

Teaching with Art

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Teaching American Studies with Art and the Web

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Art and the Web

Art is an often under-utilized resource in teaching American Studies. Combined with a much more widely recognized resource, the World Wide Web, however, new possibilities open up. Web-based images and texts related to them can be used successfully when integrating the analysis of works of art with the teaching of American history, society and culture. Ideally, the combination enlivens selected texts and inspires student interest in independent creative work and (legitimate) evidence-gathering on the net. This article uses a specific painting, and a simple dollar

bill, as examples of how to approach and broaden a discussion of a study area such as American Studies, in this case to discuss the visual markers of American identity, in such a way that students will learn to approach image materials critically and reflectively, and will practice using the web selectively as a 'research' tool rather than as a crib.

A work of art is a 'text' like any other, the origins and intentions of which should be questioned. Similarly, students should be asked to practice evaluating the legitimacy and information value of web sites they unearth to cast light on specific aspects of a painting. This article gives samples of types of web pages which students might find or be directed to, and which lend themselves to the same sorts of discussions about author background and intentions which traditional textual analysis has practised.

Web pages helpful to teachers seeking to plan courses involving art abound too. I will mention a few which may be helpful in identifying works of art, texts about art, and texts about teaching with, or about, art and with technology, such as the internet. First of all, a good place to find information about teaching American Studies in general is the Crossroads project (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/>, <http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/index.html>). American educational institutions are increasingly making their syllabi available on the internet, which may inspire you to



General Washington on a White Charger, ca 1835
(http://www.nga.gov/cgi_bin/pimage?43169+0+0)

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modify their teaching ideas to fit the academic level and structural requirements of a Danish high school. One example is the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, which has indexed course plans in an astonishing range of areas, including an abundance of classes on the appreciation of art in a social and cultural context (see <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/indexes/>).

Moreover, images are being made available on the web by American art museums and publicly-funded archives, many of which also host their own educational resources and class materials. A list of hundreds of art museums in the United States is available at <http://www.museumca.org/usa/art.html>. Many large museums host their own image databases or have picture search functions, for example the Fine Arts Museum San Francisco Image Base (<http://www.thinker.org/fam/thinker.html>) or the Art Museum Image Consortium (<http://www.amico.org/>). General art sites can also have excellent search functions, linking to images available on relevant museum sites (or at internet poster shops) as well as to texts about these images or artists (see <http://sunsite.dk/cgfa/>, <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/> and <http://www.globalgallery.com/>).

Class and background materials on art and American Studies in general can also be found at the homepages of broadcasters with an educational profile, such as PBS and A&E: <http://www.pbs.org/ktca/americanphotography/>, http://www.pbs.org/teachersource/arts_lit.htm, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/american_masters/database/index.html, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/> or <http://www.aande.com/class/>.

Worth mentioning also are the curriculum materials and teacher's guide to *Art in America* available at http://www.artsmia.org/art_in_america/to_the_teacher.html. Provided by the Minneapolis Institute of Art, this site offers a selection of images as well as topical historical and cultural information to help teachers plan their classes. When you use art in an American Studies classroom, it makes good sense to pay dual attention to primary and secondary materials. This way you can accommodate 'what can be gleaned from direct observation' of images, and subsequently use this analysis to 'expand upon what students see and ... draw conclusions' based on the culture and history inhabited, respectively, by the painting's motif, its execution and its viewing - three different moments which can influence interpretations, as I shall demonstrate by looking at a painting dating from 1852 of an occasion in 1776 still (re)viewed and (re)interpreted today.

Washington Crossing the Delaware: A Tale of American Independence

On Christmas night, 1776, General George Washington led the Continental Army to a little-known ferry crossing between New Jersey and Pennsylvania. His troops were able to cross the Delaware River undetected and went on to defeat British mercenary troops in a surprise attack. This victory was seen as a morale-boosting and strategic turning point in the American Revolution; the moment at which Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware became the starting point of a process culminating, eventually, in the creation of the United States as an independent, federal nation-state. To this day Americans stress liberty and democracy as particularly American qualities. In support of this claim their

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E. G. Leutze: *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851.

