



Early American Portraits: a Strategy for Learning About Artists and Their Works

Curriculum Unit 89.05.03
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Art is a fundamental human process. It is a way in which every person may express their inner thoughts and emotions. It is a means by which every society, from the most primitive through the most modern, has expressed its values and judgements. Through our art we learn about life—the world of our past, present, and future. As an art teacher, I am continuously thinking about new ways to bring the study of artists and their works into my lessons. Students can learn much from viewing, analyzing, and discussing artworks. After taking part in such learning experiences they delight in creating their own versions of what they have studied.

This unit is designed to introduce the Third through Fifth grade student to Early American Portrait Painting. We will first learn about the earliest known portrait painters, the Limners. By studying these anonymous works, we get a glimpse of how artists in this country first earned their living, traveling from village to village painting the portraits of the local townsfolk.

We will then observe the life and work of John Singleton Copley, one of our nation's first and possibly finest portraitists. I have also included a study of the Western artist George Catlin, for I not only admire his skill as a painter, I also respect his purpose and motivation for depicting the American Indian. His desire to preserve the native traditions of the indigenous peoples of North America sets a fine example for my students of the importance and power of visual art, and the influence of art in the world.

Through the closer study of these American painters, students will learn about some of their society's most prized values, such as freedom, individuality, inventiveness, and creativity. This unit is designed to stimulate and involve the "whole" student in their learning, introducing them to lessons which will expand emotional, intellectual, and creative abilities.

Students will be expected to:

1. Study artworks from several different artists. Students will compare and contrast these works, and will learn about the historical background of the artist and his or her times.
2. Develop the capacity to think critically and communicate their reactions effectively.
3. Develop new ways of looking at and finding meaning in artworks, with emphasis on using what has been learned about the artist and the artist's world to interpret the piece.

4. Express their feelings and emotions about the artwork verbally and in written assignments.
5. Create their own artworks based on knowledge gained in their studies.

These lessons will help students to develop both internal and external capacities. They will learn to ask questions and find new solutions, to work independently and to collaborate with others, to assemble and to take apart, to imagine, dream, and fantasize about all aspects of their world.

This unit will be presented through four components of learning; Art History, Art Criticism, Art Production, and Aesthetics. These components or disciplines are borrowed from the Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) program developed by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts. I see the DBAE program as an excellent comprehensive and effective approach to learning in the Arts, and have chosen to use it as a guideline to improve the quality and learning impact of this unit.

The Getty Center for Education in the Arts believes that visual art should be an essential part of every child's education. Since its inception in 1982, the Center has done extensive research in the field of Art Education, working in collaboration with school systems across the country and developing an effective program by which art can become a more meaningful part of a general education. The center states "A substantive arts program should help children understand the historical and cultural contexts in which art has been created. It should help them to perceive aesthetic qualities in nature, in the manmade environment, and in works of art. It should provide them with the opportunities to create their own works and it should encourage them to describe, analyze, and interpret works of art. All of these components are necessary to achieve a more comprehensive, rigorous approach to the Arts in the schools." ¹ The Getty Center realized the value and need for a strong, sequential art curriculum. If art is to be valued and take a higher position in our schools we must look for ways to increase the potential for aesthetic understanding in our students, therefore benefitting the whole of society. The Center developed a Discipline Based Art Education program which balances and integrates instruction in four areas "1) the skills of making art (production), 2) knowledge about the role of art in culture (art history), 3) the skills of appraising art (criticism), and 4) ideas about the nature of art (aesthetics)" ².

Using this comprehensive approach to learning about the arts, students are given the opportunities to develop the proper frames of reference necessary to enjoy, interpret, and develop forms of beauty in the natural and manmade world. I will now examine each of these disciplines, stating why they are important to this unit.

Art Production, or the making of artworks is important to any art program, not just for the obvious reason of giving children the opportunity to express themselves creatively, but also for the process that they go through. When children have the chance to give form to their ideas, images, and emotions, they develop important cognitive skills. First, they must conceptualize the kind of image they wish to make. Then they must use some material to give the image physical form. Children need to understand the relationship of the parts to the whole. They must learn to organize the forms in a way that satisfies the standards they hold for themselves. In doing this, the children learn to develop certain skills and techniques in using the material to obtain the imagined effect. They must learn to plan ahead for desired effects and also learn to be flexible and incorporate chance accidents into the final outcome of the finished product.

