

Classroom Connections

Vol. 4

Welcome to the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Fall 2007

Looking to Learn in Every Classroom

Young people get bombarded with thousands of visual images every day. Their choices are often influenced by those pictures, but how many youths take time to decipher streaming video, television, and other visual media? Do your students have the tools to analyze the messages sent by advertisers, designers, and Webmasters?

Teaching visual literacy is becoming more and more important—and we can help you do so! Using artworks from the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s collection, you can present students with the tools to understand and interpret visual images effectively. And visual literacy is useful not only for art teachers. Math teachers can illustrate geometric shapes and patterns using color field paintings and can teach number sequences using Billie Ruth Sudduth’s basket [Fibonacci 5](#). History teachers can prompt thinking about

westward expansion by considering the symbolism in Emanuel Leutze’s [Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way](#) or choose from thousands of other works that represent key ideas in history and civics. Language Arts teachers can show students that artists use concepts like symbolism and allegory, which can sometimes be easier for students to understand visually. Foreign language teachers can highlight cultural themes with artworks and can use objects depicted in art to introduce

new words. Science teachers can look at the use of camouflage in nature with Abbott Handerson Thayer’s works on [concealing coloration](#) or examine landscape painting and photography as students explore how the land was formed. ESL classes use images for a variety of classroom activities. Teachers of other subjects, too, have much to gain from using art in their lessons.

With practice, students can become savvy about choices that artists make about subject, color, line, shape, and composition. Skills that help students decipher the messages that accompany images can be useful to further learning in the classroom, and also advance their ability to deal with images in their day-to-day lives. For classroom resources visit us online at <http://americanart.si.edu/education/resources/index.cfm> or, for information about ideas and possibilities, email us at SAAMedstaff@si.edu.

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Calling All State-History Teachers!

Be a part of our new Web site and help pilot our new educational activity! Due for release this coming school year, the activity, entitled *Road Scholars*, is based on Nam June Paik’s [Electronic Superhighway](#), a video installation presenting a map of the United States. A television-based video collage displays within each neon-outlined state. The artist made conscious decisions about how to represent each state in video form. In that same spirit, the activity will ask students, after study of their state’s history, to make a collage of static images to represent their home state. Students will write about the images they select and the choices they make. Selected work will be displayed

on the museum’s Web site. If you teach state history, this project is a great culminating activity or review for students who previously studied the topic.

If you’d like to help pilot this program, be the first in your state to participate, and get your students’ work posted on our site, please contact SAAMedstaff@si.edu. We look forward to working with teachers from all over the country!

Nam June Paik, *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii*, 1995, 49-channel closed circuit video installation, neon, steel, and electronic components, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist.

Back-to-School Night

Date: Thursday, August 30th

Time: 4:30–8 p.m.

PRE-REGISTRATION NOT REQUIRED

SAAM is collaborating with the National Portrait Gallery to offer a Back-to-School Night for educators on August 30th. Join us for workshops, tours, performances, resources, and refreshments. This event is held in conjunction with the Back-to-School Night held by the Freer and Sackler Galleries, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the National Museum of African Art on Thursday, August 23rd.

OUR SPACE

“At Home” in SAAM

This past spring, my nineteen graduate Decorative Arts Seminar students and I made ourselves “at home” on the comfortable, contemporary visitor sofas in the third-floor gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). Our semester’s work focused on the many aspects of home. We explored home as both a physical and mental manifestation—a place which shelters goods as well as defines the parameters of comfort and sociability. At SAAM, we discussed what made a living room or parlor experience.

At the museum we read excerpts from *What Is Gentility?*, an 1828 novel written in Washington, D.C., by Margaret Byard Smith, the wife of a newspaper publisher. Through this moral tale, Smith hoped to alert Washingtonians to the true meaning of gentility as a cultivation of the mind rather than the sole activity of acquiring parlor furniture.

