



Questioning the Accuracy of War Images: John Trumbull's Paintings of the American Revolution and Photographs from the American Civil War

Curriculum Unit 12.01.10
by Kristin Wetmore

Introduction

An important dilemma for me as an art history teacher is how to make the evidence that survives from the past an interesting subject of discussion and learning for my classroom. I also want my students to question the historical value of any image. Artists and historians interpret historical events. I would like my students to understand that this interpretation is a construction. Primary textual documents provide us with just one window to view history. Artwork is another window, but the students must be able to judge on their own the factual content of the work and the artist's intent. It is imperative that students understand this.

Barber says in *History Beyond the Text* that there is danger in confusing history as an actual narrative and "construction of the historian's (or artist's) craft." ¹ Are photographs a more accurate testimony to historical events? Or can paintings be equally accurate? For the art historian, the evidence is the artwork and the documents that support it. My solution is to have students compare different media used in two specific historical periods because they will have the chance to read primary sources of each of the images selected, discuss them, and then determine whether and how they reveal, criticize, or impartially report the events. Students should be able to identify if the artist accurately represents an historical event, and if it is not accurately represented, what message is the artist trying to convey.

Background

I am a visual arts teacher at Cooperative Arts Magnet High School (Co-op), an inter-district magnet high school. Approximately 65% of the students are from the city of New Haven and 35% come from surrounding towns. The students apply for a lottery to come to Co-op and choose an area of the arts to study. This art form will be their area of intensive study for four years. The students may choose from music; choral or instrumental, visual art, theater, creative writing, or dance. The visual art students take a double period of art, approximately 90 minutes, everyday.

Students come from districts other than New Haven to attend Co-op rather than their local public high schools, primarily because they are interested in studying the arts in a smaller setting. Co-op has 624 students enrolled in grades 9-12. The student population is 65 % of female and 35% male, 49% Black students, 24% Hispanic, 26% White and 1 % Asian American students. The main languages spoken are English and Spanish with 1 % English language learners (ELLs). The school has 7% students with special education needs. The proportion of students eligible for free or reduced price lunches is 66%, which is higher than the state average. ²

Co-op is fortunate to be located one block from two of Yale University's world-renowned museums, the Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art. Teachers often take their students on mini field trips to the galleries.

The AP Art History students that I teach have a rigorous, college based curriculum that includes the following objectives which I outlined in the syllabus that I wrote for the AP Art History Course: "Students will gain knowledge of architecture, sculpture, painting and other art forms within diverse historical and cultural contexts. Students will examine and critically analyze major forms of artistic expression from the past and present and from a variety of European and non-European cultures. Students will develop an understanding of artworks in their context, considering issues of patronage, gender, politics, religion and ethnicity. Students will examine the interpretation of a work based upon its intended use, audience and the role of both the artist and work of art in a particular society." ³

Objectives

The unit will begin with several objectives: To use historical documents as educational tools for the experiencing of history; to use primary sources to make connections between artwork and history; and to examine works of art to determine if the images that we have selected are accurate depictions of history. I want my students to question the historical accuracy of the artworks in question as well as the intentions of the artist. In our digital age, with the media manipulating photographs, it has never been more important for students to question the images they are bombarded with.

The students will analyze how life is reconstructed through images, colors, details and shapes. This gives us the vision to see how things really happened in a period of time when we were not present. Specifically, this unit will help me and my students to look at an image and determine if the event that is represented has been reported accurately or whether certain details lead the artist to alter the reality behind the image. In this view, the image that makes history can open a window on the past and also teach what distortions are present in history representations.

The students will examine the following paintings in the Yale Art Gallery: John Trumbull's *General George Washington at Trenton, The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775* and *The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775* . Students will compare these depictions of war with photographs from the Civil War. The Gallery owns several of Timothy O'Sullivan's photographs such as *Pontoon bridge Across the Rappahannock* and *Company D, Camp Sprague* , as well as photographs by Alexander Gardner and Matthew Brady. Hundreds of photographs from the Civil War are available for viewing on the Library of Congress website.

