

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: The Puppet Show

Subject: Sandow Birk

Discipline: Visual Art (Painting and Film)

SECTION I - OVERVIEW	2
EPISODE THEME	
SUBJECT	
CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS	
OBJECTIVE	
STORY SYNOPSIS	
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES	
INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES	
EQUIPMENT NEEDED	
MATERIALS NEEDED	
INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED	
SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT	3
CONTENT OVERVIEW	
THE BIG PICTURE	
RESOURCES – TEXTS	
RESOURCES – WEB SITES	
VIDEO RESOURCES	
BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS	
SECTION III – VOCABULARY	6
SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK	7



Still image from SPARK story, 2006.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

EPISODE THEME

The Puppet Show

SUBJECT

Sandow Birk

GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

- Understand the development of personal works of art and their relationship to broader social themes and ideas, abstract concepts, and the history of art.
- Develop basic observational drawing and/or painting skills.
- Develop an expressive visual vocabulary with which to address personal and/or social themes and ideas.
- Develop observational and representational skills by looking at and reproducing images of people, places and things accurately and thoughtfully.

STORY SYNOPSIS

Over the last few years, Los Angeles based painter Sandow Birk has been expanding his artistic scope-- and his audience-- by turning his sumptuous contemporary history paintings into motion pictures. Spark visits Birk and his crew as they finish production on the artist's distinctly contemporary take on Dante's 14th century epic *The Divine Comedy*--set in 21st century San Francisco.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing as a group
- Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance.
- Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently.

- Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another.
- Critical reflection on personal expressions and how they are seen and received by others.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- To introduce students to Sandow Birk's work and art process.
- To provide context for the understanding of the development of personal works of art and their relationship to broader social themes and ideas, abstract concepts, and the history of art.
- To inspire students to develop visual, written, listening and speaking skills through looking at, creating and talking about visual artworks.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

- TV & DVD with SPARK story "The Puppet Show" about artists who work with some form of puppetry or computer with Internet access, navigation software, streaming capability, speakers and a sound card, printer
- Cassette player, CD player, or computer audio program

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
- Pencils, pens, and paper

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

- Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one's own body, control in handling objects
- Interpersonal - awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
- Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
- Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems
- Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Over the last few years, Los Angeles-based painter Sandow Birk has been expanding his artistic scope -- and his audience -- by turning his sumptuous contemporary history paintings into motion pictures. Spark visits Birk and his crew as they finish production on Dante's 14th-century epic "The Divine Comedy" -- set in 21st-century San Francisco.

Birk is a keen student of art history and often recasts classic subjects and compositions with modern-day figures and narratives. Birk's work is deeply influenced by history painting, a European tradition of depicting historical events in detailed and often dramatic images. He first encountered 19th-century history paintings on a trip through Europe -- he was struck by the grand scale of the images and their theatrical tone. Upon returning to the United States, Birk moved into a storefront apartment in South Central Los Angeles and began creating his own versions of history painting, documenting the events that happened in his neighborhood -- gang warfare, drug deals, looting and rioting -- in that same dramatic style.

Birk's first film project was "In Smog and Thunder," a "mockumentary" inspired by Ken Burns' marathon 11-hour film about the American Civil War. In Birk's version, Los Angeles and San Francisco engage in all-out war for control of the entire state of California. Birk got the idea for the project during a month-long trip to San Francisco for his solo show at the Catharine Clark Gallery.

After multiple affronts to his hometown from a variety of Bay Area dwellers, Birk decided to exact his revenge by making a series of canvases in which San Francisco is finally invaded and conquered by Angelinos. After the success of the series, Birk decided he could reach more people by making a

film, and he collaborated with filmmakers Sean Meredith and Paul Zaloom to produce the project.

Like "In Smog and Thunder," Dante's "Inferno" began as a series of paintings that Birk then decided to make into a film. Using live actors for the project would have been prohibitively expensive -- upwards of a million dollars -- so Birk decided to make the film using paper cut-out paper puppets. Set in contemporary San Francisco, the film follows the experiences of a blue jeans-wearing Dante and his guide, the Roman poet Virgil, as they tour the depths of Hell, finally meeting the Devil himself.

