

Lesson Plan: Imagery with Unicorns

by Saraiya Kanning

Grade Level: 1st

Time Frame: 60 minutes

Objective: Teaching artist and students will learn about medieval tapestries while exploring description and imagery.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: None

Required Materials: Whiteboard and dry erase markers, lined paper, pencils, blank paper, crayons, “While Riding an Elephant, I Think of Unicorns” poem and printouts of tapestries (below)

Sequence of Activities:

Introductions (15 min)

Students and teacher start in a circle on a rug. Welcome the students and lead an icebreaker name game if this is one of the first sessions. Spread out a map of the world and point to India. Mention that today we’ll be reading a poem that starts in India. What kind of animals live in India? Ask them to keep their ears open for any animals that appear in today’s poem.

Read a Poem (10-15 minutes)

Read “While Riding an Elephant, I Think of Unicorns” by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. After reading, show students a picture of the medieval tapestry *Unicorn in Captivity* and discuss the various images in the poem and tapestry. Have a conversation about description: descriptive words paint a picture in our minds. When we write, we can use descriptive language to provide interesting details. For example, in the poem the unicorn is “fat and sassy--almost smiling in repose--while it munches pomegranate seeds.” Read the poem a second time while students study the tapestry image.

Break (3 minutes)

Lead students through a series of motion activities, inviting them to imagine they are the unicorn. Ask them to imagine the size of their pen and walk around the outer edge. How would a unicorn walk? Imagine how a unicorn would move its head and horn. Lead the class in a “unicorn stretch” (downward dog in yoga) by lifting hips and standing with palms and feet to ground. They can “pedal” their feet, look up, and even try to walk a few paces in their unicorn pose. Invite them to find a new seat in the circle.

Describing Tapestries (15 min)

Take a few seconds to explain that tapestries are giant wall hangings made by sewing and weaving many colorful threads. *Unicorn in Captivity* is over 500 years old and from the Netherlands (point this out on the map). Share a series of tapestries with the class from the Unicorn Tapestries series. Tell them only the title of each one and ask them to imagine what is going on in the picture. What are the

men thinking as they go out to hunt the unicorn? What are they carrying? What are the dogs thinking? What do the woods look or smell like? What is the weather? Use questions to guide them into ever-increasing description. Write down their descriptions as a collective story inspired by the tapestry.

If desired, do the same exercise for each of the below tapestries.

Illustration (15 min)

Ask students: if you could make a tapestry, what would be in it? Would there be animals? People? Where would they be and what would they be doing? What details would you include? Would you hide little animals, like the frog in *Unicorn in Captivity*? What colors would you use?

Give each student a piece of legal-sized white paper and invite them to make their own tapestry. They should take their time, drawing lightly in pencil first and then coloring with colored pencil, marker, or crayon.

Poem and Tapestries:

While Riding an Elephant, I Think of Unicorns

Periyar National Park, India

By Aimee Nezhukumatathil

The elephant takes me deeper into the bamboo forest
and I start to worry about what other animals
might be hiding here. The stalks are so thick
and clustered in tight walls of green, it makes me

wonder about the tiger preserve nearby and how
this would make a lovely place to find
a dinner date, if I was a disgruntled tiger.
Or if I was a unicorn—and needed some peace

