



Teaching American History with American Art – Lesson Plan

Focus: Colonial Social Conditions and the American Melting Pot

Artwork: Edward Lamson Henry's "Colonial Wedding" (1911)

Objectives/State Standards: Understanding Life and Social Conditions in Colonial America and Differences Between Colonies (Alabama Objectives 10.1.1 and 10.2.1)

Lesson Sequence: Part I Image Analysis with Visual Thinking Strategy

1. Prior to beginning the Art Exercise, teachers should become familiar with the painting and should read both the ***Notes on the Painting***, as well as the ***Historical Context Document*** included in this lesson plan.
2. Begin the Art Exercise, by displaying the painting for everyone to see. *A high quality image of the painting should be projected and viewable to everyone while working on this.*
3. Analyze the image through discussion using the Image Analysis Questions to guide the discussion. This discussion should be based on a "cold viewing" of the image without utilizing prior instruction on the subject matter.
4. The ***Notes on the Image*** should not be given to students, but can be used to help guide students if they are struggling to pick out details from the painting.
5. Use the ***Historical Context*** essay to provide background information on the historical event(s) being depicted in the image and/or the historical context surrounding the image. The Historical Context may also be assigned as a reading after the initial "cold viewing" of the image.
6. Re-engage students in discussion about the image using both the details noted in the initial discussion and the information from the Historical Context. Analysis Questions can be asked again or broader questions linking the image and the historical context explicitly can be used.

Part I : Image Analysis Questions for "Colonial Wedding", 1911 by E.L. Henry

Use these questions to drive discussion and allow the students to freely explore what they are seeing in the painting. There are no right or wrong answers, per se, but certain interpretations are more likely correct than others and teachers may provide historical factual information to encourage meaningful dialogue and enhance learning. Encourage the students to work together and use specific details from the image to support their ideas, interpretations and judgments. Encourage a diversity of ideas. The first question is an ice-breaking question that will be repeated at the end of the discussion to gauge whether student interest has changed after understanding more about the painting and its context.

Do you like the painting? Would you buy it?

1. **Color:** Take turns describing all the colors you see.
2. **Objects:** Take turns describing all the objects that you see in the painting.

3. **Action:** What all is going on in the painting? Who are the main characters?
4. **Realism:** How realistic is this scene? Is anything unrealistic?

5. **Personal Connection:** Does this remind you of any story in your own life?
6. **Emotion:** What emotions are expressed in this work of art?
7. **Artistic Intent:** Why do you think the artist painted this?
8. **Comparison:** Compare this event to a similar event that happens today?

9. **Title:** What title would you have given to this painting?
10. **Impact:** What makes this painting special?

Do you like this painting? Would you buy it?

1. Notes on the Image: Colonial Wedding, 1911 by Edward Lamson Henry

1. The **shoe** that appears in the air above the bride and groom is an indication of an age-old wedding custom—the throwing of shoes at the wedding couple. The custom, which was thought to bring luck, is at least as old as the Anglo-Saxon period of early England. It was later replaced by the throwing of grains like rice.
2. The **boats** by the shore and off-shore are a particular type of Italian boat (catamaran) that Henry was criticized for including as most believed such ships never sailed to the American colonies at the time. He was vindicated when he proved conclusively that such ships had made port in the American colonies. The ships were used to bring the British soldiers to the Colonies.
3. The bride is seated upon a **pillion**, or padded cushion, that was used by women to ride behind male riders during the colonial period. To ensure he got the shape of the type of pillion used at the time correct, Henry searched far and wide for one and eventually found a decaying example in a museum. He carefully studied it to ensure that he would position the bride correctly on the horse.
4. The stacked firearms appear to be **Fowler muskets** and would have been typical of the type of firearm carried by colonists before the War of Independence. **Powder horns**, **quivers**, and **bows** are also hanging among the muskets. A drying **animal skin** is nearby on the ground.
5. The flowers indicate a spring or perhaps summer wedding, though many colonial weddings took place during the winter months when there were relatively fewer farming duties to complete.
6. The attire of the Indians suggests they are **Mohawk**. What is most likely a female Mohawk can be seen carrying her infant in a traditional **cradleboard**. The inclusion of a female Mohawk with an infant is further indication of familiarity and a sense of safety between the colonists and the Mohawk attendees.
7. The utensils and dishes at the table are likely **pewter**, as this was a common metal for such items in colonial times. Pewter production was very common across the colonies.
8. The date on the **old stone house** is 16_9 and is one of the stone houses available in Virginia for Henry's painting. It could be either post-medieval English stone house or a Dutch Colonial style, built in the 17th Century, which would have been common in the Dutch settled Hudson River valley region of New York,. The third digit of the house date is obscured by the chimney, but could be a 0 indicating the year that colonial representation in Virginia began, or it may be another digit representing the year that the house was constructed.
9. A wooden **watchtower** is set in the background behind the house. It may also have been used to store ammunition and firearms.
10. A shallow **well** with a cover and drinking utensils is located in the foreground of the painting next to a group of farming implements. Such wells were often dug to get fresh drinking water.

Historical Context of “Colonial Wedding”, 1911 by E.L. Henry

By Gregory Balan

E.L. Henry (1841-1919) witnessed monumental change his entire life. Born in antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, he was orphaned at seven and moved to New York to live with relatives. He came of age just as the United States barreled towards Civil War, saw the advent of the telephone and radio, and died just as the United States was emerging as a global power following the horrors of World War I. Despite, or perhaps because of, all of these changes that E.L. Henry experienced in life, he had an abiding interest in our nation’s past. Henry became known for his vivid scenes of everyday life in an America from a bygone era. A meticulous researcher, Henry was almost obsessive about getting even minute historical details in his paintings correct. And yet, detractors claim that Henry portrayed America’s past in an idealized or romanticized way that was ahistorical and unrealistic. One such portrayal of America’s past is “Colonial Wedding”; it exhibits plenty of Henry’s famous attention to detail and has been the subject of criticism for its portrayal of a wedding that exemplifies the ideal “melting pot” that many Americans cherish and others argue never existed.