Sandow Birk was raised in Southern California. He lives and works in Los Angeles. Birk earned a B.F.A. from the Otis Parsons Art Institute in Los Angeles and studied painting and art history at both the American College in Paris and the Bath Academy of Art in England. Birk was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1995, a Fulbright scholarship in 1997 and a Getty Award for the Visual Arts in 1999. His work has been shown in galleries and museums throughout North America and Europe.

THE BIG PICTURE

Much of Sandow Birk's painting is based on European history painting spanning the 17th to the 19th centuries, a tradition of representing historical, political, mythological, allegorical, or religious subjects. The term was coined by French historiographer, architect and theoretician André Félibien, who called history painting *Le grand tradition*, and placed it at the top of the hierarchy of subjects, above scenes of everyday life, portraits, landscapes, and still-life painting. This hierarchy of genres became central to academic painting in Europe and to the *Academie française* in particular.

Many of Birk's paintings are based directly on compositions and themes found in Neo-classical and Romantic history painting. Birk's 1991 canvas, "Death of Manuel," for example is based on the Jacques-Louis David's "Death of Marat" of 1793. Jean-Paul Marat was an activist in the French Revolution who was assassinated. Due to a skin disease, he was forced to spend a great deal of his life immersed in his bath, and often worked from there. David uses the bath setting to suggest Marat's tomb, simultaneously depicting the revolutionary's murder and memorial. In Sandow's version, Manuel, a Latino gangster, is depicted in his classic Chevrolet Impala, the victim of gang warfare. Sandow reverses some of the assumptions of traditional history painting, exchanging the famous for the anonymous, the historical for the everyday.



R: Sandow Birk, *Death of Manuel*, 1991



L: Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1793

In Birk's 1994 painting, *The Revenge of Lorena Bobbit*, the artist once again borrows from a composition from a classic history painting of the past, this time, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, by the Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi. The Biblical story illustrated in Artemisia's painting concerns Judith, a Jewish widow of noble decent, who decapitates Holofernes, the Assyrian general who has besieged her town. During the Counter-Reformation, the subject was popular as a parable about the triumph of Christianity over paganism, but many art historians have argued that Artemisia's particularly gruesome rendition represents the artist's own struggles as a woman in a male-dominated field. Birk's painting borrows the same composition, but turns to the contemporary subject of Lorena Bobbit who famously emasculated her husband, rendering explicit what is merely symbolic in Artemisia's canvas.



R: Sandow Birk, *The Revenge of Lorena Bobbit*, 1994

L: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620

RESOURCES – TEXTS

Birk, Sandow and Marcus Sanders. *Dante's Inferno*. Chronicle Books, 2004.

Birk, Sandow and Meg Linton. *Incarcerated: Visions of California in the 21st Century*. Last Gasp Books, 2001.

Birk, Sandow, Marcus Sanders, et al. *Dante's Purgatorio*. Chronicle Books, 2005.

Birk, Sandow, Marcus Sanders, et al. *Dante's Paradiso*. Chronicle Books, 2005.

Birk, Sandow. *In Smog and Thunder: Historical Works from the Great War of the Californias*. Last Gasp Books, 2002.

Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi*. Princeton University Press, 1991.

Monneret, Sophie. *David and Neo-Classicism*. Vilo International, 1999.

Rosenfeld, Daniel, ed. *European Painting and Sculpture Circa 1770 to 1937*. Museum Books, 1992.

RESOURCES – WEB SITES

<http://www.sandowbirk.com/>
Sandow Birk's website

<http://artscenecal.com/ArticlesFile/Archive/Articles2001/Articles0701/SBirkB.html>

An interesting article on Sandow Birk written by Jody Zellen

<http://www.cclarkgallery.com/artists/birk.html>
Page on Birk from Catherine Clark Gallery

<http://www.trilliumprints.com/inferno/index.php>
Page on Birk's *Dante's Inferno* series with images from Trillium Press

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_painting
Wikipedia entry on history painting

http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare_Illustrated/HistoryPainting.html

Helpful article on history painting

<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg61/gg61-main1.html>

Page on history painting from the National gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

VIDEO RESOURCES

<http://www.insmogandthunder.com/>

Sandow Birk's film about a battle between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

