Lesson Plan: Right and Wrong? Moral Messages in Art
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 6–10

Introduction
Art often reflects the values of the culture or period in which it is made. Genre paintings depicting everyday life, especially those of the 17th through the 19th centuries, often emphasized morals and ethics, from the ills of vain behavior to corruption in politics. Dutch painter Jan Steen’s The Family Concert of 1666 addresses behavior in the home, including vignettes such as a dog confronting a cat who approaches his food, a scene that suggests the vice of possessiveness.

American artist William Sidney Mount raises the issue of alcohol’s effect on people in his Bar-room Scene of 1835 by including a temperance notice on the wall of the tavern and a dancing man whose disheveled appearance suggests he has a life troubled by alcohol. In the United States, during the early 19th century, temperance groups formed to condemn excessive alcohol consumption, making clear its ill effects on society through public campaigns and legislative lobbying.

In this lesson, students explore the Steen and Mount paintings and their presentation of moral issues. They discuss ethical debates in society today and write a short position paper on an issue raised by the paintings or in the discussion. As a follow-up, students use the Steen and Mount paintings as models for a collage-painting in which they define and, if desired, visualize a position on the issue about which they have written.

Lesson Objectives
- Learn to analyze a work of art and to explore its relationship to the values of a particular culture
- Identify the various ways in which an artist might address moral behavior in a work of art
- Discuss contemporary moral issues and then contemplate them in writing and art making

Key Terms
- ethics
- morals
- culture
- genre painting
- Baroque
Instructional Materials
- pencil
- writing paper
- colored pencils
- paint (tempera or watercolor)
- collage materials
- scissors
- glue
- paper

Procedures

Discussion

Prepare:
- Help students define the terms "morals", "ethics", and "culture".
- Ask them if they can think of examples of how morals are different within distinct cultures or periods of history.

Look:
- Prepare in advance to discuss the paintings by reading the Art Access descriptions of the Steen and Mount objects. Project the image/s before the students and, for each painting, ask them to describe what they see. Encourage them to list all of the objects and figures in the painting. Then have them link these elements and suggest what they think is happening in the paintings.

Reflect:
- Ask students how figures’ and animals’ actions or inanimate objects in the paintings reflect or appear to be evidence of certain kinds of behavior. (In Steen’s image, for example, one sees flirting, confrontation, and an emphasis on acquiring and displaying material possessions.)
- Help students discover the actions or objects in the painting that would have suggested more specific behaviors or offered lessons on behavior more readily understood by 17th-century or 19th-century viewers. (In Steen’s image, the lute and the pipe, for example; in Mount’s image, the temperance poster and the jug.)
**Critique:**

- Ask students if the artists’ positions about the behaviors exhibited or suggested in the paintings are clear. Why or why not?
- Ask students if the issues relating to morals in these paintings are still relevant today. Encourage them to provide a reason and discuss the issues further, exploring the varied perspectives on the general topics addressed: behavior in the home and alcohol use.

**Debate:**

- Have students think of other moral and ethical issues of concern to today (e.g., students’ behavior toward fellow students, how to mete out punishments for certain crimes, drug use). Have them explore varied perspectives on one or more of the issues. Ask if they can think of contemporary images that address these perspectives (e.g. advertising, television shows, movies, community murals).

**Activity**

- Have students write a one to two page position paper on one of the issues raised in the paintings or later discussion from a 21st-century perspective. Encourage them to declare a stance on the issue in the first paragraph, then present the range of perspectives on the issue, outline their point of view in more detail, and conclude why they believe it is the right position.

**Evaluation**

- Have students use their position papers as the basis for images they will execute in a painting-collage. Encourage them to consider:
  - How figures’ actions will define the issue and possibly reflect their own position on the issue.
  - What nonfigural clues they will include to make the issue clear to a viewer of their work.
  - How the images they have chosen from magazines and other sources display certain behaviors and how incorporation of these images into a work of art might change their meaning.
  - Base students’ evaluations on their ability to analyze a work of art, their participation in class discussion, their writing assignment, and how well their art assignments reflect an awareness of the strategies used by Steen and Mount to visualize moral behavior in art.
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

**genre** *(n)*
scenes of anonymous figures engaged in everyday activities; a category of subject matter in the fine arts (for example, the genre of landscape painting)

**Illinois Learning Standards**
Social Science: 18
Fine Arts: 27