

American Art: From Colony to Nation

What was art like in George Washington's day? Students examine furniture and paintings, discuss styles and techniques, and explore what art can tell us about life in the colonial and federal periods.

Grade Level

Grades 4–12

Common Core Academic State Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- Dimension 2: History – Perspectives
- Dimension 2: History – Historical Sources and Evidence

Suggested Learning Goals

Students will be better able to:

- Use visual evidence to analyze a work of art as a primary source
- Connect visual art to their knowledge of American history
- Compare and contrast the influence of people from different social, religious, and ethnic backgrounds on the culture of the American colonies
- Describe how artists represent American identity

Essential Questions

- What can visual art and material culture tell us about the diversity of life in early America?
- What can we learn from art about the history of our local area?



American Flag with Cone-Shaped Fireworks, 1983

William L. Hawkins, American

Paint on plywood

48 x 57 inches (121.9 x 144.8cm) Framed: 49 3/8 x 58 3/8 inches (125.4 x 148.3cm)

The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz collection

BST-121

© Ricco/Maresca Gallery, Estate of William Hawkins

Suggested Vocabulary

Boycott	King George III	Patriot/patriotic	Revolution
Colony/colonial	Loyalist	Portrait	Symbol
Constitution	Nation	Primary source	Taxation/taxes
Immigrant/immigration	Neo-classical	Rebel/rebellion	Traitor
Independence	Optical illusion	Redcoats	Trompe l'oeil

Lesson-Specific Activity

This activity is designed to prepare students for thinking and talking about artworks they may see in an "American Art: From Colony to Nation" lesson.

- Show students images of a symbol of the United States that has changed over time, like several images of the flag, the bald eagle, or Uncle Sam. Ask students what they think makes these images "American." What do they symbolize about our country? What do they mean to you? Why might they have changed over time?
- Introduce the term primary source. Distribute a primary source document, image, or artifact to pairs of students. Select items that include easily observable symbolism. United States currency (dollar bills and coins) works well for this exercise. Alternatively, you could use one of the sources under **Supplementary Materials**.
- Ask students to closely examine their primary sources. Pose a few questions to guide the investigation:
 - What do you see that tells you this artifact is American?
 - What symbols do you see, and what ideas do they express?
 - When was this artifact created?
 - What was happening in American history when this artifact was created?
 - Do you see any bias or stereotypes?
 - How does this artifact make you feel?
 - What do you think this artifact would mean to someone from another time or place?
- Share selections from the book *Motel of the Mysteries*, by David McCauley, with the class. Ask students to consider why it might be so difficult to interpret the meaning or purpose of artifacts from other times and places. How do they imagine visitors from the future might interpret examples of our contemporary material culture?

Supplementary Materials

- *Motel of the Mysteries*, by David McCauley; also available on [YouTube](#)
- [The United States Postal Service](#) and [The Library of Congress](#) are both good source of images for this activity.

Alternative Activity

- Show students a photograph of a contemporary political or celebrity family. Ask students to imagine they have never seen these people before. What would their first impressions be, and why? What contemporary signs or symbols are there of social, political, or economic status?
- Now show the students a picture of a colonial family (see **Suggested Art Image**). Ask them again for their first impressions. How did the artist communicate visually what kind of people these are? What did the subjects of the portrait want others to know about them?
- Divide a sheet of paper into two columns, labeling one side for the contemporary couple and one for the colonial couple. On each side, have students list the attributes they see as clues to the social and economic status of each couple.
- Compare the two lists. What similarities and differences do students notice?
- Finally, ask students to imagine they are having their portraits painted. What clothing, accessories, furniture, or other objects would they include in the portrait to communicate something about themselves to others?

Suggested Art Image

- *Portrait of John and Elizabeth Lloyd Cadwalader and Their Daughter Anne*, 1772, by Charles Willson Peale