The Legion of Honor
Open Tues-Sunday
9:30AM to 5PM
Lincoln Park
34th Avenue & Clement Street
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.863.3330

Catharine Clark Gallery
49 Geary St., 2nd Floor
San Francisco, CA 94108
tel: 415.399.1439
fax: 415.399.0675
morphos@cclarkgallery.com

Gallery Hours:
Tuesday-Friday, 10:30 - 5:30
Saturday, 11 - 5:30
<http://www.cclarkgallery.com/>

SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Castigate

Chastise, reprimand, rebuke, criticize

Divine Comedy

Written by Dante Alighieri between 1308 and his death in 1321, *Divine Comedy* is widely considered one of the greatest Italian epic poems and indeed of world literature. It is also said to be the last great work of literature of the Middle Ages and the first great work of the Renaissance. Its influence is so great that it affects the Christian view of the afterlife to this day.

Dante's Inferno

The Divine Comedy is composed of three cantos (divisions of a long poem), *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise). The first canto, *Inferno*, is by far the most famous of the three, and is often published separately under the title *Dante's Inferno*.

Embellishment

Adornment, ornamentation, decoration, exaggeration, enhancement

Graphic

Illustrative, pictorial representation of, explicit, vivid, detailed, visual

Hunkered down

Get down to

Inferno

Hell, blaze

Lithograph

Print produced by lithography - a method for printing on a smooth surface. It can be used to print text or artwork onto paper or another suitable material.

Mockumentary

A film which is not factual but presented as if it were a documentary - a false documentary copying the style in maintaining the pretense of reality. Often used as a medium for satire and parody.

Pitch

In terms of pitch a proposal or story – propose or offer

Purgatory

The means by which those who are free from sin reach perfection before entering into the Kingdom of Heaven. According to Catholic teaching, purgatory is "a place or condition of temporal (i.e. worldly) punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions."

Slick

Polished, smooth, professional, glossy

Transcend

Rise above, excel, surpass

Virgil

A Latin poet (70-19 BC). Aelius Donatus was a teacher of grammar and rhetoric.

SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Landscape and History Painting

Explain to the class that they will be researching famous landscape and history painters of the 19th century. Then divide the group into two sub-groups and ask one of these smaller groups to consider landscape painting. What defines landscape? What do students think of as landscape? What should landscape painting look like? What does it include? Can students find examples of famous 19th century landscape painters?

Ask the second group to think about history painting. What defines history painting? What should history painting look like? What does it include? Can students think of examples of famous history painters of the 19th century?

Students may be motivated to visit one of the galleries listed in Bay Area Field Trips section of this guide to view examples of landscape and history painters of the 19th century. If this is not possible suggest students research examples of landscape and history painters on the Web.

Mute the sound and show the first section of the SPARK episode on Sandow Birk, inviting students to look carefully at the work. Freeze the frame on selected pieces to allow students to study the paintings. Additionally encourage students to view Birk's work at <http://www.sandowbirk.com> They should then work in pairs to respond to the following questions:

- What is Birk's subject matter in these paintings?
- How would you describe his approach?

- How does Sandow Birk draw from historical and landscape genres, reworking compositions for modern audiences?
- What is he trying to say? Does he have a social or political message or mission?
Students may choose to focus on ONE painting in particular to respond to these questions.

Invite each pair to present their responses to the whole group for discussion.

Exploring Irony

(9-12th grades)

Read the following extract from SANDOW BIRK July 7 - August 19, 2001, Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, by Jody Zellen at

<http://artscenecal.com/ArticlesFile/Archive/Articles2001/Articles0701/SBirkB.html>

Birk's intention is to create paintings that draw on the long tradition of the romantic American landscape in order to parody their vision of the West as a "promised American paradise"

What is intended by "parody" in this quotation? What is the purpose of parody? What effect does it create in terms of the subject matter in specific paintings? Does this device make you rethink the subject matter in any way?

Ask students to focus on the *Smog and Inferno* series to respond to these questions.

How does Birk parody this *vision of the West as a "promised American paradise"*?

Students should write 500 words describing the *Smog and Inferno* artwork in detail and commenting on the way images are reworked to satirize the American West. What are the elements and effects of satire in this work?

