



Objective: To explore how gestures convey emotion, mood, and action, and how they bring drama and meaning to art.

A) Introduction:

Today we are going to talk about gestures in art. When I point to you to answer the question, I am making a gesture. Why do you think we use gestures? Throughout art history artists used gestures to tell a story, show movement or emotion, or portray an attitude important to the times, bringing more meaning and drama to the artwork. Gestures can help us, the audience, better understand or see the emotion, mood, and narrative in the objects.

B) Vocabulary: (If the vocabulary words have been provided on poster boards, refer to them here. Otherwise, write the words on the board to refer to as you talk about them.)

Gesture: a movement that expresses or emphasizes an idea, emotion, or attitude.

Three kinds of Gestures:

- **Descriptive:** tells more about the idea of a story or provides a narrative.
- **Rhetorical:** highlights and reflects emotional conditions; it is more of an expressive gesture than a physical one. (Example: An example of a rhetorical gesture might be someone grasping their coat together with their mouth open wide indicating surprise or shock.)
- **Symbolic:** one must understand the attitudes of the time to know the meaning of the gesture.
- **Gestural Painting:** the use of sweeping, expansive movements in which the gestures of the artist's hand are evident.
- **Narrative:** True or fictitious story or account of events or experiences.
- **Contour:** Outline of object; edge or line that creates shape
- **Blind Contour Drawing:** method of drawing in which the student fixes eyes on outline of model/object, draws contour slowly in continuous line without lifting pencil or looking at paper.

Gestures are generally regarded as purposeful, not involuntary, bodily movements. Let's talk a little more about the three kinds of gestures we discussed. Does anyone remember what they are?

[Descriptive, Rhetorical, and Symbolic.] What is a descriptive gesture? **[It tells more about the idea of a story or provides a narrative.]** What is an example of a descriptive gesture? **[Pointing.]** What is a rhetorical gesture? **[It highlights and reflects emotional conditions; it is more of an expressive gesture than a physical one.]** An example of a rhetorical gesture might be someone grasping their coat together with their mouth open wide indicating surprise or shock. Artists can use gestures to tell a story, show movement or emotion, or portray an attitude important to the times, bringing more meaning and drama to the artwork. Gestures can help us, the audience, better understand or see the emotion, mood, and narrative in the objects.



Now let's look at some artwork and see how the artists have used gestures to convey emotion, mood, and narrative.

C) Artwork:

Title: *Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother)*, 1936

Artist: Dorothea Lange

Details: Photograph

- Who is in this picture? Do you think the people are related? What do you see in the picture that gives you clues about how they are related?
- How would you describe their gesture and expression? What do their gestures tell you about how they are feeling?
- The woman in the photo is Florence Owens Thompson. Lange said, "I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother . . . She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. . . . that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed."
- Lange made this photograph while working a government agency dedicated to documenting the devastating effects of the Depression during the 1930s.
- Her image depicts the hardship endured by migratory farm workers and provides evidence of the compelling power of photographs to move people to action. Within twenty-four hours of making the photographs, Lange presented them to an editor at the San Francisco News, who alerted the federal government to the migrants' plight. The newspaper then printed two of Lange's images with a report that the government was rushing in 20,000 pounds of food to rescue the workers.

Title: *The Rock*, 1944-48

Artist: Peter Blume

Details: Painting on Canvas

- Peter Blume, an admirer of Renaissance technique, made drawings and compositional cartoons before painting his work on canvas.
- It took him three years of planning and three years of painting to create this single painting (the original painting is on a six foot wide canvas). He completed this painting three years after World War II ended.
- What images do you see in this painting?
- What message do you think the artist is trying to convey? [The Rock portrays a surreal, dramatic image of a shattered, but enduring, rock in the center, with destruction on the right side, symbolizing the War, and hope and re-creation in the building of new construction on the left side.]
- Let's describe the workers' gestures and what the gestures tell us about the picture?
- The gestures Peter Blume used for his workers in this painting tell a story by showing movement, emotion, and weight of objects, and provide a narrative or meaning to the images.



C) Artwork (Con't.)

Title: Greyed Rainbow, 1944

Artist: Jackson Pollock

Details: Painting on Canvas

- This picture was create using a very unusual way to create this all-over paint effect and sense of movement. Jackson would pour the paint onto the canvas instead of using brushes and a palette.
- This painting is actually gestures in action...Pollock used all of those gestures and more to create his artwork in a very controlled manner. He was known to dance over canvases spread across the floor, completely lost in the patterns he created.
- Each physical "performance" was a unique, spontaneous, and unrepeatable event, but the final product was always subject to artistic will.
- "I can control the flow of the paint," Pollock contended. "There is no accident." He painted no image, just "action," giving birth to the style of painting referred to as "action painting" in the abstract expressionist movement. It is also referred to as gestural painting.



