Using ***Isabella and the Pot of Basil*** Across the Curriculum

Using a painting such as ***Isabella and the Pot of Basil*** as the basis for work in the classroom has many advantages. Studying the picture can give a good introduction to learning about the practical skills involved in actually making it. This can be followed up with painting and drawing sessions in which children have the chance to try out some of the materials and techniques involved, possibly with the added advantage of working with a professional artist.

It can also provide the opportunity to engage pupils in many different areas as well as Art. By becoming familiar with the image and the artist, children can gain a sense of ownership of the painting which can then be extended into work in other subject areas.

Some desired learning outcomes from using art across the curriculum include:

- To know more about the image and the artist
- To understand why the painting was made and the ideas and feelings that it represents
- To learn about the skills and techniques involved in, or represented by, the painting
- To explore pupils own responses and develop critical thinking

Isabella Line Drawing

William Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

William Holman Hunt is known as one of the most important and talented of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Unlike his fellow Pre-Raphaelites, Hunt came from a modest family background. He was born in 1827 in London, the son of a warehouse manager. His lack of wealth and privilege meant that he was not able to study art at his leisure or attend expensive classes, but had to help support himself from an early age whilst studying independently.

In 1844 he gained a place at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. This was a significant event for Hunt for it was here that he met and became friends with Dante Gabrielle Rossetti and John Everett Millais.

The young painters shared the same artistic ideals, and an admiration for Keats and Medieval art and literature. They wanted to revolutionise the art of their day, which they believed to be trivial and sterile.

In 1848 they founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The name originated from their rejection of the traditionalist methods of teaching at the Royal Academy where the work of Raphael (1483-1520) was believed to be the epitome of good painting. They aimed to produce work with a contemporary social or political message, as well as paintings inspired by literature or medieval legend. Hunt often took religious or moral issues as his subject and was known as the "High Priest" of the movement because of his deep religious convictions.

The Pre-Raphaelites were influenced by early Renaissance paintings, from which they took the technique of painting on a smooth, white ground with transparent layers of colour which gave a luminous quality to the painting.

They also believed in painting directly from nature in incredible detail. This made the Pre-Raphaelites' work seem startling in comparison with traditional Victorian Painting, which often tried to emulate the dark faded colours of Old Masters.

In 1865 Hunt married Fanny Waugh. The following year Hunt and his wife embarked on a trip to the East. This was interrupted by an outbreak of cholera and the couple decided to stay in Florence. It was in Florence in 1866 that Hunt began painting Isabella. Florence proved to be an inspiring place as it was the setting for the Keats poem ***Isabella or the Pot of Basil*** which the painting is based on. It also provided the opportunity to collect authentic objects and furnishings to add realism to his work.

