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Art Activity

Observations of the New Nation
1776-1831, Building a New Nation

Background Information

People from around the world were fascinated by the new United States and traveled from far and wide to learn more about the world's first democratic republic and the people that lived there. But not everyone could afford the luxury of seeing the new nation for themselves. Instead, they learned about the US from friends, artists, and writers who traveled there. One such artist was the Baroness Hyde de Neuville. After she and her husband were exiled from France in 1807, they fled to the U.S. and spent seven years traveling the country. As they traveled, the Baroness painted and drew the places they went and the diverse people that lived there. She was the first woman artist in America to leave a substantial body of work, and to this day her pieces tell one of the most accurate visual stories of the Early Republic.

click [HERE](#) for the full resource

Task

- Students will...analyze the work of Baroness Hyde de Neuville to discuss how art can provide detailed information about what it was like to live in a certain time and place.
- Students will...then create their own visual diaries in graphite and watercolor that capture where they live today.

Materials

- Sketchbook or pieces of watercolor paper folded together to make a sketchbook
- Drawing pencils (Suggested brand: Staedtler)
- Kneaded eraser
- Watercolor paint (Suggested Brand: Winsor & Newton Cotman)
- Paintbrushes (sable or synthetic)
- Plastic cups for water
- Paper towels

Steps

- Invite students to discuss how we learn about places that we have not seen firsthand.
 - How do we gain information about these places in the 21st century?
 - What kinds of things can we learn about a place through these various methods? What sorts of information do they convey?
 - How effective are each of these methods in conveying an accurate representation of a specific place? Why?
 - What resources can help us learn more about what it was like to live in a time and place long ago? How do these resources differ from what we have access to today?
- Introduce students to Baroness Hyde de Neuville, and let them know that you are going to analyze her artwork to see what can be learned about living in the United States when it first became a nation. Have students investigate six of Baroness Hyde de Neuville's pieces, and lead an inquiry using the line of questioning below.
 - What details do you notice in each of these images?
 - What did Baroness Hyde de Neuville choose for the subjects of her paintings?
 - Who are the people in these images? What are they doing?

Steps

- What kinds of buildings and structures existed in the United States during this time period?
 - What did towns and cities across the United States look like? How were people interacting in these spaces?
 - How do these images make you feel? Why do you say that?
 - Why are visuals so important in helping to capture a specific moment in time? What kinds of things can be communicated through art that cannot be learned through written accounts?
 - What other information can you gain from looking at these images? What do they tell us about the artist and the people and places she chose to depict?
- After discussing how much we can learn about the Early Republic from this body of work, students will now create their own visual diaries that represent where they live today.
 - First, have students imagine that they have a penpal in another state or country who they were telling more about where they live.
 - What details would they include and why?
 - Who and what do they think defines their community?
 - How would they help their penpal understand what it was like to live in their neighborhood, town, city, and/or state?
 - Then, ask students to think about how they would communicate those details visually. What would they want to capture?

Steps

- Pass out sketchbooks, graphite pencils, and erasers. Tell students that they will be spending the next week keeping a visual diary, capturing the people and the places that they encounter in their day-to-day life. Ask students to create at least one observational drawing per day (five in total) in their sketchbooks, but encourage them to do as many as they would like! The more they create, the more a viewer can learn from them.
- When students return to class with their drawings, pass out watercolor paint, paintbrushes, water cups, and paper towels. Ask them to choose the scenes or portraits from their sketchbook that they think best capture the place where they live and invite them to use their paints to add color and more detail to bring their drawings to life.

Watercolor Tips

Watercolor is a translucent or transparent water-based paint.

Application and Technique:

- Watercolor can be applied in thin translucent washes or thick solid color.
- The amount of water used with the paint determines the application technique.
- The more water used, the harder it will be to control the paint and the thinner and more translucent the color.
- The less water used, the easier it is to control the paint and the thicker and more opaque the color.

Art Vocabulary

- **observational drawing:** A drawing from life.
- **visual diary:** A journal kept by artists, containing words, sketches, and mixed media elements. Visual diaries often contain ideas for larger works, as well as allow the artist to record their day-to-day observations, activities, and emotions.

Historical Vocabulary

- **exiled:** Banished.
- **Federal period:** The early years of the United States, usually defined as 1790–1830.
- **Napoleon Bonaparte:** The military leader who crowned himself emperor of France after the French Revolution.

Reflection Questions

Once students have finished their pieces, have them leave their sketchbooks out on their desks for a gallery walk. End the gallery walk by asking them to reflect on the following:

- What did you learn from viewing your classmates' sketchbooks?
- Did you learn new things about your own neighborhoods and communities from looking at the visual diaries of other classmates that live there? What new perspectives did you gain?
- What did you learn from these images that you would not have learned from a written account?
- What did it feel like to create a visual diary? How did communicating information about a place through a work of art feel different than taking a picture on a smartphone to show someone?
- What important things can works of art tell us about a particular moment in time? What can they tell us about the people that created them?



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wams@nyhistory.org

Include your grade level and location. You can also send us feedback, questions, and thoughts!