Westminster Abbey
Learning

Light and colour in Christian art – teachers' notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this five-question survey.

All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

SLIDE 3: Think about light and colour in your home

We find colourful decorations everywhere. Ask pupils to think about a room in their home - perhaps their bedroom, or the kitchen, or living room – and some of the colourful decoration within them. It may be an object, an item of clothing, colour on the walls or something else.

With a partner, choose your favourite colourful thing from home – something that is personal to you. Show of hands to see who chose an item of clothing, a picture or poster on a wall, colourful lights or even a window hanging.

SLIDE 4: Making a house a home

First and foremost, Westminster Abbey is a Christian church and, as such, is known as a 'House of God'. In some ways, it is similar to a home.

Ask your pupils to spot things in these images that they might have at home (including places to sit, places to gather and eat etc). Though the furniture you find in a Christian Church is almost always functional each and every piece of furniture is an excuse for artistic expression whether that is in the carving, construction or colouring.

SLIDE 5: Light and colour in 'God's House'

Westminster Abbey is filled with bright and beautiful decorations – possibly like many of your pupils' homes. Some of these decorations are priceless works of art, dedicated to the glory of God.
We are going to examine three ways in which light and colour are used, focusing on examples of stained-glass windows, textiles and paintings within Westminster Abbey.

SLIDE 6: Stained glass: stories and celebrations

The Abbey, like many places of worship, features lots of stained-glass windows. These windows depict different aspects of Christian life and worship. Some stained-glass windows include images of saints, Christian leaders and worshippers. In others, there are depictions of Bible stories and key moments from the life of Christ. Much of the art in these windows are an expression of Christian faith.

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Here are some examples of stained-glass windows within Westminster Abbey. The first is a representation of the Crucifixion. The second shows detail from the RAF Chapel at the Eastern end of the Abbey where we remember the sacrifices made by the air force during World War Two. The final image was made by a famous British artist, David Hockney. It is called 'The Queen's Window' and was commissioned to celebrate the reign of QEII. It shows an English Country scene, complete with trees, and bushes and even a path and is very different from much of the stained glass you see elsewhere in the Abbey. Ask your pupils what they think of this modern stained-glass window?

Westminster Abbey is built in a gothic style, which means it has very large windows. Before electricity, the Abbey would have been lit by candlelight and therefore the light coming through the large windows would have helped Christians see the beautiful decorations more clearly.

You may wish to talk to your pupils about light within Christianity. This might include the use of candles in churches and Jesus being described in the Bible as the 'Light of the World' (Matthew 5:14).

Take time to talk about the different amounts of light coming through these windows. Along with telling stories, windows are one of the main ways throughout history that light would get into the Abbey.

SLIDE 7: Stained glass: a window into the past

Glass is fragile and easily breaks, which means that many of the windows in Westminster Abbey are no more than 300 years old. Recently though, we discovered a treasure trove of around 30,000 stained glass fragments, some of which dated back 750 years.

Can you imagine having to examine all those 30,000 fragments to see if any of them might fit together? Imagine you're a conservator (someone who preserves and cares for our history), and you have to try and identify some of those beautiful glass fragments. See if you can identify the following fragments (Crown detail, Angel, Cross, Saint, Bird).

SLIDE 8: Textiles: How to dress in a church

Next, let's think about colour in different fabrics or textiles. You may wish to quickly ask pupils if they have a favourite piece of clothing, and what colour it is.

Priests who work in a church (who may also be referred to as the clergy, or vicars) often wear a uniform. Sometimes, this uniform is quite plain and without much decoration. Here is an image of one of Westminster Abbey's priests. If you have recently visited a local, parish church, this uniform may be familiar to your pupils. Talk to your pupils about the benefits of a uniform, perhaps in relation to their school uniform. This could include: knowing a person's role or connection to a place based on what they are wearing, everyone wearing the same or a similar outfit etc. If you have recently visited a local church or have had a priest visit the school, you could talk about what they wore – particularly thinking about the colours and amount of decoration.

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Sometimes, the uniforms that the priests wear at Westminster Abbey can be very colourful and richly decorated, and can carry messages of their own. Click to reveal the image of the Blue Tunicle.

