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# Bringing Students into the Picture: Teaching with Tableaux Vivants

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## Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Susan Burch and Catharine Wright for many productive and inspiring discussions about pedagogy, and for incisive comments and guidance on previous drafts of this work. I also wish to thank the students of Middlebury College's AMST 209 class (Fall 2015, 2016, and 2017) for their willingness to experiment with this assignment; their resulting projects were even more creative, rigorous, and thoughtful than I could have hoped. Generous colleagues in the field of American art have enthusiastically suggested possible paintings and subjects for implementation. An abbreviated version of this paper was included in the session "State of the Art (History): Pedagogy Laboratory" at the 2017 College Art Association Annual Meeting. I appreciate the insightful suggestions and comments of the editorial team and anonymous reviewers of Art History Pedagogy & Practice.

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## Bringing Students into the Picture: Teaching with *Tableaux Vivants*

Ellery E. Foutch

“Art should not be confined entirely to the studio of the artist... its realization upon canvas, or upon paper, or in the living picture, tends to improve the mind, assimilates the real with the ideal, conforms taste to the noblest standard, overflows the heart with pure and holy thoughts, and adorns the exterior form with graces surpassing those of the Muses.”<sup>1</sup> – James H. Head, *Home Pastimes; or, Tableaux Vivants* (1860)

While James Head emphasized the moral and aesthetic benefits of performing *tableaux vivants* in family parlors in the 1860s, I have found that the practice is pedagogically valuable in classrooms in our own historical moment as well. The act of researching and performing *tableaux vivants* compels students to look closely, to research works of art, to think critically, to interpret and create, and to engage in metacognitive and embodied experiences, indeed “improv[ing] the mind” and bringing work beyond the confines of the artist’s studio—or the slide lecture. This essay will explore a recent experiment in implementing *tableaux vivants* as an assignment to instigate meaningful learning, pointing to the resulting assignments and the students’ written self-reflections as evidence for the successes and possibilities of the project.<sup>2</sup>

I undertook this experiment while teaching a class on American art and culture prior to 1830. I asked myself how I might engage my students and raise bigger questions about art and culture before 1830, and about their identity as college students in the early twenty-first century. Throughout the course, we discussed resonances between past and present, and we explored the ways in which the dominant narratives of early American history prioritize or foreground certain voices and identities. In our weekly discussions and topics, we were already exploring systems of power and privilege, identity and representation—but could I also reinforce those questions and issues in crafting an assignment? How might I provoke their intellects and creativity beyond the standard formal analysis essay assignments or slide identification exams? I set my own goal of engaging students in the study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century portraiture and history paintings and devising an assignment that would encourage students to look closely at a historical work, to conduct art historical research, to synthesize the scholarship on the subject, and to think critically and creatively about the work itself, about the subjectivity of its artist, its sitters, and their own perspectives—and to share these insights in group presentations. I intentionally created a group project so that students could benefit from cooperative learning, which has been demonstrated to foster a wide array of positive outcomes, from higher-order

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Head, *Home Pastimes; or, Tableaux Vivants* (Boston: J.E. Tilton and Company, 1860), 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> For a broader discussion of the concept of “meaningful learning” and associated values of learning and understanding beyond “remembering,” see Richard E. Mayer, “Rote Versus Meaningful Learning,” *Theory Into Practice* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2002), 226-232.

critical thinking skills to an understanding of diversity of perspectives, the cultivation of social skills, and both interdependent and autonomous learning.<sup>3</sup>

I developed the idea after an especially generative session on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), hosted by my colleague Susan Burch during a Teaching and Writing Retreat co-sponsored by Middlebury College's Writing Program and its Center for Teaching, Learning, and Research. She challenged our group to think about projects and curricula that could be inclusive and effective for a variety of learners, and she offered multiple ways of approaching our course subject matter and content, in addition to providing students with a variety of methods in which to convey their own learning. As other Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) experts have explained, UDL provides "multiple means of action and expression—that is, flexible options for *how* we learn and express what we know," and "multiple means of engagement—that is, flexible options for generating and sustaining motivation, the *why* of learning."<sup>4</sup> As teachers, we could thus offer alternatives for students in both the ways they learned (whether their strengths lean toward text, visual images, or kinesthetic/haptic experience) and for the ways in which they conveyed this knowledge to others (via written text, oral presentation, visual representation, bodily demonstration and other expressive options).<sup>5</sup> UDL projects also encourage students to hone executive functions such as setting goals, dividing tasks, organizing, planning, and bringing a complex endeavor to its realization.

