

RAG

RICHMOND ART GALLERY
School Art Program



Teacher Guide

Adad Hannah: *The Decameron Retold*

February 10 – April 21, 2019

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 personal experience, community, and culture through art making
- 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
- People connect to others and share ideas through the arts
- 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

About The Exhibition

For this exhibition, *The Decameron Retold*, artist Adad Hannah has created a series of video **tableaux vivants** based on historical paintings inspired by the book *The Decameron*. The works in the exhibition were created through a collaborative process between the artist, gallery, and local community and this is the first time they have ever been seen.

Tableau Vivant

Tableau vivant means “living picture” and refers to a popular practice in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A tableau vivant is a recreation of a work of art through the staging of a live “performance” of the art that can be enjoyed by an audience. In this performance, a stage is set up with a background, participants dress up in costumes to match the people shown in the painting, and then pose to recreate the painting for viewers to enjoy. Adad Hannah has updated this practice through the use of video, and in the exhibition, you will see five video projections of the tableaux he has created. Shown below is a comparison of the original painting, *Il Decamerone*, (1870) by Severin Falkman, and a still video frame from Hannah’s recreation.



The Decameron

One of the major themes of the exhibition is storytelling, and this is reflected in the five paintings being recreated. Each painting is an illustration of a story from the book *The Decameron* which was written by Giovanni Boccaccio. Giovanni Boccaccio lived in Florence and Naples in the 14th century, a time period known as the late middle ages. The book was written in the years following a great tragedy. In 1348, the peoples of Florence experienced a great sickness known as the Black Plague. This was extremely frightening for people as the current medical knowledge was very limited, and the sickness affected over half the population of the city. Having lived through this experience himself, the author of *The Decameron* set the story in Florence in 1348, and in the story ten young people decide that it is too dangerous to remain in the city, so they leave for the countryside. They stay at a villa in the countryside surrounded by beautiful gardens and woods and decide to occupy their time by gathering every afternoon in

the garden to tell each other stories. Each day one person is chosen as the King or Queen of the day, and that person decides what theme each story will be about. Over the course of 10 days, the ten young people tell a total of 100 stories.



Storytelling in Art

The Decameron was an incredibly popular book, and the stories recounted in the book became the inspiration for many paintings over the following six hundred years. The painting shown above, by John William Waterhouse, was painted in 1916 and shows the storytellers from *The Decameron* gathered in a garden and is one of the five paintings chosen by Hannah for his recreations. This crossover from books to paintings illustrates a practice in the arts that is still going on today – the remake or reboot of popular stories. We may look at how comic books are translated into films or television series are remade with updated storylines and characters and think this is a new phenomenon, but it has actually been going on in the arts for millennia. Adad Hannah is continuing this practice of the artistic remake with his practice of recreating paintings in the form of video tableaux vivants and is similarly updating or “rebooting” the original source material with the inclusion of local community members. Hannah has deliberately cast models for the tableaux that reflect the diversity of our community rather than trying to replicate the appearance of the figures in the original paintings, thus updating the original material to respond to our contemporary society. By literally putting community members in the pictures, Hannah is reminding us, the art viewer, that art is for us, and should be about us and reflect our stories, our voices, and our truths.

The Process

In order to create the tableaux, Hannah invited community members to volunteer as both models to pose in the videos, and to create all the backdrops, props, and costumes. The Richmond Cultural Centre became a hub for this creative collaboration as a temporary workshop was set up for the construction of the sets, the painting of the props and backdrops, and sewing of the costumes. Once construction was complete, the tableaux were filmed over the course of three days, in which the sets were assembled and lit, and volunteer models had costumes, hair and makeup done. Once ready, the volunteers arranged themselves in poses to match the paintings and then had to stay still as they were filmed for about 5-6 minutes. The footage you see in the gallery is the continuous filming of the models staying still for the duration of the video. In the exhibition accompanying the finished videos are some of the props, painted backdrops, and costumes, as well as a video and audio piece featuring the volunteers as they describe their experiences working on the project. Hannah's process is deliberately open ended to allow the community collaborators to take ownership of the project and to create space for their creative ideas to shape the final piece.

About the Artist

Adad Hannah holds a Ph.D. and a Master of Fine Arts degree from Concordia University in Montreal, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Emily Carr University of Art & Design in Vancouver. His work is part of over twenty public and private collections, and was exhibited extensively throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, West Africa, Korea, Mexico, and Russia. He has won a number of international awards, including the Canada Council for the Arts' Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award for outstanding mid-career artists in 2009. Hannah is currently represented by Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain in Montreal and Equinox Gallery in Vancouver.

Resources

Adad Hannah's website: www.adadhannah.com

Video Interview with Adad Hannah about this exhibition:
www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=55&v=fsRHG_6WN4c

Adad Hannah, The Diversions, Catalogue by the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery, Text by Daniel Baird, Lisa Daniels, Darryn Doull, Robert Enright, Lee Henderson, Jodh Kissick & Nigel Prince.

Before Your Visit

Background: Life in the Middle Ages

The images in this exhibition are based on the book *The Decameron*, which was written in the middle ages. We will be discussing this story and the images depicted, and students may find it helpful if they have an idea of what life was like in the middle ages prior to viewing the art. A few questions to consider:

What kind of houses did people live in?

What kind of jobs did people do?

What did people wear?

What was life like for children?

Discuss popular stories set in this time period such as fairy tales, Robin Hood, King Arthur, and Joan of Arc.

At the Gallery

Your visit will begin with a tour of *The Decameron Retold* exhibition. *The Decameron* was chosen as the inspiration for the artworks as it is a book about storytelling and stories, and we will focus on this theme throughout the tour and workshop.

In the workshop, students will create an artwork that tells a story starring them as the main character. They will pose as this character for a photograph that they will then incorporate into an artwork which tells their story. Students will have the option to dress in medieval costumes and set their story in the middle ages if they choose, or to create a story of their own making.

After Your Visit

Activity: Storytelling

During the workshop, students will create an artwork that tells a story. Back at school, students can share their stories just like the characters in the Decameron, by getting into small groups, and sharing their stories orally with each other while sharing their artworks with each other.

Extension: Tableau Vivant

Adad Hannah based his tableaux on stories. Take a book your class is familiar with and have students in small groups come up with a tableau to illustrate a scene from the story. Spend some time practicing posing and expressing different emotions to stimulate ideas for their own poses, and practice ways to stay still and concentrate. If time permits, students can create costume elements and props to help tell the story. Have students perform their tableaux for the class, and video them if you want to create a video tableau like Adad Hannahs!

Glossary

Collage	Collage was originally a French word, derived from the word “ <i>coller</i> ”, meaning “to paste”. Collages are made by gluing elements such as papers, photos, or cloth to a flat surface, creating a new picture or design.
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.
Installation	An art form that uses almost any media (sculpture, video, paint, etc.) that creates an environment for the viewer to experience.
Medium	The material or technique used by the artist to make an artwork. For example, paint is the medium used in a painting.
Tableau Vivant	French for 'living picture', is a static scene containing one or more actors or models. They are stationary and silent, usually in costume, carefully posed, with props and/or scenery. It combines aspects of theatre and the visual arts. In the case of Adad Hannah’s work, it is also a reference to early photography where people posing for photographs had to stay still for a long period of time while they waited for the camera to take the picture.

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