



Daniel Ridgway Knight, *Premier Chagrin (First Grief)*, 1892

ARTIST BIO

Daniel Ridgway Knight, born March 15, 1839, grew up in the small town of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. He studied alongside fellow-American artists Mary Cassatt and Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. In 1861, Ridgway Knight was the first of his peers to travel to Paris to continue his studies at l'École des Beaux-Arts. However, when civil war broke out in America two years later, he returned home and enlisted in the Union Army.

Even as a soldier, Ridgway Knight continued to develop his artistic talent. He sketched battle scenes and portraits of his fellow soldiers, focusing on their facial expressions and the nuances of human emotion. After the war, the artist returned to Pennsylvania where he taught art for ten years while also working as a portrait painter. He married Rebecca Morris Webster in 1871 and that same year the newlyweds moved to France permanently.

Ridgway Knight quickly achieved international success exhibiting his paintings across Europe. His talent for merging idealized, picturesque scenes of French peasant life with a realist style appealed to art critics as well as the masses. Author George Sheldon wrote of the artist, “He does not see the sadness of French peasant life, but its gladness.” Indeed, Ridgway Knight’s admiration for French peasants going about their daily chores can be seen in his paintings, which are always beautiful with happy workers bathed in soft light.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

During his first trip to France, Daniel Ridgway Knight formed friendships with the young Impressionist painters Alfred Sisley and Auguste Renoir. Although Ridgway Knight’s style is vastly different from that of his friends, their influence can be seen in his work. His attention to the changing effects of light and the desire to depict everyday subjects was directly in line with the aims of the Impressionists.

Ridgway Knight’s attention to detail was encouraged by his mentor, Jean Louis Ernest Meissonier, a French academic painter, and it is evident in the great care he takes when simulating textures.

ARTWORK

First Grief was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1892, where it received universal praise. The young, rosy-cheeked peasant girls are painted in great detail and stand in stark contrast to the loose brushwork of the surrounding landscape.

Combining the poignant title with our human desire to ease the suffering of others, Knight invites us to empathize with the subjects in his painting. Although these two girls are unknown to the viewer, we recognize the deep connection between trusted friends. The gesture of a hand gently placed over that of a friend speaks of compassion and support, while the attentive gaze of the listener prompts curiosity at the grief being shared by her friend.

INTRODUCTION

First Grief invites reflection on a French peasant girl’s story of tender heartache. The artist’s sentimental painting—a blend of narrative, nostalgia, and simple peasant life—won many awards and was featured in the prestigious Paris Salon of 1892.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- 1 Analyze subject matter, contextualize information, and recognize visual elements
- 2 Create a short story based on a single image
- 3 Construct visual representations of places/events that are part of everyday life
- 4 Experiment with similar media and concepts that Ridgway Knight used in his painting

LOOK AND DISCUSS

Take a few minutes to look closely at this painting. What do you see? What words best describe the mood of the painting?

What elements of art or principles of design did Knight use to portray the emotions associated with grief?

- o Elements of art include shape, color, line, and texture.
- o Principles of design include balance, contrast, repetition, and emphasis.

Look at the facial expressions and physical gestures of the girls. What do they communicate?

CONTINUE THE STORY

While Daniel Ridgway Knightt’s career as a painter spans both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, his works are inextricably tied to the French countryside. Through idyllic landscapes and emotionally rich subjects, Ridgway Knight created picturesque scenes of country life. For many, Ridgway Knight’s paintings were a welcome escape from the dirty, crowded, factory-ridden cities that were a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution in France.

ACTIVITY #1: IMAGINE A STORY

Materials: Paper, Pen
Subject Areas: Visual Arts, World History, English Language Arts
Duration: 20-30 minutes

After discussing the painting, create a narrative. Construct a short story that illustrates what takes place before, during, and after this scene. Consider the dialogue between the two girls. Share the stories in class.

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Respond (V.R)
Students will understand, evaluate and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

ACTIVITY #2: DRAWING OUR DAILY LIFE

Materials: Paper, colored pencils
Subject Areas: Visual Arts, World History, English Language Arts
Duration: 20-30 minutes

After discussing the painting, think about everyday subjects you find beautiful. Sketch one of these everyday scenes for 20 minutes. Share and discuss your drawings. Reference photos can be used if needed.

Optional: With your class, go outside and draw in nature as Daniel Ridgway Knight did.

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Strand: Create (V.CR)
Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation.

Strand: Respond (V.R)
Students will understand, evaluate and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment for this lesson may include student participation in group discussion or thoughtfulness of written interpretive answers. The writing activity “Imagine a Story” can be included to evaluate critical thinking skills and accuracy of spelling and grammar. The creative activity “Drawing our Daily Life” can be included to assess student craftsmanship, thoughtfulness, and personal connection to the artwork.