I hoped to construct an assignment and activity that would engage students with a variety of learning strengths in metacognitive practices—actively thinking not only about their own processes of learning, but also provoking some degree of self-awareness—and higher-order thinking skills. Having attended several pedagogical workshops sponsored by Middlebury's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Research, and inspired by discussions about "Bloom's Taxonomy," I wished to devise a task that would not only demand students research and convey this information to their peers, but that would encourage them to analyze, evaluate, and create their own original works.<sup>6</sup> I wished to encourage students to develop "History's Habits of the

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the benefits of collaborative or cooperative learning (CL) and suggestions on constructive implementation, see Junko Shimazoe and Howard Aldrich, "Group Work Can Be Gratifying: Understanding & Overcoming Resistance to Cooperative Learning," *College Teaching* 58, no. 2 (2010), 52-57; Barbara J. Mills, ed., *Cooperative Learning in Higher Education: Across the Disciplines, Across the Academy* (Sterling, VA: Stylus in association with The National Teaching and Learning Forum, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Tracey E. Hall, Anne Meyer, and David H. Rose, eds., *Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom: Practical Applications* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to my colleague's presentation, I am indebted to Scott Lapinski, Jenna W. Gravel, and David H. Rose, "Tools for Practice: The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines," in Hall, et al., eds. *Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom*, 9-24.

<sup>6</sup> For my understanding of Bloom's Taxonomy, I am relying not only on Bloom's original work (B.S. Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals I: Cognitive Domain* [New York: David McKay, 1956]) but also the more recent revision: L.W. Anderson and D.R. Krathwohl, et al., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001). On metacognition, see for example Paul R. Pintrich, "The Role of Metacognitive Knowledge in Learning, Teaching, and Assessing," *Theory Into Practice* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2002), 219-225. Laetitia La Follette has also written in this journal on possible applications of Bloom's taxonomy to art history and the value of group projects in doing so. See

Mind,” as they were articulated by the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, which foregrounded the importance of “understand[ing] the significance of the past to [students’] own lives, both private and public, and to their society,” and practices that would develop “historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.”<sup>7</sup>

I settled upon what at first might be a surprising experiment: a parlor entertainment from the period we were studying—that is, the practice of *tableaux vivants*, assuming the pose, posture, and attributes of famous works of art.<sup>8</sup> While my class focused on American culture prior to 1830, I believe this assignment and its approach could apply to a broad chronological and geographical range in order to encompass nearly any figurative art.

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Laetitia La Follette, “Bloom’s Taxonomy for Art History: Blending a Skills-Based Approach into the Traditional Introductory Survey,” *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2017): <http://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol2/iss1/3>.

<sup>7</sup> The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, *Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools* (Washington, DC: Educational Excellence Network, 1988), 8-9 and [https://nau.edu/uploadedFiles/Academic/CAL/History/History-Social\\_Studies\\_Education/Building%20a%20History%20Curriculum.pdf](https://nau.edu/uploadedFiles/Academic/CAL/History/History-Social_Studies_Education/Building%20a%20History%20Curriculum.pdf); Kenneth T. Jackson, “The Bradley Commission on History in Schools: A Retrospective View,” *The History Teacher* 23, no. 1 (Nov. 1989), 73-78.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Agnieszka Whelan for including me in her panel “*Tableau Vivant*, Performance, Public Display” at the 2008 Southeastern College Art Conference Annual Meeting, which was a wonderful source for thinking cross-culturally and cross-temporally about *tableaux vivants*. Other sources that have informed my thinking about the practice include Robin Veder, “*Tableaux Vivants*: Performing Art, Purchasing Status,” *The Theatre Annual* 48 (1995), 14-29; Dorothy Moss, chapter on *tableaux vivants* in “Recasting the Copy: Original Paintings and Reproductions at the Dawn of American Mass Culture, c. 1900,” (PhD dissertation, University of Delaware, 2012); Mary Chapman, “‘Living Pictures’: Women and *Tableaux Vivants* in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America,” *Wide Angle* 18, no. 3 (Jul. 1996), 22-52; Nicole Anae, “*Poses Plastiques*: The Art and Style of ‘Statuary’ in Victorian Visual Theatre,” *Australasian Drama Studies* 52 (Apr. 2008), 112-130; Birgitta Hjalmarsen, “Artistic Anatomy,” in *Artful Players: Artistic Life in Early San Francisco* (Los Angeles: Balcony Press, 1999); Jean-Michel Charbonnier, “*Tableaux Vivants*,” *Beaux Arts Magazine* 179 (Apr. 1999), 94-103; Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall & Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Ohio University Press, 2004); Quentin Bajac, *Tableaux Vivants: Fantaisies Photographiques Victoriennes (1840-1880)* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1999); Jack McCullough, “Living Pictures on the New York Stage” (PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 1981); Mary Megan Chapman, “Living Pictures: Women and *Tableaux vivants* in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Culture” (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1992); Robert M. Lewis, “*Tableaux vivants*: Parlor Theatricals in Victorian America,” *Revue française d’études américaines* 36 (Apr. 1988); Monika M. Elbert, “Striking a Historical Pose: Antebellum *Tableaux Vivants*, ‘Godey’s’ Illustrations, and Margaret Fuller’s Heroines,” *The New England Quarterly* 75, No. 2 (Jun. 2002), 235-275; Bryan E. Burns, “Classicizing Bodies in the Male Photographic Tradition,” in *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 440-451; Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978). Primary sources include Edith Townsend Everett, “Helps in Arranging *Tableaux*,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* XI, no. 3 (Feb. 1894), 20; I. Zangwill, “Living Pictures,” *The Cosmopolitan* 17, no. 1 (May 1894), 122.



