

Title: Picturing America: Art as a Window to Local Government

Level: High School

Overview: This lesson uses two pieces of art from the NEH Picturing America Poster program, “County Election” by George Bingham and “Freedom of Speech” by Normal Rockwell to engage students in a discussion about local government. Many schools have sets of the posters, check with your schools media specialist. The art and other lesson plans can be accessed on the web at Picturing America. You are also encouraged to use local art as a resource. Most communities have works of art that reflect their history, culture, values and experiences. Using these will help students make connections between their local community and national ideals.



Length: 1 class period

Standard: 2- Purposes of and limitations on the foundations, structures and functions of government

Evidence outcomes: b. Identify the structure, function, and roles of members of government and their relationship to democratic values. e. Use media literacy skills to locate multiple valid sources of information regarding the foundations, structures, and functions of government.

Materials: Posters from the series and copies of the Artists' biography and inspiration. These are available in the powerpoint the accompanies this lesson or from the web site.

Activities

1. Tell students that they are going to look at some American Art reflecting the structure, function and democratic values of local government. They will also make connections to their role as member of local communities. Remind them of the three steps in using art in the classroom: Observation, Analysis and Application.
2. For each of their pieces of art a protocol will be used that asks students to Observe, Analyze and Apply the art. These specific techniques help students become better viewers and interpreters of art.
 - a. Observation. Ask students to look closely at the painting and to avoid making conclusions, just jot down what they see. For example, in the Rockwell piece students may observe a document in the man's pocket or a blackboard in the background or some men are wearing ties. Use WOPAQ to help student do this. Ask them to jot down what Word, Objects, People, and/or Actions they see. Or they may ask Questions about things that are unclear to them.

- b. Go around the class asking students to report their observations and questions.
 - c. Analysis/Interpretation. Now ask students what they think the artist's message is. Doing the close observation first makes this part more successful. Ask them to support their conclusions with evidence from the painting. Use KTFD to help students do this. What does the artist want us to Know, Think Feel or Do? What part of the painting leads you to this conclusion?
 - d. Application. How do the ideas included in the art connect to your community, school or life? Do the messages still apply today?
3. Follow-up or extension activities
- a. Remake the work to reflect a different view or message.
 - b. Find some political cartoons on similar subjects. Cagle.com or slate.com are good resources for this activity.
 - c. Write a paragraph summarizing their interpretation or application of the painting. Require students to use observations from the painting as supporting details in their writing.
 - d. Breaking News: Write a news paper article using current events in your area with the painting as a "photo" of the event.

Possible discussion questions for the paintings

Questions for Rockwell painting-Additional questions available from [the Picturing America Resource Book](#)

1. What is in the background? Why is the meeting held there?
2. Who is the man speaking to? Why are they not in the painting?
3. How would you describe all the other people in the painting? What are they doing? Why important skill are they displaying?
4. How would you describe the main character? Why would Rockwell choose someone like this for the painting?
5. Why would this be a good topic for a war time painting?
6. What types of local issues encourage people to speak out?
7. Why would Rockwell choose a meeting like this as a subject? Why not a national issue?

Questions for Bingham painting-Additional questions available from [the Picturing America Resource Book](#)

1. How many different types of people are in the painting? How can you tell they are different? What types of people are missing?
2. Unlike the Rockwell painting there seems to be no main character. What does this suggest?
3. Which characters are displaying qualities we like in community members? Which are not?
4. What is the overall mood of the painting? What does this suggest?
5. How might a similar painting done today look alike and/or different?
6. What issues might the community be dealing with in the painting?
7. Why did Bingham pick a County Election for a subject? Why not a national election?