In her introduction, Smith defines her goal: “In this simple Tale, the aim has been to demonstrate through the medium of amusing incidents...that *education is gentility*: which truth, if universally adopted, would induce parents, who now lavish their hard earned wealth on dress and equipage, to devote it to the mental improvements of their children, thereby fitting them to endure poverty with dignity, and

prosperity with moderation.”¹ In this process, Smith enumerated the parlor equipage most felt necessary to be genteel—round center tables, looking glasses, pier tables, and painted fancy chairs.

This discussion led us to the second floor where we saw some of the very pieces Smith referenced in her book, like the round table by Anthony Quervelle likely used in the President’s House parlor. Here, too, were the other parlor furniture pieces—painted fancy chairs made in Baltimore, New York looking glasses, and a mirrored pier table. We discussed the increasing use of glass in early nineteenth-century parlors which is in much evidence in these galleries. Later in the Luce Foundation Center for American Art we would more fully explore the issues of glass and its manufacture.

We moved to another gallery to consider the parlor’s function in the 1860s and 70s. Here the parlor cabinet by American Alexander Roux portrayed a different mentality about life in the parlor. The large and heavy piece decorated with marquetry, porcelain, and ormolu evoked European sensibilities. In this gallery, the European subject matter of the American paintings of the same period conveyed a similar message. In this parlor setting, Americans presented their informed views of the world, a “memory palace” filled with objects—photo albums,

portfolios of prints with European scenes and paintings, and European-influenced furniture—that portrayed their worldly cultural experiences. The paintings and objects in this gallery demonstrated to my students the tension between the parlor’s intent to provide comfort and relaxation and the overt display of European-influenced culture.

SAAM’s third-floor galleries culminated our experience. There the Luce Center provides an extensive view of SAAM’s holdings in many collection areas. Our interest was glass, because the material, used principally in mirrors, became an affordable commodity in the nineteenth-century parlor. Staff presented a fascinating overview of the history of glass using examples from SAAM’s Roman glass collection and its contemporary holdings. Students commented that they would be back to take advantage of the Luce Center’s “incredible accessibility.”

Though not a conventional tour of SAAM’s collections, our afternoon visit provided students with an excellent opportunity to view objects and paintings in a wholly new context. To experience the concept of home at SAAM was a delightful discovery.

Dr. Nancy Davis
The George Washington University

1. Margaret Bayard Smith, *What is Gentility: A Moral Tale* (Washington, D.C.: Pishey Thompson, 1828), p. 4.

Upcoming Professional Development Opportunities!

Looking the Write Way: Reading Art as a Catalyst for Writing

Date: Sat. August 25th 2007

Time: Approximately 9:30 a.m.–1 p.m.

This workshop explores writing and visual literacy in an activity that analyzes art as a basis for writing in a poetic, expressive way. This strategy has proven effective for all types of learners, including those studying English as a Second Language and those with learning disabilities.

Picturing the House Divided

Date: Tues. October 23rd 2007

Time: 4:30–7:30 p.m.

In this in-service, teachers will be introduced to how to use painting, sculpture, and photography from the Civil War era to enhance their curricula. Educators will be able to provide students with a clearer picture of the conflict while introducing visual literacy.

Young America

Date: Sat. February 23rd 2008

Time: 10 a.m.–1 p.m.

Learn how to use artworks as primary sources in your classroom while teaching American history and critical thinking! “Young America,” the second workshop in a series featuring different areas of the permanent collection, features landscapes, history paintings, and portraiture.

To Register for these FREE Professional Development Workshops or for more information, send an email to SAAMedstaff@si.edu

YOUR SPACE

TEACHER FEATURE

Art Illuminates History and Writing Skills

Our high school combines AP U.S. History with 11th-grade English into a coordinated humanities curriculum, which affords an opportunity for mutual reinforcement of key substance, consolidation of knowledge, fortification of learning skills, and the application of all three. We seized on the rather extensive period after the AP exams—often up to six weeks in Virginia—to consolidate both student knowledge and understanding of history through a project that tested their ability to observe, assess, and weigh often ambiguous data obtained through careful observation of selected artworks in the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM) and the National Portrait Gallery (NPG). We built an assignment for students to employ their data by developing meaningful hypotheses to explain significant developments. These developments included both change over time and impact on broader human significance to cover both history and English.

