The Art of Storytelling
Introduction: Artists Tell Stories

How are contemporary artists documenting current events and telling stories of our lives through art making?

Throughout history, artists have created works of art that reflect the events, beliefs, and values of their culture or time. Artists illustrate narratives in many ways, using a series of images to present parts of a story, or by selecting a central moment to illustrate an entire story.

From Gustavus Hesselius, who arrived in New Sweden in 1711 to contemporary artists living and working in Delaware today, artists have been telling the story of Delaware and its inhabitants since the time of its founding as the colony of New Sweden in 1638.

Before we begin telling stories through artwork, let’s learn about two important Delaware artists: Howard Pyle and Edward Loper. Both lived and worked for most of their careers in their hometown of Wilmington, DE. While their artwork is very different, Loper was influenced by Pyle’s murals that were displayed in the Wilmington Public Library by the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, and both were influential and beloved teachers to many future artists.
Howard Pyle was born in Wilmington to a middle-class Quaker family in 1853. He became interested in art at a very early age and at 16, began traveling to Philadelphia for art classes. He later moved to New York City where he found himself at the center of America's growing publishing industry. In New York, he found work as an artist and learned the technical demands of successful illustration. Today, Howard Pyle is known as "the father of American Illustration".

Over the course of his career, Pyle illustrated many popular works and authors, producing more than 3,000 images for magazines, books, and other publications! He also wrote and illustrated dozens of books, ranging from historical fiction to fantasy, and adventures. His imagination brought us the iconic image of the swashbuckling pirate and transformed Robin Hood from a villain to a virtuous folk hero. You can read the Merry Adventures of Robin Hood by Howard Pyle [HERE].

Both fine and commercial artists flocked to his Wilmington studio to hear "the master" lecture and have him critique their work. For five years, he invited selected student to spend the summer working with him in nearby Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. When he established his art school in Wilmington in 1900, there were 500 applicants for 12 openings!

Maxfield Parrish, attended some of Pyle's lectures and described the effect that Pyle had on his students:

"Somehow, after a talk with him, you felt inspired to go out and do great things and wondered by what magic he did it."

Maxfield Parrish, painter and illustrator

Pyle believed that to bring reality to a scene, the artist had to be part of it. When he depicted a battle, he could smell the gunpowder, hear the cannon, and see the soldiers around him. Painting would leave him physically exhausted, as though he had experienced the ordeal firsthand.

Toward the end of his career, Pyle turned to painting murals for public buildings and began studying more closely the work of Old-World masters. He moved to Florence, Italy, in 1910 and died there the following year. His Wilmington studio was purchased by one of his students and is the home of an active artists group today.

In the early 1900s, an effort led by Pyle's students to ensure that the bulk of his work remained in Wilmington, led to the founding of the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, which later became the Delaware Art Museum. During his lifetime, Pyle taught and encouraged a generation of artists including several female artists, and his work continues to inspire others even now.
ED LOPER, SR. (1916-2011)

Born to a single mother and raised primarily by his grandmother in one of Wilmington’s ethnically diverse neighborhoods, Ed Loper grew up in a segregated world. He attended all black schools and though he wanted to be an artist, he knew that was not a path typically open to African Americans at that time.

As a student at Howard High School, the state’s only high school for African Americans, Loper excelled at sports. He was awarded an athletic scholarship to Lincoln University, but turned it down. Instead he took jobs in town, doing manual labor while practicing his art skills in his spare time, one of Lopers jobs was at the Allied Kid leather tanning factory.

Life was hard for young black men in segregated Delaware. Loper remembers, “On the one hand, we [black youth] were told to compete, to be the best we could be. We only had an even chance to succeed if we excelled. Good enough did not cut it. On the other hand, our daily life showed us we did not have a chance at all.”

