Painting Our Place

Section 1: Lesson Preparation

Grade Level: 4
Subject: Visual Arts | Florida History | Social Studies
Length: 4–5 class periods, approximately 45–60 minutes each

Essential Question: *How can artists tell the story of a place by painting what they see, notice, and value?*

Lesson Summary & Focus
In this lesson, students will investigate how artists used St. Augustine as a subject for their artwork during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Students will examine three paintings from the Lightner Museum collection provided as references, paying particular attention to architecture, streets, people, transportation, and everyday activities.

Students will then become "community artists." They will observe their own town or city and create an original painting that documents a meaningful place in their community. Like the artists who painted St. Augustine, students will be encouraged to look closely at ordinary places and recognize that streets, buildings, parks, businesses, neighborhoods, and people can all tell the story of a community.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Explain why St. Augustine attracted artists during the Flagler era.
2. Identify ways artists used paintings to document a community.
3. Identify foreground, middle ground, and background in a landscape or cityscape.
4. Describe the use of color, line, shape, texture, and value in an artwork.
5. Make observational sketches of a familiar place.
6. Create an original painting representing a meaningful location in their community.
7. Make intentional artistic choices about composition, color, and detail.
8. Explain how their artwork communicates something about their community.

National/State Learning Standards

This lesson aligns particularly well with the current Florida Grade 4 Access Art standards, including:

- **VA.4.C.1.1** – Integrate ideas during the art-making process to convey meaning in personal works of art.
- **VA.4.C.1.2** – Describe observations and apply prior knowledge to interpret visual information.
- **VA.4.C.2.1** – Revise artworks to meet established criteria.

- **VA.4.C.3.1** – Use accurate art vocabulary when analyzing works of art.
- **VA.4.F.2.1** – Discuss how artists and designers have made an impact on the community.
- **VA.4.H.1.1** – Identify historical and cultural influences that have inspired artists.
- **VA.4.H.2.1** – Explore artworks from different times to identify elements of art and art styles.
- **VA.4.O.3.1** – Apply meaning and relevance to document self or others visually.
- **VA.4.S.1.3** – Create artworks that integrate ideas from culture or history.
- **VA.4.S.2.1** – Organize the elements of art to achieve an artistic objective.
- **VA.4.S.3.2** – Plan and produce art through ongoing practice of skills and techniques.

Vocabulary

Artist colony – A community where artists gather to live, work, learn, and share ideas.

Flagler Era – The period in St. Augustine's history associated with Henry Flagler's development of the city in the late nineteenth century.

En plein air – Creating artwork outdoors while observing the subject directly.

Impressionism – An approach to painting that often emphasizes light, color, atmosphere, visible brushwork, and everyday subjects.

Composition – The way visual elements are arranged in an artwork.

Foreground – The part of a picture that appears closest to the viewer.

Middle ground – The area between the foreground and background.

Background – The part of an artwork that appears farthest away.

Observation – Looking carefully at something in order to notice and record details.

Cityscape – An artwork showing a city or town.

Landscape – An artwork showing natural scenery.

Assessment

Formative Assessment

During discussion, determine whether students can:

- identify details they actually observe

- describe elements of the reference paintings
- explain how artwork can document a place
- identify foreground, middle ground, and background
- generate a meaningful community subject

Summative Art Rubric

Criteria	4 – Excellent	3 – Developing Well	2 – Beginning	1 – Needs Support
Community Connection	Clearly communicates a meaningful place and sense of community	Shows a recognizable community place	Shows a place but connection is unclear	Community subject is difficult to identify
Composition	Uses foreground, middle ground, and background purposefully	Uses several areas of space effectively	Some spatial organization is evident	Space is largely unplanned
Observation & Detail	Includes many specific details that communicate the location	Includes several recognizable details	Includes a few details	Few location-specific details
Color & Brushwork	Makes purposeful choices to communicate light, mood, or atmosphere	Uses color and brushwork effectively	Some experimentation is evident	Limited experimentation
Craftsmanship	Artwork is carefully developed and completed	Artwork is mostly complete and carefully made	Artwork is partially developed	Artwork is incomplete
Artist Statement	Clearly explains the place and artistic choices	Explains the place and some choices	Gives limited explanation	Needs substantial support

Section 2: Instructional Planning

Part 1: The History – Artists and St. Augustine

Educator Background
St. Augustine has a long history as a place that attracted artists. The city was founded in 1565 and is the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in the continental United States.