(http://sunsite.dk/cgfa/l/p_leutze2.htm)

struggle for independence from British monarchical rule retains its great symbolic value and relevance to millions of Americans, and both liberty and democracy remain powerfully embodied in Washington, the revolutionary General whose elevation as the first president of the United States of America depended in part on his crossing of the Delaware's freezing waters.

Without doubt, Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's 1851 painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* has become the most popular, widely circulated and recognized representation of this crucial moment in American history. When using art to teach students about the origins of American independence, it is a hard-to-avoid image. If you make a point of identifying the image, you have already started 'teaching with art' rather than 'merely' documented a historical event or fact visually. In addition, as I shall argue, you have drawn upon the visual literacy of your students and called for a sensitivity to what reading an image can (or cannot) tell them about the (hi)story it purports to narrate.

Practising Visual Literacy with Leutze's Painting

In fostering students' visual literacy you

may want to modify the useful work sheet provided in connection with Robert Hughes' Public Broadcasting Service series *American Visions* (<http://www.time.com/time/special/visions/tep.vis4.html>) in order to introduce students to the tools with which they may read the components of a painting. Intended for younger native English speaking students, Hughes' guidelines probably place too much emphasis on the feelings paintings inspire in viewers. But with a painting like *Washington Crossing the Delaware* it may be worth asking students whether they imagine they would feel differently were they American or the motif Tordenskjold sailing up Dynekilen to launch a surprise attack on the Swedish navy (see <http://www.tordenskiold.dk/index.html>). Another (interactive) guide analysing the form and composition of Leutze's painting is provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/gw/el_gw.htm). Aimed at young visitors, its approach may seem pedestrian, but it provides a starting point for discussions of form and composition: for example: why are the proportions of the boat too small? Is this a compositional blunder or a subjective trick?

If you discuss the ostensible, historical content of the image and try to integrate it with an analysis of the form achieved by the artist you may identify ways in which the two do not match objectively. Such an approach provides opportunities for a discussion about *how* and *why* historical, social and cultural events are presented in art. The 'why' also points to the fact that teaching with art means teaching not only in the juncture between stylistic form and historical/narrative content but also between visual presentation and cultural context: what needs to be discussed, above

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and beyond the historical explanation for Washington's crossing of the Delaware and the particular way in which Leutze depicts it, is the historical context of the artist, his choice and range of style, and the reasons for his being commissioned or compelled to produce a rendition of Washington highlighting those symbolic or mythical traits which can be identified in the painting itself. This discussion may help explain why making the proportions of Washington's boat unrealistically small could be a sign of Leutze's mastery of the effects of his medium, not of his perspectival incompetence (see http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/leutze_emanuel_gottlieb.html).

Washington Crossing the Rhine? Matching History and Form

As the above will have suggested, when you teach with art you have necessarily entered into a discussion about both form and content. If you present a fine art image such as *Washington Crossing the Delaware* to initiate discussion about the American War of Independence, using it merely as a point of departure for debate about the historical significance of troops crossing a river leaves much of its potential untouched. A painting, especially one as loaded with symbolic content and contrived composition as this, points to a mythical, and ultimately ideological, event as much as an historical one. The painting is not so much about a specific date in military history, in other words, as about national history and identity, although its surface (motif and title) tells us it is about a specific departure, at 4 AM on 25 December 1776.

It is not difficult to locate and pursue the military details. Students will find web pages devoted to the topic, peripheral to it but

with promising links, or wholly devoted to links (for example: <http://www.jwjhs.reg4.k12.ct.us/tc/>, <http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/> or http://www.sisto.com/links/mil_link.htm). Sites like these may also be used to practice gathering, ranking and selecting information. One highly professional-looking site is actually made by eighth graders: is it reliable or advanced enough? Another site is closely integrated with the Amazon.com Internet bookshop: do commercial interests affect the level or quality of information? In both cases the answer is probably yes.

Military history aside, it may suffice to establish the basics of Washington's crossing (along the lines sketched out above) in order to start unpicking the image and to interrogate its form and content. If this is a painting which was intended, or has come, to represent American political independence, you may wish to initiate a discussion about whether it is *artistically* independent by asking your students to compare it to contemporary European 'epic' images, or to pursue the German background of the artist (including the fact that his portrayal of jagged ice floes on the river was allegedly based on the Rhine rather than the Delaware: see <http://www.lunds.com/antique/1996/oct2196/backgrd.htm>). Another point of departure for your discussion of composition and form may involve stressing the time at which the painting was completed and the historical improbabilities of some of the details which Leutze has included (see <http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/youasked/012.htm>).