"Observation of a child engaged in Art activity provides some evidence of the quality of the inner process. The concentration with which he approaches his task, the perseverance with which he carries it to completion, and the fleeting look of approval he gives his creation as he sets it aside, reveal what is happening within him." ³

Finally, in the evaluation of the work, children must learn to be their own critics. They should learn to benefit from suggestions offered by others and be encouraged to invent and identify solutions to problems they encounter throughout the work. But above all, they must learn to be the final judge of their work. The making of visual art provides the students with opportunities to experience the pleasure and frustration of creation while developing many valuable complex cognitive skills.

Art Criticism provides the children with the chance to learn, to see and describe the visual world in other ways. By looking at and studying works of art, children learn to examine closely how they and others perceive the world. As a result of spending more time looking at art, they naturally learn to see and appreciate more of the visual world. “They develop both the attitudes and the skills required to analyze, interpret, and describe the expressive qualities of visual form, qualities found not only in works of art, but also in the forms we encounter in the environment at large.” ⁴

Art History is a discipline in which the students learn about the historical as well as the cultural background of the artworks they study. They should know that all art is influenced and shaped by the culture in which it was created. Students taking a closer look at art from a certain time, location, and people will see that the artwork can also have influences on the culture and how the people of that culture view themselves. Students will compare and contrast cultural differences and learn to recognize some similarities between different cultures. Students are also given the chance to learn about individual artists and their works. By studying biographical material about the artists’ lives, he or she is presented more as a real person with the same strengths, weaknesses, and problems we all have. Children enjoy learning about artist’s lives in story form. Presented in this way it is easier to remember the unique contributions the artist made to a certain culture or age.

Aesthetics as the fourth discipline tries to encourage students to join in conversations about the nature and meaning of art. Everyone makes judgements about the artwork they see. It is useful for children to reflect on the reasons they value certain works of art over others. Some judgements are based on personal preference, and some may be based on what they see as holding the qualities of good art. Children must learn to recognize these qualities and appreciate good works of art on their own. A genuine appreciation of art is built by exposure to all kinds of artworks, good as well as bad. We must give our students ample opportunity to perceive and enjoy what is visually interesting and satisfying in our world—both manmade and natural. We must help to nurture the aesthetic sensibility of children by talking about form, color, and texture in artworks and pointing out contrasts and harmonies, and other interesting characteristics present in the world.

In a speech given at the National Invitational Conference sponsored by the Getty Center, Dr. Donald W. Crawford states that “by confronting questions about the basic concepts we use to describe art, aesthetics can sensitize us to the complexity of artworks, to the values we find in them, and to the place of art in our lives and cultures.” ⁵

I have structured my unit using the above components in order to reveal to my students the great diversity of American Portrait Painting, while providing a sense of history and strengthening art appreciation skills. The information derived from each of these components and their interrelationships contribute significantly to a fuller, richer understanding of art. My goal is to aid students in gaining technical competence in producing their own works of art, as well as help them to a deeper understanding and enjoyment of Portrait Painting. By taking the emphasis off of producing a certain amount of art projects, more time is left for the process of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and responding in an artistic manner. It is the process we go through in experiencing art and what we learn about ourselves while making art that is most important, not the quantity or quality of the product.

Strategy for Teaching This Unit

Lesson 1 —Slide presentation. Students will view the works of an early Limner and John Singleton Copley. They will discover the purpose of portrait painting. The teacher will guide the students through some exercises to help analyze and interpret the paintings.

Lesson 2 —Students will create their own portraits of a classmate by gathering information about the person through an interview survey.

Lesson 3 —Continue work of project and share finished portraits.

Lesson 4 —The life and work of George Catlin. The students will view slides of his portraits and begin their own independent projects.

Lesson 5— Finish portrait projects and write a short narrative.

Lesson 6 — *A visit to the Yale Art Gallery* . I strongly suggest a visit to the Yale Art Gallery as a conclusion to this unit. The third floor houses an excellent American Art exhibit including many of the paintings I have used in this unit. It is important for students to view the original works of art. The Education Office at the gallery will be most helpful and will arrange with you a tour of the collection.

