

CHOOSE YOUR WORDS

SECRETS & MYSTERIES

Teachers' Notes

Creative Writing Workshops for
Keystage 2 at the Wallace Collection



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'A writer lives, at best, in a state of astonishment...To transmit that feeling, he writes'.

William Sansom

And where better to experience a state of astonishment than at the Wallace Collection?

A two hour workshop based on a selection from eight of the treasures in the Collection is an exciting and memorable source for creative writing and will help to instil in young people an awareness of an environment like the Wallace as an abiding source for creativity.

These notes are designed to accompany the KS2 workshops on creative writing at The Wallace Collection. The notes provide a summary of the sessions, some information on the images used as sources and some ideas on follow-up work.

Students take away with them a notebook of ideas and reminders of the day and some starting points for the completion of finished pieces of writing to be done at school or in their own time. Sessions are two hours duration and are based on one of the three themes listed below. A selection of four of the eight art objects in the list will be explored by the students preparatory to some short creative writing exercises in their own 'Writer's Notebook', provided by the Learning Department.

The Workshops

The introduction to the session will look briefly at the history of the Collection and its collectors, a discussion of the chosen theme and its attendant activities, and a 'warm-up' word game.

The students will then go up into the galleries, passing through the magnificent rooms to focus on the four art objects that will stimulate their writing. The tour is interactive and students will be encouraged to voice opinions and ask questions. Two stops will be made for some short writing exercises, some of which will be shared but all of which can be the basis of more finished work later on.

The Writing Exercises will include a selection from:

- description
- dialogue/monologue
- voice and point of view
- vocabulary building
- persuasive writing

and will trigger thoughts on editing and research.

The theme you have selected for your school is Secrets and Mysteries and the children will look at four of the following pictures and objects:

Canal Scene by Moonlight, Van der Neer



In 17th-century Holland, paintings of landscapes and the activities of ordinary people were very popular. Full of atmosphere and often raising questions, they were, perhaps, the television of their day. This dark and moody picture invites interpretation and imagination.

Roll-Top Desk, Riesener, Oval Drawing Room



One of the many drawers in the desk may hold a secret. Its symbols certainly do. The many exotic woods used in the marquetry portray attributes that may belong to the first owner, the Comte d'Orsay who was a soldier, banker, diplomat and cultured man. The initials ORS on the side of the desk are his. The cockerel is the national bird of France and the dove possibly a symbol of his marriage. Mathematical instruments, books and musical instruments tell of his culture, drums, flags and cannon his army career. But the most telling perhaps, is the figure of Prudence on the back of the desk, her finger to her lips, counselling the wisdom of silence.

Cabinet, Boulle

The Boulle cabinet represents the height of luxury at the court of Louis XIV. It was most likely made for one of the members of the French Royal Family. There is a Fleur de Lys on the frieze along the top and at this time only the Royal family were allowed to put this symbol on furniture. Made from several different exotic woods, the marquetry represents realistic if stylised portrayals of particular botanical specimens, including peonies, daffodils and honeysuckle. You can even find insects including a beetle scuttling along an acanthus leaf. The numerous drawers include, at the top a small, secret drawer hidden by a gilt bronze mount which has a medal of Louis XIV in the centre. The medal was made to celebrate a military victory and the arms either side of it are laid down to symbolise the peace that the monarch has brought to the world. This cabinet would be used to keep precious objects: medals, sculptures and relics.



Apothecary's Jar, C51 Smoking Room Workshop of Orazio Pompei Maiolica, 1540 - 50

Drug or medicine jars made from maiolica were used extensively in Italian apothecaries in the 16th century. Maiolica is earthenware decorated with tin-glaze. The apothecary would have made his own medicines, grinding up and mixing herbs and spices to time-honoured recipes. This jar contained a wet medicine because it has a spout for pouring. The inscription at the base reads 'D Duob Radicib' which means 'of two roots', so the medicine would have included the roots of two plants such as ginger or liquorice mixed with liquid of some kind. The jars were often decorated with cartoon like characters and the spouts turned into dragons' mouths, perhaps indicating that the medicine would taste fiery!



The Harpsichord Lesson, Jan Steen, Oil on oak panel, 1660 – 1669



Jan Steen depicts an amusing 'real life' scene of a grizzled old music master giving a music lesson to a young woman of some wealth and status. He gives us certain clues as to the hidden message he is giving. The man is dressed in his best to impress, but the young woman diligently studies the keys, not looking at him. Behind her a key sits firmly on its hook. Overhead, in a nude painting of Venus and Cupid, the gods of love and beauty are asleep. These are all symbols to tell us that the music master may be in love with his pupil, but she is definitely not interested in him. Poor man – the door is open. He may leave at any time!

The Letter Writer Surprised, Gabriel Metsu, c. 1658 – 67, Netherlands, Oil on oak panel

Young people reading or writing letters in 17th Dutch paintings are usually indicators of amorous intrigue. Here, the woman is so absorbed in answering the letter propped against the inkstand before her that she not only neglects her domestic duties, symbolised by the work basket, but also fails to notice the jealous lover or husband, or perhaps over-protective brother who angrily peers over her shoulder. The cello in the foreground has no accompanying bow, which is also a symbol of a love affair or marriage gone wrong. If the bow were present, it would mean that love prospered.



'Monster-face' helmet, European Armoury I

Not all armour was bright and shiny, and not all armour was worn by rich knights. This is the helmet of an ordinary soldier in the army of the German city of Nuremberg. It was made quickly, to keep the price down. The metal has been left rough- you can see the hammer



marks where the armourer beat it into shape. It was painted as a cheap way of making it look more striking. The monstrous face makes it seem impressive, even though it is low-quality work.

Landscape with a Coach, Govaert Flinck, Oil on oak panel, c. 1637



A misty landscape that only reveals itself little by little, the picture can be taken as a purely decorative picture of the Dutch countryside, with a strange rather compelling atmosphere. But it can also raise questions when you search out all there is hidden in it. Where is the coach going? What are the buildings? Where does the bridge lead? Who are the people and what are they thinking?

Follow up Activities

- Choose the 'starter' you did at the Gallery that interests you most and turn it into a finished piece of writing.
- You began a piece of dialogue at the Gallery. Choose another pair of characters, not necessarily from the same picture perhaps. What might they be talking about? Would they be friendly and having fun, or has one upset the other and they are quarrelling? Write their conversation.
- Think about some of the textures and smells you found in the pictures and objects. Find some words that describe them, pleasant and unpleasant! Perhaps you can find some similes. Turn them into phrases that you can keep to put into other stories later on.
- Think about the objects you have seen. What secrets and mysteries did they hold? Perhaps you wondered what two of the men by the canal are talking about, or maybe you were puzzled by what might be in the secret drawer in the cabinet. Make a story about them.
- Take another of the secrets you thought about in the galleries. Write a letter from a character, persuading a second character to tell them the secret, to give them something hidden. Or you might prefer to write the reverse – a letter persuading them not to tell the secret to a third character. You can choose a character from one of the paintings, or the owner of one of the objects, or they can be imaginary.
- Choose two favourite things you have seen. Make a flip book about them, combining them in a story with pictures and speech bubbles.