Figure 1. "Famous Paintings Reproduced from Life in the Recent Art Tableaux at Philadelphia," *Harper's Weekly* XLIX, no. 2516 (11 March 1905): 358-359. Courtesy of the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection. Photograph by Amy Torbert.

When I first introduced the assignment to my students, I discussed the nineteenth-century practice of parlor entertainments and of the *tableau vivant*, sharing photographs of William Merritt Chase's students performing their own *tableaux vivants* (Fig. 1). At this point, the students' primary concern became one of imitating the costumes and settings of the older paintings. How were they to find appropriate clothing? Was there someone in the theater department they could contact for help? How much Photoshop or other image editing software was allowed?

I realized that I needed to reframe the concept, as a pure imitation of the original work of art was not my primary goal. While the kinesthetic and haptic sensations of assuming a painting's pose—and indeed, perhaps understanding anew the restrictions or confinements of costume and comportment were one of the benefits of this approach—I also wished them to think transformatively about the older works of art. I was acutely aware that most of the material we were studying in this pre-1830 class was created by and for elite, white, straight, upper-class cisgender men.<sup>9</sup> Portraiture made this monoculture even more visible. As a diverse group of college students in 2015, they were already upending many of the assumptions that the original makers (and sitters) might have had. By merely assuming the poses of these early American

<sup>9</sup> Of course, scholarship of the past several decades has decentered the primacy of this demographic, investigating the rich histories and cultural contributions of indigenous peoples, women, people of color, and those not in the elite, land-owning or merchant class. Yet given the expense of oil paintings in the period, most of the subjects of portraiture are indeed white, wealthy individuals.



works of art, inhabiting their identities as college students in 2015 from a variety of identity categories (social class, geographic distribution, ethnicity, gender expression, race, religion, sexual orientation, and beyond), I explained, we were changing the meaning of the works.<sup>10</sup> I also wished students to cultivate their own relationships with these works of art and their creators, exploring not only their differences but also their possible commonalities. How might they even more provocatively reconceptualize the works of art, updating them to reflect concerns of 2015 and their current lives? What would they choose to keep, and what might they alter, beyond their own bodily experiences and identity categories?



Figure 2. Left: Jean-August-Dominique Ingres (French, 1780-1867), *Napoleon I On His Imperial Throne*, 1806. Oil on canvas, 259 x 162 cm. Musée de l'Armée, Paris, France. Inv. 4 ; Ea 89.1 ; INV 5420. Photo: Emile Cambier. © Musée de l'Armée/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY. Right: Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977), *Ice-T*, 2005. Oil and enamel on canvas, 96 x 72 in. unframed (243.8 x 182.9 cm). © 2005 Kehinde Wiley. Used by permission.

To that end, I brought [several portraits](#) by Kehinde Wiley and their source images in to the next class (Fig. 2). It wasn't just that Ice-T was posed on a Napoleonic throne with a red velvet and ermine cloak about him; what did this juxtaposition of a black rapper, posing as an emperor in 2005, suggest about contemporary culture and issues of power or authority? What might it suggest about Wiley, or about the role of the artist and values of art in our own time? What references to the older works of art does he keep, and what does he change? [Wiley](#) posed [another subject](#) on a rearing horse, looking back coolly at viewers, but rather than wearing a set of armor,

<sup>10</sup> For more on the ways in which the arts and creative practices can be used as forces for social justice and imagining alternative futures, see Lee Anne Bell and Dipti Desai, "Imaging Otherwise: Connecting the Arts and Social Justice to Envision and Act for Change," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 44, no. 3 (2011), 287-295.

this young man wears a hoodie and sneakers. What might be significant in those choices? What's at stake in these images? This time, students nodded thoughtfully and enthusiastically.

In the two semesters that I have experimented with this approach, I have pre-selected several works of art and invited students to sign up from these options, choosing their own groups and topics from those choices. Given the parameters of the course, the works had to date prior to 1830 and have a connection to American art. I wanted to include works that featured human figures in complex settings that would lend themselves to interpretation and analysis, and it was important for my purposes for students to be able to find published scholarship related to the works.

In addition to looking closely at the original images, I asked students to find at least three scholarly sources that would inform their projects, guiding them to databases like "America: History and Life," JSTOR, the Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA), ProQuest, Grove Art Online, Art Index Retrospective, the International Bibliography of Art (IBA), and the museums' web pages, which often included bibliographies that point guide them to additional scholarship. I set aside class time for them to work together on different aspects of the project, but they were also expected to work outside of class. Many of them set up Google-docs that allowed multiple people to edit the files and add notes, and many of the groups chose to divide the assignment into discrete tasks and delegate those to different members (e.g. one person finding articles, another reading and writing a summary for the group, another searching for costumes, and so on). They could either perform the *tableau vivant* in person (in front of the class), or they could take a photograph and share it in a slideshow. Each group selected the latter option. In the case of single- or two-person portraits, the groups were invited to select one or two individuals to pose, or to have each individual perform the *tableau vivant* in turn. In addition to the composed image/performance, I asked them to share their research and interpretations with the class in brief presentations (the first year, I limited presentations to five to seven minutes, which proved impractically short, as I'll explain). We set aside one day, with each group briefly presenting what they saw as the most salient points about the original work of art (e.g. biography of artist, what the original subject matter was, reception, and the like) and how they chose to transform the work. Going forward, I would devote at least two days to presentations and conversations, as the group critique afterwards was often an opportunity for self-reflection and consideration of how the execution might be improved or finessed with more time and unlimited resources.