Since we are looking at art not as documentary but as ideology, the purpose of identifying such discrepancies would not be to prove the parochial experience or

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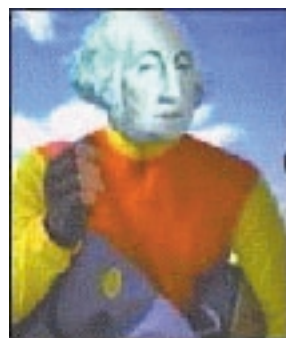
historical inaccuracy of the painter but to teach your students to look critically at a painting (like any other text) and to think actively about not only what the artist (Leutze) was trying to achieve but also what the viewer or reader (themselves or others) perceives, depending on his or her own background and assumptions (as with the Tordenskjold example). Using the internet to find interpretations of a popular painting such as *Washington Crossing the Delaware* may be a chance to demonstrate to students, through their own gathering of material, that interpretation is to some degree in the eye of the beholder. The web allows a generous sampling of diverse materials supporting varying readings.

One such reading or aspect of the painting which has been much debated (and therefore represented frequently on the web) is the presence in the boat of an African American man. The figure has been identified as Prince Whipple, but his historical presence in that boat on that specific occasion has also been disproved, something which might make a discussion of his significance (whether in the painting or in real life) interesting (for further discussion see <http://www.seacoastnh.com/blackhistory/prince.html#currier>, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h48.html>, <http://www.whipple.org/prince/index.html>).

Heads or Tails?: Portraiture, Money and American Cultural Identity

Discussions of the viewing position's relative nature may be supplemented by debate about the subjectivity of the artist. Washington, the embodiment of democracy and liberty, is an excellent example of an individual who has been masked through his symbolic figuration as a national emblem, and who has therefore

been reproduced in very different visual versions. A brief internet video, 'The Real Face of Washington', addresses such artistic subjectivity while also attempting to provide a 'final' version of his face (see <http://earlyamerica.com/georgexdsl.html>).



Virtual Washington:

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/low/english/world/americas/newsid_802000/802424.stm)

The most popular and widely circulated version of George Washington's face comes not from *Washington Crossing the Delaware* but in the simple form of the one-dollar bill. In this form, Washington's face is handled daily as symbolic of a specific monetary value (other presidents occupying higher denomination bills) and of the solidity of the Federal Government which guarantees the value of every dollar bill. In 2000, and to the tune of \$40 million, a campaign featuring a computer-animated version of the dollar-bill-Washington invoked the image of the nation's first president to sell the idea of a dollar coin (with a new face on it) to Americans citizens traditionally reluctant to abandon their 'greenback.' The US Mint (http://www.usmint.gov/mint_programs) now promotes the Golden Dollar Coin on its website by including text transcripts from the television commercials

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and radio spots through which (without commenting on the identity of the new face) Virtual Washington publicizes it.



Golden Dollar Coin design: Sacagawea, Glenna Goodacre, 1999.

(http://www.usmint.gov/mint_programs/golden_dollar_coin/index.cfm?action=golden_dollar_specs#selected)

The fresh face intended to replace Washington's familiar and meaning-laden image is that of a young Native American woman, Sacagawea. What difference does it make when the United States is represented publicly by a young Shoshone woman carrying a baby on her back rather than by the first Chief Executive bearing a powdered wig? Does the choice of image suggest the influence of political

correctness or is it a timely revision of historical imagery, you may ask your students. In fact, and ironically, justifications for the choice revolve around the fact that the woman has a specific identity: like Pocahontas (whose story the Disney Corporation has popularised), she played a role in the white exploration and colonization of the North American continent, a fact which has divided Native Americans themselves about whether or not to endorse Sacagawea's promotion as the face of the Nation (<http://www.nativelonghouse.com/sacagawea.html>, <http://enzi.senate.gov/saca.htm>).

