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Activity One

Artist Profile

Throughout *Chasing Vermeer*, author Blue Balliett offers up interesting points about the life of artist Johannes Vermeer in drips and drabs. Protagonists Petra and Calder use these facts about the artist's life to try to track down his stolen painting "A Lady Writing".

Balliett has said Vermeer is one of her favorite artists. That was one reason his work and life featured so prominently in the book.

Now, think about some of the things you would consider great works of art. These don't have to be paintings that hang in museums or statues carved by ancient Romans.

Select one work in particular that really captures your imagination.

In about 300 words, describe why this piece of art appeals to you. Talk about all the piece's various aspects from color, shape, feel, or material. Once you've finished your description, do some research on the person who crafted it. Learn as much as you can about their life and work. Detail it as if you were writing a biography on this person.

Your artist profile should be at least two pages typed and double spaced. Be sure to include any information you can find about the artist's thoughts or feelings on the work you previously described.

In your profile, be sure to include:

- When your artist was born and when they died (if they aren't living).
- Where your artist was born and grew up.
- Specific details about your artist's life and work.
- Any interesting facts others might not know.
- A list of works that can be attributed to your artist.
- Any comment the artist had on your chosen work.

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Activity Two

Your Code



In the summer before they entered sixth grade, Calder Pillay and his best friend Tommy Segovia decide they won't be mediocre kids. Calder wants to be exceptional. As part of this, Calder and Tommy devise a secret form of communication using Calder's pentominoes as the code.

Using a combination of the 12 pentomino letters and numbers, the code Calder and Tommy come up with can use every letter of the alphabet.

This is just one way of using a code. There are many different codes, from very simple ones to very complex codes that require computers to decipher.

Do some research on the various codes that exist. Pay special attention to how the symbols, letters or other characters translate into letters and words that we can read. Make sure you research the history of such codes and why they are important.

Now, partner with a classmate and try to come up with your own secret code together.

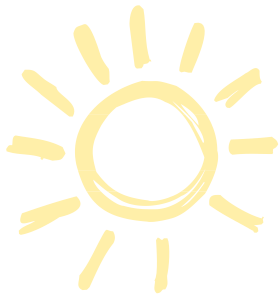
Make yourselves a sheet that shows the reader how to decipher your code. But don't show anyone just yet. Practice using your code by writing a few short messages to each other. Now, each of you find a new partner.

Take turns trying to crack each other's codes. Write some new messages to each other in your respective ciphers. Write down each partner's name on a sheet with your attempts to decipher the code.

You can compare your deciphering attempts to the actual codes to see how close you were to breaking the cipher.

You should submit a short summary detailing what you discovered about codes. The summary should be no more than 300 words.

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Activity Three

It's Mysterious



Chasing Vermeer author Blue Balliett was a teacher herself. Much like Ms. Hussey, she liked to give students interesting assignments that would capture students' imaginations. Balliett has said one assignment involved observing the events taking place outside a window for a period of time, noting each event. Then, the students would choose one event that would serve as the starting point for their own mystery story.

Here, you will undertake a similar assignment. Your task will be to observe three news stories from three different media: print, online or television. Make sure each news story is very different and has a fun or interesting aspect to it. Take these three different news items from three different sources and see if you can connect them through a fictional mystery story.

Be sure to be creative in your storytelling and in tying together the three stories. Make your story as entertaining as you can. If you're having trouble trying to craft your mystery elements, look back to *Chasing Vermeer* for some ideas or inspiration. You can use this source as inspiration but try to come up with your own creative solutions.

Your story can follow any structure you want and doesn't have to involve any characters or elements from *Chasing Vermeer*. However, you may include some of these characters in your story if you wish.

Make sure you include details that didn't come from your original news stories—this must be mostly fiction. The finished product should be approximately three typed, double-spaced pages in length and should follow each of the guidelines outlined above. Once you have finished your story, give it an appropriate title.



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Activity Four

Vermeer?



"Calder read more. The book said that Vermeer died penniless when he was in his forties, and that almost nothing was known about his life. No one understood why such a fabulous painter had made only thirty-five works of art. No one knew who the people he painted were, or why he painted the things he did. No one knew how he became an artist. Vermeer had left behind more questions than answers."

— Blue Balliett, *Chasing Vermeer*

One of those questions Vermeer left behind was if all of the works attributed to him were actually painted by the Dutch master. Or, whether works attributed to his contemporaries actually belonged to Vermeer.

There is still some contention in the art world about exactly how many paintings of Vermeer's survive. Some say 35, others 37. Your task in this activity will be to research the attribution of Vermeer paintings. Find out everything you can about Vermeer's body of work and the mystery or controversy surrounding it.

Once you've found out everything you can about Vermeer's work and the attribution of his paintings, write a detailed report. Your report should begin with who Vermeer was and what little is known about his life. From there, discuss the list of paintings that are known to be by Vermeer. Next, discuss some of the paintings that were unsigned or attributed to other artists.

Finally, talk about current opinions in the art world about the extent of Vermeer's work and overall opinions on the artist's contributions to the art world.

Your finished product should be at least two typed, double-spaced pages in length.

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Activity Five

Chasing ...



In *Chasing Vermeer*, a seemingly idealistic art thief steals Vermeer's "A Lady Writing". He or she does so with the supposed purpose of righting an injustice in the art world. We eventually find out that the theft was no more than that—a theft.

Xavier "Glitter Man" Glitts was a high-profile international art thief. He was contracted to steal the painting. He'd be paid \$60 million by a private collector as long as the police would never follow the trail. Glitts came up with his scheme as a means to cover up the theft. He took on the identity of Fred Steadman and husband to Zelda Segovia as his disguise.

While this is a wholly fictional tale, there have been a number of high-profile art thefts in the past that are just as compelling.

In this activity, you will research some of the most high-profile art thefts you can find. Describe the thefts in as much detail as possible. If possible, describe those responsible and their motivations for the theft.

Make sure you include any funny or interesting parts about the crime. Include whether the art was recovered without damage. Include where the criminals are now. Choose about five incidents to profile if you can. Summarize each crime and follow all of the guidelines above. Each summary should be about 300 words in length.

Once you have finished summarizing your art thefts, take a high-level view at all of them. What do they have in common? Are there any patterns that you can find in these thefts? What are the similarities and differences in each of these crimes?

Answer these questions in a final concluding summary of approximately 100 words.

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Activity Six

Letters Dead?



Are letters really dead? In *Chasing Vermeer*, Ms. Hussey says that letters are dead. She then tasks students with an assignment that revolves around letters. Whether they have as much impact today as they've had in the past.

In this activity, we will recreate what Ms. Hussey's assignment attempted to do. (Although we know it failed in the book, we'll try it anyway.)

Ask an adult to tell you about a letter that they will never forget. This must be a significant letter that had life changing consequences or long-lived ramifications. Ask your adult how old they were when they received the letter. Do they still have it? Make sure the letter isn't too personal before you ask what it was about.

Now, think about the way you communicate. Is there anything that had similar resonance with you? If so, why? If not, why not? Is it possible that the letter as a form of communication could be dead? Why or why not?

With these questions in mind, write a letter of your own. Try to make it a letter your classmates, family, or teachers won't forget. Make your letter as compelling as possible, but keep it appropriate.

Your letter should be at least 300 words in length. In addition to your letter, write a 300-word summary of the letter your adult told you about. Include as much detail as possible without offering any personal information.

Discuss as a class what makes a memorable letter. Why can or can't they exist in your day and age?

