About the Artist

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Anne Vallayer-Coster

Anne Vallayer was born, the second of four daughters, on December 21, 1744, in Paris, France, near the Seine River. Her mother was a painter of miniatures and her father, Joseph Vallayer, was a goldsmith at the local Gobelin Manufactory Company known for the production of the finest tapestries made in Europe. About a century before, Gobelins had been taken over by the French Crown, adding painters, metal-workers, furniture-makers, among others, who produced objects for royal palaces and royal gifts. The young Vallayer was privileged to grow up in an artistic household and to live in the Gobelin complex where community members were equally skilled in their crafts.

When Vallayer was ten, her father moved the family to another section of Paris where he bought, sold and traded jewelry. The Royal family granted Joseph the privilege of producing military metals on their behalf. Unfortunately, he soon passed away but his wife, who assisted her husband in his business, was granted permission by the Royals to continue the business with the Vallayer daughters.

Anne Vallayer showed interest in art early on and studied informally with Madeleine Basseporte, a botanical specialist who also instructed the daughters of King Louis XV. Basseporte received regular payment from the royal treasury to paint plants, birds and other small animals found near the royal châteaux. Later, Joseph Vernat, a well known landscape and marine painter, gave lessons to the young Vallayer. Under the tutelage of both Basseporte and Vernat, Vallayer grew as an artist. Her completed still life paintings produced prior to 1770 exhibited a great sensitivity to perspective, shown by books and boxes placed on angles as well as depth perception in placement of objects in the foreground, mid-ground and background. In addition, she captured amazing details in embroidered tablecloths and drapes, captured the reflective quality of silver, glass and other smooth surfaces, and distinguished the various surfaces of textured items in still life arrangements. Domestic items such as bottles, candlesticks, jugs, bowls, food items such as fruits, vegetables and even dead animals (seafood, rabbits) and musical instruments were common objects in her still lifes. She usually began her process with preliminary sketches followed by paintings using gouache, a watercolor. This allowed her to see how the composition worked visually on paper and to closely examine the objects in the still life for their reflective and textural qualities. The final version of the still life was executed oil on canvas.

The Age of Enlightenment was well underway in 18th century France. This cultural period was marked by an enormous effort to advance intellectual knowledge of the world and challenge the established order of religion and politics. The Age of Enlightenment had some influence as Vallayer’s still lifes included artifacts from the sea and land, as well as scientific instruments.

With the encouragement of teachers and other established artists, Vallayer, at the age of twenty-six, applied for provisional membership in the Royal Academy with her presentation of several still life paintings. She was accepted unanimously into provisional and full membership, a dual membership usual for women artists of the time. However, Vallayer was the only woman accepted into full membership during the French Revolution without the status of being a wife or daughter of an academician or any endorsement from the royal family. As a female member of the Royal Academy, Vallayer was not permitted to exhibit work unless associated with a discredit guild, the same scenario as the Impressionists decades later.

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Vallayer was a woman who worked in a man’s world, requiring a great deal of courage, talent and hard work. She received constant praise for the exceptional level of work she produced but she was also known for her beauty, modesty and personable disposition. Some have said she was a beautiful woman who painted skillfully as a man. As a female painter, limited to the inferior genre of still lifes, she rose to the occasion and painted within her genre with exceptional ability. She eventually moved into the genre of portrait which received mixed reviews from critics. In the end, her reputation as a still life painter was based solely on her artistic skills made evident by the quality of her clientele including many noteworthy collectors of the time such as financiers, aristocrats and the Royal family. Queen Marie-Antoinette, wife of
King Louis XVI, commissioned a number of miniature portraits. Vallayer was eventually appointed as the painter to the court of the Queen. With the Queen’s endorsement, Vallayer was granted living and studio space at the Louvre Museum in Paris and financial support for the development of art for the Museum. She was the only woman to receive such support.

Within a year of her move to the Louvre, Vallayer met and married Jean-Pierre-Silvestre Coster, a wealthy lawyer, member of the parliament and heir of a banking dynasty. The marriage contract, signed in Versailles by Queen Marie-Antoinette, raised Vallayer to the high ranks of the bourgeoisie; noble aristocrats almost indistinguishable from royalty. Being a prominent artist, member of the Academy, and aristocrat gave Vallayer the ability to apply her status when working with patrons, a rarity for a female during this time.

In 1775, Vallayer-Coster exhibited several paintings with flowers and fruit along with her familiar traditional still lifes. As usual, she began with drawings or quick painted studies of particular flowers executed with a very light hand and later transferred the composition onto canvas with oil paints. Critics agreed that her floral paintings were equally admirable to her earlier work. One such painting, *Vase of Flowers and Fruits* (1783) was among her personal favorites and one she refused to sell despite many offers, as she considered it one of her finest works. Over one-hundred twenty floral still lifes were painted by Vallayer-Coster. Some of her floral works were mass-produced as etchings with the primary purpose of patterns for such crafts as embroidery, tapestries, fan decorations, and similar embellishments created by women for women.

Following the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror in 1793, Vallayer-Coster faded from the spotlight. Her last noted painting, *Still Life with Lobster* (1781), is known as the best in her career and one she gave to King Louis XVIII. She died in 1818 at the age of seventy-four.

**About the Art**

*Still Life with Lobster* was painted by Anne Vallayer-Coster, oil on canvas in 1817 when the artist was seventy-three. The size and location of the painting is unclear but most findings lead to believe it is 10 7/8 by 12 3/4 inches and part of the collection of Staatliche Museum of Berlin, Germany.

**Directed Observation**

1. If one were to examine *Still Life with Lobster* up close, it would appear to be slightly out of focus. When it was painted, art was not hung at eye level and flat on the wall but rather high on a wall on a loose wire so the top of the work fell forward off the wall. Looking upward at the work and at a distance, the image comes into focus. Discuss how the artist may have accomplished this.

2. The items in the still life are placed on a horizontal edge representing the table top. One technique used by artists to break the strong edge is to place a few items with some parts hanging over the edge, softening the composition. Imagine the same painting with the lobster and knife sitting on the table top.

3. Vallayer-Coster’s ability to capture the surface textures of still life items is astounding. Carefully view each item in *Still Life with Lobster* and discuss how she accomplished the implied textures.

4. Eye movement is important in a well-executed still life. Identify horizontal and diagonal lines in *Still Life with Lobster* and discuss which lines better encourage eye movement. Why?

5. Including scientific or biological items in a still life supported the Age of Enlightenment. Research this historical period. If you were to gather items which represented intellectual knowledge, what would you include?

**Things to Do**

1. Gather a few simple items to use in a still life. Arrange them on a horizontal plane with one or two items extending over the plane’s edge or place items in a simple bowl with one item placed next to the bowl. Spotlight the arrangement using a lamp and darken the room if possible. Keeping the drawing simple and using an Ebony pencil, capture the imagery in terms of shapes, lines, textures and value. The lighting will enhance the shift from white to dark areas so make sure to capture that by applying appropriate pressure with the Ebony pencil. The full range of value will run from white to black. As this is done, the imagery will pull forward (with light tones) and push back (with dark tones). This will create an implied dimensional rendering. Using just mid-tones (range of grays) will result in a flat look.

2. Drawing skills will improve through practice, just as any other skill. After a collection of drawing have been completed, choose the best one to display using a crisp white mat to set off the range of tones.