In the mid-1930s, in the middle of the Great Depression, Loper applied and was hired for the Federal Art Project. Finally, he was being paid to produce art! He was mentored by Walter Pyle, a nephew of the famous illustrator Howard Pyle, and excelled, becoming one of 30 Delaware artists hired for the Federal Art Project’s Index of American Design. The only African American in the group, Loper was not allowed to eat in the same restaurants as his co-workers, or to exhibit his work in certain places.

Even though he was finally able to create art, Loper continued to work at Allied Kid, where he liked to paint the workers in his off time. Eventually, the owner saw one of his paintings of the workers and immediately bought it and gave Loper studio space to teach at the factory.

By the age of 31, Loper had achieved status as a full-time artist and was teaching others to paint. His work was shown in the Robert Carlen Gallery in Philadelphia where his paintings sold out on the first day! In time, he was featured in important regional and national exhibitions.

Loper remained in his hometown, painting and teaching well into his 80s. His work is in the collections of major institutions as well as private collectors, and his reputation as a teacher is legendary. He was the first African American to win an award from the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, the group that later established the Delaware Art Museum. In 1998, in recognition for his lifelong contribution to the arts, he was awarded a Delaware Governor’s Award for the Arts. His passing in 2011 was deeply mourned.

Following in the footsteps of Howard Pyle and Ed Loper, contemporary Delaware artists continue to create art that documents the stories of our past and present. Today, the Delaware Contemporary presents exhibitions of regionally, nationally, and internationally recognized artists that explore topical issues in contemporary art and society.
Reading a Work of Art

A painting is worth a thousand words, but how do you read them? We can "read" a work of art just like we read a story!

What are the main parts of a story?
- **Setting** - What is the setting in this work of art? Where or when does it take place?

- **Character** - Who are the characters in this work of art?

- **Plot/Action** - What do you think is happening in this work of art? What do you see that makes you say that?

We are going to look at paintings by Howard Pyle, Ed Loper, and other Delaware artists to learn how to tell stories using art. Then, we’ll create our own art to tell a story!

But before we get started, let’s set up our studio!

Set up your studio and gather your supplies!

Throughout history, art studios have been spaces for production, experimentation, and creative expression. Beginning in medieval monasteries and Renaissance bottegas, studio spaces evolved as the materials and technology available changed the way artists conceive and create works of art. Set up your own studio space and gather some supplies for making your artwork!

**General Supply List:**
- Paper to draw or paint on
- Pencil and eraser
- Markers, ballpoint pens, crayons, or colored pencils
- Acrylic or watercolor paint
- Paintbrushes and containers
- Ruler

**Contemporary Connection**

Learn more about the studio practices of contemporary Delaware artist Seonglan Kim Boyce.
Elements of a Story

Now that your studio is ready, let's learn more about the three elements of a story: setting, character, and plot.

Setting— Where? When?

The setting in a story or work of art can be a real time period and geographical location or a fictional world and unfamiliar time period. It also includes the physical landscape, climate, weather, and the societal and cultural surroundings that serve as a backdrop for the action. In paintings and illustrations, artists utilize a single point perspective or vanishing point on the horizon to create the illusion of space in the foreground, middle-ground, and background of a composition.

Single point perspective gives the illusion of a three-dimensional space in a work of art. Objects in the foreground, or “front”, of the image appear larger and get smaller as they converge toward a single “vanishing point” on the horizon line in the background. The horizon line in a landscape is where the sky meets the ground and represents the eye level of the viewer in a work of art. The vanishing point is a spot on the horizon where imaginary perspective lines converge to create the illusion of space. Practice finding the horizon line, vanishing point, and perspective lines by using a ruler to draw on a printed picture or photo from a magazine.

Let’s practice!

Look at this painting and answer the questions below.

- What is the setting in this work of art? What natural or man-made elements do you recognize in the scene?

- Describe and discuss the colors in the painting. How do colors impact the mood or feeling of the scene?

- How has the artist used perspective to create the illusion of space in the painting?

In the 1940’s Loper used vivid colors to paint landscapes and cityscapes of his neighborhood in Wilmington.
**Draw Your Own Setting: Create your own landscape or cityscape!**

1. Choose your location. Look out the window or go outside and find a spot to illustrate. Think about how the space makes you feel and the natural or built elements you will include in the scene.

