

***Breathless (Self-Portrait in Blue), Robert Carston Arneson***



Biography from the Smithsonian American Art Museum:

As a child, Robert Arneson aspired to become a sports cartoonist, and when he was seventeen, contributed a weekly cartoon to the local newspaper. Arneson studied to become an art teacher and worked in watercolor until he discovered the ceramics of Peter Voulkos. Arneson began working in clay, making comic self-portraits in which he showed himself smoking a cigar, dressed as Santa Claus, or with his fingers up his nose; he also made portraits of friends, fellow artists, and politicians. In the 1960s and 1970s, Arneson was a leader of the funk art movement of Bay Area artists who focused on the absurdity of everyday objects. Many of his sculptures offer visual puns and sarcastic observations, and depict toasters, urinals, and bottles of soda. Late in his career, Arneson applied his dark humor and biting sarcasm to address political issues.

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/robert-arneson-140>

Robert Carston Arneson (1930-1992), American  
**Breathless (Self-Portrait in Blue)**, 1976  
Glazed earthenware  
Purchased with funds from the National Endowment  
for the Arts and Phyllis Cannon (Mrs. Paul L.) Wattis  
UMFA1976.060\_A,B

## **Fisher Folk, Philip Lodewijk Jacob Frederik Sadée**

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Dressed in well-worn clothes, a woman and her child ponder the purchase of two herring. The meager meal is merely sustenance for the hungry pair. Sadée's work shows the unvarnished reality of fishermen and their families in the late 19th century.

Sadée executed numerous figure studies from life in pencil, which he integrated into his compositions. To capture the overcast sky of Scheveningen, a port near The Hague, the artist sketched in oil directly from nature.

Sadée belonged to The Hague School, a group of artists active from the 1860s until the 1890s. Like the French Barbizon painters, they painted outdoors and shared an interest in the mundane subjects ignored by academic artists.

Philip Lodewijk Jacob Frederik Sadée (1837-1904), Dutch  
**Fisher Folk**, late 19th Century  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Edward Bartlett Wicks  
UMFA1926.039

## ***Female Figurine or Pretty Lady Figurine, Unknown Artist***

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This small figure is about 3.25 inches tall and from the Tlatilco region, which is known for its figurative pottery. Some of the earliest examples of representational art in Mexico were found there.

Tlatilco is a Nahuatl (Aztec) word meaning “place of mounds.” Burials and farm fields from the region have yielded similar figures. Tlatilco artists, like those from other nearby cultures, emulated Olmec techniques and motifs.

Unknown Artist, Mexico, Central Valley of Mexico, Tlatilco Culture  
**Female Figurine or Pretty Lady Figurine**, 1500-900 BCE  
Earthenware  
Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art Museum  
UMFA1984.143.001

### **Additional Background Information for Lesson:**

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#### *UMFA Art Ambassadors*

Art Ambassadors is an initiative that reimagines how the UMFA creates access and space for diverse voices in the Museum. The program began in fall 2019, with an inaugural class of students and community members trained around the UMFA’s collection, art museum practices, and tour techniques. Working closely with a Museum educator, each Art Ambassador has created a personal tour—one that reflects their culture, background, language, special expertise, or area of interest. Together with the Museum’s highly experienced docent corps, this new group of volunteer tour guides provide personally meaningful art museum experiences for people of all ages and interests.

## ***Art and Multiple Interpretations***

Katie Seastrand

### **Overview**

Explore how everyone has their own personal interpretations of art with three artworks from the UMFA. Each work has been thoughtfully selected by an Art Ambassador and includes a write up of their own response to the work. Students then create a quick artwork with specific intentions and discuss the differences between the artist's meaning and the viewers'.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

1. explore their own initial reactions to an artwork before hearing the perspective of a UMFA Art Ambassador.
2. analyze the different ways people connect to artworks.
3. create their own artwork with specific intentions.
4. discuss the way art holds meaning for the creator vs. the viewers.

