

Looking Through the Window

Teaching History Through Art

U.S. History: 1877 to the Present

Overview

Inspired by the work of American painter Edward Hopper, the concept of “looking through the window” was developed to help middle school students interact with United States history in a more tangible and personal way. Hopper, known for painting scenes using the perspective of looking into a space from the outside, offers an excellent vehicle for students to create their own vantage point from which to view history. Using art to help students solidify a sense of time, place, and culture strengthens their understanding through visual reinforcement.

The use of art is not limited to visual reinforcement however, and is more than a hook or springboard for this history course. *Looking Through the Window* is a foundational architecture designed to support the structure of the entire year of study. Pieces of art have been selected to coordinate with each of the standards of learning, forming a progressive timeline for the course. This means more than simply displaying a contemporaneous art print of a portrait of a famous person or depiction of a famous scene. Students will be exposed to art that helps them understand the time and society at large, a glimpse through the window of history at what was really happening at the time.

Through genuine analysis of the component pieces found in the art selections, students can witness changes as they developed historically and found

representation in artistic form. What technological advances or social changes occurred in the United States between the creation of John Singer Sargent's *A Table at Night* and Hopper's *Chop Suey*? What was the change in status of the Civil Rights movement between Norman Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With* and Jacob Lawrence's *Parade*? These pieces are not to be looked at simply because they are painted well, but because they communicate to the viewer what was going on, a moment in time captured by the artist. The different perspectives and different social agendas found in art are all part of real history, a less processed and manufactured history than can be found in textbooks.

Beyond cultural and social interpretation, students can also analyze the pieces from a more aesthetic perspective, seeing actual changes of technique and materials, and understanding their relationship to technological developments. This will help in creating a timeline, not only of social changes, but also of recognized art movements that helped to define the culture and sub-cultures of the United States.

Though visual art is the primary vehicle for this concept, other arts could easily be incorporated. Adults often forget how integral music is to the lifestyle of an American teenager. For many, the music that may once have defined us or associated us with a particular social group (dead heads, metal heads) fades into the background music of car rides and trips to the grocery store. At no time in the past, however, has music been a more powerfully defining force than it is for young people today. This makes the use of music in conjunction with this framework a potentially powerful tool for making connections for the students.

When playing examples of the Jazz Age from Duke Ellington, we must move beyond the listening experience and give it context. Correlations between what young people were listening to, then and now, are evident. Generations of parents have strongly disliked and shown lack of understanding, or even willingness to understand, of why kids listen to the popular music of the time (e.g., Elvis, The Beatles, Nirvana). Finding music that represents the same time period as the selected painting develops a fuller connection to the underlying history.

Music is not the only means of connection through the arts. Literature and poetry can also be used to “see” the social climate and important issues of an age. The novels and short stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald take on more than their original purpose and become primary source documents of historical information. A snapshot of a moment in time, literature becomes another way to look through the window to the past.

Using varied art forms is a powerful tool for the realization of whole concepts in history, as opposed to piecemeal date and event memorization. Ultimately, developing music and literature connections for each of the selected art pieces would be beneficial. For the purposes of this project, however, the concentration is on the pieces of visual art themselves.

Implementation

The idea of *Looking Through a Window* provides the framework for an entire year’s study of United States history. In order to utilize it fully, there has to

be a starting point, a method of implementation. I propose to begin the year with a with a timeline activity. This activity can be used not only to introduce the concept of looking at history through a window, but also to introduce the idea of learning to use art in a way that most students have not experienced before.

After this preliminary lesson, a lighted window box will be used as a device to continue the theme throughout the rest of the year. Art selections that represent the individual SOLs will be displayed during that period of study. (Suggestions for each SOL are provided in the resource section of this document.) One recurring activity that will encourage both historical and aesthetic analysis of the selected pieces will be an exercise comparing the current piece with the one representing the upcoming SOL. For instance, the works *A Table at Night* by John Singer Sargent and Edward Hopper's *Chop Suey* would be compared to evaluate both social and technological advances, as well as some of the stylistic changes that occurred in the thirty years between their creation. Examples of comparisons that students might come up with include electrification (candles were used for illumination in the first painting, whereas the light bulbs in the restaurant sign demonstrate the use of electricity in the second). Students might also notice the change in fashion or the movement to a more urban setting. Artistically, students may notice the influence of photography or movie making on the how the paintings are arranged. Students' ability to analyze, compare and contrast, and appreciate the social value of art will all be developed through the ongoing use of visual art during this course. At the end of the course, students

will have been exposed to a wide variety of artists and styles, and will have a complete timeline of representative pieces for this era in history.

Additionally, students will have the opportunity to make art themselves. In keeping with the window motif, students will create a scene through a window, in which they illustrate what is meaningful to them about the particular time being studied. This activity would not be done for every SOL, but as a supplement to help tie together concepts associated with a substantial unit of study. Students would be given a broad range, concentrating less on creating a 'beautiful' piece of art and more on what it represents. By creating, in addition to viewing art, students inscribe their own visions of history.

Conclusion

The value of integrating art into history instruction cannot be overstated. When used as part of instruction and not simply relegated to background illustrations of war scenes and dead presidents, the art becomes part of the history itself. Art is history. More than just a pictorial representation, the reason for its existence is a sign of what is culturally significant at any given moment in time. *Give*, by Joseph Vavek, is a piece that not only depicts life during the Great Depression, but it is also valuable because it was commissioned as part of FDR's New Deal WPA effort. The piece is not only a work of art. Its existence is truly a part of the political and social history of the United States. This concept of using art to teach history could easily be adapted for use in any history class and at any grade level.

There are layers of complexity that the use of art can create in the classroom that can give students an opportunity to see what they have not seen before, prompt them to think on a higher level, and perhaps achieve a greater appreciation for both art and history in the process. Teaching history should be so much more than simply talking about dates and events. Through this arts integration concept, doors can be opened in students' minds by giving them the opportunity to look through the window to the past.