

Teacher Lab

Lesson Plan

Topic of Lesson: American Presidents

Topic of Unit that Lesson is Part of: American Leaders

Schedule: 5 sessions

Lesson Summary:

Students will analyze works of American art that represent American Presidents. They will determine the character traits represented in the works of art and identify ways in which the artist communicates those traits. They will compare and contrast the leadership qualities that have been important to the Presidency.

American Artworks on Which Lesson is Based

The two artworks in this lesson are from PICTURING AMERICA , a set of prints that is at your school. Go to <http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/> to get more resources to use with these two artworks and more.



Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868), *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851. Oil on canvas, 149 x 255 in. (378.5 x 647.7 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John Stewart Kennedy, 1897 (97.34). Photograph © 1992 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Alexander Gardner (1821–1882), *Abraham Lincoln*, February 5, 1865. Photographic print. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Key Ideas Students Will Understand:

- An artist communicates ideas through images.
- An American artwork is a window into a time period in American history.
- Every work of art has a main idea or theme.

**National Standards:**

Reading: Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (NCTE)

Social Sciences: Knowledge—The learner will understand the key theme of leadership; key concepts of era;, primary and secondary sources (NCSS)

Illinois Learning Standards:

ILS1C: Interpret a painting or photograph to identify its main idea or theme and supporting details.

ILS1C: Analyze the writer's (painter/photographer) techniques

ILS 14 D: Understand the roles and influences of individuals in the political systems of the United States

Chicago Reading Initiative Correlation:

x	Word knowledge
x	Writing
x	Reading

Student Objectives:

14.D.2 Explain ways that individual American leaders reflect and shape American values.

1.C.3b Interpret and analyze an American artwork using point of view and theme.

2.A.3a Identify and analyze a variety of artists' techniques in American artworks

Vocabulary:

characteristics	ideals	identity	leadership
political	portrait	representation	symbol
technique	values		

Add more words as students analyze the art and create their own works.

Assessment Strategies:

- Students will write a guide to interpreting American art that represents American values.
- Students will create a visual representation of Barack Obama including the representation of a theme and the use of artistic techniques to communicate that theme.



Information Important to Students' Understanding of the Artworks: About the Context, the Artist, and the Artwork

Washington Crossing the Delaware

The following explanation is copied directly from Picturing America, http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide_Chapters/Pictamer_Resource_Book_Chapter_4A.pdf

In Emanuel Leutze's painting, the commander of the Continental Army against Great Britain stands boldly near the prow of a crowded boat and navigates the treacherous Delaware River on Christmas night, 1776. The Declaration of Independence had been signed earlier that year in the summer heat of Philadelphia, and through the sobering autumn months General Washington led an army of dwindling numbers, with defeats mounting and morale sinking.

Soundly beaten in New York, Washington was pursued through New Jersey into Pennsylvania by British General William Howe, who fully expected to take Philadelphia, the seat of the Continental Congress. However, in his retreat across the Delaware River, Washington shrewdly seized all the available boats to ferry his men from the New Jersey banks to the Pennsylvania side. A confident General Howe, certain the war was all but won, had already returned to New York in mid-December, leaving his British and Hessian mercenary troops in the Trenton area. The commanders left in charge plotted a river crossing as soon as the Delaware iced over. Washington acted immediately when his spies uncovered the plan. With the same boats used to flee the British, he and his men recrossed the river at Trenton, found the enemy, killed several officers, and captured more than nine hundred prisoners. The surprise attack not only checked the British advance but helped restore morale to the rebels. The victory confirmed Washington's leadership and the brilliance of his military strategy, both vital to reinvigorating the American cause.

