An Art History Lesson at Sierra Vista

by Rudy J. Miera

During lunch one fall afternoon, I was preparing a couple of visual prompts for a proposed writing assignment. As I chose Seurat's *The Circus* and Rembrandt's *The Man in the Golden Hilt* out of a stack of laminated art posters, I tried to prepare my responses to anticipated comments like “This is stupid,” “I don’t feel like doing this,” “Was that artist on drugs?” and the perennial “But I don’t need to know this in the real world.” Just as I had formulated the perfect comeback to each classic wisecrack, the squeaky, metal door flung open and a couple of hair-pulling, squealing teenage girls whirled into our classroom.

After splitting up the rowdy pair by insisting that one of the feisty girls rejoin the rest of her peers out in the courtyard or playground, I got out tape to hang the Rembrandt and Seurat prints on Sierra Vista’s lime-green walls. The remaining student, Juanita, approached me after catching her breath.

“Hey, Mr. Miera, what the hell you doing?” Juanita’s repertoire of verbal exchanges were usually accompanied by a narrowing of her black, Mescalero-Apache eyes. “Hey, Miera, what the hell...?”

“I heard you the first time, Juanita. I’m just getting something ready here, but I don’t think you’d be interested in it. If you want, you can just sit over there and wait ’til the bell rings.”

“That painting is stupid, Mr. M.”

“Yes, I know it is. It’s also probably pretty boring. Why don’t you wait in your seat, until—”

“Is that whole thing just made out of dots?”

Pause. I can’t pass on this opening. We just may have an “educational moment” here.

“That’s right, Juanita. This oil painting was done by this French guy who never used lines... only a bunch of dots... or points. That’s why they call it pointillism.”

“But why the hell did he only use dots... I mean points?”

“Well, Juanita, why do you think he did that?”

“Ugh, to be different?”

“Yeah. Why else?”

“Maybe ’cause it would make his art not so boring?”

“Could be. Anything else?”

“Well, you know, when you go to a circus, there’s all kinds of kids eating popcorn. It kind of looks like popcorn.”

Pause. Try to introduce the concept of form and content. The idea of subject and style. “Juanita,” I say, “What do your eyes do when you see the horse and the rider and the clowns all painted this way?”

“My eyes can’t keep still. They keep going from one part of the painting to another and back again.”

“So if I asked you to describe this painting to a blind person, what would you say?”

“I would say it gives you the feeling of a circus because everything is moving, like in a real circus. I would say that there are colors that jump around, like these purple dots... next to these yellow points. Nothing seems still in this—”

“Excuse me, Juanita. Don’t forget, this is a blind person that you’re talking to. They don’t know about colors, remember?”

“Okay, I know. I would make them listen to that tape of Box playing all those fast notes that you made us listen to the other—”

“Box? Who’s...? Oh, right... Johann Sebastian Bach and his *Requiem...*”

“Whatever. I would play him Box and tell him that this painting has a lot of little paint marks just like that Box uses a lot of notes in his songs.”

Pause. I stifle a smile while spontaneously trying to extend this compare and contrast lesson to the Rembrandt poster. “Juanita. What do you see in this painting?”

“Just a man.”

“How does this compare to the other painting?”

“It’s different.”

“Can you be more specific? How is it different?”

“No points.”

“And?”

“Not so many colors. Plus, this man is closer to us.”

“Yeah. That’s what we call scale. All we see are his shoulders and face. In *The Circus*, we see their whole bodies.”

“Oh, and the one man looks sad, but everybody’s happy in *The Circus*.”

“Sharp observation. Now if I were to ask you to write about what is similar between the two prints, what would you write?”

“I would say that they’re both about people and not paintings about mountains.”

“Yeah. Paintings of mountains and deserts and so on we call ‘landscapes.’ What else is similar?”

“They’re both done in paint and not pencil or charcoal.”

“Excellent.”

Abruptly, the spell was broken as the green door almost flew off its squeaky hinges. “Beverly, I thought I told you and Juanita to stay away from each other for the rest of the day. She’s in here, so you stay out. I didn’t hear the bell ring, so go back out and—”

“Hey, Juana. Whatchoo doin’?”

“I’m comparing art... which you don’t know anything about.”

Pause. Motivational strategy #32: The lure of forbidden fruit.

“Uh, Beverly. I think maybe that Juanita is right. You probably wouldn’t be interested in—”

“Cool. Man, look at that! It’s nothing but dots, huh.”

“We call it pointillism, stupid.”

“Respect. Always respect, Juanita. So, Beverly, I was just trying to get Juanita’s ideas about these two paintings. Her opinions about—”

“Don’t you want my opinion?”
“Huh? Oh, yeah. About some things. But we’re talking about boring things here. Like, for example, this dark painting by Rembrandt who painted back in the 1600s. And this light painting by Seurat who painted in the late 1800s. Wouldn’t you rather hang around the snack bar until class begins?”

“The snack bar is boring. Besides, I like art.”

“That may be true, Beverly, but I bet you wouldn’t be willing to write down your opinions about what you like.”

Pause. West-sider’s mad-dog looks-that-kill stare.


“Mr. Miera, I’m going to the bathroom, but I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, Juanita. Now, Beva, if you had to contrast these two scenes—say you had to tell your younger brother what you saw in school today. Working from your notes here, how would you explain to him that they were different?”

“I would tell him that one has a man wearing a helmet . . .”

“Which one?”

“Huh? Oh. The Rembrandt has a man wearing a—”

“Use descriptive words, Bev. Young man? Old man?”

“Oh. The Rembrandt has an old man wearing a—”

“Is he happy or sad?”

“Mr. Miera, would you stop interrupting?”

“I’m sorry, you’re right. But just pretend that your little brother has his eyes closed, and so you have to use descriptive words to make him see it in his mind.”

“How’s this? The painting by Rembrandt shows a sad, old man wearing a golden helmet.”

Pause. We put up with universal unfounded public criticism, low status, and low teaching salaries for moments like these.

Once again, that industrial-steel, graffiticovered door squeaks open as Greggy, a quizzical frown on his face, tramps in after that infamous West-side art critic, Juanita.

“Hey, Miera. What’s this about only asking las guisas about their opinions of art? I know a little something about it, too. After all, I helped Simon Leyba with that big mural over on Guadalupe Street.”

“The thing is, I would need for you to write your opinions down on this paper. Go ahead and use this pen and set it up like Beverly’s paper.”

Beverly looks over his shoulder, “You have to use descriptive words, Greggy.”

“No sweat, Beverly.”

“And start off by writing what is similar between the two,” Juanita adds.

“I think I can figure that out, Juanita. Flaca!”

“Greggy!”

“I know, Mr. Miera. Respeto . . . respeto.”

“I mean it. If you haven’t learned respect, then it really doesn’t matter how much you know about art or how good you can write.”

“Okay. Sorry, Juanita.” (Pause.) “Flaca.”

My eyes meet Greggy’s and say all that they need to.

BRIIIIIINNGGGG! An industrial-metal-sounding bell is followed by a teenage human explosion that forces the classroom door open.

“What are we doing in class today?”

Juanita speaks over the post-lunch, curse-spiked conversational roar. “Yo, Miera, are you going to let us write about that Rembrandt guy?”

“Aww, what the heck. Maybe, just maybe, if you’re lucky, I just might let everybody write a ‘compare and contrast’ between that Seurat guy and that Rembrandt guy. Think that’s a good idea?”

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