Educator’s Guide

Native American Myths and Stereotypes, Manifest Destiny, and Historical Narratives in Visual Art

January 23–April 13, 2015

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed as a multidisciplinary companion for K-12 educators bringing their students to visit the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum from January 23, 2015, through April 13, 2015. Our intent is to offer a range of learning objectives, gallery discussions, and postvisit suggestions to stimulate the learning process, encourage dialogue, and help make meaning of the art presented. Teachers at all grade levels should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students. Teachers should consider ideas addressed in this guide in relation to themes presented in the current special exhibition Sam Durant: Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C.¹

IN THIS GUIDE

Before You Visit | p.2
In the Gallery | p.2
In the Classroom or at Home | p.4
Vocabulary | p.5
Additional Resources | p.5

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Anthropology, Art, Art History, Cultural Studies, History, Literature, Native American Studies, Painting, Photography, Political Science, Social Studies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will examine the ideology of manifest destiny as it relates to the art presented.
Students will explore stereotypes of Native Americans in visual art.
Students will discuss the formation of historical narratives in relation to privileged cultures.
Students will compare and contrast these works to themes presented in the current special exhibition Sam Durant: Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C.


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¹ Sam Durant: Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C. consists of thirty minimalist appropriations of American monuments honoring victims of the so-called Indian Wars between the mid-seventeenth century and 1890. While twenty-five memorialize white Americans, only five recall Native American fatalities, reflecting the violent and unequal power relations between whites and Native Americans during the creation of the republic.
BEFORE YOU VISIT
Suggested topics to explore, research, and discuss before visiting the exhibition.

Manifest Destiny
Research the history and ideology behind manifest destiny. Who were the leading proponents of this belief? Why is it so ingrained in the history of the United States? What artworks can you find relating to manifest destiny? Do the ideals behind this attitude still exist in the United States?

Native American Groups
Research local Native American groups. Historically what were the predominant groups in the St. Louis area? What were they known for? How did westward expansion and settlement affect them? Are there still members of these groups in the area?

Language Bias
Research the term “Indian.” Where did it originate? Why is it considered derogatory? What other names for Native Americans do you see in popular culture (products, team names)? Do you consider them derogatory?

IN THE GALLERY
Ideas to consider when viewing the exhibition.

George Caleb Bingham
Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap, 1851–52

George Caleb Bingham, a self-taught artist and Missouri politician, was fascinated with the stories about the pioneer frontiersman Daniel Boone, who explored and settled what is now Kentucky. Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap depicts Boone at the front of a long line of settlers and casts him in the heroic guise of Moses leading his people. Symbolism and metaphor abound in this carefully constructed painting: the hierarchy of figures in the painting gives prominence of position to Boone and his wife Rebecca, shown riding a large white horse; divine, golden light illuminates the figures, while a distant patch of blue sky appears after a storm; and broken tree branches, arranged to form crosses, literally line Boone’s path across America. Bingham’s glorification of this historical narrative stands in stark contrast to the reality of the decimation of Native American populations and cultures by white settlers.

Discussion Questions
How does this painting reflect and promote the idea of manifest destiny? How would you describe the facial expressions and postures of the settlers? What other stories from Christianity come to mind when looking at this painting? How do we know the people in the painting are settlers? Who and what is Bingham leaving out of this painting? Why do you think these people and objects were omitted?
Charles Ferdinand Wimar
*The Abduction of Daniel Boone’s Daughter by the Indians*, 1853

This painting by the German-born American artist Charles Wimar illustrates the famous 1776 incident of Daniel Boone’s daughter Jemima being abducted by Native Americans. Wimar, raised in St. Louis, considered himself an expert on Native American culture and produced many works with similar themes for American and European audiences. Also a popular literary theme, these so-called captivity narratives played a pivotal role in perpetuating the rhetoric, stereotypes, and myths about Native Americans and helped fuel the aggressive expansion campaigns of nineteenth-century America. Made while Wimar was in Germany, this work contrasts Jemima Boone’s innocence with the savagery of the three Native Americans. This particular story was fictionalized in the 1826 novel *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper.

