

Points of View: An Elementary Lesson

Painting #1: *St. George and the Dragon* by Paolo Uccello

Painted around 1470

[See the original at the National Gallery in London](#)



1. Who are the characters in this painting? (Remember that animals are characters!)

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

D. _____

2. What do you think each character is **thinking**? Write a short sentence for each.

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

D. _____

Choose one character and describe what happens next to that character. Use the back of this paper or a sheet of lined paper.

Painting #2: *Watson and the Shark* by John Singleton Copley
Painted in 1778
[Find it at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.](#)



1. Choose four characters in the painting. (Remember that animals are characters!)

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

D. _____

2. What do you think each character is **saying**? Write a short sentence for each.

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____

D. _____

How did the man in the water get there in the first place? Write a story that describes his day. Use the back of this paper or a sheet of lined paper.

Notes from the museums for parents, plus questions to ask students.

1. *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* by Paolo Uccello, about 1470

Saint George taming—and then slaying—a dragon is one of the most fantastic legends of the saints from the Middle Ages. Uccello has compressed two parts of the story into one small and strange picture. The saint plunges his spear into the head of a dragon, whose odd shape mirrors the entrance to his cave. An elegant, if bored-looking, princess already has a leash around the dragon's neck.

Questions: Ask your child how the leash got there. Why does the princess look so bored?

Many paintings at this time were created for the church, since the churches were the ones who had money to pay artists. We don't know who this painting was for, but its small scale and non-religious feel (it's more about a magical adventure than Christian virtue) suggest it was intended for someone's home. It was relatively cheap to make: it's in oil on canvas and contains no expensive pigments or gilding.

Questions: Ask your child where they would hang this painting if it was in your home. Would it look out of place in your home? Ask your child to imagine what houses must have looked like in the year 1400 for this painting to have seemed at-home.

Uccello was fascinated by ***single point perspective***. This means he used lines that lead to one point to create an illusion of depth within a painting. But he hadn't quite mastered the technique here. The geometric patches of greenery recede towards the horizon, but the rectangular stones of the ground slope up to the right.

Questions: Ask your child if anything else looks not-quite-natural about the painting. The looks on the characters' faces, for example, or the realism of the horse.

2. *Watson and the Shark* by John Singleton Copley, 1778

On a warm day in 1749, 14-year-old Brook Watson dove into Havana Harbor for a swim. As he floated surrounded by merchant ships, a shark sank its teeth into his leg, pulling him beneath the waves in a vicious, sustained attack that severed his right foot. Bleeding and helpless, he struggled to stay above water as a group of sailors maneuvered a small skiff into position and pulled him from the toothy Behemoth's mouth. His leg would have to be amputated at the knee, but he survived his ordeal. Nearly thirty years after the incident, John Singleton Copley historicized Watson's attack in the monumental painting *Watson and the Shark*.

Question: Ask your child to recall the problem in Watson's story. What was the outcome?

Copley was a successful painter who left America for Europe after the outbreak of the Revolutionary War (1776), seeking to some extent to escape political turmoil. His wife's family were staunch loyalists while he cautiously supported independence. He writes of a desire to create history paintings, considered the most technically challenging and important genre of painting at the time, to elevate his career.

Question: Ask your child why "history paintings" would have been so difficult.

It is not known how Copley learned of Watson's past, but it is believed Watson approached Copley for a commission in which he saw great opportunity. In *Watson and the Shark*, Copley upended the traditions of genre painting by making contemporary figures the heroes. His heroes were taking part in real events rather than depicting traditional religious, mythical, and allegorical subjects, successfully gaining the acclaim he sought upon leaving America.

The painting caused a sensation at the Royal Academy, where it was exhibited in 1778 under the exceptionally explanatory title *A boy attacked by a shark, and rescued by some seamen in a boat; founded on a fact which happened in the Harbor of the Havannah*. Audiences shocked by the painting's dramatic and grisly content were even more amazed by the novel treatment of a true event, an approach only seen previously in Benjamin West's 1770 work *The Death of General Wolfe*. Critics complimented Copley's masterful telling of a tale focusing on the heroism of common men.

Question: Ask your child to recall (or discuss together) what people loved about this painting and what they found disturbing.

Watson's story is one we see repeated in the narratives of contemporary shark attack survivors. In interviews, survivors often describe themselves as having been in the wrong place at the wrong time; unfortunate victims of chance who were freed from certain death by their own strength or by the bravery of others, who nonetheless persevere and live happy and full lives. The gory details of these narratives shock and excite us, much the way they did audiences in 1778. They also comfort us by providing a sense of agency in an unpredictable and chaotic world. When we see individuals conquer unfathomable terrors, we entertain the idea that we too could persevere if faced with a similar challenge.

Extension activities for upper elementary and middle school:

1. Compare and contrast *St. George and the Dragon* and *Watson and the Shark*.
 - A. How are their subject matters alike? How are they different?
 - B. How are the characters in the paintings alike? How are they different?
2. Research the background stories of one of the paintings: the legend of Saint George and Watson's shark attack. Describe how well the painting interprets the original stories.
3. Describe what each painting shows about what was important to the people of the time. What would some of their core values have been? How can you tell?