

# **The Signature Project – A Curriculum Framework**

Age/grade range 5-8 or modified for K-12

## ***Introduction and Rationale:***

This Unit Framework examines the creative concept of “meaning making.” It has been said that all art has “aboutness” (Barrett, T. 2000). However, artists have different reasons for making art and some choose to leave the meaning open-ended with no specific reference intended. These works can take on contextual meaning from the time and place where the work was created or the viewer can construct understanding based on personal response to formal characteristics.

In contrast, there are artists such as Patrick Dunning who intentionally embed meaning in works of art. For hundreds of years, artists have been fascinated with distortion, illusion and hidden meanings. In the past, this approach to art making may have been used to disguise expression of unpopular ideas or to engage the viewer through mystery where, in the end, a surprise may be uncovered. Not only were symbols used for this purpose, but also unusual perspectives were explored to create illusions that altered or played with meaning.

Two concepts are helpful for a discussion about understanding meaning in art works: intrinsic information and extrinsic information. Intrinsic information may be considered the essential elements that belong naturally to an object. This information is considered inherent. Extrinsic information is the opposite since it comes from outside the object. This can be understanding of the art based on the context of artist and culture.

For example, in *The Signature Project*, the signatures, the colors, even the symbols that make up the image can be considered intrinsic information. That is, if we are able to study details of the work itself, we can identify the lines, colors, and forms making up the whole. However, Patrick Dunning tells us that for every signature - there is a story and if the “drawing” has a million signatures it will represent or connect with a million stories. Therefore, the story behind every signature is extrinsic information. Even the context of the artist, his culture, as well as the artist’s intended meaning for the symbols, is extrinsic and found outside of the work itself. We discover these layers of meaning in art from explanation or study of the work.

When art works are explored in depth, as they are during the performance of *The Signature Project*, there is opportunity for intrinsic and extrinsic information to come together. It is this coming together of information that surprises and excites viewers and it is likely that as individuals gain understanding about *The Signature Project* (or any art work), they will feel a shift in their personal response from what it was when first introduced to the work. Understanding is at the heart of appreciation for art works as it is the beginning of all relationships.

## **Curriculum Overview:**

The following curriculum framework will present options for Big Ideas, Key Concepts, and Essential Questions. Content is connected with National Art Standards for grades 5-8 but can be modified for K-12 students. Standards-based art curriculum will include objectives for art process and skills, historical/cultural insights, as well as knowledge and skills for talking about or analysis of art, which includes learning appropriate related vocabulary. Finally, Habits of Mind (Hetland et al., 2007) have been included for teacher consideration as students engage with the following ideas.

## **Theme for Signature Project and Curriculum:**

### **Architecture for Abstract Thinking**

**Big Idea:** Overarching idea; points to the heart of the main curriculum idea(s)

#### **MAKING MEANING / FINDING MEANING**

**Key Concepts:** Ideas that bridge the big idea with essential questions.

Meaning in the arts is not always on the surface.  
Meaning can come from the artist or from the observer.  
Meaning in art can come as a surprise.  
Meaning in the art can be planned or an accident.  
Meaning in layers can make experience more interesting.

**Essential Questions:** Open-ended questions that drive the unit.

What information in the *Signature Project* is Intrinsic Information?  
What information in the *Signature Project* is Extrinsic Information?  
Why do some artists choose to hide or mask layers of meaning in art?  
In what ways does this kind of art reflect life?  
Is the *Signature Project* a self-portrait of the artist?

## **Habits of the Mind/Creative Behavior:**

Curiosity, Reflection, Stretch and Explore

## **Connection with National Art Standards:**

*The National Standards for Arts Education can be found at:*

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teach/standards/>

Or: <http://www.naea-reston.org/store/books/naea-standards>

# **Classroom Ideas for The Teacher**

## ***Art Process/Activity Suggestions:***

A survey of the Internet will provide ample ideas for developing related art activities as well as art skills that might be taught in this unit. The student process may or may not be like the process used by Patrick Dunning in the *Signature Project*. However, there should be a clear connection between the Big Idea/Signature Project Theme and the big idea/essential questions that the students explore for their own projects for the final task. Consider the following as a fairly simple, yet potentially meaningful, process.

**Activity:** A Portrait of My Hand; A Portrait of Me

### **Reflect and Write:**

What does it mean to be “me?” Begin with descriptions such as: “If I were a color, I would be \_\_\_\_; If I were a season, I would be \_\_\_\_\_,” and so on. Also, consider what it means to be “me” in the context of family and community. Then explore specific significance and potential meaning of “me” related to “my” hand(s).

Compose a brief and personally descriptive statement then translate into Morse Code on a practice sheet of paper. Statement can come from reflection above. (See Morse Code Key Decoder <http://havenworks.com/language/morse-code/>)

### **Draw and Plan:**

Place one hand on a sheet of paper and carefully draw the outline shape with a light pencil line. Drawing with coded message can be completed on this sheet of paper or the hand can be cut and pasted onto another colored background.

