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Susan Rosoff, Associate



Somewhere in America, 1934
Robert Brackman

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Writing a Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt

Arts Integration:

Visual Arts and English/Language Arts

Target Audience:

Grades 4-12

Description:

Study the painting of an African American girl by Robert Brackman and write an imaginary letter to the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt.

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 write a final product for the intended audience.

Lesson Logistics:

Materials:

Image by Robert Brackman: *Somewhere in America*, 1934
<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=2706>

Photocopies of letters to Eleanor Roosevelt and the responses
<http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/er3a.htm>

Paper and pen or pencil

Space:

Classroom (no special arrangement needed)

Vocabulary:

Visual Arts:

portrait, pose, facial expression, sitter, attribute (something that identifies the sitter)



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Lesson Strategy:

Starting the Lesson:

- How many of you have had your picture taken? Show me the way you posed. A pose means the way you sit or stand. A painting of a specific person who poses is called a portrait.

Building the Learning Experiences:

- Robert Brackman painted this portrait. What are some of the things you see? Where do you think the girl is? What makes you say that? How did the girl pose? What is her facial expression? What does that tell you about her mood? Where are her eyes looking? What does that imply?
- What things do you see in the portrait that tell us something about the girl? (she has a toy, she has something to eat, the tablecloth and chair suggest the house she lives in is simple) The bear is called an attribute; an attribute is something that identifies the sitter.
- What colors did the artist use? (primarily red, white and blue) Why do you think Brackman used red white and blue as the main colors for the portrait? (simple colors help us focus on the personality of the girl) What does that suggest? (patriotism)
- Why do you think Brackman chose to paint a portrait of this young girl instead of painting someone rich or important? (he wants to highlight that even down-to-earth people matter in American culture) What do you think Brackman was trying to say? (everyone is important) How do you think the title of the work, *Somewhere in America*, relates to the artist's intent in painting this portrait? (he is reflecting what is going on across the country, not in one particular place)
- Although we do not know much about this girl, during the Depression, children were severely affected by economic hardship experienced by their families.
 - Three million children were out of school because schools did not have the money to stay open.
 - Twenty percent of children did not have enough to eat or were poorly clothed. Many did not have shoes or winter clothes.
 - Many children became homeless and wandered the roads or traveled on railways, effectively becoming nomads.ⁱ
- How does the painting make you feel?
- Explain that the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, gave a weekly radio address in which she talked about how the Depression affected young people. She also helped found an organization that helped youth with scholarship funds and finding work. She was perceived as being sympathetic to their problems. Children who often felt that their problems were insurmountable wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt asking for help. Mostly they wanted clothes and money, but some asked for bicycles or luxuries. Choose a sample letter to read. What is the feeling you get from this letter? How do the feelings you have about the letter and the feelings you have about the painting compare? The girl in Brackman's painting does not look as desperate as most letter writers sound. Most of the artists painted optimistic views of America: their paintings implied that things were going to turn out all right.
- Ask the students if they think the child who wrote thought that Mrs. Roosevelt would be able to help him/her. What evidence is there for this opinion?



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- Divide students into groups, and pass out four of five photocopied letters to each group. What do the letters reveal about the children's values? What letters stood out? Why is this?
- Imagine that you are the girl in the portrait or a boy similar to her. You wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt during the Depression about a particular problem. Now you are an adult, and you want to let Mrs. Roosevelt know what happened to you. Write a follow-up letter telling her how you got through the Depression, and what you are doing today. Tell her how her work was helpful.
- Review the format for a friendly letter. Your letter should have at least two paragraphs. The first paragraph should explain the contents of the letter that you wrote in the 1930s. The second paragraph should explain how your life unfolded. (Secondary level students should think about what opportunities there were after the Depression and incorporate that in the letter.)

Assessment:

- Students use the correct form for a friendly letter.
- Students are able to write a two paragraph letter that explains how the Depression affected them, what their life is like today and how Mrs. Roosevelt helped them.

Summary:

- Portraits are pictures of specific people. Artists can show a lot of what a person feels and thinks through pose, facial expression, and attributes.
- Good letter writers create a picture with words.

Documentation:

During the Depression, young people like the girl pictured below, wrote letters First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt asking for help. The English/Language Arts class updated Mrs. Roosevelt on how we made it through the Depression. Our letters told her how her work helped us.

Post the Brackman portrait and the letters the students wrote.

