

I used to scrawl in pencil and spread crimson lake, Prussian blue and gamboge on every piece of paper that came to hand. . . . From these artistic attempts I have retained the mania for blackening the margins of my manuscripts and the main part of my private letters with formless illustrations which flatterers pretend to find amusing. Who knows? I might have been a great painter instead of the poet that I am.
—PAUL VERLAINE

chapter

3

What's Art Have to Do with It?

PAMELA B. CHILDERS

In the late 1970s I began presenting slides of American art that related to the American literature my English classes were studying. Nothing worked quite so well as linking the transcendentalists with Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School, especially when students saw Asher Durand's painting *Kindred Spirits* showing the poet William Cullen Bryant and the artist Thomas Cole standing on a jutting rock in the Catskill Mountains of New York. The connection between artist and writer was undeniable!

But I wasn't content simply to look at slides of paintings. I wanted more but didn't know what *more* meant. Then, Patrick McCormack, a French teacher at Red Bank Regional High School, in Little Silver, New Jersey, approached me about taking our students on a bus trip to New York City to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick Museum. By the 1980s, Patrick and I were scheduling annual trips for students in junior honors English (American literature) and in the French National Honor Society. I had learned that the American Wing of the Metropolitan offered American literature students a chance to see art associated with the literature they were reading. We would visit the American Wing, select our favorite works of art, and set about describing them. But was I really making the most of this learning experience? My answer came on one of the bus trips, when I found myself responding through poetry to the churches, buildings, and bridges on our trip up the New Jersey Turnpike to the Lincoln Tunnel. What might I do to inspire students to respond (intellectually

and emotionally) to what they saw in the American Wing? I began to make a list of paintings, stained glass, and sculpture in the American Wing, and, running out of time, simply listed the names of American artists, since many were represented by several works.

On our next trip, I decided to distribute the list during the bus ride. I asked students to

- select a work by each artist listed
- describe the work as specifically as they could in a sentence or two

Within the first few minutes of our arrival at the museum, my students were as excited as young children on their first scavenger hunt. They collaborated to locate the works, while I strolled around the American Wing answering questions and enjoying my own participation in the game. As we boarded the bus for the short ride to the Frick, the students were even more excited.

“What are we going to do at the Frick?” they asked.

“Any suggestions?”

“Come up with something a bit more creative,” they answered.

The Frick Museum had been a private home for many years, and the dining room table still displayed a magnificent centerpiece of fresh flowers, just as it must have when the building was a family residence. I suggested the following task:

Pretend that this is your home and you have just been told that you will have to part with all the possessions except three works of art. Select the three you want to keep and tell why you want to keep them. Don't worry about the size or the monetary value of your selections.

Students began knocking into each other in their eagerness to get off the bus and into the Frick ahead of their peers. (Once I began the same writing assignment, I realized what a difficult task I had proposed. My final choices were two paintings and a larger-than-life sculpture of Venus.) And we had to pull some students almost literally from the museum to get them home on schedule.

During the next week, I joined students as they worked on these two assignments. The students realized that their writing was as important as the works of art they had viewed at the Metropolitan and the Frick. It was a way of reflecting on their own experiences. Before, they had taken notes on the slides we viewed or the pictures they saw at the museum by rote, but now they were relating images to their own experience and communicating their ideas clearly on paper. They were eager to share their writing with their peers and eventually with me. Students wanted to become “coauthors” with the artist. Rather

than just react to a painting, they wanted to participate with the artist by exploring the impact a work evokes. The artist uses the visual medium, and students wanted to respond in one of their own—words. They had engaged in a personal dialogue with a visual work, and now they were creating a text to validate that dialogue (Adams 1985; Scholes 1989). Their visual experience had moved into their own private worlds. They were more concerned about the quality of their writing because they believed their opinions were important.

Dawn published the following poem in the school literary magazine, *The Crow's Nest*:

The Portrait

Her long auburn hair is hidden
by roses and lace.
Her pale brow wrinkles slightly
In a questioning manner.
Her green eyes dance in the light,
From beneath long dark lashes.
Her Roman nose turns up
To scoff at life.
Her full red mouth frozen
In a twittering snicker.
Her ivory shoulders thrown back
In arrogant pride.
Her blue brocade frock barely visible
Under the wooden frame.
The rest is hidden . . .
"Lady Ashley."

In the same issue of *The Crow's Nest*, Elizabeth Kahn described her choice at the Frick Museum, Degas' *Woman in a Tub*. "Motherhood still lingers in the golden light of her hair. A shadow of pain crosses her face. She is still a woman, another child may come, [and] a golden glow promises everything."

This annual trip, and variations on the assignments, became part of the required curriculum for American literature, and over the next eight years or so, all the juniors participated. (If we had lived more than an hour from New York City, we would have found another museum or art gallery closer to home and used its collection to encourage writing in response to visual media.) Through individual conferences and annual course evaluations, I learned that students never tired of the adventure or of the creative excitement of writing in response to visual images. I made sure that the students were involved in devising our writing activities, which tended to be student-centered. They came to see me as a student, too, because I participated in and learned from their writing activities.

