

# PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

The Stuff of Life

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A National Gallery Touring Exhibition in partnership with Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery and the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne



## Teachers' notes

These online teaching resources are produced in connection with 'The Stuff of Life', the fourth in a series of exhibitions produced in partnership between the National Gallery, London, Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery and the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne. The exhibition is shown at all three galleries [to find out more [click here](#)] The aim of the touring partnership is to enable the nation's collection of Western European paintings from 1250 to 1900 to be enjoyed by the widest possible audience, as well as sharing museum and gallery expertise.

## Introducing the paintings

Five paintings from 'The Stuff of Life' exhibition have been selected for this e-learning resource: three from the National Gallery's collection and one from each of the partner galleries. Digital images of the paintings, for use on an interactive whiteboard, digital projector or individual PCs, are provided with these teachers' notes. National Gallery paintings have the added facility of zoomable images.

Students will probably be unfamiliar with most of the images that appear in this web resource. When introducing a piece of art to students, of whatever age, it is important to allow them space for discussion which involves their own perceptions and interpretations. These can be encouraged with open-ended questions.

As students begin to explore the paintings, connections can be made with different subject areas. For example, a year 5 class discussing the 16th-century painting of a fruit and vegetable stall by Beuckelaer could make links to the science curriculum unit, 'Life processes and living things: nutrition'. A year 10 GCSE art and design group may be inspired by how the painter managed to portray one of the four elements using food [for an example of a year 10 art and design project devised by Initial Teacher Training students from the University of Gloucestershire [click here](#)].

Many of the suggested activities in this web resource combine literacy, ICT, history and science, as well as art. These can be tailored to meet the requirements of different key stages. Some are more obviously suited to secondary than primary age groups.

## 'The Four Elements: Earth', 1569 Joachim Beuckelaer (active 1560 - 1574)



Oil on canvas 157.3 x 214.2 cm

### About the painting

This painting of a fruit and vegetable market is one in a series of four which use food to represent the four elements. In this painting, 'Earth', we are shown an abundance of perfectly ripe food, exquisitely painted to look good enough to eat.

Made in 16th-century Antwerp, the image is more a fantasy than a reflection of everyday life. Firstly, the stall is crammed with fruit and vegetable from every season, making it impossible for Beuckelaer to have observed them all at the same time. Secondly, the Southern Netherlands was in the depths of an economic recession at this time and under the despotic rule of the Spanish Duke of Alba.

In the background of each painting in the series is a biblical scene. At the time there was no tradition of still-life painting. Beuckelaer's pictures were in fact among the earliest to place such importance on objects, above biblical and classical stories.

### About the artist

Beuckelaer seems to have spent his entire life living in Antwerp. He trained in the studio of the Flemish painter Pieter Aertsen, who in 1542 had married Beuckelaer's aunt. The two painters worked closely together even after Beuckelaer became an independent artist. Their styles are so similar it is difficult to distinguish their work.

## Lesson ideas across the curriculum

Using fresh fruit and vegetables, make first-hand observational studies. Experiment with different media and mark-making to reflect the qualities of the objects. (Art)

- Compare Beuckelaer's representations of fruit and vegetables with scientific drawings of the natural world. What are the differences in the approach? The science museum website is a useful resource for this activity – [www.sciencemuseum.org.uk](http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk). (Science)
- Find the other three Beuckelaer paintings in the National Gallery's collection on the National Gallery website and discuss how the artist represents the four elements. How would the students depict the same themes in their own work? (ICT/art)
- Research the way people lived in the Netherlands in the 16th century and how it is different from the way people live there today. (ICT/ history)

Download the image using the link below:

<http://www.takeonepicture.org/nesw/images/ng6585.jpg>

View a zoomable image on the National Gallery website by clicking on the link below or copying and pasting it into your browser:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=ng6585>

## 'Van Gogh's Chair', 1888 Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)




Oil on canvas 91.8 x 73cm

### About the painting

This painting of a humble rustic chair, with a woven rush seat, was painted by Van Gogh at his French home in Arles. The sprouting onions in the background add to the rural atmosphere that the painting evokes.