This image is of The Blue or Holy Innocents Tunicle, which was made in 1910. This elaborate embroidery shows birds, flowers and butterflies with children from her extended family. The subject depicted on this garment (The Holy Innocents) features in the Bible, the artist has used their own family as inspiration. A Tunicle is a garment worn by a particular member of the clergy (subdeacon). Clergy wear specific garments for worship when doing specific things. The Holy Innocents is a Bible Story where Herod the Great orders the execution of all male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem. It can be found in the Gospel of Matthew 2:16-18. What a story to feature your own family.

SLIDE 9: Textiles: How to dress a church

Like many churches, Westminster Abbey is adorned and decorated with numerous hanging cloths and textiles.

Perhaps most significant of these are the altar cloths, with the colour of the cloth changing according to the time of year. Here are five different altar cloths, where different colours are used at different times in the Christian calendar.

- Gold and the richest of decorations are used as the two most special celebrations in the church year. Ask your pupils which two celebrations these would be (Easter and Christmas).
- Green marks 'Ordinary Time' (any time that falls outside Christmastide, Eastertide, Advent, and Lent).
- Blue is often seen to represent Advent – that time used to prepare for Christmas.
- Red marks 'Pentecost', Palm Sunday and 'Holy Week'.
- Plain cloth marks the time of Lent, usually covering the altar and surrounding decorations. Ask your pupils why decorations might be covered during Lent.

SLIDE 10: Paintings: A splash of paint

While lots of the walls of Westminster Abbey are now bare, grey stone, this has not always been the case.

When the Abbey was rebuilt in the 13th century, during the reign of King Henry III, the walls, pillars, and ceilings would have featured beautiful images to strike awe and inspire worshippers. Ask pupils to imagine having to repaint those paintings over the years. That's why so much has now been lost.

In one or two places the decorations have been recreated so we have an idea how the Abbey would have looked all those centuries ago. This is the 'Star Lobby' - ask pupils what features and colours they can spot? Comment on the golden stars, reminding pupils about the use of the colour gold in church. Talk about the use of blue to represent the Heavens.

The last image show has paintings have been used to tell stories in the Chapter House at the Abbey. These images are slightly different to those in the rest of the Abbey as each picture is accompanied by a

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box of text, describing the story in the picture, which is unusual. The Chapter House would have been used primarily by the monks at the Abbey and, as such, they would have been the few people in medieval times who would have been able to read and understand the text beneath. It could be thought of as a medieval version of a comic or graphic novel.

SLIDES 11 to 14: Over to you

Here are three different activities that pupils could now complete based on what they have learnt about light and colour in stained-glass windows, textiles and paintings within Westminster Abbey. Delete the slides you don't need as applicable.

Activity idea 1: Stained-glass conservation

Invite your pupils to imagine they are conservationists working on a recently uncovered hoard of priceless stained-glass fragments. In pairs, choose and draw a scene (options include faith stories or stories of heroes and inspirational people). Alternatively print and distribute a series of prepared scenes. Once each pair has a scene, they then cut them into smaller pieces (probably no more than 12 – time allowing!). Pass your 'stained-glass fragments' to the next pair and see if they can put the pieces together and work out the story being told.

Activity idea 2: Storytelling garment

For this activity you will need some old material – bed linen is probably most useful. Split your class into groups of three or four. Each group then decides what kind of creation they want to make (options could include flags, banner or cope). For the latter, they will need material cut into a large 'D' shape. Then, on the straight edge of that 'D', cut out a smaller semi-circular section (that's the bit that fastens around the neck). Give your pupils some time to decide what kind of image or story they want to create. Once they have decided on an image or story to portray, they can start sketching the image directly on to the fabric, using felt-tip pens, crayons, or fabric paint. Garments, banners and flags can all be hung up to make an amazing display.

Activity idea 3: Comic strip

Invite your pupils to think of an inspiring story – this could be a Bible story, a real event that happened to them or their friends, something in the news, the story of an inspiring hero, a sporting moment or a moment from history. Thinking of the main beats or points of their story, can your pupils break their story down into four or five images? These are the images they will need to bring to life on paper, as part of their 'medieval comic'. When they are ready, your pupils should mark our four or five large squares on their paper and begin drawing their story. Once they are happy with their images, and have made them as colourful as possible, it's time to write the story of each image beneath. (Remind your pupils that, although medieval paintings may look 'washed out' and drab, when they were originally painted, they would have been awash with colour). Once your pupils have finished their comic, they can share them with another pupil, but cover up the text to see if they can work out or recognise the story.

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