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Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak, Resources for Teachers

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WITNESS

THE ART OF
SAMUEL BAK

Creation of Wartime III, 1999-2008
Oil on canvas, 50 x 75"

Resources for Teachers

Extend the experience: Teachers, we are pleased to provide educational resources to accompany *Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak*. These resources will allow you to extend the discussion of Samuel Bak's art beyond the exhibit tour. The materials are designed to be used with students who attended the exhibit and can also be used to introduce Samuel Bak's art to students who could not visit the gallery and with your future classes.

Try something new: As a teacher, we recognize you may be primarily drawn to the exhibit, a certain painting, or a symbol by your area of expertise. However, understanding how other disciplines approach Bak's art can draw you and your students more deeply into the paintings and may prove to be quite enlightening. The strategies listed here can be implemented in varied content areas, and we hope you consider trying a strategy not commonly used within your discipline.

Instructional Strategies

The following instructional strategies reference exhibit catalogue page numbers, specific paintings, and content. Paintings are also referenced by title if you prefer to access online exhibit images (<http://bit.ly/UNOTEDBak>).

Reading Visual Text: (individual and small group analysis, small and whole group discussion)

Background information

Samuel Bak's paintings tell a story and provide witness to the trauma he experienced as a child. While many storytellers use words to convey their experiences, Bak uses numerous images as symbols in his storytelling. He invites his audience to read and interpret the symbols he carefully chooses, creates, and places in his paintings. How does Bak use symbols to tell his story?

Implementation steps

1. Divide the class into several groups of four students.
2. Reference the following paintings on pages 55-56 in the catalogue:
 - *Looking Back* - *Give and Take A* - *On Time and Its Numbers* - *Before and After*
3. Assign one member in each group to be the lead analyst for one of the four paintings.
4. Ask the small groups to answer the following question: What do the cart in *Looking Back*, the people in *Give and Take A*, the clock in *On Time and Its Numbers*, and the dice in *Before and After* have in common? (Note: Bak portrays each image as broken, damaged, cracking, incomplete, or fragmented.)
5. After answering the above question, ask the small groups to discuss the following question: Why might Bak have included broken/fragmented images throughout his works? Ask for volunteers to share the analysis of their small group with the whole class.
6. Ask each student to find the human figure(s) in their assigned painting. Each student should point out the human figure(s) within their painting to other group members. Then within the small groups, students can discuss whom the figures might represent, what the figures have in common, and how the figures differ. Ask for volunteers to share the analysis of their small groups with the whole class.
7. Ask each student to find the dice in their assigned painting. Each student should point out the dice within their painting to other group members. Then within the small groups, students can discuss what the dice might represent, what the dice have in common, and how the dice differ. Ask for volunteers to share the analysis of their small groups with the whole class.
8. Reference the following paintings on pages 57-58 in the catalogue:
 - *Burden* - *Memoir* - *Chapters*
9. Ask the class as a whole to discuss the following questions:
 - a. What do the candles represent? How are they similar/different in the paintings? What is the significance of the flame?
 - b. How are the candles creating light and darkness simultaneously? What is the significance of this?
 - c. Each painting is titled with a single word. What might be the significance of this?

Adaptation: Divide the class into groups of three. Using the paintings on pages 55-56, assign one student in each group to find evidence of brokenness, another to analyze the human figures, and another to analyze the dice. Have each student describe their analysis to their group members. Ask for volunteers to summarize the discussions of their small groups with the whole class.

Reading like a Historian¹: (whole group analysis/discussion)

Background information

People often turn to witness accounts to better understand history. Witnesses record their personal stories in many ways (i.e. letters, diaries, journals, testimonials), and these first-hand accounts are considered primary sources. Historians and savvy audiences carefully analyze witness accounts. Samuel Bak's personal account is recorded in his paintings. Viewing Bak's paintings as primary sources, how might we analyze his account of the Vilna (Vilnius) ghetto?

