

Teacher Resource Guide

American Art

The
Nelson-Atkins
Museum
of Art



L to R: Jean-Baptiste Dubuc (French, 1743-1819), *Mantel Clock*, 1806-1817. Copper alloy with gilding and silvering, 19 x 14 1/2 inches. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33-109. | George Caleb Bingham (American, 1811-1879), *Fishing on the Mississippi*, 1851. Oil on canvas, 28 3/4 x 36 inches (unframed). Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33-4/4. | Joseph Hirsch (American, 1910-1981), *Lynch Family*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 35 x 33 inches (unframed). Gift of the Friends of Art, 46-82.



ABOUT THE COLLECTION

Since before the founding of our nation, American artists have sought to represent the events, identities, and experiences of their own times. Often their works also served to shape perceptions and opinions among the American public. Exploring American art gives students of today the chance to consider the interdependent relationship between artists and their historical contexts while also experiencing the way art can reach across time and move us in the present.

American art is as varied and wide-ranging as Americans themselves. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art's collection of American art includes paintings, sculpture, and works on paper made in the United States from the 18th century through World War II. Photographs, decorative art objects, and works by modern, contemporary, and Native American artists serve to further illuminate American experiences from a variety of historical moments and viewpoints.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Look inside for background information about American art at the Nelson-Atkins, questions and activities to engage your students both at the museum and in the classroom, and suggestions for where to learn more.

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4525 Oak Street
Kansas City, Missouri 64111
nelson-atkins.org

To schedule a tour:
nelson-atkins.org/educators/school-tours/

TIMELINE: THE UNITED STATES, 1750—1950

Art & Artists

1754: *Hall from Robert Hooper House*,
Danvers, Massachusetts



1758: John Singleton Copley, *John Barrett*

1806-1817: Jean-Baptiste Dubuc, *Mantel Clock*

1841: Frank W. Wilkin, *Nikkanochee, Prince of Econchatti, A Young Seminole Indian, Son of Econchattimico, King of Red Hills*



1850: *Shield*, Arikara, South Dakota



1851: George Caleb Bingham, *Fishing on the Mississippi*

1852-1853: Gustave Herter, *Bookcase*

1861: Carleton E. Watkins, *View from Camp Grove, Yosemite*



1875: *Eagle Feather Headdress*, Northern Cheyenne

1886: John Singer Sargent, *Mrs. Cecil Wade*

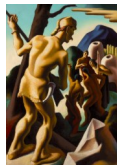


1894: James Earle Fraser, *End of the Trail*

1895: Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Young Sabot Maker*

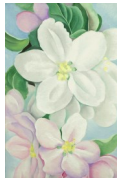
1902-1903: Frank Lloyd Wright, *Reclining Armchair*

1919-1926: Thomas Hart Benton, *American Historical Epic* series



1928: John Steuart Curry, *The Bathers*

1930: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Apple Blossoms*



1936: Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*

1938: Peter Hurd, *José Herrera*

1940: Edward Hopper, *Light Battery at Gettysburg*



1946: Joseph Hirsch, *Lynch Family*

1946: Isabel Bishop, *Girl with a Newspaper*

American History

1775-1783: American Revolution

1804-1806: Lewis & Clark Expedition

1807: Robert Fulton builds the first commercially successful steamboat

1821: Missouri becomes a state

1830: Indian Removal Act

1861: Kansas becomes a state

1861-1865: Civil War

1869: Transcontinental Railroad completed

1870: Voting rights for all races

1874: Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone

1879: Thomas Edison invents the lightbulb

1887: Congress establishes Yellowstone as the first National Park

1890: Wounded Knee Massacre

1903: Wright Brothers' first airplane flight at Kitty Hawk, NC

1908: Henry Ford produces first Model T

1914-1918: World War I

1916: The Great Migration begins

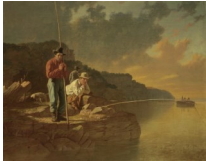
1920: Women get the right to vote

1930s: Great Depression and Dust Bowl in drought-stricken southern plains

1939-1945: World War II

THEMES TO EXPLORE IN AMERICAN ART

Nature and Natural Resources



The natural environment has shaped American art in many ways, from providing raw materials for art to influencing the types of subject matter artists depict. Works like George Caleb Bingham's *Fishing on the Mississippi* (1851) and Maya Lin's *Silver Missouri* (2013) demonstrate the enduring importance of one natural resource—rivers—within the American economy and ecosystem.