Background on Artists Used in This Unit

The Limners —early 1700's

The earliest known American artists used to paint portraits. These men were not called artists at this time, they were called Limners. They were self taught craftsmen skilled in painting decorations on houses, signs, furniture and limning. The word limning is derived from a medieval term for drawing or making pictures with lines. The demand for his craft was not so great that he could work from a studio. He spent most of his time traveling from one settlement to the next. He acquired his customers by word of mouth, by advertising in the local newspaper (if there was one by then) or by going door to door like a peddler. If business was good, he would stay in town—when it slacked off, he would pack up his things and move on.

The Limner, being self taught, knew little or nothing of the fundamentals of art. He lacked skill in mixing colors, perspective, anatomical drawing and shading techniques. He also lacked a personal style. He simply painted what he saw as best he could. As a result, he used color arbitrarily and his paintings usually looked very flat and lifeless. He paid no special attention to an individual's own subtle characteristics so very often one person would end up looking like the next. Despite the Limner's inadequacies as an artist, their paintings have a special simplicity and sincerity. We can view them as a look into our country's past. We can see the way people used to dress and also the things that they cared about. Very often the Limner would paint in some of the person's personal possessions or would include some clues as to their occupation or hobbies.

Limners seldom signed their names to their work. On occasion they would inscribe the name of their subject and the date. Most of these portraits remained anonymous.

John Singleton Copley—1737 (?)1815

John Singleton Copley was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1737. He was trained as an engraver, but at an early age he knew he would like to be an artist. He studied and copied the works of other artists from his area. At the age of eighteen, he was a popular young artist who could turn out a portrait as well as anyone in the colonies. At twenty, he could paint a better portrait than any other artist in America. But this was not enough for him, he still wanted to improve his artwork. He was known as a thorough and meticulous craftsman. Copley paid close attention to nature and real life. You will notice in his paintings he shows a great skill in depicting textiles, hair, facial features and other surface textures. He was concerned with not only capturing an exact likeness of a person's looks, but also their character as well. Many of his portraits were of Boston aristocrats or upper class merchants like Paul Revere. Copley did not paint Mr. Revere in his best clothes instead he chose to depict him as the artist and craftsmen he was. He is shown with shirtsleeves showing and his silversmithing tools out about him. Copley has captured Mr. Revere at work in a moment of sincere reflection.

As a result of Copley's desire to ever improve his skill he moved to England, where he could study with other artists and learn from their paintings. Although he continued his career in England, he is best known as an American painter. His best paintings by far were done in America, once in England he became interested in history painting.

George Catlin—(17961872)

Catlin was born in Pennsylvania in 1796. His parents sent him to law school but Catlin taught himself to paint. He practiced on friends and relatives without much success. One day in 1824 a delegation of Far West Indians came to town dressed in all their various costumes and performing some of their dances and ceremonial rites. Young Catlin was deeply impressed. He made some sketches and realized they were some of the best he had done so far. He had an idea to found an Indian gallery that would contain his paintings of all the Indian tribes that still existed in America at this time. He felt he must record every detail of the Indians in their "natural state", before they disappeared. Catlin felt the Indian was doomed, and that "the history and customs of such a people, preserved by pictorial illustrations, are themes worthy of the life time of one man, and nothing short of loss of my life shall prevent me from visiting their country, and of becoming their historian." ⁶

Catlin was determined and in 1830 he set out on his journey to visit all known North American tribes and bring home portraits of their leaders, views of their villages, pictures of them at play and daily work, along with notes on their character and history. Catlin was very successful in his mission. The Indians greeted him with friendship and most of the time he would stay right in their villages. He worked very hard and accomplished an amazing amount of work in a limited amount of time. He organized his exhibit in 1837 and traveled with it to tell the world of these people and the threat of the American government on their way of life.

Although his cause seemed to be a lost one at the time, Catlin will best be remembered for his depiction of the Indians. His beautiful portraits are full of life and beauty. We can see that he truly knew these people he painted and believed in their way of life. His entire collection of artifacts and paintings are now housed in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

Sample Lessons

Lesson 1

Learning Objective 1. Students will learn to evaluate and give their opinion on a work of art. 2. Students will learn to compare and contrast works by different artists. 3. Students will learn that artworks can express feelings and give us new ideas.

Performance Objective After viewing and discussing the art of the Limners and John Singleton Copley students will be able to pick out similarities and differences.

Materials Slides, projector, screen, lined paper, pencils.