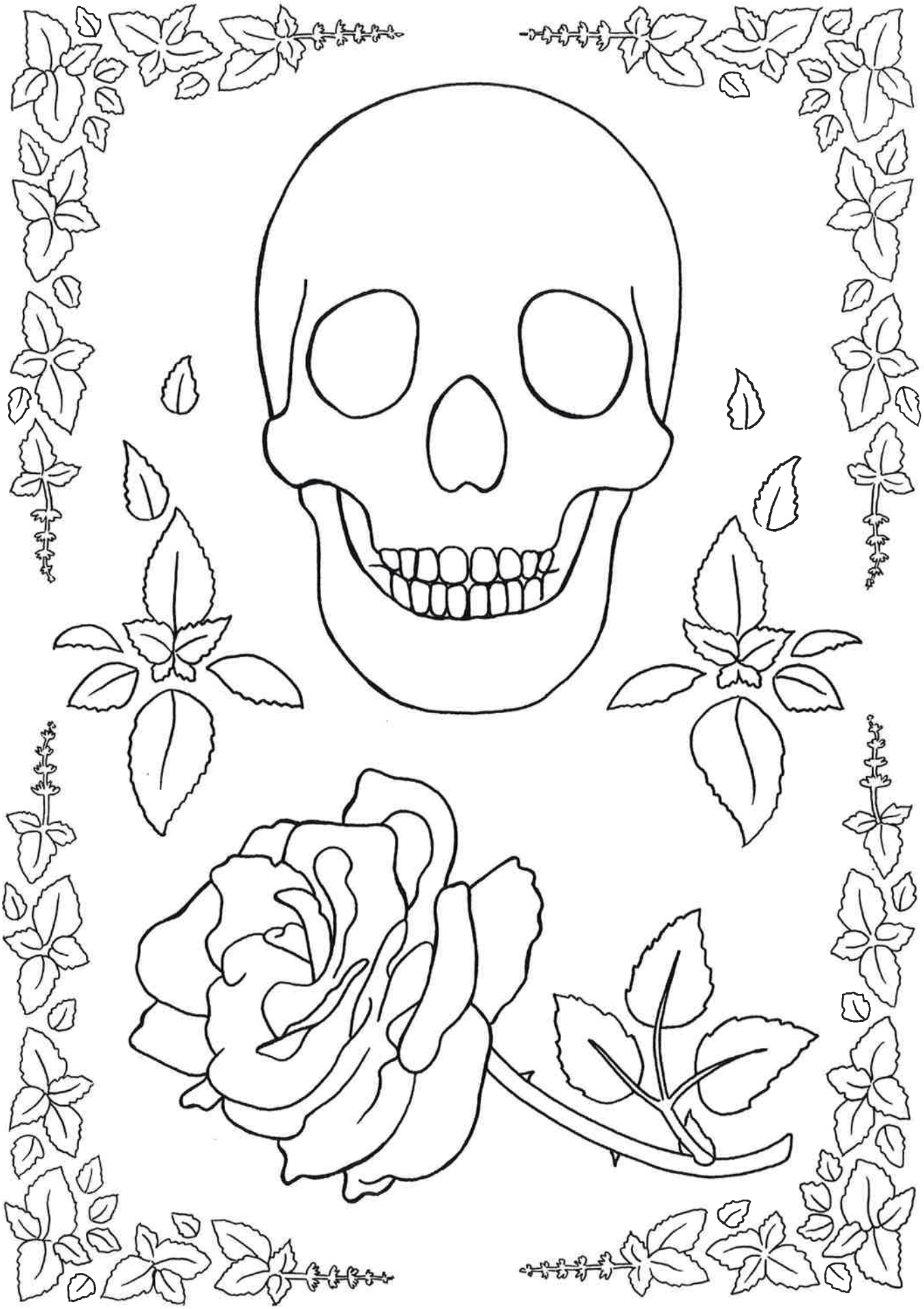
Hunt's letters dating from this time express his enthusiasm for the painting and the great joy he felt in his marriage to Fanny, who was by this time heavily pregnant. Undoubtedly, Hunt's feelings for his wife provided inspiration for his work.

Fanny gave birth to their son Cyril Benone in October 1866 but tragically died two months later. Hunt was overwhelmed by grief but endeavoured to complete the painting. It was significant that the theme of the painting was desire and loss, and the work now became for Hunt a celebration of his love for Fanny and an expression of his bereavement.

Hunt returned to England with his baby son and completed the painting. It was well received and bought by James Hall of Newcastle in 1868. It was eventually given to the Laing Art Gallery in 1953.

In 1875 Hunt married Fanny's sister Edith. He had two more children from this marriage, a son, Hilary, and a daughter, Gladys. He enjoyed a successful career and became respected as one of the leading artists of his era. He died in London in 1910.

Symbols from the Painting



Art Project: Texture

Look at the painting with the class and initiate discussion about the different textures of the various materials shown. Ask children to list the materials and describe them. Encourage children to notice differences or similarities between textures. ***Ask how do you think that would feel? Would it be soft / hard / smooth / rough?***

Use activity sheets to list and categorize or use the Isabella line drawing to name and place materials. Talk about the different ways of drawing texture:

What kind of marks would you make to show rough texture? Smooth texture? What would you choose to draw with?

Demonstrate with selected materials and methods to show different effects:

1 Use pencil (HB) with controlled, careful marks to show a smooth surface

2 Use a soft pencil (4B) with heavy, broken marks to show a rough texture

3 Use charcoal or pastel blended with finger or tissue to show a soft, fairly smooth texture

4 Use crayon to make a variety of marks then paint over the surface with ink or watercolour to create a range of hard or rough textures

Ask children to choose something from the painting and identify its texture. Take a sheet of paper and draw a line through the middle (see activity sheet 2). In one section experiment with materials and techniques to draw this texture. In the other section draw the item, or part of the item chosen. Next, choose a contrasting texture and repeat.

