

Visual Voices of the Holocaust - The Life and Art of Samuel Bak

Objective:

Students will examine the role and meaning of artwork created during the Holocaust; use visual literacy skills to explore the life and art of Holocaust survivor and artist Samuel Bak; and develop Fine Arts Projects based on central themes found in Bak's work.

Overview:

Artwork is a powerful medium that invites its viewer to explore history and modern day society from unique perspectives. Through art, we are able to catch glimpses of how broader historical events impact and transform individuals, societies, and cultures; observe and recognize how universal themes and experiences interwoven throughout history relate to society today; and expand our world view through cross-cultural connections that foster empathy, compassion, and appreciation.

In this lesson, students will use art as a framework for learning about the history of the Holocaust and its historical legacies. At the conclusion of this lesson, students will have the opportunity to create their own artwork based on what they learned.

Grade Level: 6-12

TEKS: Middle School

Social Studies – Grade 6: 1 (A, B); 18 (B, D); 21 (A, B, C, E); 22 (C, D, E)

Art – Middle School 1: 1 (A, B, D); 2 (A, C); 3 (A, B); 4 (A, B)

High School

World History: 1 (F); 12 (B); 29 (A, B, C, D); 30 (C)

Art – Level 1: 1 (B, C, D); 2 (A, D, F); 3 (A, B); 4 (A, B)

Duration: 2-3 class periods

Materials:

“Teaching the Holocaust Using Art” Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TD-mSTOoYvs>

Chart Paper or Butcher Paper

Markers

Samuel Bak's Biography

<https://www.puckergallery.com/samuel-bak>

Samuel Bak's Timeline

<https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bak/biography.asp>

Samuel Bak NOVA Documentary

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/video/holocaust-survival-tale-sam/>

"Illuminations: The Art of Samuel Bak" Video

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/illuminations-art-samuel-bak>

"Samuel Bak: The Art of Speaking about the Unspeakable" Video

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/samuel-bak-art-speaking-about-unspeakable>

"Samuel Bak: Facing my own history and my story with *Facing History and Ourselves*" Interview

<https://www.facinghistory.org/illuminations-art-samuel-bak/about-samuel-bak>

Bio Poem Instruction Handout (see page 1 in appendix)

Samuel Bak Gallery – A Virtual Exhibition

<https://hnh.org/exhibitions/samuel-bak-gallery-and-learning-center-in-loving-memory-of-hope-silber-kaplan>

"See, Think, Wonder" Worksheet (see page 2 in appendix)

"Writing Windows" Worksheet (see page 3 in appendix)

"DQC Strategy" Worksheet (see page 4 in appendix)

"Unveiling Stories" Worksheet (see page 5 in appendix)

Engage:

Begin a class discussion by asking students to reflect on the role of artwork throughout history and in modern day society.

Activity: Musical Mix-Freeze-Group

Using the lead4ward instructional strategy “Musical Mix-Freeze-Group,” ask students to reflect and respond to the following questions with a partner:

- ❑ What is art?
- ❑ What are different forms of art?
- ❑ Why do people create art?
- ❑ What role has artwork played throughout history and in society today?
- ❑ Why do people create artwork, especially during periods of injustice?

To begin the activity, ask students to spread out around the classroom. Instruct students to walk around the room when they hear music playing and to freeze when the music stops. Allow students to “mix” and mingle with each other as the music plays and pause the music when you are ready to pose the first question. While the students are frozen, ask them to partner up with the person closest to them and present the first question to the group. In their pairs, students will take turns responding to the question before coming back together as a large group. Give the students 60-90 seconds to reflect and share their ideas with each other before coming back together as a class. Restart the music and repeat this process for each question. Once the students have answered all of the questions, invite students to share out major take-aways from the activity.

Explore:

1. In the midst of the Holocaust, as Jews experienced persecution, discrimination, violence, and murder, artwork within the Jewish community flourished – artwork became a compelling medium that helped symbolize the plight of the Jewish people during a catastrophic time in history. Through their artwork, Jewish artists explored how individuals, families, and entire communities were being impacted by the dangerous policies of the Nazis while simultaneously highlighting the resiliency and power of the human spirit.

Encourage students to reflect on the role and meaning of artwork created during the Holocaust and how these visual voices deepen our understanding of the Holocaust on an individual, societal, and historical level through “Silent Graffiti.”

Activity: Silent Graffiti

To prepare for this activity create “graffiti boards” using chart paper or butcher paper. Each “graffiti board” will have a different question written prominently either at the top or middle of the page. Prepare your “graffiti boards” using the following questions:

- o Why did Jewish men, women, and children create artwork during the Holocaust?
- o What were Jewish artists trying to say through their artwork? What was their message?
- o What can Holocaust art tell us about the personal experiences and stories of Jewish men, women, and children during this time?
- o What can Holocaust art tell us about society at this time?
- o How does Holocaust art deepen our understanding of the Holocaust?

For additional information and suggestions on how to use the “Silent Graffiti” in your classroom, please visit the following link:

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/graffiti-boards>

To begin the “Silent Graffiti” activity, watch the video “Teaching the Holocaust Using Art” as a class: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TD-mSTOoYvs>

*Note: it is recommended that educators watch the entire video while students view a portion of the video (section 1:37 - 3:35). As students watch the video, place the “graffiti boards” around the classroom.

After students have viewed the video, ask each student to grab a marker and instruct everyone to silently respond to the questions on the “graffiti boards” displayed around the classroom. Give the students 10-15 minutes to write down their thoughts and ideas before coming back together as a class. As a class, discuss important themes and conclusions from the “Silent Graffiti” exercise.