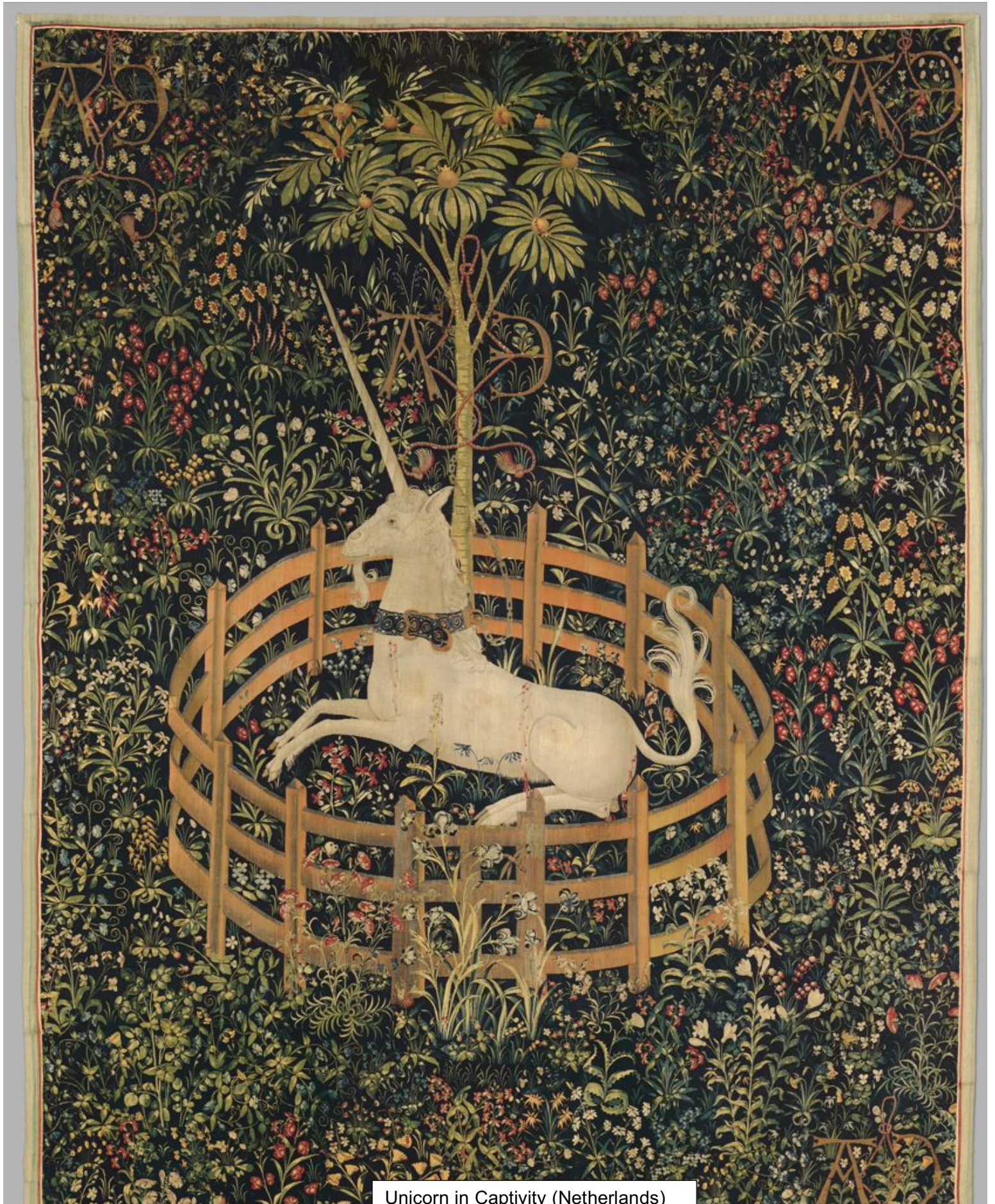
and privacy—this would definitely be the ideal spot.
And when I daydream about unicorns, I can't help
but think of that little frog in the right hand corner
of that famous medieval tapestry, *Unicorn*

in Captivity. That unicorn is fat and sassy—
almost smiling in repose—while it munches
on the pomegranate seeds that must have fallen
from the swollen tree under which it sits. The unicorn

seems oblivious to the wily frog in the lower
right-hand corner who hides in a bed of violets.
The lesson this frog teaches me here atop this elephant,
deep in this bamboo—is to not panic. Even when

you are so clearly out of place and nothing seems
familiar: enjoy the view. There will be plenty of time
for delicious and comfortable water-spots.
That frog doesn't know he will be part of

what will be history's most memorable image
of the unicorn. Instead, he just sits there,
in his wee wool-warp, silk and gilt wefts, enjoying
the view, grateful for the fields of flower finery.



Unicorn in Captivity (Netherlands)



The Hunters Enter the Wood (from the Unicorn Tapestries)



The Mystic Capture of the Unicorn (from the Unicorn Tapestries)



Fragment of a tapestry from Switzerland