

# “I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold” Project Plan

1. Introduce Demuth’s “I Saw the Figure Number 5 in Gold”. Project it for the class to see.
2. Do a “close read” of the painting using the “See, Think, Wonder” strategy. (<http://pzartfulthinking.org/?p=8>)
3. As a class or individually, have students read William Carlos Williams’ poem “The Great Figure” while the painting is projected. Use the “See, Think, Wonder” strategy with the poem to spark student led discussion about the poem. (Students will relate the poem to the painting.)
4. Ask students which they think came first, the poem, or the painting? Have them tell the people sitting close to them why they believe it was the painting or the poem. Then have a volunteer share.
5. Share with students that you have an article that explains which came first. Before passing it out, explain that students should “read with a pencil”. This means they should read the article 3 times. As they read, they should annotate the text. Students should circle powerful words/phrases, underline words/phrases they don’t understand, place an exclamation point next to surprising facts, write question marks where they have questions, and jot down connections to the text. (Here’s a poster of what to do on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> read: <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Close-Reading-Four-Free-Posters-by-the-Teacher-Next-Door-1038678>, and a poster for annotating text: <http://www.watanabe.blogspot.com/2013/04/close-read-complex-text-and-annotate.html>)
6. Without telling the students they are getting different passages, pass reading #1 to half of the class and reading #2 to the other half of the class. After students have plenty of time to read and annotate their article, ask which came first, the poem or the painting. Remind students to cite evidence from the text as they explain what they think.
7. This will quickly become a great argument, but allow the students to continue discussing until they realize that they have different articles.
8. Conclude by explaining that we don’t know which came first. It is a great opportunity to point out that when researching, sometimes we find conflicting information, and it’s best to read multiple sources. In this case, even multiple sources don’t solve our mystery, so we present both.

## **The Project:**

Explain that students will be creating a book with a number 5 on the cover, inspired by “I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold”. That number will represent the number of pages or chapters in their book. This book could culminate any topic you are studying. For example, my class studies Lancaster County history. For this project, students have to

choose the 5 most important places to visit in Lancaster. This is a writing/research project, so students research places important in Lancaster County's history. Each page in their book includes an informational paragraph giving information about the important place, and an opinion paragraph about why it made it on to their top 5 list.

**To create the cover:**

1. *The following steps are from a combination of conversations with my school's art teacher and the directions at this blog:*  
<http://www.shinebritezamorano.com/2010/10/charlie-5.html>)
2. Demonstrate how to make numbers 0 through 9 visually interesting as block or bubble numbers with a little flair. (Or show a video clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS93idNmQXs>) Option: have students use stencils. (Find stencils here: <http://freenumbersstencils.com/>) Have students practice the number a few ways.
3. Students should draw the number 3 times going from big, medium, to small. (Option: Have students draw one large number.)
4. Students should add 3 circles. One should go off the paper and one should be overlapped by a number.
5. Have students use a straight edge to draw 7 lines, breaking up the background and negative space. These should cut through the number.
6. Have students trace all lines outside the number with a black marker and erase pencil lines.
7. Have students add colored pencil to numbers. They should choose to use either warm or cool colors. No two colors should touch at the lines. Then, color over the entire number with a gold pencil crayon.
8. Have students add color to the circles with colored pencils or crayons, using same group of colors as are on their numbers. Make circles into spheres by adjusting hand pressure to go from light to dark.
9. Have students add the opposite group of colors with colored pencils to the shapes made with the 7 lines. Students should go from hard to soft hand pressure to go from dark to light color tints.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/for-educators/lesson-plans-and-pre-visit-guides/beyond-the-figure>

<http://www.shinebritezamorano.com/2010/10/charlie-5.html>



**Artist:** Charles Demuth (American, Lancaster, Pennsylvania 1883–1935  
Lancaster, Pennsylvania)

**Date:** 1928

**Medium:** Oil, graphite, ink, and gold leaf on paperboard (Upson board)

**Dimensions:** 35 1/2 x 30 in. (90.2 x 76.2 cm)

From the MET's Timeline of Art History: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/49.59.1/>

# The Great Figure

William Carlos Williams, 1883 - 1963

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

From <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/great-figure>

## Reading #1:

# "I Saw the Figure 5 In Gold": Portrait for a Friend

One of Demuth's closest friends was the poet, William Carlos Williams. Often considered his greatest painting, Demuth's 1928 *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold* is a homage portrait to "Bill." There is no face, no body, only the number "5" three times, and part of his friend's name at the top, amidst a forced, Cubist perspective of surging, grey planes. At the bottom it is signed with his own initials and those of his friend.

Demuth considered the work a collaborative effort. It is based upon a line from a poem by Williams, *The Great Figure*. The poem continues, "Among the rain and lights, I saw the clangs, siren howls and wheels rumbling through the dark city." Demuth's "portrait" of his friend is the frenzied, cubistic, headlong flight of a fire truck through the dark, deserted streets of New York. It's often considered the most quintessentially "American" painting ever created.

Unlike his friend, Bill, who lived to be eighty years old, Charlie, as he was known to his friends, died in 1935 at the age of 53. He might have died some thirteen years earlier had it not been for a new, experimental drug. A diabetic for much of his adult life, Demuth was only the second individual in this country to receive insulin. And though he was notoriously careless about maintaining his treatments, they literally saved his life. Demuth was affluent enough that he never had to sell his work. What he did sell during his lifetime was primarily representational watercolors.

From HumanitiesWeb.org: <http://www.humanitiesweb.org/spa/gai/ID/643>

## *Reading #2:*

# "I Saw the Figure 5 In Gold": In Response to a Poem

Charles Demuth's poster-portrait of 1928, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, is a response to a poem by his friend William Carlos Williams. Williams has described the poem's occasion, a July evening when he was stopping by the New York studio of another artist-friend, Marsden Hartley. "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."

Demuth's painting translates the poem's verbal images, swift motion, and balanced composition into a cubist/futurist design. Whereas the poem leads us forward through a sentence balanced on its central word, "moving," the painting pulls us into its space by way of receding figures and convergent lines. Here the image of urban vitality also expands to become a general tribute to Williams and to art. We find "BILL" on a billboard, "carlos" in lights on a theatre marquee, "ART Co" on a store window, and the initials of both painter and poet at the bottom of the design.

*From:*

<http://oldeprovidencepta.cmswiki.wikispaces.net/file/view/2012+11+Nov+Parent+Info.pdf> (Page 5)