Teachers met in advance with Smithsonian educational specialists to select fewer than a dozen works from both the SAAM and NPG for student observation during a half-day field trip. The limited number of works focused students on observation and data acquisition. In addition to honing these skills, artworks were carefully selected to target the organization, hypotheses/ thesis formation, writing, and organization skill objectives of both disciplines. Some works were selected for their sheer excitement, some for their historical illumination, and some for their emotional impact. All were additionally available on the

SAAM and NPG Web sites and students were provided with some analytical cues to support their subsequent writing assignment. Typical works (two of eleven) were:



George Catlin, *Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going to and Returning from Washington, 1837–1839*, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.



Lavern Kelley, *Classroom with Three Figures, 1979–1987*, mixed media, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr.

Students were required to take notes (pencils only) during their observations and then select a small number of the artworks they observed to assess, interpret, and explain their personal impact and their historical illumination. SAAM and NPG education staff provided a map of the selected works and assigned a route to each group to reduce congestion.

Students then, over the next week, completed their writing assignments. The resulting “assessment” was included as a substantial

“culminating” activity for our AP students who were, by this time in the academic year after their College Board AP Exam, somewhat out of motivational gas.

The experience provided an exciting, challenging, and quite different venue for expanded learning, a shift from the structure of in-class learning, and, of course, a break from school as summer increasingly preoccupies our students. It was exceptionally useful for consolidating learning in English and U.S. History, and fun both for students to construct and for teachers to assess at the end of the school year.

The museum’s educational staff provided supporting background information and perspective for student use before and after the field trip. The support helped us insure that our visit would be more than a typical post-AP Exam “lunch-on-the-economy-in-downtown-D.C.-experience,” although they did manage that as well.

Despite their residential proximity to Washington, D.C., and their attendance at a select, magnet high school, few students had prior knowledge of the Reynolds Center. They were clearly enthused, and a number volunteered, “I had no idea this was here,” and “I’m going to come back with more time in the summer.”

Larison F. Helm and Romana Iorga, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Fairfax County, Alexandria, Virginia

'S.M.Art' Kids Look More Closely

SAAM educators visited Glebe Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, to speak to fifth-grade students participating in an interdisciplinary program known as *S.M.Art* or *Science, Math, and Art*. The theme for the year was the artist Jacob Lawrence and his use of tempera paint.

The first half of SAAM's presentation covered Lawrence's life and work. Students as a group were asked to analyze his paintings, exploring how he used images to tell stories. They also related his work to works by artists who influenced him, either from the Harlem Renaissance or contemporary abstract schools. These discussions exercised student looking skills and promoted visual literacy. In addition to Lawrence's works in SAAM's collection, students also viewed a short

video showing Lawrence [at work in his studio](#), which is available on the Web site for SAAM's Luce Foundation Center for American Art (<http://lucefoundationcenter.si.edu>).



Jacob Lawrence, "Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them then or bear with them."--Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *Meditations*, VIII:59. From the series "Great Ideas of Western Man," 1958, oil on fiberboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Container Corporation of America

Student observations of Lawrence at work served as a connection to the second portion of the presentation, which covered the field of art conservation. Conservation is an excellent connection to science education, as it involves both chemistry and physics. Jacob Lawrence experimented with developing his own forms of tempera paint, an egg-based formula. Knowing what media the artist uses helps conservators take care of the artwork so that it survives for future generations. Visitors to SAAM can visit the Lunder Conservation Center, a facility we share with the National Portrait Gallery. Resources from the Lunder Web site (<http://lunderconservation.si.edu>), including videos and before-and-after photographs, are available as classroom tools.