To my surprise, the parameters of this assignment made the students quite excited to research and relay their findings about the historical works of art. Students wished to share some of the drama behind the pictures, either in the artist's own biography or in the subject matter. They often featured excellent recent scholarship, sharing how those insights and historical contexts had influenced their interpretations. The big "reveal," of course, was the unveiling of each group's final *tableau vivant*, which was often greeted not only with good-natured laughter, but also with genuine appreciation, entertainment, and wonder. The assignment required students to look closely at the original works of art, performing their own copy and deciding what elements to keep or exclude, what to update or what to ignore.





Figure 3. Left: Charles Willson Peale (American, 1741-1827), *Staircase Group* (*Portrait of Raphaëlle Peale and Titian Ramsay Peale I*), 1795. Oil on canvas: 7 feet 5 ½ in. x 39 3/8 in. (227.3 x 100 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, The George W. Elkins Collection, 1945, Accession number E1945-1-1. Right: Members of Middlebury College AMST 209, Fall 2015.

In looking at the students' completed *tableaux vivants* and their written responses, it is clear that the assignment did indeed achieve many of its goals, from a close consideration of the formal qualities of the work to contemplation of the significance of iconography and props, and how those objects might convey certain concepts or broader social statements. In keeping with the principles of UDL, the assignment offered students the opportunity to convey their learning and creativity in a variety of media, enabling students to play to their individual learning strengths and challenging them to try new ways of communicating knowledge of their subject. One group for example experimented extensively with lighting in their attempts to render the strong shadow cast in Charles Willson Peale's *Staircase Group*, attending to the work's formal qualities (Fig. 3). Although their substitution of a pool cue for a mahlstick did not account for the significance or function of the original, their reading of Wendy Bellion's work on Peale's painting and issues of illusionism caused group members to think carefully not only about the painstaking handling of light and shadow, but also about how a laptop, rather than a painter's palette, might be used to create new works of art and illusion in 2015.<sup>11</sup> In their class presentation, they also discussed the importance of the three-dimensional step in the frame of Peale's original painting and the ways in which they struggled to reconceptualize it in 2015. Could the laptop perhaps suggest recent innovations in virtual reality (VR) technology? Could they perhaps have placed a VR headset on

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Bellion, "Illusion and Allusion: Charles Willson Peale's *Staircase Group* at the Columbianum Exhibition," *American Art* 17, no. 2 (Dec. 2002).

the steps, rather than the discarded museum ticket seen in Peale's *Staircase Group*? Although these ambitions were not fully realized in the execution of the *tableau vivant*, discussing these possibilities for further development indicated a successful engagement with the issues at hand and a capacity for meta-cognition.

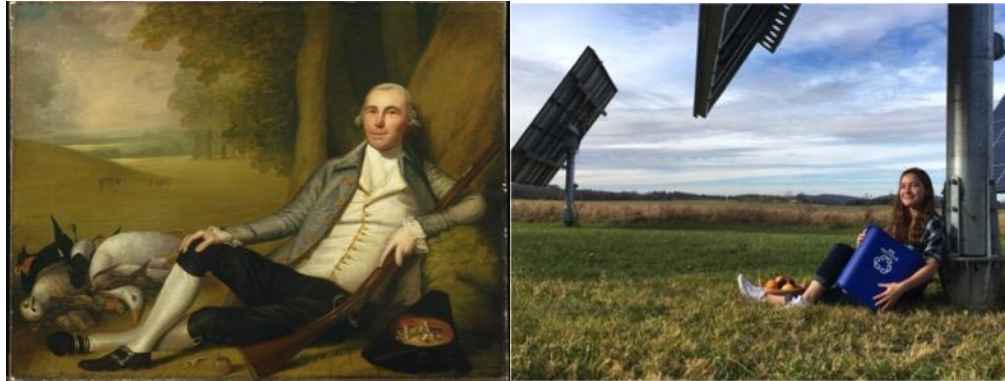


Figure 4. Left: Ralph Earl (American, 1751-1801), *Reclining Hunter*, 1783-1784. Oil on canvas, 45 ½ x 59 ½ in. (115.6 x 151.1 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, Gift of Drs. Caroline and Peter Koblenzer in honor of Sidney F. Sabin, 1993, Accession number 1993-71-1. Right: Members of AMST 209, "Hunting for Sustainability," Fall 2016.