American Indian Heritage and Cross-Cultural Exchange



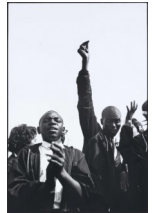
The American Indian presence in American art long predates our country's founding. Works made about American Indians may, as with James Earle Fraser's *End of the Trail* (1894), reflect artists' interest in their cultural legacy, while works made by Native artists, such as Jamie Okuma's *Adaptation* (2011), show that this legacy continues to thrive by blending traditional forms and materials with elements introduced from outside.



Civil Rights and Civic Engagement



The expressive qualities of art enable it to both record and leverage people's power to make a difference. As in Danny Lyon's *Singing Group at the March on Washington. Basis for the SNCC poster titled "Now"* (1962-1964), many works of American art depict the ways individuals have sought to bring about change; others, like Joseph Hirsch's *Lynch Family* (1946), exemplify how artists use their medium to encourage Americans to engage with social issues.



National Symbols, National Heroes



From America's earliest days, visual symbols have served to represent our nation and the values we espouse. Artists can employ these symbols to celebrate, memorialize, or challenge individuals who loom large in our national history. Jean-Baptiste Dubuc's eagle-topped *Mantel Clock* (1806-1817) commemorates George Washington, while Radcliffe Bailey's *Mound Magician* (1997) features symbols connected with baseball player Satchel Paige.



Americans at Work



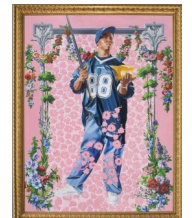
Many American artists throughout history have depicted ordinary men and women at work. The setting, appearance, and type of worker being shown may differ greatly between Isabel Bishop's *Girl with a Newspaper* (1946) and Peter Hurd's *José Herrera* (1938), but each reflects an artist's interest in and respect for the lives and occupations of their fellow Americans.



American Portraits and Identity



A portrait—whether it's an oil painting or a Snapchat selfie—is a way to communicate identity. Portraits can tell us what was important to Americans of different time periods and walks of life. John Singleton Copley's *John Barrett* (ca. 1758) suggests the genteel status of this wealthy Boston merchant, while Kehinde Wiley's *St. Adrian* (2014) gives its subject the air of confidence and prestige associated with historical heroes.



BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Practice Looking

Observation and interpretation are two important skills students use when making sense of American art. One way to practice these skills is to have an open-ended discussion centered on just three questions:

- What's going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?*

Choose an American work from the museum's website (art.nelson-atkins.org/collections) to talk about as a class and, after a moment of silent looking, kick off the discussion by asking the first question. Paraphrase any responses that are given, being sure to ask the second question if students offer interpretive comments. Keep the discussion going by regularly asking the third question.

*This is a highly abbreviated description of a teaching method called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). For more details on the pedagogy, development, and successful implementation of VTS, visit vtshome.org.

Compare & Contrast

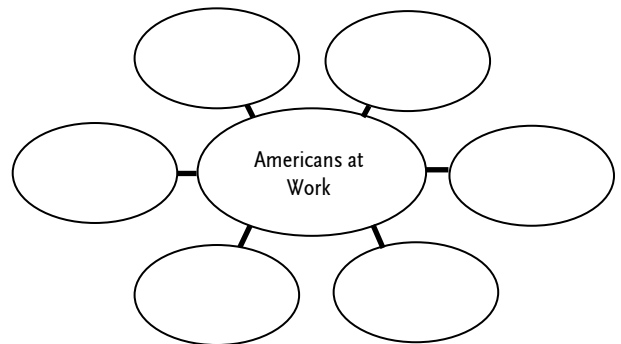
Analyzing similarities and differences between two works of art that deal with the same theme can lead to new insights. Challenge students to choose one of the pairs of images shown on the previous page and to compare and contrast the two works. How are they similar? How are they different? What might each one tell us about American lives and experiences? (Find images and descriptions at art.nelson-atkins.org/collections.)

