

PETIT BRAS

A Sensory Story Activity Pack to accompany Claude Monet's
'The Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil', 1872.



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Sensory Journeys

Bringing stories to life with your help

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ABOUT THIS PACK

This sensory story activity pack has been created to offer an inclusive, sensory-led exploration of Claude Monet's *Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil* (1872), enabling participants to experience the painting in ways that go beyond sight alone. The pack is designed so that everyone can meaningfully connect with this artwork through touch, sound, movement, and atmosphere.

The activities are particularly suited to early years children and to individuals with severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities (SLD or PMLD). If you work as a sensory communicator, this pack has been developed with you and your practice in mind.

The sensory story itself is written as a poem. It invites participants into the painting by exploring its sensory qualities: the river setting, the winter season, the colours Monet used, and the distinctive brushstrokes that bring the scene to life.

To support the poem, you will need a small collection of props and resources. We provide a list of suggested materials that are low-cost or freely available, though you are very welcome to adapt these ideas or substitute your own resources. Our website also offers specially created sound recordings to support and enrich the auditory experience.

A good sensory story is one that can be returned to again and again. With repeated sessions, anticipation may grow, and participants may begin to show preferences or indicate a wish for certain moments to be repeated. The aim of this sensory story is not to rush, but to linger within the painting: to build connection, support regulation, and discover moments of calm by stepping into Monet's world.

To deepen this experience further, we have included extension activity ideas across art, cookery, and horticulture. These activities offer opportunities to explore *Petit Bras* through real-world, hands-on experiences, extending the sensory journey beyond the story itself.

You'll also find an introduction to the Cake Method for exploring artworks, including both the theory behind the approach and practical guidance for using it. The Cake Method is one technique amongst many that can support people of all ages and abilities to use their own skills, perceptions, and experiences to engage with art. It can be led by a facilitator or taught as a structured approach, supporting the development of confidence and lifelong skills in accessing and exploring visual art.

LE GATEAU DE MONET

Looking, Seeing, and the Cake Method

The Cake Method as a foundation technique for accessing visual art

This sensory story pack introduces a practical technique for teaching foundational skills in accessing and understanding visual art: the Cake Method. The technique uses a layered approach to looking, supporting learners to engage with artworks in structured, manageable ways and to build meaning over time.

This approach is rooted in the Sensory Heritage methodology developed by Collar & Cuffs Co. Sensory Heritage begins by designing from the perspective of people with the most complex sensory, cognitive, and access needs first. By starting here, access is embedded from the outset rather than added later as an adaptation. This ensures that activities are inclusive by design and accessible for learners across a wide range of ages, developmental stages, and abilities, including early years and primary learners, neurodivergent learners, and people with severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities (SLD or PMLD).

Claude Monet's 'Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil' (1872) is used here as a fully developed and worked-through example of the Cake Method approach. Once learned, however, the Cake Method can be applied to many other artworks and visual materials. It is intended as a transferable way of teaching how to look at art, rather than a one-off activity tied to a single painting.

At its core, the Cake Method supports learners to engage with visual information by reducing complexity and offering clear structure. By conceptually or literally "slicing" an artwork into sections, learners are supported to orient towards images, sustain attention, explore relationships between parts and whole, and gradually build confidence in visual exploration.

Origins of the Cake Method

Collar & Cuffs Co has spent nearly a decade creating sensory tours and trails for galleries, museums, gardens, and historic properties, with a focus on widening access for young children and for people of all ages with physical, sensory, and learning disabilities, sensory processing differences, and neurodevelopmental differences.

The Cake Method emerged through this practice, from working alongside a wide range of visitors and supporting them to access art and heritage using their own sensory and motor skills, knowledge, and lived experience.

Galleries and museums are typically vision-first environments: look, but usually do not touch. For many people, age and stage of development, combined with the sensory demands of heritage spaces, can make looking challenging and truly seeing, in the sense of processing and understanding artworks and objects, difficult or even inaccessible.

The Cake Method is a response both to what visitors bring with them and to the disabling barriers created by heritage environments. It is grounded in the social model of disability, recognising that access barriers are not inherent to individuals, but are produced by the way spaces, collections, and experiences have been designed.

In this pack, Petit Bras is explored through four imaginary cake layers: the riverbank, the river, the trees, and the sky. These layers form the underlying structure for the sensory poem, the supporting resources, and the extension activities.



The Cake Method | Practice Summary

- Introduce the artwork in parts, rather than all at once
- Use consistent language for each layer across sessions
- Allow learners to remain with one layer for as long as needed
- Revisit layers regularly to build familiarity and confidence
- Treat the structure as supportive, not prescriptive
- Use the parts to help build narrative

Developing looking skills across different learners

Learning to look at artworks is a developmental process. In early years and primary-aged children, visual skills are still maturing. Many children begin by orienting towards an image and recognising it as something of interest before they are able to scan it deliberately, sustain attention, or move flexibly between the whole picture and its details.

Typical development of visual skills (0–7 years)

Broad guide only. Visual skills and understanding develop gradually and unevenly in early childhood.

