

American Revolutionary Leaders In Art

Final Project  
Teaching American History

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## **Introduction:**

Most high school students access history through the lectures of their teachers or the words in their textbooks. Both media are a mixed bag. Some teachers can make history come alive, but some present an overview of dates, events, people and places that is superficial at best and overwhelming at worst. As Gordon Wood has said, to most students the past is a foreign country. What can educators do to offer another way into the past? One way is through art and teaching students visual literacy. As Peter Gibbons notes in his lectures, past heroes are often wooden and unreal to those of the present day. This is particularly true of the leaders of the American Revolution who lived before the invention of photography. To give contemporary students a ‘look’ at those men and women, we can turn to American portraiture of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not only do these portraits show what these previously one dimensional men and women looked like, they can also tell us how they wanted to be portrayed, what the attitudes of the times were to class and gender, and provide insight into their individual characters.

## **“American Revolutionary Leaders Through Art” Teaching Unit**

“American Revolutionary Leaders Through Art” is a five-day teaching unit that aims to familiarize students with seven Revolutionary leaders while learning how to view and analyze portrait paintings. Students will be required to choose one of the seven leaders, research biographical information about that person, analyze a portrait and quotes from the person in order to gain insight into the leader’s personality and character. Students will then be required to write a 5-paragraph essay about this leader.

This unit may be taught after teaching about the Boston Tea Party, Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill and the Continental Congress. It can also be used as an introduction to studying the writing and signing of the Declaration Of Independence.

**Objectives:**

The objectives of this unit “American Revolutionary Leaders Through Art” are:

1. To instruct students in the components of visual literacy. At the end of the lessons, students will be able to analyze a painting by considering pose, expression and setting.
2. To familiarize students with the way different political leaders were portrayed by examining famous American portraits. Students should be able to recognize and distinguish these leaders by their appearance and their character.
3. To enable students to see the Revolutionary leaders as people through an analysis of the leaders’ personality and character as seen in their portrait, quotes and biographical information.
4. To enable students to recognize how the social attitudes towards class and gender are reflected in these portraits. Students will have a renewed appreciation for who and what was meant by the American ideals of equality.

**Standards:**

This unit will incorporate the following:

Massachusetts Social Studies Framework # 5.17: Describe the life and achievements of important leaders during the Revolution and early years of the United States.

ELA Standard # 19: Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization and sufficient detail.

ELA Standard # 24: Students will gather information from a variety of sources analyze and evaluate the quality of the information they obtain and use it to answer their own questions.

Art Standard #10: Integrate knowledge of dance, music, theater and visual arts and apply the arts to learning in other disciplines.

### **Historical Background:**

In the Colonial Era, art was mostly created along the European style. Traditionally, the subjects of English portraiture were royalty, nobility, and the clergy thus indicating the highest ranks of the day. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, middle class patrons began to commission portraits that emphasized individual character and likeness. Portraits in the American colonies tended to combine both. Artists attempted to capture both the sitter's likeness as well as his social class through clothing, settings and symbols. As trade increased between England and the American colonies, a new wealthy merchant and gentleman farmer class could afford to have their portraits painted. They "...often ordered portraits to celebrate a specific event such as getting married, receiving an inheritance, or achieving a noteworthy office. Colonists also commissioned portraits to decorate formal rooms in their newly erected mansions to exchange as gifts of friendship or as tokens in memory of a family member. Portraits of children were especially important in an age when so many died before reaching adulthood."

By the 1760s, one painter stood out from the rest as the American master of portraiture-John Singleton Copley. He wanted to paint great history subjects like the large scenes that the European masters did, but in pre-Revolutionary America the demand was

overwhelmingly for portraits. The buildings in the new republic couldn't accommodate these grandiose pictures, which were usually quite large, and the Americans found scenes from classical history irrelevant. Also the Protestant colonists regarded biblical subjects suspiciously and the church played no role in commissioning such images. The newly wealthy in America wanted to be painted like the European aristocracy and demanded to use the same poses and props as they did. Copley was in great demand and intentionally avoided the politics of the time by painting both patriots and loyalists.