This unit will be essentially focused on the analysis of primary sources and their specific details to understand, interpret, and analyze, and draw conclusions about the artists' choices in depicting an event. Each primary source will be studied following the four levels of critique that we use in the art classroom: describe -- what is the subject matter, medium, art style, and size - analyze -- How is the work organized as a complete composition? Name the Elements and Principles of Design? -- interpret -- What is happening in the artwork? How does it make you feel? What does the artwork make you think of? - and decide -- What was the artist trying to explain? These questions were developed by the Visual Art Department of Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School. My aim is to improve my students' skills as independent thinkers who do not accept every word or every image they see, on the internet, in print, or in movies. The students will be able to make a powerful, personal connection to their own artwork and that of others.

This unit will also help me teach "reading for information", which has become a requirement in all classes that are taught. The students will read historical documents that refer to the artist's background, biography, or reviews. This unit will give me the chance to bring to class reading documents that are not only effective and connected to the artists we are going to study, but also documents which are interesting, different and will certainly improve their reading abilities and their knowledge of this subject. These will help improve the students' critical and thinking skills.

The works of John Trumbull

"Our visual conception of the events surrounding the birth of this republic are due to the documentation of a certain Connecticut Yankee." ⁴



The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775 1786 John Trumbull, American, 1756 - 1843. Yale University Art Gallery

John Trumbull was a Connecticut-born artist who came to be known as the "first professional artist in America with a college degree." ⁵ Born in Lebanon, Connecticut to an upper-class New England family, John was the son of Jonathon Trumbull, Sr., who was a colonial and revolutionary Governor of Connecticut. ⁶ Trumbull enrolled at Harvard in 1772 because his parents were not supportive of his training to be an artist. ⁷ His father wanted him to pursue a career in law or ministry. ⁸

While Trumbull was in Cambridge, he visited John Singleton Copley, the pre-eminent Boston artist of the time.

Copley not only made a living as an artist, he was quite affluent. This impressed Trumbull. ⁹ Trumbull studied the paintings that hung on the walls of Harvard as well as the paintings of Copley. ¹⁰

In July of 1780, Trumbull went to London to study with the American expatriate Benjamin West who had achieved success in the British capital. While he was there he also met Gilbert Stuart. In London, and at the urging of West, Trumbull decided to concentrate his works on historical painting. ¹¹ Historical paintings based on classical ideals were characteristic of the Neoclassical period in Europe in the late 18th century. These paintings were popular in the Royal Academy in London and in the salons of France.

Trumbull was influenced by Copley, West, Stuart and the academy painters he saw in London. "Death scenes proliferated on academy and salon walls, and one classically draped hero after another fell back into the arms of aids and comrades in poses that were meant to evoke memories and emotions associated with paintings of Pietas, Lamentations, Depositions, and Entombments." ¹² Trumbull admired these works and clearly drew on them for inspiration. He admired the values these paintings espoused.

"Trumbull saw the recent war as opening a new field in America for history painting and portraiture." ¹³ Both John Adams, who was also in London and Thomas Jefferson, who was in Paris also encouraged Trumbull to paint the series from the Revolution. ¹⁴ The Battle of Lexington on April 18, 1775 was the beginning of the Revolutionary War. The colonists were at battle with the British troops. Trumbull enlisted as an adjutant of the First Regiment of Gen. Joseph Spencer. He served in the Boston area and on June 17, 1775 witnessed the Battle of Bunker's Hill from across the bay. ¹⁵ Bunker's Hill was a two and half hour battle on a clear summer day. The actual battle took place on Breed's Hill in the Charleston area of Boston. The battle is called the Battle of Bunker's Hill because that was the intended hill for the colonial fortification. ¹⁶ The battle ended in defeat for the colonials, but the English suffered over a thousand casualties, including many officers. Even though it was a loss, the battle did prove that the poorly dressed, ill-equipped colonials were ready to fight. "It was deemed a battle of which the nation could be proud." ¹⁷