Age 0–2

- Responds to light, movement, and strong contrast
- Vision closely linked to touch and movement

Age 2–3

- Recognises familiar objects and people
- Drawn to bold colour and simple shapes

Age 3–4

- Begins to scan images intentionally
- Notices some detail but may struggle with complexity

Age 4–5

- Starts to relate parts of an image to the whole
- Benefits from adult support to build meaning and knowledge

Age 5–7

- Growing ability to interpret images symbolically
- Still developing skills in filtering visual information

Children develop visual skills at different rates. Reducing visual complexity and offering clear structure supports access at every stage.

At the early stages of visual development, attention is often drawn to bold colour, strong contrast, or familiar shapes, and understanding how different elements relate to one another develops gradually through shared, supported experiences of looking, as well as eye and brain maturation.

Neurodivergent learners, including autistic children and young people, may approach images differently. Some may naturally attend to details before forming an overall sense of the image, focusing on texture, pattern, or small areas of contrast.

Others may prefer to remain with a single element for longer periods rather than shifting their attention across the scene. These ways of looking are not less valid. They reflect different perceptual styles and can offer rich engagement with artworks when they are recognised and supported.

Structured approaches, such as the Cake Method, can help support connections between detail-focused attention and a broader understanding of the image without requiring learners to abandon their natural ways of attending.

For learners with severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities (SLD or PMLD), visual experiences may be shaped by visual processing differences, visual impairments, or difficulties with eye movement control, focus, depth perception, or sustained attention. Visually complex images can be overwhelming or difficult to organise without support. In these cases, looking may involve orienting towards an image, noticing light, colour, or movement, or responding to changes in contrast. Building meaning from visual information often requires repetition, clear structure, and the use of additional sensory channels alongside vision.

What this means for teaching

- Avoiding the assumption that all learners see the same thing you see
 - know your group and their range of age/stage of visual skill development, integrate your knowledge of learners' neurotypes or sensory impairment and processing differences
- Accepting detail-focused looking as positive engagement; neuroaffirming approaches
- Avoiding rushing learners towards "the whole picture"
- Valuing pausing, repetition, and returning
- Enabling shared looking to develop over time

Case Study

A mixed group of primary aged learners in a contemporary art gallery exploring an exhibition. They pause in front of a large impressionist painting depicting a figure in a garden scene.

When asked what they can see, responses include 'garden', 'green', 'lady', 'man', 'big', 'flowers', 'tree'.

These answers are all correct. They reflect the first thing they saw, processed, and linked to language.

A bit like the proverbial story of the wise blind men describing an elephant through the part they could reach.

The Cake Method offers a way to honour these partial views while gently supporting shared understanding over time.

Exploring Monet with people with PMLD

For people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), engagement with this pack is not about learning facts about Claude Monet or developing conventional art knowledge. Instead, the painting offers a starting point for sensory exploration, connection, and communication.

'Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil' provides a stimulus through which experiences of cold, winter, water, earth, movement, and presence can be explored.

These experiences may already exist in a person's sensory memory: the feeling of cold air on skin, the sensation and sound of flowing water, the smell of damp earth. Monet's painting does not teach these concepts so much as offer a way to revisit, rehearse, and connect them within a shared experience.

For learners with PMLD, meaning often emerges through the body rather than through cognition or language. Engagement may be expressed through changes in breathing, posture, facial expression, vocalisation, or movement. Communication may be subtle, fleeting, or physical. In this context, the value of the activity lies in shared attention, responsive facilitation, and the quality of the sensory experience itself.

The Cake Method supports this by providing a clear but flexible structure for exploration. By focusing on one layer at a time, learners are not required to process multiple sensations or ideas simultaneously. One sensation, one material, one quality can be explored deeply and without pressure. Over time, layers can be revisited and gently connected, much like rehearsing one act of a play before gradually performing the whole. Alternatively, learners may remain with a single layer, where curiosity, regulation, and response are strongest.

What this means for teaching for learners with PMLD

- Engagement is the outcome, not knowledge acquisition
- One layer is enough
- Repetition builds meaning
- Stay where curiosity and regulation are strongest
- Monet is a stimulus, not the goal

Case study

During a one-to-one sensory exhibition tour with an adult with PMLD, the individual responded strongly to the first sensory resource offered: a sheet of embossing foil. The shiny, flexible surface caught the light and produced a soft, wobbly sound in the gallery space.

The experience was so pleasurable that further resources were declined and movement through the exhibition stopped. In keeping with the Cake Method, the facilitator chose to remain with this single "layer" rather than progressing through others, following the person's agenda and staying beside the related sculpture to explore the foil's sensory qualities.

Using principles from Intensive Interaction, the facilitator introduced coloured torches and mirrored the person's actions, flapping the foil rhythmically in time with the individual's name and favourite songs. Through changes in movement and response, the person communicated requests for repetition, expressed pleasure, and demonstrated a clear sense of humour.

There is no expectation to explore every layer, either within a single session or over time. Lingering in the riverbank, for example, might involve extended exploration of mud: its weight, texture, temperature, and smell. In staying with the essential muddiness of mud, shared sensory engagement may open the way for choice, autonomy, preference, motor skills, joy, communication and wellbeing - in no particular order of priority or importance.

In these moments, Monet is not the focus, but he is not absent either. The painting acts as a gentle frame for experience, allowing meaning to emerge through sensation rather than explanation.