Since those early writing assignments involving the visual arts, I have tried many other projects that help students of all ages with writing. I don't believe in using such assignments as filler for days when I have nothing better to do or before or after a vacation. (I've watched colleagues show films on Fridays, and fill class time with visual material that has nothing to do with the learning involved in the course or in students' lives.) My point is quite clear:

the visual arts become a means of taking all of us beyond one art form, the written word, and of adding a wealth of texture through words.

Students end up communicating much more than they could discover otherwise. The integration of the visual and the verbal enables the writer and the reader to communicate more clearly on the same channel, or maybe I should say, the same operating system. As I study movements, such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, I am reminded of how the visual and the written work hand in hand, from paint brush to pen and vice versa.

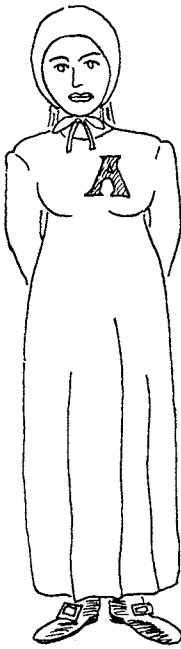
A Connection with Art and Writing

I remember one exchange I never would have had if it hadn't been for art. Katie was a sullen girl in my honors-level American literature class. I knew she had to be intelligent in order to meet the entry requirements, but she had yet to demonstrate much in her succinct oral responses and terse pieces of prose. In the third week of school, I introduced daily journal writing. Sometimes I gave a prompt as a thought-provoking lead for a class discussion on a new literary period, a literary device, or a connection among several works we had been reading. Most of the time we would just spend five to ten minutes writing, and sometimes longer, if necessary. After a few weeks, this bright group of students learned to use these journal times for freewrites, allowing them to escape the pressures of the difficult academic schedules they were carrying. I indicated to the class, since I wrote with them, that I was willing at anytime to participate in a dialogue journal with anyone.

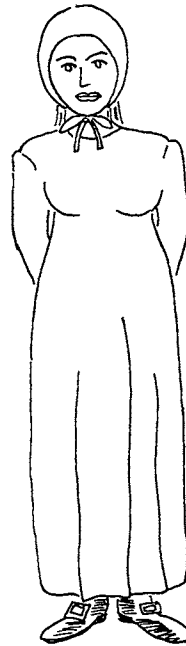
One day Katie walked into class as the bell rang, dropped her books in a pile on top of her desk facing mine, and just stared at me. I wrote in my journal, "Want to talk about it?" and shoved it toward her. She looked at my writing, smirked, and responded, "I don't want to talk about it right now, but this is kind of neat." Before I read this message, Katie had begun sketching in her journal and chuckling to herself. Finally, she returned my journal and passed hers over for me to see. I can't reproduce her drawings exactly, but Figure 3-1 gives some idea of Katie's message.

My reaction to her sketches started both of us laughing and ended

Figure 3-1
Katie's drawing #1



Adulterated HESTER



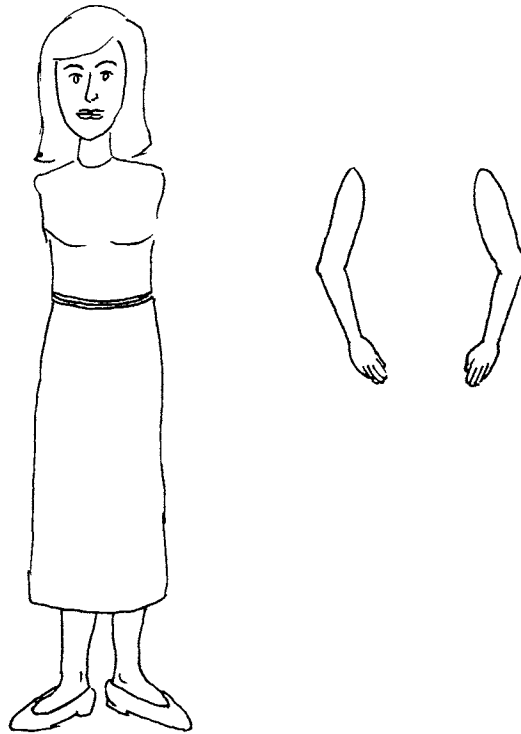
Unadulterated HESTER

any chance of further journal writing for that day. I realized that when Katie could not put her feelings into words, she could communicate through her art. Throughout the year, she let me know when it was time to talk with her pictures rather than her words. As she moved from that form of dialogue to written communication, her oral communicative skills developed, too. A girl who had been a loner, considered an "artsy" silent type, soon became a respected, actively verbal member of the class community. Other students called upon her artistic talents, and the two of us covered a lot of ground in our dialogue journal during the year. Katie feared that her parents were going to move again; the house she had loved, within walking distance of the school, was replaced with a condo on the ocean, miles from school and her few friends. She feared what would happen after her senior year, even questioning whether her parents would pay for her to go to college. I took Katie to our school psychologist and stayed with her as long as she needed me there. Later, in class, she sketched during our class

discussion, a funny grin across her face. I couldn't wait to finish talking about *A Farewell to Arms*, never one of my favorites. As the bell rang, Katie put something similar to the sketch in Figure 3-2 on my desk and called from the doorway, "See ya tomorrow, Mrs. Farrell [Childers]."