Learning Sequence

Opener —Begin the lesson by explaining to the students what a portrait is. A portrait is a picture of a person. It can be a painting, a sculpture or a photograph. In this unit we will be looking at some portrait paintings of early Americans. Before the invention of the camera, people had no way to record what they looked like. If they were fortunate enough they could

- hire an artist to paint their portrait. There were many different reasons that people had their portraits painted in early America, as a record of their likeness, as a record of their character or personality or as a record of their wealth. These paintings were then hung in the family's home to be later passed down to their ancestors or they may have sent the paintings back to family members left in Europe as proof of their good fortune here in the new world.

You are now ready to dim the lights and present the slides. Begin with the Limners and then move on to Copley. Refer to background material on each artist given above.

Student participation —With each slide shown students will be asked to answer some very simple straightforward questions about the painting. I call this process the dissecting of a

- painting. It is at this point you may want the students to have their own paper and pencils to write down responses or you may want to write their answers on the chalkboard. The class could also be divided into small discussion groups.

Question #1—What is this a painting of? What is it showing?

answer—(a man, a woman) (a man reading a book, a woman with her dog)

Question #2—List all the shapes you can see.

answer—(square—book, circle—head, oval—flower, rectangle—window. . .)

Question #3—List all the objects in this picture.

answer—(person, book, chair, hat. . .)

Question #4—Based on your answers to questions #1, 2 and 3 can you tell me something about this person? What was the artist trying to tell us about this person?

answer—(he reads books, she likes animals)

Question #5—Do you like this painting? Why? Would you like to meet this person? Why?

Closure —Have your students answer these questions to each of the slides. After this process c. is complete you can begin to discuss the differences in the painters style. (Refer to background above)

Evaluation Can the student cite several differences and several similarities between the work of a Limner and that of Copley.

Lesson #2 and 3 Personality Portrait

Learning Objective Students will learn that a portrait can tell us more about a person than just what he looks like.

Performance Objective Students will interview a classmate to learn more about their likes and dislikes and personality traits.

Each student will create a portrait of their partner using information gathered in the interview process.

Students will learn about proportion of the head and approximate location of the facial features.

Time Period 2 classes

Materials Large pieces of white paper or oak tag, markers, pencils, erasers, interview questionnaire.

Learning Sequence

Opener —1. Brief review and discussion on the way in which the Limners and John S. Copley were able to tell us something about their subjects' personalities in the painting. 2. Discuss
a. how facial expression can reveal a person's character. 3. Show the class how to fill the whole paper. The background can be utilized to give more information about the subject.

Student Participation —Students will choose a partner to interview and gather all the information on their subject. (see figure 1) Then the subject and interviewer will switch jobs. This is to make sure everyone has someone to draw. Putting the questions and answers aside,
b. each student will draw a basic head and features as the teacher has demonstrated. (see figure 2) Next each student will draw features and other details based on their subjects answers. The result will be a unique portrait indigenous to one classmate.

Closure —Share finished portraits. See if students can try to guess who was being interviewed
c. based on the artist interpretation.

Lesson #4 and 5

Learning Objective Students will learn about the life and work of George Catlin. They will learn

what motivated him to paint portraits of the Indians.

Performance Objective Students will view and discuss the work of George Catlin. Each student will then choose a specific Indian tribe to research and focus on a certain custom or activity like buffalo hunting, tribal dances, etc. Students will then create their own drawings of these Indian activities and report to the class on what they have learned.

Materials Books on Indians, large white paper or oak tag, markers, crayons.

Learning Sequence

- a. *Opener* —View and discuss George Catlin.

Student Participation —1. Students will be expected to research an Indian tribe or study a specific Indian activity. 2. Students will then create their own portraits of these Indians at work or play, trying to include details that cannot always be put into words. 3. Each student

b. will write a short narrative about his or her subject giving such details as name of tribe, location, custom or activity they studied and what purpose it served. Students should try to tell something interesting they learned about these people in story form.

- Closure*—Students will share their portraits and stories with the class. Then you and your
- c. students might study Catlin’s version of the same activity to see what he has chosen to draw or paint. What aspect of the activity does he emphasize?

Evaluation Did your students use any of the methods introduced to them in the previous lesson? Does their drawing tell us more about the people or custom than just what their narrative states?

Lesson #6

Field trip to the Yale Art Gallery. Be sure to make arrangements ahead of time for the docent to show you to the American exhibit. Remember to inform them that your students have been studying early portrait paintings. See if your students can identify the work of a Limner or any of Copley’s portraits. Allow extra time to view other aspects of American art such as landscapes and genre painting.