A layered way of working with an artwork

When working with the Cake Method, layers may be approached mentally, physically, or in combination. Mentally holding a layered structure in mind and moving between parts of an image is a higher-level skill and may not yet be accessible to all learners.

For many learners, particularly those with SLD or PMLD, layers need to be made concrete. This might involve physically adapting the artwork so that only one section is visible at a time, cropping or masking images, or cutting up printed versions of the artwork. In these cases, the structure is not imagined but experienced.

Physical slicing allows learners to engage with one area of the artwork without the additional demand of filtering out visual information. It supports focus, reduces cognitive and sensory load, and makes the layered approach accessible at a sensory level rather than a conceptual one.

Over time, some learners may begin to anticipate that

Making the layers concrete

- Use cropped or masked images to show one layer at a time
- Physically cut up printed versions of the artwork
- Cover and reveal sections gradually
- Present only the layer you are exploring
- Let structure be seen, felt, or handled, not just imagined

Case Study

In co-production sessions with the community in preparation for 'Petit Bras' to visit South Shields Museum and Art Gallery, the painting was projected at a large scale on the wall. This was an adaptation as a version of the painting printed on polyester fabric had not arrived in time for the workshop days; a fabric version can be folded to reveal one section at a time and freely handled without damage.

The facilitator used a telescopic pointing stick with a red foam hand on the end to act out the imaginary slicing of the projected image into four layers, adding chopping, slicing, and cutting sound effects with their voice to engage workshop participants in the action and make clear which parts of the image were the focus in that moment.

In this way, workshop groups were able to attend to each section of 'Petit Bras' in series, building towards a visual understanding of the whole.

different parts belong to a whole. Others may not, and this is equally valid. The purpose of the Cake Method is not to move learners towards abstraction, but to support engagement at whatever level is right for them.

Beyond this painting

Although Monet's *Petit Bras* is the worked example in this pack, the Cake Method is intended as a reusable way of working with visual art. The number and direction of layers can be adapted to suit different artworks, images, or visual materials.

Some may work best when sliced vertically, others horizontally, and others still as overlapping or rolling sections.

What matters is not the cake metaphor itself, but the underlying principle: breaking visual information into accessible parts, offering structure without rigidity, and supporting learners to build understanding over time.

Making artworks easier to see and easier to understand

Developing looking skills is influenced not only by what we look at, but by how artworks are presented and experienced. The conditions in which an artwork is viewed can either support access or unintentionally create barriers.

In classroom settings, technology allows artworks to be enlarged, cropped, or zoomed into, helping learners focus on specific areas and temporarily exclude others. These tools can be extremely helpful, particularly for learners with emerging visual skills or visual impairments. However, encountering an artwork in real life offers a different sensory experience. Scale, surface texture, and spatial context all shape how an artwork is perceived and understood.

Links to Quality First Teaching

The Cake Method aligns with key principles of Quality First Teaching by:

Chunking learning

Breaking complex visual information into manageable parts to reduce cognitive load.

Scaffolding understanding

Providing structure that supports learners to build comprehension gradually, with support reduced or adapted over time.

Reducing cognitive load

Limiting the amount of visual information presented at one time to support attention and processing.

Supporting developmental readiness

Respecting that visual and meaning-making skills develop unevenly and should not be assumed.

Universal design

Embedding access from the outset rather than adding differentiation later.

Inclusive participation

Valuing different ways of noticing, responding, and communicating as valid engagement.

When we use the Cake Method in practice, everyone wins not just in terms of accessibility but in terms of developing lifelong skills for accessing, understanding, and enjoying visual arts.

The height at which an artwork is displayed, and how much of it a viewer can physically see, can include or exclude individuals. This is particularly relevant for young children, buggy and wheelchair users, and shorter adults.

Looking also requires light. Gallery lighting is carefully managed to protect artworks and often relies on artificial light at reduced levels. While necessary for conservation, artificial lighting can affect colour perception and make viewing difficult for people with certain visual impairments or processing differences.

Many people with visual impairments, particularly those with SLD or PMLD, see best when there is strong contrast between the image and its background. Viewing artworks against a dark or black background can significantly improve visual access. This approach draws on principles from the Positive Looking method developed by Gwyn McCormack.

Why sensory approaches matter in visual art: Making The Cake Method real

The visual arts are, by their nature, visual. Even with a structured approach to looking, visual information alone may not be enough to support understanding.

For very young children, as well as for people with sensory processing differences or SLD or PMLD, learners may not yet have accumulated the sensory experiences and memories that help make sense of what they are seeing. Sensory interpretation allows understanding to be built through the body, without reliance on language or cognitive ability.

