Subject	**Art History**
Topic	**Changes in figurative arts between the late 19th century and early 20th century.** Two paintings in comparison: Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *On the Edge of the Sea,* 1879 Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* 1906-1907
Age of students	17/18
Language level	B1-B2
Time	2 hours (50 minutes each)

Contents aims

After completing the lesson, the student will be able to:

· Interpret and understand a figurative painting of the late 19th century (Analysis of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *On the Edge of the Sea,* 1879).

❿ Interpret and understand a figurative painting of the late 19th century (Analysis of Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,* 1906-1907).

❿ Compare the two paintings, pointing out the main differences of their visual language.

❿ Compare the two paintings, pointing out the main differences of their expressive language.

❿ Understand the historical, cultural and artistic reasons that led to the new concept of reality.

Language aims

After completing the lesson, the student will be able to:

❿ Analyse the paintings using an appropriate new vocabulary.

❿ Use new vocabulary to express his/her personal opinions about paintings.

Pre-requisites

❿ To know the main features of the visual language (line, modes of space representation, rhythm, colours, shapes, volume, composition, etc.).

❿ To know the main expressive features of the relative artistic movements, in the cultural and artistic context in Europe.

Materials

❿ Good images of the paintings

❿ Internet connection

❿ Software for computer structural analysis of an image

❿ If possible, school books about arts

Procedure steps

Lesson one

1. The teacher introduces the topic (showing the paintings, see attachment 1 and 2). Some other pictures of the artists considered will be shown as a reinforcement.
2. The students are invited to analyze the basic elements of the visual language and, finally, the composition of the paintings. To stimulate the discussion, some important questions in the form of a debate will concern:

❿ Knowledge of Neo and Post-impressionism in the historical and cultural context they developed.

❿ Knowledge of the themes and visual techniques adopted by the most important artists, also in relation to the studies about optics and the philosophical considerations about the relation subject/object.

❿ Knowledge of the different solutions given by artists considering visual elements such as colour, drawing, volume.

· Knowledge of the philosophical and literary concepts expressed by Symbolism, considered as a movement opposing to Realism and a positivistic, laic and scientific idea of culture.

· Knowledge of the concepts expressed by Historic Avant-Garde in the early 20th century. .

Lesson two

1. The teacher and the students discuss the responses about their work.
2. The teacher introduces the **artistic and expressive elements** (with some hints to the historical context) in the period between 19th and 20th centuries.
3. The teacher offers an example of what a complete final analysis is (See attachment 3).

Reading activity: Students read different passages and find out the main information (by circling the key-words and underlining the main concepts).

4. Writing activity: The students must summarize (by using the box given, See attachment 4) the most important elements of each painting.

Assessment grid

Assessing writing task:

1	Little organization is apparent; the task has little structure and the argument is poorly developed.
2	Some organization is apparent; the task has some structure, although it is not sustained. The argument has some development.
3	The task is organized, and the structure is generally coherent. There is some development of the argument.
4	The task is well organized; the structure is mostly coherent and the argument is clearly developed.
5	The task is effectively organized; the structure is coherent and the argument is effectively developed.

Attachment 3

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes,
Jeunes femmes au bord de la mere
(*On the Edge of the Sea*), 1879.
Oil on canvas, 205 x 154 cm.
Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

The painting, which looks like a decorative pannel, was greatly appreciated by the critics of that time and by the painter himself; it gets great appreciation even today. As the many preparatory sketches and drawings show, the execution is very accurate. This work of art was exhibited at the Salon in Paris in 1879, the same year it was made.

The topic
Three half-naked women are represented. One is standing and looking at the sea, combing her hair. The other two are lying on the shore, with a lingering pose. The time of the day is not well determined: it could be dawn or sunset, as we can see from the colours in the distance which are light and tend to fade into pink near the horizon. The surrounding is bare, only some plants/pink flowers are depicted. The whole composition is bare, an aspect that makes the observer to perceive the landscape as timeless.

The representation of human body
The three female bodies are not completely traditionally portrayed, in fact their shape is rather sketched, not really realistic. This stylistic feature reminds us more of the classicism of the primitive Italian painters rather than of Raffaello's. This is clearly shown in the little hill on the left, where the simple elements of Giotto's art are present (Puvis travelled a lot all over Italy, being interested in Giotto's art he studied deeply). However, the poses just hint to a sort of slight movement: the woman in the foreground on the left and the one standing are portrayed in a way which clearly puts in evidence their elegant forms, both the visible ones and the part of their bodies which are covered with a white linen. The lady on the right is only half-painted, but the observer can imagine she has the same posture and features of the others.