Plan how to copy the Morse Code personal statement onto the hand shape (outline). Use light pencil lines, if desired, to guide writing of the coded message onto the hand shape.

### **Choices and Meaning Making:**

Many of the choices made in this process have expressive potential. Consider the following:

What color paper will the hand be drawn on? What color paper will the background be? Will the final line, defining the hand shape, be light or dark and what color? Will the background be developed in others ways, using other images? What is the coded statement? How is the coded statement written; is the line straight, diagonal, or a spiral?

### **Report:**

Students can talk with each other and compare intrinsic and extrinsic information about each self-portrait.

**Materials:**

pencils, black and colored pens, scissors, glue sticks, rulers

***Art Process/Skills/Standards:***

**Content Standard #1:** Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes

- Students select media, techniques, and processes; analyze what makes them effective or not effective in communicating ideas; and reflect upon the effectiveness of their choices

**Content Standard #2:** Using knowledge of structures and functions

- Students employ organizational structures and analyze what makes them effective or not effective in the communication of ideas

**Content Standard #3:** Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

- Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks. Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

***Historical/Cultural View Suggestions:***

Historical or cultural connection should begin with *The Signature Project* artist: Patrick Dunning. An interview with him (following) gives us an understanding of who the artist is and the context of his work. The artist's words help us see the way he thinks about his work. This gives the audience opportunity to have a deeper response and understanding of the work. It may also inspire young students to creatively explore meaning making in a similar way on their own.

Once students are introduced to *The Signature Project*, teachers may also wish to make further historical connections with other artists who, for hundreds of years, have hidden or layered meaning in their art works. *Hidden Images, From the Renaissance to the Present* (F. Leeman, 1975, Harry Abrams, New York, pp. 11-13) provides an interesting introduction to related artists including: Leonardo da Vinci (Anamorphic sketch of child's head, 1485, Italy); Erhard Schön – (Follower of Albrecht Dürer, 1500s, Germany); and Hans Holbein (*The Ambassadors*, 1533, Germany/England).

***Historical/Cultural View/Standards:***

**Content Standard #4:** Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

- Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

## ***Analysis/Vocabulary Suggestions:***

Specific objectives for vocabulary and concepts can come from the essential questions, from ideas found in the historical//cultural investigation, or from the interview with the *Signature Project* artist: Patrick Dunning.

### ***Vocabulary Sample:***

Intrinsic information and extrinsic information (explore the meaning)  
Anamorphoses  
Expressive qualities

## ***Analysis/Vocabulary/Standards:***

**Content Standard #5:** Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

- Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art
- Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry

**Content Standard #6:** Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

- Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts

## The Signature Project: Interview with the Artist, Patrick Dunning

*Q: What comments have you heard, following your presentation, which might help us "unpack" the central idea of the Signature Project?*

PD: A teacher once told me that the students who saw my show were able to conceive or imagine in their minds the mental architecture necessary for abstract thought. In the presentation and through this 'abstract architecture' I reveal images, sounds, ideas and scientific facts in an artistic way. This allows me to open up other areas of science and life that can be further explored.

*Q: Will you talk about your creative process, how the Signature Project came to be, and the choices you made for the symbols that make up the overall image?*

PD: The imagery for the painting was based upon a very spiritual experience I had when I was 17. At that time, I was studying yoga with a group in Dublin and was quite dedicated to the regimen of diet and exercise. For weeks, the only food I would consume was fruit and water. My mother thought I was mad, and maybe I was, but the breathing exercises and meditation at early hours in the morning were truly spiritual. One morning, while meditating at dawn and concentrating about my purpose in this life, I had what can only be described as an 'out of body' experience. There was a total disconnect from my physical being as my conscious floated in a vibrating void of pure energy and harmony. There was a sense of being witness to an immense power and being given access to experience it. That's the best way I can describe this and it may sound a little theatrical to some but it's the best I can do. No words can do it justice and it was far beyond just being beautiful. In a strange way it also frightened me. The feeling I took from all of this was that everything is connected. Everything.

As I pondered what the image of the artwork should be, I decided to draw from that experience. The signatures are the brush strokes, the base line; it's us, in our daily lives as we are. The earth is where we live with each other. We live because of the sun's heat and the moon's cycle. Earth is floating in space surrounded by distant, shining stars and a mere speck in a massive galaxy. The galaxies are countless. The white heart at the center of the sun is there to represent a positive attitude. Some would call this naive but many people seek to understand life's existence through religion. In a quiet, discreet way this motif provides the accessibility for people to embrace the art without conflicting their own personal beliefs.

*Q: Will you explain how the components of the image for the signature project came to be signatures and not other words or images?*

PD: I consciously set out to create an artwork that would have many dimensions to it, would involve over a million people, and open up a range of experiences. Whenever I need to come up with an idea I can just set my mind to 'auto loop' the parameters of what

I need. It's like a 'built in' filtering system that allows me to process the images or concepts that I need to come up with to suit the task at hand. When I process the information and get a result I can then process it again, and again and again to refine it. This was the way *The Signature Project* developed.

