

Art, Memory, and Creative Resistance: Teaching the Holocaust through Charlotte Salomon's *Life? or Theater?*

Time Allocation

- This unit includes seven lessons, averaging 30-45 minutes each, depending on pacing, discussion length, and selected activities.
- While individual lessons may be adapted and taught independently, we recommend teaching at least lessons 1-3 sequentially to provide students with the historical and biographical foundation necessary to fully engage with the curriculum and achieve its main learning outcomes.

Audience

9th -12th grade (some lessons in this unit could be adapted for 7th – 8th grade)

Student Outcomes

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

- Understand how Nazi policies and the rise of antisemitism affected daily life for Jewish individuals in Germany.
- Analyze artworks from *Life? or Theater?* using visual and textual evidence to support interpretation.
- Describe how Charlotte Salomon's work reflects the relationship between historical events and the individual's experience of those events.
- Interpret how Charlotte Salomon uses image, text, and narrative structure to represent memory, identity, and personal experience.
- Reflect on the role of artistic expression as a way of interpreting, responding to, and making meaning from lived experience.

Additional lesson-specific student outcomes are outlined within the instructional materials for each lesson throughout the unit.

California Standards Alignment

World History, Culture, and Geography: The Modern World (Grade 10)

- **CA HSS 10.5** – Students analyze the rise of totalitarian regimes, including Nazi Germany, and the effects of Nazi policies on Jewish communities.
- **CA HSS 10.8** – Students analyze the causes, course, and effects of World War II, including the Holocaust and its impact on individuals and communities.

Historical and Social Sciences Analysis Skills (*Grades 9–12*)

- **Chronological and Spatial Thinking 1** – Students compare the present with the past, evaluating the consequences of past events and decisions and determining lessons that were learned.
- **Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View 2** – Students distinguish between primary and secondary sources and evaluate credibility, perspective, and evidence.
- **Historical Interpretation 1** – Students show how events and issues can be interpreted from multiple historical perspectives.

California Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (*Grades 9–10*)

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1** – Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2** – Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7** – Integrate quantitative or technical analysis with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9** – Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1** – Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues.

California Visual Arts Standards (*Grades 9–12*)

- **VA:Re7.2.HSI** – Analyze how one’s understanding of the world is affected by experiencing visual imagery.
- **VA:Re8.1.HSI** – Interpret an artwork or collection of works, supported by relevant and sufficient evidence found in the work and its various contexts.
- **VA:Cn11.1.HSI** – Describe how knowledge of culture, traditions, and history may influence personal responses to art.

Acknowledgment

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Context

This curriculum invites students to explore the work of Charlotte Salomon through close observation, inquiry, and comparison with historical sources. Centered on her visual narrative *Life? or Theater?*, the lessons examine how personal memory, lived experience, and historical events are interpreted and expressed through art. Students analyze selected artworks, develop evidence-based interpretations, and deepen their understanding through engagement with primary and secondary sources, connecting individual experiences to broader historical contexts.

Teaching Strategies

Guided Visual Inquiry

Most lessons in this curriculum use a Guided Visual Inquiry approach adapted from Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and related inquiry routines commonly used in history education. Students will closely observe visual sources, develop interpretations grounded in evidence, and engage with one another's ideas before receiving additional historical context.

Teachers facilitate discussion using three core prompts:

- What is going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

Historical sources and contextual information are then introduced to deepen and refine student understanding. Teachers may use [this VTS resource](#) for practical guidance on facilitating this approach.

In some activities, teachers may also invite students to identify questions or areas of curiosity using inquiry routines such as *See–Think–Wonder*. Teachers may use [this resource from Facing History & Ourselves](#) for more guidance.

Art as a Historical Source

Throughout this unit, students approach Salomon's work not only as art, but also as a primary source: like diaries, letters, and other firsthand accounts, her paintings provide insight into how she experienced, interpreted, and represented the world around her. This approach invites students to consider how history can be understood not only through traditional historical documents, but also through artwork, images, and personal narratives.

Access to Charlotte Salomon's Work

Salomon's work is preserved by the Jewish Museum Amsterdam and is [accessible through a digital platform provided by the Jewish Cultural Quarter](#). Teachers may use this resource to explore the [full collection of *Life? or Theater?*](#) and select additional materials to support instruction, as appropriate for their classroom context.

Sensitive Content and Instructional Framing

The life and work of Charlotte Salomon include deeply complex and sensitive themes. In addition to the historical context of Nazi persecution and the Holocaust, Salomon's biography reflects personal experiences of trauma, including multiple suicides within her family and other forms of psychological distress. Some scholarship also discusses experiences of abuse within her family. These aspects are part of the broader biographical record but are **not the focus of this curriculum** and are **not necessary for achieving the learning objectives of these lessons**.

Teachers should be aware that students independently exploring *Life? or Theater?* or related materials may encounter references to these topics.

It is recommended that teachers:

- Preview materials in advance
- Curate selections intentionally
- Provide clear framing and boundaries for inquiry
- Offer students support and options if they encounter or wish to discuss difficult content

Due to the sensitive nature of the artwork and its broader biographical context, this curriculum is recommended for students in grades 9–12. Select lessons may be adapted for use with grades 7–8 at the teacher’s discretion and with appropriate framing.