A major change came in the 1880s when Henry Flagler visited St. Augustine and envisioned transforming it into a winter resort for wealthy visitors. Flagler's development of the railroad and construction of grand hotels—including the Hotel Ponce de Leon and the Hotel Alcazar—helped transform the city and brought new Spanish Renaissance-inspired architecture to St. Augustine.

Artists were attracted to St. Augustine because of its history, architecture, warm climate, landscape, and growing tourist industry. Flagler's Hotel Ponce de Leon even provided studio space that helped attract artists from the Northeast. The artists sold their artwork to wealthy hotel guests who wanted to take home a special memory of their trip to St. Augustine.

Artists associated with St. Augustine during the Flagler era included **Felix de Crano**, **Frank Shapleigh**, and **Gustave Adolph Hoffmann** who wintered in the city between 1890 and 1910 and painted outdoors, or *en plein air*. Their St. Augustine paintings combined careful observation of buildings and streets with the light and atmosphere of Florida.

This idea is especially important for the students' project: **the artists did not need a spectacular subject. They looked carefully at the place around them and decided what was worth recording.**

Student-Friendly History Introduction

Begin by telling students: *"Imagine that you traveled back in time to the 1890s and arrived in St. Augustine. There are no smartphones or cameras like we have today. You want to remember what the city looks like. What could you do?"*

After students respond, introduce the idea that artists served as visual recorders of places. Explain:

- St. Augustine is a very old American city, founded in 1565.
- Henry Flagler helped turn it into a popular winter resort in the late 1800s.
- Hotels, railroads, tourists, and new buildings changed the city.
- Artists came to St. Augustine and painted what they saw.
- They painted buildings, streets, boats, trees, people, animals, and everyday life.
- Their paintings allow us to imagine what St. Augustine looked like long ago.
- Today, students will do something similar: they will make a painting that tells us something about the place where they live.

Part 2: Looking Closely at the Three Reference Paintings

Display the three provided paintings one at a time. Rather than beginning with "What do you think this painting means?", begin with **observation**. Ask students:

What do you SEE? Ask:

- What kinds of buildings do you see?
- What shapes do you notice?
- What colors are used?
- Where do you see people?
- What are the people doing?
- Do you see animals?
- What kinds of transportation are shown?
- What plants or trees do you notice?
- Do you see water?
- What is happening in the background?
- Where does your eye go first?

What does the painting TELL US? Ask:

- What might this place have looked like when the artist was there?
- What can we learn about people's lives from the painting?
- What kinds of transportation did people use?
- What kinds of buildings were important?
- What details tell us that this is Florida?
- Why might an artist choose to paint an ordinary street instead of a famous landmark?

Compare the Three Paintings.

What Artists Painted	What Students Notice
Buildings	Architecture, windows, balconies, roofs
Streets	Roads, sidewalks, paths
People	Clothing, activities, groups
Transportation	Horses, carts, boats
Nature	Trees, flowers, water, sky
Light	Shadows, bright areas, reflections
Community life	Shops, homes, work, recreation

Explain that the paintings are more than pictures. **They are visual records of a community.**

Part 3: Introducing Impressionism and Observation

Students do not need a complicated history of Impressionism, but they can be introduced to the basic idea. Explain:

Artists can paint what a place feels like—not just what every object looks like.

Point out:

- visible brushstrokes
- areas of bright and dark color
- changing sunlight
- reflections
- loose or expressive marks
- colors placed next to one another
- emphasis on atmosphere and everyday life

Tell students:

"The goal is not to make your painting look exactly like the reference paintings. The goal is to understand the artists' way of looking: **look closely, notice what makes a place special, and use art to help someone else see it.**"

Part 4: The Big Question – What Makes YOUR Community Special?

Ask students to brainstorm places in their own town or city. Possible subjects:

- a favorite park
- downtown
- a historic building
- a neighborhood street
- a library
- a school
- a playground
- a beach
- a river or lake
- a bridge
- a local business
- a sports field
- a farmers' market
- a neighborhood garden
- a church or other community building
- a bus stop
- a fire station
- a familiar street

- a place where families gather

Emphasize that the subject **does not have to be a “famous” or well-known place.**

Ask: "If someone moved here 100 years from now, what would you want them to know about our community?"

