
- What time of day do you think it is? How do you know?
- How many people can you see in the painting? (some may be hard to spot)
- What would you see/hear/feel and smell if you were in the painting?
- What words would you use to describe the mood of the painting?
- Where is the artist? Why do you think he chose to paint his picture from this angle?
- If you were in the painting where would you like to be and why?
- What do you think might happen next?

Background information

The painting

At first sight this painting illustrates popular British seaside entertainment at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sickert has painted the scene of a pierrot show as the setting sun turns the sky a dusky pink. The pierrots perform on a wooden stage on the beach with a background of houses on Brighton seafront. Two performers in red suits and straw boaters stand rather stiffly at the front of the stage. They face a sparse audience seated in deckchairs. This may look awkward but Sickert wants us to focus on the pierrette in pink playing the piano at the back of the stage – she stares directly back at us. Both she and the pierrot in green are wearing traditional costumes with ruffles round the neck and a conical shaped hat.

Has Sickert deliberately arranged the figures on the stage in an awkward way to undermine the perceived joviality of their performance? The stage is lit by footlights and by lamps hanging above the stage and the acid colours of the scene created by the artificial stage lights add to the unsettling sense of all not being well.

The historical context

Painted during the First World War, this is not simply a visual record of British seaside entertainment of the time. It could be viewed at another level, perhaps highlighting the tension and melancholy evoked by the war. There are many empty deckchairs in the audience. Are they perhaps to make us think about the young men who could be sitting there enjoying themselves but in fact, have gone to war? Some of the men in the audience appear to have bandaged heads. Could this be a reference to the wounded soldiers from the war?

Pierrot shows had first appeared in Britain's seaside resorts during the 1890s and offered great holiday family entertainment with their mixture of singing, dancing, music, acrobatics and comic sketches.

The artist

Sickert was born in Munich. In 1860 he moved to England with his family as a small boy. His father was an artist but Sickert first set out to be an actor and theatrical life inspired many of his paintings.

Sickert was on holiday in Brighton during August and September 1915. He watched the show on the beach near the Palace Pier every evening for five weeks and made many sketches, which he later used to create this painting in his London studio. He is a master in creating mood and atmosphere.

Ideas for creative planning across the KS1 & 2 curriculum

Understanding the arts

- Look at the colours in the painting and recreate part or all of the painting using digital or mixed media, e.g. collage.
- Design and make puppets/ a model theatre/ Punch and Judy kiosk/ deck chairs/ swimwear and/ or theatrical costumes.
- Listen to music from the period.
- Create you own pierrot show with song and dance routines.
- Make posters for the pierrot show.

Swimwear designs inspired by Sickert's 'Brighton Pierrots.'

Understanding English, communication and languages

- Choose one of the people in the painting. Describe what that person can see and hear and ask the class to work out who you are?
- Describe what might happen next in the pierrot show.
- Imagine that you have travelled to Brighton. Write a postcard or letter home about your visit.
- Write about your memories of a holiday, day trip or visit to the theatre or other entertainment.

Mathematical understanding

- Look at the angles in the painting.
- What shapes can you see?
- Make a jigsaw puzzle of the painting. Estimate how many pieces would be sky/ stage etc.

Understanding physical development, health and wellbeing

- Discuss the benefits of holidays, entertainment, fresh air and outdoor activity. Healthy living depends upon a balance of physical activity, nutrition, leisure, work and rest to promote wellbeing.

Historical, geographical and social understanding

- Use Google Earth to locate Brighton. Using clues from the painting decide where this scene could be located in the town.
- Discuss seaside holidays and entertainments in the past and today.
- Sickert painted this scene in 1915 during World War I. Discuss why there might be so many empty deck chairs? If some of the audience are injured war veterans how might they be feeling?
- Investigating coastlines and seaside habitats. What is the landscape like? Compare and contrast the coastal habitat of Brighton with your locality.
- Discuss who works in seaside towns and on the sea.

3D seaside scene inspired by Sickert's 'Brighton Pierrots.'

Tips for introducing paintings to a class

- Reveal the painting section by section over a number of days. Each time a new detail is revealed the children can make predictions about what might be in the rest of the picture by looking at the details.
- Display the painting in the classroom for a number of days with a tape recorder or 'graffiti wall' for children to add comments or questions about the painting. Once the pupils' comments and questions have been gathered a class discussion could follow on.
- Introduce the painting to the whole class in a question and answer session designed to take the pupils into the painting as outlined on page one.
- Show the painting to the class for a minute or so and then cover it up or taken away. Ask the children to remember what they could see.
- Show the painting to one or two willing volunteers . They should then describe what they have seen to the rest of the class. Pupils could then draw what they have heard described to them and then see how well the versions match up.

Take One Picture inspires…

Take One Picture encourages teachers to use a painting imaginatively in the classroom, both as a stimulus for artwork, and for work in more unexpected curriculum areas. Many curriculum areas can be delivered using a single image as a starting point.

The challenge is for each school to use the painting as a focus to develop culturally enriching, engaging, relevant and practical learning opportunities across the curriculum.

> "The children always cheer when they see TOP on the timetable."
> Teacher from The Blake School, Witney

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