MAKING AMERICAN TASTE

Narrative Art for a New Democracy

CLASSROOM UNIT GUIDE FOR THE EXHIBITION

Grade Level: This unit has been developed for use in high school art classrooms but can be differentiated for elementary and middle school art classrooms as well.

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
MUSEUM & LIBRARY

(Above) Louis Lang (1814-1893), ***Return of the 69th (Irish) Regiment, N.Y.S.M., from the Seat of the War, N.Y.,*** 1862. The New-York Historical Society, Gift of Louis Lang, 1886.3

MAKING AMERICAN TASTE

Narrative Art for a New Democracy

CLASSROOM UNIT GUIDE FOR THE EXHIBITION

"I feel sometimes an American artist must feel, like a baseball player or something--a member of a team writing American history." --Willem de Kooning

INTRODUCTION

This unit is focused on engaging students with American narrative art from the ninetheenth-century in ways that can inform their own artmaking. They will be challenged to create narrative art of their own that explores our contemporary national and cultural identity. It is inspired by Making American Taste: Narrative Art for a New Democracy--an exhibition that mines the collections of the New-York Historical Society and explores ideas about taste in relation to the visual arts in nineteenth- century America. The learning objectives and student outcomes are based on the *New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning: Visual Arts, K-12*.

William Henry Burr (1819-1908), ***The Intelligence Office***, 1849.
The New-York Historical Society, Purchase, Abbott-Lenox Fund, 1959.46

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition brings together paintings and sculptures depicting genre, historical, literary, and religious subjects that were deemed essential components of works of art according to aesthetic standards that prevailed before the Civil War. Most of the works on view were well known to contemporaneous audiences, having been exhibited publicly, re-produced in print form, and/or written about in the press. Yet some entered the canon of American art while others have not. The reasons depend on matters of taste, but the question is, whose taste? More important, how is taste defined? Is taste inborn, or is it something to be learned over time and with effort? The view that taste is inborn perpetuates a set of hierarchical, academic rules, but these contradict the egalitarian precepts of the new American democracy.

Taste, although once a stable sign of refinement, became elastic, stretching to accommodate the diverse political, social, and professional aspirations of those who invoked the word. As the century unfolded, the meaning of taste expanded to include not only refinement but also market demand and, ultimately, personal preference.

LESSON 1: LOOKING CLOSELY AT MAKING AMERICAN TASTE

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Through questions that encourage visual thinking, discussions, and sketching, students will engage with nineteenth-century American works of art to explore how artists used narrative images to cultivate American taste.

Tompkins Harrison Matteson (1813-1884), ***The Last of the Race***, 1847.
The New-York Historical Society, Gift of Edwin W. Orvis, 1931.1

ACTIVITY & DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Introduction - As a class, students will look at one work of art from the exhibition (suggestion: *Return of the 69th (Irish) Regiment, N.Y.S.M., from the Seat of the War, N.Y.* by Louis Lang) and briefly discuss what they notice:

- What do you notice?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What else do you notice?
- What's the story being told? What is a narrative?

2. Activity - On their own, students will be challenged to select one work of art from the exhibition and examine it, making a quick sketch of the work, writing about what they see, and describing what they interpret as the narrative being told by the artist. Following this activity, they will discuss the below questions as a class:

- What were some discoveries you made while drawing that you didn't notice by just looking?
- How might you describe the narrative?
- Who might have seen and enjoyed this work of art?
- What might be the message that was received?

3. Discussion and Reflection - Students will hear/read about the concept behind the exhibition and explore the idea of the American narrative and making taste:

- Now that you have seen these images, what do you think is meant by a narrative painting?
- What were the American narratives in the nineteenth-century? What might they be today?
- What do you think is meant by cultural identity? How might artists have contributed to creating cultural identity for the young nation?
- How is this connected to taste? What is taste? What else is taste?

