Frontier Ethics and the Representation of the American Male Identity

A lesson prepared by Chris Mullin, Santa Ynez Valley Union High School for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art

High School US History 11th Grade
Lesson Explanation

Students will compare artistic images from the 19th and 20th centuries to an 1890s primary source essay and evaluate to what extent there is a consistent message between the visual and written works.

The focus of the lesson will be on the repeated historical projection of a rugged and self-reliant masculine ethic and explanation for why that image exists. The written document that will serve as the focus will be Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* in which the author portrays the American character as uniquely shaped by repeated contact with an ever present frontier. The images from the SBMA collection are dated from both before and after Turner’s thesis and serve to support a consistent vision over time.

Students will also discuss to what extent historic art and photographs are reliable sources for understanding history. Using their own personal knowledge of the subjective and limiting view of modern *Selfies*, students will evaluate to what extent art images are equally limited in scope.
**Opening Activity:** Lead the students in a discussion of **Selfies**

Start by having an informal conversation about **Selfies**. Ask the students questions about what faces they make or what places do they like to include. Do they like to be with a friend or solo? Do they share them on social media? Are they meant to be seen for the long term or for only a brief time? Give the students time to pair-share first and then share with the group as a whole. The purpose of this opener is to encourage “easy” student discussion and to create a general framework for patterns of image making and to what extent those images represent a true or manufactured reality.

Now, if the conversation has not already gone this way, guide the students in more focused questions such as:

2. How accurate are these **Selfies** to your real self or your real life?
3. Do your **Selfies** and those of others end up portraying real elements of society even if some are manufactured?
As before, have student pair-share and then share out to the whole group. If possible, write down and organize student responses on a dry erase board or poster sheet. This “publishing” of student voice both validates their efforts and helps create a written document that the class can refer to later on.

Finish by letting them know that they will be coming back to this concept at the end of the lesson.

Activity II
Students will take part in an activity where they read aloud and then try to summarize the excerpts from Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*.

Reading Activity:

Although the main portion of this lesson will focus on visual images, one goal is to pair visual primary sources with a written one. In this case, students will be reading excerpts from Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential thesis: *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. This essay, which was written in the 1890s at the official close of the American frontier, is filled with suggestions of an American character that is rugged and individualistic. It praises toughness and in more general terms the merits of isolation and tenacity. These are the exact themes that reappear in the selected visual images, most notably in the depiction of the American male.

Begin by giving each of the students one of the 20 short quotations, provided on pages 11-15. If you have more than 20 students, it is fine to have repeats. If you have fewer than 20, feel free to select the most interesting of the quotations. Now have the students walk around or mingle taking their turns reading their quotes to other students in the group. Have them read their quotes as many times as possible and to listen carefully for similarities in the quotes of others.
Once the students have had time to interact with the text in a low risk, participatory manner, have them return to their seats, or circle up on the floor. Provide each student with: **Student Handout A: Frederick Jackson Turner: The Significance of the Frontier in American History.**

The students now will listen carefully as each person reads their quotation to the whole group, starting with number one and continuing to number twenty. After all of the quotations have been read, give the students a few minutes to complete the box on the right of the worksheet. In the box, they should write down key words, key phrases or key ideas for each quote.
Once the students have completed their worksheets, lead them in a discussion to summarize Turner’s message. As with the Selfie talk, it is advisable to write down student ideas.

Two primary points of focus you will want to establish in your discussion are:

1. Turner suggests that the American character was shaped by a continual interaction with a harsh frontier.

2. Turner suggests that the American character is rugged, tenacious and individualistic.

The exact wording is flexible, but these are some themes that will emerge in the next image viewing activity.
Activity III

Students work through an activity inspecting, discussing, naming and ranking six images related to art images of the American male.

Divide the students into six small teams of roughly equal numbers. Each team will be given the task of being the image specialist.

Provide each image specialist team with time to work as a group to dissect their own image, finding broad and subtle details and generating a sense of what the artist was trying to say. It is important at this point to have the students realize that these paintings and photographs are exclusively of men. This is deliberate because the overall goal of the lesson is to identify and explore a consistent American projection of expected male traits or ethics.
Following a small group discussion, the image specialist teams should be prepared to share their responses to these two questions:

1. What do these American images say about being a man or about the expectations of masculinity?

2. To what extent do they reflect Frederick Jackson Turner’s view of the American character?

Once each small group has had suitable time to explore their work and craft responses, the full group should reconvene.
Listen: Hear the words as your classmates read aloud these lines from Turner’s essay.

Think: What is his overall message about the American character? What is it like? What caused it?

Write: Once the reading is over, go back through the lines writing key words, themes or descriptors in the box at the right.
Teacher Resource: Cut out these quotations into strips handing them to student to read aloud.

Here is a new product that is American.

At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense.

Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American.

The advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.
Each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area, the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics.

And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions... is to study the really American part of our history.

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization.

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought.

It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe.
It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin.

It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him.

In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man.

He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish.

And so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails.
Little by little he transforms the wilderness; but the outcome is not the old Europe.

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness.

That practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients.

That masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic, but powerful to effect great ends.

That restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, Working for good and evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.
These are the traits of the frontier.
Student handout B: Dissecting the Images

Now have the students view the six art images. They are listed below chronologically. Each image will be on its own placard with its date but at this point there should be no image title. Student will predict their own temporary titles as part of this activity.
Have the **Image Specialist** teams present their image to the rest of the class, ideally following the chronological order of the works. They should be encouraged to identify to what extent the artist has captured some of the key traits or themes identified by Frederick Jackson Turner.

Now provide each student with **Handout B** which has all six images on it. Have the students work alone or in pairs to review each image and then decide to what extent they represent the message of Turner in his essay.

Once they have reflected, ask the students or student pairs to rank them 1-6, with 1 being the MOST representative of Turner’s message and 6 being the LEAST representative of Turner’s message. The act of ranking the images will encourage them to look closely at the images and mentally prepare a case for why a certain picture works better than another.

Once they have ranked them, now have the students actually name the image, as if the artist were Turner himself. This will draw a clear link between a student’s understanding of Turner and a student’s impression of the images.

This is the work of the historian, tying together various sources to compile a historical conclusion.

Finish this activity by having the full group come to agreement about which images are most reflective of Turner and which are least. They can engage in a fun debate or vote as you tally the results on a whiteboard or paper.

Provide the student with a handout that includes the six images and their actual names, dates and artists.
Carleton E. Watkins, *Table Rock, 3,300 feet, Glacier Point*, ca. 1865. 1870 albumen print. SBMA, Museum purchase, Photography Acquisition Fund

Frederic Remington, *Fight Over a Waterhole*, 1897. Oil on canvas. Gift of Barbara D. Dupee

Robert Henri, *Derricks on the North River*, 1902. Oil on canvas. Museum purchase for the Preston Morton Collection, with funds provided by the Chalifoux Fund.


Finishing Up/Final Discussion

Now that students have explored representations of idealized or even imposed American male traits and matched them against Turner’s influential essay about the American character, it is time to revisit the initial discussion on **Selfies**. Referring back to the starter discussion on **Selfies**, bring up the notion that **Selfies**, like paintings, photographs and essays, can sometimes be limited in representation or tailored to present a specific viewpoint. Likewise, **Selfies** can omit undesired but true elements. This begs the question of just how reliable historical painting and photographs are as tools for the study of history.

Some summary focus questions might include:

- Are images that we consider art, more or less reliable than written resources for the study of history?
- What are their limitations? What are their benefits?
- Do the works we have looked at today have anything in common with **Selfies**?
- We have seen that throughout the decades, art and photography has tended to reinforce the notion that American men should be rugged, self-reliant individualists. Does this message continue today?
- Do you think that art tends to represent real life or do you think that art tries to shape real life?

One suggestion, even if repetitive, and can be helpful to have students pair-share before responding in a group setting. It gives the students a moment to “test out” their ideas in a safer environment.
Activity IV

Now that you have explored the connection between written and visual sources that provide a projection of the American male, it is worthwhile to explore and compare images and writings targeting the American female.

Begin by having the students read aloud the four primary sources about women. They provide an amusing environment and opportunity for discussion and sharing. All four seem to encourage women to be modest, submissive, and generally inconsistent with Turner’s and the art world’s depiction of men. Students, and most notably women in the group are likely to bridle against some the recommendations.

Suggestion: When reading excerpt D, it is a good idea to have the students practice performing a curtsy in the manner described.
When you are done, have a group discussion about the general message to women and chart some of the main ideas on a dry erase board or poster paper.

Now arrange the seven images of women, G-M in a mini gallery. They can be on the wall or spread out on tables. Have the students walk around in pairs to observe and discuss each of the images. Before beginning this activity, provide each student with the Student Handout C. They will take this with them as they walk around the gallery.

Tell the students that their job is to decide whether each image better reflects Turner’s messages and those of the male images or if it better reflects the sources which provided advice to the women.

William Merritt Chase, *Lydia Field Emmett*, 1900. Oil on canvas. SBMA, Bequest of Margaret Mallory
Four selections of advice for women in the 19th Century

Excerpt A)

“In whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her.”

-The Young Lady’s Book of 1830
Excerpt B)

"True feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood."