Reinforcement Activity

Materials provided: blank sheet of paper
8.5 x 5.5 gesture drawing example sheet

Children provide: pencil and/or color pencils

Give each student a blank canvas Art Adventure sheet of paper and a gesture example sheet.



Have the students fold the paper into four sections (fold in half and then in half again). Using a timer or the second hand on the clock you will be providing the students four separate 30 second timed drawing sessions. During each 30 second session, they will be drawing a gesture drawing of an animal. Before starting the timer have the students select four animals off the example sheet (provide only a few minutes for this part).

Begin the timer. After 30 seconds has passed, have them stop drawing the first drawing. Begin the second span of 30 seconds and have them draw their second choice. Proceed with the two additional 30 second spans of time while they draw out their last two animals.

Optional Activity

Explain to the students they will first do a quick warm-up exercise on one side of the paper called a blind contour drawing (remind them of definition of this vocabulary word) by quickly (20 seconds) and loosely drawing an outline of the sample **Gesture Drawing (this sample gesture drawing should be included with your materials)** without looking down at their paper. Then, ask the students to flip over their paper and fold it in half lengthwise and widthwise, creating four boxes. Ask for a volunteer to strike a pose for 30 seconds, then ask the class to do a quick timed gesture drawing in the first box using lines that look like tight spirals or metal springs like in the **Gesture Drawing**. You can count the 30 seconds out loud, or just count down from 10. Explain to the children that this exercise is not about creating a 'perfect' sketch, but rather it is about capturing the essence of the movement, mood, or emotion (i.e. the gesture).

Repeat this three times with different student volunteers until all four boxes contain a gesture drawing. You can provide the following ideas for poses, or let students create their own: baseball player batting or catching, dancer, pointing at clock or exit, girl entering her surprise birthday party, or carrying heavy object or backpack. Make sure to time every drawing and do not let students sketch past 30 seconds.



Additional Background Material:

This material is provided to give you, the discussion leader, additional information about the artists and paintings that may help you answer questions or generate additional discussion with the children if time permits. You are not expected or required to cover this information in the classroom.

The Rock (Migrant Mother), Peter Blume, 1944-48

Blume was brought to the U.S. at age 5 and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He went to work at age 13 as a lithographer's apprentice, studying art on the side. At age 18, he received an advance from a Manhattan gallery so he could paint full time. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1932 and spent a year in Italy. Many of his paintings are politically charged, and portray destruction and restoration simultaneously.

Human Erosion in California (Migrant Mother), Dorothea Lange, 1936

Dorothea Lange was born in 1885 in Hoboken, New Jersey. Dorothea developed polio in 1902 at age seven. Like many other polio victims before treatment was available, she emerged with a weakened and wizened right leg, and a permanent limp. Lange was educated in photography in New York City, and later moved to San Francisco, where she quickly established a photography studio. With the onset of the Great Depression, Lange turned her camera lens from the studio to the street. Her studies of unemployed and homeless people captured the attention of local photographers and led to her employment with the federal Resettlement Administration (RA), later called the Farm Security Administration (FSA). From 1935 to 1939, Lange's work for the RA and FSA brought the plight of the poor and forgotten, particularly sharecroppers, displaced farm families, and migrant workers, to public attention. Distributed free to newspapers across the country, her poignant images became icons of the era. This photograph, known as "Migrant Mother," is her best-known picture. Dorothea Lange's image of a mother and her children on the brink of starvation is as touching today as when it first appeared in 1936. Lange made six exposures of this striking woman, who lived in a makeshift shelter with her husband and seven children in a Nipomo, California, peapicker's camp. Years after this photograph was taken, Florence Owens Thompson did not want this picture published anymore because she felt it labeled her as "poor" when she no longer was. [Discussion questions: If it had been up to you, would you have honored her request? If a subject agrees to be photographed, should they be able to control how the photo is later used?]

Greyed Rainbow, Jackson Pollock, 1944

At the age of 17, he began his studies at the Art Students' League in New York. By the mid 1940s, he was painting in a completely abstract manner, and the "drip and splash" style for which he is best known, emerged with abruptness in 1947. He said, "The painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through." "It is impossible to make a forgery of Jackson Pollock's work," Time magazine critic Robert Hughes claimed in 1982, "It is what his imitators could never do, and why there are no successful Pollock forgeries: they always end up looking like...spaghetti, whereas Pollock--in his best work--had an almost preternatural control over the total effect... In his paintings, the light is always right.." His paintings are the result of split-second decision making, choreography and chance. Although Jackson didn't intend to represent any particular objects Greyed Rainbow, it suggests things to some of the people who view it.