TAKE ONE PICTURE

LAING ART GALLERY

Primary Teachers' Notes

The Bard by John Martin

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The Bard by John Martin (1789 – 1854)

These notes are for primary teachers participating in Take One Picture: North, East, South, West, a project funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and linked to the National Gallery's Touring Partnership with the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne.

In these notes you will find information about the painting and the artist along with curriculum links and suggestions for classroom activities.

A selection of cross-curricular work produced in schools as a result of this project will be exhibited on the www.takeonepicture.org.uk/nesw website.

The painting was bought by the Laing Art Gallery in 1951 with grant aid from the National Art Collections Fund.

The painting measures 215.5 x 157 cm. It was painted in oil on canvas in 1817.

What is the painting about?

The painting illustrates a poem called 'The Bard' written by Thomas Gray in 1757. Bards were medieval Welsh poets and musicians who were held in high esteem by local kings, princes and chieftains. These educated men used stories, poems, songs and music to encourage people in their daily lives, especially against hardship and oppression.

In the thirteenth century Edward I marched into Wales with the largest army seen since 1066, set on conquering the country. The Prince of Wales, Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, had repeatedly refused to pay public homage to the King. Due to the sheer strength of the English army, Llywelyn submitted to Edward's demands, giving him more control of Wales than any previous English ruler. In 1282 the Welsh rebelled against English rule and Llywelyn was killed in a minor skirmish the following year. Edward continued with the conquest of Wales, effectively controlling its independence by imposing English law and subduing Welsh language and culture.

It is traditionally believed by some that during this time Edward I ordered an end to the Welsh bards, to prevent them using their influence to encourage further uprising and rebellion.

John Martin's painting depicts the last surviving bard standing on a high precipice. He is cursing Edward's troops below before he hurls himself from the rocks to his death. The bard's curse prophesied the end of Edward's line to the throne, and the rise of the House of Tudor. The story has since been proven to be untrue but this doesn't detract from the dramatic imagery seen in the painting.

The mountains and crags depicted in the painting are not native to Wales. Martin probably based the mountains on alpine ranges and the crags on views around Allendale, near to where he grew up. The castle in the background is modelled on Harlech Castle. It was one of many that formed an 'iron ring' of castles surrounding the coastal regions of Snowdonia, stretching from Flint to Aberystwyth. They were built to prevent any further rebellion in that area. Harlech Castle is still standing today but its outer wall lies in ruins and no longer looks as impressive as the castle in John Martin's painting.

Who was the Artist?

John Martin was born near Haydon Bridge, Northumberland, in 1789, but spent most of his adult life working in London. He was particularly famous for his paintings showing apocalyptic scenes of destruction.

Martin's reputation developed and he continued to paint many different landscapes inspired by poetry or mythology. Many of his most important works were painted between 1819 and 1828 and focused on biblical or historical subjects.

Despite Martin's huge popularity his paintings could often take years to sell so most of his income came from his work as a mezzotint engraver. For an explanation of the mezzotint process see http://www.npg.org.uk/live/mellonmezzotint.asp

John Martin proved himself to be not only an artist but also an engineer. Between 1827 and 1848 he devoted a lot of his time to improvement schemes in London including how to develop railway systems, water supplies and sewerage and mine ventilation.

John Martin died whilst visiting friends on the Isle of Man in 1854, after suffering an attack of paralysis while he was painting.

Introducing the picture in the classroom

'The Bard' can be introduced in the classroom using a reproduction of the painting. Alternatively, the image can be accessed with the teacher's notes via the Take One Picture website at www.takeonepicture.org.uk for use with a whiteboard.

It is hoped that using the image in the classroom will inspire students and teachers to visit the Laing Art Gallery, individually or as a group, to enjoy the original painting. With this in mind, introduce the concept of the 'original' with the students by talking about the difference between a printed reproduction, a virtual image and a unique painting.

The most effective way of introducing the content of a picture is a discussion in which students' own perceptions and opinions are encouraged. Students will probably be unfamiliar with the painting. With the aim of developing their visual literacy skills, allow them space to try and work out what is happening in the picture.
Discussions could be started with such questions as:

- Who are the men on horseback and what are they going to do?
- If you were the figure standing on the cliffs, how would you feel?
- Was this painting made recently or a long time ago? How can you tell?
- What do you like/dislike about the painting and why?

Using 'The Bard' across the National Curriculum

Enriching the primary curriculum by linking different subject areas to a painting is a successful methodology used by many teachers participating in the National Gallery's Take One Picture project. This creative approach aligns with the Primary National Strategy: Excellence and Enjoyment.

The desired learning outcomes from using art across the curriculum include:

- Knowledge and understanding: increased understanding of connections between subjects.
- Skills: increased ability to work with others, involvement in class, whole school, community and national events.
- Attitudes and values: increased self-esteem enabling all students to succeed.
- Enjoyment, inspiration and creativity: fulfilment and satisfaction from achievements; providing an environment where pupils feel confident to work beyond planned experiences.

Some suggestions

Art and Design

- Investigate how John Martin and other artists paint water.
- The Bard was inspired by Thomas Gray's poem. Read your class a poem by a contemporary poet and ask them to illustrate it.
- Look at the architecture of the castle in the painting. Research medieval castle architecture and create your own design for a fantasy castle.

Geography

- Look at maps of Northumberland. Find East Landends near Haydon Bridge where John Martin grew up. Can you find the crags near Allendale that he used as a model for the painting?
- Research the topography of Wales including the mountains, valleys, and rivers. Compare these with the Austrian Alps. Which look most like those seen in the painting?
- The castle in the painting is modelled on Harlech Castle in Snowdonia. Research the coast around Snowdonia and the locations of the 'iron ring' of castles built there by Edward I.

History

- Can you think of any people today, or through history, who could be described as bards. Can you explain why?
- Investigate the English conquest of Wales by Edward I in the thirteenth century.

Literacy/Drama

- Find out about the annual Welsh National Eisteddfod. Ask each member of your class to write a poem. Hold your own poetry competition or Eisteddfod and crown the winner as your class bard.
- Focus on the landscape in the painting. Write a news article encouraging people to visit the area including a visit to the castle. You could design your own posters too.
- Choose a story from the 'Mabinogion', a collection of medieval Welsh folk tales, and act it out in class. www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/myths-customs/pages/mythmabintro.shtml
- What do you think the bard is shouting to the troops below? Write a rousing speech to be read out loud.

Music

- Create a soundtrack to accompany the painting. Include noises you would expect to hear such as marching, hooves, running water, wind, harp music, and shouting.
- Experiment with different types of music and find some that would best fit the dramatic nature of the painting.

Numeracy

- From the date of the painting, calculate how long ago it was painted.
- Trace the route of the road and calculate how long it is using the size of the people and horses as a guide to scale. How long would it take you to walk to the castle?
- Using the size of the original painting as a starting point, calculate how much space within the painting is taken up by the mountain in the background. Using cardboard and papier mache build a scale model.

Science

- Using the painting as a starting point, investigate rocks and soils.
- There are trees growing on the side of the mountain in the painting. What type of trees might they be? Investigate the life cycle of a tree.

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