Lesson Plan: Play a Painting
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 3-5
Estimated Time: One class period

Introduction
Music is auditory, existing in time, but art is visual, existing in space. The process of examining music and art together can highlight the distinctive elements of each form. It can also demonstrate how their characteristics are interrelated. In this lesson, students create musical interpretations of two works of art.

Lesson Objectives
• Learn to describe and analyze works of art
• Explore the relationship between music and the visual arts

Key Terms:
• composition
• improvisation

Instructional Materials
• Classroom percussion instruments or instruments made from rubber bands, paper, blocks, etc.

Procedures
Activity One
• Encourage students to think about the sounds they can make on their own and with instruments. Begin discussion with the following questions:
  o How many ways can you make sounds with your hands?
  o How many different sounds can you make with your mouth and voice?
  o What different sounds can be produced with handmade or percussion instruments?
• Look together at Pablo Picasso’s *The Old Guitarist*, late 1903-early 1904, and discuss it, asking:
  
  o What do you see?
  o What is the dominant color in the painting?
  o What is the painting’s mood? What other elements of the composition contribute to this mood?
  o What would the music played by the old man sound like?
  o Have students describe the sounds in detail. Ask:
    o Are the sounds loud, soft, long, short, high, low, smooth, rough?

• Encourage students to try to produce the sounds of the painting, first with their hands, mouths, or voices, and then with their instruments.

**Activity Two:**

• Once students have finished interpreting an art object as sound, have them "play" a work of art. Look at Vasily Kandinsky’s *Improvisation 30 (Cannons)*, 1913. Ask:

  o What do you see? (real objects such as a cannon, formal elements such as colors, lines, etc.)

• Tell students that in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky associated color with the sounds of musical instruments: green with the cello, yellow with brass instruments, and white with silence. Ask them whether or not they agree with Kandinsky’s associations:

  o How do you feel about Kandinsky’s associations?
  o Are they valid? Are they arbitrary?

• Ask students to describe what sounds come to mind while looking at the painting and have them try to produce these sounds with their hands, mouths, voices, and instruments.

• Find out which parts of the painting students think they should play alone, as solos, and which parts they want to play together, in chorus. Ask them in what order they think they should play the parts and why. Encourage them to consider how their eyes move across the painting. Ask:

  o What attracts your eyes first?
  o What do you think the artist painted first?
  o What elements of the painting are the most prominent (loud)?
  o What elements seem to be in the background (soft)?
• Act as the composer/conductor for the first performance; then allow a series of students to take that role. Let the composer/conductors choose from the proposed sounds the ones that they want to use to present each visual element. Allow them to conduct the piece more than once if necessary to achieve the effects they desire.

Glossary

composition (n)
the arrangement of elements, such as space, shapes and colors, in a work of art

improvisation (n)
an act performed or composed spontaneously, without previous preparation or rehearsal

Evaluation

Base students’ evaluation on their ability to identify elements of line, shape, space, color, texture, pattern, and mood in the visual arts while making varied and creative musical sounds inspired by these elements.

Illinois State Licensing Standards
Fine Arts: 25, 26