

Education: Lesson Plan

RESOURCES FOR K-12 EDUCATORS

Hannah Duston Killing the Indians

Junius Brutus Stearns, Hannah Duston Killing the Indians, 1847.

Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 42 1/4"

Lesson: Western Expansion and the Depiction of Native Americans

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Depictions of Native Americans in 19th century art were often not authentic. However, they serve as historical tools and reflect European American ideas about manifest destiny.

Summary

The 1800's was a time of rapid growth for the nation. There was a great push for western expansion. The nation offered the promise of a vast western frontier as a place for a fresh start. Settlers traveled west looking for this new prosperity and Native Americans were caught in a fight to save their traditional culture and lands.

European-American artists responded to this period of western expansion by creating works with different perspectives on western expansion and Native Americans. Some artists displayed their struggle, others proposed a more idealistic view.

Pre-Museum Visit Activities

Print a copy (color preferred) of Junius Brutus Stearns' Hannah Duston Killing the Indians, 1847.

Before providing background to the painting, ask students to describe what is happening.

Who is the villain in the painting? How would you describe the mood of the painting? What details do you notice about the action that is occurring? Is this painting portraying a tragedy? An action scene? A drama? What is each of the figures in the painting feeling? Who is the most sympathetic person in the painting?

Share with students the following background knowledge:

Junius Brutus Stearns (1810–1885) is an American artist known for his depictions of historical events and people. Born in Arlington, Vermont, Stearns studied painting at the National Academy of Design in New York. He is not well-known today and there is not much recorded information about his life or paintings. We do know that his most famous paintings are his Washington Series, (1847–1856), depicting George Washington. The series is currently on display at the National Academy of Design.

Hannah Duston was a popular theme in art and literature and Stearns' depiction of her was collected by the Lasbury family, descendants of Hannah Duston, and was donated by them in 1993.

Hannah Duston Killing the Indians is based on a true event that occurred in 1697. Hannah Duston, a colonial wife living in Haverhill, Massachusetts, was captured by a group of Abenaki Indians (a Maine tribe) during a raid on her town and farm. Captured with Hannah were her six-day-old baby and her nursemaid, Mary Neff. After traveling away from the town in the direction of Canada, the Native Americans found Hannah's baby slowing the group's escape, so they killed the infant. The main raiding party then split, with Hannah and her nurse being left with a Native American family consisting of two men, three women, and seven children.

Amongst the Abenaki family was a fourteen-year-old boy named Samuel, who had been captured by the natives nearly two years earlier and had been incorporated into the Abenaki family.

After many days of traveling very long and grueling miles, the party finally rested one night on the Island of Contoocook, just outside of Concord, New Hampshire. It was here that Hannah Duston, along with her fellow captives, made their escape. While the Abenaki family slept, Hannah, Samuel, and Mary Neff obtained tomahawks and struck their captors, killing all but two, an older woman and child who managed to escape.

The accounts about Hannah Duston are very controversial. When Hannah escaped she brought the scalps of her dead captors back to Massachusetts for bounty money. This act, alongside the fact that she killed women and children in order to escape, sparked a debate among people when Hannah returned. This controversy has

continued into present time with some people believing she is a heroine and others seeing her as a cruel murderer.

The complexity and mystery surrounding Hannah Duston Killing the Indians makes it a particularly important addition to the Colby College Museum of Art collection, where it invites inquiry and reflection about the American past.

Pose the following questions for discussion:

How would you judge Hannah Duston's encounters with the Native Americans and her conduct during and after her escape?

How would you judge the Abenaki Indians?

How do you think Stearns is judging Hannah Duston and the Abenaki Indians?

Why did Stearns recreate this captivity narrative with paint 150 years after the fact?

Stearns painted three white women in the piece—two presumably are Hannah Duston and her nurse, but the other woman is a mystery. The boy, Samuel, has been omitted, as are the Abenaki women and children who were present? Why did Stearn make this choice?

Follow up Activity:

Explain to students that J.B. Stearns created a second painting about Hannah Duston's husband to have accompany "Hannah Duston Killing the Indians." Unfortunately, the second painting, named "Perils of the Colonists in 1697," was lost shortly after it was exhibited in 1847. However some information about the work is known from a review published in magazine called The Literary World in 1847.

Distribute copies of the article and instruct students to read it. Discuss the negative use of the word savages. Is the reviewer presenting a biased opinion of the work?