Implementation steps

1. Have students practice the skill of sourcing: To what extent is he a credible witness? Is his ability to provide an account of events impacted by the fact he was a child at the time? By the trauma he experienced? By the time that has passed since the Holocaust?
2. Have students practice the skill of contextualizing: What context is represented in Bak's paintings? What dates? What location? What time of year? What time of day? Inside or outside? If you were 'in' the paintings, what would you hear or smell? What textures or surfaces would you be able to feel?
3. Have students practice the skill of corroborating: What information do we have from other primary sources to substantiate or refute what is represented in Bak's paintings?

Turn and Talk: (individual analysis, paired discussion, whole group discussion)

Background information

Throughout his works, Samuel Bak uses symbolism (the representation of ideas, emotions, and states of mind through objects). Looking at his paintings, you will notice Bak repeatedly includes several symbols throughout his paintings. In the paintings included in *Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak*, what symbols do we find in multiple paintings, and what might they represent?

Implementation steps

1. Draw students' attention to some of the many symbols that appear in multiple paintings (i.e., pears, candles, keys, smoke, flames, cups, ships, birds, bricks, houses, dice, clocks, angels, chess pieces).
2. Ask students to select one symbol and find two or more paintings in which the symbol appears and analyze the similarities and differences in the way Bak uses the symbol in various paintings.
3. Have students share their analysis with a partner who selected a different symbol.
4. After the first student is finished sharing, have the second student share the analysis of their symbol.
5. Ask for volunteers to share their selections and analysis with the whole class.

Rename the Painting: (small group analysis/discussion, whole group analysis/discussion)

Background information

Unlike many artists, Samuel Bak selects titles for his paintings after completing them. How do the titles of Bak's paintings reveal more about his life or add to a story told within a painting?

Implementation steps

1. Model how you might rename one of Bak's painting.
2. Working in small groups, have students rename three to five paintings you have preselected.
3. Lead a whole class discussion. Consider what the new names may have in common with each other or with Bak's original title. Consider why a painting might evoke such different names.

Think, Ink, Pair, Share: (writing, paired discussion, whole group discussion)

Background information

Bak is a prolific artist. He started painting at age three and held his first art exhibit at age nine in the Vilna (Vilnius) ghetto. He has told his story in thousands of paintings and actively works on over one hundred paintings at any given time. *Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak* includes just seventy of his works. In this collection, which work or story most intrigues you?

Implementation steps

1. Have students identify the painting in the catalogue that most resonates with them.
2. Ask students to write three to four sentences to explain why they chose that painting.
3. Direct students to share their selected painting and reason for choosing it with a partner.
4. Ask for volunteers to share their selections and reasons with the whole class.

Questions and Answers: (writing, small group discussion)

Background information

We often think of a witness as answering questions about what happened. Bak's paintings certainly give witness to his experiences, yet his paintings also elicit many questions. If you carefully observe *Recall* (page 48), you might notice the handle of the cup is in the form of a question mark. What other questions might Bak's paintings be asking?

Implementation steps

1. Have students identify a painting with a human figure in it.
2. Ask students to write a question they would ask the person in the painting and/or what question the person in the painting might ask someone (i.e., leaders of their time, Bak, members of the class).
3. Have students work in small groups. Direct one student to ask their question, and have the other group members speculate how the question might be answered.
4. Rotate until all group members ask their questions and hear possible answers provided by their peers.

Text Tagging Personal Connections: (individual analysis, whole group discussion)

Background information

Samuel Bak's paintings reflect the Holocaust or Shoah. The Holocaust occurred approximately eighty years ago. To what extent do Bak's paintings reflect today's world and/or our lives?

Implementation steps

1. Have students use sticky notes to tag the exhibit catalogue pages that include the paintings they feel:
 - a. Best represents today's world.
 - b. Speaks most strongly to their generation.
 - c. Evokes the most intense emotions for them.
2. Ask volunteers to share the paintings they tagged and why they selected them.

Adaptation: Place printed copies of several paintings on walls throughout the classroom. Read the first prompt and have students stand near the painting they selected in response to the prompt. Students grouped around each painting can discuss their selection in small groups and then share their small group's discussion with the whole class. Repeat for each prompt.