**Intended Audiences/Grade Levels** 9-12th

**State Core Links** (see State Core Links at the end of this lesson plan)

**Duration** 60-90 minutes

### **Materials**

1. Image of *Breathless (Self-Portrait in Blue)*, Robert Carston Arneson, UMFA1976.060\_A,B (projected or printed)
2. Image of *Fisher Folk*, Philip Lodewijk Jacob Frederik Sadée, UMFA1926.039 (projected or printed)
3. Image of *Female Figurine* or *Pretty Lady Figurine*, UMFA1984.143.001 (projected or printed)
4. The coordinating Art Ambassador responses to individual artworks (projected or printed) (this and images can be found at the end of this document)
5. Paper
6. Pencil
7. Coloring utensils (colored pencils, crayons, pastels, etc.)

### **Vocabulary/Key Terms**

**Perspective** a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something; a point of view

**Proletariat** workers or working-class people, regarded collectively

**Transcendent** beyond or above the range of normal or merely physical human experience; surpassing the ordinary; exceptional

### **Activity**

#### ***Artwork Discussion:***

There are many different ways people react and connect to artworks. We'll explore 3 different works and reactions from Art Ambassadors with the UMFA.

- Share artwork 1 with the students.
- Have everyone write down 3 words they would use to describe this artwork. They can use words that describe what they see, feel, or think about it.
- Once everyone is finished, have one student read aloud the coordinating Art Ambassador's three words and response.
- Have a short discussion about the work and response:
  - How did the Art Ambassador connect to this artwork? Emotionally? Knowledge and interests? Experiences?
  - How are the words you chose similar to the Art Ambassador's? How are they different?
  - After hearing this other perspective, do your thoughts and feelings change about the artwork? In what ways are they changed or unchanged?

Repeat this same process with the two remaining Artworks and Responses.

Discuss why people have different reactions to the same artwork. Possible questions to ask are:

- Why is it that two people can look at the same artwork and have entirely different ideas and feelings?
- How can it be important to hear different perspectives and ideas about an artwork?
- In what ways can art be a tool to communicate and connect with different people?

#### ***Art Making:***

- Individually looking at their list of nine words used to describe the artworks, each student should select one word for each of the below categories:
  - Lines
  - Shapes
  - Colors
- On a blank paper (can be the back of the one used for your word lists) each student should create an artwork in which their selected words illustrate their assigned category. Push, think, and explore this creatively. Encourage students to take leaps and create without planning much beforehand.

### ***Final Discussion:***

- Do a gallery stroll looking at the different works before having a final discussion. Or alternatively have the students share their works in small groups and talk about the final discussion prompts together.
- Final Discussion prompts:
  - How did it feel to create an artwork with a specific purpose? With certain ideas or feelings to share?
    - What was difficult? What was easy?
  - Even though an artist may intend something specific with their artwork, how can people react in different ways? Why is that ok?
  - How can an artwork balance being made with a specific purpose or idea and being flexible to whatever the viewers think and feel?