Leutze grew up sharing the democratic ideals of the American Revolution and frequently represented them in his historical and literary paintings. The December battle at Trenton, a turning point in the war, appealed to the German-born painter, who had immigrated to the United States as a child decades after the Revolution. His works are combinations of carefully researched information presented in a meticulously rendered dramatic style. Leutze's theatrical interpretations of historic events brought him private and government commissions. The sheer size of



Leutze's canvas, twelve by twenty-one feet, pulls anyone standing before it into the scene. The viewer is nearly the same size as the painted figures and the action seems only a few feet away. Washington stands fast in the lead boat as his men struggle to navigate the craft through the choppy, ice-filled waters. Other boats follow, crowded with soldiers and jittery horses. We feel Washington's resolve and courage in facing the battle ahead as he leans forward into the blustering wind. As his men strain to pull the oars through the water, one deflects the ice while another at the back of the boat uses a paddle like a rudder to steer the course. Dawn glimmers below the troubled sky, and the American flag, blown and knotted by the wind, rises to a peak behind the General.

The Continental Congress did not officially adopt the flag shown in the painting until June 14, 1777, but according to tradition, Betsy Ross is said to have completed one of this design in late May or early June of 1776 at the request of George Washington and two other members of the Congress. The thirteen colonies represented in the flag's ring of stars are also symbolized in the painting by the thirteen men accompanying Washington in his boat, each in clothing representative of his colonial region. Leutze, a passionate abolitionist, included an African American as the third boatman from the front. Hoping for a government commission, Leutze put the painting on public exhibit in New York in 1851. Within four months, fifty thousand people had paid to see it. Not long after, a private collector bought the work for ten thousand dollars, a stupendous sum at the time. Engraved reproductions, popular in nineteenth-century American homes, expanded the fame of the work even further. The attention and high praise Leutze received helped the artist obtain the commission for his mural *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, which now occupies a stairway in the U.S. Capitol.

Originally, Leutze's painting was held in a carved and gilded wooden frame. Along the top of the work's original frame was a twelve-foot carved eagle holding a banner with the famous words from George Washington's eulogy, "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."



Abraham Lincoln, February 5, 1865

The following explanation is copied directly from *Picturing America*, http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide_Chapters/PictAmer_Resource_Book_Chapter_9B.pdf

Abraham Lincoln was the first American president to use photography for political purposes. During his first presidential campaign in 1860, some thirty-five portraits of the candidate by the photographer Mathew Brady were circulated throughout the country. The immediacy of a photograph created a sense of intimacy between viewer and subject (or voter and candidate) that few painted portraits could achieve—particularly in the mid-nineteenth century, when the medium was still a novelty for many Americans. Acknowledging its power to move the populace, Lincoln gave portrait photography credit for his victory. “Make no mistake,” he said. “Brady made me President!” This photograph of Lincoln by Alexander Gardner was made some years later, when the burden of the presidency had taken its toll. Gardner had been one in a team of photographers employed by Brady to follow the Union troops and make a visual record of the Civil War. He began to work independently in 1863, when he established his own studio in Washington, D.C., and became known for his portraits of uniformed soldiers setting off for war. President Lincoln visited Gardner’s studio one Sunday in February 1865, the final year of the Civil War, accompanied by the American portraitist Matthew Wilson. Wilson had been commissioned to paint the president’s portrait, but because Lincoln could spare so little time to pose, the artist needed recent photographs to work from. The pictures served their purpose, but the resulting painting—a traditional, formal, bust-length portrait in an oval format—is not particularly distinguished and hardly remembered today. Gardner’s surprisingly candid photographs have proven more enduring, even though they were not originally intended to stand alone as works of art.