Self-Portrait²: (individual analysis, sketching or writing)

Background information

Samuel Bak and many other artists (Salvador Dali, Leonardo da Vinci, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, Kehinde Wiley, etc.) have used self-portraits. *Close Up* (page 35) is often seen as a self-portrait of Bak. Within this painting and others, Bak uses symbols to personalize his story. What symbols might you choose to include in your self-portrait or to tell your personal story? How might you portray those symbols?

Implementation steps

1. Have students identify other paintings that may have elements of Bak's self-portrait.
2. Ask students to identify three to five symbols they might include in their self-portrait.
3. Direct students to sketch self-portraits.

Adaptation: Rather than sketch self-portraits, have students describe the symbols in a short paragraph.

Become an Expert - Theme Jigsaw: (small group analysis/discussion)

Background information

Samuel Bak repeats symbols in his art, and the symbols he uses can be interpreted many ways. Someone might analyze a single symbol within a single painting or across several paintings to further their understanding of Bak's life before, during, and after the Holocaust. Another person might look for a way to group or categorize multiple symbols based on a unifying concept or theme. What do Bak's symbols reveal when grouped together into various themes?

Implementation steps

1. Divide the class into base groups. Within each base group, determine which students will become experts on the themes of war, household items, and nature.
2. Have students move to new expert groups based on themes.
3. Assign individual expert groups to identify paintings throughout the catalogue that include images of:
 - a. War (i.e., targets, soldiers, missiles, blood, destroyed buildings, smoke, swords) and discuss why Bak would choose these symbols and what symbols of war might be used in today's world or what other symbols of war they would choose if they were an artist.
 - b. Household items (i.e., candles, dice, chessboards, ladders, dishes, tables, keys) and discuss why Bak would choose these symbols and what symbols of home might be used in today's world or what other symbols they would choose if they were an artist.
 - c. Nature (i.e., sky, trees, water, clouds, doves, rainbows, mountains, rocks) and discuss why Bak would choose these symbols and what symbols of home might be used in today's world or what other symbols they would choose if they were an artist.
4. After completing the above, have expert group members disperse and return to their original base groups and share their expertise on their theme with other base group members.
5. Repeat the above step until each expert has shared their expertise on their theme within the base groups.

Adaptation: Add additional themes to accommodate more students and groups. Additional themes might include religion, childhood, and justice.

Reading Comprehension: (prediction, summarizing, paired/whole group discussion, writing)

Background information

A historian wrote *Surviving Children Found in the Rubble* (pages 15-20)³. The text, photograph, and paintings center on an iconic photograph from the Holocaust and an important figure in Samuel Bak's work, the Little Boy. What does this essay reveal about the history of the Holocaust as well as Bak's repeated use of this image?

Implementation steps

1. Ask students to read the title on page 15, look at the photograph and paintings on pages 15-20, and based on these predict the topic of the text on pages 15-20.
2. Have students turn to a peer sitting next to them and take turns sharing their predictions.
3. Read the first paragraph on page 15 to the students. Call their attention to "Beney-Kedoshim: Bak" and then ask students to elaborate on their original predictions.
4. Have students turn to the same peer as before and share their expanded predictions.
5. Have students independently (or in pairs) read the remaining text on page 16. Have students identify at least four facts while they read.
6. Again, have students turn to their partner and exchange facts. Ask for a few volunteers to share their facts with the whole class.
7. Have one student in the pair read the first four paragraphs on page 17 ("The original German..."; "In the middle..."; "There are a..."; and "Bak has explained...") while the other partner reads the last paragraph on page 17 ("Bak has incorporated...") through the second paragraph ("Bak's *Disposition* is...") on page 19.
8. Have students summarize what they read to their partner. Ask for volunteers to share their summaries with the whole class.
9. Have one student read the section on *Targeted* (remainder of page 19) while the other student reads the section on *Signal of Identity* (first two paragraphs on page 20). Have students summarize what they read to their partner. Ask for volunteers to share their summaries with the whole class.
10. Direct students to pages 45 and 46 and ask them to view the four paintings (*Deposition*, *Targeted*, *Signal of Identity*, and *Icon of Loss, Ancient Memory*) that include the image of the Little Boy. Ask students to identify how many images of the Little Boy they can find in the four paintings. (Note: *Icon of Loss, Ancient Memory* has the Little Boy standing on a jutting cliff. The cliff is in the shape of the Little Boy.) Discuss similarities and differences of the paintings.
11. Together as a class, read the last two paragraphs on page 20. Have students write a response to either of the following questions:
 - a. How can one repair a broken world?
 - b. What can we do for our brothers (fellow human beings)?