2. While artwork created during the Holocaust provides key insights into how the Jewish community experienced and coped with the Holocaust as it unfolded over time, what role does contemporary Holocaust art play in society today? How can artwork created after the Holocaust enrich our understanding of this historical time period? Students will now consider the function and meaning of artwork created after the Holocaust by examining the life and art of Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak.

Samuel Bak is a renowned artist who uses art to illuminate the human experiences of the Holocaust and how communities cope with trauma and loss in the aftermath of genocide. As a young child, Bak became a prominent figure within the Vilna Ghetto

artistic community and had his artwork first publically displayed at an art exhibition in the ghetto. Bak utilized his art to document the atrocities of the Holocaust while in the ghetto but survived the war with his mother. Bak's contemporary Holocaust art explores the historical legacies of the Holocaust through visual metaphors that tell a story – it is the story of a world that once existed but is now destroyed, of a world that has been rebuilt but one that cannot be wholly pieced back together.

Activity: Samuel Bak Bio Poem

Invite students to learn more about the life of Samuel Bak through videos, interviews, and biographies that chronicle his life story, art, and career:

Samuel Bak's Biography – Pucker Gallery

<https://www.puckergallery.com/samuel-bak>

Samuel Bak's Timeline – Yad Vashem

<https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bak/biography.asp>

Samuel Bak NOVA Documentary – PBS

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/video/holocaust-survival-tale-sam/>

“Illuminations: The Art of Samuel Bak” Video – Facing History and Ourselves

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/illuminations-art-samuel-bak>

“Samuel Bak: The Art of Speaking about the Unspeakable” Video – Facing History and Ourselves

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/samuel-bak-art-speaking-about-unspeakable>

“Samuel Bak: Facing my own history and my story with *Facing History and Ourselves*” Interview

<https://www.facinghistory.org/illuminations-art-samuel-bak/about-samuel-bak>

*Note: it is recommended that teachers preview each resource to determine if it is grade level appropriate for your students. We also encourage you to access each resource based on how much time you will give the students to research.

Once students have completed their research on Bak, instruct each student to compose a “Bio Poem” about Samuel Bak summarizing his life story as well as the purpose and meaning of his art. Provide each student with a copy of the “Bio Poem Instruction Handout” (see page 1 in appendix) and give students 10-15 minutes to work on their poems. After students have completed the writing exercise, come back together as a class and invite students to share their bio poems with the class.

3. Delve into the artistic world of Samuel Bak by exploring Holocaust Museum Houston’s Samuel Bak Gallery and Learning Center – A Virtual Exhibition.

Activity: Samuel Bak Gallery – A Virtual Exhibition

<https://hnh.org/exhibitions/samuel-bak-gallery-and-learning-center-in-loving-memory-of-hope-silber-kaplan>

As students explore the Samuel Bak Gallery – A Virtual Exhibition, encourage them to tour the entire space and to take their time when studying each of the paintings. Ask students to record their general observations, feelings, and questions regarding Bak’s work in a journal before coming back together as a class. *Note: it is recommended that teachers allocate 20-30 minutes for this activity.

EXPLAIN

What can Bak’s art tell us about the historical legacies of the Holocaust? What are the central themes found in Bak’s work? What message is Bak trying to convey through the visual metaphors and symbols found in his work? How does Bak’s work add depth to our knowledge of the Holocaust and its aftermath? Students will now consider these questions through an analysis of Bak’s work.

Activity: Bak Art Analysis

Working in small groups, students will choose one painting from the “Samuel Bak Gallery – A Virtual Exhibition” collection to analyze (one painting per group). Encourage students to select a painting that either stood out to them or that they found interesting. *Note: each group should analyze a different painting from the collection.

To guide students through their art analysis, select one of the following strategies and provide a copy of the worksheet to each group:

Middle School (Grades 6-8):

“See, Think, Wonder” Worksheet (see page 2 in appendix)

“Writing Windows” Worksheet (see page 3 in appendix)

High School (Grades 9-12):

“DQC Strategy” Worksheet (see page 4 in appendix)

“Unveiling Stories” Worksheet (see page 5 in appendix)

Once each group has completed their analysis of Bak’s work, bring the class back together. Each group will give a five minute presentation sharing their painting and interpretation with the class.

ELABORATION

Connect the concepts interwoven throughout this lesson by assigning students a Fine Arts Project on Holocaust art.

Activity: Fine Arts Project

Students will create their own artwork about Holocaust using central themes found in Bak’s work. Suggested themes include: family; childhood; community; memory; trauma; loss; transformation; and healing.

Students can choose a Fine Arts Project that focuses on the history of the Holocaust or its historical legacies using a visual arts medium: painting, photograph, graphic novel, collage, drawing, mural, mosaic, sculpture, needlework, models, prints, stained glass, film, etc. Students can incorporate one or more of Bak’s themes into their work.

Each project should include the following:

- ☐ Name of Artist
- ☐ Title of the Artwork
- ☐ Artist Statement (5-7 sentences) explaining the concept behind the project (why they created this piece and how it relates to Bak’s work) and the meaning behind their work (an interpretation of the symbols and metaphors found in their work)
- ☐ Medium used (what the art is made of)

*Note: it is recommended that teachers allocate one class period or outside class time to allow students to work on their projects.

EVALUATION

Students will present their Fine Arts Projects to the entire class.

We encourage students to submit a photograph of their project for a chance to be featured on Holocaust Museum Houston's website, social media page, or in our gallery. For more information, please contact education@hnh.org