

Eloquent Images

Using Art To Teach American History

By Debra Michlewitz

History is a great story, and it requires a great storyteller. Art can help every teacher become that storyteller.

History or current events—history in the making—inspire art. Pablo Picasso's (1881–1973) paintings reflect the events in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, from the brutal images of his *Guernica*, a mural commemorating innocent victims of the Spanish Civil War, and his *Weeping Woman* of 1937 (right) to *Plante des tomates*, depicting a tomato plant on a wrought-iron window bearing luscious round fruit, which Picasso painted after the Allies marched into Paris at the end of World War II. The Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746–1828) tells a tale of resistance and death during the Napoleonic Wars in his *Shootings of May Third, 1808*. Art attempts to make sense of what often defies easy analysis. It offers complex answers to students who too often have heard simple ones.

Picasso, a painter who is still difficult to read, makes students think hard. He awakens the art critic in all of them. His weeping women are not literal portraits, and students are quick to note every departure from reality: noses shown in profile and straight on, displaced eyes, fragmented faces. What is the point? I turn my profile to the class and then

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face the students head on. I ask them in what way Picasso is depicting the truth. What do they have to do in order to see me the way they see one of Picasso's women? And what truth does that way of seeing reveal about everyone? With enough time, students can create their own portraits of weeping women or self-portraits. I've enjoyed the ones my students have drawn of me.

Students bring this questioning approach to historical paintings as we study

American history. The American Revolution and our young nation's quest for a heritage inspired many paintings that focus on the narrative elements of an event. Students start their study by looking at the work of Benjamin West (1738–1820). *The Death of General Wolfe* (opposite page) depicts the Battle of Quebec during the French and Indian War, showing figures who could be classical heroes in 18th-century dress. But it fell to West's student, Connecticut-born John Trumbull (1756–1843), to create heroic American history paintings. When students look at Trumbull's painting *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec* (opposite page), which is set early in the American Revolution, they quickly grasp how Trumbull, an ardent patriot, appropriates West's iconography to promote the American Revolution. My students think Trumbull's painting is great propaganda for the American cause.

Students look at thematic and historical aspects of both paintings, identifying the artistic devices that reinforce the



YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, TRUMBULL COLLECTION

(Opposite) Weeping Woman by Pablo Picasso.

(Above) The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec by John Trumbull.

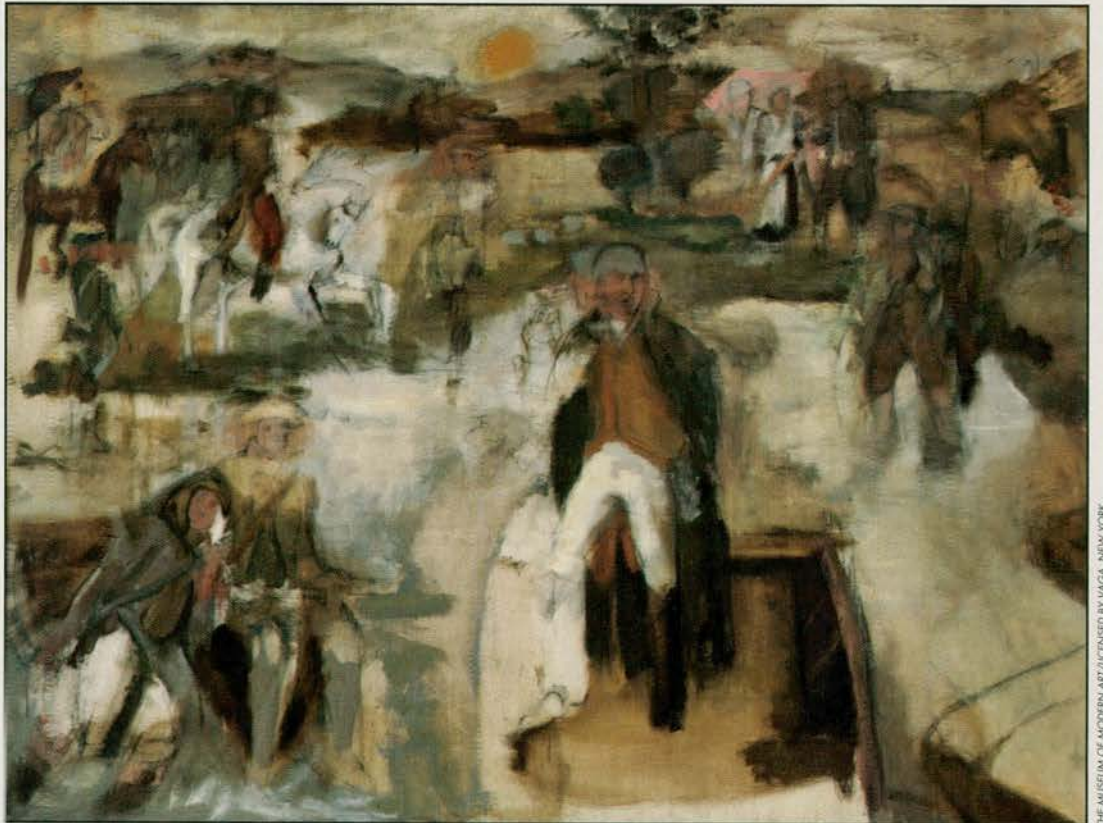
(Right) The Death of General Wolfe by Benjamin West.