Social Studies/History Extensions

All Grades

Critical Thinking

- Have students consider the responses that the letter writers received from the White House. How would they feel if they received a letter from Mrs. Roosevelt's secretary or an unsigned form letter? How would that be different than receiving a more personal note, even if the letter still said Mrs. Roosevelt could not help you?



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- In the letters to Mrs. Roosevelt people wrote about problems that they were having. Draw up a list of problems that you believe are typical for youth today and list them on one side of a chart. Then list problems that children had during the Depression on the other side of the chart. Draw lines to link similar problems. What problems are there in common? Which group do you think faced more challenges? What solutions to these problems might we find? (see chart for student use on page six)

Analyze and Classify

- Have the students identify some general characteristics about the letter writers. These could include gender, age, race, religion, geographic region, level of education, general socio-economic status of their parents. Have the group share their findings with the class. Determine what patterns emerge. For example, more girls write letters than boys. Why might this be? Is a general cross section of America represented?

Secondary School

Critical Thinking

- Eleanor Roosevelt frequently used her newspaper column and a weekly radio program to talk about how the Depression impacted young people. Adults and children sent her over 300,000 letters in 1933, her first year in the White House. She could not help people individually, but she helped found the National Youth Administration (NYA) in June 1935. The goal of the NYA was to grant students financial aid in exchange for work so they could stay in school, or find work for those who were not in school. Brainstorm a list of groups students think might help with youth problems today. Invite a guest speaker from one of the groups to speak to the class about agencies that typically deal with these types of problems.
- Franklin Roosevelt used the radio to give speeches about issues of national concern. He called these “Fireside Chats” because he wanted them to seem friendly. He often spoke in a reassuring way about economic and social recovery. What national issues are of concern to your class? Create an audio podcast that addresses these concerns, and making some promises about what you will do to address these concerns.

Research

- The Works Progress Administration (WPA) established programs that supported youth. They included the establishment of day care programs for children of working parents, school nutrition programs, the establishment of surplus stores that carried clothing, toys and other goods, and recreational programs. Find out how New Deal programs such as these were implemented in your area. Newspaper archives, libraries that have special sections on community history and historical museums might help you in your search.

Problem Solving

- Imagine that you received a letter describing a problem similar to one described by Eleanor Roosevelt. Respond to the writer with a suggestion of a community resource that might help solve the problem.



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Arts Experiences for Another Day:

All Schools

Draw

- Choose a letter where you can almost “see” the writer when you read the letter. Draw a portrait of that person as you envision him/her to be.

Compare and Contrast Portraits

- Compare and contrast Brackman’s portrait *Somewhere in America* with Ivan Albright’s *The Farmer’s Kitchen*, <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=217> and Kenneth Adams’ portrait of *Juan Duran*, <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=90>. Use a Venn diagram or a double bubble map.

Music

- Composers and lyricists sometimes draw portraits with music. The lyrics of Stephen Foster’s “I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair” describe her well. Read the lyrics here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeanie_with_the_Light_Brown_Hair
Listen to the music of this folksong. How does the choice of instruments affect the mood of the piece? What about the tempo? Make a list words tell how the music helps “describe” Jeannie. Does the music suggest that she is soft and quiet, or loud and energetic? Happy or sad? Would she walk fast or float by? Why? Marilyn Horne, a famous opera singer, performs this song accompanied by a harpist at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZECxmbP908>. This video has no action; it shows the period sheet music for the song during the entire performance. As an alternative, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAE1M8AdaO4>. This performance was done on the Johnny Carson show. To skip the dialogue, start the video at 2:21 minutes.

Drama

- Strike a pose. What pose and facial expression communicates the following emotions: distress, jubilation, thoughtfulness, consternation (or concern), fear, boredom, confusion, disgust, serenity.

Resources:

Book:

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression, by Robert Cohen

Through letters, this book offers insights into how families were affected by the Depression.

Photo Credit for Page 1

Somewhere in America, 1934

¹ <http://newdeal.feri.org/eleanor/er2a.htm>

Robert Brackman

Born: Odessa, Russia 1898

Died: New London, Connecticut 1980

oil on canvas 30 1/8 x 25 1/8 in. (76.5 x 63.9 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor

1964.1.75



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COMPARE AND CONTRAST: THEN AND NOW

Name _____ Grade/Session _____

What problems did children have during the Depression? What problems do children have today? Put your answers on either side of the chart. Draw lines to link similar problems.

| THEN (The Depression) | NOW |
|------------------------------|------------|
| | |



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