**Lesson: Does art have to tell a story?**

This resource was found at: http://schools.walkerart.org/swita/switaact3.html

For centuries, philosophers and artists believed that art must tell a story or have important meaning. In order to fully appreciate the artwork, viewers had to “read” this story from the image and understand its meaning.

In the 1700s, philosopher Sir Joshua Reynolds stated that great art must tell a major story. He even described the acceptable themes—Greek and Roman mythology and material from the Bible. Subjects such as portraits, landscapes, and still lifes were less important in art. While this may seem old fashioned today, many people still believe that art should express some great idea or tell a story. Therefore, to fully appreciate and understand a work of art, viewers must understand the message behind the work.

This concern for meaning in art expanded in the mid-1800s. Some artists rejected the major art subjects and instead depicted scenes of everyday life and common objects. Others began to reject realistic work altogether and explored other types of images. As the messages became less obvious, viewers were challenged to decipher a story or understand the meaning of the work.

**Procedure:**  
  
**View the following images without reading the background information:**  
1. John Currin *Park City Gril*l  
2. Jacques Lipchitz *Prometheus Strangling the Vulture II*  
3. Adrian Piper *The Mythic Being; I/You (Her)*   
4. Sigmar Polke *Mrs. Autumn and Her Two Daughters*  
5. George Segal *The Diner*   
6. John Sloan *South Beach Bathers*  
7. Kara Walker *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress*  
8. Andy Warhol *16 Jackies*

**Activity**

For each of these works, write a brief story about what you think is happening from the point of view of one of the people in the image. Look for visual clues in the artwork to help you add details to your story.

Next, read the artists’ background information and answer the following questions. Give specific reasons for your answers.

Which artist seems the most interested in telling a story?   
Which one seems to be more open to interpretation?   
How do these artists communicate meaning in their work?   
Which artwork is the most interesting to you?   
Which is the most challenging?

**Resources:**  
[Related works of art](http://schools.walkerart.org/swita/all.html?ref=3) (online version)  
[Related works of art](http://schools.walkerart.org/swita/imagesetpages/dahttas/Walker_Story_images.pdf) (downloadable PDF version)  
  
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