

RAG

**RICHMOND ART GALLERY
School Art Program**



Teacher Guide

Pierre Vassura

December 1, 2018 - January 20, 2019

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Program Overview

Dear Teachers,

This guide contains information about the exhibition, the artists, and some classroom activities that will help you to prepare your students for their visit to the Richmond Art Gallery. Please review this package with your students to get the most out of your gallery visit. The suggested activities require a minimum of materials and are adaptable to the needs of different grade levels.

Throughout the guide you will find art vocabulary words in bold that are defined in the vocabulary section, and resource links have been included for further topic explorations.

Program Goals

The goals of the gallery tour and art workshop are to encourage students to:

- Describe and respond to works of art and explore artists' intent
- Observe and share how artists use processes, materials, and techniques to express ideas
- Explore identity, place, culture, and belonging through arts experiences
- Examine the relationship between art and the wider world
- Create artworks using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play

Big Ideas explored

- People create art to express who they are as individuals and as a community
- Exploring works of art exposes us to diverse values, knowledge, and perspectives
- Works of art influence and are influenced by the world around us
- Artistic expressions differ across time and place
- Experiencing art challenges our point of view and expands our understanding of others
- Engagement in the arts creates opportunities for inquiry through purposeful play
- Creative expression is a means to explore and share one's identity within a community

Before Your Visit

Background: Fables and Morality Plays

For most of human history, only select professionals such as scribes or monks could read or go to school, so the majority of people shared knowledge through oral storytelling, dramatic plays, and visual artworks. Moral behaviour was taught through short stories called **fables**, and through the performance of **morality plays**. These stories feature characters who represent different human characteristics, such as greed, pride, or generosity, and the events of the stories teach moral and life lessons to the listeners or viewers.

Artist Pierre Vassura uses the characters from these fables and plays as the subjects for his paintings, **sculptures**, and puppets. One source that your students may be familiar with is Aesop's fables, as they continue to be featured in children's stories today.

Discussion: Fables and moral stories

Discuss the genre of the fable with students, and ask if they are familiar with any. Some examples of common Aesop's fables:

The wolf in sheep's clothing
The boy who cried wolf
The tortoise and the hare
The fox and the crow
The ant and the grasshopper

Some questions to consider:

- What are some children's tales that you know?
- What was the "moral of the story" for that tale?
- What does the word "moral" mean?
- In what ways do the animal characters act like humans?
- How can a story show us the importance of a moral?
- Are these important lessons to learn? Why did people want to teach these lessons?
- Are there other ways we can learn these lessons?

Two of Aesop's fables that are featured in the exhibition are included on the next page, and can be used as examples so students can be familiar with the stories before seeing Vassura's painted versions.

The North Wind and the Sun

(sourced from <http://read.gov/aesop/143.html>)

The North Wind and the Sun had a quarrel about which of them was the stronger. While they were disputing with much heat and bluster, a Traveler passed along the road wrapped in a cloak.

"Let us agree," said the Sun, "that he is the stronger who can strip that Traveler of his cloak."

"Very well," growled the North Wind, and at once sent a cold, howling blast against the Traveler.

With the first gust of wind the ends of the cloak whipped about the Traveler's body. But he immediately wrapped it closely around him, and the harder the Wind blew, the tighter he held it to him. The North Wind tore angrily at the cloak, but all his efforts were in vain.

Then the Sun began to shine. At first his beams were gentle, and in the pleasant warmth after the bitter cold of the North Wind, the Traveler unfastened his cloak and let it hang loosely from his shoulders. The Sun's rays grew warmer and warmer. The man took off his cap and mopped his brow. At last he became so heated that he pulled off his cloak, and, to escape the blazing sunshine, threw himself down in the welcome shade of a tree by the roadside.

Moral: Gentleness and kind persuasion win where force and bluster fail.

The Mischievous Dog

(sourced from <http://read.gov/aesop/118.html>)

There was once a Dog who was so ill-natured and mischievous that his Master had to fasten a heavy wooden *clog about his neck to keep him from annoying visitors and neighbors. But the Dog seemed to be very proud of the *clog and dragged it about noisily as if he wished to attract everybody's attention. He was not able to impress anyone.

"You would be wiser," said an old acquaintance, "to keep quietly out of sight with that clog. Do you want everybody to know what a disgraceful and ill-natured Dog you are?"