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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF JOHN STEWART KENNEDY, 1851



THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

(Top) *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze. (Above) *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Larry Rivers. (Right) *George Washington at Princeton (detail)* by Charles Willson Peale. (Top right) *General George Washington Before the Battle of Trenton* by John Trumbull.



YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, GIFT OF THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI IN CONNECTICUT

THE WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION, COURTESY OF THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

drama on the canvas: turbulent skies, diagonal compositional elements, and moody palettes. They then write historical analyses of the paintings, discussing the way in which the historical events are depicted and speculating about the reasons for the artists' choices. Some students, using stick figures, try their hand at creating their own representations of historical events. They decide who would be participating in the event (and who would not), how the actors would be arranged, and the exact moment to portray.

Next, students “read” portraits of George Washington to gain a deeper understanding of our first president. Pictures of Washington often portray both the man and the historical moment on a single canvas. Students comment on the differences between Charles Willson Peale’s full-length portrait of *George Washington at Princeton*, painted in 1779 (left), and John Trumbull’s *General George Washington Before the Battle of Trenton*, from 1792 (above). They learn that Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828) painted more than 60 versions of George Washington the president, depicting a reserved, self-contained man at the same time as he rendered inspiring homage to Washington. (See the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington, page 7.) When I ask my students why Stuart painted the same face in the same way so many times, I give them a broad hint: Stuart called these paintings his “hundred dollar bills.” They laugh.

Students compare two versions of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Emanuel Leutze’s 1851 history painting with Larry Rivers’s 1953 version of the same event (opposite).

Setting the Scene

Paintings or other images can often be used to engage students in a lesson that involves a complicated train of events. For example, at a Gilder Lehrman Institute Summer Seminar at Brown University, we discussed the precedent George Washington established for the executive branch's enforcement of law, specifically during the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794, and I later adapted this discussion for my history class.

Frederick Kemmelmeyer's (1788-1816) *Washington Reviewing the Western Army at Fort Cumberland, Maryland*, provides an introduction to the lesson. Without telling students the name of the picture, I ask them what details in the painting might help them identify the historical moment and how they could try to confirm their surmises.

I next distribute excerpts from James Thomas Flexner's *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Little, Brown, 1994) to give them more information about the critical issues involved in the Whiskey Rebellion.

It occurred Flexner tells us, when "foreign problems were...quiescent. But at home trouble broke loose. The ostensible cause was an excise tax on whiskey.... The legislation was accepted everywhere but on the frontier." On the following pages, Flexner offers a wonderful narrative which, with the aid of a mini-dictionary prepared by the teacher to assist with the challenging vocabulary, can be relished by the students. It makes for excellent reading aloud or silently. Finally, copies of Washington's letters to Thomas Jefferson, his secretary of state, and Alexander Hamilton, his secretary of the treasury; the actual proclamation asserting executive branch authority to enforce the Whiskey Tax; and a cover letter bemoaning the inadequacies of the Postal Service and the need to send the proclamation by messenger—directions to Monticello included—can be excerpted from *The Writings of George Washington from Original Manuscript Sources: 1745-1799* (available online) and dis-

tributed. The students now have a moment of history spread out on their desks.

Once the event and the significance of Washington's action are clear, the class can discuss the importance of this precedent. Another component is the clause in Article II, Section 3 of the Constitution which states that the president "shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed." This gives students the information they need to understand and comment on Washington's action. As a final application, the class can do research about executive enforcement of laws in our history. For example, President Dwight David Eisenhower's actions at Little Rock, Ark., in September 1957, when he sent federal troops to enforce a court order for the desegregation of the local high school; and the federal actions at Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993, when a fire in a compound held by a religious group known as the Branch Davidians resulted in the deaths of more than 80 people.



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF EDGAR WILLIAM AND BERNICE CHRYSLER GARRSCH, 1963.

Washington Reviewing the Western Army at Fort Cumberland, Maryland, by Frederick Kemmelmeyer.



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, ARTHUR HOPPOCK HEARN FUND, 1950; ESTATE OF GRANT WOOD/LICENCED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

(Above) The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere by Grant Wood.
 (Right) John Brown Going to His Hanging by Horace Pippin.



COURTESY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA, JOHN LAMBERT FUND.



THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

(Above) *The County Election* by George Caleb Bingham.
 (Right) *Election Night* by Jack Levine. (Opposite) *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* by Ben Shahn.

Students are often familiar with the Leutze version since the gallant general sailing to victory is reproduced on many schoolroom walls (though they might not be aware that the actual crossing took place in the dead of night during a blizzard). “But what is Rivers trying to say about America?” students ask. Comparing these two paintings leads to spirited discussions of the meaning of patriotism then and now.

