

## SYMBOLS: COMMUNICATING BEYOND LANGUAGE

Symbols are all around us. They are a natural part of our language and of the objects of our culture. In fact, our ability to communicate would be limited without the use of symbols. A symbol is a person, place, or object that represents something beyond itself. They possess standard interpretations, which are generally accepted by a culture, and personal interpretations, which vary from one individual to the next. These interpretations allow us to use symbols to examine other cultures and viewpoints. In this lesson, students will examine and interpret symbols on functional art objects and will make connections between the cultural and historical meaning of these symbols and common symbols in today's world.



*Chest over Drawers*, 1803  
America (Pennsylvania German)  
Poplar, white pine, painted decoration; brass, iron  
30 3/4 x 54 1/4 x 22 3/8 inches (78.1 x 137.8 x 56.8 cm)  
Gift of Arthur Sussel, 1945  
1945-12-1

### Curricular Areas

English – Language Arts

### Grade Level

For grades 4–7

### Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.2](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.5](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.10](#)

### Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are 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.

- [Cuirassier Armor](#), 1612, France  
ARTstor search: 1977-167-36
- [Chest over Drawers](#), 1803, America (Pennsylvania German)  
ARTstor search: 1945-12-1
- [Embroidered Picture](#), c. 1800, by Sarah Montgomery Thompson  
ARTstor search: 1894-274

# PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

## Lesson Process

1. Display the Museum's object page for *Cuirassier Armor*. Select the third of the five images provided (the front chest plate). (You may also explore the Audio Stop and the Teacher Resources for this object.) If using ARTstor's Offline Image Viewer (OIV), zoom in on the chest plate. Ask the class: What image do you see on the chest plate? Why would someone put a lion's head on a suit of armor? What traits does this person want associated with the lion's head? (Bravery, courage, ferociousness, etc.) These traits reveal a standard interpretation for the symbol of a lion's head.
2. Discuss: What other symbols might be appropriate for a suit of armor? (Dragon, bear, panther, snake, Christian cross, Islamic crescent, political donkey or elephant, etc.) What would these symbols tell us about the owner of the armor? Analyze which class responses are standard interpretations and which are personal interpretations.
3. Have students write or discuss responses to these questions: What is the purpose of symbols? If you were designing your own suit of armor, what symbols would you want to include and why?
4. Display the Museum's object page for *Chest over Drawers*. (Feel free to explore the Audio Stop.) What symbols does the class see here? What interpretations can the students make from these symbols? (These symbols are less common, so the class should refer to the Teacher Resources from the website to answer the question.) Record their responses on the board.
5. What do these symbols tell us about the woman who owned this chest, in addition to her community? What other symbols might you use if you were decorating a marriage chest? What symbols would express your heritage or the community in which you live?
6. What other kinds of symbols can you think of? What symbols do you see on the Internet? On Facebook? What are emoticons? How do these other symbols help us communicate with each other? What do they say about us?

## Assessment

1. Have students create a Symbol Scrapbook. They can scan magazines for symbols, or write brief descriptions of symbols they see day-to-day. Have students select a few of the symbols from their scrapbooks and write about their interpretation of those symbols.
2. Write a profile of the person who owned either the *Cuirassier Armor* or the *Chest over Drawers*. Their profiles will be imaginary, but should be based on the symbols found (and interpreted) on the two works.

## Enrichment

1. Examine *Embroidered Picture* by Sarah Montgomery Thompson for its use of symbols to tell a visual story about George Washington. Have students look at the embroidery and describe what they think is happening. Then ask students to explore the symbols in the embroidery, listing as many as they can find and discussing the significance of each. How do the symbols add to the story of George Washington? Let students refer to the Teacher Resources from the website to help identify all the symbols.