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Making the Case for Visual Evidence

A New Feature of "Teaching with Documents"

How do students learn historical thinking skills and content? Why teach with both visual images and documents as primary sources? Lee Ann Potter, head of education and volunteer programs at the National Archives and Records Administration, and I set out to answer these and other questions as we discussed ways to collaborate to further enrich the "Teaching with Documents" department of *Social Education*, a magazine published seven times a year by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

The May/June 2007 issue of *Social Education* features our first attempt to pair a textual document from the National Archives with a work of art from the Smithsonian American Art



Thomas Chambers, *Capture of H.B.M. Frigate Macedonian by U.S. Frigate United States, October 25, 1812, 1852*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Sheldon and Caroline Keck in Honor of Elizabeth Broun

Museum. The "Teaching with Documents" column looks at the War of 1812 through two sources—a letter by U.S. Commodore Stephen Decatur describing his capture of a British frigate and a painting by Thomas Chambers depicting a scene from that battle.

The two works are featured in full-color images that can be reproduced in any quantity in the classroom. The article and accompanying teaching suggestions show teachers the potential of using both primary documents and related artwork to teach history, visual arts, and English Language Arts. We hope this new feature will encourage teachers to use these images to increase visual literacy and higher-order thinking skills and to help students consider a variety of sources for historical information.

For more information about *Social Education* see <http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/se/>.

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This newsletter is designed to inform teachers of our programs and showcase activities that integrate our materials in classrooms around the country. Please share this newsletter with teachers in your faculty lounge. To give feedback on this issue, ask questions about any of the programs highlighted, or pose questions about the Education Office itself, email us at SAAMEdStaff@si.edu.

CYBERSPACE

Beyond the Everyday: SAAM Reaches Rural Oregon with a New Videoconference Program

In May and June, SAAM staff and docents presented a series of videoconference programs to schools and libraries in rural Oregon. These video visits were an integral part of the *Folk Art at the Library* program in the Libraries of Eastern Oregon (LEO). Each library hosted exhibitions of folk art, ranging from woodcrafts, paintings, and stained glass to quilts, works of silver, and American Indian beadwork. SAAM staff gave an overview of the museum's extensive folk art collection, including the usual highlights, but also showcasing lesser-known works that related to each library's display. Some audience favorites were James Hampton's *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*.

Nations' Millennium General Assembly, a visionary installation made of tin foil, and *Bottlecap Figure with Mirror*, a self-portrait of living artist Mr. Imagination.



James Hampton. *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, about 1950–1964, gold and silver aluminum foil, Kraft paper, and plastic over wood furniture, paperboard, and glass, 180 pieces overall, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of anonymous donors.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. “Our Smithsonian videoconference was a smash hit! And what fun! We all talked for an hour afterwards, excited that finally the arts will move into our town, thanks to partnerships such as this one,” says Jo Cowling, director of the F. Maxine and Thomas W. Cook Memorial Library in La Grande, Oregon.

Interested in bringing folk art to your classroom? *Folk Art: Beyond the Everyday* is the newest videoconference offering. For more information on this or any other videoconference topic, email education specialist Ellen Kovacs at kovacse@si.edu.

Looking Forward to Future Videoconferences

The following article chronicles the new developments in our distance learning program and is the second in a two-part series.

When Ellen Kovacs moved into her seat as education specialist at Smithsonian American Art Museum, she brought along a formidable résumé for a young woman. Apart from earning her bachelor's degree in art history and a graduate degree in museum education, Ellen also had experience working with a variety of museum programs including those at the Corcoran Gallery, the Virginia Discovery Museum, the Isabella

Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, the Children's Museum in Memphis, and the National Building Museum. Ellen's new assignment taps all of those experiences!

Charged with evaluating and strengthening SAAM's videoconference program, she has been conferring with staff, docents, and teachers, while researching other programs. Part of strengthening the program is to create more pre- and post-visit materials as supplemental options for teachers. Training within the docent corps is also an

ongoing responsibility, as a new class of docents was added in June.

Ellen has discovered there are not very many art museums offering videoconferencing, so the opportunities to enlarge and improve the niche SAAM has created are myriad. With her boundless energy and bright ideas, we look forward to sharing with teachers and students the fruits of her labor.

Phoebe Kline
SAAM Docent

The Smithsonian American Art Museum's videoconference program entitled 'Artful Connections' is completely free of charge to any teacher or curriculum coordinator. For more information about the program visit us online at http://americanart.si.edu/education/programs/artful_connections.cfm, or email us at SAAMEdStaff@si.edu.