In this unit "American Revolutionary Leaders Through Art," students will analyze the Copley portraits of Paul Revere, Mercy Otis Warren, John Adams and Samuel Adams as well as the portraits of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin completed by various artists. Students will be introduced to the role that portraits played in colonial America. They will be introduced to the three tools the artist uses to capture a person's personality. They will also become aware of the use of symbolism in the paintings. For example, instead of being portrayed with paper and pen like the intellectual that she was, Mercy Otis Warren is posed with a climbing nasturtium plant that symbolizes nurturing. Obviously this was a more fitting setting for a woman than a library or grand villa.

Likewise, Paul Revere is painted in his work shirt in stark contrast to the portraits of those in the upper class. He is holding a silver teapot, which may refer to his craft or may be a political statement about tea. And he rests his elbows on a highly polished table, which implies that while Revere works with his hands, the product of his work is art. The fact that a working class man had his portrait painted indicates that he is an important figure. Such information is engaging, relevant and fun for students to discover.

Experience looking at fine art will improve students' visual literacy while breaking down fears or intimidation regarding their knowledge of art. Furthermore, the Copley portraits are currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and a field trip to the museum could be a culminating activity.

**Procedures:** (The following is a narrative description of the first lesson. The additional lessons with their assessments are attached as a separate document.)

Most high school students (and many non-art teachers) feel that art in general and 18<sup>th</sup> century portraiture in particular is something that they both cannot understand and do not find particularly interesting. When we begin this unit we encourage the students to express their reluctance to “analyze art”. We assure them that they can do it and they will become good at it. They don't believe us. Therefore the first lesson in this unit is designed to introduce the process of visual literacy by using a contemporary photograph of celebrities that students know. These include comedian Chris Rock, Michael Jackson and Bill Gates. With these images on the screen, students are asked to do a written brainstorm about the personality and character of the person portrayed. They are asked to write as many adjectives as they can about the celebrities.

Next they compare their lists with a partner and discuss. Finally the observations of the whole class are discussed and the teacher lists words and phrases on the board. Once this is complete, the teacher asks the class to group the observations into categories. For example, all of the comments about his clothes go into one category. All of the comments about the background are in another and so on. At the end of this lesson, the teacher explains that when we look at art, visual literacy is defined by an analysis of three

factors: pose, expression and setting. We tell the students that they have successfully done this and ask them to group their observations under pose, expression or setting. Students will then be assigned short biographical readings of the leaders that will be studied in the following lessons. Students will chose one of the leaders to research and learn more about them. They will analyze a portrait of this person as well as quotes and do biographical research that will culminate in a 5-paragraph essay.

### **Conclusion**

By the end of this unit, not only do students have a much deeper understanding of the leaders portrayed in these paintings, but they also have developed a language and procedure for analyzing any portrait. The portraits are a wealth of information of the Revolutionary leaders and their times; information students would not have tried to access before these lessons. The hope is that not only have these once wooden leaders ‘come alive’ for our students but that going forward they have the confidence and the ability to continue to look at history through art.

## American Revolutionary Leaders in Art Unit

### Lesson 1

Overview: This lesson focuses on introducing students to visual literacy to prepare them and make them comfortable with analyzing portraits. Students will look at photographs of famous people and brainstorm adjectives to describe the person's character, personality, and interests. Then students will be introduced to the three tools portrait artists use to convey meaning without words.

Objectives: Students will gain skills in visual literacy, practice finding visual evidence to support ideas, become familiar with artist techniques.

Materials Needed: AV Projector, PowerPoint of photographs, a photograph of a student or teacher (can come from a yearbook), student notebooks

#### Strategies:

**Introduction:** Ask students about their familiarity with taking photographs.

- ◆ Do they ever take photographs? Of What? Why do they take photographs?
- ◆ Has anyone ever had professional photograph taken of them?
- ◆ Did the photographer ask you to sit a certain way or look in a certain direction? Why did they do that?

Show photograph of person. What do we learn from portraits? Brainstorm answers.

Do professional photographs show the person with 100% accuracy? Can changes be made? Can moods be set? Can the photographer have a bias?

What is the purpose of portraits? Brainstorm ideas, present ideas of: ideal representation of person, communicate personality, character, interests

**Practice:** Show first slide of Chris Rock.

- ◆ In notebooks, students list 5 adjectives to describe this person. (5 minutes)
- ◆ Compare list with 1 neighbor. (5 minutes)
- ◆ As a class, make a list of adjectives on the board.