Embodied sensory approaches can also support regulation. When people feel physically and emotionally safe, they are more likely to remain in a state where exploration and

Making Looking Easier

- Enlarge images wherever possible
- Use dark backgrounds to increase contrast
- Experiment with lighting levels and direction
- Consider viewing height and physical access
- Try natural daylight for landscape artworks

If looking at works solely in an art gallery:

- Develop a portable 'Looking Kit' to support learners. This can include:
 - An acrylic mirror - useful for those with limited head/neck mobility to be able to access images above their heads via a reflection; mirrors can also reflect a whole large artwork behind a learner if you experiment with positioning and angles.
 - Cardboard or plastic 'letterbox' viewers; cut out narrow rectangle letterbox shapes and use these as a way of supporting learners to focus on particular areas of an artwork.
 - Magnifying sheets, telescopes, or binoculars - for those with stronger visual skills, these can help support attention to detail.
- View artworks alongside learners at their height and eyeline first to understand their experience of what they are seeing.

learning are possible. Over time, sensory engagement supports the development of a rich, felt repository of experience that can be drawn on in future encounters with art and the wider world.

This is why sensory interpretations of art are not only for SEND access. They are for everyone. Sensory approaches level the playing field, allowing all participants to become active viewers of art rather than passive observers.

Building narrative through the Cake Method

The Cake Method supports not only how learners look at an artwork, but how they begin to build a sense of narrative around it. By exploring an artwork layer by layer, visual elements can become prompts for story, curiosity, and social connection.

Every artwork contains potential narratives. These may be obvious or subtle, historical or imagined, shared or personal. Supporting learners to detect and explore stories within artworks offers an important way into understanding art, particularly when visual conventions or cultural references are unfamiliar.

For younger learners and those at earlier developmental stages, the teacher or facilitator will usually need to hold the narrative. In these cases, the adult determines the story and uses it to structure exploration of the artwork. They decide which elements to foreground, the order in which layers are explored, and how the story unfolds. This provides clarity, reduces cognitive demand, and allows learners to engage through listening, sensory exploration, shared attention, and response.

As learners become more confident and able to reflect verbally, responsibility for narrative can begin to shift.

Why we need to make the Cake Method real

- Sensory experience builds understanding where vision alone cannot
- Embodied learning supports regulation and curiosity
- Access is not an add-on, but a foundation
- Art becomes active when it can be felt, not just seen

What Are Sensory Stories?

In this pack, a sensory story is a shared experience that uses sensory resources, such as objects, textures, movement, and atmosphere, to support engagement with an artwork.

Sensory stories do not rely on language, memory, or abstract understanding. Instead, they offer embodied ways to explore ideas, environments, and experiences through the body and senses.

When paired with the Cake Method, sensory stories help build connections between visual elements and lived experience. They allow learners to explore one layer at a time through sensation, supporting regulation, curiosity, communication, and shared attention.

Sensory stories are not about retelling a fixed narrative. They create space for exploration, response, and connection, making art accessible as an experience rather than something that must already be understood.

Using the layered structure provided by the Cake Method, facilitators can support learners to develop their own stories through simple prompts such as Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? These questions help learners move from noticing visual elements to connecting them into a coherent narrative, while still working within a supportive framework.

With further practice, more able groups may be invited to lead all stages of the Cake Method themselves. They may decide how to slice the artwork, describe what they notice, and develop stories based on their own observations and discussions. In these contexts, the facilitator's role becomes one of support and reflection rather than direction. This approach is essentially phenomenological: learners begin with their own experience of the artwork and build understanding from there.

As learners take greater responsibility for shaping narratives, the stories they generate can offer valuable insight into their lived experience, opinions, cultural references, and historical understanding. These responses can help teachers and facilitators identify areas where additional input may be helpful, for example providing historical context, introducing new vocabulary, or addressing gaps in background knowledge.

In 'Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil', Monet provides particularly accessible starting points for this process. The river, trees, and sky are familiar elements that readily prompt narrative exploration. The silhouetted human figures add a social dimension: there is enough detail to recognise them as people, but not enough to fix who they are or what they are doing. This openness makes it easy to wonder, speculate, and build stories that can grow in complexity over time.

Finding and Framing Cake Method Stories

- Treat the visual elements of each layer of an artwork as story prompts - how you 'slice' the Cake can affect how stories emerge; layers structure how the story might unfold.
- For early learners and those with SLD/PMLD, hold the story as facilitator and pre-decide how to 'slice' up the Cake
- Introduce Who/What/Where/When/Why/How questions as learners are ready to help them be Story Bakers, mixing, making, and decorating their own narratives
- Gradually hand over responsibility for 'slicing' and storytelling to learners - compare and contrast how different learners choose to divide up pictures into their composite areas
- Use learners' stories to inform future teaching and support from cultural and historical knowledge to vocabulary

Stories created by learners can be brought to life through sensory elements or added into literacy activities through Helicopter Stories.

They can also be a stimulus for art by using the same media as the artist and creating What Happened Next pieces or responses.

Practising narrative skills for more complex or contemporary artworks

By using the Cake Method with an artwork like 'Petit Bras', learners can rehearse key skills: focusing attention, connecting visual prompts, asking questions, and developing narratives layer by layer. Once these skills are established, they can be transferred to artworks where the narrative is more obscure, fragmented, or intentionally ambiguous, as is often the case in contemporary art.

In this way, Monet is not presented as simpler or more important than contemporary work, but as a supportive starting point. It offers a way to build confidence and shared strategies that enable learners to approach a wide range of artworks with curiosity rather than hesitation.

Case Study

When co-designing a sensory tour of a contemporary art exhibition with adults with learning disabilities, the group developed confidence in visually "slicing" artworks by practising with images from the exhibition catalogue. Printed images were cut up with scissors, and blank postcards were used to isolate sections and block out others.

