

Lesson 3 Art in Life

Art that Inspires

Many works of art bring us happiness or comfort by their existence alone. Take, for example, the work of Arthur Elsley. His paintings of children and their pets have made people smile for over a century. The work of another artist, Mark Rothko, might be more recognizable. The solid colors in his paintings bring to mind the diversity of human emotions, helping those who view them feel a sense of warmth and comfort.

Artwork, however, is more deeply appreciated with a deeper understanding of the artist and the experiences that helped produce it. We are going to explore the lives of three artists whose art has inspired people from different cultures and generations. As their life experiences became the inspiration for their art, understanding the stories behind their work will not only help us better appreciate their work but also inspire us.

Grandma Moses

When it seems too late

At the Well. This painting, with its warm colors and detailed portrayal of an ordinary day on a farm, fills the viewer with a sense of calm. In this depiction of another peaceful day, we see farmers go about their day — sweeping, pushing a cart, and drawing water out of the well. We can also see cows and goats grazing on the grass, alongside the farmers. This painting was done by Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860-1961), better known as Grandma Moses, one of the most well-known figures in the world of Naive art.

Before she started painting, Grandma Moses lived on a farm, selling homemade foods at local markets while raising her five children. She started painting in her 70s but had become an internationally recognized artist by the time she passed away at the age of 101. During that time, she produced more than 1,600 paintings. These paintings portray a simple lifestyle in the rural countryside, bringing about a sense of nostalgia about the past.

Her first paintings were done with leftover crayons and old paintbrushes that had been used by her grandchildren. She started by making these paintings to give away as gifts. Later, she tried selling them at local markets, but they received little or no attention. Then, one day in 1939, an art collector named Louis Calder noticed her paintings in the window of a drugstore. Realizing the beauty of her work, he organized exhibitions of her drawings, which were all a big hit with the public, and the rest is history. The exhibitions brought the work of Grandma Moses to the public, allowing people from all walks of life to appreciate the calming beauty of her everyday life. The story of Grandma Moses is a reminder that it is never too late to accomplish our dreams.

Lee Jungseop

Hope within life difficulties

Lee Jungseop (1916-1956) is one of the most important artists of 20th century Korean modern art. While White Ox is his most recognized piece, much of his work dealt with the themes of young children and family. Lee used common objects such as animals and children to produce artwork that reminded him of "home."

This painting, Two Children and Fish and Crab, seems lighthearted at first glance. However, behind this seemingly happy image of children is a sad story. In 1951, Lee and his family took refuge on Jeju. Although they were fleeing from the war, for Lee, the year that he spent on the island with his wife and children was the highlight of his life. Sadly, it was also the last year of happiness for his family. Poverty from the war led to the separation of his family, as he was forced to send his wife and two sons to Japan for a better chance of survival. During this time of separation, Lee continued to create art, which was his way of remembering the memories he had with his family.

Underneath the cheerful content of the painting is the sadness that Lee felt as he lived alone, far away from his family. But these paintings also allowed him to remember the good times and look forward to a happier future. His ability to express this hope through art brought his work much attention, and his art is a source of comfort to people to this day.

Alfonse Mucha

Finding the light at the end of the long tunnel

Alfonse Mucha (1860-1939) was one of the first Art Nouveau artists, which led to this form of art being referred to as the "Mucha Style." His style became famous later on in his life and is used often, even to this day. His fame, however, did not happen overnight.

As a younger artist, Mucha was rejected when he applied for his local art school, but he did not give up. Holding on to his dream of one day becoming an artist, he moved to Vienna at the age of 19 to continue his education. After working different jobs to support himself during his studies, he finally finished his schooling and 7 years later, moved to Paris.

In Paris, Mucha made money drawing inserts and illustrations for magazines but also continued working on his own art. His big break came much later in 1894, when he landed the opportunity to draw a poster for the play Gismonda. He was working alone late on Christmas Eve when he was commissioned to produce a drawing of the actor Sarah Bernhardt for a poster of the play. Based on a style that he had been developing, he produced a life-sized poster, portraying Bernhardt as a member of Byzantine royalty. This led him to eventually become known as a primary figure in the development of the Art Nouveau form.

Mucha was not an instant success when he started his career, but he kept working on his own style until the right opportunity came along. Success is said to happen only when preparation meets opportunity, and Mucha's story reminds us that beautiful things can happen when the two finally come together.