Vocabulary and terms referenced in the reading:

surname
Ukrainian Cossacks
atrocities
memoir

genocide
ghettoization/ghetto
mortality rate
SS (Schutzstaffel)

deposition
crucifixion
unwrought
collaborators

Adaptation: Omit steps 9 and 10 to shorten the strategy.

RAFT⁴: (small group or individual analysis, writing)

Background information

The paintings of Samuel Bak represent his many roles. For example, he is a grandson. *For Khone* (pages 5-6) references his grandfather, and *For Shifrah* (page 38) bears the name of his grandmother. Bak is also a Jew and Holocaust survivor and represents these roles in *The City*, *Harvest of the Night*, *One of the Memorials*, *Penetrability of Spheres*, *Voyage*, and *The Wall Continues*. The corresponding text (pages 9-10) tell us more about his experience and topics related to the Holocaust⁵. Bak's art speaks to audiences including art scholars, historians, and museum visitors. The primary format he uses is his art, but he also wrote a book, *Painted in Words - A Memoir*⁶. What roles might we take as we study Bak's work? What topics might we wish to address regarding his work, and what formats may be the best means to do so?

Implementation steps

1. Explain to students that RAFT stands for **R**ole, **A**udience, **F**ormat, and **T**opic.
2. Working alone or with a partner, have students select the role they will take as the writer. This might be the role they are actually in (i.e., student viewing Bak's paintings), or it might be from another perspective (i.e., one of the people in one of the paintings).
3. Ask students to decide to whom they will address with their writing. Some ideas include Bak (the artist), the curator of a local museum, another teacher or principal, their friends, etc.
4. Have students select the format for their writing. They might be writing a letter, a poem, a blog (or other social media) post, etc.
5. Have students select the topic. Ideas include writing about the painting they found most interesting, any questions they might have, convincing others they should go to the exhibit, etc.

Examples include: Role – student viewing the paintings; Audience – Bak, the artist; Format – letter; Topic – telling Bak about the painting they found most interesting. Role – person in the painting; Audience – friend or family member of the person OR Bak; Format – letter; Topic – explaining what they are thinking at the moment captured in the painting OR asking questions about Bak's artistic choices.

Adaptation: Assign students their roles, audience, format, and topic (or elements of it). You can also give students limited choices for each element.

Notes:

1. The Stanford History Education Group developed this strategy to teach students how to analyze primary source documents. *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School Classrooms*, written by Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano (Teachers College Press, 2012), fully outlines the strategy.
2. This strategy is adapted from *Interpreting the Works of Samuel Bak: Self-Portrait*, a lesson developed by Facing History and Ourselves available at <http://facinghistory.org>
3. Dr. Mark Celinscak authored this essay in 2019. Celinscak is an assistant professor in the History Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and Director of The Sam and Frances Fried Holocaust and Genocide Academy.
4. RAFT is often attributed to Carol Minnick Santa and her colleagues who outlined the strategy in *Content Reading Including Study Systems*, (Kendall/Hunt, 1988) and attributed RAFT to Nancy Vandervanter and the Montana Writing Project.
5. Dr. Amy Millicent Morris authored the text in *Witness: The Art of Samuel Bak* in 2019. Morris is an associate professor in the Art History Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
6. *Painted in Words – A Memoir* was authored by Samuel Bak and includes a foreword by Amos Oz. It was published in 2001 by the Pucker Gallery and distributed by Indiana University Press.

Resources for Teachers Authors

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