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Lesson Plan: Louis C. Tiffany's Natural Inspirations

Grades

All levels, with suggested variations

Subject Areas

Visual Arts

Life Science

Estimated Time

Varies, depending on level and scope of project

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Student Learning Objectives

In the first portion of this lesson, students will practice close observation of nature. Then, they will move from their observation to create a design inspired by it.

Essential Question

What sources inspire artists? How have artists used nature to inspire decoration?

Resources

For images and information related to close observation and natural history:

Smithsonian Museum of Natural History botany database, see Plant Photo Archive collections.nmnh.si.edu/search/botany

Lesson Plan (middle school): Plant Collections and Citizen Science, Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, naturalhistory.si.edu/education/teaching-resources/life-science/plant-collections-and-citizen-science

Plants database, United States Department of Agriculture plants.usda.gov/java

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation Online Database, Carnegie Mellon University huntbotanical.org/databases/show.php?2 and huntbot.org/artdb
Offers a collection of paintings, drawings, and print illustrations of plants from the Renaissance era forward

Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters: Women of Art and Science website at the Getty that includes a few examples of botanical illustration
getty.edu/art/exhibitions/merian

New York Botanical Gardens virtual herbarium, sweetgum.nybg.org/science/vh

Harvard Museum of Natural History, Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants, the “Glass Flowers, hmn.harvard.edu/glass-flowers and youtu.be/CIXC_CHuRPA. Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka created detailed plant models in glass

Scientific Botanical Illustration suggestions for drawing (if seeking scientific accuracy), Botanical Art and Artists, botanicalartandartists.com/scientific-botanical-illustration.html

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For images and information related to Tiffany glass:

“Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933)” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, Metropolitan Museum of Art and the online collection database for additional images [metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tiff/hd_tiff.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tiff/hd_tiff.htm)

The Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, “Louis Comfort Tiffany” [morsemuseum.org/louis-comfort-tiffany](https://www.morsemuseum.org/louis-comfort-tiffany)

Vocabulary

Leaded glass: as it relates to stained glass and the artwork of Tiffany Studios, leaded glass refers to the piecing together of color glass sheet with lead solder as connector

Botanical: relating to plants

Context

Louis Comfort Tiffany was an artist who decided he wanted to make decorative objects to be able to share his designs with more people. Tiffany was fascinated with nature and many of his designs celebrate the variety of colors, textures and patterns found in nature. Tiffany was especially known for creating glass windows, lamps and vases and he worked to develop new colors and textures of glass that would be appropriate for representing colors found in nature. One of the designers working for Tiffany, Clara Driscoll, also loved nature and made designs for lamps based on flowers and dragonflies and other inspirations.

To include scientific botanical illustration as part of the lesson, review “300-Year-Old Botanical Illustrations and the Art They Inspire Today” by Emma Taggart, published at mymodernmet.com for a concise overview and selected artists.

mymodernmet.com/history-of-botanical-illustration

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Project 1

Students will make a close observation of a natural specimen, drawing it first in a pencil sketch and then in a more carefully rendered botanical drawing or painting.

Materials

- Sketch paper
- Graphite or colored pencil(s) for sketching
- Blooming flowers, cut or planted (if needed, use photograph); can also use feathers, seed pods, leaves and other similar items
- Drawing paper or watercolor paper
- Colored pencils, watercolor pencils, or watercolor paints
- *Optional:* brushes and water

Instructions

1. Provide students with objects or images to select (or take a trip to a local garden).
2. Students should begin by looking carefully and making a sketch of their chosen object.
3. If using graphite, take a photo or practice descriptive language to record the colors for later use.
4. After initial observation and sketching, make a more careful illustration with watercolor or pencils

Adaptations

- To connect with science vocabulary, students studying the parts of plants could also make a key, or label their drawing directly.
- To connect with ELA, ask students to write a paragraph describing the specimen thoroughly.

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Project 2a: Nature based design – Drawing and Painting

Designers like Clara Driscoll would begin with inspiration from nature and then would slightly abstract the forms into shapes appropriate for a glass lamp or window, adding borders or background patterning and shapes where relevant. For this project, students will create their own design for a glass window.

Materials

- Pencil and paper for sketching
- Colored pencils or watercolor
- Appropriate paper or vellum

Instructions

- Begin by looking at images of Tiffany leaded glass lamps and windows with flowers as a subject. Compare the shapes to an image of the plant used to inspire the decoration. Discuss the ways the plants are similar and different.
- With sketching paper, students should play with the shapes and colors of the natural item they observed in the first project.
- Students should then create a design for a stained glass window based on the natural item. Consider color, shape, and composition. Decide if the image needs a patterned border.
- Paint or color the design.

Adaptations

- For older students, this can be combined with tessellations
- For older students, they could create a design and paper prototype for a lamp shade
- For younger students, perhaps use tracing paper to help them copy shapes from their initial drawing and then create a design on new paper by re-drawing these shapes

Project 2b: Nature based design – Collage with India Ink

Designers like Clara Driscoll would begin with inspiration from nature and then would slightly abstract the forms into shapes appropriate for a glass lamp or window, adding borders or background patterning and shapes where relevant. For this project, students will create a painting with India ink and collage with tissue paper based on initial close looking from the first project.

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Materials

- Pencil and paper for sketching
- Multi-media or watercolor paper
- India ink
- Brushes
- Water
- Non-bleeding tissue paper, in various colors
- Glue brushes
- Glue/water mixture (about the consistency of milk)
- *Optional*: scissors

Instructions

- Begin by looking at images of Tiffany leaded glass lamps and windows with flowers as a subject. Compare the shapes to an image of the plant used to inspire the decoration. Discuss the ways the plants are similar and different.
- Identify the broad outlines of the forms in the natural object observed. Simplify into a few key shapes by sketching on paper.
- On the final paper, paint the key outlines in India ink. With light application, this should dry very quickly.
- Select tissue paper colors to fit the design. Layer different colors to create additional combinations. Cut or tear tissue paper into pieces to fit within the painted shapes.
- Dip brush into glue/water mixture and wipe off excess on side of container. Lightly brush glue over the tissue paper to adhere. (For younger students, they may find it more successful to paint a small area of glue first then apply the tissue paper.)

Adaptations

- Use thick, black, permanent marker instead of India ink
- For young students or students with special needs, apply tissue paper to sticky side of clear contact paper. *Optional*: Draw key outlines with permanent marker on the non-sticky side. Seal tissue side with Mod Podge or acrylic medium if desired.
- For very young students or students with special needs, you could bypass the sketching and instead draw a few shapes with permanent black marker, then fill in and around with glued tissue paper.