

PICTURING AMERICA LESSON

The Power of Symbolism

World leaders are, and always have been, larger than life, and for thousands of years, governments and statespersons have been keenly aware of the power of symbols to express complex beliefs, values, and ideas. This lesson explores how artists employ symbols to speak of the greatness of America's premier founding father, George Washington. Students will examine several depictions of our country's first president, focusing on the artist's use of symbol.



Embroidered Picture, c. 1800
Sarah Montgomery Thompson, American
Silk plain weave with silk floss and silk chenille
embroidery in satin, encroaching satin, couching,
stem, and cross stitches and bullion knots; gouache
paint
Length x Width: 24 1/4 x 25 inches (61.6 x 63.5 cm);
framed (LxWxD): 31 x 32 1/2 x 2 inches (78.7 x 82.6 x
5.1 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Henry Nagle, 1894
1894-274

Grade Level

For grades 5–8, adaptable for both elementary and high school

Common Core Academic Standards:

**SOCIAL STUDIES (HISTORICAL CONTEXT),
LANGUAGE ARTS (SYMBOL)**

- Reading Informational Text: Participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners #1; Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats #2
- Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence #4

Art Images Required

Click on the Museum object title below to view a high-resolution photograph on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Click on the Picturing America object titles to view those resources on the National Endowment of the Humanities 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 OBJECT:

- [Embroidered Picture](#), c. 1800, by Sarah Montgomery Thompson
ARTstor search: 1894-274

For more information, please contact Division of Education and Public Programs: School and Teacher Programs by phone at 215-684-7580, by fax at 215-236-4063, or by e-mail at educate@philamuseum.org.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

RELATED PICTURING AMERICA OBJECTS:

- [George Washington \(Lansdowne Portrait\)](#), 1796, by Gilbert Stuart
ARTstor search: george washington landsdowne
- [Washington Crossing the Delaware](#), 1851, by Emanuel Leutze
ARTstor search: leutze 11777

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. Explain to the class that George Washington became a legendary figure toward the end of his life and in the years following his passing. In art, Washington was transformed into a national symbol and archetype (for example, the revolutionary, the warrior, or the statesman).
3. Have the class examine each image, and individually or in small groups, describe the following elements:
 - Washington's expression and pose.
 - His clothing.
 - Props and accessories included in the work.
 - The setting of the picture.
4. From these observations and descriptions, have the groups (or the class as a whole) form conclusions about which archetype Washington is symbolizing in each work.
5. Compare Emanuel Leutze's painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851) and Sarah Montgomery Thompson's *Embroidered Picture* (c. 1800). Notice the difference in size. What effect does the size of the work have on its emotional power? Where did these artists expect their work to be displayed? Discuss the symbols seen in these two works. List them and discuss why the artist chose to include them.
6. Compare Gilbert Stuart's painting *George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait)* (1796) and Sarah Montgomery Thompson's *Embroidered Picture*. What additional symbols do you see in Stuart's portrait? Discuss specifically the following:
 - Where is Washington pointing?
 - How is Washington dressed and what do his clothes tell us about him?
 - Find discuss the use of: a rainbow, a horn of plenty, the items on the table, the house

Assessment

1. Using a portrait of another president or other American leader, write about the symbols you see in the portrait and the meaning those symbols are meant to impart to the viewer.
2. Create a new coat of arms logo for your school that includes symbols you feel represent your school and community. Present your creation to the class, explaining your artistic choices and persuading the audience to choose your logo for the school's next coat of arms

Enrichment

1. Government officials have always been concerned about their public image. Search for examples of official presidential portraits and write about the symbols you see and the reasons they are included. (This may also be completed as a class presentation.)
2. Find examples of official presidential photographs, and examine these for symbolic content. Present your findings for class discussion.