Other groups achieved similar conceptual explorations in their finished *tableaux vivants*. Ralph Earl's *Reclining Hunter* of 1783-1784 provided the impetus for one group's consideration of relationships between humans and "nature" in the eighteenth century and today (Fig. 4). As the students' research and subsequent presentation revealed, Earl's dapper hunter approaches a near-caricature of the fashionable man who displays his avid collecting practices of the "natural" world in manicured yet pastoral hunting grounds; his tri-cornered hat is full of foraged mushrooms, while an array of various birds, the bounty of his hunt, lies tangled in an absurd and ungainly heap at his feet.<sup>12</sup> Based on their reading of the scholarship, the students decided to stage a fashionable "hipster" (skinny jeans with the cuffs rolled up, a plaid shirt) reclining in a conspicuously environmentally-conscious setting: the college's "solar farm." In their resulting "Hunting for Sustainability" *tableau*, a student leans against a solar panel, self-consciously holding a recycling bin in which she has presumably been foraging not for mushrooms but for recyclables. The birds have been replaced with a basket of fruit from the dining hall; as with Earl's bizarre inclusion of a white owl, the basket contains not local, sustainably-harvested fruit, but rather exotic oranges and bananas, subverting the "naturalness" of the composition. Although these students were pleased with their reinterpretation, they also expressed the desire to find ways to take the project further. As one student noted in his reflection,

One area that we left unexplored was the role of class in both Earl's painting and in hunting practices of the period in both Britain and America. ...[T]here are fascinating ways in which, in both 1783 and today, nature is both universal and

<sup>12</sup> Students especially cited Martin Knoll, "Hunting in the Eighteenth Century: An Environmental History Perspective," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 29, no. 3 (2004), 9-36 and Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, *Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

highly stratified, in terms of socioeconomic class. In a repeat of the project, or any further investigation into Earl's painting, I would like to think more deeply about who, historically has been allowed to enjoy outdoor spaces, in what ways, and what has changed or remains the same between the 1780s and today.<sup>13</sup>

While our campus's ownership of solar panels and an organic farm might arguably indicate institutional wealth, this student's reflection essay pointed to both the strengths and the weaknesses of his group's finished project, a rewarding metacognitive engagement that also considers broader issues of access and social justice.<sup>14</sup>

Feminist scholarship and histories of female education in the United States similarly inflected a reinterpretation of Maria Crowninshield's needlework picture depicting students and a teacher at an academy for young women in early nineteenth-century Dorchester, Massachusetts. In addition to their historical consideration of pedagogy, the young women in the group were encouraged to think about women's access to education—and different kinds of education—over the years, replacing the floral crown of Crowninshield's needlework picture with the “crowning achievement” of a diploma (Fig. 5).<sup>15</sup> As one student observed, “...I think the classic beauty of our final photograph captures the long standing tradition of academia and the particular presence that women have carved out for themselves in the world of higher education.”<sup>16</sup> In their presentation, students discussed their collaboration in a multi-ethnic group, rather than the whiteness of Crowninshield's figures, as well as the importance of mentoring. One student actually implemented a similar project in a camp that she led the following summer! In addition to the metacognitive insights that Crowninshield's picture inspired, the students also thought carefully about posture, pose, and iconography as a result of the *tableau vivant* assignment. As a student working in this group noted,

The knowledge that we were going to have to physically recreate the scene in the artwork enlivened my academic research process. Rather than merely reading about the art, I was drawn to look closely at scholarly analysis about details in the needlework and in the symbols included. This practice of slowing down and thoughtfully observing an art piece is often missed, and so the task of creating the *tableau vivant* allowed me to soak in the artwork to a greater

<sup>13</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Sam Martin (2016) and used with permission.

<sup>14</sup> See also Maurianne Adams, Lee A. Bell, and Pat Griffin, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2007); W. Ayers, J. A. Hunt, and T. Quinn, *Teaching for Social Justice: A Democracy and Education Reader* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1998). Extremely useful resources for working on social justice issues and teaching about power and privilege are found in Diane J. Goodman, *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People from Privileged Groups* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Sources cited for Maria Crowninshield's work included Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799); Betsy Krieg Salm, *Women's Painted Furniture, 1790-1830: American Schoolgirl Art* (University Press of New England, 2010), 101-102; Paula Bradstreet Richter, *Painted with Thread: The Art of American Embroidery* (Salem, Mass.: Peabody Essex Museum, 2000), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Joanna Balla (2015) and used with permission.

degree. Being able to physically embody the artwork further enhanced my study of Crowninshield's work.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 5. Left: Maria Crowninshield, "Wrought by Maria Crowninshield/At Mrs. Saunders & Miss. Beach's Academy Dorchester," 1804. Textile, paper, watercolor, gouache, 24  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (62.865 x 48.895 cm). Peabody Essex Museum, M18627. © 2006 Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA. Photography by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey R. Dykes. Right: Middlebury College AMST 209 students, Fall 2015.

The project's bodily engagement asked the students to assume the poses of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century counterparts, postures that were sometimes surprising to them. Physically imitating the composition revealed previously-unseen aspects of the painting. Students who worked on Copley's *Watson and the Shark* especially appreciated the kinesthetic challenges of the project (Fig. 6):

I discovered how difficult it is to try to imitate the positioning of figures in paintings—shot by shot some aspect of my figure strayed from the depiction of the harpooner in the piece. Ultimately, however, it was enjoyable to physically place myself in a painting, which contributed to my fuller understanding of the piece as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. For other explorations of the values of "slow looking" and practices that encourage students to take time in *looking* at a picture, see Jennifer L. Roberts, "The Power of Patience: Teaching Students the Value of Deceleration and Immersive Attention," *Harvard Magazine* (Nov.-Dec. 2013): <http://harvardmagazine.com/2013/11/the-power-of-patience>. This article was adapted from Roberts's talk at the Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching in May of 2013: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnQVT\\_p6pxg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnQVT_p6pxg).

