

Teaching with *Te Ata*

by Nellie Ellen Shepherd



This document is designed to help teachers present, discuss, and teach about Oklahoma history and art literacy through the use of this work of art. The information and exercises here will aid in understanding and learning from this artwork.

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First Analysis and Criticism

The steps below may be used for group discussion or individual written work.

Before beginning the steps, take two minutes to study the artwork. Look at all the details and subject matter. After studying the artwork in silence, follow these steps:

Describe:

Be specific and descriptive. List only the facts about the objects in the painting or sculpture.

- What things are in the artwork?
- What is happening?
- List what you see (people, animals, clothing, environment, objects, etc.).

Analyze:

- How are the elements of art – line, shape, form, texture, space, and value used?
- How are the principles of design – unity, pattern, rhythm, variety, balance, emphasis, and proportion used?

Interpretation:

Make initial, reasonable inferences.

- What do you think is happening in the artwork?
- Who is doing what?
- What do you think the artist is trying to say to the viewer?

Evaluate:

Express your opinion.

- What do you think about the artwork?
- Is it important?
- How does it help you understand the past?
- Do you like it? Why or why not?

Overview of the Artwork

Te Ata (1895-1995) was a traditional Native American storyteller, also known as Mary Frances Thompson Fisher, was born in the Chickasaw Nation near Tishomingo, on December 3, 1895. Her parents were members of the Chickasaw Nation. Her father, T. B. Thompson, the last treasurer of the Chickasaw Nation, operated stores in Tishomingo. Te Ata's uncle, Douglas H. Johnston, was the last governor of the old Chickasaw Nation.

Mary Thompson attended Bloomfield Academy in the far southeast corner of Johnston County. Later she attended high school in Tishomingo, encountering "white" children for the first time. Later, while attending the Oklahoma College for Women (now the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma) in Chickasha, she acquired a mentor, Francis Densmore Davis, an active researcher and writer on Indian cultures. Davis recognized the young woman's talent for drama and soon Mary began to use the name Te Ata, reflecting her American Indian heritage.

Te Ata worked on a Chautauqua circuit and developed her style of storytelling using various American Indian sources using readings, storytelling, and dance. She eventually also used small drums, rattles, and other traditional instruments.

She attended the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pennsylvania and then moved to New York City where she worked in theater. It was there that Te Ata met Clyde Fisher, a naturalist and the eventual curator of the Haden Planetarium, and they married in 1933.

In 1933, Te Ata performed for the first state dinner given by President Franklin Roosevelt. Many of her performances in the 1930s were at summer camps throughout New England and New York. In 1939, she performed again for the Roosevelts at their home in Hyde Park, New York, on the occasion of a state visit by the king and queen of Great Britain.

Te Ata toured Europe, giving performances for royal families and heads of state. The Fishers traveled in South America and extensively in the United States, often observing Native ceremonies and learning different traditions. Te Ata incorporated these experiences in performances later in her storytelling.

In 1958, Te Ata was recognized by the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. In 1975, Te Ata received a "special recognition" award at the first Governor's Arts Awards ceremony. In 1987, Te Ata was designated as the state's first Cultural Treasure by Governor Henry Bellmon and the Oklahoma Arts Council. Te Ata continued traveling and telling her stories until the late 1970's. The aunt of late Senator Helen Cole and the great-aunt of U.S. Congressman Tom Cole, Te Ata died in 1995, a few days before her 100th birthday.

Her name, Te Ata, means "Bearer of the Morning." She preserved and promoted great affection for old ways, American Indians and natural beauty.

About the Artist

One of Oklahoma's earliest professional woman artists, Nellie Ellen Shepherd was born in Thayer, Kansas, on April 30, 1877. Her parents, George T. and Martha Ellen Shepherd, brought their six daughters and two sons to a homestead near Oklahoma City in the Land Run of 1889. After graduating from high school, Nellie Shepherd attended the Academy of Art in Cincinnati and then studied for three years in France, where her portrait of her sister Lottie was selected for exhibit at the 1910 Paris Grand Salon and won Honorable Mention.

In 1916 she spent several months studying in the art institutes of Chicago and Kansas City. In autumn 1917 she became head of the art department in the Oklahoma College for Women, in Chickasha. She also taught privately and in 1918 was elected president of the Oklahoma Art Association. Plagued by ill health, after spending time in Arizona and Colorado, she died in Tucson of tuberculosis on July 18, 1920. An impressionist, Nellie Shepherd worked primarily in oils and preferred portraiture.

Most of the Shepherd homestead, located around Northwest 23rd Street in Oklahoma City, was sold to make way for Shepherd Mall and for a residential area. The Shepherd Historic District, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1997.