LEARNING OUTCOME

Students will write and create sketches demonstrating their close examination of a nineteenth-century American narrative work art. Through a class discussion, they will describe their understanding of various American narratives in the nineteenth century and how artists contributed to the formation of the nation's cultural identity and taste.

LESSON 2: RECREATING A WORK OF NARRATIVE ART IN COLLAGE

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will learn to engage with nineteenth-century American narrative art in a different way by recreating a work of art as a collage.

Daniel Huntington (1816-1906), ***Sowing the Word***, 1868.
The New-York Historical Society,
Gift of the Estate of Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes, 1948.158

ACTIVITY & DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Introduction and Activity - Students will revisit the works of art they sketched from the prior lesson. They will be asked to recreate the original work of art as a paper collage, examining the composition and various elements and principles of art and design (color, shape, space, value, proportion, emphasis, movement, etc.):

- What shapes do you see in the work of art? How might you cut and change paper to reflect these shapes?
- How will you use paper to create values of light and dark? To show movement?
- Which details do you see that might be important to include? Which could be left out?
- How will you arrange your cut paper to reflect the composition you see in the work of art?
- How will you ensure that the narrative is captured?

2. Written Activity - After completing their collages, students will be asked to answer the following questions in a written reflection or discussion:

- While you were creating your collage, what were some discoveries you made about the work of art that you didn't notice before?
- How might you describe the narrative now?
- What did you notice about the choices that the artist made?
- Which of these support the narrative most?

3. Class Reflection - As a class, students will look at the collages made by their classmates along side the original works of art. They will discuss:

- Describe the common elements in the collage and the painting.
- What do you notice about one of the works of art that you didn't notice before?
- What element from the collage helped you make this discovery?

LEARNING OUTCOME

Students will create collages demonstrating their close examination of a nineteenth-century American narrative work of art and the choices that artists made within the work to support the narrative.

LESSON 3: MAKING MODERN AMERICAN TASTE

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will explore the modern American visual narratives that are offered to them in their lives and examine how visual culture and cultural identity have changed over time. By creating artworks that depict what the modern American narrative means to them, students will learn that they can both capture and shape modern cultural identity.

ACTIVITY & DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Introduction - Students will participate in a group discussion that explores modern visual culture:

- What is the modern American narrative today?
- How is it connected to taste?
- What are the visual narratives that are being presented to you in your world?
- How does this influence your taste?
- What does "beautiful" and "important" looking art look like today? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- How does this compare with the American view in the nineteenth century?
- Is taste something that is learned or a preference you are born with?

2. Activity - Students will depict their concept of a modern American narrative in a medium of their choice. They will consider the artistic choices they found successful in the prior lesson and how they as artists might make choices to best support their narratives.

- What might America's narrative be today? How has it changed from the nineteenth-century? How has it stayed the same?
- What is available to you that was not available to them?
- If you were asked to capture a modern American narrative in a work of art, which might you choose to tell?
- How might you depict this narrative in an artwork?
- What choices did the artists from the nineteenth century make to help support their narratives? Will you do the same in your artwork?

3. Reflection - Students will write a brief reflection on their understanding of narrative art and how an American narrative was expressed and promoted during the nineteenth century. Then they will reflect on the choices they made in creating the American narrative as they understand it today. Following, they will reflect on the artworks created by the class and discuss the questions below:

- Look closely at your classmates' artworks. What do you notice? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What are the kinds of stories being told?
- What are the different ways of telling stories?
- Looking at the body of work altogether, what might we say about modern American cultural identity?

LEARNING OUTCOME

Students will create artworks and write a reflection that demonstrate their understanding of modern American narratives and the artistic choices made to support these narratives. Through the class reflection, they will express their understanding that artists capture various stories in different ways--all of which contribute to making modern American taste.

Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910), ***The Window (later known as A Window, House on Hudson River)***, 1863.
The New-York Historical Society, The Robert L. Stuart Collection, S-71