Trumbull never intended Bunker's Hill to be an accurate, eyewitness account of the battle or of the death of General Warren. As art historian Irma Jaffe explains, "Roger de Piles, whose *Cours de Peinture par Principes* Trumbull read, and it is safe to say, every artist of the period read, held that there were three kinds of truth: simple truth or the appearance of things; ideal truth, consisting of a selective combination of various beautiful parts; and perfect truth, composed of simple and ideal truth, which 'carries so beautiful a probability as often appears to be more true than truth itself.' This theory allowed painting the license it needed to compete with poetry as a liberal art." ¹⁸

Even though the Americans lost the battle, Trumbull wanted to depict the behavior and honor of the participants. Trumbull said, "The attempt by the fiendish looking grenadier to plunge a bayonet into the fallen general was a pictorial liberty – analogous to the *licentia poetae*. He did not know that any such occurrence took place – but the scene was introduced to afford an opportunity to do honor to Col. [sic] Small who arrests the thrust of the grenadier. Col. Small was distinguished for his humanity and kindness to American prisoners and therefore he was made by the artist to do a deed of mercy." ¹⁹

"In 1831, distraught over the financial uncertainty that had plagued his entire life as an artist, Trumbull sold many of his works to Yale College in return for an annuity of \$1,000 a year. As Trumbull reasoned,

I thought first of Harvard College, my alma mater, but she was rich, and amply endowed. I then thought of Yale - although not my alma, yet she was within my native state and poor.

Through his bequest, Trumbull established at Yale the first college art gallery in America. In 1837, at the age of 80 he began work on his autobiography, which would become the first written by an American artist." ²⁰ Technically, the paintings were not sold to Yale; they were deeded in exchange for \$1,000. It was because of this exchange that the University began its collection.

Trumbull designed the building which would house the paintings. "The building included skylights for each gallery and slits in the floor 12 feet by 15 inches wide that would be used to lower the paintings to the first floor for removal in case of a fire." ²¹ The gallery opened in 1832. When Yale's collection became so large that an additional building was required, the collection was moved and the Trumbull gallery was used as office for the university president and treasurer. The building was later demolished in 1901. ²²

Trumbull wanted to remain near his paintings that he referred to as "his children" in perpetuity. ²³ John and his wife Sarah are interred in a tomb below the gallery. Each time the gallery has moved into a new building the couples' remains are reinterred. "Yale has carefully respected (Trumbull's) wish to lie beneath that gallery where his pictures hang, although this was not stipulated in the indenture. The University has also abided by the provision that said painting shall never be sold, alienated, divided, or dispersed but shall be always kept together". ²⁴



Photograph of Trumbull stone in the Yale University Art Gallery. "Col. John Trumbull Patriot and Artist Friend and Aid of Washington Lies beside his wife beneath this Gallery of Art Lebanon 1756-New York 1843" Photo by

Photographs of the Civil War

"Verbal representations of such places, or scenes, may or may not have the merit of accuracy, but photographic presentment of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubting faith." ²⁵ -Alexander Gardner



What Do I Want, John Henry? 1862, Alexander Gardner, American, 1821 - 1882. Yale University Art Gallery

Beginnings of Photography

Photography was in its relative infancy at the outbreak of The Civil War. What we consider to be the first true photograph was created in 1826 in Paris by Joseph Niépce. In 1839 Louis Daguerre invented the daguerreotype which was the most popular process for creating a photographic likeness. Daguerreotypes are images printed on a piece of silver. Daguerreotypes produce a single image that can't be reproduced, while the wet plate process allows unlimited copies to be made. ²⁶