Discuss

Many of the American artworks you will see at the Nelson-Atkins were created to influence people's opinions about particular individuals, events, places, or situations. Think of a work of art (either visual art or another art form, such as music or film) that has affected how you feel about a current event or issue. What about the work made it have that effect on you?

Explore Themes

As a class, choose one of the themes described on the previous page. (You might choose something that relates to topics you have been studying in class.) Brainstorm people, places, things, and ideas related to your chosen theme and create a concept map. During your museum visit, you can see if any of the details you listed show up in works of art.



Dig In

Have each student choose an American artist whose work is on view at the Nelson-Atkins and use resources from the web, your school library, or the ERC to learn more about that artist's life and work. Suggested artists:

Thomas Hart Benton

John Singleton Copley

Georgia O'Keeffe

George Caleb Bingham

John Steuart Curry

John Singer Sargent

Isabel Bishop

Edward Hopper

Henry Ossawa Tanner

IN-GALLERY ACTIVITIES

Observe

The works shown in the American art galleries at the Nelson-Atkins are grouped roughly according to time period, starting with the Colonial era and ending with the mid-1950s. As students explore each gallery, ask them to consider the following questions:

- What types of people are shown in these works of art? What types of people are **absent** ?
- How would you describe the environments shown in these works of art?
- What do the objects in this room have in common with one another?
- What time period do you think these works come from?

Students can read the labels posted next to the art on display to learn the general time period represented in each gallery. Encourage students to compare the imagery, materials, and styles they see in each space.

Identify

If students spent time gathering information about a particular American artist prior to their visit, instruct them to find a work by that artist in the museum. Have students record the title of the work, the subject matter shown in the image, their overall impression of it, and how it compares to other works they saw when they researched that artist.

Extend

Have students choose one of the themes listed earlier in this guide. Challenge them to look for at least one other work in the American art galleries that touches on that theme in some way. How is it similar to or different from the examples provided? What message does it send about America or the American people?

AFTER YOUR VISIT

Connect

Use art as a springboard for writing: instruct students to choose a work they saw in the museum and to write a narrative based on what they see in the image. They should take note of the setting, characters, and suggested action shown in the work of art to add detail and interest to their narrative.

Reflect

Play students a video recording of poet Glenn North reading “Lynch Family Blues,” which he wrote in response to Joseph Hirsch’s *Lynch Family* (view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q86ggAXvr2U>). How do the poem and painting compare in terms of mood, message, and point of view? What social issue would you wish to draw attention to through art or poetry?

Create

Challenge students to create an original collage that represents one of the themes they explored in the American art galleries. Students can use images of museum objects as well as hand-drawn symbols or pictures cut from other print sources to show what that theme looks like today or what it might have looked like at a particular point in American history.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: American Paintings to 1945
Edited by Margaret C. Conrads

This catalog includes images, detailed descriptions, and contextual information for the American paintings on view at the Nelson-Atkins. Available in the ERC.

Smithsonian Q & A: American Art and Artists
By Tricia Wright

In this guide, students can get easy-to-understand answers to some of the more common art historical questions they may have about American art. Available in the ERC.

Great American Artists for Kids
By MaryAnn F. Kohl and Kim Solga

This book provides biographical information about a variety of American artists and describes a related hands-on art project idea for each one. Available in the ERC.

Picturing America
National Endowment for the Humanities

This set of poster-sized reproductions of great works of American art also includes a Teachers Resource Book and classroom discussion questions. Available in the ERC.

Library of Congress Classroom Materials
loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials

Search this extensive database for photographs, documents, and other primary sources that can help students link works of art with different time periods and themes in American history.