There were practical challenges in terms of what size the picture should be, what materials to use and most critically, how to achieve the physical input of a million people. The idea of using signatures as a medium was something I had thought about before. They are fascinating expressions of our individuality. Each one is literally a unique self-portrait, coded information about our own personality. In our daily lives, when a signature is required, it is a legal request to express oneself with a drawing and to identify who we are. The legal ramifications of signing a document are well known, but I was more fascinated by the artistic result, how they looked and what personal traits they expressed. Some are manic while others are serene. Some are busy and vibrant while others are casual and loose.

*Q: For each signature there is a story. Will you talk about the many layers of meaning in the Signature Project?*

The fact that each image or element revealed is suggestive of another element hopefully leads the audience onward; the object is to engage and hook their curiosity. Each new image just offers up other questions. One canvas that contains 7000 signatures on its surface is just a small piece of the bigger picture. Because the signatures are observed in sunlight or natural light, that is all we can see. However, sunlight is just a small area on the spectrum that makes up our observed world. When you move away from the sunlight part of the spectrum to other areas, like ultraviolet light, and observe the same canvas using that light, other images appear. Move to x-rays and others images appear. Some x-rays expose images that I have made with Morse code. Once the audience realizes this is a code they are curious to know what it says.

This is a very powerful tool for teachers if they can adapt it to their own classroom. Example--- Present something to the students, which following decoding points to another question and takes on another form. For example, if the teacher was to put a cardboard box in the middle of the room and have the students sit in a circle around it. One side of the box is painted red and the other is blue. Then ask the students what they see. Half would say a red box and the other would say a blue box. They are looking at the same object but seeing different things. Now have the teacher open the box to reveal something inside such as a little mirror. As each student looks in and sees their own reflection they are all getting a different result. They all look in, but see something different. The point I'm trying to make is that we don't all see the same thing and that perspective is a variable experience. *The Signature Project* has these other layers to it. The students usually begin to realize the breadth of the spectrum we exist in and the natural limited view we have of it, but it encourages them to sense the bigger picture out there.

*Q: Do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to leave us with?*

The end of my show has a blues music/driving sequence that I present. I play live over a backing track with images of the roads I've traveled in different states. Sometimes the experience of life can be expressed through the arts instead of the sciences. For me this is an important element in the show because every discipline I reveal just enhances the other or balances it. Another thing I have found is that when we have a personal problem in life, if we have the ability to express that problem in an artistic way, with maybe music or art or poetry, it diminishes the problem and creates something beautiful.

The scope of The Signature Project is huge. I try to express the breadth of emotions we feel in life when I talk about love and loss. Both my parents have passed away and I reveal this to them and the sadness it brings. At the same time there is a joy with the wonder of this thing called life along with an awareness of its fragility and I try to show that through the people I introduce on screen. While life facts are being presented with one hand the scientific elements are also being introduced with the other, such as the spectrum and space and our place in the universe. Hopefully, the audience can sense the depth of the artwork and use the signing of their own name as recognition of their own place in the reality.

#### **Potential for Further Research:**

##### **Literature Connections:**

*The Red Book*. Lehman, B. (2004). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

*Flotsam*. Wiesner, D. (2006). New York: Clarion Books.

*Zoom*. Banyai, I. (1995). New York: Penguin Books.

##### **More Art Connections:**

*Puzzles About Art*. Battin, Fisher, Moore, & Silvers (1989). Boston, MA: St. Martin's Press.

*How to Think like Leonardo da Vinci*. Gelb, M. (1998). NY: Dell Publishing.

*Hidden Images*, Leeman, F. (1975). NY: Harry N. Abrams Publishers.

*From Ordinary to Extraordinary*. Vieth, K. (1999). Worcester, MA: Davis Publications, Inc.

##### **Related Websites:**

Morse Code Translator

<http://morsecode.scpillips.com/jtranslator.html> Translates typed words into images and plays it as sound

Morse Code Key Decoder

<http://havenworks.com/language/morse-code/> Chart of Morse Code letters and numbers

Spectra and Spectral Data/Electromagnetic Spectrum

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/chem/info/spectrum.html> Spectrum Graphic both showing the portion we live in and the other areas

## References

- Barrett, T. (1997). *Interpreting Art, Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishers.
- Broudy, H. (1994). *Enlightened Cherishing, An Essay on Aesthetic Education*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
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- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a Blue Guitar*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
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### Websites:

National Art Education Association Website, *The National Visual Arts Standards* (1994). Retrieved 07/06/2010 from: <http://www.naea-reston.org/store/books/naea-standards>

The Kennedy Center ARTSEdge, *The National Standards for Arts Education*. Retrieved 07/06/2010 from: <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teach/standards/>