

PICTURING AMERICA LESSON

The Power of Women: Art with a Social Agenda

The power of women is a common theme in art, and this lesson examines that theme using images from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Picturing America resource in addition to objects from the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The works in this lesson also promote the social agenda of the artist. Students explore connections to social issues and learn how each artist uses details to reveal inner strengths through their subjects.



Mother and Child, 1954
Elizabeth Catlett, American
Terracotta
11 1/2 x 5 3/4 x 6 5/8 inches (29.2 x 14.6 x 16.8 cm)
125th Anniversary Acquisition. Purchased with funds contributed by Willabell Clayton, Dr. Constance E. Clayton, and Mr. and Mrs. James B. Straw in honor of the 125th Anniversary of the Museum and in celebration of African American art, 2000 2000-36-1

Grade Level

For grades 9–12

Common Core Academic Standards

SOCIAL STUDIES, LANGUAGE ARTS

- Reading Key Ideas and Details: Analyze how complex characters develop, and promote the development of theme #3
- Listening and Speaking Comprehension: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats #2

Art Images Required

Click on the Museum object titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Click on the Picturing America object titles to view those resources on the NEH website. Images that are also available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

RELATED PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART OBJECTS:

- [Mother and Child](#), 1954, by Elizabeth Catlett
ARTstor search: 2000-36-1
- [Woman of Tehuantepec](#), c. 1929, by Tina Modotti
ARTstor search: modotti woman of tehuantepec

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RELATED PICTURING AMERICA OBJECTS:

- *Migrant Mother*, 1936, by Dorothea Lange
ARTstor search: lange migrant eastman
- *The Migration Series, No. 57*, 1940–41, by Jacob Lawrence
ARTstor search: lawrence migration 57

Lesson Process

1. Take some time, either as a class or in small groups, to look closely at each work, reading the background information provided online. (Be sure to review the “Teacher Resources” on the Museum website.) Discuss what you have discovered, including any questions you may still have about the paintings.
2. Where do your eyes go first when looking at Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (1936)? What details come to mind? How would you describe the woman’s face? Her clothing? What do you know about the backstory of this photograph? Why do you think the faces of her children are turned away?
3. Consider this woman and her situation. On a piece of paper, list a few adjectives that describe her physical state and her character. Write a paragraph in the first person describing her thoughts as you imagine them.
4. Reexamine Elizabeth Catlett’s *Mother and Child* (1954). Where do your eyes go first? How would you describe her clothing? Her posture? Her attitude? As with *Migrant Mother*, make a list of adjectives that describe this woman’s appearance and her character, and write a paragraph in the first person describing her thoughts.
5. In a small group, use a Venn diagram to list both similarities and differences between these two women. How do these two images compare? Focus on the center of the Venn diagram and write a summary of these similarities for your group and to share with the class.
6. Going back to the photograph and the sculpture, how does each artist reveal strength of character? Look for such details as expression, posture, composition, and geometric shapes.
7. What do these works say about women in America, and how does this message fit with the artist’s purpose as noted in the text that accompanies each work of art?

Assessment

1. Review the details listed in the outer spheres of the Venn diagram (the differences). Add additional details gathered from closer examination and previous class discussions. Write a brief persuasive essay on the following topic: These are two depictions of the power of a woman’s character. Which artist do you feel has offered the most interesting view of this theme? Discuss the differences between the two works from which you formed your opinion.
2. How do artists use details to show such elusive concepts as character? Create a presentation focusing on details from these two works as examples.

Enrichment

1. Research the time period in which each work of art was created. What was happening in America—politically, socially, economically, and culturally? How do the works of art reflect the time in which they

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were produced? Both of these works were made by women. What challenges might these women artists have been facing in their careers when they created their artworks?

2. Examine the other two works listed in this lesson plan: *Woman of Tehuantepec* (c. 1929) by Tina Modotti and *The Migration Series, No. 57* (1940–41) by Jacob Lawrence. In small groups, read the background material provided on the Museum and NEH websites and discuss how both artists have created images of the power of women. Of the artists mentioned, Jacob Lawrence is the only male. How does his image of powerful women compare with the others?