

# Digital Citizenship

## Lesson Title: Can a Picture Tell 140 Characters?

### Middle School



#### Essential Question:

Can we really control the way others interpret what we post online?

#### Materials:

- Photo from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/12103150/Rembrandt-The-Night-Watch-The-real-story-behind-the-kids-on-phones-photo.html>
- Reprint of The Night Watch (1642) by Rembrandt van Rijn <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio/artists/rembrandt-harmensz-van-rijn/objects#/SK-C-5,0>
- Means to write (e.g., paper and pen, computer writing program, etc.)

### Procedure:

#### Introduction:

1. Begin this lesson with a discussion of the phrase “A picture is worth 1,000 words.” Share that we believe that the phrase is American in origin and began to be used often in the American press around the 1920’s as applied to graphics in advertising.
  - Ask students what this phrase means to them.
  - How might it apply to fine art that we view in a museum?
  - How does it apply to the photos and comments we post online?
2. Tell students that the title of this lesson is “Can a Picture Tell 140 Characters?” Why was that title chosen? What can they infer (make an educated guess) about the title? How does that title relate to the well-known phrase referring to a thousand words? (NOTE: Twitter messages have a maximum length of 140 characters.)
3. Next, share with students the photograph of the famous Rembrandt painting *Night Watch*, which hangs in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It is Rembrandt’s largest, most famous canvas. Rembrandt was the first to paint figures in a group portrait actually doing something. The captain, dressed in black, is telling his lieutenant to start the company marching. The guardsmen are getting into formation. Rembrandt used the light to focus on particular details, like the captain’s gesturing hand and the young girl in the foreground. She was the company mascot (reprint available at end of lesson or use recommended websites).

4. If possible and if you have access to YouTube, watch what happened in an Amsterdam mall when the museum re-opened after a renovation and this international treasure was once again on public display: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1ys2UCROU0>.
5. Now that the importance of the painting to the art world and to the people of Amsterdam has been established, have students look at what recently went viral. Show the photo snapped and posted on Facebook by a professional photographer:
  - What do you think is happening?
  - How would you feel if your image was captured at the museum on a field trip?



Photo: Gijsbert van der Wal <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/12103150/Rembrandt-The-Night-Watch-The-real-story-behind-the-kids-on-phones-photo.html>

6. Explain that the viral image caused a stir. Ask students what they might expect were some of the Twitter remarks on social media (almost 9,500 posts) before sharing these actual comments:
  - The “distracted” society. No wonder we’re in the shape we’re in now. Teach Your Children!
  - Anyone believe they’re Googling Rembrandt? Nope, me neither
  - What a sad picture of today’s society!
  - Doesn’t it make you think that maybe we ought to be questioning the relevance of old brown paintings?

7. Share the real story. It turns out the students were actually researching a school assignment when the photo was taken. Here is the photographer Gijsbert van der Wal's explanation:

"A small group of high school students were sitting on the benches in front of Rembrandt's Night Watch. Almost all of them were either looking at their own smartphones or their classmates'. I thought it was a curious sight and took a photograph.

"That same evening, I posted the photo on Facebook where, to my utter surprise, within a few days it was shared almost 9,500 times. The image was also reposted by others and shared on Twitter, Tumblr and Reddit. It went viral, with people often adding rather dispirited captions: today's youth is more interested in Whatsapp than they are in Rembrandt.

"On the other hand there were people who warned not to be misled by the image: they asserted that the students were in fact attentive to the art works, using the museum's freely downloadable multimedia tour. That seems a plausible explanation. However, I think a well-designed museum app should continuously direct the attention of the user from the phone to the actual objects on display."

**Source:** <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/12103150/Rembrandt-The-Night-Watch-The-real-story-behind-the-kids-on-phones-photo.html>

8. Explain that student will do a writing activity called Connecting the Centuries. Let's say the characters in Rembrandt's Night Watch could post on social media as well. What might they have to say as they look out at today's museum visitors? Ask students to be creative and think about the wonderment and confusion these individuals from the 1600's might have on today's dress, conduct, tools and technology. How might we be misunderstood? How might we be admired?
9. Have students share their 'posts.'

## Conclusion

Discuss the following: Can we really control the way others interpret what we post online? What do we need to think about when posting?



The Night Watch (1642) by Rembrandt van Rijn is one of the most famous paintings in the world. Rembrandt was the first to depict the figures in a group portrait in action, showing the civic guardsmen taking up their positions in order to march out. His manipulation of light was also unprecedented.

<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/exhibit/dALSivMco4xJJJA?hl=en>

<http://uncatalogedmuseum.blogspot.com/2014/12/what-do-you-see-in-this-picture-from.html>