Distribute paper, crayons, markers, colored pencils and/or paint. Instruct the students to recreate this painting based on the article's description.

Ask students to create a second work based on their knowledge of Native American history.

Have students compare and contrast their work in a classroom discussion.

Museum Visit Activities

Students will see other portrayals of Native Americans from this time period including Albert Bierstadt's Chimney Rock.

Albert Bierstadt, Chimney Rock (View of Chimney Rock, Ogalallah Sioux Village)

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Share with students the following background information:

A self-taught artist, Albert Bierstadt is considered one of the most prominent landscape painters of his time. He delighted society with beautiful paintings of places he experienced during his expeditions into the American West. Painted in 1860, Albert Bierstadt's Chimney Rock depicts the scene of the great western United States frontier through a nostalgic and idealizing lens. Though one of his smaller landscapes, its delicate imagery produces the same effect generated by his more famous larger-scaled paintings.

Integrated within Bierstadt's landscape is a peaceful Sioux village on the North Platte River. The Native Americans are completing daily tasks as a glowing red and gold sky brings the day to a close. In the background lies Chimney Rock, located in western Nebraska along the Oregon-California-Mormon Trail.

The artist first viewed Chimney Rock during his earliest journey out west, when he traveled with geologists surveying and planning the routes of transcontinental railroad lines. This formidable landmark

is a shadowy distant shape in the painting that helps Bierstadt convey the vastness ascribed to the American West.

As one of the first artists to paint the western landscape, Albert Bierstadt enchanted audiences in New York and New England with attractive western scenes most had never witnessed. In 1866, Chimney Rock was sold to William G. Blackler of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Blackler was a wealthy businessman involved in the China trade who also invested heavily in the transcontinental rail lines and the opening of the west to European–American settlement.

The same year, Samuel Valentine Hunt engraved the painting, printing it in the monthly periodical, *The Ladies' Repository*. A full page devoted to the print allowed the general public, who might not have the opportunity to view the actual painting, to bring Bierstadt's work into their home.

Although Chimney Rock is not one of his best known paintings, it remains an admirable piece and an example of Bierstadt's distinctive use of small details to craft a captivating scene of the seemingly innocent west. For traveling settlers, Chimney Rock was one of the last markers that embodied this vision of the western dream. After passing Chimney Rock, they would enter Wyoming and learn the realities of the frontier by living through its challenges and harsh conditions.

Nevertheless, Bierstadt's romanticized perspective and breath-taking portrayal of majestic open spaces were heartily sought after by the general public of the 1860s, many of whom subscribed to the set of beliefs known as Manifest Destiny. It was a vision that the United States had a divine mandate to expand across America to the Pacific Ocean. Americans used their belief in Manifest Destiny to justify acquiring more territory, particularly Native American land.

Chimney Rock not only exhibits Bierstadt's skill for scenic detail and color, but it explores complicated 19th century notions about Native Americans and the American West.

Activity during visit:

Direct students to use the Venn diagram worksheet to compare and contrast Bierstadt's painting with "Hannah Duston killing the Indians." Students may use museum clipboards. However, only pencils are permitted in the museum.

Post-Museum Visit Activities/Assessment

High School:

Essay Questions for High School Students

Junius Brutus Stearns, Hannah Duston Killing the Indians

1. How does Stearns depict women in this painting? How do you think his images of women made viewers feel in the 1850's? How do you think his images of Native Americans made viewers feel in the 1850's?
2. What do you think Stearns was trying to say about Hannah Duston and her actions and escape? What do you think about them? Do you see Hannah's escape as pioneering? Is she a survivor? Consider the time period and the type of social environment the colonists, and especially women, were living in. What ideas are being generated about gender, both during the colonial period and 19th century?
3. Stearns' interpretation of this event takes his viewer into the colonial past and into a time period that was considered savage, harsh, and challenging. How does the artist investigate how the lives of two very different cultures clashed with each other as members of both worlds attempted to live on the same piece of land?
4. What does Stearn's work say about his own mid-nineteenth century perspective of nature? How does he represent nature within the painting? Does he depict a struggle with the untamed wilderness of this new country? How? Provide detailed examples from the paintings. Does Stearns present Hannah as a survivor in this natural environment? How?
5. Pay attention to the darkness surrounding Hannah and other captives in the painting. What does the lack of light, or the small

amounts of light imply about Hannah's circumstances, feelings, and position?

