

Narratives in Art: Our California Stories

Tour Overview

This guided tour explores how California artists tell stories through their work. Students discover that art isn't just about what we see—it's about the narratives, emotions, and histories that artists choose to share or inadvertently reveal. Through close observation and discussion of selected paintings, participants learn to "read" visual stories and understand that art can hold multiple meanings.

Duration: Approximately 60 minutes (flexible based on group size and engagement; can be adjusted by adding or removing artworks)

Tour Structure: Introduction to artwork → Discussion → Activity choice (repeat for 3-5 artworks) → Closing reflection

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this tour, students will:

- Develop a greater appreciation for the depth of understanding art can provide
 - Recognize that art is not necessarily fixed but can have multiple meanings and interpretations
 - Consider different perspectives when viewing and interpreting artwork
 - Understand how artists compose narratives through their creative choices—what they include, what they exclude, and how they arrange visual elements
 - Feel encouraged in their own creativity and recognize their capability to create meaningful work
-

Tour Flow

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

The tour begins by introducing students to the concept of narrative in art. Paintings tell stories, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Artists spend time and effort creating something, and through their choices—what they include, what they leave out, how they compose the image—information emerges about the artist, the subject, and the time period.

The guiding principle: **How we relate to art is more important than any single "correct" story it tells.** If we can't relate to artwork, it's difficult to care about it. Students are encouraged to think about what story the painting tells them personally.

Artwork Stops (40-45 minutes)

Each artwork follows the same structure:

1. **Observation** - What do we see?
2. **Discussion** - Historical context and artist's process
3. **Composing a Narrative** - Introduce one compositional concept
4. **Activity** - Students engage with the artwork through a chosen activity

Step 1:



Note: Specific artworks are placeholders and will change as the gallery rotates its collection.

Discussion:

- Historical context and background
- Artist's process and intention
- Open-ended questions that encourage personal interpretation

Discussion Questions:

- "What do you notice first? Why do you think that caught your attention?"
- "What story is this painting telling you?"
- "Does anything in this painting stand out to you as Californian? What makes this Californian—or is it?"
- "Do you relate to this artwork? If so, how?"

Composing a Narrative: Balance All the different components of a picture must balance each other so that the image works as an integrated whole. Artists achieve balance in different ways depending on their aim—some convey harmony and serenity, while others opt for contrast, dynamism, or jagged discord.

- Where do you see balance in this composition?
- How did the artist create that balance?

Activity: [Selected from options below]

Stop 2:



Note: Specific artworks are placeholders and will change as the gallery rotates its collection.

Discussion:

- Historical context and background
- Artist's process and intention
- Open-ended questions that encourage personal interpretation

Discussion Questions:

- "What do you notice first? Why do you think that caught your attention?"
- "What story is this painting telling you?"
- "Does anything in this painting stand out to you as Californian? What makes this Californian—or is it?"
- "Do you relate to this artwork? If so, how?"

Composing a Narrative: Rhythm A painting should have rhythm like a piece of music. Shapes can be repeated or set in opposition to each other. Visual links and a sense of rhythm are particularly important in pictures with a lot happening, or they can look like a jumble of unrelated elements. The spaces between shapes are just as important as the shapes themselves.

- Can you identify repeated shapes or patterns?
- How do these repetitions create rhythm or movement?

Activity: [Selected from options below]

Stop 3:



Note: Specific artworks are placeholders and will change as the gallery rotates its collection.

Discussion:

- Historical context and background
- Artist's process and intention
- Open-ended questions that encourage personal interpretation

Discussion Questions:

- "What do you notice first? Why do you think that caught your attention?"
- "What story is this painting telling you?"
- "Does anything in this painting stand out to you as Californian? What makes this Californian—or is it?"
- "Do you relate to this artwork? If so, how?"

Composing a Narrative: Visual Flow Artists guide our eyes through a composition using lines, gestures, colors, and the arrangement of elements. The way our gaze moves through the painting affects how we understand the story.

- Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next?
- What elements guide your eye through the painting?
- How does this visual journey affect the story being told?

