

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

Seaport with the Embarkation of
the Queen of Sheba
Claude



Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba by Claude (1604/5-1682)



The scene in this picture refers to the Old Testament story of the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon in Jerusalem after she had heard of his legendary wisdom and magnificence (1 Kings 10: 1-2). Her departure is not mentioned in the Bible, and in any case she is likely to have travelled by land – Sheba is thought to have been in Africa, possibly Ethiopia. Here Claude has painted the start of an imaginary sea journey and set it in what looks more like 17th-century Italy than Africa. The story offered him opportunities to paint light, water and buildings. The horizon, beyond which nothing can be seen, also suggests the uncertainty of a journey into the unknown.

There is story-telling in this picture, but we notice the setting first: the early morning sky, the sun, right in the centre, reflected in the waves and catching the tops of the imposing buildings. Next we may take in the bustle of the port, with men working on the ships and loading luggage and goods.

We have to look quite carefully to spot the Queen. Claude helps us to do this through the composition of the picture. He leads our eyes to the group of people on the steps on the right: they are at the intersection of a line of perspective (the step) and the strong vertical of the far left column of the palace. The queen is marked out in the group by the bold colours of her clothes: a pinkish-red tunic, a royal blue cloak, and a golden crown. She is about to step into the launch which will take her to her ship. Her ship is probably the one part-hidden by the columns on the left, but it could be the one waiting near the horizon, which also marks the vanishing point. Small crowds have gathered to watch the scene, but some, like the boy in the left foreground, are perhaps more impressed by the sun rising than the majesty departing. The picture was painted nearly 350 years ago.

Talking about the picture

You could start by playing a game where the children look at the print for one minute and then try to remember what they saw when you take it away. They will probably remember the sea, sky, buildings and boats, but no one will mention the Queen. This makes the point that in this painting of a story, the story may be less important than the view.

You can then ask:

- **Where is the Queen?**
- **Where is the scene set?**

Talk about harbours and ports. Where should they be built? A bay or inlet; a wall is needed to keep out large waves.

- **What will the queen do next?**
- **Which ship do you think is hers?**
- **Is she making a long journey or going for a trip around the harbour?**

The small boat would suggest a short trip, but the amount of luggage tells us that it will be a long journey. Talk about what preparations people need to make before making long journeys. Packing – what would you pack? Telling neighbours you will be away, arranging for the hamster to be fed etc. Talk about possible conditions during long sea voyages in the past: many days at sea, little fresh food (only dried, salted or pickled would survive), danger of pirates, no stabilisers, so likelihood of seasickness.

- **What do you think the Queen has packed in her chest?**
- **Why doesn't the large galleon pick her up directly from the quay?**

The water is too shallow – it is lapping around the ankles of the men loading the chest.

- **How is the galleon powered?**
By wind, but also by oars in case of lack of wind, and for manoeuvring.

- **Would there be enough of a breeze to set sail?**
Yes, the flag on the mast of the ship on the left is fluttering.

- **What time of day is it?**
As this is an imaginary place it is not possible to tell whether it is morning or evening, but long journeys would normally be started early in the day.

Some suggestions for taking things further

Art

- Work on reflections.
- Make a large cooperative painting of a sea journey.
- Work on light. Painting the sun and sunlight. Do observational work on shadows. Gradations of light on cloud.
- Make drawings of buildings/objects and put them together to create an imaginary scene. (As Claude did.)
- With Keystage 1 children you could turn your home corner into a ship with portholes. Get the children to describe the view from them.
- Years 5 & 6 could do work on perspective. The use of perspective to create space in pictures. Introduce terms such as 'horizon' and 'vanishing point'.

RE/English

- Tell stories of other journeys – in the Bible, the Exodus, and the Flight into Egypt; From Hinduism, the story of Rama and Sita's wanderings in the forest.

English

- Use the picture to extend vocabulary. Name the things in it and then collect descriptive words, not forgetting the atmosphere, sounds and so on.
- Study poems about the sea, e.g.:

Cargoes by John Masefield

*Quinquere of Nineveh from distant Ophir Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine
With a cargo of ivory, And apes and peacocks, Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine...*

Or Sea Fever by John Masefield

*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky, And all I ask is a tall ship
and a star to steer her by, And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's
shaking, And a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking...*

Or the description of Cleopatra's barge from Antony & Cleopatra by William Shakespeare

*The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne Burn'd on the water; the poop was beaten
gold, Purple the sails, and so perfumed, that The winds were love-sick with them, the oars
were silver, Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke...*

Also parts of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Coleridge.

- Imagine you are a TV reporter and describe the Queen's departure... Write the script. Interview the queen, her attendants and the ship's captain and so on.
- How might a royal person set off on a journey today? Describe an airport (or other) departure.
- What product or service might the picture be used to advertise? Write copy.

Science

- Sinking and floating
- Wind and wave power
- The sun and the solar system
- Marine life
- Tides
- Pollution

History/Geography

- Journeys: departures and arrivals, communication
- Building techniques/styles of the past
- Ships then and now
- The weather

Music

- Listen to Handel's 'Arrival of the Queen of Sheba'.

A note about the artist

Claude Gellée (usually called Claude Lorraine), was born in Lorraine in present-day France, but went to live in Rome as a boy. There he developed a style of landscape painting based on drawings he made out of doors. His paintings were made in the studio, and showed imaginary places. Their format is easily recognisable: dark trees or buildings in the foreground frame a distant sunlit view of water and/or hills. They are often peopled with small, sometimes curiously proportioned, figures.

Landscapes were less highly valued than subjects from the Bible or classical antiquity but Claude managed to combine poetic and idealised landscapes with storytelling elements. The paintings particularly appealed to aristocratic patrons. Claude was especially admired and collected in 18th-century England where his paintings not only influence other artists, but also the way in which real landscape was seen and the way parks and gardens were designed.