EDSITEment
edsitement.neh.gov

Developed by the National Endowment for the Humanities, this site features a searchable database of lesson plans and student resources related to art, history, and other humanities subjects.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Exploring American art at the Nelson-Atkins will afford your students the opportunity to make observations and interpretations of works of art while considering how artists can reflect, respond to, and influence the events of their times. The following learning standards may be addressed through a museum visit and/or the activities in this guide:

Visual Arts Standards (KS)

- Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Visual Art Standards (MO)

- Investigate the nature of art and discuss responses to artworks.
- Analyze and evaluate art using art vocabulary.
- Explain how American culture and events and ideas in U.S. history are expressed in works of art.
- Compare and contrast artworks from different historical time periods and/or cultures.

History, Government, and Social Studies Standards (KS)

- The student will investigate specific beliefs, contributions, ideas, and/or diverse populations and connect them to contemporary issues.
- The student will recognize and evaluate continuity and change over time and its impact on individuals, institutions, communities, states, and nations.

Social Studies Standards (MO)

- Recognize and explain the significance of national symbols associated with historical events and time periods being studied.
- Explain connections between historical context and peoples' perspectives at the time in American history.
- Analyze the artistic and intellectual achievements of Americans at different periods in history.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO AMERICAN ART

Canvassing

Asking for votes for a particular candidate or issue in an election (see George Caleb Bingham, *Canvassing for a Vote*, 1852)

Cast

A sculpture made by pouring molten metal or a similar material into a mold (see James Earle Fraser, *End of the Trail*, modeled 1894 and cast 1918)

Commission

A agreement made between a patron and an artist to produce a work of art

Composition

The placement or arrangement of forms, colors, and other elements within a work of art

Cross-cultural exchange

Interaction between two or more different culture groups that involves the sharing of ideas, trade goods, and/or other elements of culture (see Jamie Okuma, *Adaptation*, 2011)

Flatboat

A flat-bottomed boat used to transport freight and passengers downstream on shallow waterways; it was an important mode of shipping in the United States until the invention of steam-powered boats in the early 1800s (see George Caleb Bingham, *Fishing on the Mississippi*, 1851)

Genre painting

A scene of everyday life that depicts ordinary, often anonymous people rather than recognizable individuals (see Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Young Sabot Maker*, 1895)

Heritage

Valued objects, ideas, and cultural traditions that have been passed down from previous generations within a particular group

Industrialization

The transformation of a society through the large-scale introduction of manufacturing

Landscape

An artwork that depicts natural scenery (see Carleton E. Watkins, *View from Camp Grove, Yosemite*, 1861)

Lynch

To kill someone by mob action without legal authority (see Joseph Hirsch, *Lynch Family*, 1946)

Memorialize

To preserve the memory of a person or event (see Jean-Baptiste Dubuc, *Mantel Clock*, 1806-1817)

Narrative Art

Art that tells a story, either as a single moment in a suggested ongoing story or as a sequence of scenes unfolding over time (see Thomas Hart Benton, *American Historical Epic* series, 1919-1926)

Continued on next page

GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO AMERICAN ART, continued

Patron

A person who supports an artist, often by purchasing the artist's work

Portrait

A work of art that depicts a specific individual (see John Singleton Copley, *John Barrett*, ca. 1758)

Regionalism

A movement in American art that reached its height in the 1930s; it focused on scenes of rural life shown in a realistic and generally positive manner (see Peter Hurd, Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry)

Rural

Relating to the countryside rather than the town or city

Still Life

A work of art with inanimate objects—such as fruit, flowers, or dishes—as its subject matter

Symbol

A visual image or design that represents something or someone else (see Radcliffe Bailey, *Mound Magician*, 1997)

Urban

Relating to a city or town

Westward Expansion

The growth of the United States that occurred when people of European descent populated more and more territory in North America, spreading westward from the original thirteen colonies



EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

The ERC can help you expand your pre- and post-visit activities to connect your students' museum experience with your classroom curriculum. The ERC offers:

- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

Visit nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources for info.