2. In the space below or on a separate piece of paper, draw a horizon line across the page and think about the foreground, middle ground, and background of your scene or composition.

3. Look closely and use a pencil to add the landscape elements you see to the illustration. Think about their size and position in relationship to the horizon line as you draw. Remember that elements closer to the horizon line should appear smaller than elements in the foreground or “front” of the scene.

4. Use crayons, markers, colored pencils, or paints to complete your illustration. Think about the way color choices can convey the mood or feeling of the scene.

**Character - Who?**

In a story, a character is a person, animal, being, creature, or thing. Writers use descriptive language to describe a character’s qualities or attributes and help the reader visualize the character as they perform the actions and speak dialogue to tell the story. Before photography, portraits of important mythical or historical figures were sculpted or painted. Portraits have been used throughout history to illustrate people or characters in works of art. Details included in a portrait, such as clothing, accessories, animals, and objects, can tell us about who the person is. A portrait can illustrate a single person, or a work of art can include multiple figures or characters. When an artist illustrates themselves, it is called a “self-portrait”.

**Let’s practice!** The illustration you see here is by Howard Pyle, from a short story he wrote for Harper’s Weekly called, “The Fate of a Treasure Town.”

- What do you notice about the character in this work of art?

- Who do you think this person is? What do you see that makes you say that?

- What are some character traits you pick up on by looking at this illustration?

**Contemporary Connection**

Explore the work of contemporary Delaware Artist Jenna Lucente.
**Draw a Character: Create your own self-portrait!**

1. Think about the aspects of your identity that you want to illustrate in your self-portrait. What details will you include that will tell the viewer about who you are?
2. In the space below or on a separate piece of paper, use basic shapes to sketch out your head, neck, and shoulders. Your portrait can illustrate your head and shoulders or your entire body.
3. Grab a mirror and look closely at the shape of your eyes, nose, and mouth. Use a pencil to sketch your facial features.
4. Sketch the shape of your ears and hair. Think about your hair as one big shape, not just lots of tiny lines.
5. Draw your clothing, jewelry, and any additional accessories that you want to include that will tell viewers about your interests or personality.
6. Use colored pencils, crayons, or markers to color your portrait.

**Draw a Character: Create a portrait of a literary character!**

1. Explore a passage or text from a book or magazine like the following excerpt of "The Rat Trap" by James Branch Cabell. Look for descriptive words that help the reader visualize the character and make a list of these elements.
2. Review the list of descriptive characteristics and, using the blank space on the next page or on a separate piece of paper, create your own portrait of the character based on elements from the text.

"... small and thinnish she was, with soft and profuse hair that, for all its blackness, gleamed in the lamp-light with stray ripples of brilliancy, as you may see a spark shudder to extinction over burning charcoal. The Valois nose she had, long and delicate in form, and overhanging a short upper lip; yet the lips were glorious, and her skin the very Hyperborean snow in tint. As for her eyes, say, gigantic onyxes—or ebony highly polished and wet with May dew; too big for her little face they were: in fine, they made of her a tiny and desirous wraith that moved nervously through life, very strange and brightly colored, and always thrilled with some subtle mirth, like that of a Siren who notes how the sailor pauses at the bulwark and laughs a little, knowing the outcome, and does not greatly care."

"The Rat Trap" by James Branch Cabell, 1907

**Contemporary Connection**

Explore the work of contemporary artist Lauren Peters, a Delaware artist who creates self-portraits that use accessories to tell a story.

Explore the work of contemporary artist Shawn Baron Pinckney, a Delaware artist who creates couture clothing designs inspired by historical figures.
Action/Plot - What? Why? How?

