American Art from 1650 to 1850

A Resource for Classroom Teachers
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Introduction

The Philadelphia Museum of Art is home to an exceptional collection of American art. The work that spans the years 1650–1850 reflects the global forces that shaped the new United States and Philadelphia's central role as its cultural capital. This teaching resource highlights works of art chosen by educators to reflect multiple perspectives on the history of the United States. The selection spotlights lesser-known or overlooked stories of the experiences of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people as well as women. These works are sorted into four themes that highlight relationships among them: Global Connections, Power and Portraiture, Peale’s Museum, and Crafting Identity.

We hope that you and your students enjoy exploring these works of art and making meaningful connections, both among them and to other things you learn. We also invite you and your students to the museum to see firsthand the artworks featured in this resource along with many more.

How to Use This Resource

This booklet provides an introduction, background information about selected artworks, and suggested curriculum connections to classroom teachers. The digital presentation included on the enclosed USB card is designed as a teaching tool. The presentation includes additional images and text that will help you engage your students in looking closely at and responding to the selected artworks. The USB card also contains a collection of multimedia files to engage your students in American art and history. Many videos are also available at youtube.com/c/philadelphiamuseumofart. The booklet and presentation are also available for download at philamuseum.org/teacherresources.

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The United States’ Global Connections around 1800

This global map will help students place the works of art in this resource into the larger political, economic, and geographical context of the time period.
Before British colonization, these lands were the traditional territories of the Delaware, Susquehannock, Shawnee, and Iroquois People. By 1800, many of these indigenous communities had been displaced by British and German immigrants.

This partial family tree shows the artistic dynasty that descended from three siblings: Charles, Elizabeth, and James Peale. Ten of their eighteen children (see bold *) became artists. We have included pictures of Peale family members referenced in this resource (see bold). Some of the portrayals are self-portraits while most others are likenesses created by family members.

Image credits: one of the works on this chart is part of the George W. Elkins Collection. Three works of art are gifts of the McNeil Americana Collection. The photograph of Mary Jane Peale is courtesy the American Philosophical Society.
Connections to Educational Standards

Common Core State Standards

English Language Arts/Literacy Standards College and Career Readiness
Anchor Standard for Reading
Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing
Standard 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Standard 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

English Language Arts Standards History/Social Studies
Standard 1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
Standard 2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
Standard 3: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

National Visual Arts Standards

Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
Anchor Standard: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
Anchor Standard: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
Anchor Standard: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context
Anchor Standard: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.
Anchor Standard: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

National Council for the Social Studies

C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards
Standard D2 Geo.2: Use maps, graphs, photographs, and other representations to describe places and the relationships and interactions that shape them.
Standard D2 Geo.7: Explain why and how people, goods, and ideas move from place to place.
Standard D2 Geo.11: Explain how the consumption of products connects people to distant places.
Standard D2 His.2: Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
Standard D2 His.4: Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
Standard D2 His.10: Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past.
Global Connections

The art of the Americas reflects a complex history of colonization, slavery, immigration, and trade. These forces brought together the knowledge and customs of Indigenous people, Europeans, Africans, and Asians. In this context, artists developed new American cultural traditions, using their voices to promote and shape the ideas of their time.

Many of the artworks that survive were created for wealthy patrons and present history from the point of view of those in power. Investigating the layered stories of each object can reveal the contributions of Indigenous nations, immigrants, traders, and people brought here in bondage. These important, yet often untold stories prompt us to think about the multifaceted nature of American culture, shaped by global connections.

Curriculum Connections

Adaptable for all grades/Art
Research the origins of a fruit, vegetable, spice, or recipe that we eat in America. Create a collage or still life that tells its story. Is it indigenous to the Americas? How has it been cultivated, prepared, and consumed over time? Reflect as a class on the global culinary reach of food influences in the United States.

Adaptable for all grades/Critical thinking skills
Focus on a single work of art. Record your first impressions. Read the background information and discuss with a partner. How did your perception grow or change? How does this artwork connect to your understanding of United States history? How do images affect our understanding of history?

Middle and High School/Social Studies
Philadelphia was a center for Free Black artisans and entrepreneurs, including Thomas Gross, James Forten, Robert Bogle, and Peter Bentzon. Research one of these makers and create a presentation to share with your class. Discuss: What does that person’s life story tell us about the experience of the Free Black community in Philadelphia when slavery still existed in the United States?

High School/Social Studies
There is no scientific basis for race, but Enlightenment thinkers developed biological justifications for the social construct. Research the origins of this so-called scientific racism. Consider how images and texts reinforced power structures. How do these invented concepts continue to affect society today? How can we continue to debunk these harmful misconceptions?
Punch Bowl Showing Factories of Canton, China

Layers of architecture and activity are packed into the decoration of this punch bowl. The scene is set in the Chinese port of Guangzhou (gwaang-JOW, also known as Canton) in the foreground, small river boats cluster at the gates. They transport goods such as tea, silk, and porcelain from large ships to merchant buildings. Each building is a hong, or center of trade between China and another country. Merchants from different countries used their hong, also called a factory, as an office, warehouse, and hotel.

