



Teaching American History through American Art – February 2023

We are developing materials to assist K-12 American History and Social Studies teachers to utilize great works of art from the former Warner Collection and available on this website, to better teach U.S. History in the classroom. Each month we will feature a new painting and provide historical information that will help teachers to utilize the image to teach visual literacy skills while engaging students in conversation and critical thinking about important themes in American History. These lesson plans will help teachers integrate the study of History with the study of art. We will also be inviting a current teacher to contribute additional historical information that can be used to enrich the lesson plan.

Rather than using written text as the entry point, this resource encourages using art as the entry point for learning American History. It is based upon a modified QUEST methodology (questions for Understanding, Exploring, Seeing, and Thinking) developed through Project MUSE at Harvard University. It encourages meta-cognition and the development of "visual literacy" skills through close observation, deep thinking, and respectful discussion. (<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/project-muse>)

The exercise will be performed with a group of students who view the artwork together on a projected screen. The lesson is inquiry-based, involving a layered structure of questions designed to promote slow-looking, deep thinking, and respectful conversation, during which the students learn to construct meaning based upon their observations and those of their classmates while reflecting on historical information provided by the teacher.

The discussion is guided by the teacher, who encourages responses and facilitates a respectful conversation that values differences in interpretation. Although the QUEST methodology requires no prior knowledge of History, and there are no right or wrong answers regarding one's personal response to visual stimuli, the questions themselves present excellent opportunity for teachers to introduce additional historical information and context (facts) that may appropriately influence or alter the student's response. The student may then understand and appreciate how knowledge of historical context affects interpretations and judgments about History.

The ten questions presented below represent a lesson plan and the generic format of questions that teachers should use to engage the class in slow-looking, respectful conversation and historical thinking.

COLOR	What colors do you see?
OBJECTS	What objects do you see?
ACTION	What is happening?
PERSONAL CONNECTION	Does this remind you of anything?
REALISM	Is this realistic?
EMOTIONAL IMPACT	How does this painting make you feel?
ARTISTIC INTENT	Why do you think the artist painted this?
COMPARISON	Compare what is happening then and now.
TITLE	What title would you give this painting?
IMPACT	Did you learn anything from this painting?

Today, we present the painting "Washington and Gist Crossing the Allegheny River" by Daniel Huntington. This painting relates to the Colonial Period, specifically to the years leading up to the French and Indian War. It relates to U.S. History Standards, including the Colonial Period, the French and Indian War, Western Expansion, and the early life of George Washington. We have also invited Gregory Balan, a history teacher at Riverdale High School in Fort Meyers, Florida, to contribute a lesson plan and additional historical research specifically designed to utilize this painting in an inquiry-based approach to teaching.



George Washington and Christopher Gist crossing the Allegheny River, 1841, attributed to Daniel Huntington (1816-1906).

To read more about what was occurring in American History, please visit Mount Vernon's library for historical background on Washington's work in 1753 and his travels with surveyor Christopher Gist. Source: <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/alleggheny-expedition> (biography of Washington: Allegheny Expedition)

About the Artist:

Daniel Huntington was born in 1816 in New York City. A prolific artist with over 1,200 known works, he is known mainly for his portraits, although he did paint some Hudson River-inspired landscapes and illustrations. Huntington's paternal grandfather was Benjamin Huntington, a delegate at the Second Continental Congress and the first U.S. Representative from Connecticut. His mother was Faith Trumbull, a relative of the accomplished artist John Trumbull, and it was in his studio that young Daniel was first exposed to the genre of history painting.

Daniel studied at Yale in 1832 and Hamilton College in 1833, where he met portrait artist C.L. Elliott. In 1835, he studied at New York University with Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872) and later with portraitist Henry Inman (1801-1846). Huntington first exhibited his work at the National Academy of Design in 1836 and was then elected a member.

From 1839-1840 Huntington went on a grand tour of Europe, visiting England, Rome, Florence, and Paris, and became greatly influenced by the work of Renaissance painter, Titian. After his return to New York, he devoted his time chiefly to portrait painting, although he painted many genre, religious and historical subjects, as well as landscapes in the tradition of the Hudson River School. In 1840 he became widely recognized with the exhibition of his "Mercy's Dream," with an established reputation, Huntington returned to Europe again from 1851 to 1858, painting portraits of notable figures in England and elsewhere.

In 1850 Huntington exhibited 130 of his completed York's Art Union buildings. He personally wrote and published the accompanying catalogue. The work listed as No 91, was entered into the catalogue as a "sketch for illustration" as it was the original completed painting of Washington and Gist crossing the Allegheny River which was intended to be the basis for a later engraving. This painting was also exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1843 and again in 1860, where it was titled "Washington Crossing the Monongahela".

Daniel Huntington became one of the leading portrait artists of New York society in the post-Civil War period and a leading figure in the city's art circle. He was president of the National Academy of Design 1862-1870, and again 1877-1890. He was also vice president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He died in 1906.