American Studies and the Web: An Exponential Relationship

Whether incorporating art or not, American Studies is a very fruitful field to pursue via the web. At times, indeed, it is too fruitful. Since so much web activity originates across the Atlantic, there is no dearth of materials about the United States, which means that a simple key word search for web sites featuring 'Washington' or 'dollar bill' will unearth not only worthwhile sites but also an overwhelming jumble of dubious sites you might not want to use in relation to



Elvis dollar bill

(<http://www.dollarbillsink.hollywood.com/>)

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teaching or examination: from reminiscences by religious fundamentalists about everyday encounters with the first president to commercial advertisements for celebrity one-dollar bills (see, for example, either <http://www.greaterthings.com/Susan/Washington.htm> or <http://www.dollarbillsink.hollywood.com/>).

That the United States is a country of both Mormon and Mammon students scarcely need turn to the web or art to have confirmed: such preconceptions are already rife in prevalent Danish perceptions of the nation. Instead, the selection of an American Studies area, usefully supported by art and questioned by it, might work effectively to awaken the critical and reflexive ability of students rather than to spur reflex criticism.

When you teach a subject *with* art, although you may be seeking to engage your students in the exploration of and discussions about the social impact on a country like the United States of a particular period (and here I wish to refer briefly not to the revolutionary era but to the Great Depression), you are also teaching *about* art. Though art in the 1930s was often government-funded (as was the case with the New Deal's Works Progress Administration murals and paintings) or purported to be documentary (as the work of the many Farm Security Administration photographers was intended to be), my final recommendations and list of web sites might inspire you to introduce your students to a period in American cultural history where art forcefully spoke two languages: one of visual and aesthetic literacy as well as one of explicit social and cultural criticism.

In conclusion, a single event as apparently important to the existence and identity of



Dorothea Lange: *Migrant Mother*, 1936. (http://www.artsmia.org/art_in_america/21_full.html)

the United States as Washington's crossing of the Delaware has understandably been commemorated in different ways. The site of the river ferry was turned into the Washington Crossing State Park in 1912 and was, ironically, developed during the Great Depression as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's WPA initiative. It can now be visited virtually as well (see <http://www.state.nj.us/travel/virtual/tendays/index.html>).

The title of this essay, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (originally the title of a 1941 book by Walker Evans and James Agee) is therefore intended to make an ironic link between the traditional, celebratory portraiture of a great man, a new American identity represented by a native American Woman, and the social criticism and representation of quite ordinary, suffering

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men and women, which the art of photographers like Evans depicted alongside Agee's text in their articles on the daily life of tenant farmers in the Deep South in 1936: the 'famous men' of the title.

Links on The Great Depression - History, Society and Art

Academic Teaching Resources:

'Crossroads' 1930s project, art literature etc:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/front.html>

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/g/UG99/vizzuso/WPAproject.html>

Library of Congress:

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tr11c.html#depress>

National Archives and Records

Administration:

<http://www.nara.gov/exhall/newdeal/newdeal.html>

Student Link pages on the Great

Depression:

<http://www.snowcrest.net/jmike/20sdep.html>

<http://www.msc.k12.in.us/mhs/social/madedo/resource/depresor.htm>

http://www.madbbs.com/~rcw/US_History/great_depression.htm

1930s Arts Pages:

WPA Murals:

<http://www.wpamurals.com/>

<http://www.lanehs.com/gallery1.htm>

WPA Posters:

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaposters/wpahome.html>

The Art Institute of Chicago, Grant Wood:

http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/modern/73pc_wood.html

The Whitney Museum of American Art:

Edward Hopper:

http://www.whitney.org/collection/hopper_slides.html

Photographers:

Walker Evans:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/welcome.html>

<http://www.rpkphoto.com/>

http://www.metmuseum.org/special/walkerevans/walker_images.html

<http://hudson.acad.umn.edu/doceye/essay.html>

http://www.photo.net/books/walker_evans

Dorothea Lange:

<http://www.slam.org/pd3.html>

http://www.artsmia.org/art_in_america/21_1.html

Ben Shahn:

<http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/Shahn/exhibitiontour/index.html>

Photo galleries:

<http://newdeal.feri.org/library/>

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fsahtml/fahome.html>