The colour
The colour presents some nuances only but clearly well-lighted: the brown colour, mixed up with green with few lighter and darker nuances, is used for both the little hill and the shore; -il blue of the sea and sky creates a sharp contrast with the hill; the pink colour perfectly goes with the fading light blue of the sky. The artist, therefore, is far from the bright colours of Expressionism, the artistic movement which exactly in the same years was gaining consent both from the public and from critics. The colours are exalted because put in strong contrast or used on an opaque surface. The following painters such as Signac, Gauguin and Matisse, who will base their work on this study of colours, will be influenced by a juxstaposition of well-defined chromatic spots, together with the Symbolist attitude that will be so successful in the last decades of the 19th century.

The representation of space he space is not prospective, being determined only by different levels of depth: the ground, the hill, the sea, the sky. The colour of the sky is particularly interesting: with delicate, pale colours it strongly opposes the chromatic strength of the dark blue sea and this gives the painting a two-dimensional feature. The space is uncertain in its three-dimensional definition: the women are three distinct figures but at the same time, being too close, they create a unity without the insertion of a specific unifying element. Considering all these elements, the colour plays an important role in the definition of the space: the body of the standing woman is exalted by the contrast with the background thanks to the extraordinary contrast between pale/bright, or cold/warm colours. However, the use of chiaroscuro, a technique producing a graduate contrast between light and dark, gives softness to the forms.
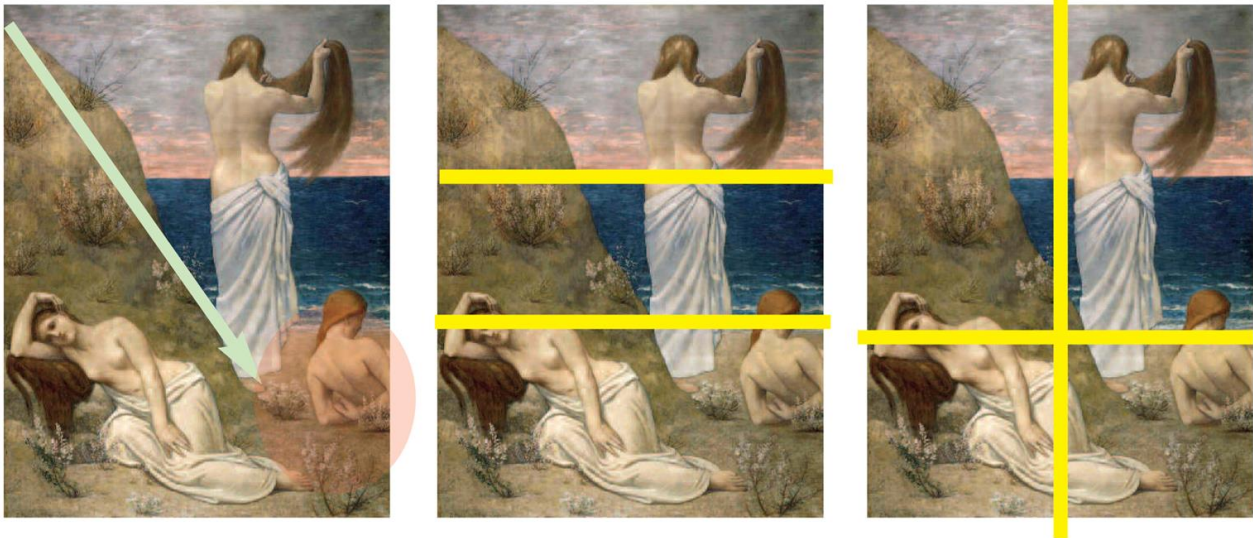
The formal composition
The composition is only apparently simple. It has, however, clear correspondences based on well-studied proportions and asymmetries. A vertical asymmetry axis divides the paintings into parts which are different but have equal visual importance: the brown of the small hill on the left, the intense blue of the sea on the right which gains its visual importance thanks to the strength given to the composition by the standing woman. On the base of the painting, the shore is equivalent and symmetric to the sky even though some correspondences are not well-balanced: the left half is based on a diagonal line (the slope of the hill, the woman's body) while on the right the two women form a sort of L-line. These devices give the composition a less rigid aspect, showing the artist's extraordinary ability in organizing the painting.

Some aesthetic elements The figures are represented according to the classical models: the standing woman is quite similar to a statue of the ancient Rome (both for the clear and delicate skin of the body and of the cloth around her hips, that look like marble, and the perfect balance of the whole body), but the figure is painted with a taste which can be called "primitive". The figures are linked to nature as if they directly came out of it. The body in the foreground, whose female forms are clearly depicted with the light volumes of a marble sculpture, seems to follow the undulating shapes of the little hill. This shows how Puvis is able to get back to an abstract Classicism shown in a sort of dream, rather than in a clear use of a style belonging to the past: the result is a dimension beyond time and space. This can also be explained from an historical point of view: the painting belongs to a period in which social peace was needed after the deep crisis provoked by the French-Prussian war (1870) and the experience of the Third Republic. The painting is often considered to be very close to the European Symbolism since it alludes to an "atmosphere", very close to an allegory, rather than clearly showing real and recognizable characters. The women and the landscape are depicted in a sort of melancholic state and this keeps Puvis far from the taste of his times (as the so called "Art Pompier" used to do with huge canvas) although his art is also far from the chromatic strength of Post-Impressionism. It is therefore easy to understand why Puvis' style will later deeply influence some important painters such as Matisse and Picasso.