The flags flying in front of each factory represent the nation that traded there. The American and British flags hang beside each other, a powerful symbol given that the Revolutionary War had just ended in 1783. After protesting unfair taxation on Chinese goods, such as the tea thrown overboard in Boston in 1773, the new nation won the ability to trade directly. The first United States merchant ship sailed for China just one month after the war ended. Establishing trading relationships was important both for the new country’s economy and the recognition of its independence.

To protect their own nation, the Chinese government strictly controlled access to the country. The port of Guangzhou was the only area open to European and American trade. The blend of these influences is clear in the design of the hongs and the people’s clothing. Classical Roman columns and pediments stand beside window screens with Chinese patterns. European merchants are dressed in tricorn hats and knee-length frock coats while their Chinese counterparts wear long robes and rounded hats.

Chinese artisans developed the methods to make porcelain and kept this knowledge a closely guarded secret for almost five hundred years. Prized for their brilliant white surfaces, colorful decoration, and durability, porcelain objects were highly desirable and expensive, especially since they were shipped halfway around the world. Punch bowls, a party centerpiece used to serve a mixed drink, were made for export to the United States where they would have demonstrated a host’s status and connections to the wider world.
Pepper-Pot: A Scene in the Philadelphia Market

Outdoor markets were one of the rare places in Philadelphia during the early 1800s where people of all ages, professions, social classes, and races would interact. For an artist, they provided a lens to study these exchanges. In this painting, the circle of people around the soup vendor includes a tall man from the country, an older woman, a former soldier, a kneeling woman feeding a young boy, and two girls with a basket of flowers. There are some elements of harmony between them, like in the shared gesture of raising a spoon or tilting their heads. But there are also signs of discomfort: the two girls, dressed in the fancy clothes of wealthy city families, look at the old soldier, perhaps with pity or condescension. Their bright footwear stands out in contrast with the bare feet of the street vendor, alone in the center of the group.

John Lewis Krimmel was born in Germany and had only arrived in Philadelphia a year before painting *Pepper-Pot*. His observation of street life in his adopted city appealed to his contemporary museum audiences. He provided an immigrant’s perspective on society in a country just beginning to establish its national identity.

One aspect of life in the United States that was different from Germany was the presence of the large Free Black community. Many of the jobs that were open to Black people depended on white attitudes about what was appropriate. For entrepreneurial Black women without professional training, cooking and selling food was an alternative to domestic labor. Black female street vendors were an important part of Philadelphia’s economy by 1811. Many of them achieved economic self-sufficiency despite discrimination. Pepper-pot soup was a popular dish often sold by Black women on High Street (see map on page 6). Over many generations, as people were forcibly transported to Philadelphia through the transatlantic slave trade, they incorporated food traditions of West Africa and the Caribbean into the spicy soup still enjoyed today (see map on page 4).

**History Connection**

In the 1800s, Philadelphia’s Free Black community included many talented artisans. However, it was rare for any furniture maker to sign their pieces, so it’s difficult to identify their work today. When cabinetmaker Thomas Gross wrote his name on the underside of this chest, he made an important contribution to Black history.

**Let’s Look**

What is going on in this picture?
How would you describe the people in this scene? What clues can you find to each of their identities? What makes them similar or different?
How are the people interacting? What kinds of conversations can you imagine them having with each other?
Why might the artist have chosen to paint this scene? What does it reveal about life in Philadelphia in 1811? What questions does it raise?

*1811 | John Lewis Krimmel (American, born Germany, 1786–1821) Oil on canvas 19 1/2 x 15 1/2 in (49.5 x 39.4 cm) 125th Anniversary Acquisition. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edward B. Leisenring, Jr., 2001-196-1*
The Peaceable Kingdom

Gentle animals gather around a barefoot young child in this wooded landscape. Behind them, a large ship floats in a tranquil river. On the grassy riverbank, a group of people meet under an elm tree. Look closely at their clothing and you’ll notice that the men on the right are British colonists while the men on the left are Indigenous Americans. What could they be discussing?

Both scenes are meant to tell stories of peace. The child and animals in the foreground illustrate a passage from the Bible. In this story, the prophet Isaiah predicts that one day all of the world’s creatures will live peacefully together:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain. (Isaiah 11:6–9, King James Version)

In the painting, Edward Hicks connected Isaiah’s vision to the legendary meeting between William Penn and the Lenape (Luh-NAY-pay, also known as the Delaware) chief Tamanend that took place at Shackamaxon, near Philadelphia, in 1682 (see map on page 6). The story holds that Penn proclaimed:

We meet on the broad pathway of good faith and good-will; no advantage shall be taken on either side, but all shall be openness and love.

Hicks, a Quaker like Penn, painted this picture almost 150 years after the event occurred. His message of peace was intended as an example for his Quaker neighbors, who were in the midst of disagreements. Today, we understand that the terms of the original treaty had not been honored and most of the Lenape had been displaced to the Midwest by the time Hicks painted this image. Nevertheless, the peace agreement between Penn and the Lenape remained a symbol of harmony for the artist.
Let’s Look

Compare and contrast the two images. What similarities or differences can you find?

How is each family interacting?

What do you notice about the ways people are dressed?

What details can you find in each scene? What do they tell you about the people’s daily lives?

What do you think the artist is conveying about the social status of each family? What do you see that makes you say that? What does that reveal about the culture of New Spain?