HILBERT MUSEUM

OF CALIFORNIA ART • AT CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

Activity: [Selected from options below]

Stop 4 & 5: [Artwork Title/Artist] (Optional)

Note: Specific artworks are placeholders and will change as the gallery rotates its collection.

The fourth & fifth artwork stop follows the same structure as above, cycling through the compositional concepts or revisiting them with greater depth based on student engagement.

Activity Options

Teachers/chaperones should select ONE activity to use consistently throughout the tour. Activities are designed to reinforce narrative thinking and help students engage personally with the artworks.

Option 1: Expand the Frame

Students are given templates of the selected painting with extra blank space on either side (or top/bottom). They draw what they imagine exists outside the frame.

Process:

- Students observe and discuss the painting first
- Distribute templates with extended borders
- Students fill in the blank spaces with their own additions
- Students share their work and explain their thought process

Discussion Questions:

- "What influenced your decision about what to add?"
- "How does expanding the frame change the story?"
- "Why do you think the artist chose to frame it the way they did?"

Learning Outcome: Encourages students to think about artistic choices regarding composition and framing. Reinforces that what's left out is as important as what's included.

Option 2: Before & After

Students create two small drawings: one showing what they imagine happened immediately before the scene depicted, and one showing what happens immediately after.

Process:

- Students observe and discuss the painting
- Distribute index cards or drawing paper (two per student)
- Label one "Before" and one "After"
- Students draw both moments
- Students share and explain their narrative choices

Discussion Questions:

- "What clues in the painting helped you imagine these moments?"
- "How do different interpretations change the overall story?"

Learning Outcome: Develops narrative thinking and helps students understand that paintings capture single moments in larger stories. Reveals how the same artwork can suggest different narratives to different viewers.

Option 3: Thought Bubbles

Students are given images of the painting with blank thought bubbles attached to figures in the scene. They write or draw what they think each character is thinking or saying.

Process:

- Students observe the painting and learn historical background
- Discuss the artist's process and possible intentions
- Distribute sheets with thought bubbles positioned over key figures
- Students fill in thought bubbles with text or drawings
- Students share and explain their reasoning

Discussion Questions:

- "What in the painting made you think this character would say/think that?"
- "What went into your thought process?"

Learning Outcome: Encourages perspective-taking and empathy. Helps students understand that narratives contain multiple viewpoints and that artwork can be interpreted through different characters' experiences.

Option 4: Exquisite Corpse

A collaborative drawing game where students work together to create a figure inspired by the paintings they've viewed, with each student adding to the drawing without seeing what others have drawn.

Process:

- After viewing several paintings, ask "What would a person from these paintings/this period look like?"
- First student draws the head on top of the paper, folds it to hide their drawing (leaving small guide marks), and passes it on
- Next student draws the torso, folds, and passes
- Continue with legs, feet, etc.
- Unfold to reveal the complete collaborative figure
- Discuss the result and connections to the artworks viewed

Discussion Questions:

- "What elements from the paintings do you recognize in our creation?"
- "How does working collaboratively change the creative process?"
- "What makes this figure feel connected to California or the time periods we discussed?"

Learning Outcome: Builds creative confidence through low-stakes collaborative art-making. Demonstrates how individual contributions combine to create something unexpected. Can reference specific artworks as a starting template for less confident students.

Closing Reflection (10 minutes)

The tour concludes with students reflecting on what they've learned about narrative in art. Gather the group and facilitate a brief discussion:

Reflection Questions:

- "What connects these different California stories we've seen today?"
- "Why do stories matter in art—and in our own lives?"
- "If you were going to create a California narrative painting, what story would you want to capture? What would you include? What would you leave out?"

Students are encouraged to share their favorite painting or story from the tour, but participation is optional.

Key Takeaway: Art is not fixed. It holds multiple meanings, invites multiple perspectives, and creates space for us to see ourselves and our world in new ways. The stories we find in art are shaped both by what the artist intended and by what we bring to the viewing experience.

What Teachers Can Expect

- Emphasis on observation, interpretation, and personal connection over memorization
- Students encouraged to share ideas, ask questions, and discover there are different ways to "read" artwork
- One consistent activity used throughout the tour to reinforce narrative thinking
- A welcoming environment where there are no "wrong" interpretations, only supported and unsupported ones