This activity could be expanded into a large scale transcription of the painting by using the overhead projector to trace a large drawing. Children could then be assigned different textures to draw, which could be collaged onto the outline drawing.

Put together a **texture box** by collecting objects with similar textures to those in the picture. Use this to demonstrate and draw from.

Other themes can also be explored in this way eg: pattern or shape.

Texture Activity Sheet 1

Look carefully at the painting. There are many different kinds of texture shown. Describe the texture of each item on the list below.

Isabella's dress .....

Basil pot .....

Altar cloth .....

Floor tiles .....

Basil plant .....

The curtains on the bed .....

Isabella's hair .....

Watering can .....

Altar .....

Chair .....

Shoes .....

Blanket .....

Texture Activity Sheet 2

Choose something from the painting to study. This could be an object e.g. the watering can or part of something e.g. a section of Isabella's dress. Which materials would be best for drawing the texture? Experiment with different materials and different kinds of marks in the space below.

Which materials and marks worked best? Make a drawing in the space below using these materials.

Literacy Project: Isabella's Diary

Start a discussion around the idea of diaries.

Why do people keep diaries?

What sort of things do they write in them?

What else do they put in them?
e.g. drawings, doodles, tickets, mementos

Look at some examples of diaries e.g. ***Diary of an Edwardian Lady, Adrian Mole, Leonardo's notebooks.***

What would Isabella put in her diary?
Talk about the era in which she lived, her social status etc. to set the scene.

Use brainstorming and spider diagrams to generate ideas.

Divide children into small groups and ask them each to produce a page for the diary. Give each group a different set of criteria e.g.

- Produce a page that Isabella might have written before she met Lorenzo
- Produce a page that Isabella might have written after discovering Lorenzo's murder

Each group must carefully consider how Isabella might have written: the style, the content and the handwriting. Each page must be decorated in some way.

Pages from each group can be collected and put together to create a finished diary. Think about presentation to make it look authentic e.g. colouring the paper with tea or coffee to make it look old.

This project could be adapted in various ways:

- younger children could work on a simplified version on photocopied sheets with decorative borders to be coloured-in
- ask children to give the diary a modern day setting
- work on diary entries by someone else from the story e.g. Lorenzo or the brothers

Diary Activity Sheet

Try to imagine a typical day in Isabella's life before she met Lorenzo. What sort of things do you think she would write in her diary? Answer the questions below to help you decide.

1 What time would Isabella get up?

2 What would she have for breakfast and who would make it?

3 What duties do you think she would have?

4 How do you think she would spend her day?

5 Would she be alone or with other people?

6 What time would she go to bed?

7 Think about how different things would have been in those days.
What sort of pen do you think Isabella would have used?

8 Try to imagine how Isabella might have written.
Experiment with different kinds of handwriting in the space below.

Science Project

Materials and their properties

One of the most striking things about the painting is the accuracy and meticulous attention to detail. This makes it easy to recognise and identify many of the materials shown.

Begin a discussion about the different types of materials. Ask children firstly to simply identify as many as possible. Use the Isabella line drawing to name and place them.

It's a good idea to then focus on one area of the painting and talk about it in depth. Ask questions such as:

What is Isabella wearing?
Is the material thick or thin?
Would it keep you warm?
Would it feel rough or smooth?
How was it made?

Introduce the idea of compare and contrast by talking about the similarities and differences between materials. Use activity sheets to sort into groups of opposites eg: hard / soft; reflective / non-reflective; transparent / opaque.

Life processes and living things

William Holman Hunt has painted the basil plant with great care to make sure that it is a truthful depiction of nature. Show children a real basil plant and compare it to the painted version.

Use this opportunity to talk about life processes and living things. Identify living things in the painting and which things originated from living things. Talk about the similarities and differences between living things e.g. Isabella and the plant.

Use the illustration of the basil plant provided in this pack to name and label the different parts.

Basil Plant Illustration