

THE ART TEACHER

a School Story

1. Modern Art History Lessons
2. Irreverent Teens
3. Any Other Business

by
Adriano Guerra



ADRIANO GUERRA

THE ART TEACHER

A SCHOOL STORY

Modern Art History Lessons,

Irreverent Teens,

Any Other Business

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FIRST EDITION: June 2026

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For contact and information: info@teachfizz.com

To Michele and Roberto.

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PROLOGUE

“I could do that too!”

My name is Adriano Guerra. I teach Visual Arts at “Dante Alighieri” Middle School in Castelveto, in southern Italy.

I live in a fifth-floor apartment in a building from the 1970s. I have a dog named Pollock at home.

Yes, Pollock, like the American artist.

I’ve been teaching for ten years. Before that, I was an architect.

Then something happened. Nothing in particular. Maybe just a bit of boredom. Maybe I wanted to build something else: something made of more than bricks and concrete.

One day, at the newsstand near my house, I read that the Ministry of Education was looking for new teachers through a public competition. I bought some teaching manuals almost on impulse, without much conviction. Back home, I pulled Argan and Gombrich’s essays on art and a novel by Daniel Pennac that I had read a long time ago off the bookshelves.

I began studying almost out of curiosity. I had registered for the exam, but I wasn’t yet sure I would take it. After a few weeks, however, that curiosity was taking on a different form.

I spent a couple of wonderful months immersed in my studies, rediscovering extraordinary works and figures.

Getting back into studying is rejuvenating.

Anyway, I passed the exam, a vacancy in Castelveto, a new job. A new adventure.

Today, honestly, my only regret is that I didn’t start sooner.

If there’s one place where it’s impossible to get bored, it’s school.

If I were asked to define school, I'd say: *school is that place where every emotion exists in its purest form—enthusiasm, cruelty, insecurity, friendship, loneliness, fear of being excluded, a desperate need to be seen. All concentrated within a forty-meter-long hallway that smells of industrial detergent, cold focaccia, and the lingering scent of "J'adore" from the Italian teacher.*

I decided to write this book one afternoon in May, on my way home after a particularly chaotic class about Maurizio Cattelan's famous banana stuck to the wall.

At one point, Mattia, one of my boldest students, had raised his hand.

"Mr. Guerra, I could have done that too!"

I gave him the same answer once again. The quick one. The standard response I used every time someone—especially Mattia—told me, "I could do that too."

"Sure. But you didn't do it."

A response that works well enough to get the lesson back on track.

But on my way home, I realized that wasn't enough. Because the problem wasn't the banana. The problem was the look.

For years, I, too, thought that, after the historical avant-garde movements, art had slowly begun to lose its way. I viewed much of contemporary art with suspicion, especially the pretentiously "conceptual" kind. I spent hours looking at certain installations at the Venice Biennale, feeling somewhere between perplexed and genuinely annoyed. And yes, that darn banana, too.

For the uninitiated—and for many teenagers—this sense of a rupture likely began as early as the post-Caravaggio era.

"I could do that too."

That's the phrase I hear most often when standing in front of a modern work.

And if I'm being honest, sometimes I'd like to say it myself.

It's a useful phrase, if it takes you somewhere.

It's a toxic phrase if it keeps you stuck there.

This book aims to take you somewhere. Not to convince you that every work of art is a masterpiece. I don't even think that myself.

It was created to try to do something much more useful: teach you to look a little better.

I'm not an art critic. And this isn't a book written for specialists. So don't expect complicated words or sentences so long you lose the thread halfway through. If I did that with my students, many of them would raise their hands: some to beg to start drawing, others to escape to the bathroom.

I write the way I speak in class: with examples drawn from a soccer game, a chat, a Coldplay song, a pizza with friends, an Instagram post, a TV series.

You might get the impression that certain concepts come up often. That's on purpose. In school, important things rarely sink in on the first try: they need to reappear, be seen in a new light, find a fresh angle.