### **Method(s) for Assessment**

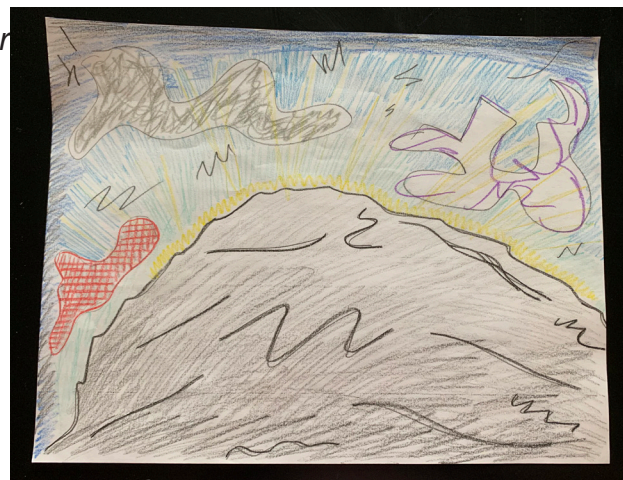
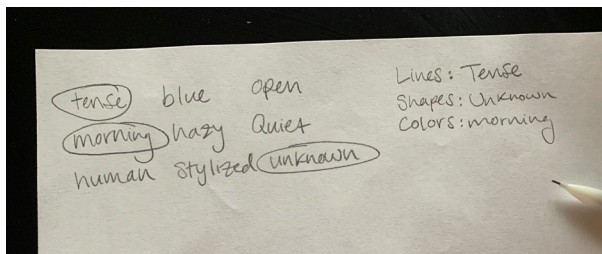
Assessment can be made based on the engagement of the students and the content of the discussions. Pay special attention to the way students communicate and discuss respectfully.

### **State Core Links**

#### **Visual Arts**

*Respond (L1.V.R.): Understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.*

*Connect (L1.V.CO.): Students will relate artistic skills, ideas and work with personal meaning and external context*



Artwork 1: *Breathless (Self-Portrait in Blue)*



Artwork 1 Art Ambassador Response:  
*Breathless (Self-Portrait in Blue)*

**Comical, Witty, Light-hearted**

“Whenever I need a good laugh, I enjoy seeing the sculpture called Breathless. I like showing or talking about Breathless to others at any occasion, but especially during a new or tough situation. It is a wonderful reminder to keep breathing!”



Artwork 2: Fisher Folk



Artwork 2 Art Ambassador Response:  
*Fisher Folk*

**Resilience, Despair, Proletariat**

“Fisher Folk by Philip Lodewijk Jacob Frederik Sadee is a depiction of Dutch working-class life in the late 19th century. The small barefoot child is covering her mouth with her tattered apron, she looks up as the two women are making an exchange. The muted brown and gray colors suggest the end of a long day, as this would offer fishermen the highest yield of fish. A resilient woman, who has to choose between shoes or food for her children, would know this. The cost of two herring is small and offers a bit of sustenance, but will it be enough?

The difficult narrative of the working class depicted in Fisher Folk can be applied through the transition from industry to technology. Opportunities for globalism have increased over time, but the wealth is still held by a small amount of people. The impossible choices made by the Dutch working class in the late 19th century is not at all dissimilar from those of the modern American age. This is told by the expression of Fisher Folk’s central character, dressed in brown, with her hands hidden beneath her robes.”



Artwork 3 Art Ambassador Response:  
Female Figurine or Pretty Lady Figurine

**Humble, Unknown, Transcendent**

“The UMFA is home to hundreds of beautiful, refined pieces—giant paintings of beautiful women with flawless, paper-white skin, modern works composed of intricate layers of dots and crisp edges of color. However, one of the pieces that is most personal to me is a humble statue that could probably fit in the palm of my hand. Her name is Pretty Lady, and she looks just like me. The wide, unafraid curvature of her hips, her short legs; I like to imagine that some of the dust caked into her skin over the years before discovery would feel rough to the touch, like the skin of my face. She’s a caricature; imperfect and humble. It’s part of the fantastic nature of this small, ancient Mexican sculpture. To me, it’s very intimate, with less focus on perfection or public presentation, but capturing someone’s best features, no matter their imperfections. The unanswered questions the pieces themselves leave behind interest me as well. Was Pretty Lady a gift for someone? Was she displayed in an important place in their house, or was she carried around like a lucky talisman? As she sits in a display case now, forever preserving a craftsman’s deft hands that I can imagine tenderly shaping the oversized ears, the slim curvature of the brows that touch close enough to become one, I wonder if Pretty Lady was inspired by someone who was loved and cherished enough to be forever immortalized in the reddish splendor of terra cotta. I wonder if she smiled, Pretty Lady would have a gap in her teeth like me. I’d like to think that she does.”