



Picturing America: Art as a Witness to U.S. History

Course Syllabus

Course Description

What does it mean to be an American, and how has visual art shaped what it means to belong to this nation? This course will take you on a journey through the evolving identity of the United States through the unique lens of its artwork. From early national portraiture to contemporary social art, you'll discover how artists have responded to pivotal moments in American history, including colonization, revolution, the Civil War, slavery, immigration, industrialization, civil rights, and beyond. From early maps to contemporary murals, artists have imagined, reflected, and questioned what it means to be American. Ultimately, this course will help us to understand who we are, where we've been, and where we might be going.

This course enhances classroom teaching effectiveness and supports improved student outcomes by introducing new knowledge in how visual art reflects, constructs, and challenges American identity and history across social, political, and cultural contexts.

Course Objectives

At the end of this course you should be able to:

1. Evaluate how early maps and landscape imagery shaped cultural perceptions of land, ownership, and national identity in order to interpret the role of visual art in constructing historical narratives.
2. Compare how Indigenous and Western visual narratives depict Native identities, and evaluate the impact of those representations on dominant cultural myths.
3. Evaluate how Revolutionary War-era artworks constructed ideals of freedom and national identity, and analyze how those images continue to shape public memory, civic spaces, and historical understanding today.
4. Evaluate how artists from the Civil War to the Civil Rights era documented conflict, reclaimed identity, and challenged systemic racism in order to interpret how art can shape historical memory and inspire social change.
5. Appraise how artists have captured, shaped, and challenged public understanding of American wars by interpreting artworks, photography, propaganda, and memorials.
6. Analyze how artists have documented and challenged national ideals of freedom and liberty in the U.S. through their depictions of immigration, child labor, and the fight for voting rights.



7. Analyze the symbolic messages embedded in American currency and related artworks to understand how economic imagery reflects and critiques national values, identity, and power.
8. Examine how American artists created a distinct national identity by making uniquely American works of art.

Modules

- Module 1: Picturing Paradise: Maps, Landscapes, and the Promise of Freedom, Quiz 1
- Module 2: Picturing First Contact: Native Presence and Colonial Perspectives, Quiz 2
- Module 3: Picturing a Nation: Portraits, Power, and Early American Identity, Quiz 3
- Module 4: Picturing War at Home: Civil War and Civil Rights, Quiz 4
- Module 5: Picturing War Abroad: Visual Records of Conflict, Propaganda, Sacrifice and Memory, Quiz 5
- Module 6: Picturing Borders: Immigration, Voting Rights, and Labor, Quiz 6
- Module 7: Picturing Power: Money and Capitalism, Quiz 7
- Module 8: Picturing America's Future: Modern Art and Jazz, Quiz 8

Grading

Each quiz must be passed at an 80% or higher (three attempts allowed).

Format

This is a self-paced, asynchronous (no required live meetings) course. Throughout the PD course, you will find it helpful to take notes along the way to assist with the quizzes. Within each module, you will find reflection assessments that are not graded but will help in your journey through the course. There is an interactive forum in the course to help you connect with peers and instructors, share ideas, and collaborate on best practices throughout your learning journey.