<sup>18</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Aly Slater (2015) and used with permission.





Figure 6. Left: John Singleton Copley (American, 1738-1815), *Watson and the Shark*, 1778. Oil on canvas, 71 11/16 x 90 7/16 in. (182.1 x 229.7 cm). The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Ferdinand Lamot Belin Fund, 1963.6.1. Right: Middlebury College AMST 209 Students, Fall 2015.

The “performed copy” demanded close attention to detail and to elements of the composition, from pose and facial expressions to lighting, points of view, and perspective:

This project helped me to learn about early American painting in a very experiential way. At the beginning of the project, I did not realize the amount of emotion in the faces of the characters of the painting. As the rest of the members of the group and I began to pose for the photo, we had to analyze the expressions and postures of the characters. I then began to realize the varying levels of emotion and the role in body language in the portrayal of that emotion in the painting. It was only when each character was looked at individually did their exaggerated gestures look out of the ordinary and as more gallant than usual. I also began to appreciate the role of the perspective of the painting in the portrayal of the scene. We soon realized that the angling of the camera created very different effects on how the scene was portrayed and interpreted. The same was true of the lighting. This gave me a greater appreciation of Copley’s piece as I realized the true breadth of his intentionality in staging of a scene he created from imagination.<sup>19</sup>

This student thus realized not only the complicated facial expressions and grandiose postures of the figures in the painting, but also the impact that the artist’s point of view and angle of depiction could have on the resulting image, observations made much more concrete during the act of attempting to replicate or re-perform the image, rather than simply observe it on a screen or in a book. The balance between individual details and the overall effect of the painting was similarly articulated by another student: “I came to recognize that prior to the tableaux vivant, as an individual with limited art history experience, I am guilty of oversimplification. I realized that I tend to look at a painting’s elements and single them out one by one rather than analyzing their relationship to each other and how they intermingle to achieve an overall sentiment or message in an artwork.”<sup>20</sup> The act of posing for the *tableau vivant* and cooperating with her classmates on

<sup>19</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Jill Stauffer (2015) and used with permission.

<sup>20</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Margot Marchese (2015) and used with permission.

the project led to a closer consideration of both details and broader effects of composition, tone, and affect.

Another student's reflection upon *Watson and the Shark* captures her group's engagement not only with the iconography of the painting, but with broader issues of presentation and self-presentation (readers might also note her enthusiastic embrace of the benefits of working in a group and peer instruction):

From this assignment, I gained a greater appreciation for the complexities associated with producing a piece of artwork. Each individual detail, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can in some way contribute to the interpretation of a piece. My group mates gleaned things from the painting that I never even stopped to consider, and likewise in the reverse. For instance, given my limited knowledge of religious texts and stories, I would have never made the connection between the harpooner and the shark and Saint Michael defeating the devil or of Saint George fighting the dragon. That analysis imbues the painting with an entirely new layer of complexity that aids towards the theme of salvation. ... [O]ur recreation...was an entirely different mode of artistic interpretation that allowed us to step inside the mind of John Singleton Copley and personally connect to a piece from the past.<sup>21</sup>

While their consultation of art historical scholarship led to new understandings about the iconographical and spiritual resonance of the poses Copley's figures assumed, this level of engagement led them to think critically about the exaggerated depiction of the shark and the associations the picture might have in their own historical moment. Reading about the inaccurate representation of the shark and the likelihood that Copley had never seen one of the sea creatures himself and was thus unable to perform his own anatomical drawings and studies, students were reminded of Katy Perry's then-recent Superbowl performance with back-up dancers clad in stylized shark costumes. The widely-circulated cultural phenomenon of the mishaps of the so-called "Left Shark" had inspired a slew of Halloween costumes, one of which was repurposed for the assignment, bringing a more recent layer of resonance and allusion to the work. As the group explained, "Our modern interpretation of the piece attempted to keep much of the painting the same, while re-emphasizing the Greco-Roman figure of Brook Watson and the dramatization of the shark. ...as much of research concluded, Copley's shark was fantastical and over-exaggerated—much of which can be attributed to the fact that he had likely never actually seen a shark. We endeavored to exaggerate and dramatize the shark even further by making it cartoonish and thus further unrealistic."<sup>22</sup> The group's deft use of photo editing software in

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<sup>21</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Aly Slater and used with permission. Students' group bibliographies cited the entry "Watson and the Shark: Explore This Work," [www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/highlights/highlight46471.html](http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/highlights/highlight46471.html), accessed 20 Nov. 2015; Jennifer L. Roberts, "Failure to Deliver: Watson and the Shark and the Boston Tea Party," *Art History* 10, no. 4 (Sept. 2011), 625, 675-695; Michael Gaudio's discussion of Copley in "Swallowing the Evidence: William Bartram and the Limits of Enlightenment," *Winterthur Portfolio* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 13-16 (assigned for another session).