Sketching Exercise

Play the second half of the Sandow Birk story on SPARK. Then prepare for a sketching exercise by brainstorming key moments or events students can recall from their history or literature classes. The event could be about a famous person or it could be the subject of a poem or from a book studied in class. Encourage students to work in groups of five or six to decide on their topic.

Once everyone has identified their topic, ask students to draw five or six sketches to illustrate this theme, event or topic. Remaining in their groups, each student should work on one of the images.

Place each set of images side by side in the style of a storyboard and ask students to write a short two minute narrative to accompany their sketch sequence. The narrative should not be more than 300 words.

Assemble the class and invite each group to “perform” their narrative sequence, timing the narrative to accompany the relevant image. At the end of each sequence, encourage students to discuss challenges as well as the thinking behind each set of sketches.

Found Object Puppets

This exercise is from Found Object Puppets by Matt Buchanan at ChildDrama.com and is cited with his permission.

<http://www.childdrama.com/puppetfound.html>

Bring in a selection of found objects – a pencil, pair of sunglasses, a small box, a paper-punch, a shoe, a ruler, a potato or apple etc. The idea is that anything can be a puppet if it is animated to create a character. The Child Drama.com site offers hints:

“Sunglasses, with their bows spread wide, become a very convincing ant's head, complete with reflective eyes and two antennae, if the manipulator is skilled enough. A shoe has a tongue and can talk, or it can

use its laces like tentacles. The paper-punch can obviously become a baracuda. If it has a hinged lid, a cardboard box becomes a big-mouthed character with a ferocious appetite. A ruler behind a notebook becomes a shy character who keeps peeking out and darting back out of sight.”

After exploring the idea of creating puppet characters from everyday objects, challenge students to find an object and create a puppet from it. Depending on the age of the students and on the timing, it may be helpful to provide objects or to assign the task prior to the class.

Work with students on character and story, on manipulating their invented characters and interacting with others. Suggest that they allow the nature of the chosen object to help them determine the personality of the puppet. (Which is lazier--an old bedroom slipper or a high-heeled shoe? How is the attitude of a pair of pliers different from the attitude of an oven mitt?)

From ChildDrama.com

RELATED STANDARDS -VISUAL ARTS

Grade 6

2.0 Creative Expression

Skills, Processes, Materials, and Tools

2.1 Use various observational drawing skills to depict a variety of subject matter.

2.2 Apply the rules of two-point perspective in creating a thematic work of art

Grade 8

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Develop a theory about the artist's intent in a series of works of art, using reasoned statements to support personal opinions.

4.3 Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work.

Grades 9-12, Advanced

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Identify the intentions of artists creating contemporary works of art and explore the implications of those intentions.

Sadow's Dante

Screen the second part of the SPARK story featuring Sadow Birk's animated movie of *Dante's Inferno* featuring puppets — all hand made by artists. It is created in the tradition of "Toy Theatre," a European style of 19th century puppetry that uses paper puppets just slightly larger than six inches tall.

Discuss this technique with students:

- What is the effect of using paper puppets to tell a story? How does it differ from using actors?
- How does Sadow Birk's theatrical technique using a toy theatre and puppets impact *Dante's Inferno*?
- Does Birk manage to evoke the poem's fantastic, imaginative and dramatic effects through his artistic techniques on film?

RELATED STANDARDS - VISUAL ARTS

Grade 4 – Artistic Perception

Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design

1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (color, shape/form, line, texture, space and value), emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment.

Grade 7 – 1.0 Artistic Perception

1.1 Describe the environment and selected works of art, using the elements of art and the principles of design.

- Birk is using the poem as an allegory to comment on the contemporary world? An *allegory* is a mode of representation that conveys a meaning other than (and in addition to) the literal meaning. What other meanings does Birk convey?

SPARKLER:

* For students who are adventurous and would like to build a toy theatre see

<http://pennyplain.blogspot.com/2005/12/how-to-build-your-own-toy-theater.html>

RELATED STANDARDS - VISUAL ARTS

Grades 9-12, Proficient

1.0 Artistic Perception Impact of Media Choice

1.5 Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.

1.0 Artistic Perception

Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design

1.3 Research and analyze the work of an artist and write about the artist's distinctive style and its contribution to the meaning of the work.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/index.asp>