Moral: Notoriety is not fame

*Clog: a thick piece of wood

At the Gallery

Your visit will start with a gallery tour of our current exhibition. During the tour we will look at various artworks in depth, and discuss the overall themes of the exhibition.

Ideas explored:

- The history of fables and morality plays, and the role of the arts in the transmission of moral lessons
- The use of shape to simplify, abstract, and create a focal point
- The use of colour relationships to create harmony, contrast, and emphasis

After the tour, we will go into the gallery classroom and students will have the opportunity to create a geometric painting inspired by Pierre Vassura's work. Students will select an animal figure from a fable, and will be guided through simplification using geometry, line, and shapes. Once drawn, students will paint their picture using a colour scheme (such as analogous, warm/cool, or complementary) to create harmony or contrast.

Please note, the paintings will still be wet at the end of the workshop, and will need to be picked up at a later date. Paintings can be picked up during gallery hours (M-F 10-6, Sa-Su 10-5). Speak to the gallery attendant and they will retrieve your artwork.



Preschool-Primary



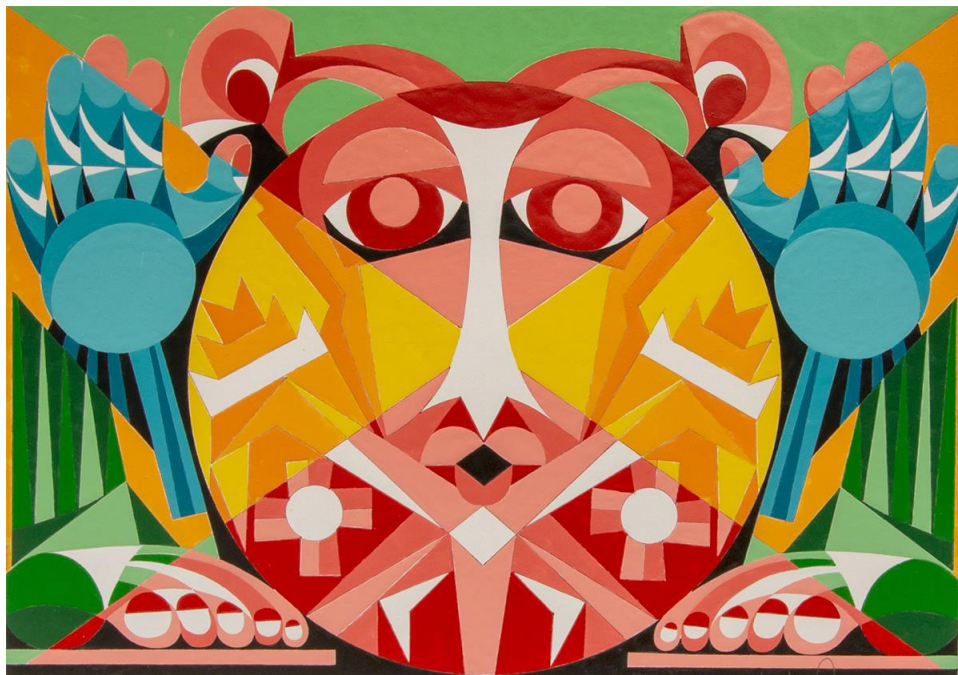
Intermediate

About The Exhibition

The Richmond Art Gallery is proud to present the first solo exhibition by Richmond artist Pierre Vassura. Over forty years in the making, the exhibition will showcase a range of sculptures, paintings and drawings, highlighting a strong graphic style and vibrant use of colour. Many of Vassura's paintings are in series, like classic grand narratives, and the sculptures shown include puppets and purpose-built stages. These artworks are a joyous celebration of storytelling and visual culture that cross national, cultural and language boundaries, drawing from diverse sources. Vassura evokes classic literature including the *Decameron*, *Dante's Divine Comedy* and *Aesop's Fables*, as well as referencing the Tarot and stories from The Bible.