<sup>22</sup> Excerpt from group statement by students Margot Marchese, Aly Slater, Jill Stauffer, Anton Connolly, and Kevin Conroy (2015) and used with permission.



adding a dramatic sea and sky evidenced their attention to the aesthetics and heightened the turmoil of the scene (in contrast to the calm skies of Copley's harbor).



Figure 7. Left: John Singleton Copley (American, 1738-1815), *Watson and the Shark*, 1778. Oil on canvas, 71 11/16 x 90 7/16 in. (182.1 x 229.7 cm). The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Ferdinand Lamot Belin Fund, 1963.6.1. Right: Middlebury College AMST 209 Students, Fall 2016.

The following year, another group tackled the subject of *Watson and the Shark* with decidedly different motivations, choosing to draw parallels instead to their own identities and college experiences.<sup>23</sup> This group of student-athletes self-consciously posed with the attributes of their varsity sports: racquets, balls, water bottles, jerseys, and more (Fig. 7). They decided to pose after-hours in the classroom in which our course met, with an image of the school's sports center projected behind them. As they explained in their presentation, this was meant to represent the ways in which the rigors of academics and athletics sometimes felt at odds with one another, while echoing the masts of ships in the harbor in the background of Copley's work. Although the conflicting demands on their time sometimes made it feel as though they were drowning, they explained, their community of varsity athletes worked together to try to keep one another "afloat." Although this group did not adhere as closely to the aesthetics of Copley's painting as in the prior year, their project nonetheless conveyed a self-reflexive quality that indicated metacognitive work and empathy with the historical figure of Brook Watson.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> This group also cited different sources, including Irma B. Jaffe, "John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*," *American Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (May 1977), 15-25; Mónica Domínguez Torres, "Havana's Fortunes: 'Entangled Histories' in Copley's *Watson and the Shark*," *American Art* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2016), 8-13.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the promises of metacognitive work, see Pintrich, 2002; on the place of empathy in the study of history or liberal arts education, see S.J. Foster & E.A. Yeager, "The Role of Empathy in the Development of Historical Understanding," *International Journal of Social Education* 13 (Spring-Summer 1998), 1-7; E.D. Lazarakou, "Empathy as a Tool for Historical Understanding," *The International Journal of Social Education* 23, no. 1 (2008): 27+; Bradley Commission on History in Schools, *Building a History Curriculum*, 8.



Figure 8. Center: Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), *George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait)*, 1796. Oil on canvas, 97 ½ x 62 ½ in. (247.6 x 158.7 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquired as a gift to the nation through the generosity of the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, NPG.2001.13. Left and right: students from Middlebury College's AMST 209, Fall 2016.

The historical context of the 2016 election and students' own identities came to the fore in one group's reinterpretation of Gilbert Stuart's 1796 portrait of George Washington (known as the *Lansdowne Portrait*, Fig. 8). After reading about the iconography and representations of power in the original portrait, students thought carefully about their own identities and how these might be conveyed to viewers. A Mexican-American woman posed in a dress with Mexican embroidery, a shelf of her favorite books and a Mexican flag in the background. A young man who was passionate about theater and music posed next to a piano, holding a book of plays in contrast to Washington's sword. Another young man wished to reject traditional signifiers of power and identity, posing in a plain white T-shirt and ubiquitous blue jeans against a blank white wall, leaving the viewer guessing as to his opinions and the statements he might be proclaiming. The final member of the group, an observant Muslim woman, wore her head scarf, as she did every day, but also brought in a prayer rug and several books. Rather than the inkwell and documents strewn about the table in Stuart's painting, her laptop is open to reveal an image of the original painting, while she herself holds up a smartphone and poses for a selfie.

In their presentation, this group shared some of their collaborative discussions about American identity and self-presentation in 2016, both in the political sphere and their personal lives. Their presentation and resulting images evidenced a thoughtful engagement with historical representations and with current questions about selfhood and identity. Building on another session's reading of Crèvecoeur's "What Is an American," the students explored the multiplicity of American identities in 2016 and the ways some identities were currently under attack under the guise of the rhetoric of "Make America Great Again"—despite the long-standing presence of immigrants, varying religious identities, and diverse viewpoints in American culture, as we had discussed over the course of the semester.<sup>25</sup> The students used the assignment as part of a way of processing the recent election of Donald Trump and their own perceived places in U.S. society.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, "Letter III: What Is an American" (1782), from *Letters from an American Farmer*, as published in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> See Nancy Chick, Terri Karis, and Cyndi Kernahan, "Learning from Their Own Learning: How Metacognitive and Meta-affective Reflections Enhance Learning in Race-Related Courses," *The*



Figure 9. Left: Matthew Pratt (1734-1805), *The American School*, 1765. Oil on canvas, 36 x 50 ¼ in. (91.4 x 127.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Samuel P. Avery, 1897, 97.29.3. Right: Middlebury College AMST 209 students, Fall 2015.