Once in the gallery with the original artworks, some group members could hold an internal image of their chosen slices, while others used physical strategies, such as looking through a circle made with forefinger and thumb, to support focus.

When exploring the same artwork, individuals sliced the image differently and, as a result, developed different stories.

One learner identified birds in a set of photographs as swallows, another as starlings, while a third challenged both interpretations based on their special interest in birds. The group discussed how each story reflected a different way of seeing and personal frame of reference. While not all interpretations aligned with factual accuracy, all were valued as valid contributions, supporting shared discussion and respect for differing perspectives.

Working with complex or contemporary narratives

When working with contemporary art, narratives may be layered, ambiguous, or explore challenging themes.

- Use artists' own leads. Follow information provided through exhibition texts, interpretation cards, catalogues, or artist statements to understand the starting points for the work.
- Use the Cake Method to distil complexity. Slicing an artwork into layers can help break complex narratives into more accessible elements, focusing on emotions, relationships, environments, or actions rather than explicit content.
- Pitch narratives appropriately. Where artworks reference adult or challenging themes, facilitators can choose age- and stage-appropriate narrative entry points, such as exploring feelings, care, power, safety, or what healthy relationships look like.
- Draw on wider curriculum links. PSHE and safeguarding frameworks can provide helpful guidance when shaping narratives around consent, boundaries, and wellbeing.

The aim is not to avoid complexity, but to approach it thoughtfully, using structure and narrative to support safe, inclusive engagement.

PETIT BRAS

A sensory poem inspired by Monet's winter river scene

Drift, hush —
Light pools, flows,
Silver slipping,
The river slows.

Winter glistens,
Scratches face,
Cool, chill sparkles
In tranquil space.

Mud dapples banks,
Cool, thick, low,
Feet press,
Voices murmur slow.

Boughs bend,
Lean, creak, sigh,
Fingertips reach toward
Arched mauve sky.

Clouds stretch,
Pale light high,
Water lingers,
Overcast day slips by.

PETIT BRAS

With imaginary cake layers added

Drift, hush —
Light pools, flows,
Silver slipping,
The river slows.



River
Buttercream filling



Winter glistens,
Scratches face,
Cool, chill sparkles
In tranquil space.



Cake temperature
Refrigerated, not room temperature

Mud dapples banks,
Cool, thick, low,
Feet press,
Voices murmur slow.



Riverbank
Sponge layer



Boughs bend,
Lean, creak, sigh,
Fingertips reach toward
Arched mauve sky.



Trees
Chocolate stick
decorations



Clouds stretch,
Pale light high,
Water lingers,
Overcast day slips by.



Sky
Icing



SENSORY STORY RESOURCES

What to find or make

To stimulate the senses and bring the poem to life, you will need:

- A river - in the gallery, we used a painted sheet with lots of ribbons sewn on it to make a swishy, dry, river sheet visitors could sit beneath to imagine being in the water. Depending on your group, you can tailor to what would elicit the strongest reactions, which could range from long pieces of damp fabric or ribbons to water sprays. You could even integrate your water play area or bath tub into the sensory story. Monet's colours are not vibrant, bright colours so choose muted tones if you can.
- Ice or cold packs - these are to stimulate thermoception, or our sensory experience of temperature. Monet's painting is set in the winter, and the temperature helps make links with the season as well as offering a strong sensation. You could explore ice cubes or crushed ice, or use cold packs; in the gallery we used self-cooling First Aid packs. For those with sensory sensitivities to the cold or wet, explore wearing gloves or by wrapping the cold packs in a tea towel.
- Mud - depending on your group, you may be able to create a mud kitchen with real mud or compost. Alternatives could include brown play or salt dough, ooblek (cornflour mixed with water) coloured and scented with cocoa powder, or porridge; porridge can be made up to various consistencies and can be made to look muddy by adding cocoa powder, ground cinnamon, or even Marmite! If your group is tactile defensive and does not like messy play, you could use cushions wrapped in muddy-coloured fabric instead; in the gallery, we made mud cushions using faux suede and memory foam to provide a sticky, squishy, non-messy mud effect.
- Grass - you could use freshly mown grass or artificial grass, towels or fleece blankets in shades of green, or cut green paper into strips and bundle together to make a grassy cheerleader-style pompom.
- Trees - the trees in the painting are Lombardy Poplar trees, you may be lucky to have some poplars nearby that you could take some leaves and branches from. Alternatives could include a besom or old-fashioned 'witches' broom, sticks, or you could use your bodies to pretend to be trees.
- Silver sparkles - the silver is in the water and in the wintery air. Silver survival blankets, wrapping paper, or kitchen foil all work well and make nice rustling sounds when shaken.
- Mauve light - torches or even your phone light both work well, to achieve a mauve colour use pieces of pink and purple cellophane - chocolate wrappers, or clingfilm coloured in with felt tip pens - to cover the light and tint it the right colour.