You'll find seventeen chapters. Seventeen school days. Seventeen encounters with artists, masterpieces, and movements that have changed the way we see the world: from Claude Monet's Impressionism to Kusama's installations and Marina Abramović's performances.

We'll go in chronological order. Not because dates are important in art, but because every artist is always born into a conversation started by someone else. Understanding Kandinsky without knowing Monet is a bit like reading the ending of a novel while skipping half the story.

It can be done. But it's better not to.

In this book, I'll use the term "modern art" to refer, broadly speaking, to artistic production ranging from Impressionism to the present day. It's a simplification. I hope art historians, teachers, and experts will forgive me for it.

A quick note about the students you'll meet. Their names are made up. They are not.

They are the students every teacher encounters every day: attentive and bored, shy and hyperactive, brilliant and disorganized, quiet and uncontrollable, full of enthusiasm or already convinced they aren't good enough. Kids who ask wonderful questions and kids who pretend not to listen while, in reality, they hear everything.

One last recommendation.

This book isn't just about modern art.

It's about what happens when we're faced with something we don't immediately understand: an abstract painting, a person, a teenage child, a news story on TV, a sudden silence. Ourselves.

Now we can begin.

It's September. Class 3B* returns to the classroom after summer a little taller, a little tanner, and convinced they're already adults.

Pollock is sleeping under the teacher's desk, paws stretched out. He looks right at home. Principal Tagliabue pretends not to see the dog in the classroom because, beneath her apparent sternness, she has a soft heart.

I turn on the interactive whiteboard.

On the screen... a harbor full of light.

*In Italian middle schools, classes are identified by year and section. Class 3B roughly corresponds to eighth grade in the U.S. system.

CHAPTER 1

**"It looks like it was done in ten
minutes!"**

IMPRESSIONISM

Claude Monet,
Impression, Sunrise (1872)



This morning I'm supposed to explain Monet. At least that's what I've set out to do.

Often, art history classes take a different turn than what's planned.

Normally, I prepare everything carefully: slides, references, outlines for written exercises or practical assignments, and then, poof, a single sentence, a question, a comment, or a particular event manages to throw the schedule off track. At that point, you have two options: ignore what's happening around you and stubbornly stick to the plan, or accept the detour and try to figure out where it might lead you.

Over time, I've learned that it's often better to take the second path.

Fortunately, art is a vast territory: full of images, connections, symbols, and stories capable of hooking onto practically anything that happens inside and outside a school. And it is precisely there, in those unexpected detours, that lessons stop feeling like lessons and begin to become experiences.

The coffee was ready and Pollock was already at the door, leash dangling, looking as if he thought the collar should be on his owner. But as I searched for my keys, I felt I'd forgotten something.

The photo!

Normally, to introduce Monet, I use a photo of a landscape familiar to the students to draw a comparison between photography and Impressionist painting.

I grabbed my phone and snapped a panoramic shot of Castelveto from my kitchen window: a sky streaked with a few clouds, a sun still shy, the bell tower of the Madonna del Carmelo, the white houses of the historic district, the supermarket below my apartment..

I left the house ten minutes late, and Pollock, in the car, was still looking at me as if wondering who was supposed to be teaching whom.

When I walk into the classroom, Class 3B is waiting for me with three distinct sounds: Mattia recounting his exploits from the last soccer game, Edoardo downplaying Mattia's exploits, and Davide's drum solo,

performed by tapping a couple of pens on Greta's desk—she looks visibly annoyed.

Davide is a hyperactive boy from Class 3A who loves to crash into other classes, especially ours. By now, he's practically family.

Pollock enters before me, takes a slow walk around the room, and stretches out under the teacher's desk. Principal Tagliabue hasn't seen him.

"Good morning," I say, turning on my laptop. "Davide, go back to 3A."

"Mr. Guerra, there's a dog."