The plot, or action, is what happens in a story. Together with a setting and characters, works of art can tell a story using visual details. Like artist Howard Pyle, historic and contemporary illustrators create works of art that depict the action in a story. Drawings, paintings, photographs, and other works of art can illustrate a single moment in time or can include multiple parts of the narrative throughout the composition. Whether it is several small illustrations in sequence, like a comic strip, or a large-scale painting or mural, elements throughout the composition in the foreground, middle-ground, and background provide visual clues that help the viewer make meaning or understand the story being told through the work of art.

Let’s practice!

Explore the story being told by artist Edward Loper with the following questions.

• What do you think is happening in the painting? What did you see that made you say that?

• How has the artist used lines, shapes, colors, or textures to convey mood or emotions in the work of art?

• Examine the figures or characters in the painting. How do facial expressions, body language, and gesture convey action in the work of art?
Tell a Story

Now that you have learned how to read a work of art, it’s time to tell its story. Pick one of the below images to reflect on. Think about the setting, character(s), and plot: What is happening in this painting? Who is in it? What are they doing? Where are they? Then, on the following page, write a short story about what you think is happening in the painting.

Backyard Scene, 1955
Jack Lewis (1912-2012)
Watercolor
1999.052.0055
Image courtesy of Delaware Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs.

Balconies, c. 1940
Gertrude Howland Balch (1909-1964)
Etching and aquatint with hand applied watercolor
plate: 7 7/8 x 9 3/4 inches, sheet: 9 1/2 x 12 9/16 inches
Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1987
© Artist’s Estate
Illustrate a Story

1. Think about the story you want to tell in your work of art. It can be inspired by historic or contemporary events, be part of your daily life or your imagination, or you can choose a scene from your favorite book or story.

2. Brainstorm the following story elements:
   a. Setting - Where does the story take place? What is the location or time period?
   b. Characters - Who are the characters in your story? They can be people, animals, shapes, or objects.
   c. Action - What will happen in the beginning, middle, or end of the story? What moment will you illustrate in your work of art?

3. With pencil and paper, start sketching the setting for your story. Think about the foreground, middle-ground, and background. Elements in the foreground will appear larger and might be more important to the story than smaller elements in the distance.

4. Sketch the characters and action in your story. What are they doing? Consider the grouping and placement of characters in the composition. How will their clothing or accessories tell viewers about their identity and role in the story? How will their facial expressions and gestures illustrate the action?

5. Use crayons, markers, colored pencils or paints to complete your work of art. Think about the different types of marks and colors you can use to convey the mood or feeling of your story.

Contemporary Connection

Explore the work of Meleko Mokgosi, a contemporary artist whose large-scale paintings explore themes of colonialism, democracy, nationalism, and life in Southern Africa.
Curate your own exhibition

Curators help collect and present works of art, or exhibitions, in museums and galleries.

Look at the works of art you have created and plan your own exhibition.

- Where will you display your collection of work?
- Think about different ways to group or organize the pieces you’ve created for your show. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Think about the sequence or order for viewing and sketch out an exhibition map or floor plan.
- Write labels for each piece or an artist statement that tells viewers about your artwork. Include details about your inspiration, materials, process or techniques, and the story you are telling through your art.

