

Workshop 1

Visual Arts

Introduction

This workshop session introduces the analysis of visual art objects as a tool in the literature classroom. David Bjelajac, professor and art historian at George Washington University, uses the example of a John Singleton Copley* painting to help teachers enhance their reading of American literature texts.

By looking at two intellectual products from the same culture—the painting and excerpts from Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*—you will better understand the beliefs and values of late eighteenth-century America.

During the course of the session, you will learn how to search for visual art artifacts to help teach American literature. In the onscreen classroom, David discusses the discipline of art history and how he uses visual art artifacts in his own classroom. He provides high school teachers with ideas of how to read the Copley painting and suggests specific lesson plan ideas.

We then follow the onscreen teachers into the computer lab where they work with David and each other to find artifacts that supplement the themes and context of the literature they are currently teaching. Next, we follow Charley Barniskis—a teacher at Sandy High School in Sandy, Oregon—into his own high school classroom. We watch as he models a similar lesson with his students. Finally, we hear Charley’s reflections on his own teaching practices.

* indicates a reference in the Glossary.

Before the Session

Before watching the “Visual Arts” video, be sure to:

- Guide: Read the Visual Arts Reading.
- Video: Watch the *American Passages* episode “Spirit of Nationalism.” (The episode can be viewed on the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org. Click on “Video on Demand” or go to <http://www.learner.org/resources/series164.html> and click on the VoD icon next to the appropriate program title.)
- Web: Download the John Singleton Copley painting *Paul Revere* (serial #1491) from the *American Passages* archive site at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php.
- Literature: Read Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, parts I and II.

As you read, consider the following close reading questions. See the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix for instructions on effective close reading.

- What themes and societal issues raised in Franklin’s *Autobiography* reveal him to be an eighteenth-century man?
- It has been said that Franklin prided himself on the “clarity, smoothness, and brevity” of his writing. In what ways does his rhetorical style in the *Autobiography* reflect these elements? In what ways does it not?
- In what ways does Franklin’s *Autobiography* influence Jefferson’s writing of the *Declaration of Independence*?

Synopsis of David Bjelajac’s Presentation

- David begins by discussing the field of art history; by comparing different objects and works of art, these objects illustrate the stylistic progression from one time period to the next. David suggests how artists compose work that visually expresses social and political values, whether they intend to or not.
- David gives background information about the painter John Singleton Copley, then reads the painting *Paul Revere*. David points out the way that Copley’s *Paul Revere* is filled with signs, codes, and symbols that make it possible to read the painting like a text. In the process of this close reading and decoding, a viewer is afforded a moral statement about who Paul Revere was.
- After modeling the analysis of *Paul Revere*, David asks the onscreen teachers to do a close reading of another Copley painting, *Boy With a Squirrel*. He asks some pointed questions about the position of the boy in the portrait and the color in the painting to guide the teachers in their analyses. After their close reading of this painting, the teachers and David make connections to Franklin’s *Autobiography*.

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts

Facilitators:

- Before this workshop session, you will need to download the John Singleton Copley painting *Paul Revere* (serial #1491) from the *American Passages* archive and print out copies for all your participants. Be sure to print and copy the descriptive information that accompanies the image. (For further information on how to navigate the archive, see instructions in the front matter.)
- Begin the workshop by watching program 1: “Visual Arts” through the *American Passages* excerpted clip. Watch for approximately 11:30 minutes.
- Follow up with the discussion activity below. The discussion should take approximately 10 minutes.

Activity 1: Discussion of the Literary Movement

1. As a whole group, discuss what literature you have taught or are currently teaching from this literary movement. If you don't currently teach anything from this movement, how might you add it to your curriculum?

