



Minnie Evans, *Two Angels Adoring Central Figure*, 1963-66. Mixed media (crayon, oil, pen) on paper, 14 ¾ x 20 in., Collection of Christian Daniels

Grades: 4–7

Subjects: English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts

Time Required:

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Lesson Overview

Students will look at a painting by outsider artist Minnie Evans. They will learn about Evans's biography and her unique form of visionary art, learning to identify key characteristics of her imagery and style.

Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Two Angels Adoring Central Figure*. See how much students 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 students started before sharing with the whole class.
 - **Pair Share:** Students turn to a partner and take turns making observations about the painting. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will begin to look more deeply and notice things that 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 can you find out about the work?
 - What's going on? What makes you say that?
 - In the center of the picture we see a face with a winged crown. Another figure wearing an elaborate headdress emerges from the crown. On either side of the central group, an angel depicted in profile looks on in adoration. Vibrant

plumage and waves of vivid color blend seamlessly with flowering vines to create an intricate pattern.

- What is the mood of the painting? What makes you say that?
 - The bright colors and exuberant lines convey a strong sense of joy. The title tells us that this is a scene of adoration, the act of displaying profound reverence or love. The splendor of the central figure radiates outward and seems to glow, and the dense foliage suggests tropical flowers and birds. Disembodied eyes peer outward, as though the picture itself were teeming with life.
- How is this painting different from traditional religious artwork? (For instance, compare it to a Renaissance or Baroque painting from LUMA—images available at http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collections_martindarcy.html).
 - Minnie Evans was a self-taught or outsider artist, which means that she received no formal artistic training and was not necessarily familiar with the conventional ways of depicting religious subject matter in Western art. Her style combines several distinctive elements:
 - She uses an all-over composition, which means that she distributes interest across the entire picture, without emphasizing any one area in particular. Further, her drawings and paintings are highly symmetrical and tend to be decorative in their sensibility. Evans works in elaborate patterns, which often radiate outward from some central design and she often covers every part of the picture with activity. This tendency is called *horror vacui* or fear of empty spaces, which means that she does not like to leave empty spaces (or voids) in her paintings. Instead, they are full of action, which lends visual force to her exuberant subject matter.
 - Formally trained artists use techniques like chiaroscuro (an Italian word meaning light and dark) to shade and highlight their figures, modeling them to make them look three-dimensional. Evans works in a flat, schematic style, so that her figures and designs appear to lie directly on the surface of the picture.

4. **Artist's Biography:** Now let's learn about Minnie Evans's biography to help us understand what makes her art so distinct.

- Minnie Evans was born in 1892 in Long Creek, North Carolina. Her mother was only 14 years old, so Evans was raised primarily by her grandmother. As an adolescent, she worked as a door-to-door shellfish salesperson. She married at 16, and her husband helped her get a job as a domestic worker in the home of the Jones family, where he already worked as a driver.
- It wasn't until she was 43 years old that Evans began making art. One day, she heard a voice that said, "draw or die." She made her first picture on Good Friday, 1935, and continued from that point on to produce religious art. Evans incorporated a distinct blend of biblical imagery, floral motifs, and fantastic dreamscapes, drawing extensively on her faith and imagination and using the materials at hand—markers, colored pencils, and (after 1950) paint on paper or canvas. In 1948, the Jones family estate was converted into the Airlie Gardens, and Evans became the gatekeeper, which gave her the opportunity to sell her artwork to visitors and increase her exposure. In 1966, Evans had a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The art she saw during her visit to the city inspired her to work on a larger scale and to experiment with collaging elements of earlier work.



Minnie Evans

Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts

3 – Writing

4 – Listening and Speaking

5 – Researching

Social Science

16 – History

18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts

25 – Language of the Arts

26 – Creating and Performing

27 – Arts and Civilization