"Davide, I know the dog is here."

"But he should be at home."

"He should, but I'm conducting a pet therapy experiment. Apparently, dogs improve the class's psychological well-being."

He looks at me strangely, sensing how flimsy my excuse is. I made it up on the spot, it's true. But, come to think of it, it might even have a scientific basis.

Pollock had suffered from severe separation anxiety. The vet had advised me not to leave him alone at first, explaining that this distress most likely stemmed from what he had experienced before coming into my home and my life.

Over time, he got better.

The problem is that, over time, I've developed excessive separation anxiety.

Davide gives a final stroke of his pen on Greta's metal water bottle, theatrically concluding his solo. And he slips away into the hallway.

"Guys, look at this photo," I say to the class.

I project the photo of the sky as seen from my kitchen onto the screen.

Mattia speaks up right away: "Mr. Guerra, is that your photo?"

"It's a photo of mine."

“It didn’t turn out very well.”

“Mattia, I snapped it on the fly from the kitchen while I was looking for my keys. It wasn’t supposed to turn out great,” I explain, almost embarrassed.

Some of the kids, with their smartphones, are much more skilled photographers than I am.

Sofia, who until a moment ago was drawing little stylized hearts in her diary, looks up at the screen for the first time.

“Keep that in mind,” I say. And I switch the image.

Monet appears on the screen.

Impression, Sunrise. 1872. Oil on canvas, 48 x 63 centimeters. A small painting, now at the Musée Marmottan in Paris.



There is a harbor. It's hard to make out: there's water in the foreground, a small dark boat with two figures, a boat a little further back that looks as if it were sketched in three strokes, industrial cranes in the background that you can only make out if you look for them. And high above, amid the orange sky that washes over a strip of gray-blue clouds, there is a small red-orange sun.

It's a sun that doesn't illuminate anything: it's just sitting there, like a coin. The water beneath it doesn't reflect realistically. It reflects just enough.

And that's it.

"Mr. Guerra"

Mattia, of course.

"Prof, it looks like it was done in ten minutes."

"Did you notice anything interesting, Mattia?"

"It's a sketch. It's not a painting. It's, I don't know... it's quick."

Edoardo, who at thirteen has visited more museums than I have, turns around. "Mattia, it's Monet. He's one of the most important."

"Good, Edoardo, it is Monet. But let's get back to the question. I asked: *what do we see?*"

"We see a harbor."

"We see a harbor, yes. Mattia said it looks like it was done in ten minutes. Greta?"

"It's true that it looks like it was done in a hurry."

"Lorenzo?"

Pause. Lorenzo De Marco is the boy in the back, his father a mechanic, his hands always with a bit of oil under his fingernails. He thinks about it.

"Maybe because he was good at doing it quickly."

"Explain yourself, Lorenzo."

Lorenzo looks at the screen. Then he looks at me. Then he speaks, slowly. "When I have to do a math problem, it takes me a long time, because I don't like math— . But when I have to study history, it doesn't take me long. I'm a whiz at history." He pauses. "Maybe it's the same thing."

Well, that's a good start.

"Good. Now let's go back to the photo of the sky seen from my kitchen," I say.

I switch screens. My photo comes back up on the screen. The morning sun over Castelveto, the white clouds, the bell tower of the Madonna del Carmelo, and that terribly sad supermarket roof which, I must admit, ruins the composition a bit.

"Mattia," I say, "if I asked you right now what I saw this morning from my kitchen window, would you be able to give me an idea?"

"Yes."

"How precise?"

"Well, there's the sun, there are the clouds, the houses, there's the bell tower, there's the supermarket. It's all there."

"Everything's there. Exactly. The photo, even taken on the fly (and badly), gives you everything. All the details, all the colors, all the proportions. It's a perfect catalog of the scene. Too perfect."

"Monet, on the other hand, does something completely different: Monet doesn't paint a harbor. He paints *the experience of having seen a harbor*."