6. Stearns' painting presents his perspective about issues pertaining to his own 19th century. How does his painting present the ongoing complex relationship continued between the indigenous people of America and Euro-Americans during the 19th century? How might this painting relate to the rapid westward expansion of the United States occurring in the 1800's?

Albert Bierstadt, Chimney Rock

1. What type of social environment is Bierstadt depicting with this painting? How are Native Americans and their lifestyle being represented? How is their relationship with nature being portrayed? Do you believe that this is an accurate depiction of Native American life in the mid-nineteenth century?

2. Do you see any hints of European culture within this village? If so, what would that suggest? What does that suggest about Bierstadt's opinion about Native Americans and their attempts to sustain their culture and traditional lifestyle during this time period? How does Bierstadt represent the Native Americans' relationship with white Europeans-Americans?

3. How do you believe Bierstadt perceived the western natural landscape? What do you see in this painting that makes you think that? What is the significance of the early dating of this piece and the fact that Bierstadt painted it during his first trip out West?

4. How do you think Bierstadt actually saw the West? Does he give any inclination within this painting that he believed in Manifest Destiny? Are there any allusions to the ideology of Manifest Destiny? If so, what are they? Give detailed examples.

Notable Works in the Colby Collection

Junius Brutus Stearns, Hannah Duston Killing the Indians, 1847

Albert Bierstadt, Chimney Rock (View of Chimney Rock, Ogalallah Sioux Village), 1860

Lesson Vocabulary Words

Western expansion, frontier, Abenaki Indians, landscape, Manifest Destiny, culture

Learning Results/Objectives

Students make individual and collaborative decisions on matters related to social studies using relevant information and research and discussion skills.

Students understand political and civic aspects of unity and diversity in Maine, the United States, and the world, including Maine Native Americans.

Students understand major eras, major enduring themes, and historical influences in the history of Maine, the United States, and various regions of the world.

Identify and analyze major turning points and events in the history of Native Americans and various historical and recent immigrant groups in the United States, and other cultures in the world.

Students read texts, within a grade appropriate span of text complexity, and apply their knowledge and strategies of comprehension, vocabulary, alphabets, and fluency.

Students read informational text within a grade appropriate span of text complexity, for different purposes.

- a. Ask and answer relevant questions.
- b. Restate facts from the text.
- c. Follow one-step and two-step written instructions.

Students engage in inquiry by developing research questions, accessing and verifying a variety of sources, communicating findings, and applying the conventions of documentation. Students present findings orally, in writing, or using mixed media.

Students recognize and can explain the effects that both print and non-print sources have on listeners, viewers, and readers, in order

to develop an awareness of the effects that the media have on forming opinions and making decisions.

Colby Museum of Art

- * HOME

- * COLLECTION / SEARCH

 - o

 - BROWSE THE COLLECTION

 - o Highlights from the Collection

 - o Alex Katz Collection

 - o Lunder Collection

 - + Lunder Collection Highlights

 - + James McNeill Whistler Collection

 - + Colville Collection of Early Chinese Art

 - o John Marin Collection

 - o Richard Serra at Colby College

 - o Skowhegan Lecture Archive

 - o Terry Winters Print Collection

 - o

 - SEARCH THE COLLECTION

 - o Quick Search

 - o Advanced Search

- * EXHIBITIONS

 - o Currently On View

 - o Upcoming Exhibitions

 - o Past Exhibitions

 - o Currents Annual Emerging Artists

- * PUBLIC PROGRAMS / EVENTS

 - o Public Programs Overview

 - o Calendar of Events

 - o Recent Events

- * EDUCATION

 - o School Visits and Request Form

 - o Visit Evaluation Form

 - o Resources for K-12 Educators

 - o Colby Students

 - o Colby Faculty

- * GET INVOLVED

- o Become a Member: Friends of Art
- o Become a Volunteer Docent
- * VISIT
 - o Hours and Directions
 - o Museum Floor Plan
 - o Museum Tours and Request Form
- * NEWS
 - o Current Press Releases
 - o Press Release Archive
 - o Museum Newsletter
 - o Colby Museum in the News
 - o Press Coverage of the Lunder Gift
- * ABOUT US
 - o History and Holdings
 - o Contact Information

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