Katie has since moved on to a career as an artist after getting a scholarship to Rutgers. We haven't seen each other in years, but other students have told me she's doing fine. Would Katie have broken through those communication barriers without her art? I don't know, but I do know that she was able to become an active communicator through her art, her words, and her voice by the end of the year. The sense of humor apparent in her art added another element to her ability to get her message across to a real audience, me.

Figure 3-2
Katie's drawing #2



A "FARRELL"

Two ARMS

Still Life and Poetry

A few years ago my poetry class was invited to visit art teacher Catherine Neuhardt-Minor's art studio. Here she had created a still life to give art students a sense of perspective in their drawing. The two sides of the still life had latticework in front of them. Through either end (or through sections of the lattice), one could observe a platform holding the following objects, all draped with cobwebs:

- a snowshoe rocker with a shawl draped over it
- a stuffed snake
- a gold pump
- artist's brushes in a pottery pitcher
- a stuffed raccoon on a tree stump

Students were given no directions for their writing other than to observe from whatever place they wished to stand or sit and to begin writing whatever came to mind. What occurred went far beyond classroom interaction and discussion. Somehow the still life triggered imaginative, creative poetry far beyond any they had previously written. Here are some excerpts:

The vines seep through the hole in the attic.
The dust and cobwebs
make the life in here die.
But, this place will always be alive
to me.

Once upon a time.
Fairies lose their innocence, . . .
Grimm drinks bourbon by the pint . . .
Imagination isn't useful, because everything is real.
Our babies are old.

I question whether these students would have considered such thoughts or written them down without this three-dimensional visual experience. I tried the same activity the following year, and Catherine produced an even more challenging still life. It had a variety of objects, including

- an American flag
- some gardening tools
- empty picture frames hanging from a tool rack

Recently, a colleague who is an artist and a poet explained how she felt compelled to create a painting based on a poem that another friend had written. When she finished, she was inspired to write her

own poem based on her painting. Things didn't end there, however, because her new poem triggered the creation of still another painting. Perhaps, for her, the cycle will never end. When one is multitalented, visual and verbal art continue to inspire each other. For most of us, however, it is the visual world around us, the visual art of others, and the pictures we create in our mind that inspire our written responses. Although we may be surrounded by visual images, so often we don't stop to consider or look at our responses.

The Environment

It is important to create a classroom environment within which the following can happen:

- Students are offered visual stimulation.
- Students have a place to talk and write about that visual experience.
- Students have an opportunity to share the experience in public.

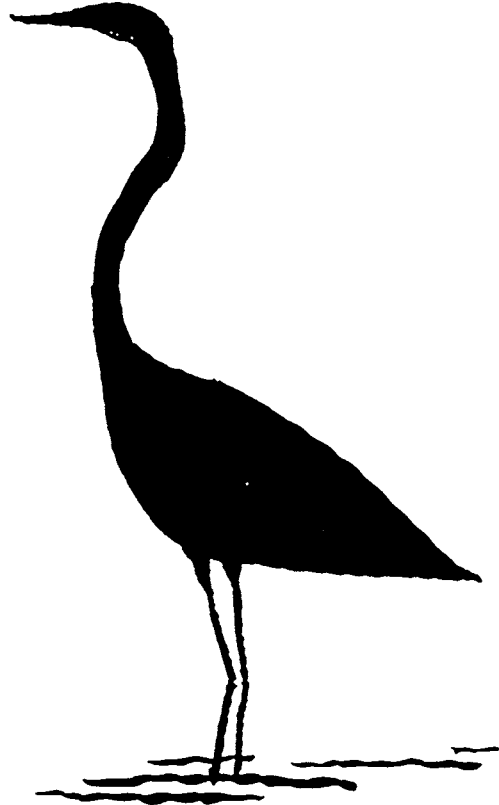
Certainly I would encourage students to tune in to their other senses for inspiration. But everyone *sees* in the transcendental sense. When someone says, "I see," they mean I understand or I comprehend. In talking about revision, Donald Murray refers to it as "re-vision," meaning to understand or comprehend in a new way. Murray himself understands the uses of the visual in written communication (see Figure 3-3).

Every day we should remember to bring in the visual, not only to stimulate our students' writing but also to help them "re-vision" their world and revise it. If they are having trouble using details, we can say, "Look around this room, then close your eyes and tell me what you saw." We write those details on the board or have students type them into a computer. "Now, look again and see all the details you have missed. Then look at your piece of writing and give your reader the same kind of details." For teachers in subjects across the disciplines the visual arts can stimulate new ways of seeing, writing, and thinking. The visual and cultural contexts students experience on trips to museums create a rich personal environment for verbal explorations.

Figure 3-3
Donald Murray's sketch

Pam

Don Murray



Writing

The poet must learn
the terrible patience of the heron

the slow, dainty steps toward the yet unseen
and, yes, the sudden cruel strike

but most of all the calm
waiting

the certainty
of prey.

Donald M. Murray
