Smithsonian
Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Integrating Social Studies and the Visual Arts

Sample "Learning to Look" Strategies

All images used in this document can be found by searching here: http://americanart.si.edu/search/search_artworks.cfm

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Observation vs. Interpretation

Have students fill out this chart, separating what they can see in the artwork from what they can infer based on that observable evidence. Use their completed charts to spark a classroom discussion of the artwork and its representation of the historical event or era.

Observation	Interpretation
Final Reading:	

Example:

Charles Willson Peale
Mrs. James Smith and Grandson
1776

Observation	Interpretation
Older woman, young boy The two people stand close together, her arm around his shoulders Boy wears bright clothes, pattern of vines on his vest Woman wears dark and simple clothing Boy points to a book that reads, "To be, or not to be"	Family members, grandmother and grandson Boy represents youth, future, new growth Woman represents past Book often a symbol of education, quote may refer to status of colonies in year this was painted
Final Reading: The figures in this painting symbolize the past and future of what many hoped would become a new nation. The Shakespeare quotation asks the question, "Should we or should we not declare revolution?"	

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Dividing up the artwork

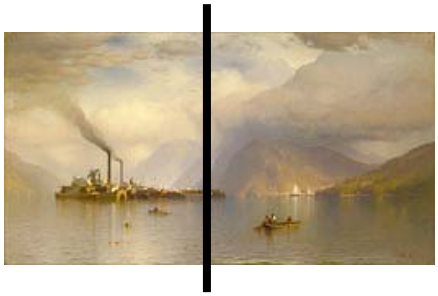
It is often helpful to divide up an artwork in some way when introducing it to students. This helps to simplify images that might otherwise be overwhelming and encourages students to observe detail. In addition, it can demonstrate how misleading it can be to look at only part of the story being told. In this example, a detail shows a strong superhero figure that may conjure such adjectives as strong and protective. Put back in context, this figure's intent is revealed to be more threatening in nature; this American figure is imposing a traditional Japanese setting. Students can begin to use the image and the title of the picture to draw on the emotions of Japanese-Americans at the time of internment camps.

detail

Roger Shimomura
Diary: December 12, 1941

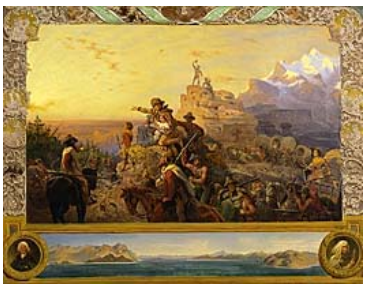
By moving from the part to the whole, students can practice revising their perceptions based on new evidence.

There are many ways to divide an artwork. Some will work better physically cut into halves or quadrants. With others it may be helpful to divide them thematically, perhaps separating figures from context. For example, Samuel Colman's *Storm King on the Hudson* naturally divides itself vertically in two: the left hand side representing new industrialization and the right hand side representing old ways of life.



Samuel Colman
Storm King on the Hudson

Emanuel Leutze's busy canvas, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, is best divided into three thematic categories: figures, landscape, and borders. Each tells the story of manifest destiny in its own way and are strengthened when the class reconnects them.



Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze
Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way

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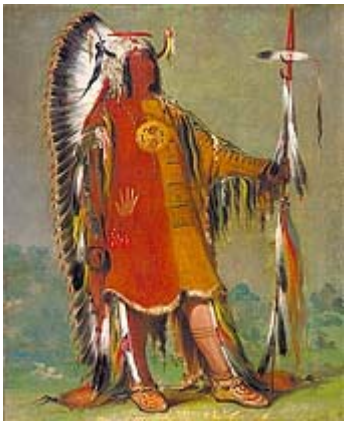
5 ‘W’s and an ‘H’

Artworks are primary resources in the same way that letters, diaries, and other textual sources are. Historical context is extremely important to the “reading” of these resources. To get the whole picture, select a work of art and assign your students to research the answers to the simple questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how.

Example:



George Catlin
Máh-to-tóh-pa, Four Bears, Second Chief, in Full Dress
1832

Who: Four Bears, an important and widely popular Mandan Chief

What: This painting shows George Catlin’s favorite subject in full dress. Each element of clothing is a mark of status and accomplishment awarded to him by the Mandan nation. For example, each eagle feather represents a victory in battle and the hand on his robes symbolizes a time he touched an enemy—a mark of great bravery.

When: When Catlin painted Four Bears in 1832, the United States Congress had passed the Indian Removal Act just two years prior. At that time, the Mandan tribe was not yet effected, but many tribes east were suffering from the devastation of migration, which brought with it small pox epidemics, as well as conflict from settlers moving west. This created pressures on Indian cultures to adapt or perish. Catlin portrayed the nobility of these still-sovereign peoples, but he was aware that he painted in sovereignty’s twilight.

Where: Mandan village in what is now North Dakota

Why: Catlin believed that American Indians were a dying race. He sought to document their cultures in image and text. This included their chiefs, leaders, regalia, etc.

How: The journey west represented a great challenge to Catlin, but he developed a system for painting hundreds of oil paintings in the field. He used precut canvas, thin layers, selective detail, and other strategies to capture as much of Indian life on canvas as he could while living with them.

Information taken from: http://catlinclassroom.si.edu

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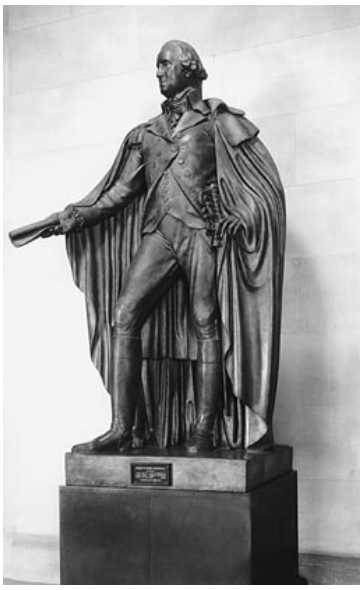
Matching Text and Image

Matching an image to a complementary excerpt can help students deepen their understanding of a person, event or concept and will help build up their skill at making connections. Also, some students may respond more to an image than they would to text on its own. A wide variety of primary sources are easily available online.

In this example, a classically-influenced sculpture of George Washington resigning his military commission is matched with an excerpt from his speech accepting the military appointment in 1775:



Excerpt from George Washington's speech to Congress on his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army; June 15, 1775:

Though I am truly sensible of the high honor done me in this appointment, yet I feel great distress from a consciousness that my abilities and military experience may not be equal to the extensive and important trust. However, as the Congress desire it, I will enter upon the momentous duty, and exert every power I possess in their service and for the support of the glorious cause. I beg they will accept my most cordial thanks for this distinguished testimony of their approbation.

But lest some unlucky event should happen unfavorable to my reputation, I beg it may be remembered by every gentleman in the room that I this day declare, with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with.

Sample Questions

- What can we learn about George Washington from each source? Are they consistent with one another?
- What does the speech tell us about how Washington wanted to be perceived?
- How does his representation in the statue, sculpted almost seventy years later, compare to the image created by the speech?

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