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Van Gogh uses two shades of blue for the walls and orange shades for the floor. These complementary colours are a striking setting for the bright yellow chair, which seems to hover over the slanting tiles. This strange perspective distorts the image into something which is less about a real chair that can be sat on, and more about the person who sits on it.

Van Gogh wanted to convey an image of himself as a simple rustic figure in a 'self portrait' using only objects. The pipe and tobacco tell us about his pleasures, while the soft natural light underlines his close relationship with nature.

## About the artist

Van Gogh was born in Holland. He tried many types of work and travelled to The Hague, London and Paris. While in Paris, he was influenced by the work of the [Impressionists](#).

Van Gogh didn't achieve any success in his lifetime as a painter, but is now one of the world's most famous artists, and his paintings are amongst the most expensive.

## Lesson ideas across the curriculum

- Think about which objects could convey different aspects of a person's personality. These could be famous people or students and teachers. Using only pictures of objects make a collage portrait from photographs, magazine cuttings and first-hand observational drawings. (Art)
- 'Van Gogh's Chair' is yellow and the room it sits in is blue with a terracotta floor. Discuss and experiment with how colours can make us feel and change our moods. Colour bulbs or filters could be used to light different areas of the classroom. (Science)
- Look at a colour wheel and find out why opposite colours complement each other. (Art/science)
- Think about the symbolism of colour. For example, yellow can be a happy colour because it reminds us of the sun, and a red rose is given as a sign of love. However, red is also used in traffic lights to signal to stop. Use these ideas as a starting point for a poem. (Literacy)

Download the image using the link below:

<http://www.takeonepicture.org/nesw/images/ng3862.jpg>

View a zoomable image on the National Gallery website by clicking on the link below or copying and pasting it into your browser:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=ng3862>

## 'Still Life with Drinking Horn', about 1653 Willem Kalf (1619–1693)



Oil on canvas 86.4 x 102.2 cm

### About the painting

Kalf's particular style of still life was known as 'pronkstilleven', meaning 'still life of display or ostentation' in Dutch. Such works featured valuable man-made objects, for example, decorative glass, porcelain, sumptuous carpets and expensive foods, such as lemons, which were an exotic fruit in 17th-century Amsterdam. Many of the items reappear in his compositions.

Kalf carefully describes in oil paint the contrasting surface qualities of the objects. He shows us the fleshy insides of the lemon by partially peeling the rind, and the distortions and reflections in the glasses filled with a liquid, probably wine. All the objects on the marble table are pushed into the foreground so that we can see them close up; the illusion is of leaning over the table. We can study the antique drinking horn of the Saint Sebastian Archers' Guild, dated 1565 and now in the Amsterdam Historisch Museum, and even see the underside of the lobster reflected in the shiny silver platter.

### About the artist

Kalf started his career painting interior scenes, mainly of barns, but he became far more successful as a still-life painter. He was born in Rotterdam but he settled in Amsterdam with



his wife, Cornelia Pluvier, a poet and musician, in 1653. It was around this time that he made this painting.

## Lesson ideas across the curriculum

- Because of the minute attention to detail in Kalf's painting we become conscious of senses other than sight. Explore the painting through taste, touch and smell. This could begin as a speaking and listening exercise and develop into a piece of creative writing. (Literacy)
- The objects on the table would have belonged to someone of considerable wealth. Discuss how artists use objects to portray individual people's lives or aspirations by comparing the opulence of the objects in Kalf's painting to the humbleness of those in 'Van Gogh's Chair'. (Art)
- Unlike other still-life paintings produced in 17th-century Holland, Kalf's objects do not seem to have any specific symbolic meaning. Compare this painting with Harmen Steenwyck's '[Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life](#)' on the National Gallery website. (Art/history)

Download the image using the link below:

<http://www.takeonepicture.org/nesw/images/ng6444.jpg>

View a zoomable image on the National Gallery website by clicking on the link below or copying and pasting it into your browser:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=ng6444>

## 'My Neighbour's House', 1929 Frederick Elwell (1870 - 1958)



Oil on canvas 100.3 x 125.7 cm  
Bristol's City Museum & Art Gallery

### About the painting

The house shown here is in Beverley, East Yorkshire, where the artist was brought up. Two of Elwell's friends lived here, and the woman in the painting is their mother.