Teachers seeking guidance on adapting the curriculum for different grade levels, classroom settings, or instructional goals are encouraged to schedule a curriculum consultation with the [JFCS Holocaust Center](#).

Differentiation

- Provide guided questions, sentence starters, or vocabulary support for English learners
- Allow students to respond through discussion, drawing, or written reflection
- Use pair or small-group discussion before whole-class sharing
- Provide printed image details, enlarged visuals, or read-aloud supports as needed
- Adjust the length or complexity of written responses
- Offer extension activities that invite deeper analysis of historical context, symbolism, or artistic interpretation for accelerated learners

Assessment

Students will maintain an ongoing journal throughout the unit. The journal serves as both a formative assessment and a summative assessment.

Journal entries will include:

- Responses to guiding questions
- Reflections on visual and textual sources
- Interpretations from each lesson

The journal provides evidence of students’ ability to:

- Analyze visual material
- Connect individual experiences to historical context
- Support interpretations with evidence

This unit includes a Culminating Assessment, which offers three options for possible final assessments.

Materials and Lesson Structure

Each lesson is accompanied by a corresponding slide deck, provided in both PowerPoint and Google Slides formats. Please note that while both versions contain the same content, the PowerPoint version includes enhanced animation features and is the preferred format when available.

Lessons that include gallery walks or small-group image or document analysis activities provide full-page versions of the materials for printing. Teachers may use these resources for classroom display, small-group activities, or student handouts.

- [Teacher’s Guide for Charlotte Salomon, *Life? or Theater?*](#), provides essential background on Salomon, including key biographical context, historical background, and central themes in *Life? or Theater?*, to support teaching the lessons.
- [Glossary](#), for introducing key terminology and building background knowledge.
- [Lesson 1 – Introducing Charlotte Salomon: Life, Art, and Story](#), introduces Salomon and her work *Life? or Theater?*. Students learn key background and begin to consider how art can reflect personal and historical experience. (40-45 minutes).
- **Lesson 1 Slide Deck** [[PowerPoint](#) | [Google Slides](#)]
- [Lesson 2 – “My Whole Future Lies Before Me”: The Impact of Antisemitism on Charlotte Salomon’s Teenage Life](#), examines Salomon’s early life and the effects of antisemitism following the Nazi rise to power. Students analyze images to explore how these changes shaped her experiences as a student. (40-45 minutes).
- **Lesson 2 Slide Deck** [[PowerPoint](#) | [Google Slides](#)]
- [Lesson 3 – Witnessing History: Experiencing Historical Change Through Charlotte Salomon’s Eyes](#), explores how key historical developments are reflected in Salomon’s work. Students analyze images to understand how individuals experience and interpret historical change in real time. (40-45 minutes).
- **Lesson 3 Slide Deck** [[PowerPoint](#) | [Google Slides](#)]
- [Lesson 4 – Culture Under Constraint: The Kulturbund](#), examines how the *Jüdischer Kulturbund* is represented in Salomon’s work. Students engage with a sequence of images and texts to explore how cultural life continued under restriction. (40-45 minutes).
- **Lesson 4 Slide Deck** [[PowerPoint](#) | [Google Slides](#)]
- [Lesson 5 – Historical Turning Point: Kristallnacht](#), examines how Salomon represents historical events through art by pairing paintings from *Life? or Theater?* with primary sources related to Kristallnacht. (30-40 minutes)
- **Lesson 5 Slide Deck** [[PowerPoint](#) | [Google Slides](#)]
- [Lesson 6 – Painting as Survival: Art and the Search for Self](#), explores the role art plays in Charlotte Salomon’s life and how she uses artistic creation to understand herself and her experiences. (30-40 minutes).
- **Lesson 6 Slide Deck** [[PowerPoint](#) | [Google Slides](#)]

- **Lesson 7– Art, Memory, and Creative Resistance**, invites students to reflect on the themes of the unit and consider how art can function as a form of memory, identity, and creative resistance. (25-30 minutes).
- **Lesson 7 Slide Deck** [[PowerPoint](#) | [Google Slides](#)]
- **Culminating Assessment** offers three options for possible unit’s final assessments.

Historical Background and Supplemental Teaching Resources

For a thorough introduction to the Holocaust, teachers may choose one or more of the following resources based on students’ prior knowledge, grade level, and available time.

- **Introduction to the Holocaust:** This 9-minute video by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum outlines key events, actors, and the broader context of Nazi persecution leading to the Holocaust. It is appropriate for students with limited prior knowledge and may also be used as a brief refresher or review for students with previous learning on the subject.
- **Holocaust Timeline Activity:** This hands-on activity from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as an alternative to the introductory video. Using a multi-layered wall timeline, students examine the relationship between Nazi policies, World War II, historical events, and individual experiences during the Holocaust. Through discussion and analysis, students explore how historical events unfold over time and consider their impact on both targeted groups and individual lives.
- **Remember the Children – Daniel’s Story:** This short, animated video by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum presents the Holocaust through the perspective of a child. The narrative is constructed from multiple historical experiences and is intended to reflect a range of children’s lives during this period. **This is a composite narrative. It does not represent a single individual but draws on multiple accounts.** This resource may be especially useful for middle school teachers who wish to adapt selected lessons from this curriculum for younger learners.

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