Grand Rapids Art Museum - School Programs

**Concept:**
Beginning / Middle / End

**Objective (Goal):**
Students will demonstrate their understanding of sequencing by composing the beginning and end of a story that uses a work of art as the prompt for the middle of the story.


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Mathias Alten
American, 1871-1938
*The Broken Mast*, 1910-1911
Oil on canvas
Grand Rapids Art Museum
Gift of Peter C. and Pat Cook, 1998.1.2
About the Work

Mathias Alten painted *The Broken Mast* in the Netherlands during one of his many trips abroad. This painting combines several reoccurring themes in Alten's work - the seashore and men and animals involved in physical labor. In *The Broken Mast*, he has painted a three-horse team struggling to pull a damaged boat to shore. The white horse on the right is shown with its head down and gaze fixed, determined to complete its task, while the horse on the far left has perhaps been coaxed by the man who leads the group ashore.

Alten has accentuated the horses' muscles to demonstrate the power in their bodies. He has captured their straining movement realistically with oil paints, yet with undefined brushstrokes that allow for some viewer interpretation. The cloudy day and the bluish-cast to the somber palette emphasize the laborious task that these men and animals have undertaken.

Alten's paintings often show the bond between man and animal. In *The Broken Mast*, the men rely on the horses to help pull their damaged boat to shore, while the horses, in turn, depend on the men for guidance and care during this physically intensive task. Alten portrays man and animal working side by side in a dignified, heroic manner that glorifies the industrious laborer and his equally hard-working animal companions.

About the Artist

Mathias Alten, a Grand Rapids citizen throughout his adult life, moved to this city with his family in 1889 at the age of seventeen from the Saar region of Germany. During his younger years, Alten worked in various capacities as an artist, painting signs and murals for local businesses and patrons, and won many art competitions.

In 1899, at the age of twenty-eight, he made his first trip back to Europe to study in Paris, enrolling at the Academie Julian, the Academie Colorossi, and a veterinary clinic studying animal anatomy - knowledge he would use extensively in his later work. This formal training coupled with his earlier efforts as a self-taught artist officially launched his career as a painter.

Over the course of his life Alten traveled extensively, painting in France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Morocco, Italy, New Mexico, California, Oregon, and New York. With each new location Alten would refine his skill and adjust his style to capture the natural beauty of his subject matter.

Alten remained a leading artist in Grand Rapids, often painting local scenes including John Ball Park, Division and Monroe Avenues, and local farms, until his death in 1938 at age sixty-seven. Mathias Alten's work is a study in the growth and adaptation of an artist. Alten's broad range of subject matter, from still lifes and exquisite women, to the working class and agrarian harvest scenes, captured the appeal of a broad audience and his work remains celebrated as timeless interpretations of history.

Vocabulary

**Agrarian** - relating to, or characteristic of farmers or their way of life; also relating to fields or lands or their tenure.

**Composition** - the placement or arrangement of visual elements in a work of art.

**Impressionism** - an art movement and style of painting that began in France in the 1860s that is characterized by the artists' interest in showing their subject matter at various times of the day, trying to capture an 'impression' of what the eye sees in a particular moment.
Elements of Art

**Color** - must have three properties: 1) Hue, the name of the color, e.g. red, yellow, etc. 2) Intensity or the purity and strength of the color. 3) Value, or the lightness or darkness of the color.

**Form** - three-dimensional object having volume (ex. cube, sphere, cone). Three-dimensional objects are considered to be viewed “in the round” because they are designed to be viewed from all sides.

**Shape** - is an enclosed space defined by other elements of art. Shapes may take on the appearance of 2-d or 3-d objects.

**Texture** - refers to the surface quality or "feel" of an object, such as roughness, smoothness, or softness.

**Value** - describes the lightness or darkness of a color. Value is needed to express Volume.

**Line** - the continuous mark made on some surface by a moving point. It may be two dimensional, like a pencil mark on a paper or it may be three-dimensional (wire) or implied (the edge of a shape or form). Often it is an outline, contour or silhouette.

**Space** - refers to the distance or area between, around, above or within things. It can be a description for both 2 and 3 dimensional depictions.

Principles of Art

**Contrast** - refers to the differences in a work. You can achieve contrast by using difference shapes, textures, colors and values in your work.

**Balance** - is a sense of stability in the body of work. Creating a feeling of equal weight can create Balance.

**Unity (Harmony)** - is seen in a painting or drawing when all the parts equal a whole. Your work should not appear disjointed or confusing. Unity can be achieved through the repetition of multiple elements.

**Movement** - adds excitement to your work by directing the viewer's eye throughout the picture plane.

**Proportion** - the size relationship of parts to a whole and to one another.

**Emphasis** - in a composition refers to developing points of interest to pull the viewer's eye to important parts of the body of the work.

**Rhythm (Pattern)** - is seen in repeating of shapes and colors, or alternating lights and darks.
Warm-Up Activity:

Mathias Alten
*The Broken Mast*

In this painting, the artist, Mathias Alten, included many details.

1. Look closely at the horses.
2. Describe the horses using many details.
3. Give the horses names.

Imagine that you are the white horse. You and the other horses are pulling the boat.

1. What would you say to the other horses?
2. What would the other horses say back?

Look closely at the men and what they are doing.

1. Describe the problem that the man in the blue shirt has.
2. Sketch or write a solution.
3. Then, describe the problems for the other men in the painting and sketch solutions for each person.

**Goal:**

The goal for this activity is to use a work of art to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and an end.

**Discussion Questions:**

First, view and discuss the artwork *The Broken Mast*.

1. Describe the animals found in this painting.
2. What are the animals doing? Why?
3. Where does this scene take place? What type of day is it? Describe the mood. What visual clues has the artist used to tell us?
4. Describe the artist’s application of paint. How does this affect the mood? Would the painting feel the same if the artist had used thin, flat layers?
5. Why would horses be used for this activity? Could the men pull the boat ashore by themselves? Explain.
6. What relationship exists between the horses and the men?
7. If you were the man leading the horse in this scene, what would you be thinking? If you were one of the horses, what would you be thinking?

**Activity:**

1. Work with the students as a group to complete the sentence about what is happening in the painting (the middle of the story).
2. Students can work individually or with partners to write a beginning and an end of the story in the appropriate boxes on their worksheets.
3. Students can read through their stories aloud (or with their partner) from start to finish, for continuity.
4. When finished, individuals (or partners) can take turns sharing their completed stories to the full group.
Title:

At First,

Middle

Now the _____________ horses are ___________

adjective

adverb

pulling the _____________ toward shore.
noun

End

Finally,