Other presidents have also been rendered by various artists. The portraits of Abraham Lincoln tell human and engaging stories about the man, the myth, and the president. Photography (which was then a new medium) adds another interesting dimension to students’ appreciation of Lincoln. When they compare an 1860 photograph by Alexander Hesler with one taken in 1864 by Matthew Brady, they see the terrible suffering etched on Lincoln’s face, and they understand the toll the war took on Lincoln personally. The 20th-century American artist, Robert Indiana (b. 1928), takes an entirely different approach to presidential portraiture. His symbolic portraits, like the one of Jimmy Carter, which proclaims *An Honest Man in the White House*, use words and facts to make a portrait that is reminiscent of a commercial logo. Students can use this technique to create portraits of any president or other historical



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figure, choosing and incorporating dates, place names, colors, maps to help define the person.

Many important 19th- and 20th-century American artists abandoned the tradition of patriotic narrative painting in favor of an art involving social and political commentary. For example, Grant Wood’s (1892–1942) *The Midnight*



WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART / © ESTATE OF BEN SHAHN / LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

Ride of Paul Revere (see page 17) and Horace Pippin's (1888–1946) *John Brown Going to His Hanging* (see page 17) lead students to questions about the artist's attitude toward the event depicted. They find Wood's aerial view of a tiny Paul Revere in a doll-like landscape particularly intriguing. And they wonder about the anger that Ben Shahn (1898–1969) often reveals in his portrayals of contemporary events and issues. What exactly is he criticizing in his *Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti* (see page 19), for example? In anticipation of Election Day, I have shown my classes George Caleb Bingham's (1811–1879) *The County Election* and Jack Levine's (b. 1915) cynical *Election Night* (see page 18). The Bingham, with its detailed,



vigorous, and admiring portrayal of the electoral process, makes for a fascinating contrast with Levine's painting of rather debauched looking people who seem to be celebrating in a night club.

Other types of paintings lead students to reflect on class differences and the daily lives of ordinary people in 19th- and early 20th-century America. Comparing Maurice Prendergast's (1859–1924) *Central Park* and John Sloan's (1871–1951) depictions of the elevated train and the backyards of tenements, for instance in *Sixth Avenue Elevated at Third Street*, make these differences very clear. Paintings by Eastman Johnson (1824–1906) form an extended text about many aspects of the daily life and aspirations of African-American slaves and newly freed slaves and provide an important gloss on the primary sources of that era. *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* (above), for example, can be seen as a moving illustration for the Emancipation Proclamation. Winslow Homer's (1836–1910) *The Veteran in a New Field* (opposite), depicting a Civil War soldier's return to farming, makes a fitting illustration of the sentiments expressed in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. The 60 panels in Jacob Lawrence's (1917–2000) *The Migration of the Negro*, convey the 20th-century experiences of African Americans who left their lives in the rural South to become part of the urban culture of the North. (See opposite page, top.)

The remaining problem is identifying and locating the art, but, in fact, there are now many sources:

- The postcard racks at museums offer some solutions.
- Old, new, and discarded history textbooks are a valuable resource.
- Museum Web sites often link to mini-galleries that can provide virtual visits if the museum is off your beaten track.
- Art is posted all over the Internet. Searches using artists' names and subject keywords usually yield good results.
- The University of Virginia at xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/Field/intro.html showcases Erastus Salisbury Field's (1805–1900) *The Historical Monument of the American Republic*. The painting allegorically recounts the history of the nation on the occasion of its centennial. It depicts 10 towers covered with historical allusions and details. An essay explicates the painting. It is a wonderful site.
- Many great historical paintings hang in local and state historical societies. I'm currently waiting for a postcard depicting Peter Rothermel's (1812–1895) *Banishment of Roger Williams*.
- An invaluable resource is *Index to Reproductions of American Paintings*, a two-volume work by Lyn Wall Smith and Nancy Dustin Wall Mouri, which indexes paintings in various categories. For example, the American West, historical subjects, portraits, and genre works. Citations direct you to other sources where the paintings are reproduced. It is published by Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, N.J., 1977.



THE PHELPS COLLECTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, BEQUEST OF MISS ADELAIDE MARTIN DE BRISTOL (1876-1947), 1947.

(Opposite) *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* by Eastman Johnson. (Above) *The Migration of the Negro Panel No. 3* by Jacob Lawrence. Lawrence's full caption to the panel reads: "In every town Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go North and enter into Northern industry." (Left) *The Veteran in a New Field* by Winslow Homer.

■ Many schools still have slide sets produced by the Center for Humanities. There are two carousel trays called "Painting in America" and a third one called "The American Dream." The selection provides many excellent choices.

Paintings can fulfill many different pedagogical purposes. They can illuminate historical events and characters and bring them to life. Paintings and other images can also make students aware of a point of view—the artist's commentary—that enriches and modifies the history they find in

books and documents.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, artistic vision provided a wonderful and much-needed moment for my classes. I showed them a rendering in the *New York Times* of *Towers of Light* by John Bennett, Gustavo Benevardi, Julian La Verdiere, and Paul Myoda, a huge light projection that will be created on the site of the World Trade Center towers. The spirit in the classroom changed. The image expressed feelings and desires and freed students to think of a better future, the best goal of history. □