Figure #1 Personality Portrait

This is a portrait of _____

Interviewed and drawn by _____

Questions:

1. What is your favorite color? _____
2. What is your favorite number? _____
3. What is your favorite food? _____
4. What sport do you like best? _____
5. What would you like to be when you grow up?

6. If you could stay home from school tomorrow what would you do with your time?

- _____
7. You have just won the lottery, what would you do with a million dollars?
- _____
8. What do you like to do in your spare time?
- _____
9. Where is your favorite place to go?
- _____
10. What is your favorite subject in school? _____

Figure 2

TO HELP STUDENTS DRAW THE FACE IN PROPORTION. Use very light pencil lines to draw these guidelines.

1. Start with an egg shape, small side down as the chin. Divide this shape in half vertically, then again horizontally about onethird down, or where it looks like your subject's eyes should be.
Draw in the eyes, leaving a space between them about the same size as the eyes you have drawn.
2. Divide the space from eye level to chin in half horizontally, or where it looks like your subject's nose should be.
3. Draw in the nose, with the bottom of the nose reaching the line. Divide the space from nose level to chin in half horizontally, or where it looks like your subject's mouth should be.
4. Draw the ears starting just above the eye level, ending just above the nose level. Everybody's face is a little different so be sure to study your subject closely and draw what you see!
Lightly sketch your subject's hair near the eyes and ears and above the top of the head.
5. erase the vertical and horizontal guidelines, as well as any lines that are covered by your subject's hair.
Begin filling in and detailing the subject's features as you see them, adding the appropriate highlights and shadows.
6. Place your subject in some location, doing something that helps express their personality.

(figures available in print form)

Notes

1. Leilani Lattin Duke, "'The Getty Center for Education in the Arts', *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1984, Pages 612-613
2. Ibid Page 613
3. Betty Lark-Horowitz and others, *Understanding Childrens Art for Better Teaching* , 1973 Page 253
4. Elliot W. Bisner, *The Role of Discipline-Based Art Education in America's Schools* , 1987 Page 17

5. Donald W. Crawford, *Discipline-Based Art Education: What forms will it take?* , 1987 Page 29
6. Arianne Ruskin and Michael Batterbury, *The Story of American Art for Young People* , 1976 Page 100

Annotated Bibliography for Students

1. Batterbury, Arianne Ruskin and Michael, *Story of American Art for Young People* , New York, Pantheon Books, 1976.
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3. Chase, Elizabeth, *Looking at Art* , New York, Thomas Y. Cromwell Co., 1966.
The author has taken several aspects of the artists craft and shown how each has been used in different times and cultures.
4. Downey, Marion, *Children Worlds Art* , New York, Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard Co., 1970.
An interesting book for children about childrens presence in famous paintings.
5. Fisher, Leonard Everett, *The Limners, America's Earliest Portrait Painters* , New York, Franklin Watts, Inc., 1969.
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7. Jansen, H. W. and Dora Jane, *The Story of Painting for Young People* , New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1952.
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Interesting and informative narrative on the life of George Catlin.

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

1. Freedgood, Lillian, *An Enduring Image, American Painting from 1665* , New York, Thomas Y. Cromwell Co., 1970.
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2. Hubbard, Guy, *Art in Action* , San Diego, Coronado Publishers, 1986.
An excellent series of classroom art textbooks at each grade level. Author places emphasis on experiencing various activities to broaden the students' appreciation of their world.
3. Kainz, Luise C. and Olive L. Riley, *Understanding Art* , New York, Harry N. Abrams.
This book talks all about the art of portrait painting from ancient Egypt to Picasso.
4. Lark-Horowitz, Betty and Hilda Lewis and Mark Luca, *Understanding Children's Art for Better Teaching* , Columbus, Ohio, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1973.
A well written book for teachers and parents, guides us through the development of children's art.
5. Lee, Cuthbert, *Early American Portrait Painters* , New Haven, Yale University Press, 1929.
Biographies of 14 early American painters including Copley.
6. Taylor, Joshua C., *To See is to Think: Looking at American Art* , Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975.
A series of mental and visual exercises to enhance one's appreciation of the creative concepts that lie behind most paintings.
7. Townsend, Benjamin, *This New Man, A Discourse in Portraits* , Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1968.
Published in conjunction with an exhibit at the Smithsonian. This book looks at 161 characteristic Americans. An interesting book to look over with students.

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