Other authors from *American Passages*’ “Spirit of Nationalism” for potential discussion:

- **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803–1882) Transcendentalist poet and essayist most commonly known for writing *Self-Reliance* and *The Divinity School Address*.
- **Thomas Jefferson** (1743–1826) Remembered mostly for his political career, which included holding the presidency of the United States, Jefferson authored the *Declaration of Independence*, a document that embodies the Enlightenment influence on the spirit of nationalism.
- **Susanna Rowson** (1762–1824) Writer, actress, and educator, Rowson wrote one of the first American novels; *Charlotte, A Tale of Truth*, is a sentimental and instructive romance.
- **Jonathan Edwards** (1703–1758) Theologian and philosopher, Edwards wrote sermons that illuminated his staunch belief in Calvinism.
- **Phillis Wheatley** (1753–1784) Kidnapped from Africa as a child, Wheatley lived with a Boston family who taught her English and Latin, and encouraged her talent for writing. Her book of poetry was one of the earliest texts published by an African American.
- **Margaret Fuller** (1810–1850) A key figure in the transcendental movement, Fuller expanded on the work of Emerson and other transcendentalists; she argued that women, like men, were inherently divine.
- **William Apess** (1798–1839) A Pequot Indian of partial white ancestry, Apess wrote *Eulogy of King Philip*.
- **J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur** (1735–1813) Born in France, Crevecoeur became a citizen of New York in 1765 under the name of J. Hector St. John. St. John’s *Letters From an American Farmer* provides an interesting, if somewhat biased, view of the early Republic.
- **Royall Tyler** (1757–1826) A lawyer, teacher, and writer, Tyler studied law in the office of John Adams; later in life, Tyler wrote the play *The Contrast*, produced in New York City.

For more information on these authors, visit the *American Passages* Web site at www.learner.org.

2. How did the Visual Arts Reading change or enhance your view of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* or other literary works you have read in this movement?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- Continue watching the video until the point where David Bjelajac finishes reading the first artifact (*Paul Revere*, serial #1491). Begin at the title First Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 9:30 minutes.
- Divide the session participants into groups of three and hand out the previously downloaded artifact. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 2: Reading the First Artifact

1. In your group, analyze the painting that your facilitator provides for you. First, make some initial observations about the artifact:

- How much of the figure of Paul Revere does Copley show in the portrait? How much extra space surrounds the figure? What is the effect of this extra space?
- Does the painting advertise the political or the personal importance of the subject?
- What do the clothing, furnishings, background, and angle and posture of the sitter say about his personality?

(Questions adapted from Sylvan Barnett's *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*.)

2. Next, read the artifact more closely; use the **CAATS** acronym below, along with the Visual Arts Reading and synopsis of David Bjelajac's lesson.

CAATS

Creator: Who created this artifact? What do we know about the person(s) who created it? How did it influence his/her life at the time it was created? Would the creator find relevant connections to the literature you are pairing with this artifact?

Assumptions: What do you know about the context of this artifact? What assumptions can you make based on prior information that you bring to this analysis?

Audience/User: Who was the audience for this object when it was originally created? What leads you to this assumption?

Time and Place: When and where was this artifact created?

Significance: Why is this artifact important? How does it help explain the literature you are teaching with it? Does the context of the artifact parallel the context of your literature?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- After discussing Copley's painting *Paul Revere*, spend five to seven minutes discussing the first two chapters of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Use the close reading questions from the Before the Session section as a starting point for discussion.
- Continue watching the video of David reading and making connections to Copley's *Boy With a Squirrel*. Begin at the title Second Artifact Reading and watch for approximately 8:30 minutes. Stop the video after this second artifact reading, before the title Lesson Planning.
- Then do the activity below. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 3: Connecting Literature to the Artifact

1. Whole-Group Discussion Questions:

- What is the first step that David Bjelajac takes with the onscreen teachers to discuss the fine art artifacts and their history?
- How does he move the teachers' discussion from the artifact analysis to connecting the artifact with the literature they are reading?
- What techniques does David use on-screen that help you as a viewer? Could you use these techniques in your own classroom?

