Drawing to Music: Hearing Colors and Seeing Sounds

ESSENTIAL QUESTION
How might visual artists use music as a tool for inspiration, and how might sound be reflected through art?

OVERVIEW
“Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.”

-- Wassily Kandinsky (wassilykandinsky.net, 2018)

The word “synesthesia” comes from the Greek syn and aisthesis, which can be translated as “together” and “sense,” or “join” and “perception”. Both translations offer a good description of what the neurological condition of synesthesia embodies: a unity of senses that results in the experience of one sense when another is stimulated.

Many believe the groundbreaking Russian abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky was a synesthete. Kandinsky’s work explored his multi-sensory perception of color and music, which he termed a “joined perception” of sight and sound. “Kandinsky literally saw colors when he heard music, and heard music when he painted,” explains the Denver Art Museum’s Renée B. Miller, “he deployed color, line, shape, and texture to create a rhythmic visual experience that evoked an emotional response.”

While describing Kandinsky, Miller evokes several basic principles and elements of art—color, line, shape, texture, and rhythm—all of which have parallel meanings in music. Indeed, the “joined perception” of synesthesia has empowered not only artists such as Kandinsky and Van Gogh, but also musicians including Franz Liszt, Duke Ellington, Pharrell Williams, Lady Gaga.

In this lesson, students explore the principles of synesthesia through drawing to music. By viewing and analyzing artwork based on multi sensory perception, students will become aware of the role of the senses in art, and how sensory stimulation—such as listening to music—can be used as a tool for inspiration. Guided by a handout outlining the basic elements and principles of art, students will engage in active discussions about how sensory perceptions can be interpreted through color, line, and form. They will then apply these reflections on their own artistic work.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - What synesthesia means in the context of art
   - How to use the senses as a tool for inspiration
   - Basic elements and principles of art
   - About the artist Wassily Kandinsky

2. **MASTERY OBJECTIVE:**
   - Students will be able to demonstrate the role of the senses in visual art and synesthetic principles through drawing to music, and critical analysis of the works of Wassily Kandinsky.

**ACTIVITIES**

**MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY**

1. Distribute **Handout 1 - Elements and Principles of Art**, and go over the terms as a class.

2. Ask students:
   - Have you ever heard the term synesthesia? What do you think it means?

3. Show students **Image 1, “Synesthesia Definition,”** and ask,
   - What might “modality” mean in this definition?
   - How would you describe this definition using your own words?
   - Can you think of an example of synesthesia?
   - Who might use synesthetic principles in their work? (*Encourage students to consider how a painter might translate sound to color, a musician might hear sound when she sees color, or how a chef might correlate smell with color, etc.*)
   - Are you aware of any artists in any fields that are synesthetes?

4. Show students **Video 1, “Live Kinetic painting to ‘The Sea’ (Jura), by M.K. Ciurlionis, by Norman Perryman.”** Before starting the video, ask students to focus on how the music and art interrelate in the clip.

5. After the video, ask students:
   - In what ways do you think Perryman’s painting might reflect elements of the music that is playing? (*Encourage students to consider the rhythm with which Perryman paints, as well as his approach to color, stroke, texture or anything else they notice.*)
• In what ways might some elements of music and visual art share properties? Do you see any terms on Handout 1 that have applications in music as well?

• Do you think there is a “right” way to paint to music? How might you approach a painting if you were in Perryman’s position?

PROCEDURE

1. Tell students that you will be exploring the principles of synesthesia as a way to use music for inspiration in visual arts. Introduce the activity “Listen & Draw,” in which students visually respond to 10 music genres through 10 song snippets of approximately 30 seconds each. Students will have an additional 30 seconds to draw after the song has finished playing. You can make your own playlist, or try the Spotify list we’ve created here: https://spoti.fi/2JPQsrl.

• Distribute 10 Post-it notes and a set of markers to each student. Instruct students to number their Post-its 1-10 on the back, so they can remember which drawing was made in response to which song.

• Encourage students to “feel” each song quickly and with minimal thought, and use color, line and rhythm to draw what comes to mind while listening. Then play Song 1.