Aesop's Fables

Aesop's Fables is a collection of short, fictional stories that often feature animals as the main characters. Each fable is connected to a short life lesson or moral. Aesop is believed to have been a slave from Africa who was living in ancient Greece. This collection of stories was gathered about three hundred years after his death and popularized throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. As a result, sometimes there are multiple versions of the same story, based on the different sources that gathered them. Pictured below is one of Vassura's vibrant compositions from his series *Analogies of Aesopo's Fables*. This image depicts a human body whose parts are at odds with each other, from the fable *The Belly and the Members*. In this story, the arms, legs, and other body parts go on strike to protest the apparent laziness of the belly, only to discover after becoming weak from hunger, that the belly is indeed just as important as they are.



Fontaine

Another collection of stories that are reimagined in Vassura's work are those of Jean de La Fontaine, a French collector of fables in the late 17th century. Similar to those of Aesop, Fontaine's fables often feature animals to tell wry tales that teach the reader an important lesson. Originally, these stories were created with a sophisticated, adult audience in mind, but they quickly became popular teaching tools for children, particularly among royalty in France and then throughout Europe.



Literature

Vassura's other works reference famed literature that deeply affected the European cultural landscape, including 14th century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* – a text which features 100 witty tales that tell different life lessons. Dante Alighieri, another 14th century Italian author, is represented in a series of 10 paintings inspired by the first 10 cantos of *Inferno*, the author's epic poem that details different sins and punishments for those who do wrong. *Midway on our life's journey*, shown above, details the author's realization that he has become lost in a dark wood, a metaphor that he has strayed from the true path of good.

European Puppetry

In addition to his paintings, Pierre Vassura has created a large body of sculptures, puppets, and marionettes featuring characters from traditional European morality plays and puppet shows. European puppetry has a rich history that was primarily developed through Italian traditions. Puppetry was initially recognized in ancient Greece and Rome, then further developed in the Italian Medieval and Renaissance periods. Like other puppet traditions in regions around the world, Italian puppetry makes use of stock characters whose symbolic values are recognized by the audience. During Medieval and early Renaissance times, **marionettes** (puppets controlled by strings from above) were used by the Christian Church to perform **morality plays**, in which the protagonist meets different characters who symbolize moral qualities. In these plays, each of these symbolic characters is represented by a particular puppet and tries to steer the main character in the direction of good or evil.

This exhibition was co-curated by Jonathan Middleton and Eli Bornowsky, who in addition to being curators are also artists. Of the work and the artist, Bornowsky writes “The sculptures, paintings and drawings exhibited are polychromatic with flat, hard-edged forms, and detailed design. On one hand Vassura’s work holds a strong centralized gestalt with mandala-like energy. On the other hand, Vassura’s baroque visual sensibility lends itself to iteration, and many series of his work repeat formal motifs with cycling colour variations. (...) Vassura considers his visual art to be analogies for the stories and poems that his works refer to, and he has described his work as “analogical formalism”. Vassura rejuvenates themes from classic stories, to act as stepping-stones to be used in search of the “foundations of art, original freedom and the core aspects of being human”. This is a massive claim, but after reading the manifestos written by Vassura, I know it is a claim he champions. The challenge and the pleasure of this exhibition is the opportunity for viewers to meet these claims through his colourful and nearly psychedelic compositions.”

About The Artist

Pierre Vassura was born Romagna, Italy in 1935. The son of an architect and teacher, he enrolled in agricultural studies following the death of his father at age thirteen. Farming was not his passion however, and at age twenty Vassura moved to France in search of artistic experiences. He first secured work as a ceramic designer at the Faiencerie de St. Clement, and later a ceramic studio in Cote d’Azur, Vallauris-Juan les Pins. Vassura became a technical and production expert in several ceramic factories in Switzerland, France, Italy and Israel and he participated in Israel’s vibrant emerging ceramics industry with Palceramic in Haifa. With the Beit-Hagefen Art Gallery, Vassura first exhibited his paintings in Tel-Aviv and Haifa from 1963 to 1965. In the early 1980’s Vassura and his family moved to Richmond, BC. In 2002, Vassura exhibited a mature body of work at Vancouver’s Italian Cultural Centre. *Pierre Vassura: New Work 1983 – 2018* is his first major solo exhibition.

Pierre Vassura’s Website: <http://vassuraanalogyart.com/>

After Your Visit

Activity: Create your own Fable

Aesop's fables were created literally thousands of years ago, in the 5th century BCE, but some of the stories can be traced to even earlier stories recorded in Egyptian papyri. Because of this, the references to the world and the lessons taught within them reflect the time in which they were written. Some moral lessons are universal and never change, but today we are faced with new situations that are not necessarily addressed by the ancient fable writers.