2. Return to small groups. Begin to draw connections between the painting *Paul Revere* and Franklin's text. Use the following guiding questions:

- What important cultural metaphors do the language in the text and the images in the painting provide about ideas of nationalism?
- Franklin is well known for his virtues that appear in the *Autobiography*. What virtues does the painting reinforce?

Facilitators:

- Watch the Lesson Planning and In the Classroom portions of the video. Begin at the title Lesson Planning and watch for approximately 34:30 minutes.
- Then do the next activity. This activity should take approximately 20 minutes.

Activity 4: Classroom Strategies Discussion/Create Lesson Plan

1. Whole-Group Discussion Questions: You just watched Charley Barniskis apply what he had learned about connecting artifacts and literature to his own classroom. Take 10–15 minutes to discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the difficulties that arise when you use art in your classroom? What are the benefits?
- What strategies did Charley use to help his students do a close reading and analysis of the paintings?
- What methods did Charley use to help his students understand the contextual connections between the paintings and Franklin's *Autobiography*?

2. In your same small groups, brainstorm different literary movements/pieces of literature that you could use with the *Paul Revere* painting. What are some other visual art artifacts that would supplement the literature you are currently teaching?

Relating the Literary Movement to the Artifacts, cont'd.

Facilitators:

- Watch Charley Barniskis's reflective interview. Begin at the title Reflection and watch for approximately three minutes.
- Ask session participants to comment on what Charley felt worked in his classroom. Did this parallel what they thought worked as they were watching?

Building a Lesson Plan and Teaching With Artifacts

For the detailed six-step process for artifact selection, see the Teacher Resources section in the Appendix.

Homework

1. Create a lesson plan using a visual art artifact with a piece of literature you are currently teaching.

For example: Have your students do individual projects where they each select a painting or other piece of visual art that appeals to their senses. Have the students research the artists, the dates of the pieces, and the mediums. Then have them write responses to each of the following questions:

- What symbolism is used?
- How is perspective used?
- In what roles are people portrayed?
- What is left out of the composition?
- What does the information about the artist, the medium, the subject, and the composition tell you about the prevailing attitudes and conditions of the time period?

OR

Introduce your students to formal analysis.* (Use Sylvan Barnett's *A Short Guide To Writing About Art* for a good distinction between analysis and description.)

- Step 1: Ask your students to write down what they think differentiates formal analysis and description.
- Step 2: Divide your students into groups of three or four. Then pass out two different images—one painting and one photograph—to each group. Give them 20–25 minutes to write brief, collective analyses for each image.
- Step 3: Have each group read its brief analysis to the class. Have the other groups take detailed notes on what they agree with and/or disagree with for a follow-up discussion.

Share this lesson with fellow teachers at the next workshop session.

2. See next week's Before the Session section.

Building a Lesson Plan and Teaching With Artifacts, cont'd.

Artifacts and Literature Pairings: Visual Art Artifacts

The following visual art artifacts can be found in the *American Passages* archive at http://www.learner.org/amerpass/slideshow/archive_search.php. Enter the serial number to view a picture of the item and a detailed description.

Artifact and Serial

The Emancipation Group
(1875) (#1159)

At the Seaside
(1892) (#2576)

The Return of Ulysses
(1976) (#6715)

Literary Movement and Literature

Masculine Heroes:
Walt Whitman's
O Captain My Captain!

Regional Realism:
Kate Chopin's
The Awakening

Poetry of Liberation:
Derek Walcott's
Omeros

Teaching Tips

- In order to give the teachers a better understanding of art history, especially in relation to the cultural context of the two Copley paintings, David Bjelajac has the teachers read an excerpt from his text *American Art: A Cultural History* prior to class.
- If students do their own research on an artifact's historical period, or if the teacher provides students with a contextual art history reading before a lesson, the students will better understand the connections between the text and the artwork.
- A good teaching strategy that Charley Barniskis implements is the use of small groups. In this collaborative learning style, the classroom becomes more student-centered than teacher-centered. Students can arrive at a variety of theories and ideas about the text when the teacher takes a coaching approach rather than a didactic one. Charley also makes sure the students have time to "report out" to the larger group so that all ideas can be heard and discussed.

