

Video Transcript for Creativity Writing workshop: Points of View
Siena Art Institute
Instructor: Jeff Shapiro
Academic Director: Lisa Nonken

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Lisa Nonken: This workshop was organized by Jeff Shapiro, the creative writing instructor at the Siena Art Institute. For an activity that takes place at the beautiful art museum here in Siena, the Pinacoteca Nazionale. The activity thinks about different points of view, thinking about the different characters that we see in the artwork and empathizing with them to imagine what is their viewpoint.

Just a few technical notes: this type of activity works best when looking at representational art (so ,for example, artwork in which people or animals or other characters are depicted). It would not work so well to do this activity with abstract art , for example, because we need characters to be able to empathize with for this workshop.

In terms of the learning objectives for this workshop, we're focused on of course creativity in the realm of creative writing. Also critical thinking as we're switching from different viewpoints. Communication both in the act of writing as well as in the constructive feedback that we're giving during the activity and also for the follow up sessions.

Jeff Shapiro: Buongiorno. My name is Jeff Shapiro. I'm a writer and I teach creative writing here at the Siena Art Institute. I recently had the happy experience of putting together a workshop that was a collaborative effort between the Siena Art Institute, a beautiful local museum, the Pinacoteca Nazionale and students from the Liceo Classico here in Siena. It was a pilot program, so a very small group, but I could not ask for more brilliant, better minds who cooperated wonderfully.

The mission of the workshop was to encourage a sense of empathy with other people and with people inside works of art. To not only look at a painting from the outside, but what would it mean to look at a painting from the inside? Characters in that painting: What are they feeling? How are they living that moment?

So the structure of the workshop: We went to the art museum together. First we looked at a series of paintings and talked our way through them. What were characters inside those scenes feeling? It being Siena, naturally it's mostly sacred art, but that can add extra dimensions. I'm Jewish, so for me this is not my religion. We talked this through with the students, but still there

are tremendous psychological truths within the paintings. For example, we looked at the first painting, just to talk through, was a 1344 painting by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, the Annunciation: The Madonna and the angel: What did the Madonna feel in that situation? A virgin being told that she would give birth to a child. How did she feel about that? The angel. How did the angel feel in delivering this message? How far into the future could the angel see in terms of knowing what destiny awaited the baby to be born? How much of that information could the angel reveal to the young woman? We talked about this.

We looked at a beautiful painting of the Nativity scene. How did the baby feel to feel the warm breath of the ox and the donkey? How did the ox and the donkey feel in that scene? What could they perceive? And the students gave the most beautiful answers. They said they could sense the vulnerability of a small creature. And they said the baby to the animals probably smelled of milk. So once we talked our way through various paintings to get their minds in the right place,

Then it was time to begin the actual work of the workshop, which was each student chose their own painting to concentrate on and sat in front of that painting for 20 minutes: writing down that scene from the point of view of one particular character, concentrating on body sensations, emotions, memories, everything they could bring into that scene. They worked for 20 minutes. We went to a different room of the museum and read each other's work, talked about it. And then the surprise for them: we went back to the same paintings, another 20 minutes. This time, the same scene from the point of view of a different character, met up again, read each other's work. And then I gave them a chance to perfect, to finish their work, make it as perfect as they could at home, and to send it to me.

That was the structure of the program. I was blown away by what they came up with.

To tell you quickly about the works that they chose: Laura picked St Michael Banishing the Rebel Angels by Beccafumi was the artist. First portion of the exercise, she wrote from the point of view of a rebel angel: This angel's memories of previous closeness to God. Very unexpected observations. Beautifully, beautifully done. And then the second part that she chose was St Michael, who, in a way is punishing his former colleagues, his former companions, these other angels. What really I had not counted on was his feelings of envying the rebel angels, because they had more courage than he did. And I thought, beautiful observations that Laura wrote about: about what it means to risk being oneself, even if it means being banished from a former home.

Giulia's work: she concentrated on a mythological painting, which was The Flight of Aeneas from Troy. An amazing painting by Jenga, again from the early 1500s. These are paintings from hundreds of years ago. She interacted very, very meaningfully with this painting. It shows a family fleeing war. You see the hero, Aeneas, who's carrying his old father on his back. His

young son and his wife, whom he's trying not to lose in the crowd. He does lose her. This panic scene of running away from war, and Giulia captured it beautifully, tragically. It's very, very current. That's what's happening now in the world: families trying to stay together while keeping themselves safe from war. Giulia did an amazing job: first describing the father's point of view, how he didn't want to be a burden on his son, even though he was. The son's point of view, who felt anything but heroic as he was trying to keep the threads of his family together even though they were fleeing. Beautiful, beautiful writing.

I was very moved by what both students came up with, and I came away feeling very proud to be part of an art institute that encourages people to engage directly in art and through art to engage with the world.

Lisa Nonken: This particular workshop with Jeff Shapiro at the Pinacoteca Nazionale Museum in Siena lasted for two hours. However, this activity really could benefit from additional time to allow the students to follow up on the feedback sessions, to continue to refine and revise their writings. This could either take place in a follow-up session or the students can be corresponding with the instructor by email if need be. This activity really encourages the students to experience the museum perhaps in a way that they never have before. Rather than just passively observing or just passively receiving established narratives about the artwork, we're really encouraging them to develop their own narratives, to think about how they can use the existing artwork to launch their own creative responses. In this activity not only are the students developing their skills in creativity but also in communication both in terms of their written work as well as in the feedback that they are giving and receiving to each other and of course that brings forth a collaborative spirit as well. Also the aspect of critical thinking is quite important, to also be able to shift to different perspectives, and really to develop their sense of empathy both for each other as well as the imagined characters that they are creating.