What evidence from the photograph support these adjectives? Make a list that corresponds to the adjective list.

**Artist Tools:** Show 2<sup>nd</sup> slide. Explain the 3 tools of the artist: pose, expression, setting. Explain the idea of symbolism. Show Chris Rock again. Why is there a brick background? What might it suggest about his personality?

**Practice #2:** Show slide of Michael Jackson

Make a list of adjectives and evidence to support it.  
Examine the pose, expression and setting. What do they convey about his personality?

**Practice #3:** Show slide of Bill Gates

Same as above.

**Conclusion:** Review the 3 tools of the artist. Introduce idea that in colonial and Revolutionary periods, there was no photography. All we have to learn about founding fathers is the portraits they had painted of them.

## American Revolutionary Leaders in Art Unit

### Lesson 2

Overview: Students will use the visual literacy skills from lesson 1 and apply them to painting portraits. This will be preparation for their own analysis of portraits of the founding fathers.

Objectives: Students will practice and improve visual literacy skills using portraits. Students will take steps at overcoming their feeling of inadequacy in looking at fine art.

Materials needed: AV projector, PowerPoint, portrait analysis worksheet, homework reading sheet

Strategies:

Review the three tools of the portrait artist.

Review the role portraits played in the colonial and Revolutionary periods.

Pass out portrait analysis worksheet. Have students only complete the top section of adjectives and evidence.

**Show slide 1 of Nathaniel Sparhawk.** Have students fill out the worksheet on their own.

**Show slide 2 of Mrs. Boylston.** Have students fill out the worksheet.

**Show slide 3 of Winslow Warren.** Same as above.

Go back to slide 1 and review student answers. Expand on their observations.

Sparhawk - showing full body = ego, pride, important  
- showing turned calf = a dancer = very cultured

Explain symbolism of background – Mrs. Boylston - countryside symbolizes her civility; statue symbolizes that she is cultured/refined, knowledgeable of the arts

Explain symbolism of pose – gentle, pale = doesn't work, upper class

Explain symbolism of expression – eyes make contact – personable, caring, etc.

Repeat review of student answers for slides 2 & 3.

Homework: Reading. Give students sheet with 7 Revolutionary War leaders and their brief biographies. Students have to choose a leader to research for the next class.

**Portrait Analysis  
Worksheet**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Make a list of adjectives and descriptions of the person's personality or character based on what is seen in the painting.

Slide 1

ADJECTIVES/DESCRIPTION

EVIDENCE FROM  
PAINTING

POSE:

EXPRESSION:

SETTING:

Slide 2

ADJECTIVES/DESCRIPTION

EVIDENCE FROM  
PAINTING

POSE:

EXPRESSION:

SETTING:

Slide 3

ADJECTIVES/DESCRIPTION

EVIDENCE FROM  
PAINTING

POSE:

EXPRESSION:

SETTING:

## American Revolutionary Leaders in Art Unit

### Lesson 3

Overview: Students will analyze a portrait and research the leader they have chosen to study. They will complete a worksheet in order to prepare for writing a 5-paragraph essay about the leader.

Objectives: Students will practice their visual literacy, research and critical thinking skills.

Materials needed: AV projector, PowerPoint, portrait analysis & research worksheet, homework reading sheet

Strategies:

Class will meet in the computer lab.

Students are divided into groups based upon the leader they have chosen to research.

Smaller groups of 2 or 3 are made and sit together at the computer.

The portrait analysis worksheet is handed out with quotes.

Explain the assignment.

With the AV projector, show the slides of the portraits one leader at a time. Students will analyze the portrait. Students not researching that leader will look for biographical information on-line to complete the rest of the worksheet. Rotate the leader portraits every 5 minutes.

Homework: Complete research and the worksheet.

## American Revolutionary Leaders in Art Unit

### Lesson 4

Overview: Students will use the information gathered for their worksheets to write a 5-paragraph essay about the leader.

Objectives: Students will practice their visual literacy, research and critical thinking and writing skills.

Materials needed: AV projector, PowerPoint, portrait analysis worksheet, homework reading sheet

Strategies:

Students return to computer lab and sit in their groups of 2-3.

Review the requirements of the essay.

