

ART ACTIVITY

*Sanitary Fairs***Background**

The word “diorama” was first used in France in 1822, when Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre and his coworker Charles-Marie Bouton opened an exhibition called The Diorama. The original “diorama” created the impression of movement in a painting by altering the light on and behind the image. In 1839, Daguerre invented the daguerreotype, the first publicly available photographic process, leading to innovations in photography that would capture the realities of the Civil War. By the mid-1800s, dioramas would evolve into small-scale replicas of a scene, and later larger-scale replicas in museum exhibitions. During the Civil War, women created dioramas that advanced the Union cause. They contributed to the war effort by organizing Sanitary Fairs where their dioramas and other crafts were sold to raise funds for hospitals and soldiers wounded in battle.

Task

After analyzing a diorama made for a Union Sanitary Fair in the 1860s, students will choose a *WAMS* life story to study to learn about a woman who lived through the Civil War. Students will then create a diorama depicting a scene that captures the woman they studied taking action.

Materials

- Pencils
- Scrap/sketch paper
- Boxes (shoe boxes, small fruit crates, delivery boxes, etc.)
- Mixed media materials / found objects:

- For decorating the box: Construction paper, tissue paper, felt or fabric scraps, markers, crayons, water-based paints (tempra or acrylic), etc.
- For diorama elements: Crayola Model Magic® to create 3D pieces, plastic figurines, buttons, foam, cardboard, etc.
- Adhesives: Glue (glue stick for attaching paper, quick-drying tacky glue or a hot glue gun for gluing down heavier 3D elements), double sided tape
- Scissors

Art Vocabulary

- **background:** An area of a scene that appears farthest from the viewer.
- **composition:** The arrangement of elements in a work of art.
- **diorama:** A model representing a scene with three-dimensional figures.
- **foreground:** The area of a scene that appears closest to the viewer.
- **proportion:** The principle of design concerned with the size relationship of one object to another.
- **scale:** Relative size or proportion of one object in relation to another.

Steps

- Invite students to consider the various ways that one can convey a moment in history to a wider audience.
 - What makes an effective story? What are some different ways to tell a story?
 - How important is imagery in helping you imagine what a specific historical event might have been like?
 - Have you ever seen a small or large scale diorama? What is effective about these scenes in telling a story? How might they help make a concept or an event come to life for the viewer?

- What considerations do creators of dioramas have to keep in mind?
- What can a diorama, as an object and artifact, tell us about the time in which it was created?
- First, lead an inquiry with [Diorama from the Northwest Sanitary Fair](#), ca. 1863-1864 using the line of questioning below.
 - What do you notice about this diorama?
 - What elements make up this piece?
 - What kind of scene is depicted? Who is depicted?
 - What aspects of this depiction are problematic?
 - This diorama was created by women for a sanitary fair to support the Union cause during the Civil War. What does this tell us about the intentions of the artist in creating this scene?
 - How is viewing this diorama different from viewing a two-dimensional piece, like a painting?
 - What does this diorama tell us about the time period in which it was created?
- Have students look at a few more examples of dioramas. Consider how folk artist Karen Collins, creator of the [African American Miniature Museum](#), uses dioramas to tell Black history; and how the American Museum of Natural History teaches science and natural history through their large-scale [habitat dioramas](#).
- After analyzing some examples, break students into small groups to discuss the different ways that dioramas can be made, and how they can be used to tell a story:
 - List the key elements that make a diorama successful. Students might note things like color, sense of movement created by the figures, the different materials used, depth of the scene, etc.
 - Bring everyone back together to create a class list. Be sure to highlight for students the importance of the background and foreground of the dioramas, as well as its scale and the proportions of all the elements of the scene.

- Next, have students choose and read one Life Story from the [Civil War](#) section of [A Nation Divided](#). As they read, ask them to note moments when the life story subject took action during the Civil War. Where was this woman when this event took place? What was she doing? What elements make up this scene? How might the student recreate this moment in a diorama?
 - After reading the life story, encourage students to do some additional research to make sure the elements of their scene are accurate to the time period they are depicting (clothing, technology, scenery, etc.). As they begin designing, make sure students avoid stereotypes and consider the impact of their scene on the viewer.
- Pass out scrap paper and have students make a rough sketch of their diorama. They should think through the composition of their piece and what materials they might use to create each element of the scene.
- Create the background of the scene. Students should remove the top of the box and tilt it upright on its side. They can draw or paint the scenery, or they can cut out pieces of construction paper to layer on each element and create more depth.
- Students can now move on to adding more elements of their diorama to create the foreground and main action. They can incorporate three-dimensional elements by sculpting objects and people using Model Magic; they can bring in their own figurines or found objects; and/or they can create more depth by layering paper cutouts. They should make sure that the elements are in proportion with each other and to scale with the rest of the scene. During this step, encourage students to lay everything out and make sure they are happy with the arrangement before gluing anything to the box.
- When students have finished, have them reflect on the following:
 - How did you use your diorama to tell the story of the woman whose life story you chose to focus on? What inspiration did you draw from the life story?

- What elements did you use to depict this woman taking action during the Civil War? What experiences did you choose to focus on and why?
- What details did you include to signal the time period in which this scene took place?
- How does your diorama compare to the dioramas sold at Sanitary Fairs during the Civil War? What are some of the differences between creating visual pieces that reflect on a moment in history while it is taking place, and creating pieces that reflect on the history after it has happened?