Part 5: Student Art Project — "A View of My Town"

Artistic Challenge

Students will create an original 2-D artwork showing a meaningful place in their town or city. Their artwork should communicate:

"This is a place in my community, and this is why it is worth noticing."

Students may work from:

- personal observation
- photographs taken by themselves or their families
- teacher-provided photographs
- sketches made during a walk around the school
- memory, when appropriate

Students should not simply copy an existing photograph or painting.

Suggested Materials

- 9 × 12 or 11 × 14 white drawing paper
- pencils
- erasers
- watercolor, tempera, or acrylic paint
- brushes
- water containers
- paper towels
- black or dark-colored crayons/pencils for selected details
- reference photographs or student sketches

Part 6: Demonstration — Building a Community Painting

Demonstrate the process while thinking aloud.

Step 1: Choose a View

Show students how changing their viewpoint changes the composition. Ask:

"What happens if I move closer?"

"What happens if I look down the street?"

"What happens if I put the building on one side instead of directly in the middle?"

Introduce **foreground, middle ground, and background**.

Step 2: Lightly Sketch Large Shapes

Students should begin with:

- horizon line
- major buildings
- road or sidewalk
- trees
- water
- large groups of people

Encourage students not to begin with tiny details.

Step 3: Establish Color

Students choose colors that communicate the time of day, weather, season, or mood.

Encourage students to notice that shadows are not always simply black. They may contain blues, purples, greens, or other colors.

Step 4: Add Details

Students add details that make the place recognizable:

- signs
- windows
- doors
- trees
- flowers
- cars
- bicycles
- people
- animals
- boats

- streetlights
- fences

Step 5: Add Expressive Brushwork

Students experiment with different brushstrokes to show:

- leaves
- clouds
- water
- sunlight
- texture
- pavement
- brick
- reflections

The objective is not photographic realism. Students should make purposeful choices about how to represent their community.

Part 7: Optional Schoolyard Observation Activity

If possible, take students outside for 15–20 minutes. Give each student a small sketching sheet. Ask them to find:

One building + one natural element + one sign of community life

For example:
school building + oak tree + students playing

or

neighborhood store + palm tree + people walking

Students make quick observational sketches rather than finished drawings. When they return, they use these observations to develop their final composition.

This reinforces the *plein air* practice of working from direct observation. Shapleigh and other artists associated with St. Augustine painted outdoors, using the city itself as their subject.

Part 8: Connecting Art to History

Before students begin their final artwork, pose this question:

"What will your painting tell people about our community that they could not learn from a list of facts?"

Students might answer:

- "People like to go to the park."
- "There are lots of trees here."
- "Our town has old buildings."
- "People spend time near the water."
- "This is where people shop."
- "Our neighborhood is busy."
- "This place is important to my family."

Explain that this is exactly why historical paintings are valuable. They can show us **how places looked and how people used those places.** The National Park Service describes St. Augustine's historic district as a visual mixture of architectural styles and periods—a "timeline" that can be explored through the city's buildings and streets.

Part 9: Artist Statement

After completing their paintings, students write a short artist statement. Provide this outline:

Title: _____

I painted:

This place is important because:

I included:

One artistic choice I made was:

I want people looking at my painting to notice:

Part 10: Classroom Gallery Walk

Display the finished paintings around the room.

Give students sticky notes or index cards.

During the gallery walk, students respond to two prompts:

I notice...

This painting makes me curious about...

Then conduct a whole-class discussion:

- Which paintings show buildings?
- Which show nature?
- Which show people?
- Which show transportation?
- Which paintings tell us something about the community?
- How are our paintings similar to the St. Augustine paintings?
- How are they different?
- What will someone learn about our community by looking at our artwork?

Educator Closing Notes

The central idea of this lesson is not simply that students are learning about St. Augustine or practicing painting. They are learning that **artists can be historians, observers, storytellers, and record keepers**.

The Flagler-era artists found inspiration in St. Augustine's streets, architecture, waterways, vegetation, people, and everyday life. More than a century later, those paintings help us imagine the city as it once was. Students can do the same thing for the places they know.

Gustave Adolph Hoffman (American, 1869-1945)

Charlotte Street, St. Augustine, ca. 1905

Oil on canvas

Lightner MUSEUM

Felix F. de Crano (French-American, 1839-1908)

King Street Looking East, 1906

Oil on canvas

Lightner MUSEUM

Frank Shapleigh *(American, 1842-1906)*

St. George Street, 1892

Oil on panel

Lightner MUSEUM