Global Connections

These artworks, known as *casta* paintings, illustrate a system of racial hierarchy invented by elites in Spanish America to place themselves at the top of a caste system (see map on page 4). Each scene contains two parents of different races and their child. The labels at the top use terms* that define the racial heritage of each person. At the top of this caste system are families with the greatest percentage of European ancestry, followed by racial mixes between Indigenous people and then Black Africans. These two images are probably part of a set of sixteen canvases, illustrating a system of strict stratification that was much more fluid in reality.

In the bottom image, we are presented with a Spanish father, a *Morisca* mother (Spanish and African ancestry), and their child. The father and son wear elegant European clothing, conveying their higher status. The family uses expensive glass and ceramic objects, and a horse is visible in the background, another symbol of wealth. In the top image, the artist depicts an Indigenous father, a *Mestiza* mother (Spanish and Indigenous ancestry), and their child. The father’s lower social status is shown in the simple draped cloth he wears. The table is overflowing with root vegetables in woven baskets and platters, perhaps items the father will sell at the market. Notably, both mothers in the paintings look similar, with rebozos (shaws) and beauty marks, suggesting that these figures were based not on individuals but types, and that the same model may have been used throughout the series.

When the Spanish first colonized Spanish America, marriages between different races were common as initially few women immigrated to New Spain and marriages could be used to form alliances. As the false idea that there was a scientific basis for race emerged, the Spanish government developed the *Casta System*, which included a series of privileges and restrictions, to maintain their power and superiority over other racial groups. The legal system was abolished when Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821 but continues to have lasting impact on racial identities and social structures.

*These terms were created as part of the development of the *casta* system and should not be used in reference to race or ethnicity.

Around 1800 | Attributed to José de Alcíbar (Mexican, 1725/30–1803)

Oil on canvas

31 x 39 3/4 in (78.7 x 101 cm)

Gift of the nieces and nephews of Wright S. Ludington in his honor, 1980-139-1,2

*De Indio y Mestiza, Coyote.*

*De Español y Morisca, Albino.*

These terms were created as part of the development of the *casta* system and should not be used in reference to race or ethnicity.
San Diego de Alcalá  
(Saint Didacus of Alcalá)

This small religious painting connects the arts and culture of three continents.

Born in Spain, San Diego de Alcalá is a Catholic saint honored for his devotion to the poor and sick. In this image, he stands in the garden of a monastery wearing a simple tunic. His bare feet symbolize his humility. With one hand he supports a large cross, a reminder of sacrifice. In the other, he holds a basket of bread and flowers. These symbols are a reference to one of the miracles he performed, where bread he had stolen to feed the hungry was transformed into roses to conceal the theft. The garden is echoed in the frame, where an abundance of grape vines filled with birds connect the painting to the wine used in religious rituals.

The shimmer visible in San Diego’s robes and many other parts of the painting is created by the addition of mother-of-pearl, which is the iridescent inner layer of a mollusk shell. Artists create these enconchado paintings by inserting pieces of shell into the panel like tiles in a mosaic. In a time when art was lit by candles, the flicker of light across the shell would create movement and luminosity. Small paintings like this one were objects of personal devotion, and the richness of the materials was intended to inspire reverence.

Indigenous people in the Americas made shellwork painting long before Spanish colonization. Enconchados of religious imagery gained popularity during the colonial period as spreading the Catholic faith was one of the main goals of the Spanish as they gained control in New Spain (see map on page 4). Religious art like this painting was used as a missionary tool in that effort. This work was likely painted by a Criollo artist, someone of Spanish descent born in the Americas.

The Spanish also used their colonies as a base for trade with Asia. New trade routes led to an exchange of artistic ideas and materials. Enconchado paintings were inspired by jewel-like Japanese lacquerware with inlaid shell and Indigenous shellwork traditions. This melding of cultures expressed a unique identity, distinct from their European ancestors.

Let’s Look
How would you describe the person in this painting? What is he wearing? What is he holding? What can you tell about the setting? What animals and plants can you find? What colors stand out to you? Can you find them in both the picture and the frame? What do you notice about texture? Which areas seem shiny?
What can portraits tell us? At first glance, they can describe a person’s physical appearance. Looking more closely, they can communicate what was important to the sitter. They can suggest information about their personality, beliefs, and aspirations. Many portraits are commissioned, meaning that the sitter paid the artist to create it. Other times, artists choose a person to honor, sometimes long after their death. In the 1700s and early 1800s, commissioning a portrait was expensive, and so most paintings from that period depict individuals from wealthy and powerful groups who lack racial, religious, and socioeconomic diversity. However, as this selection of portraits demonstrates, the Americas were home to people with many different life experiences and backgrounds.

Curriculum Connections

Adaptable for all grades/Art
Create a portrait of yourself or someone you want to honor. Consider pose, facial expression, setting, clothing, and other objects to express important aspects of their identity. Were you inspired by any of the artworks in this guide?

Adaptable for all grades/Language Arts
Select a portrait and write a letter to the sitter. What do you see in their portrait that makes you curious? Let them know what you wonder about their life, what you admire about them, and what you wish you could tell them.

Middle and High School/Science
Research Benjamin Franklin’s kite experiment. Why did Franklin conduct it? How did he use the results to solve a problem? Identify a problem in your daily life and brainstorm solutions. What experiments would help with your design?

