



Philosophy
Circles

Once there was an artist

There's a wonderful anecdote in John Berger's book, "The Success and Failure of Picasso", where Picasso looks at some grand house on a hill, and he draws it, and the drawing buys the house! It isn't as "narrow" as my usual stories in putting a single concept forward and drawing attention to obvious questions. I used this for a World Philosophy Day, so may require more time than 30 minutes if pupils are choosing questions.



Ask pupils to imagine they could draw one picture, and whatever was in the picture, you could have it. What would it be? Just picture it in your mind's eye.

Then invite anyone to share what they pictured. It's best not to put them on the spot as they may have private images they don't want to share, such as lost loved ones.



This is a particularly good stimulus to provoke pupils' questions. A number of bulletin readers wrote back with how their class had responded. For a class experienced in P4C, you could ask them to create their own questions from the stimulus. Alternatively, you could present with a selection to vote on:

What makes a painting valuable?

Can you capture someone's "true heart" in a painting?

Can love at first sight really be love?

How much control should parents have over our lives?

Is life like a painted picture?

Do we need to impress to prove love?

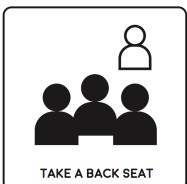
Can paintings capture reality?

Is what you really want what you really need?

Can a painting be as valuable as a house?

It is unfair to use your talent to get things?

Why would you risk your life for something there is more than one of?



Once the pupils have voted for a question, step back and be at the service of the enquiry. Scribe their ideas, rather than script the direction of the enquiry. Use your notes to recap on what has been said and help pupils decide where to go next. Encourage them to talk to each other, rather than look at you.

NEXT STEPS

Take another look at the story. What ingredients made it a good stimulus for questions? Based on this, can they make their own Philosophy Fairytale?

Once there was an artist. So great an artist was she, that when she wanted something, she had only to paint it and give the picture in exchange, and the thing was hers.

When she wanted a meal, she would draw it on an innkeeper's table and he would make it. When she wanted a dress, she would paint a pattern for the weaver, who would gladly weave the cloth from the finest thread. When she wanted a house, she would make a painting of it. The owner would sell his house for the painting, and sell the painting for a bigger house.

Before she ran out of paints, she would use the last of each colour to paint itself, and when she was down to her last brush, she would paint another with its final stroke, so that she never wanted for anything.

Until one day, when she was painting a little cottage, sure that the owner would be happy to exchange it for the beautiful picture it would make. A young man came out of the cottage to see what she was doing. He was so handsome that straightaway she fell in love. In no time at all, she had made up her mind to marry him.

"I shall paint my greatest picture ever, of one of the grand houses in the city, with footmen and maids and all, and we shall live there together and be happy," she said.

"That's all well and good," said the youth. "But I shall only marry when my mother says. For she's the one that brought me into the world and has kept me in it."

"Let me paint her a picture of you," said the artist. And she did. When it was finished, it was the most beautiful picture she had ever painted.

But when she showed it to the youth's mother, the old woman said, "Not a bad likeness. But there is something missing. You have not captured his true heart. When your painting shows me that, then you shall have my blessing to marry. Come again tomorrow."

So the next morning, the artist began again, working with her finest brushes and her most beautiful paints, until you would think that even his mother could see no difference between the youth and the painting. But again, his mother said, "No, you have not captured his true heart. Come again tomorrow."

And so it went on. Every day the artist would paint the painting anew, trying to capture the youth's true heart. She tried different lights, different poses, different brushes, different paints. But the old woman was never satisfied. The artist grew thinner, because she would sometimes forget to paint some bread for the baker before she came to see the youth; and her clothes began to fade, because she had no time to visit the weaver and the seamstress and paint a new dress.

One day, she had very few paints left, for she had forgotten to use the last of them to paint them again, and her brush would hardly last to paint another. The new painting for the day was almost finished. It looked to him perfect in every way, as if it were a mirror. Yet he knew that it would still not please his mother, and the artist would be sent away again to come back tomorrow.

At that moment, three tears dropped from his eyes onto his cheek. With the last of her paints, the artist caught the tears on the canvas, and the painting was finished.

The old woman looked at the painting and at the tears. "Now," she said, "you have caught my son's true heart, and you shall be wed!"

And so they married. And what a splendid wedding she painted!