

RUTH GROTENRATH: REFLECTING COMMUNITIES



Ruth Grotenrath, *Unloading a Riverboat at the Hudson*, 1942 (detail)

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

Students will examine Ruth Grotenrath's *Unloading a Riverboat at the Hudson* to explore how visual details communicate community life, labor, and shared spaces. Through analysis of figures, actions, and setting, students will make inferences about the Hudson, Wisconsin community in 1940 and consider how historical context and artistic purpose shape public art.

Students will then apply these ideas by designing a preliminary mural sketch inspired by their own community, reflecting everyday activities, shared spaces, and the people who define local life.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify clues that provide visual evidence related to labor, community, and daily life
- Connect an artwork to its historical context, including the artist's purpose and the time period in which it was created
- Communicate ideas through written and visual forms

MATERIALS LIST

- Image of *Unloading a Riverboat at the Hudson* by Ruth Grotenrath (digital or printed)
- Paper or sketchbooks
- Drawing materials



Learn more about
Ruth Grotenrath's
*Unloading a Riverboat
at the Hudson*

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SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is happening in this painting?
- Who is included in this painting? What does that tell you about their lives, work, or community?
- What can you infer about life in Hudson, Wisconsin, in 1940 based on the painting?

ACTIVITY STEPS

1. Introduce students to *Unloading a Riverboat at the Hudson*. Facilitate a class discussion to guide students through visual interpretation. Use the provided guiding questions to help students identify visual evidence related to labor, community, and daily life.
2. Provide background on the artist and the time period. Note that in the 1930s, the U.S. government developed programs which paid artists to create artwork for federal buildings. Artists competed for commissions and were expected to design works that reflected local communities. In 1940, Grotenrath created sketches for the post office mural in Hudson, Wisconsin depicting the city's river trade and everyday life. Her final mural presents a busy scene featuring workers, emphasizing labor.
3. Explain that students will create a preliminary mural design inspired by Grotenrath's approach. Ask students to select a building or public space in their own community. Students should observe or reflect upon the space. Ask students to consider who uses the space and what types of activities take place there.
4. Students will sketch a mural design that visually represents their chosen space and the people who use it. Encourage them to think carefully about observations, figures, actions, and setting.
5. To conclude, students will explain their design choices through a brief artist statement or class discussion. They should describe what the mural depicts, how their observations of the community influenced their design, and why their mural would be meaningful for the audience.

REFLECT AND CONNECT

- Why is it important for a mural in a public building to reflect a local community?
- How can art help people feel valued or represented?
- What responsibilities do artists have when creating work for public spaces?



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