High School/Social Studies
Compare and contrast the portraits in this guide. What do the objects, poses, clothing, facial expressions, and other details reveal about the sitters and the artists? How did race and gender define people’s lives during the 1700s and 1800s? What opportunities and choices did these people have or not have? What about now?
Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin (Sarah Morris)

This couple appears to be enjoying a relaxed moment instead of posing for a formal portrait. However, everything—from the couple’s clothing to their body language, facial expressions, and surroundings—is a carefully considered statement rather than a spontaneous snapshot of everyday life.

Philadelphia couple Sarah Morris Mifflin (around 1747–1790) and Thomas Mifflin (1744–1800) were visiting Boston when they commissioned John Singleton Copley to create this image. The couple sits close together, and their hands almost touch. Thomas gazes admiringly at Sarah with a slight smile. Their physical closeness and visual connection convey their loving relationship. Their clothing, made of expensive fabrics, show their wealth and status. Although their clothes reflect the latest style, as Quakers they present themselves modestly, without jewelry, lace, or brightly colored fabrics.

The portrait also tells us about the couple’s political views. Thomas, who was a merchant, opposed the taxes that American colonists had to pay on British goods. He protested these taxes by refusing to import products from Britain. However, it is not Thomas but Sarah who seems to address this political issue. She weaves decorative fringe on her loom, perhaps demonstrating that she will boycott British goods and make her own instead. As a woman she was prevented from holding public office, but her actions and confident look communicate her determination to make her voice heard.

Copley was a self-taught artist who became known for his attention to detail, making each texture look as realistic as possible. Notice the smoothness of the table and the folds of fabric on Sarah’s dress and cap. Copley was so devoted to recording exactly what he saw that he often included some features that could be considered imperfections, such as the smallpox scars on Sarah’s cheek.

1773. John Singleton Copley (American, 1738–1815)
Oil on ticking
61 5/8 x 46 in (156.5 x 121.9 cm)
125th Anniversary Acquisition. Bequest of Mrs. Esther F. Wistar to The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1900, and acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art by mutual agreement with the Society through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Rio Eugene Dixon, Jr., and significant contributions from Stephanie S. Eglin, and other donors to the Philadelphia Museum of Art; as well as the George W. Elkins Fund and the W. P. Wilstach Fund, and through the generosity of Maryland and Howard H. Lewis to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, EW1999-45-1

Compare and Connect
This is another portrait of a family from the same time period. Compare and contrast the two paintings.

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.

Let’s Look
What are the people in this painting doing? How can you tell?
What do you think the relationship between the man and woman might be? What do you see that makes you say that?
What do you think the artist is telling us about each person’s personality?
Where do you think the artist wanted us to look? How do you know?
In this portrait, an older man looks directly at us with a gentle smile. There is wisdom in his eyes and warmth in his expression. His rosy cheeks and the glint in his eyes suggest his lively personality. He wears a blue coat with shiny brass buttons and a heavy overcoat, indicating he may have just come in from the cold. His knit cap suggests a kufi, a hat traditionally worn by African Muslim men.

Yarrow Mamout (around 1736–1823) was brought in bondage from Guinea in West Africa to Maryland around 1752, when he was a teenager (see map on page 4). By the time this portrait was made, he had endured forty-five years of enslavement, gained his freedom, purchased his son’s freedom, bought a house, and held stock in a bank. Devoted to his Muslim faith throughout his life, Mamout was literate in both Arabic and English.

In the winter of 1818–19, the artist Charles Willson Peale traveled to Washington, DC, the nation’s capital, to paint portraits of prominent figures for exhibition in his museum in Philadelphia. While there, he heard about Yarrow Mamout, who was rumored to be 140 years old (though he was actually around 83). Peale was 77 years old at the time and was interested in what contributed to a long, healthy life. He set out to find Mamout and paint his picture.

Yarrow Mamout was manumitted (legally freed) in the 1790s, becoming a well-known member of the capital’s Free Black community of about 400 people in the Georgetown neighborhood. He reportedly worked for fixed wages during the day and spent nights making nets, baskets, and other items for sale. When he died in 1823, his obituary read, “it is known to all that knew him, that he was industrious, honest, and moral.” Peale displayed this portrait in his museum to illustrate such character. Two centuries later, Mamout remains a role model of perseverance and strength.

**Let’s Look**

What do you notice about the man in this portrait? Describe his clothing, pose, and expression.

Look closely at the man’s face. How might he be feeling, and what might he be thinking about?

Read about the man in this portrait, Yarrow Mamout. What surprised you about his life story?

What new thoughts do you have about the portrait after reading about his life?
Benjamin Franklin
Drawing Electricity from the Sky

This painting shows an imagined version of a real event, when Benjamin Franklin demonstrated that lightning is a form of electricity in 1752. Painted by Benjamin West around 1816, it shows Franklin holding his clenched fist toward a metal key that hangs from a kite string. A spark of electricity flows between them. Storm clouds rage, the wind blows Franklin’s gray hair and red robe, and a bolt of lightning illuminates the sky. Two cherubs play with jars that hold electric current, and three more help with the kite.