- Rough texture - this texture will be used on skin, ideally faces. In the gallery, we used silver sequin gloves, but chunky-knit woollen ones could also work. Other alternatives could include the rough side of a non-stick pan scourer or a shower puff, the bristles of a hairbrush or, for a softer feel, the bristles of a clean paint or makeup brush.
- Clouds - you could use bed sheets in shades of white, grey, mauve, or pale blue and use these to waft around and create breeze. For a smaller, more contained experience, you can use cotton wool or soft toy filling; if you make it damp and then freeze it, the fluff will gradually melt in warm hands giving a sensation of icy, wet, fluffy clouds - you can also dot tiny drops of watercolour paint or food colouring on the fluff to tone it to the sky in the painting.

Resource Checklist

River

☐

Silver sparkles

☐

Ice or cold packs

☐

Mauve light

☐

Mud

☐

Rough texture

☐

Grass

☐

Clouds

☐

Trees

☐

SENSORY PROMPTS

Bringing Monet's painting to life

Use your sensory resources and the following prompts to immerse yourself in Monet's painting.

Read the words in bold out loud, then follow the invitations underneath each line to explore and play.



Drift, hush —, Light pools, flows, Silver slipping, the river slows.

Use your river resources, especially fabrics or ribbons, to make a rippling, flowing, river. Fabrics may make a swishing noise in the air, and create a breeze. Add your silvery sparkles to the river to catch the light.



Winter glistens, Scratches face, Cool, chill sparkles in tranquil space.

Gently scratch the rough texture against skin; if you will be using the rough texture on someone else, make sure to ask their permission to touch them first and stop if they tell you to or show they do not like it. Explore your cold resources with hands or feet. Revisit your silver sparkles again if you would like to.



Mud dapples banks, Cool, thick, low, Feet press, voices murmur slow.

Explore your mud resources with hands or feet, working with the texture and any sounds it may make, but also noticing hand or foot prints, or where participants may have made channels, mounds, or balls of mud. Explore your grass resources. Can you arrange the mud and grass to create a riverbank scene?



Boughs bend, Lean, creak, sigh, Fingertips reach toward arched mauve sky.

Explore your tree materials with hands. If using natural materials, be sure to smell them. Use a torch or light through your trees to cast shadows. Invite participants to move, sway, and reach up high like a tree in the wind.



Clouds stretch, Pale light high, Water lingers, overcast day slips by.

Explore your cloud materials with hands - if using fluffy materials, these can be teased and pulled apart, reformed into balls and puffs by rolling and squishing them together. Wave and waft the sheets or fabric to create breeze - the motion may blow your fluffy materials away!

SENSING MONET'S MATERIALS

More ways to explore and create

As part of our gallery resource set, we created a series of painted artist's palettes so visitors could experience what it might feel like to hold a palette and compare colours directly with the painting. We also used artist's canvas to make some of the resources. Offering these sensations can help groups build not only sensory memories of how artists' tools feel, but also an embodied sense of the effort, movement, and physicality involved in making art.

We also created a set of smells linked to different colours. These were chosen through community voting. Linking smell to colour can support people with visual impairment to differentiate between colours when exploring paint, and can also help people connect colour with feeling and memory. Smell is processed by the brain in areas closely linked to memory, which is why it can be such a powerful tool in reminiscence work.

FOLEY STORY RESOURCES

What to find or make

In radio, film, and television production, Foley is the art of creating sound effects in post-production with every day objects and resources.

Using the suggested items and prompts, you can share the poem by making your own sound effects. The Foley version of the story may appeal to those who particularly need or enjoy sound stimulation, but could also be used as an exploration of percussion, conducting, and of different volumes and intensity which can make sounds feel closer or further away.

These Foley sounds also have an ASMR quality. ASMR is a popular at the moment for the soothing, tingle-inducing sensations certain sounds can create for some people.

For the Foley Story, you will need:

- A plastic or metal bowl, half-filled with water - as an optional extra, you can use a torch to illuminate the water surface.
- Tin foil, tissue paper, or plastic food packaging - these items when scrunched and squished make interesting wintry crackling sounds.
- Ice cubes - drop these into your bowl of water to listening to them cracking as they melt.
- A wet tea towel - you may like to use this on a tray or plate to catch drips.
- Twigs, sticks, wooden coffee stirrers or lolly sticks
- Plastic bags cut into strips - form these into bundles to wave and shake.

Resource Checklist

Bowl and water

☐

Wet tea towel

☐

Ice cubes

☐

Twigs

☐

Tin foil or tissue paper

☐

Plastic bags

☐

FOLEY PROMPTS

Bringing Monet's painting to life

Use your Foley resources and the following prompts to immerse yourself in Monet's painting using sound.

Read the words in bold out loud, then follow the invitations underneath each line to explore and play.

Drift, hush —, Light pools, flows, Silver slipping, the river slows.

Explore the bowl of water and see how many river sounds you can make. You can swirl the water in the bowl, dip your hands in and splash or let drops trickle from your fingers. Add some light to illuminate the water if you would like to.

Winter glistens, Scratches face, Cool, chill sparkles in tranquil space.

Use the foil, tissue paper, or plastic packaging to make sparkly, sharp, sounds. Try scrunching the materials with your hands or feet, unfolding them, and repeating. Explore different speeds and rhythms through the sounds you make.

If using ice cubes, drop these into your bowl of water to hear them splash and clink. If you listen carefully, you will hear them cracking as they melt.