The objects in the house are depicted with great accuracy. We can see Chinese ceramics alongside English and European porcelain, pewter and copper, potted plants and paintings. The objects suggest a family collection, gathered over many years, and displayed with some importance. They also give us an insight into the people who lived here. The use of light leads the viewer's eye through each room of the house into the garden at the rear.

Elwell used two tricks to deceive the eye and give the illusion of space. He painted in one-point perspective, so that the woman becomes the focal point of the painting, and he changed the plain floor to a patterned one of black and white tiles to make the area appear more spacious and to link to a frequently-used convention in Dutch paintings of interiors.

### About the artist

Frederick Elwell was born in Beverley, East Yorkshire. He studied at the Lincoln School of Art and later in Antwerp, where he was influenced by the 17th-century Dutch tradition of interior scenes with still life. During a short stay in Paris he also experimented with the effects of light.

Elwell was particularly interested in people and places, and many of his works show in great detail the small things that make up his subjects' lives.

### Lesson ideas across the curriculum

- Discuss the differences between a house and a home? What do we have in our houses that make them into homes? (Literacy)
- Imagine you are the eyes of the portrait in the hall. What do you see every day? Or imagine you are standing in the painting. What can you hear? (Literacy)
- What do you think the front of the house looks like? Make an historical investigation into Victorian domestic architecture. (History/ICT)
- Experiment with one-point perspective. How can this change the appearance/subject of a painting? (Art/numeracy)
- Examine the way light has been used to open up each room. Look at ways of changing the mood of the painting by experimenting with different kinds of light. (Science) You will find the image below.

Download the image using the link below:

<http://www.takeonepicture.org/nesw/images/w21.jpg>

## 'Still Life (Marine Set)', 1936 Edward Wadsworth (1889 – 1949)



Egg tempera on wood, 76.1 x 63.7 cm  
Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne

### About the painting

This still-life painting is very characteristic of Wadsworth's style. The painting is in tempera, which means the pigment is mixed with egg rather than oil. This medium dries very quickly and to achieve a dense colour many layers need to be placed on top of each other.

The mood of the painting is playful, with the jaunty starfish and suspended fishing floats, whipped ropes, and a dart, which looks out of place in this setting.

Wadsworth had a long-standing passion for harbours and nautical instruments. A photograph taken in his studio in the mid-1930s shows floats and other objects hanging from the ceiling. Though the sea itself was never a forceful presence in his work it is often treated as a flat background for still-life scenes.

His paintings were artificial combinations of studies painted from life and 'Still Life (Marine Set)' combines two conventions of picture-making: the 'trompe l'oeil' technique of hanging objects on a wall to suggest they are in the viewer's space, and the illusion of entering the world within a picture.

## About the artist

Edward Alexander Wadsworth was born in Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire. He studied art first in Munich, then at the Bradford school of Art and the Slade School of Art, London. At the Slade he met Roger Fry, who later founded the Omega Workshops. Wadsworth designed a number of carpets and furnishings for the workshops before becoming involved with Fry's more radical rival Percy Wyndham Lewis.

Few of Wadsworth's early works survive but those that do are clearly influenced by Post-Impressionism. By the 1920s Wadsworth had absorbed all these influences and had started to produce work in his own very individual style.

## Lesson ideas across the curriculum

- Find a recipe for egg tempera paint on the Internet and try making your own in class. Compare the use of this paint with oil- and water-based paints. (ICT/art)
- Collect images of objects found at the seashore from magazines and the Internet. Generate word lists from the images and use these to write a short story. (ICT/literacy)
- Investigate the flora and fauna of the seashore and how different plants and animals have adapted to this environment. (Science)
- Explore the history of local industries connected to sea or river environments. (Geography/history)

Download the image using the link below:

<http://www.takeonepicture.org/nesw/images/w18.jpg>