Pablo Picasso,
Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1906-1907.
Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York.

The many studies and sketches (at least 806 preparatory drawings) that preceded the creation of the painting give us a clear idea of the artist's whole creative process. Therefore, although the work seems to be unfinished, it is the result of a process which went on for a long period of time. The earliest studies of the paintings also show the presence of two male figures, probably a sailor and a medical student holding a book and, in a previous sketch, also a skull. The painting was kept in Picasso's studio until 1916, where it was seen by many of his friends and colleagues, and was published for the first time in 1925. It is said that the first title given to the painting, suggested by a group of intellectuals, such as Guillaume Apollinaire, was Le bordel philosophique.

The topic
Five naked girls, posing as models in front of a painter. The painting shows the notorious brothel in Barcellona in Carrer d'Avinyó (Avignon street) that the artist knew very well and that is where the title of the work comes from. The main feature of the painting is the mixture of female nudes depicted according to the ancient painting tradition (very often with mythological references) and the theme of a vulgar brothel. This relation between ancient and mythological themes and everyday life had already been depicted by artists belonging to the second half of the 19th century, Manet for example, but even before them Goya had depicted the same subject with Maya Desnuda and Maya Vestida. The women seem to be exhibited and waiting for their clients; down, in the foreground, the presence of a still life. Faces and bodies are depicted with sharp lines and acute angles. The faces, in particular, remind the observer of African masks (objects avidly collected by the artist). The figures' noses and breasts are pointed and sharp. Down, the melon looks like a scythe.

The representation of human body
The human body is not represented according to the chiaroscuro technique and does not respect the principle, which was considered as a "must" to be strictly followed, of the perfect proportions of its parts. The bodies are represented with sharp, clear lines and interrupted planes, according to principles that only a few years later will pave the way for the formal and analytical elements of Cubism. The representation of the bodies is not natural, but is expressed from different points of view: for example, the noses are represented laterally (as the Egyptians did), while the women are seen in their front position; the female figure in the right corner shows her back but her face is frontal and clearly looks like an African mask.

The colour
In the attempt to simplify the composition to the extreme, the painter chooses only two colours, ochre and blue, in all their possible nuances. Picasso is probably influenced by the two periods of his artistic life called "Blue" (1901-1904) and "Rose" (1904-1906) that had characterized his production on his arrival in Paris.

The representation of space
The painting represents the radical crisis of prospective space and of any other form of volume representation through chiaroscuro. The planes are therefore intermingled. The women are close one to the other, but their position does not suggest a two-dimensional vision: They are perceived by the painter's mind as indistinct unities. Therefore, the curtains between them are reduced to fragments of planes, and deprive them of a space relation.
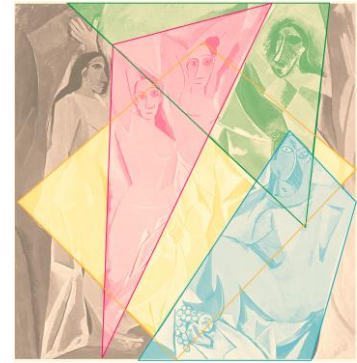
The formal composition
The work does not show any hierarchy, therefore it is useless to try to find any axis of symmetry or a space unit inside which to locate people and objects. In the foreground, down, an image of still life seems to be located on a plane, maybe a table, but since the plane faces the observer, it loses its role and is just one of the other visual units.

Some aesthetic elements The painter clearly tends to an apparent form of simplification: forms, space, colours (reduced to two nuances only). This principle of fragmentation of natural objects into abstract geometric forms is the result of his abandoning the traditional single point of view in favor of the 'simultaneous view' which was revolutionary at that time. This painting, therefore, anticipates the search of Cubism. Picasso's art can be compared to ancient art. The theme of groups of women, for example, had already been a feature of the painting tradition of late Renaissance. Besides, Picasso was impressed by paintings belonging to the 19th century tradition such as Le Bain turc by Ingres (1862) and Les grandes Baigneuses by Cézanne, but above all the women depicted by Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec. Before them, the representation of poor and sad women belonging to his "Blue period" and "Rose period" and some portraits at the beginning of his artistic career in Spain. The woman on the left reminds us of the Egyptian art, while the two on the right clearly look like African masks. The painter, therefore, denounces the strong desire of the western art to go back to its origins and to the expressive simplicity of the early Greek art. Thanks to the device of observing the women from "outside", Picasso creates a four-dimensional space which includes time and our look.

Attachment 4

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes,
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Pablo Picasso,
Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1906-1907.
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