**Discussion Questions**

How has Wimar chosen to depict Jemima Boone? How has he chosen to depict the Native Americans? What are some adjectives you might use to describe both? How do the scenery and lighting relate to the narrative depicted? What aspects of the painting support stereotypical ideas about power, sensuality and beauty?

Edward Sheriff Curtis
*Pottery Burners at Santa Clara and The Apache Reaper*, 1906

(See page 1 for image of *The Apache Reaper*)

Edward Curtis, an American photographer, is best known for *The North American Indian*, an expansive twenty-volume collection of images and texts documenting Native American people, culture, traditions, art, and ceremonies. According to the prevailing Euro-American beliefs in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Native Americans represented a vanishing primitive race. Curtis considered himself a friend of Native Americans and spent thirty years photographing over eighty different groups. His photographs have stirred controversy because they were often staged, a fact that Curtis made no attempt to conceal. For example, he would avoid including contemporary objects such as clocks and would ask Native Americans to dress in ceremonial, not everyday, attire for his shots.

**Discussion Questions**

How do you think viewers in the early twentieth century would have reacted to these photographs? How do you think viewers today view these photographs? What do you think about Curtis staging the photographs? How does the aesthetic quality of these images romanticize the subject matter? Discuss the pros and cons of Curtis’s legacy and his motivation in documenting Native American lives.

Cahokia Mounds
Plan a visit to Cahokia Mounds. How are the history and culture of Native Americans presented there? Compare that to works highlighted in this guide.

Contemporary Native American Art
Research how westward expansion and the Native American story is illustrated now. How are contemporary artists exploring issues and themes related to Native Americans? Are there contemporary Native American artists addressing historical ideals such as manifest destiny? Compare their work to George Caleb Bingham’s painting.

James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans
Read The Last of the Mohicans. How is the literary version of the kidnapping of Jemima Boone (Cora and Alice Munro in the novel) similar to and different from Wimar’s painting? Research and read other stories about Native Americans—both older and contemporary—and compare them to visual art depicting similar narratives.

Discussion Questions
While this is considered a fairly accurate depiction of a buffalo hunt, how does it support the myths and stereotypes about Native Americans? What clues are given to indicate contact with settlers? What motifs are utilized in this painting to connote death? Compare Wimar’s depiction of Native Americans in The Buffalo Hunt and The Abduction of Daniel Boone’s Daughter by the Indians: What aspects of each painting seem exaggerated or romanticized? What aspects seem true to life?
VOCABULARY

1. Captivity narrative—Stories of innocents, usually women, kidnapped by perceived uncivilized savages, usually Native Americans, popular in the nineteenth century. These narratives helped perpetuate stereotypes and myths of Native Americans and settlers.

2. Cumberland Gap—Pass through the Appalachian Mountains between Virginia and Kentucky used by early settlers during westward expansion.

3. Daniel Boone—Legendary explorer, frontiersman, and pioneer whose exploits made him famous during his lifetime and whose folk-hero legacy lives on through myths and stories about his life.

4. Manifest destiny—The predominantly nineteenth-century belief that it was the destiny of early settlers, mainly white Europeans, to expand the United States all the way to the West Coast.

5. Motif—a recurring subject, theme, or idea in a literary, artistic, or musical work.

6. Myth—a widely held belief or idea about people that is usually false.

7. Photogravure—an image produced from a photographic negative that is transferred and etched into a metal plate.

8. Rhetoric—Persuasive language designed to have an effect on its audience but often lacking in factual or meaningful content.

9. Stereotype—a standardized commonly held belief that usually represents a prejudiced attitude or judgment.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books:

Online:
George Caleb Bingham
http://www.georgecalebbingham.org/bio.htm
Daniel Boone
http://www.biography.com/people/daniel-boone-9219543#synopsis
Edward Curtis
http://curtis.library.northwestern.edu/curtis/aboutsite.html
http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/immortal-images-of-native-americans/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/essay3.html
http://edwardscurtis.com/e-s-curtis-biography/
Sam Durant
Manifest Destiny
http://www.history.com/topics/manifest-destiny
Myths and Stereotypes about Native Americans

Support for Sam Durant: Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C. is provided by the William T. Kemper Foundation; Nancy and Ken Kranzberg; Eliissa and Paul Cahn; the Hortense Lewin Art Fund; the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency; and members of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.