Notes

Session Reading

Visual Arts Reading

What do we mean by visual art artifacts?

The much-debated definition of the term “art” can be generally defined as the production of sounds, colors, forms, movements, or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty. Visual art artifacts, specifically, are art objects that appeal to the visual sense. Some examples are paintings, sculptures, and photographs.

Why are they useful to bring into a literature classroom?

According to David Bjelajac, “There’s a kind of dialogue between the visual and verbal arts. This interaction varies from historical context and period, from one to the next, but there is always this kind of dialogue between the verbal and visual throughout the course of history.” This dialogue between visual and verbal is highlighted when we pair a piece of art and a piece of literature that were both produced in the same era. For example, looking at a painting produced during the Harlem Renaissance alongside Langston Hughes’s poetry can enhance the understanding of cultural and literary ideas of that period; the same content and form might appear in both works, or the images in the painting may be reflected in the words of the poem.

Visual art artifacts and works of literature contain the same rhetorical possibilities: to describe, explain, narrate, and persuade. Students can learn that vision is not a passive act; rather, it is an intellectual and active process that can provide insights, queries, and solutions to challenging pieces of literature.

Contextualizing visual art artifacts and literary texts: The case of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*

Though best known for his aphorisms and inventions, Benjamin Franklin was also an influential writer and philosopher during the eighteenth century. The principles of reason, self-reliance, and individuality reflected in Franklin’s *Autobiography* were the guiding forces in the Enlightenment era. The American Enlightenment was a movement that grew out of the French and English Renaissances.

The *Autobiography*, begun in England in 1771, was interrupted by Franklin’s numerous diplomatic and civic duties and was not continued until 1788. He was still in the process of writing it until his death in 1790. Franklin’s writing is a departure from contemporary Puritan writers like Jonathan Edwards, as Franklin eschewed the belief in God’s salvation and instead wrote of man’s ability to influence his own fate through intellect and hard work.

The question of what exemplifies America and an American was addressed by Franklin, but also was explored by many of his contemporaries. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, in *Letters From an American Farmer*, initially writes about the superficially idyllic American farm life; the work goes on to describe the atrocities of slavery and the horror of the American Revolution. In *Letters*, the protagonist does not support the American Revolution—a contradiction to both Benjamin Franklin’s and Thomas Jefferson’s views. Jefferson, a fervent believer in American independence, drafted the famous *Declaration of Independence* with Franklin’s help in 1776. That same year, Thomas Paine published his treatise *Common Sense*, which urged the colonies to declare their independence. It is evident that Franklin’s instructive and persuasive prose greatly influenced the beliefs and writings of both Jefferson and Paine.

Visual Arts Reading, cont'd.

Pairing visual art with Franklin's *Autobiography* helps to illuminate the culture that generated both of them. Additionally, the pairing might expose contradictions in Franklin's work. In his iconographic* reading of John Singleton Copley's *Paul Revere*, David Bjelajac points out visual codes that illustrate Paul Revere's more affluent social status, such as the crispness of the clothing and the polish of the table. He also points out the codes that indicate Revere's profession—that of a silversmith. It is important to note that the cleanliness of the workstation and the finished teapot don't point to work that necessarily required taxing labor. The common theme of the working man is present in both the painting and Franklin's *Autobiography*; yet Copley appears to elevate this theme by acknowledging and vindicating material goods and consumerism. While Franklin doesn't outwardly espouse affection for material goods, the pages of his *Autobiography* give us hints—like the case of his wife's silver tea set—that he may enjoy material possessions despite his stance on frugality. While Copley's paintings are not directly connected to Franklin's *Autobiography*, their pairing can allow us to discuss themes of frugality, temperance, and industriousness in a new context.

Works Cited and Referenced

Works Cited

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* indicates a reference in the Glossary.