Now I'll explain who the man was who painted this picture, and why he painted it this way.

His name was Claude Monet. He was born in 1840 in Paris and grew up in Le Havre, on the northern coast of France, where he had seen the sea every morning of his childhood. He drew caricatures in the cafés by the harbor. He sold them for a few francs each. His mother had said, "This

boy has an artistic streak.” His father, who wanted Claude by his side in the grocery store, had sighed.

But now let’s pause for a moment and take a step back.

1839. A device called *the daguerreotype* was introduced to the public in France. In short: the first camera. For the first time in history, one could capture reality—a face, a building, a square—without painting it. A single click was enough, and everything was there. In black and white, of course, but people appreciated this novelty.

By the time Monet was thirty, in 1870, cameras were popping up everywhere in Paris. Any member of the middle class could go to a photo studio and have a portrait taken for just a few francs. A city scene. A landscape. Just think: the photographer Felix Nadar had photographed Paris from above, aboard a hot-air balloon.

Try to imagine what that might have meant for a painter.

For centuries, the painter’s craft has been to capture reality—from Giotto’s early attempts to the linear perspective of Brunelleschi and the entire Renaissance. The purpose of art was to turn painting into a kind of photography before photography existed. But when real photography arrived, the painter looked at that machine and realized he had a ruthless competitor. The machine captures everything, in an instant, perfectly, and at a very low cost. Game over.

At this point, painting had two paths.

The first: to continue pursuing reality even more stubbornly. Academic painters perfected every detail: perfect color nuances, highly polished surfaces, skin tones that looked like wax, delicate shadows, soft drapery, and flawless anatomy. They wanted to prove that the human hand could still surpass the machine in precision, elegance, and control.

The second path: to seek what photography cannot do. Photography captures the sky, captures the harbor, but it does not capture *the smell of the harbor, the morning mist, the lightness of the sun*. It captures the

detail, but it does not capture the sensation, the perception of the moment.

Monet chooses the second path. It is a choice that is very simple to explain and very difficult to make. He looks at a scene and paints what's in his mind after looking at it. Not the details, not the catalog. He paints *the impression*, he paints the light.

At thirty, Monet was a painter who didn't sell. He had a wife, a son, and no money. The official academies, the Salon—the only institution in France that granted access to the art market—rejected his paintings.

The juries wrote: *it is not finished enough. The edges are not defined. The brushstrokes are visible.* Rejected!

The greatest revolution in modern art was born, incredibly, from a rejection.

In 1874, Monet and a group of friends experimenting with “the second path” (Renoir, Pissarro, Degas, Sisley, and others) decided to organize the exhibition that the Salon would never grant them. They rented a photography studio—specifically, Felix Nadar's studio (the one with the hot-air balloon) in Paris. They displayed their canvases. Among them was the painting you see on the screen, painted by Monet in Le Havre two years earlier.

A critic named Louis Leroy arrives at the venue. A man with a knack for writing scathing reviews. He stops in front of the harbor at Le Havre. There is a label beneath the painting. Leroy reads: *Impression, soleil levant.* Impression, Rising Sun.

That very evening, Leroy writes a piece in the satirical newspaper *Le Charivari* in which he mocks the entire exhibition. He invents a character, an old painter of the old school, has him imagine the exhibition, and has him say, standing before Monet's painting, more or less these words: *Impression, I was sure of it. I was telling myself that, since I'm impressed by it, there must be some impression in there. And what freedom, what ease of execution! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than this landscape.*

The article is titled "The Impressionist Exhibition."

It is an insult.

Monet and his friends read it, and they do something unexpected and extraordinary: they appropriate Leroy's insult.

Impressionists? Fine. Then from today on, call us "Impressionists."

The most beloved movement in art history got its name because a Parisian journalist, in 1874, wanted to make a mean-spirited joke.

"So they made fun of them, and they kept the name?" asks Greta.

