

America's Signs & Symbols

Creating a School Seal

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the application of symbolism in artwork and be better able to decode artworks.

Age Group/Grade Level: 11-13 years, grades 6-8

Subject Area: Social Studies

Duration: approximately 40 min.

Background

The Great Seal of the United States (<http://tinyurl.com/GreatSealUS>) was adopted by Congress on June 20, 1782, to reflect the aspirations of the new American government. The seal incorporates several symbols that represent individual American ideals. The American bald eagle, native to North America and our national bird, is a symbol of freedom, courage, and strength. The arrows in the eagle's left claw represent the power to wage war, while the olive branch in the eagle's right claw represents the power to make peace.

The number 13 is repeated throughout the seal and refers to the original 13 colonies. It is incorporated into the image as the number of stars above the eagle, the stripes on the eagle's shield, arrows, olive branch leaves, and the number of letters in "E pluribus unum." *E pluribus unum* means "from many, one" in Latin and is intended to show the unification of the 13 colonies into one new country.

Inaugural medals have been sold to mark American presidents' assumption to office since George Washington's time. Not all of them, however, feature elements of the Great Seal, as John F. Kennedy's did (at right).

Discussion

Have students compare Paul Manship's *John F. Kennedy Inaugural Medal (Galvano of reverse)* with [the Great Seal](#). Encourage discussion with the following questions:

- Which elements of the Great Seal were used in this medal? Which are left out?
- What impression of the United States does the seal convey? How does the design contribute to that impression?
- Why might the seal have been used to mark the inauguration of President Kennedy?

Explain that each item in the Great Seal holds symbolic meaning. Have students create a detailed written description of the inaugural medal, taking special note of the number of each item, as well as their arrangement in relation to one another.



Paul Manship, *John F. Kennedy Inaugural Medal (Galvano of reverse)*, 1961, white-plated metal alloy, 1/4 x 9 1/2 in. diam., Bequest of Paul Manship, 1966.47.114.

- The eagle's head is looking toward the olive branch, a symbol of peace. What message is being sent by this detail? What might it mean that there are arrows in the other claw?
- What must you know about American history in order to truly understand this set of symbols?
- Why might such a seal be valuable to a new country? What value does it hold today?
- Imagine that, instead of appearing on an inaugural medal, the seal appeared in an advertisement. Why might the US Department of State want to carefully control the use of the Great Seal?

Activity

Have students begin designing a seal for your school by independently researching your school's history. As a large group, have students discuss important aspects and principles of your school today.

As a large group, have students brainstorm five to six symbols appropriate to your school and vote on those they think are best suited to a new school symbol. Have students work independently to develop their own seals that incorporate the agreed-upon symbols, including other images to represent their school and its principles. Once finished, have students compare their work and discuss the effect of differences in artistic vision and symbolism.

For a full-size image of Paul Manship's *John F. Kennedy Inaugural Medal (Galvano of reverse)*, visit:

http://americanart.si.edu/images/1966/1966.47.114_1a.jpg