VOCABULARY

**Attribute:** A characteristic or quality

**Bottega:** (Italian) A workshop or studio, particularly the area used by a master artist’s assistants or students

**Commercial Artist:** An artist who creates art used in advertising and selling

**Composition:** The way the parts of something are put together; a particular work of art

**Contemporary Artist:** An artist creating “the art of today”; and artist active during the late 20th through today

**Critique:** To discuss what is good or bad about something

**Cultural:** Of or relating to culture

**Dialogue:** A talk between two or more people or between characters in a play, film, or novel

**Fine Artist:** An artist who creates visual art to be appreciated primarily of its imaginative or intellectual content

**Horizon:** The line where the earth and sky appear to meet

**Monastery:** The buildings used by a community of monks

**Mural:** A large picture painted on or made a part of a wall or ceiling

**Narrative:** A story, description, or account of events

**Old-World Masters:** Refers to any Master painter who worked before about 1800.

**Publishing:** To prepare and bring out for sale for the public to read

**Quaker:** A member of a Christian religious group founded in England about 1650, called the Society of Friends

**Sequence:** A pattern or process in which one thing follows another

**Single point perspective:** A drawing method that shows how things appear to get smaller as they get further away

**Societal:** Of or relating to society
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Extensions and Resources

Additional Artmaking Activities Tutorials

• Write and illustrate your own story in a pamphlet stitch book with this bookmaking tutorial using supplies from around your home. https://youtu.be/RPV_bKTID3Y
• Learn more about color theory and create your own basic color wheel. https://youtu.be/vijzrApbf18
• Examine portrait photography and practice creating your own photographic portraits with this lesson from the J. Paul Getty Museum https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/dorothea_lange/lange_lesson09.html
• Explore additional literary connections and create your own comic strip with this Scholastic activity https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plans/teaching-content/comic-strip-creations/

Museums, Galleries, and Online Collections
Explore these local museums and galleries along with online collections from museums across the country.

• The Delaware Contemporary
  200 S. Madison St. Wilmington, DE 19801
  https://www.decontemporary.org/
• Christina Cultural Arts Center
  705 N Market St, Wilmington, DE 19801
  https://www.ccaacde.org/
• The Sold Firm
  800 N Tatnall St, Wilmington, DE 19801
  https://www.thesoldfirm.com/
• Chris White Gallery
  701 Shipley St, Wilmington, DE 19801
  https://www.chriswhitegallery.com/
• LaFate Gallery
  227 N Market St, Wilmington, DE 19801
  https://www.lafategallery.com/
• Mezzanine Gallery
  820 N French St 2nd floor, Wilmington, DE 19801
  https://arts.delaware.gov/mezzanine-gallery/
• Somerville Manning Gallery
  101 Stone Block, Road 2nd Floor, Greenville, DE 19807
  https://somervillemanning.com/
• The Delaware Art Museum
  2301 Kentmere Pkwy, Wilmington, DE 19806
  https://delart.org/
• The Biggs Museum of American Art
  406 Federal St, Dover, DE 19901
  http://www.biggsuseum.org/
• The Brandywine River Museum Museum of Art
  1 Hoffmans Mill Rd, Chadds Ford, PA 19317
  https://www.brandywine.org/museum
• The Philadelphia Museum of Art
  2600 Benjamin Franklin Pkwy, Philadelphia, PA 19130
  https://philamuseum.org/
• The Barnes Foundation
  2025 Benjamin Franklin Pkwy, Philadelphia, PA 19130
  https://www.barnesfoundation.org/
• The Walters Art Museum
  https://thewalters.org/
• The Baltimore Museum of Art
  https://artboma.org/
• The Metropolitan Museum of Art
  https://www.metmuseum.org/
• The Museum of Modern Art
  https://www.moma.org/
• The Brooklyn Museum
  https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/
• The Walker Art Center
  https://walkerart.org/
• The National Portrait Gallery
  https://npg.si.edu/
• The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
  https://hirshhorn.si.edu/
• The J. Paul Getty Museum
  https://www.getty.edu/
• The Art Institute of Chicago
  https://www.artic.edu/

Local and Online Art Supplies
Basic art supplies can come from almost anywhere! You can also replenish your stash of materials or explore additional supplies at these local and online retailers.

• Jerry’s Artarama
  269 S. Main St. Newark, DE 19711
  https://www.jerrysretailstores.com/delaware/
• Michaels Arts and Crafts
  https://www.michaels.com/
• Joann Fabrics and Crafts
  341 W Main St, Newark, DE 19702
  https://www.joann.com/
• Artist & Craftsman Supply
  307 Market St, Philadelphia, PA 19106
  https://artistcraftsman.com/
• BLICK Art Materials
  1330 Chestnut St. Philadelphia, PA 19107
  https://www.dickblick.com/
• Enasco
  https://www.enasco.com/c/Art-Supplies-Crafts