

Art Docent Presentation

The Figure 5 in Gold – Charles Demuth (1883-1935)

Dear Parents,

Today, your child learned about the poem *The Great Figure* (William Carlos Williams) and the painting *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (Charles Demuth), both shown below. As you may be aware, last month the children created poetry inspired by a painting. This month, I was fortunate to find that the piece of artwork I selected from the collection was actually inspired by a poem, and I was able to tie poetry and painting together again.



Charles Demuth (1883-1935)
The Figure 5 in Gold (1928)
Watercolor
Alfred Stieglitz Collection
Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Great Figure

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)
Sour Grapes: A Book of Poems
Four Seas Company, Boston, 1921

Charles Demuth was an American watercolorist who turned to oils late in his career, developing a style of painting known as Precisionism. Demuth was a lifelong resident of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The home he shared with his mother is now the Demuth Museum, which showcases his work. He graduated from Franklin & Marshall Academy before studying at Drexel University and at Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. While a student at PAFA, he met William Carlos Williams. The two were fast friends and remained close for the rest of their lives.

Demuth's most famous painting, *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold*, was inspired by Williams' poem *The Great Figure*, about a fire truck racing by on a rainy evening. Specifically, in his autobiography, Williams writes, "Once on a hot July day coming back exhausted from the Post Graduate Clinic, I dropped in as I sometimes did at Marsden [Hartley]'s studio..... As I approached his number I heard a great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forceful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it."¹ Demuth then takes Williams poetic description of the event and transforms it back into a visual image. While the painting is not an exact illustration of the poem, it does evoke the sense of rain, light, gong clangs, siren howls and wheels rumbling. It also pays homage to Williams by including the poet's initials, and the names Bill and Carlos.

For our project, I first shared the poem with the children. I explained that our artist of the day made a painting based on this poem, written by his friend. Before seeing the painting, I asked them to create their own picture, using the poem and *their* imagination to bring the words to life with paper and crayons (and a little gold glitter!). We then shared some of their works, discussed how the poem inspired their art, and then showed them Demuth's visual depiction.

¹ William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography*, New Directions, NY, 1967, p. 17

References:

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Demuth
- <http://www.wisdomportal.com/Christmas/Figure5InGold.html>
- <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/49.59.1>

The Great Figure

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

Sour Grapes: A Book of Poems

Four Seas Company, Boston, 1921