- 1850: *Greenwood Leaves*

*Winslow Homer, In autumn Woods, c. 1877. Watercolor. Private Collection*

“This fast age, with its fast horses and faster men, has brought about that rather fashionable monstrosity, the fast woman. They were a want of the age, those fast women, or the age would never have developed them. Fast young men wanted something to keep up with them, and, presto! We have the fast young woman. The gum-elastic nature of woman supplied the deficiency; and she, who is the pride of earth and the incentive to heaven, consented to lend her splendid capabilities to fill up the measure of Young America’s insolent requirements, and to become, for his convenience, the fast woman. Accordingly we see them with dresses decollete and bare arms, with loud-ringing laugh and questionable wit, with polka and Redowa, and a thousand other accomplishments peculiar to themselves, attracting the blasé foplings, whose attention the true woman would instinctively shun. They are up with the times and, to the honor of Old Virginia be it said, somewhat in advance of her daughters, these fast young women. But, though they are so attended, and so applauded, and so exhilarated, there is no young fopling in their train who has not at least brains enough to sneer at them behind their backs. And thus it happens that these fast young women do not marry quite as fast as they dance. In the hymeneal race, we find them lagging behind; and, as their speed is all gotten up expressly for the hymeneal race, it must be exceedingly mortifying to them to find themselves beaten by dozens of quiet, genteel girls who never danced a polka in their lives. It is the old fable of the hare and the tortoise. We would advise them not to be quite so fast.”

-Mrs. R. B. Hicks: The Kaleidoscope
Before concluding our article, we deem it expedient to describe the approved mode of performing the Curtsey; and as our aim is to improve the general deportment in society, as well as in dancing for the ball-room, to offer a few observations on walking.

The performance of the curtsey in a proper manner, proves a matter of difficulty to some young ladies; but it will be found very easy, after a little practice, to curtsey with grace, if proper directions be given and attended to. The following is the usual mode:—The front foot is first brought into the second position; the other is then drawn into the third behind, and passed immediately into the fourth behind,—the whole weight of the body being thrown on the front foot; the front knee is then bent, the body gently sinks, the whole weight is transferred to the foot behind while rising, and the front foot is gradually brought into the fourth position. The arms should be gracefully bent, and the hands occupied in lightly holding out the dress. The first step in walking, after the curtsey, is made with the foot which happens to be forward at its completion. The perfect curtsey is rarely performed in society, as the general salutation is between a curtsey and a bow (Fig. 14.)

The manner of walking well is an object which all young ladies should be anxious to acquire; but, unfortunately, it is a point too much neglected. In the drawing-room, the ball-room, or
Glossary:

- **Decollete**: a revealing, low cut dress
- **Polka**: an upbeat bouncy dance for two
- **Redowa**: a jumping energetic waltz
- **Blasé**: showing disinterest or lack of energy
- **Foplings**: young men with too much fancy adornment
- **Hymeneal race**: the race to get married young

Marion Post Wolcott, Untitled (Woman in a kitchen), n.d. Gelatin silver print. SBMA, Gift of Arthur B. Steinman
Now you will get a chance to walk around mini-gallery of art images depicting women across the decades. For each image, decide if the content is more representative of Turner’s essay or more representative of the written sources giving advice to women. In each box, write down your opinion and explain why you feel that way.
Connections to Standards

From the National Visual Arts Standards

Creating / Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.
Anchor Standard #1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
Anchor Standard #2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
Anchor Standard #3. Refine and complete artistic work.
VA:Cr2.1. Explore and invent art-making techniques and approaches.
VA:Cr2.1. Experiment and develop skills in multiple art-making techniques and approaches through practice. VA: Cr2.3. Identify, describe, and visually document places and/or objects of personal significance.

Responding / Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.
Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
Anchor Standard #9. Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.
VA:Re8.1. Interpret art by referring to contextual information and analyzing relevant subject matter, characteristics of form, and use of media.
VA:Re9.1. Apply one set of criteria to evaluate more than one work of art.
VA:Re8.1. Interpret art by analyzing characteristics of form and structure, contextual information, subject matter, visual elements, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.
VA:Re9.1. Recognize differences in criteria used to evaluate works of art depending on styles, genres, and media as well as historical and cultural contexts.
Connections to Standards (continued)

From the National Visual Arts Standards

Responding / Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
VA:Re8.1. Interpret art by distinguishing between relevant and non-relevant contextual information and analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.
VA:Re.IIIa Construct evaluations of a work of art or collection of works based on differing sets of criteria.

Connecting / Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.
Anchor Standard #10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
VA:Cn.1. Apply formal and conceptual vocabularies of art and design to view surroundings in new ways through art-making.
VA:Cn.1. Document the process of developing ideas from early stages to fully elaborated ideas.
Connections to CCSS

K-5

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.

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

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.

Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
Connections to CCSS

6 – 12

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.

Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.

Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing. Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study

Delineate a speaker’s argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.
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Artwork and lesson created by Chris Mullin, Santa Ynez Valley High School, for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art

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