



# Smell, Memory, and Place

a 30 – 60 minute classroom activity  
Adaptable for all grade levels  
By Jeff Leake, NW Noggin and Portland State University

## Lesson Overview:

Often when we come to a museum we assume we are simply looking at art, however our perceptual experiences always involve complex interactions between many senses. Even more interesting those sensory experiences are dependent on information from areas of the brain associated with both emotion and memory that can profoundly alter how we consciously perceive what we are looking at.

With that in mind, I want to focus on a sense that we may not normally associate with visual art, our sense of smell. This is not a description of what we literally smell when we're in a museum but rather it's a way to give us some idea of how rich our perceptual experiences actually are.

## Goals:

- To describe viewing artwork as a multisensory experience.
- To learn how our brains process and integrate information to give us our conscious perceptual experiences.

## Suggested Posters:

- Charles Heaney, *Mountains*, 1938
- C. S. Price, *Winter*, 1940

## Subject connections:

- Landscape painting
- Environmental sciences
- Neuroscience
- Neuroesthetics

## Materials:

- Large Ziploc bags (for scent materials)
- Scent materials (cut branches, pine cones, fresh leaves, earth etc.. depending on what artwork you are looking at)
- Alternately scented oils (Canopy makes a line of scented oils from native Oregon tree species <http://www.oregoncanopy.com/essential-oils/>)

## Before the Lesson:

1. Gather scented materials in sealed bags.
2. Prepare presentation on sense of smell (use prepared materials, or for more in depth exploration go to <http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/nosek.html> or for older/advanced students, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK11032/>)



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## Lesson Steps:

### LEAD IN:

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With that in mind I want to focus on a sense that we may not normally associate with visual art, our sense of smell. This is not a description of what we literally smell when we're in a museum but rather it's a way to give us some idea of how rich our perceptual experiences actually are.

First look at the artwork for one minute.

Now close your eyes, and imagine yourself in this place. What is your perceptual experience? What do you smell? What sounds do you hear? What memories does this evoke for you? What emotions do you associate with this?

Now I want to add another sensory experience to this. Consider how the introduction of actual scents might affect how you view this image. Is the experience altered in any way for you?

### PROCEDURES:

- Have students look at the image for one minute.
- Have students close their eyes and answer “imagine yourself in this place. What is your perceptual experience? What do you smell? What sounds do you hear? What memories does this evoke for you? What emotions do you associate with this?”
- Take out your scents
- Have students smell the scents while looking at the image.
- Have students answer “how did the introduction of actual scents affect how you view this image. Is the experience altered in any way for you?”
- Describe the sense of smell.

### CLOSURE:

- Ask students “how does all of this affect your experience when looking at art?”



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- It turns out that our senses all inform and influence each other to create a rich perceptual experience that affects what you remember and your emotional state.
- Ask students “consider how visual information, and the specific content of your memories and experience might contribute to evoking a more complex perceptual experience.”

**EXTENSIONS:**

This can certainly be done as a stand alone exercise, however it can also be accompanied by many other activities, that said here are a few ideas.

- Have students write a paragraph on their perception of the artwork before and after the addition of the scents noting any change in their experience.
- Have students create their own scent profile for a particular image (collect organic materials that relate to a specific landscape)
- Have students create an imagined landscape based on a set of scents.
- Have students create a map of the brain that describes the relationship between their sense of smell and areas of the brain that process other senses plus emotion and memory (see the image in the booklet or go to <https://protoplasmix.wordpress.com/2012/03/31/new-model-of-the-olfactory-system/>). I often have students draw images related to those areas on a large paper brain.

Go online for Poster PDFs in Spanish and English, maps, and more:  
<https://portlandartmuseum.org/learn/educators/resources/posters/>