Franklin was endlessly curious about the world around him. He was fascinated by weather and began conducting experiments with electricity in 1746. He thought lightning might discharge electricity to high objects, such as trees and church spires, which caused fire. To test the theory, he went outside during a storm and flew a kite with a thin metal rod attached to the top. He hung a metal key from its hemp string, then tied a silk ribbon to the end for insulation. Indeed, when he reached his hand up to the metal key, he felt a spark of electricity. His theory was correct! With this information, Franklin invented the lightning rod, which protected buildings from fire by grounding electricity from lightning. We still use this principle today to protect homes and buildings.

West painted this picture twenty-six years after Franklin’s death and changed several details of the story. The dramatic setting and angelic assistants suggest that Franklin was godlike. He was 46 at the time of the experiment, but West shows him as an older man, perhaps because this is how he was most recognizable to the public.

The artist, who was friends with Franklin, painted this small portrait in preparation for a larger one, intended to be placed at Pennsylvania Hospital, which Franklin founded. Although the final painting was not made, this version captures Franklin’s ambition, intelligence, and determination.

Let’s Look
Notice the setting. What can you tell about where this is taking place?

What details did West include about Franklin and his experiment?

What do Franklin’s expression and pose tell us about him?

Why do you think West changed some details from the actual event?
Portrait of Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz

This portrait depicts the famous poet, scholar, and nun, Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz. She looks directly at us and holds a small book of prayers in her left hand. She rests her right hand on a larger book, identified as a volume of her own poetry. Juana’s clothing and headpiece convey that she is a Catholic nun, someone who has dedicated her life to religious observance. Under her chin is a devotional badge with a biblical scene of the angel Gabriel telling Mary that she will give birth to Jesus. A pyx (pix), a round box that holds the wafers for the ritual of communion, is attached to Juana’s left shoulder. She also wears a rosary, a string of beads that guides Catholics in prayer.

Juana was born in 1648 in a part of New Spain that is now Mexico. This Spanish colony extended from what is now the southwestern United States into Central America (see map on page 4). She was an extremely bright child, reading at age 3 and writing poetry by 8. At the time, women were excluded from academic studies, especially if they were married. In hopes of continuing her education, she joined the Convent of San Jerónimo in 1669. While there, she amassed a personal library of over 4,000 books and studied a wide range of subjects. She wrote plays, poems, and essays, publishing books that brought her fame in Europe and Spanish America. Some of her writings criticized the Catholic church for keeping women uneducated. This angered some church leaders, who eventually forced her to abandon her non-religious studies. She gave away her books, musical instruments, and scientific equipment. She died in 1695 while caring for her fellow nuns during an epidemic.

This painting was made by Nicolás Enríquez de Vargas after Juana died. The inscription at the bottom describes her as the “phoenix of America,” and the “honor of the nation of the New World and the subject of admiration and praises of the Old.” Today she is remembered as a gifted writer, scholar, and brave advocate for women’s education.

Let’s Look

What do you notice about this woman’s clothing and headpiece?

Describe her pose and facial expression. What do they communicate?

What might the objects around her tell us about her?

Read about her life and consider why the inscription refers to her as a phoenix.

What do you wonder about her?

Around 1720–70 | Nicolás Enríquez de Vargas (Mexican, 1704–around 1790)
Oil on canvas
41 1/2 x 32 1/2 in (105.4 x 82.6 cm)
The Dr. Robert H. Lamborn Collection, 1903-918
Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) believed in the power of knowledge. If people could understand the world around them, they could improve their community and its future. To this end, he opened Peale’s Museum in 1786 in the heart of Philadelphia to educate, entertain, and inspire the public. Museum visitors could see natural history specimens, Peale’s painted portraits, and new inventions.

Peale is best remembered today as an artist, but he was also a scientist, soldier, politician, and inventor. He fought in the Revolutionary War and wanted to help the new nation thrive. Peale felt that establishing an American art tradition was important to the country’s success and helped found its first art school. He taught many of his family members to paint, forming the nation’s first artistic dynasty.

Peale’s Museum

Curriculum Connections

Adaptable for all grades/Language Arts

Create an exhibit representing your school or community. Collect objects that tell important stories about its people, places, and traditions. Decide how to order and display these objects and write informational labels to tell your audience what they are and why they are significant.

Adaptable for all grades/Science

Keep a nature journal. Choose one thing to track over time such as a tree, a plant, or the moon. Make a daily sketch. Write about your observations and add research notes.

Middle and High School/Art

Using a light source, cast your shadow on a piece of white paper and have a partner trace your silhouette. Cut it out and paste it to paper of another color. As an extension, fill your silhouette with words or symbols that relate to your identity.

High School/Social Studies

Research the Enlightenment. What were the main ideas and who developed them? How did Peale’s work, both in creating a public museum featuring art and science and in establishing an American art tradition independent from Europe, relate to these ideals? How are they reflected in these artworks?
Staircase Group
(Portrait of Raphaelle Peale and Titian Ramsay Peale I)

Two young men peer out at us from a curving staircase. They seem to invite us to walk right into this life-size painting and follow them upstairs. In fact, many people have been fooled into thinking these are real people in an actual staircase. As part of the trick, the painting is surrounded by a doorframe instead of a picture frame, and a wooden step projects out from the bottom of the canvas. Even George Washington is believed to have tipped his hat to greet the boys when he first saw this work of art. Its fame has grown ever since.