Students begin to write their 5 paragraphs essay based on the information on their worksheet.

Essay requirements:

- ◆ Introduction – present the person studied with an overview of their accomplishments and introduce what the paper will present
- ◆ 2nd paragraph – biographical information based on research
- ◆ 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph – description of personality and character based on evidence from the painting
- ◆ 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph – views of the Revolution or personality based on analysis of the quotes.
- ◆ 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph – conclusion: accomplishments of the leader and student commentary: what do you think of this person? Would you have liked them and why?

Homework: Finish the essay.

## American Revolutionary Leaders in Art Unit

### Lesson 5

Overview: Students will share the information gathered and their analysis of the portraits with the class.

Objectives: Students will practice their oral communication skills and practice visual literacy skills.

Materials needed: AV projector, PowerPoint, portrait analysis worksheet, essays (last two are collected for assessment)

Strategies:

Show each portrait while students share their observations and analysis of each leader.

Show the slide of The Signing of the Declaration of Independence. Have students discuss their answers to the following questions.

- ◆ Is this painting giving an accurate portrayal of the signing? Why or why not?
- ◆ Who do you recognize? (point out the main leaders)
- ◆ Do their personalities come through?
- ◆ How are the leaders shown in relation to each other?
- ◆ What is the artist trying to say about Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, etc.?
- ◆ Who is missing and why?

Review role of portraiture for documenting people of the past.

Use student observations of the painting to set the stage for introducing a lesson on the writing of the Declaration and prepare students for in-depth study of the document.

**Portrait Analysis  
& Research Worksheet**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of person in portrait being studied \_\_\_\_\_

Make a list of adjectives and descriptions of the person's personality or character based on what is seen in the painting.

ADJECTIVES/DESCRIPTION

EVIDENCE FROM  
PAINTING

POSE:

EXPRESSION:

SETTING:

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**RESEARCH ON-LINE:**

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

What was their role in the Revolution? What were some of their accomplishments?

**QUOTES:**

Read the attached quotes from the person you are studying. Analyze the quotes.

Quote 1: What is the main idea in the quote? Do they sound angry/passionate/cynical?

Quote 2: What is the main idea in the quote? Do they sound angry/passionate/cynical?

Do the quotes match the personality you discovered in the painting? How or how not?

Review your answers on this sheet. What do you think about this person? Do you like them? Why or why not?

## Quotes

### **Ben Franklin:**

“The man who trades freedom for security does not deserve nor will he ever receive either.”

“There was never a good war, or a bad peace.”

### **George Washington:**

“If the freedom of speech is taken away then dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.”

“Associate with men of good quality if you esteem your own reputation. It is better to be alone than in bad company.”

### **Mercy Otis Warren:**

"Our situation is truly delicate & critical. On the one hand we are in need of a strong federal government founded on principles that will support the prosperity & union of the colonies. On the other we have struggled for liberty & made costly sacrifices at her shrine and there are still many among us who revere her name to much to relinquish (beyond a certain medium) the rights of man for the dignity of government."

“The rights of the individual should be the primary object of all governments.”

### **John Adams:**

“I must not write a word to you about politics, because you are a woman.”

“If we do not lay out ourselves in the service of mankind whom should we serve?”

“In politics the middle way is none at all.”

### **Sam Adams:**

"It does not require a majority to prevail, but rather an irate, tireless minority keen to set brush fires in people's minds."

"The Constitution shall never be construed... to prevent the people of the United States who are peaceable citizens from keeping their own arms."

"The liberties of our country, the freedom of our civil constitution, are worth defending against all hazards: And it is our duty to defend them against all attacks."

**Thomas Jefferson:**

“The rights of the individual should be the primary object of all governments.”

"Determine never to be idle. No person will have occasion to complain of the want of time who never loses any. It is wonderful how much may be done if we are always doing"

**Paul Revere:**

"He said to me, "We are now going towards your friends, and if you attempt to run, or we are insulted, we will blow your brains out." When we had got into the road they formed a circle, and ordered the prisoners in the center, and to lead me in the front."

"I knew what they were after; that I had alarmed the country all the way up, that their boats were caught aground, and I should have 500 men there soon. One of them said they had 1500 coming; he seemed surprised and rode off into the road, and informed them who took me, they came down immediately on a full gallop."

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