The exact basis for Colonial Wedding is not entirely clear, but famed early 20th century art critic Elizabeth McCausland claimed that the painting was based upon Henry’s conversations with her grandmother. McCausland’s grandmother recounted the details of what may have been her mother’s wedding at the estate known as Sir William Johnson Hall located in the Mohawk Valley of upstate New York. Regardless of the exact source for Henry’s inspiration, Colonial Wedding presents a diverse and engaging wedding scene corroborated by historical studies of the Anglo-Dutch customs of New Amsterdam and later New York. Many of these wedding customs were shared or similar to those found in other colonies such as Virginia, where Henry set this painting.¹

Colonial Wedding depicts a wedding at a tidewater Virginia home, but beyond the setting, the details of the painting are derived from the wedding at Sir William Johnson Hall. William Johnson was an Anglo-Irish settler with extensive ties to the Mohawk tribe, and who was knighted by the British Crown for his efforts in building diplomatic and trade relations between the British Empire and the Iroquois Confederation, of which the Mohawks were a member. The newly minted Sir William Johnson built his estate for his Mohawk wife and their 8 children in 1763 at what was likely the height of cordial sentiments between the British Empire and her colonists following the British victory over the French in the French and Indian War. The Iroquois Confederation were key British allies during the war and assisted colonial militia and British regulars in rebuffing French attacks from Canada and joint FrenchIndian attacks from the Ohio River Valley and Great Lakes regions. The wedding that occurred at Johnson’s hall sometime after its construction would almost certainly have included Mohawk attendees. These Mohawks are seen gathered near the bride and groom as they set off together after the wedding party ended. Amidst the large crowd, where a minister can be seen, are both British regulars in their traditional red coats and colonial militia in the blue coats and red undercoats

¹ See Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play*, (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1989); Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Days in Old New York*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1896).

that were common in colonies like Virginia and New York. The remainder of the crowd appears to be family, friends, and servants, both black and white.

The depiction of various socioeconomic groups coming together in harmony for a wedding is a controversial one today when so much discourse is premised on the assertion that members of such diverse groups could not possibly get along socially. However, we know from extensive historical research that colonial weddings were, on the whole, fairly inclusive and joyous celebrations. Such weddings were rarely held in churches, but instead were typically held at the bride's home. While a minister of the couple's choosing would preside over the ceremony in most instances (secular Justices of the Peace could also perform the ceremony), the wedding being placed outside of a church tamped down on any sectarian exclusions. As mentioned earlier, the presence of Mohawks at the wedding is virtually 1 See Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play*, (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1989); Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Days in Old New York*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896). guaranteed given Johnson's deep personal, economic, and diplomatic ties to the Mohawk tribe. The presence of both colonial militia and British officers is plausible given the approximate time when this wedding would have taken place—shortly after the British/colonist victory over the French. Johnson's respected position within the British diplomatic corps and his estate's location in a rural, frontier town would likely account for the presence of such soldiers. The presence of black and white servants was a common thing at colonial weddings. Tables were typically set up for the servants, though separated from the head table for the bride, groom, and wedding party, and they were permitted to partake in the festivities. Servants were expected to return to work once the wedding was over, though the bride and groom often spent time moving between the homes of members of the wedding party to continue the celebration for several days after the wedding itself. This practice appears to have originated with the Dutch, but became common in New York. The attire of the guests, bride, and groom, though a seemingly minor detail, are accurate for the time period as well, and attest to Henry's meticulous research. The advent of the white wedding dress had not yet come, and colorful prints were the favored textile for wedding dresses. Grooms often wore equally colorful coats that coordinated with the bride's dress.

These details are corroborated by historians' research into the letters, travel journals, newspaper articles, and diaries of colonists and visitors to the American colonies at the time. While many of these writers are obscure, more famed observers of the American melting pot provide us with vivid descriptions of the unique social conditions that constituted American society.² Colonial America was not a utopian society, but it was an unprecedented society where the potential for everyone to have a seat at the table, whether it was in the halls of power, or at a backyard wedding, existed. E.L. Henry's *Colonial Wedding* reminds us of that potential and serves as a happy reminder of what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature.

² See Part II to access Volume I, Part 1, Chapter 3: "Social State of the Anglo-Americans" of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*; "Letter III—What is an American" of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*; Benjamin Franklin's *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*.

Lesson Sequence: Part II: Inquiry Based Learning with Primary Source Documents

Teachers should assign one or more of the following primary source documents to students for a second/follow-up, text-based lesson on this same theme of “Life and Social Conditions in the Colonial Period”. Teachers are encouraged to develop their own questions for inquiry based learning for engaging the students in critical thinking and respectful dialogue and debate. These 3 documents represent diverse, but corroborating views. When responding to questions, teachers should ask students to back up their responses by referring to specific passages in the primary source documents.

- J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer, “Letter III—What is an American?”<https://americanliterature.com/author/j-hector-st-john-de-crevecoeur/book/letters-from-an-americanfarmer/letter-iii-what-is-an-american>
- Benjamin Franklin, “Information for Those Who Would Remove to America”
<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/information-to-those-who-would-remove-to-america/>
- Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Volume I, Part 1, Chapter 3: “Social State of the AngloAmericans” https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/schleifer-democracy-in-america-historical-critical-edition-vol-1#lf1532-01_label_1261