Charles Willson Peale painted this picture of his two sons, Raphaelle (1774–1825) and Titian Ramsay (1780–1798). Because he was an artist, Raphaelle holds paintbrushes, a palette for mixing oil paints, and a maulstick, which artists use to steady their hand while painting fine details. Titian, who was a natural scientist, peeks out from a higher step and points upward, suggesting that there is more to see.

Peale painted Staircase Group for a special exhibition that celebrated the opening of the nation’s first artists’ organization, the Columbianum, in Philadelphia. As a proud champion of American art, Peale wanted his painting to convey a message. Raphaelle’s confident pose and Titian’s curious look imply that art and science have a promising future in the United States.

A small, white piece of paper appears to have been dropped on the second step. A closer look reveals that this is an entrance ticket to Peale’s Museum, which displayed fine art and natural history specimens (see map on page 6).

Following the diagonal line of the maulstick, we notice Titian’s pointed finger. Is this a clue? Some people believe that Peale carefully positioned Staircase Group in the exhibition gallery where it was first shown so that Titian would point to a nearby window, through which you could see Peale’s Museum. With clever tricks and realistic details, Peale delighted his audience while inviting them to think about the larger meaning in his art.

Admission Ticket to Peale’s Museum, 1794, by Charles Willson Peale (Gift of Jack L. Lindsey in honor of H. Richard Dietrich, Jr., and Robert L. McNeil, Jr., 1997-172-2)

Let’s Look
What details catch your eye in the painting? What do you notice first?
What can you tell about where these young men are standing?
What do you think they are doing?
What might happen next?
What messages do you think Peale wanted to convey in this painting?
Cut-paper profiles, or silhouettes, were a popular form of portraiture before the invention of photography. About the size of a game card, they show a person’s face from a side view. Visitors to Charles Willson Peale’s museum in Philadelphia enjoyed having their profiles made there (see map on page 6). The best examples are credited to the artist Moses Williams, a man of European and African ancestry, who was enslaved by Peale until he was manumitted (legally freed) by 1802. In 1803, the first full year that profile-cutting was offered at the museum, over 8,000 people paid to have Williams produce their likeness.

How did Williams create the profiles? First, a person sat on a stool, facing sideways. Using a newly invented machine called a physiognotrace (fizz-ee-OH-no-trace), Williams followed the surface of the sitter’s head with a dowel, causing a pointed instrument to impress an outline onto white paper secured at the top of the machine. Using scissors, Williams carefully cut out the person’s profile from the middle of the paper, capturing delicate facial features with precision. Because the paper was folded twice, he produced four profiles at once. Each profile was placed on top of dark paper so that the portrait stood out. Sometimes he added details like eyelashes with black ink. Remarkably, this entire process only took a few minutes.

Williams was born with slave status. Scholars believe that Peale accepted his parents, Lucy and Scarborough, as payment for a portrait. Peale manumitted them while Moses was a young boy. Upon gaining his freedom, Scarborough changed his name to John Williams. Peale continued to enslave Moses into his adulthood. Reportedly, Moses’s skill cutting profiles prompted his manumission. When he was freed, Moses took the last name Williams, like his father. After a few years of cutting profiles, Moses had saved enough money to purchase a two-story brick house in Philadelphia (see map on page 6).

Because the profiles made at Peale’s Museum were stamped “Museum,” Williams’s identity as the artist of these works of art was unknown for many years. Today he is recognized as an important artist in early America whose success is even more significant given the severe adversity and discrimination he faced.

Let’s Look
Compare the profiles. What makes each one unique?
What can you tell about each person?
What details are not included?
Why do you think these small profiles were so popular?

After 1802–5 | Moses Williams (American, 1777–1825)
Pen and ink and traces of graphite on wove paper, hollow cut
Approximately: 4 13/16 x 4 in (12.2 x 10.2 cm)
Gift of the McNeil Americana Collection, 2009-18-42(167,166,170,15)
Grapes and Peaches

A bountiful late summer harvest is laid out on a table in this small painting. The white, red, and black grapes are perfectly ripe, catching glimmers of light on their skin. Fresh, firm, and seemingly juicy, they cascade toward the edge of the table, tempting the viewer to reach out and taste one. Their curly vines playfully dance across the picture. On the right are two peaches—one with the stem and three leaves still attached, as if it has just been picked. The other is only a half, suggesting that someone has already enjoyed the rest.

Mary Jane Peale, granddaughter of the famous painter Charles Willson Peale, began studying art as a young woman. Although women faced significant barriers to pursuing an artistic career, Mary Jane benefited from her family connections in the art world. She trained with several well-known artists and took classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. When she painted Grapes and Peaches she was living with her parents on a farm outside of Philadelphia. Her father, Rubens, devoted most of his life to museum work but was also a gifted gardener. At age 71, he took up painting. Mary Jane gave him instruction and helped him finish his works. The two artists inspired each other.