Matthew Brady learned the daguerreotype method from Samuel Morse. Morse learned the method from Louis Daguerre. ²⁷ When the Civil War began Brady knew it would be important to record the events. He had to obtain permission from the Federal Government to be allowed to photograph the battles. ²⁸ "With the outbreak of the Civil War, Brady devoted himself to its documentations, hiring teams of photographic "operators," including Alexander Gardner, Timothy O'Sullivan, and John Reekie, whose photographs, in line with standard studio practice, were usually credited to him (Brady). Brady's expectation that he would sell these photographs, and those purchased from freelancers, as historical records of the war, failed to be realized, as people wished to forget the trauma of the conflict." "The idea of photographing a war in all its phases was a daring innovation: no such enterprise had ever been undertaken before and it entailed unknown dangers and hardships." ²⁹

Gardner and Brady both used the wet-plate or wet collodion process and the albumen print. "Although the

need for the plate to be prepared and developed when used was a major drawback to the wet collodion method (as is necessitated ready access to cumbersome apparatus including a portable darkroom, processing equipment, chemicals, water, and a supply of prepared glass plates that had to be kept perfectly damp), such difficulties were justified by the greater sensitivity of the emulsion, which reduced exposure time to under one second and produced a sharp easily reproducible negative." ³⁰

Albumen prints are made by coating printing paper with salted egg white. The paper is then soaked in a silver nitrate solution, which makes the paper light sensitive. ³¹ This entire process had to be done in the field under less-than-desirable conditions.

"Brady had a crew of some 15 photographers at the battlefield. They moved about in a cumbersome van that the soldiers call a "what-is-it wagon," which the photographers used for on-the-spot developing of their negatives." ³²

"Gardner wanted a by-line on his photographs; Brady, who directed the operations, said no." Gardner left Brady and continued to photograph the war. Timothy O'Sullivan also began his career working for Brady. When Gardner left Brady, O'Sullivan went with Gardner as his assistant. "Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War", includes 45 photos by O'Sullivan. ³³

"Gardner [like Brady] shot few of the pictures himself; he usually set up the scene and gave directions, leaving the actual photographing to the staff he assembled - to whom he gave the credit that Brady had denied him. He did, however, process the pictures. ³⁴

Of Brady's photos, only four show actual battle scenes. The collodion process required the subject to be very still. The gear was large and required time to move and set up. "He could photograph the dead, where they fell or where they had been assembled, but it would seem that, in all save a very few instances, he was confined to photographing dead rebels." ³⁵ Because the photographers couldn't take many photographs of the actual battles, most of the photos were of either soldiers in their camps before battles or dead bodies after the battles. It was later discovered that some of the photographers would move the bodies to make the photographs appear more interesting. In the photograph by Alexander Gardner, *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*, Gardner and his assistant moved a body to lie beside a stone wall and then placed a rifle near the body. ³⁶ George Barnard's photograph, *Rebel Works in Front of Atlanta, 1864-65* was a compilation of two negatives. ³⁷

Brady amassed thousands of negatives. Interestingly, at the end of the war Brady was impoverished. "There was little market for his war pictures - the war was too recent and too horrible, and no one wanted to be reminded of it." ³⁸ "There was no ready-made market for his (Brady's) work, for the popular weekly newspapers had no means of reproducing his negatives." ³⁹ The first half-tone photograph was not published in a newspaper until 1880. ⁴⁰

The negatives eventually became the property of the library of congress. In 1907, Edward Eaton published a book with these negatives, "Original Photographs Taken on the Battlefield During the Civil War of the United States by Matthew B. Brady and Alexander Gardner, who operated under the Authority of the War Department and the Protection of the Secret Service", with over 200 photographs. ⁴¹

Activities

Activity One

Students will visit the Yale University Art Gallery to view the civil war photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan, Alexander Gardner, George Bernard, and Mathew B. Brady. These works are not on permanent display, and an appointment must be made with the Prints and Drawings department to view the photographs. This work is also not on display, and an appointment must be made for students to view the print. Students should work in pairs or in groups of three to discuss the documents and artwork and then determine whether and how they reveal, criticize or correctly report the events that they represent.