Mud dapples banks, Cool, thick, low, Feet press, voices murmur slow.

Use the wet tea towel to make squelchy, wet, muddy sounds using your hands to press and wring the material. You could also use your feet. Try making sounds to match different people or creatures - someone walking carefully, someone trying to run, a small bird hopping, a duck or swan waddling, or a horse trotting by. Cup your hands around your mouth to make mumbling, murmuring sounds with your voices.

Boughs bend, Lean, creak, sigh, Fingertips reach toward arched mauve sky.

Bend and snap your wooden sticks to make the sounds of poplar trees swaying in the wind, or people walking through the woods. You might like to use your voices to make the sound of wind in the trees.

Clouds stretch, Pale light high, Water lingers, overcast day slips by.

Use bundles of strips cut from plastic bags to wave and shake to make the sound of a wintery sky. By varying the speed and intensity you can create a light breeze through to a winter storm. Jerky shakes of the bags might even sound like lightning, or banging the bundles together with the clap of your hands could sound like thunder.

SOUNDS LIKE MONET

More ways to explore and create

Try looking at some of Monet's other nature or garden scenes - can you use the same Foley resources in different ways to bring these scenes to life with sound too?

Go on a sensory walk outdoors and see if you can find or make the Petit Bras sounds as you go - can you find some running water, some mud, some trees? Can you hear the wind? You can use a smart phone or other recording device to record what you hear.

If you look on the Sensory Journeys website, you'll find instructions and a materials list to make a 'Creak Machine'. This is a resource, made from junk and scraps, that can be used to make lots of interesting creaking sounds.

The people in the painting are likely speaking in French. Try learning a few French phrases, such as 'Il fait froid!' (it is cold!) or 'Le ciel est gris' (the sky is grey).

Petit Bras

By Collar & Cuffs Co



Drift, hush —



Light pools, flows,
Silver slipping,



The river slows.



Winter glistens,
Scratches face,



Cool, chill sparkles
In tranquil space.



Mud dapples banks, Cool, thick, low,
Feet press, Voices murmur slow.



Boughs bend,
Lean, creak, sigh,



Fingertips reach toward
Arched mauve sky.



Clouds stretch,
Pale light high,



Water lingers,
Overcast day slips by.

EXTENSION EXPLORATION IDEAS

Mauve, winter, and materials

Here are some ideas you could use to extend learning and turn looking at Petit Bras into a bigger project and experience:

1. Sensing mauve

This activity offers a low-language, sensology-style exploration of the colour mauve, suitable for people with PMLD and those who benefit from embodied, non-verbal experiences. Monet uses mauve in 'Petit Bras' to convey a wintry atmosphere; mauve is a shade of purple-pink.

Mauve can be explored through your choices of :

- light (soft purple and grey-blue projections),
- materials (fabric, foam, gel, paper, icing),
- temperature (cool packs wrapped in fabric),
- and sound or movement (slow, gentle rhythmic music).



The focus is not on naming the colour, but on experiencing its qualities: softness, coolness, dusk-like light, stillness.

Facilitator note

Stay with one sensory quality at a time. Mauve does not need to be explained to be experienced.

2. From colour to plant: marsh mallow

Monet's use of mauve is historically linked to pigments derived from plants, including the marsh mallow plant (*Althaea officinalis*), from which the colour takes its name.

Marsh mallow can be grown in sensory gardens and outdoor learning spaces. It thrives in damp soil and supports biodiversity by providing nectar for pollinators.

Activities may include:

- planting marsh mallow,
- exploring its leaves and flowers through touch and smell, crushing to make natural paints and potions
- noticing seasonal changes,
- observing insects and soil life around the plant.

This offers a slow, repeated experience of mauve as something living, growing, and relational. Marsh mallow seeds can be sourced cheaply from Amazon and garden centres.



EXTENSION EXPLORATION IDEAS

Mauve, winter, and materials

3. From plant to body: teas, oils, and marshmallows

Historically, marsh mallow has been used in teas and oils for its soothing properties, particularly for skin and digestion. Where appropriate, dried marsh mallow root can be explored through smell and texture. For groups able to engage in cookery, marsh mallow roots can be used to create traditional marshmallow sweets. Unlike modern commercial marshmallows, these are plant-based and can be made vegan-friendly.

Suggested experience

Rather than focusing on precise cooking outcomes, prioritise:

- mixing,
- stirring,
- feeling changes in texture,
- tasting (where appropriate),
- and noticing transformation.

Vegan Marshmallow Recipe - With or without marsh mallow root

This recipe offers two ways to make soft, plant-based marshmallow-style sweets. If you are able to source marsh mallow root, it can be used as the setting agent. If not, agar agar can be used instead. Both options follow the same process and support a shared sensory experience of transformation, texture, and taste rather than a focus on perfect results.

Ingredients

150 ml water

150 g caster sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla extract (optional)

Cornflour or icing sugar, for dusting



Choose one of the following setting options:

With marsh mallow root: 2 tablespoons dried marsh mallow root (cut or powdered)

Without marsh mallow root: 1½ teaspoons agar agar powder

You can source marsh mallow root and agar agar powder from Amazon or some health food shops.