During the 1800s, the most popular types of painting were portraits, landscapes, and stories from history. The Peale family brought new attention to still life painting, which features objects such as fruit, flowers, and other everyday items. Mary Jane’s great uncle James (Charles’s brother) and her uncle Raphaelle (seen in Staircase Group) were gifted still life painters, and their work inspired a younger generation (see family tree on page 7). This dedication to painting objects from nature also overlaps with the Peale family’s interest in the natural sciences. Charles believed wholeheartedly in the power of learning directly from nature, as exemplified in the natural history displays at his museum in Philadelphia. Immersed in art, science, and nature from a young age, Mary Jane was inspired to carry on her family’s legacy in her paintings.

Let’s Look

What types of fruit do you recognize on this table? How do you imagine they would taste? What similarities and differences do you see between the grapes and peaches? What are some details that Mary Jane included to make the fruit look realistic?

1864 | Mary Jane Peale (American, 1827–1902)
Oil on canvas
13 1/4 x 19 1/2 in (33.7 x 49.5 cm)
Gift of the McNeil Americana Collection, 2009-177

Compare and Connect

Mary Jane’s uncle Raphaelle painted this picture of peaches covered by a translucent handkerchief. What details do you notice in the painting? What do you think would be challenging about painting this image?

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.

Peaches Covered by a Handkerchief, 1819, by Raphaelle Peale (Gift of the McNeil Americana Collection, 2015-1-2)

PEALE’S MUSEUM
Crafting Identity

Many artists skillfully create decorative and functional objects for daily life. These objects are not only beautiful, they can also help to preserve cultural traditions and mark important milestones.

Pennsylvania was the only colony in British North America to be shaped by two dominant immigrant groups with distinct artistic traditions. German visual culture, featuring bold colors and designs, contrasted with the more ornate and delicate British forms. Over time, the two separate but interconnected communities developed new hybrid American styles.

On a national level, the arts played a role in communicating American identity to the world. Patriotic symbols visually proclaimed the power and plenty of the nation.

Curriculum Connections

Adaptable for all grades/Art

Using a blank paper plate, design a dish that represents yourself or your school, city, or nation. Consider what idea, milestone, event, or person you want to celebrate. What symbols, colors, patterns, or words will you include? How will you place your designs on the circle?

Elementary and Middle School/Language Arts

Choose an object that you use every day. Write a descriptive reflection of it. Spend time observing it and considering its purpose. Describe how you use it, its qualities, its history, and why it’s important to you.

Middle and High School/Social Studies

Pennsylvania was the only North American colony with two dominant immigrant cultures. Find out more about why people came to Pennsylvania, where they settled, how they interacted with each other and with Indigenous people, and how things changed over time. What are some lasting impacts of these different cultures that we still experience today?

Middle and High School/Social Studies

Investigate the goods being imported and exported to the United States during the 1700s and 1800s, such as silver, mahogany, or porcelain. Use the map of the world on page 4 as a starting point. Where did the goods come from? Why did people value them? What was the human cost of their manufacture and trade?
In the center of this plate, a woman and man face each other, holding hands. They wear tall hats and fancy clothing—a flowered dress for the woman, and a long green coat for the man. Flowers surround the couple. Four small speckled birds appear beneath them. The writing around the edge is in German and translates, “God created all beautiful maidens. They are for the potters but not for the priests.”

Although the maker’s name is unknown, we know that this plate was made in 1793 by a Pennsylvania German artist, likely in Montgomery County, near Philadelphia. Around 80,000 German-speaking immigrants from various areas of Europe arrived in Pennsylvania before the American Revolution. They sought new opportunities, natural resources, farmland, and religious freedom. The immigrants spoke different dialects and represented different Christian denominations. However, over the years, a new shared culture emerged. Pennsylvania German artists developed a style characterized by bold colors, symmetry, natural motifs, and geometric designs.

The plentiful red clay found in southeastern Pennsylvania provided potters with an ideal material for making bowls, plates, cups, and other items. After forming the object’s shape, the artist covered the area to be decorated with a light-colored liquid form of clay called slip. Next, the artist drew into the slip with a sharp tool, creating designs by revealing the clay’s red color. This method of decoration is called sgraffito, the Italian word for scratch. Other colors could be added with metal oxides. The plate was then fired in a hot kiln, where the clay hardened.

The decoration on plates sometimes included humorous jokes and witty phrases. Other times, it celebrated nature’s beauty or an important life event. This plate may be a self-portrait of the artist who wished to commemorate his happy marriage. Displayed as decoration, such plates generally were not used for serving food. Objects like these not only brought joy to daily life, but they also helped Pennsylvania Germans maintain their cultural heritage.

Let’s Look
Describe the images you see on this plate.
What do you notice about the writing? Can you find the year it was made?
Why do you think the artist chose this decoration?
Why do you think people wanted plates with images of people, plants, and animals on them? How would you decorate a plate if you could design one?

1793 | Made in Pennsylvania (Frederick Township, Montgomery County)
Lead-glazed earthenware with slip, copper oxide, and sgraffito decoration
Inscribed (translation): God created all beautiful maidens. They are for the potters but not for the priests. The 21st of October 1793
2 1/4 x 12 1/8 in (5.7 x 30.8 cm)
Gift of John T. Morris, 1900-19
Dinner Platter
(Wild Turkey)

This large serving platter shows a wild turkey proudly strutting on an icy lake. A few branches emerge from the ice, frozen in place. In the background, leafless tree branches stand out amid the orange glow of a sunset. The rectangular platter has rounded edges that curl up on each corner, revealing gold decoration underneath.