This half-length portrait of Lincoln is one of the finest from that February studio session. The president sits comfortably in a sturdy chair, his left elbow resting on its arm, his right on his own slightly elevated knee. There is nothing in this photograph to indicate Lincoln’s exalted position: we might just as well be looking at a humble country doctor. His clothing appears plain (though not unfashionable) and his loosely knotted bowtie has been left slightly askew. By this point in his public life, the president had sat for dozens of photographs, and he would have been mindful of the need to hold perfectly still during the several minutes it



took to make an exposure. In this print, Lincoln’s eyes look steadily toward the camera but his hands fiddle impatiently with his eyeglasses and pencil as if to remind the photographer that he had more important things to do. What draws and holds our attention is Lincoln’s expression, which the poet Walt Whitman described as “a deep latent sadness.” At the time this picture was taken, Lincoln had weathered the worst of the war and almost succeeded in his fight to preserve the Union, yet he was painfully aware how much that cause had cost the nation. Lincoln appears much older than his fifty-five years, and Gardner did nothing to flatter the president’s haggard, careworn features. The photographer may even have exaggerated them, for the turn of Lincoln’s head leaves one side of his face slightly in shadow, making his right eye and cheek appear hollow and cadaverous.

Gardner’s photograph took on another dimension shortly after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination on April 14, 1865. A Boston publishing firm exploited the nation’s grief by producing prints of the portrait Matthew Wilson had based on Gardner’s photographs. Gardner’s own publisher countered a few days later by offering this and other photographs from the February studio session. They were advertised as the products of “Mr. Lincoln’s last sitting.” That unsupported (and until recently, unquestioned) claim gave rise to the tradition that Gardner’s portraits had been taken just four days before Lincoln’s death, investing them with a special aura of martyrdom. We now know that these were not in fact the last portraits of Abraham Lincoln. Even though Gardner’s picture does not belong to the president’s final days, it records his weary and worried countenance during the last long weeks of the war, when the surrender at Appomattox was still some months away.

Learn More: Relevant Websites

- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/>
- <http://www.barackobama.com/>

Organize an Internet “field trip” to see these works and others at <http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/>.

**Student Activities:**

Day	Emphasis of this Lesson Idea/Outcome	Activities
1	<p>Artists communicate character traits through their representation of a leader.</p> <p>Students will begin to use art interpretation techniques to observe and infer from American artworks.</p>	<p><i>Students draw a picture of Barack Obama showing him as a leader.</i></p> <p><i>Students exchange pictures and identify elements other students used to communicate leadership.</i></p> <p><i>Discuss use of symbolism as a way to show character traits.</i></p>
2	<p>Artists communicate character traits through their representation of a leader and that leader's context.</p> <p>Students develop greater fluency at identifying and interpreting use of symbols. Students apply strategies of reading to identify and support main idea or theme.</p>	<p><i>Show <u>Washington Crossing the Delaware</u>.</i></p> <p><i>Identify and classify elements of the painting that tell about the context.</i></p> <p><i>Identify and interpret elements of the painting that indicate Washington's character traits.</i></p> <p><i>Discuss the historical moment.</i></p> <p><i>Make class Venn diagram showing parallels and differences between that time and today.</i></p>
3	<p>Artists communicate character traits and ideals through representation of national leaders.</p> <p>Students develop greater ability to identify and support themes.</p>	<p><i>Show <u>Abraham Lincoln, February 5, 1865</u>.</i></p> <p><i>Students discuss context--what challenges he faced.</i></p> <p><i>Students list elements of the photo that represent his character traits--in a chart--detail in photo, inferred character trait.</i></p> <p><i>Students make Venn diagram contrasting Washington and Lincoln's eras.</i></p> <p><i>Students decide what American ideals are represented in both artworks.</i></p>
4	<p>Artists communicate ideas through art.</p> <p>Students will develop the ability to analyze the use of techniques in an artwork.</p>	<p><i>Class analyzes a poster for Barack Obama.</i></p> <p><i>Students list techniques they identify used, including color, symbols, organization of the page.</i></p>
5	<p>Artists can communicate an era through art.</p> <p>Students will develop the ability to communicate ideas visually.</p>	<p><i>Students create a drawing that Obama that conveys the ideas and ideals Barack Obama has brought to the White House.</i></p> <p><i>Students review drafts of each other's drawings and revise based on the other students' recommendations.</i></p>
	Assessment	<i>Students write a guide to interpreting an American artwork.</i>