Details



1. Te Ata means “bearer of the morning” and was Mary Thompson’s chosen stage name.
2. Artist Nellie Shepherd was the head of the art department at the school in Chickasha at which Te Ata was a student.
3. Shepherd was in the audience at the school to see Te Ata’s debut performance.
4. The portrait was painted at the beginning of Te Ata’s 60-year career but at the end of Shepherd’s career. Shepherd died of tuberculosis not long after the portrait was painted.
5. Nellie Shepherd studied painting under the guidance of famous French, Impressionist painter Henri Martin.
6. Much of Shepherd’s artwork focused on people and nature.
7. Shepherd’s Impressionist style is characterized here by:
 - a. The focus on light across Te Ata’s face
 - b. Her own visual experience is depicted and the painting does not look exactly like the actual person (e.g., the dress and the background).
 - c. The short, thick strokes of paint which capture the essence of the subject rather than every detail and reflect the quickness with which Impressionist painters are known to work.

Details

8. While studying painting in Paris, Shepherd was described by one critic as “an alert and thoughtful student of human nature. It is this insight into the human psychology that has fitted her to become a portrait painter.”
9. Shepherd draws the viewer to focus on Te Ata’s face with the light and amount of detail in that area of the paintings.
10. Some critics believe the painting captured Te Ata’s spirit because Shepherd had watched Te Ata perform. From Richard Green, author of *Te Ata: Chickasaw Storyteller, American Treasure*:
 - a. “The focus of Nellie Shepherd’s portrait of Te Ata is her beautiful, sensitive face.”
 - b. “While her face is delicate and sensitive, her intelligence radiates through her penetrating, thoughtful gaze.”
 - c. “The upward tilt of her chin and the large, liquid, unflinching eyes suggest confidence and pride in being Indian.”
 - d. “...the dress has little detail except for some indistinct fringe, and is colorless except for some red accents.” This lack of detail in the dress brings the viewer’s eye back to the face.
 - e. “...Te Ata is beautifully framed and accented by squiggly brush strokes, predominately muted orange and ivory on her left and rich blues on her right, representing differences in the ambient lighting of the setting.” These brushstrokes in the background representing light reflect Shepherd’s Impressionist style.

Suggested Reading

Online Resource

Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History & Culture, Oklahoma Historical Society

<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/T/TE001.html>

Final Analysis

After completing the readings and activities, go back and look at the artwork again. Now that the students are more familiar with the subject matter, ask them to write a few paragraphs about their interpretation of the artwork. In their own words, the writing should address the following:

- Description of the artwork and who/what is in it
- How the elements of art and principles of design are used within the artwork
- What feelings, emotions, or information the artwork depicts
- Their opinion of the artwork

Pass Objectives

Grade 4- The Arts

Standard 2: Visual Art History and Culture - The student will recognize the development of visual art from an historical and cultural perspective.

1. Describe and place a variety of specific significant art objects by artist, style and historical and cultural context.
2. Identify themes and purposes of works of art and artifacts in history and culture.
3. Demonstrate a basic knowledge of several fields of art such as painting, sculpture, drawing, computer graphics, printmaking, architecture, and fiber arts.
4. Identify how visual art is used in today's world including the popular media of advertising, television, and film.

High School- Oklahoma History

Standard 1. The student will demonstrate process skills in social studies.

1. Identify, analyze, and interpret primary and secondary sources (e.g., artifacts, diaries, letters, art, music, literature, photographs, documents, newspapers, and contemporary media).

Standard 3. The student will evaluate the social, economic, and political development and contributions of Native Americans from prehistoric settlement through modern times.

4. Identify significant historical and contemporary Native Americans (e.g., John Ross, Sequoyah, Quanah Parker, Jim Thorpe, Will Rogers, the Five Indian Ballerinas, the Kiowa Five, and Wilma Mankiller).

Standard 8. The student will examine factors that contributed to the political, economic, and social history of Oklahoma during the twentieth century.

1. Identify significant individuals and their contributions (e.g., Jerome Tiger, Frank Phillips, Kate Barnard, Angie Debo, Ada Lois Sipuel, Clara Luper, George Lynn Cross, Ralph Ellison, Robert S. Kerr, Henry Bellmon, and Reba McEntire).

High School- The Arts

Standard 1: Language of Visual Art - The student will identify visual art terms (e.g., content, engraving, foreshortening, mosaic, perspective)

3. Describe exhibitions of original works of art seen in the school or community.
4. Differentiate between art criticism and art reviews, recognizing that criticism is positive as well as negative in its evaluation of a work of art.

Standard 2: Visual Art History and Culture - The student will recognize the development of visual art from an historical and cultural perspective.

5. PROFICIENT: Identify major regional, national, and international collections of art.

Standard 4: Visual Art Appreciation - The student will appreciate visual art as a vehicle of human expression.

2. Demonstrate respect for their work and the work of others..