"Exactly."

Mattia turns to Edoardo. "So 'the professor' is an Impressionist."

Edoardo doesn't smile right away. Then he does, just a little.

There was a week in sixth grade when someone started calling Edoardo "*the professor*."

For a few days he showed annoyance, getting angry every time someone called him that. Then he started signing his homework "*Professor Marchetti*," and now at school we all call him that, but affectionately. He figured it out at eleven: when a word hurts you, take it.

"Prof, so how long does the painting last?" asks Mattia.

"What do you mean, Mattia?"

"How long did it take you to do that?"

"Very little. It's an *en plein air*. That's what it's called—painting outdoors, done on the spot, as the light changes. You have to be quick, because the light doesn't wait. But be careful, Mattia: quick doesn't mean easy. Quick means skilled. Monet was perfectly capable of creating highly detailed paintings, like the academic artists. But he wasn't interested in that."

"So is it worth a lot?"

"Mattia, it's worth a lot because it happened. It's worth a lot because it opened a door. The real value is the threshold he crossed."

Mattia looks at me. I don't think he's fully understood. That's okay. We have the whole year to talk about wide-open doors, revolutions, and provocations.

Under the teacher's desk, Pollock has woken up from his nap, stood up, and is sniffing with interest at a crumb of focaccia that escaped the school janitor's broom. He eats it in one gulp. Then he slumps back down, satisfied, as if he'd solved an existential problem.

"Kids. Grab your sketchbooks and colored markers. Today we're going out to the courtyard to experiment with Impressionism. You won't need pencils; you won't be doing any preparatory sketches. You'll use color directly, without corrections and without second thoughts. You'll create your own *en plein air*."

The kids start pulling the necessary supplies out of their folders and rush out of the classroom.

We head down to the courtyard.

After a few minutes spent calling a small group of rowdy kids to order—they keep chasing each other through the courtyard flower beds—I finally manage to spread them out among the benches and low walls and begin the exercise.

Objectively speaking, the landscape isn't exactly that of the Seine or Le Havre, but my young Impressionists are content with what they have.

CHAPTER 2

"He's obsessed with that mountain!"

POST-IMPRESSIONISM (Part 1)

Paul Cézanne,

Mont Sainte-Victoire (series, 1880–1906)



PUBLICATIONS

TeachFizz.com is a publishing platform dedicated to education, art, and creativity. It was born from the desire to offer teachers, educators, families, and young readers materials that combine rigor, imagination, and practical application.

The project brings together books, resources, and learning paths designed to support learning through images, stories, hands-on activities, and educational tools. Each publication is created with a specific goal: to make knowledge more accessible, engaging, and meaningful, without compromising the cultural quality of the content.

The website features several book series.

Most of the publications are available in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

Inside Art

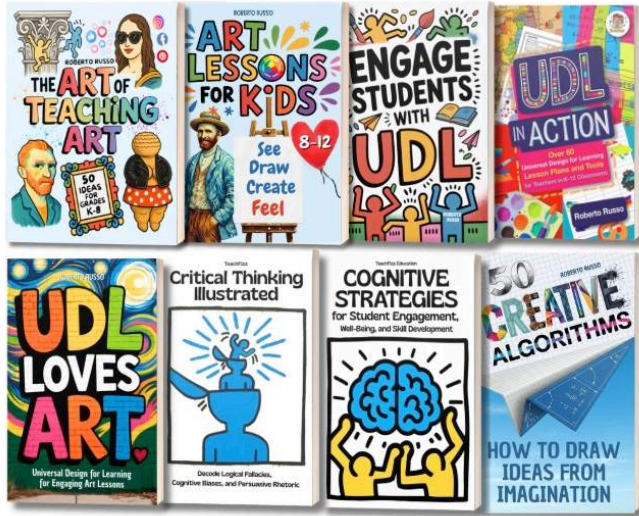
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