For each of the images, students should go through the Describe-Analyze-Interpret-Judge exercise.



Rebel Works in front of Atlanta, GA 1864-1865, George N. Barnard, American 1819-1902, 2003.107.1 Yale University Art Gallery

1. Describe - What do you see? What are the subject matter, medium, art style, and size?
2. Analyze -- How is the work organized as a complete composition? Name the Elements and Principles of Design?
3. Interpret -- What is happening in the artwork? How does it make you feel? What does the artwork make you think of?
4. Judge -- What was the artist trying to explain? The student will make inferences about the message in the work, going beyond narration.

Activity Two

Students will visit the Yale University Art Gallery to view the paintings of John Trumbull. These works are on

permanent display in the Trumbull Gallery. Students should work in pairs or in groups of three to discuss the documents and artwork and then determine whether and how they reveal, criticize or correctly report the events that they represent. For each of the images, students should go through the Describe-Analyze-Interpret-Judge exercise.

Activity Three

Students should compare *Death of General Wolfe (after Benjamin West), after 1771* , and *The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775* by John Trumbull. Both of these pieces are at the Yale University Art Gallery. Are there any comparisons between the two paintings? Using the Art History textbook, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages, 12th Edition* , find other paintings or images that John Trumbull could have used as a model for his painting.

Students should create a tableau of each of the paintings. This will reinforce how much each image is similar.

Activity Four

Students should compare Barnard's photograph *Rebel Works in front of Atlanta, GA, 1864-65* and Winslow Homer's painting *In Front of Yorktown, probably 1863-66* . Both of these pieces are at the Yale University Art Gallery. These two images were created at about the same time. They both depict the Civil War. How are they similar? How are they different?

Activity Five

Students should each chose a photograph from a past war, World War I through Viet Nam, and a contemporary war photo from Iraq or Afghanistan. Compare the accuracy and validity of these images in comparison to the Civil War photographs. Discuss the changes in technology that have made these images possible.

Activity Six

All tenth grade students in Connecticut must pass the Connecticut Academic Proficiency Test (CAPT). One portion of this test is Reading for Information, which requires students to read three non-fiction articles and answer a combination of 12 multiple-choice and 6 open-ended questions. There are two types of open-ended questions: Developing and Interpretation and Demonstrating a Critical Stance. This activity will allow students to practice taking this type of test.

Students will read "Architect of the Capital, Declaration of Independence", and complete the following statements. The teacher should project the image of the painting if possible or show a print. This is article details John Trumbull's paintings in the Capitol rotunda in Washington, DC.

Demonstrating a Critical Stance:

1. The author assumes that the reader of this article already knows
 - a. what interred means.
 - b. how the Revolutionary war ended.
 - c. what the Declaration of Independence is.

d. all of the above.

2. Based on the information in the article, is it fair to assume that

- a. Trumbull died a wealthy man.
- b. the painting is an accurate account of the events.
- c. Many people saw the painting before it was exhibited in the rotunda.
- d. Trumbull should not have cleaned his painting.

Developing an Interpretation

3. Which of the following best describes the central idea of the article?

- a. This painting is Trumbull's most famous piece.
- b. Trumbull was not an accurate painter.
- c. Trumbull lived an extravagant lifestyle.
- d. It is Thomas Jefferson's fault the painting is not accurate.

4. *The article implies that*

- a. painting from live models is best.
- b. Trumbull made up all the events of the day.
- c. Trumbull was trying to capture the spirit of the signing.
- d. Thomas Jefferson should have been the only one in the painting.