Using the animal you painted in the workshop as your main character, create a fable that teaches a *modern* moral lesson or that updates an existing fable, but told in a modern setting. Some examples:

Modern lessons

Look both ways when you cross the street
Be kind online
Put down the screens and spend some time outside
Recycle

Updated existing fables

The wolf in sheep's clothing becomes *The Creeper in Dog's clothing* (minecraft)
The Ant and the Grasshopper are not preparing for winter, but are instead preparing for a school test

Some common characteristics of fables for students to keep in mind:

- The use of animals and objects to represent human qualities and characteristics. These animals and objects can speak and often act like humans.
- Underlying message meant to teach a moral lesson
- Short in length

For reference there is an excellent website created by the US Library of Congress, which is an interactive online book of fables, adapted from the "The Aesop for Children: with Pictures by Milo Winter," published by Rand, McNally & Co in 1919. You can find it here:

<http://www.read.gov/aesop/001.html>

Extension: Share your work

Compile all the paintings and fables and share them with the school. Put them together into a book of fables, post them in the hallway for other students to read, or put on your own version of a morality play by making puppets and having students perform the stories.

Resources

Aesop's Fables

An excellent website created by the US Library of Congress, which is an interactive online book of fables, adapted from the "The Aesop for Children: with Pictures by Milo Winter," published by Rand, McNally & Co in 1919. <http://www.read.gov/aesop/001.html>

A introduction to who Aesop was and where the fables originated, plus many of the fables listed and available to read: <http://www.taleswithmorals.com>

Online collection of Aesop's Fables: <http://www.aesopfables.com>

Morality Plays

Medieval Plays <https://medievaleurope.mrdonn.org/plays.html>

Drama Online <https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/morality-play-iid-2491>

Geometric Art

Examples of artworks that use shapes <https://artclasscurator.com/artworks-that-use-shape/>
Geometric art <http://www2.mae.ufl.edu/~uhk/GEOMETRIC-ART.pdf>

Dante's Inferno

The epic poem, with resources, reproduced online <http://www.worldofdante.org/inferno1.html>

Italian Puppetry

World Encyclopedia of Puppetry arts <https://wepa.unima.org/en/italy/>

Glossary

Allegory	“Allegory in art is when the subject of the artwork, or the various elements that form the composition, is used to symbolize a deeper moral or spiritual meaning such as life, death, love, virtue, justice etc.” www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/allegory
Classical Antiquity	The long period of cultural history based in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. Also known as the classical era, classical period or classical age.
Contemporary Art	Artwork that is produced in this current time, generally considered to be artworks made from 1970 to the present. Contemporary art is a very broad term, including artworks made in almost any medium and incorporating many different themes and ideas.
Fable	A short story that teaches a lesson or moral, often featuring animal characters that represent human qualities and characteristics.
Formalism	“Formalism is the study of art based solely on an analysis of its form – the way it is made and what it looks like.” https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/formalism
Medium	The material or technique used by the artist to make an artwork. For example, paint is the medium used in a painting.
Morality Play	An allegorical dramatic genre popular in Europe especially during the 15th and 16th centuries, in which moral lessons are taught, and the forces of good struggle against evil.
Sculpture	A sculpture is a three-dimensional work of art. Sculptures may be a carved, modeled, constructed or cast object that can be made of many different art materials. Examples of sculpture can be found throughout the world, as sculpture has been an important part of culture since ancient times.

Image Credits

Cover: Pierre Vassura, *Polychromic Analogies – Octopus*, enamel on wood board.

Page 7: Pierre Vassura, *Analogies of Aesopo's Fables (The Belly and the Members)*, enamel on poster board.

Page 8: Pierre Vassura, *Analogies of Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, Inferno – Cantos 1 to 10 (Midway Upon The Journey of Our Life)*, enamel on wood board.

School Program Supporters and Partners



The Richmond Art Gallery School Art Program is one of many gallery programs made possible by the Richmond Art Gallery Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to extending the reach of our gallery exhibitions through community programming.



www.islbus.com

International Stage Lines is making it possible for more schools to visit by donating free bus travel to and from the gallery. Enter to win a free bus trip at <http://www.richmondartgallery.org/learn-and-create/schools/elementary>



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