

Overcoming Great Odds



Desco da Parto (birth tray): Scenes from the Story of David and Goliath, ca. 1470

Italy (Florence)

Tempera on panel

Loyola University Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, 1998-01

Grades: 5 – 7

Subjects: English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts, Foreign Language

Time Required: 2 – 4 class periods, 45 minutes each

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Lesson Overview

Students will learn that *desco da parto* is an Italian phrase that means “birth tray.” They will discover that this kind of tray was made to celebrate the birth of a child and that LUMA’s work includes four scenes from the Biblical story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). Students will then think about a time when they overcame an obstacle. They will create a round collage about an experience when they were like David and defeated their “Goliath.” The circular shape of the collage will underscore the continuous narrative, simultaneously illustrating several scenes involving the same characters.

Materials

- Reproduction of *Desco da Parto*
(http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collection_details/birth_tray.html)
- Paper, magazines, glue, and other arts and crafts items like ribbon, stamps and ink pads, markers, etc. for creating a collage
- Round paper or cardboard. Try a local pizzeria for clean round cardboards that can be used by a group of students. Or create and use a template which students can trace to make individual projects. For a smaller, more intimate project, coffee filters make a good, inexpensive alternative. They can also be mounted onto another sheet of paper for strength.

Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at the *Desco da Parto* (birth tray). See how much they can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get them started before sharing with the whole class.
 - Pair Share: Students turn to a partner and take turns naming one thing that they see in the picture. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will soon begin to look more deeply and notice things their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion.
 - What do you see? What more can you find?
 - What do you think this work is made of?
 - Tempera (permanent fast-drying painting medium consisting of colored pigment mixed with a binder medium [often egg yolk]) on wood panel
 - What is the purpose of this object?
 - A *desco da parto*, or birth tray, was given as a gift to an expectant mother. Scenes painted on the tray were meant to inspire the child. After the child was born, the tray would be covered with a cloth and laden with rich foods and sweetmeats (candied fruits and nuts) to feed both the new mother and her visitors, who were entertained at her bedside.
 - What story is being depicted in this painting? How many scenes can you point out?
 - Depicted on LUMA's *desco da parto* are four scenes from the epic battle between the Philistine Goliath and the Israelite shepherd boy David. The images of David and Goliath are painted in continuous narrative, meaning that several scenes involving the same characters are seen simultaneously.
 - In order of occurrence, in the middle ground (to the left) David is poised to sling a rock at the giant (notice the stones at his feet).
 - In the foreground, David has drawn a sword to cut off the dead giant's head.
 - Toward the back, David presents the severed head of Goliath, complete with stone lodged in the forehead, to King Saul, who stands atop a platform carried by two elephants.
 - In the far background, a battle rages between the Israelites and Philistines.
 - We assume that the tray was created to celebrate the birth of a boy. It was hoped that the child would model himself after the brave David and be strong for the defense of his hometown, Florence, Italy.
 - What figures (human and animal) do you see?
 - David, Goliath, King Saul, many soldiers, and an elephant are visible.
 - What is unusual about the elephant?
 - The elephant's feet are shaped like those of a lion, the tusks are not curved, and the tail is too thick.
 - Do you think that this artist has seen many elephants?
 - It is clear from this artist's depiction of the exotic creature that he had not observed the animal directly. Rather, this painting seems to be based on secondary information.
 - What kind of clothing are the figures wearing?
 - David's clothing is typical of Renaissance (1400s to 1520s) fashion, even though the story of David and Goliath is found in the Old Testament of the Bible, written ca. 5th century BCE. ("before the common era;" before the year 0) David wears a coat that reaches as far as the hips; it cinches at the waist and then puffs away from the body. He is also dressed in close-fitting tights and a type of soft pointed shoe called a *soulier à la poulaine* (French for "shoe of Polish origin"), or simply *poulaine* (pronounced poo-LENN). Sometimes *poulaines* were so

long that men needed to hold up the tips with cords to prevent tripping. Fashion was a powerful status symbol in the Renaissance, and well-to-do men and women spent a great deal of money on fashionable outfits like David's to show their wealth.