Open-ended Questions

1. How does the *Declaration of Independence* balance *General George Washington Resigning His Commission*?
2. Why does the author include the quotation, "When Trumbull was planning the smaller painting in 1786, he decided not to attempt a wholly accurate rendering of the scene; rather, he made his goal the preservation of the images of the Nation's founders. "?

Reading List

http://artgallery.yale.edu/pages/collection/buildings/build_trumbull.php

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Images from the Yale University Art Gallery Collection

Death of General Wolfe (after Benjamin West) after 1771

Artist: copy after: Benjamin West, American 1738-1820. 1907.3

The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775 1786 John Trumbull, American, 1756 - 1843. 1832.1

The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775 1786 John Trumbull, American, 1756 - 1843. 1832.2

General George Washington at Trenton 1792 John Trumbull, American, 1756 - 1843. 1806.1

Company D, Camp Sprague 1861 Mathew B. Brady, American, 1823 - 1896. 2008.54.1

What Do I Want, John Henry? 1862, Alexander Gardner, American, 1821 - 1882 1978. 148.2a-b

In Front of Yorktown Probably between 1863 and 1866 Winslow Homer, American, 1836–1910. 1930.15

Pontoon Bridge across the Rappahannock, plate 32 from Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War 1863 Timothy O'Sullivan, American, ca. 1840 – 1882. 1978.148.3a–b

Rebel Works in front of Atlanta, GA 1864–1865, George N. Barnard, American 1819–1902, 2003.107.1

Appendix A:

Implementing District Standards

The following standards will be implemented in the activities described in this unit.

New Haven Public Schools Power Standards for the Visual Arts

1. Reflect upon, decide, analyze, interpret, and evaluate one's artwork and that of others.

(Response to Art)

Students will know how culture, history, and the visual arts influence each other.

2. *Making connections between the visual arts, other disciplines, and daily life.*

Recognize that the visual arts tell something about the time in history and culture in which they were created.

Social Studies Standards (Connecticut Frameworks):

Content Standard 1: Historical Thinking

Use primary source documents to analyze multiple perspectives.

Content Standard 3: Historical Themes

Students will apply their understanding of historical periods, issues and trends to examine such historical themes as ideals, beliefs and institutions: conflict and conflict resolution; human movement and interaction; and science and technology in order to understand how the world came to be the way it is.

Content Standard 4: Applying History

Students will recognize the continuing importance of historical thinking and historical knowledge in their own lives and in the world in which they live.

Visual Arts Standards (Connecticut Frameworks)

Content Standard 1: Media

Students will understand, select and apply media, techniques and processes.

Content Standard 4: History and Cultures

Students will understand the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

Content Standard 5: Analysis, Interpretation and Evaluation

Students will reflect upon, describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate artwork.

Endnotes

1. Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird, eds. *History beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* . (London: Routledge, 2009), 9
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4. Theodore Sizer, *The Works of Colonel John Trumbull, Artist of the American Revolution*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 5
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6. Irma B. Jaffe, *John Trumbull: Five Paintings of the Revolution* . (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1975), 5
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12. Irma B. Jaffe, *John Trumbull: Five Paintings of the Revolution* . (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1975), 9
13. Joanne B. Freeman, *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery* . (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 80

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15. Irma B. Jaffe, John Trumbull: *Five Paintings of the Revolution* . (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1975), 6
16. "Battle of Bunker Hill", http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle_of_Bunker_Hill
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18. Irma B. Jaffe, John Trumbull: *Five Paintings of the Revolution* . (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1975), 14
19. Irma B. Jaffe, John Trumbull: *Five Paintings of the Revolution*. (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1975), 15
20. Daniel C. Favata, John Trumbull: *A Founding Father of American Art* . (New York, NY: Fordham University Libraries, 2001), 22
21. Irma B. Jaffe, John Trumbull: *Five Paintings of the Revolution*. (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1975), 278
22. http://artgallery.yale.edu/pages/collection/buildings/build_trumbull.php
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