Lesson Plan: The Body Talks
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 4–12
Estimated Time: Two to three class periods

Introduction
Mannerist painting and sculpture of the 16th century and Baroque art of the 17th century are populated by figures whose gestures are active, even vigorous, and often convey intense emotions. The lively gestures in Mannerist and Baroque art contrast with those of figures in Renaissance art of the previous 15th and early 16th centuries, whose bodies are posed to lend compositions greater order and harmony.

In this lesson, students explore Mannerist and Baroque works by El Greco, Alessandro Vittoria, and Peter Paul Rubens to come to a better understanding of gesture and its ability to bring drama and meaning to art. Older students are introduced to different kinds of gesture (descriptive, symbolic, and rhetorical). All students act out charades incorporating the gestures in the objects, and then make gesture drawings of fellow performers in their class. In a project for evaluation, students create a narrative drawing that incorporates well-defined, easy-to-read gestures.

Lesson Objectives
- Gain an appreciation of how gestures express moods and emotions and help define artistic narratives
- Create a charade inspired by human gesture
- Make gesture drawings

Key Terms
- Mannerist
- Baroque
- Renaissance
- gesture (descriptive, symbolic, rhetorical)
- mood
- emotion
- narrative
- pantomime
Instructional Materials

- sketching pencils
- charcoal
- paper

Procedures

Discussion

- Prepare for the activity by reading the Art Access descriptions of the objects above. Project two or all of the images before the students. High-school teachers should also read Rudolph Wittkower's definitions of gesture in art.

- Introduce the concept of gesture (a movement usually of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea, sentiment, or attitude) and how it can convey mood, emotion, and meaning in art. High-school teachers can define the term further by introducing students to what is meant by symbolic, descriptive, and rhetorical gesture.

- Ask each student to identify and describe carefully at least one gesture in the projected works and then select a word to describe this gesture (e.g., in Alessandro Vittoria's *The Annunciation*, Mary grasps her robe at her chest with wide fingers indicating surprise or shock; a rhetorical gesture).

- Ask students to notice if the gesture they chose connects with another gesture. If so, how? (e.g., in Vittoria's *The Annunciation*, archangel Gabriel lifts his right arm and points to heaven; the cupid above his head does the same. They are both indicating that Gabriel's message for Mary has arrived from heaven; descriptive gestures)

- Ask students to identify the gestures that most help the viewer understand the characters’ relationship and what is happening in the work. (Mary's hand on her chest and her quickly turned body express her surprise at the angel's message from heaven.) Ask them to imagine what a speech bubble from each figure’s mouth might say.

- Review how the gestures (and facial expressions) allowed the students as viewers to understand emotion and mood, as well as the narrative, in the objects. Discuss how the gestures create tension in the objects.

Activity

Charades

- Divide the class into groups of two to five. Have students in each group select a work and then a character in that work (the snake can be included in the Rubens image).
Instruct each group to develop a two-minute skit using the gestures portrayed in the work and others needed to act out the skit.

Allow the students about 15 minutes to prepare. Have each group pantomime their skit.

As skits are performed, ask the rest of the class to suggest dialogue for the gestures. At the end of each performance, compare the viewers’ interpretation with the actors’ intended meaning for various gestures.

**Gesture Drawing**

As a warm-up exercise, ask students to quickly and loosely draw lines that look like tight spirals or metal springs.

Have each group pose in a moment of their skit (one that includes well-defined gestures). Ask the other students to quickly sketch the group’s poses using spirals to define the body movements (see illustration above left). Allow students a minute for each figure in the group to complete their gesture drawings.

**Evaluation**

Have students use their gesture drawings as the basis for new narratives (incorporating at least two figures) that they will execute in another drawing. Students can identify another moment in one of the charades or create another scene altogether.

Encourage students to incorporate gestures in their drawings that create an interesting tension and make the narrative in the work relatively clear.

Base students’ evaluations on their incorporation of well-defined gestures in their final projects and on their earlier class participation.

**Rudolph Wittkower’s definitions of gesture in art**

"We may perhaps differentiate between three…'pictorial types of gestures, namely between descriptive, symbolic, rhetorical…"

"Descriptive gestures, like pointing, elucidate a story or narrative and are therefore needed when painting or sculpture have to deal with a literary theme."

"Rhetorical…gestures reflect and illuminate emotional conditions."

"Symbolic gestures belong mainly to pre-Renaissance art; from the 15th century on they are, as a rule, confined to such attitudes as blessing. I call this symbolic gesture because, in contrast to the rhetorical ones, we are faced with a code which must be known in order to be understood."

Glossary

Baroque (adj)
style of art and architecture prevalent in Europe in the 17th and early 18th centuries, characterized by extravagant theatrical forms and including dramatic manipulations of space, vivid illusions, opulent color, movement, and strong contrasts of light and dark

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

Mannerism (n)
designation for paintings and sculptures produced between about 1520 and 1580 (the later Renaissance) characterized by an interest in the distortion of formal conventions, exaggeration of expression, elongated proportions, enigmatic gestures, unusual colors, and an irrational treatment of space and light. Derived from the Italian word maniera, suggesting grace, playfulness, and formal beauty.

Renaissance (n)
the French word renaissance, meaning "rebirth." In 15th- and 16th-century Europe, the revival of learning, literature, art, and architecture emphasized and often imitated Classical examples from ancient Greece and Rome. Although the Renaissance was initially centered in Italy, aspects of Renaissance culture also appeared in Northern Europe (particularly Flanders, the Netherlands, and Germany), especially during the 16th century.

Illinois Learning Standards
Fine Arts: 25–26