- Can you think of any fashion trends popular today that are not very practical or may actually impede movement like the *poulaines* in this artwork?
 - Some examples include high heels, baggy clothing, and sagging pants.
- What do you notice about the background? How can you tell that some figures are farther away than others?
 - The artist of this birth tray used two visual techniques of perspective that were developed during the Renaissance: linear and atmospheric.
 - Linear perspective is an approximate representation, on a flat surface, of an image as it is perceived by the eye. The artist used linear perspective on Goliath's body at the bottom of the image; note how it appears that his body is angled towards the viewer. This technique is called foreshortening.
 - Atmospheric perspective is evident in the mountains in the background; the mountains look less defined, pale, and hazy as they recede into the distance. By painting with perspective, the artist was attempting to paint a realistic-looking picture, a goal of many Renaissance artists.
- How do you think this object was made? What kind of skills would the artist need to make this tray? What country do you think this object is from?
 - We do not know the particular artist(s) who crafted this piece. However, we do know this *desco da parto* is from Florence, Italy. It is highly likely that it was created in a workshop, where a different artist made the tray from the person who painted it. In most cases, trays were purchased already painted but were customized with the family's crest. Others, however, were specially commissioned. We do not know what the case was for this tray.

4. **Historical Background:** Now let's learn about the period in which this panel was created.

- From 1400 to the 1520s, Italy entered a period known as the Renaissance (from the French word for rebirth [of Roman culture, especially its art and philosophy]). During this time, increased trade led to expanding wealth and an interest in new types of objects and creatures, such as the elephant on the left of the *desco da parto*. Also during the Renaissance, wars were waged between city states in Italy. The city of Florence found itself at odds with Milan. Since Florence was smaller and fought the bigger city of Milan, the town adopted David as its symbol and viewed Milan as Goliath.



Italy



Activity

1. Ask your students to think about a time when they defeated their “Goliaths” and triumphed over adversity. For example, one student might remember when long division was a difficult concept, but s/he studied and received an A on the test.
2. Have students use the round cardboard or paper to create a collage or drawing about their experiences, bringing their stories to life.
3. Have students show the conflict and its resolution, making the work a continuous narrative like LUMA’s piece with a beginning, middle, and end. Remind them to repeat some of the same elements or characters in each scene to emphasize the connection between scenes.
4. Tell students to give titles to their works.

Expanding the Lesson

Students could do one or more of the following:

- Present finished work to the class.
- Write about the experience in prose or poetry form.
- Research and write an essay on a famous person who has overcome adversity.

Vocabulary

atmospheric perspective: using contrast and detail to define where things are in the picture plane; more detail in the foreground and less detail and lower contrast as objects recede into the distance.

background: the scenery or ground that is behind a main figure or object (as in a painting).

continuous narrative: several scenes involving the same characters are seen simultaneously.

desco da parto: Italian phrase that means “birth tray;” given as a gift to an expectant mother.

foreground: the part of a scene or picture that is nearest to and in front of the viewer.

linear perspective: an approximate representation, on a flat surface, of an image as it is perceived by the eye. This technique is also called foreshortening.

middle ground: the scenery or ground that is behind a main figure or object (as in a painting).

Renaissance: 1400 to the 1520s, from the French word for *rebirth*. A time of great interest and growth of Roman culture, especially in art and philosophy.

soulier à la poulaine: French for “shoe of Polish origin,” often abbreviated *poulaine*. Sometimes *poulaines* were so long that men needed to hold up the tips of the shoes with cords to prevent tripping.

sweetmeats: candied fruits and nuts.

tempera: permanent fast-drying painting medium consisting of colored pigment mixed with a binder medium (often egg yolk).



Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts

1 – Reading

3 – Writing

4 – Listening and Speaking

5 – Research

Social Science

16 – History

17 – Geography

18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts

26 – Creating and Performing

27 – Arts and Civilization

Foreign Languages

29 – Culture and Geography