• At the conclusion of Song 1, have students stick their drawings on an empty wall/board in one long horizontal row, remembering where their drawing is so they can build a vertical column of Post-its 1-10.

• Repeat this procedure for songs 2 through 10. When complete, there should be 10 rows, one for each song, and as many columns as there are students. (Note: you may wish to include a note with a song or genre title for each row.)

2. Have students gather around the drawings and discuss as a class:

• Do you see any patterns between your drawings and those of others?

• Do you see any patterns in various students’ approaches to visualizing sounds? How might these patterns relate to the music genres that they represent?

• In what ways do various people’s interpretations differ? Why do you think this might be? What might make two artists respond to sound so differently? (Encourage students to consider how background knowledge of a type of music or technical artistic ability may have influenced visual responses.)

• In what ways do you “see” rhythm? How do you think rhythm may have affected various artists’ choices of lines and form?

• In what ways might you “see” the tone you hear in music? How might tone affect our choice of color?

• Are there any other terms from Handout 1 that seem to make sense here?

3. Display Image 2, “Wassily Kandinsky, Composition VII (1913)” and distribute Handout 2 - Kandinsky: The Visual Musician. Read “Excerpt 1” out loud as a class and ask:

• What do you think Kandinsky might mean when he suggests that some painters find, “no satisfaction in mere
representation”? What does he seem to believe music does offer in this sense? (Encourage students to consider the necessarily abstract nature of music—it’s not a picture of anything, just sounds that we hear and create our visions from.)

• How do you think Kandinsky’s Composition VII might reflect some of his notions about the abstract in painting? How might it suggest rhythm?

• What do you think Kandinsky might mean regarding the way each piece expresses “duration of time?”

4. Read “Excerpt 2” out loud as a class and ask:

• Why do you think that Kandinsky suggests that color “cannot stand alone”?

• What do you think Kandinsky might mean when he suggests color and form have a “spiritual value”?

• In what ways might the color and form of art function like “harmony” in music? (Encourage students to consider the interaction of color and form much like the interaction of various notes through which we hear “harmony” in music.)

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Have students go back to the drawings on the board/wall. Choose a few of the Post-its and, armed with the insight gained throughout period regarding synesthesia, connections between music and visual art, and Kandinsky’s notions of color and form, analyze the drawings as a class and discuss the following:

• Did you find it challenging to translate what you heard into color and line/form? Why or why not?

• How might your sense of a particular song’s emotional quality have impacted your color choices in relation to specific genres?

• How do you think rhythm and tone impacted your choices of line and form in relation to specific genres?

• Do you notice any trends or patterns within the class’s drawings? What are they and why do you think they occurred?

• How might you continue to use synesthetic principles in your own work?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Practice drawing to music at home. Choose an instrumental song that inspires you, and draw what comes to mind. Explore which colors and lines/forms you can associate with the song, and develop this into a color scheme and style to use for a future work of art or design.

2. Choose another one of the senses to explore visually, either touch, smell or taste. Again try to reflect on the colors and lines/forms these sensations evoke. A visual analysis of sensory elements can be a great starting point for a brand design. You could, for example, design a
new packaging for your favorite perfume, starting from an analysis of the colors and lines/forms the smell of the perfume evokes.

3. Conduct a full sensory analysis of your favorite snack food, reflecting on smell, touch (texture), taste, sight, and sound, and try to associate these sensations with colors and line/form to develop a color scheme and style for a new packaging design.
STANDARDS

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

Creating

Anchor Standard #1-Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #2-Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard #3-Refine and complete artistic work.

Producing

Anchor Standard #4-Analyze, interpret, and select artistic work for presentation.

Anchor Standard #5-Develop and refine artistic work for presentation.

Responding

Anchor Standard #7-Perceive and analyze artist work.

Anchor Standard #8-Interpret intent and meaning in work.

Anchor Standard #9-Apply criteria to evaluate work.
RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES
- “Live Kinetic painting to ‘The Sea’ (Jura), by M.K. Ciurlionis, by Norman Perryman

HANDOUTS
- Handout 1 - “Elements and Principles of Art”
- Handout 2 - “Kadinsky: The Visual Musician”