The platter is a part of a 562-piece dining set, or service, that was originally made for the White House. It was commissioned in 1879 by First Lady Lucy Webb Hayes, whose husband Rutherford B. Hayes served as President from 1877 to 1881. At the time, formal dinners were quite elaborate. This service has place settings for nine courses, such as a soup, a main course, and dessert. Instead of every dish having a matching decoration, the plate or bowl for each course had a different design. The image often corresponded to what would be served on it—this platter was intended for turkey. Some of the other dishes in the service feature oysters, ducks, quail, and blue crab. The entire set is made of porcelain, which is sometimes called china because the Chinese discovered the formula for making it.

Theodore Russell Davis, an American illustrator, created the designs. The service was produced by Haviland and Company in Limoges, France, which is home to many famous porcelain factories. Davis was inspired by French decoration for the images and by Japanese ceramics for the unique shapes of the dishes. Despite these global influences, Davis infused the design with American patriotism. All of the birds, plants, and fish featured in the set were native to the United States. The country was expanding westward, and this decoration implied that the government held power over the animals, plants, and land. The wild turkey, seen here, was long admired as a national emblem. In the early United States, the turkey was thought to be brave, courageously attacking anyone who entered its territory, like a Revolutionary War hero. Davis’s designs were very popular, and many copies, such as this one, were made to be sold to the American public.

Plate, 1796, designed by Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest; made for export to the American market (Gift of the McNeil Americana Collection, 2006-3-7)

Let’s Look
What do you see in the foreground?
What details can you discover in the background?
What time of day is it? How do you know?
What season could it be? What clues can you find?
What ideas do you think the artist wanted to communicate?

Compare and Connect
This plate is part of a service made during George Washington’s presidency (1789–1797). The names of fifteen states, linked by a chain, circle the outside. Martha Washington’s initials are in the center, above a Latin phrase about strength.

How do the plates differ? What messages are conveyed in their decoration?

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.
Objects like this one were created not only for a practical purpose but also as an expression of artistry, status, and identity. Made by a Pennsylvania German artist in Lancaster, this wardrobe was used to store clothing and bed linens. Its designs connected its owners and makers to their cultural roots.

The decorations on this wardrobe preserve information about its first owner, Georg Huber, for posterity. The patterns were created using sulfur inlay—a process in which molten sulfur is poured into carved channels. Flowering vines curve up around each door. Matching crowns, each held up by a pair of birds, sit above each part of Huber’s name. On the lower part of the doors, curved crosses stand for good fortune. The Latin phrase “Anno 1779” indicates that the wardrobe was made for him in that year.

Families commissioned gifts like these as a rite of passage when children grew up. Huber married Barbara Oberholzer one year later. In the Germanic artistic tradition, these motifs may be intended as a blessing for marriage and beginning of a family. The craftsmanship and elaborate inlay demonstrate Huber’s high social status in his community as the son of a wealthy miller in Lancaster County.

Let’s Look

What designs can you find on this wardrobe? How might they relate to getting married and starting a family?

What adjectives would you use to describe this object?

How does this object compare to the way you store your clothes and sheets today?

How might this object reflect the identity or culture of its makers or owners?

What would your furniture look like if you designed it to reflect your identity or influences?
“The Fox and the Grapes” High Chest of Drawers

Delicate carving and intricate curves set against expanses of polished wood show the influence of British design on this high chest. It was made in Philadelphia, the center for furniture making in British colonial North America. This style of decoration combined with a form developed in America demonstrates the strong cultural ties between colonial citizens and their country of origin. This object was a showpiece, although it would have been kept in a bedroom where clothing and linens were stored.

This object is made from mahogany, a hardwood tree native to the Caribbean where the Taino people had for centuries found it ideal for dugout canoes. British colonizers used it for shipbuilding as well. They also found that the tight, lively grain and rich brown color of mahogany was well suited for European styles of architectural woodwork and carved furniture. The tremendous demand for mahogany and the challenge of harvesting the massive trees led to an increase in the enslavement of West Africans. They likely named the Caribbean tree species based on its close similarity to the West African m’oganwo tree.

The makers and owners of this chest are unknown, but the decorative scene of “The Fox and the Grapes” from Aesop’s Fables may provide a clue. Some Quakers disapproved of people reading novels because they thought they were useless and frivolous. By contrast, they appreciated the morals taught by fables. In this tale, the fox is unable to reach the grapes and, in disappointment, claims they are sour. This is the origin of the phrase “sour grapes,” to describe a person who criticizes something they cannot have. Balancing this luxury item with a story that warns readers against greed and excess might have appealed to a Quaker household.

Let’s Look

What designs can you find on this chest? Which part do you think could have been the most challenging to carve?

How does this object compare to the way you store your clothes and sheets today?

What adjectives would you use to describe this object?

Why might the artist have chosen the story of “The Fox and the Grapes” as a decoration for a luxury item?

How might this object reflect the identity or culture of its makers or owners?

What would your furniture look like if you designed it to reflect your identity or influences?

1765–75 | Made in Philadelphia
Mahogany, tulip poplar, white cedar, yellow pine; brass
96 3/4 x 46 1/2 x 25 3/4 in (245.7 x 118.1 x 65.4 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Henry V. Greenough, 1957-129-1