Method

Before starting, ensure hands are washed and surfaces are clean. An adult should always manage heating and handling hot liquids, as hot sugar can cause serious burns.

To begin, prepare your setting liquid. If using marsh mallow root, place the dried root in a small saucepan with 150 ml of water and gently heat for 20–30 minutes without boiling. The liquid will gradually become slightly thick and slippery. Strain out the root and keep the liquid. If using agar agar instead, place 150 ml of water in a saucepan and whisk in 1½ teaspoons of agar agar powder.

Next, add 150 g of caster sugar to your prepared liquid. Heat gently, stirring until the sugar has fully dissolved, then bring to a gentle simmer for around five minutes. If using agar agar, ensure it is completely dissolved. This stage involves hot sugar and should be managed by an adult. Learners can observe changes in bubbling, colour, and smell from a safe distance.

Remove the pan from the heat and allow the mixture to cool slightly. Stir in a teaspoon of vanilla extract if using. Once the mixture is warm rather than hot, it can be whisked. This is a good time for your group to get hands-on by using a hand whisk or electric whisk with supervision; a switch-adapted whisk would be great too! Whisk for several minutes until the mixture becomes lighter in colour and slightly thicker, noticing the change in texture and volume.

Pour the mixture into a lightly oiled or lined tray and gently smooth the surface. This step can be supported or completed together, depending on need. Leave the tray to cool and set at room temperature for one to two hours.

Once set, dust the surface lightly with cornflour or icing sugar and cut into soft cubes. Cutting should be done by an adult, but learners can explore the finished marshmallows through touch, smell, and, where appropriate, taste.

Throughout the process, tasting is optional and should follow your setting's food safety guidance. Many learners may prefer to engage through watching, touching utensils, noticing changes in texture, or smelling ingredients rather than eating.

Learners who are nil-by-mouth may enjoy smelling the marshmallows, or squishing them in their hands. For a taste-safe alternative, you can find marshmallow-flavoured lip balm to offer an oral and olfactory (smell) sensation.

4. Making a Monet 'Petit Bras' cake

This activity invites learners to create a literal interpretation of Petit Bras of the Seine at Argenteuil as a cake, using the Cake Method structure.

Suggested elements:

- marbled chocolate and green sponge for the riverbank; use your favourite sponge cake recipe.
- marbled buttercream for the river in different shades of blue, green, mauve
- chocolate sticks (such as Matchmakers, Mikado, or chocolate-dipped mini breadsticks) for trees,
- marshmallow fluff for the sky - you could marble food colouring through the vegan marshmallows after whisking, or use a supermarket-bought jar

Learners can participate at different levels:

- Touching and exploring ingredients
- Mixing batters, icing, and colour-matching to the painting
- Choosing where elements go
- Assembling layers
- Or simply observing and tasting

The aim is not realism, but translation. The painting becomes something that can be built, shared, and eaten. Any green sponge on the outside edges of the cake may look an odd colour after baking, but when you cut into the cake it should be fine; if you use a sheet cake tin, rather than a round one, you can trim the edges as needed.

5. Painting winter with Monet

This painting activity explores winter through materials and colour, without relying on snow imagery or drifting into autumnal palettes.

Suggested materials:

- Paints suitable for your group - tempera, watercolours, or taste-safe paint (yoghurt or ooblek and food colourings) in muted blues, mauves, greys, and soft greens; as these paints mix and merge together, they will look complimentary and create further interesting shades.
- Sponges, wide brushes, fingers, or rollers
- Textured paper, cardboard, canvas boards or fabrics - a textured surface increases both the tactile experience of painting and will create more visual interest afterwards
- Consider adding scents to paint to help learners with visual impairments differentiate colours

Rather than depicting objects, learners can explore:

- horizontal movement for water and vertical marks for trees
- soft washes for sky
- pauses and stillness.

Directional movement can be supported by including the rhythmic use of language, such as 'side to side' or 'up and down' or 'dab, dot, pat, and blot'.

For people with PMLD, painting may involve:

- Supported movement,
- Watching colour spread and touching wet paint,
- Responding to smell and sound.

The focus is on atmosphere rather than representation, echoing Monet's approach.

Consider setting the scene for calm and experimental painting using music or soundscapes:

- Vivaldi's Four Seasons - Winter
- Claude Debussy - Rêverie or Des pas sur la neige
- Erik Satie- Gymnopédies or Gnossiennes
- Maurice Ravel - Pavane pour une infante défunte
- Sound effects or field recordings of water flowing, wind through trees - you can find looping soundtracks of this kind on YouTube, sometimes with appropriate visuals, or for free via the BBC Sound Effects Archive.

Facilitator notes

- Keep music volume low and consistent
- Avoid sudden dynamic changes
- Repetition supports focus and regulation
- Silence is also a valid choice
- Music can be layered in later, not always at the start
- Supporting adults can help set the tone by intentionally lowering the tone and volume of their voice, breathing low and slow to signal calm and offer co-regulation, and choosing to move slowly and quietly around the space
- You could add a smell to the space with marshmallow scented aroma oil or wintery peppermint added to a diffuser; both are easy and cheap to find on Amazon



Poem, sensory prompts,
and activity pack created by



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