Several students' work brought issues of power and privilege to the fore, echoing and enhancing previous discussions of these themes in American culture. A presentation on Matthew Pratt's *American School* noted that rather than the plaster cast of an artist's studio, the library table of the 2010s holds the omnipresent water bottle (Fig. 9). But their critique went further than this substitution of props. In their presentation, students discussed not only the expatriate American art community in London but also the complicated interpersonal relationships of the artists pictured and their jockeying for position, reconceived as a power struggle in a contemporary classroom. As these students relayed in their oral presentation, they deliberately cast their "characters": a young white man confidently and aggressively asserts his position and power even as his female teacher, a young woman of color, leans over to help another student, who shares not a canvas in progress but rather her laptop with an open Word document; another student peeks at her screen.<sup>27</sup> While there were many laughs of recognition about this representation of "mansplaining," the students were also productively critiquing gender and race relations in U.S. classrooms of 2015.

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*International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 3, no.1 (Jan. 2009); Brooke Barnett and Peter Felten, eds., *Intersectionality in Action* (Stylus Publishing, 2016); Nancy Chick, "Difference, Privilege, and Power in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The Value of Humanities SoTL," *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning In and Across the Disciplines*, ed. Kathleen McKinney (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 15-33; Goodman, *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice*.

<sup>27</sup> Students cited, among other sources, Carrie Rebora Barratt and H. Barbara Weinberg, "American Artists as They Saw Themselves," *The Magazine Antiques* (Nov. 2009); Carrie Rebora Barratt, "Faces of a New Nation," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 61, no. 1 (2003), 5-56; Susan Rather, "A Painter's Progress: Matthew Pratt and 'The American School,'" *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 28 (1993), 169-183; James Thomas Flexner, "The American School in London," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 7, no. 2 (1948), 64-72. See also Meg Gorzycki, "Social Justice in the Curriculum," The Center for Teaching and Faculty Development, San Francisco State University: <https://ctfd.sfsu.edu/content/social-justice-curriculum>



Issues of race, gender, identity, and equity were also explored by the group working on Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*, who reflected upon our college's still-limited diversity (the setting of an elite liberal arts college in New England, with a majority-white population).<sup>28</sup> One student described their early thought process: "Let's use the large number of women in our group to emphasize the increased political empowerment of women since the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> centuries."<sup>29</sup> With further reflection, their approach became more nuanced:

We talked a lot about who was and wasn't present, both in the painting and in our group. We realized that the overwhelming underrepresentation of people of color in government is reflected here at Middlebury [College] in our administration, our faculty—even our class project groups. Because we had almost all women in our group, we were able to apply a pseudo-feminist lens, but as Audre Lorde says, 'It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians' [Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's House," address read at the Second Sex conference, NY, 1979]. This is not to say that none of the women pictured in our tableau are poor or that none are lesbians; it merely serves to call out the underrepresentation (or in many cases, the absence) of marginalized groups.<sup>30</sup>

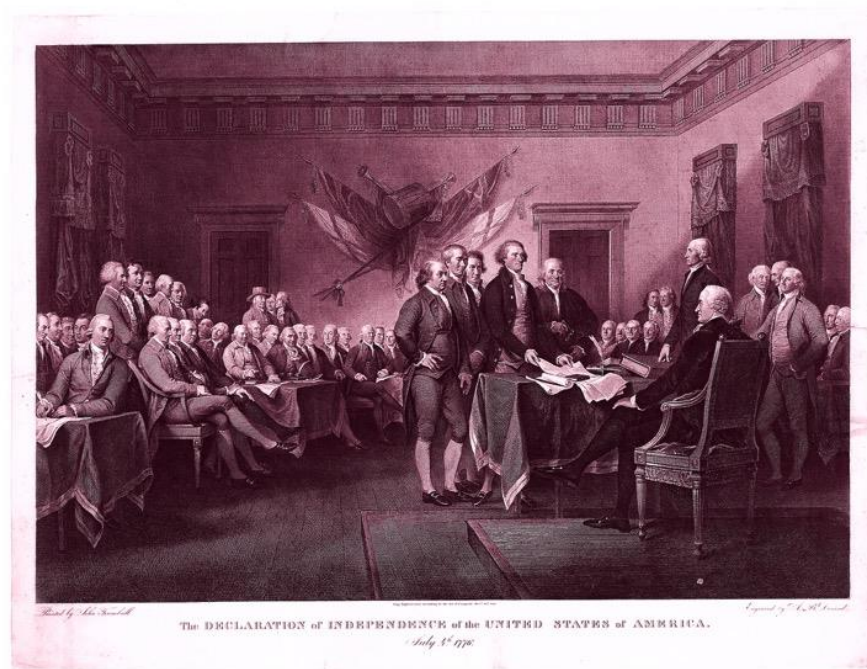


Figure 10. Asher Brown Durand (1796-1886) after John Trumbull (1756-1843), *The Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776)*, 1823. Engraving (sixth state of six), 23 7/8 x 32 in. (60.6 x 81.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Charles Allen Munn, 1924, 24.90.1514.

<sup>28</sup> Again, Goodman's *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice* is an invaluable resource.

<sup>29</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Marney Kline (2015) and used with permission.

<sup>30</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Addie Mahdavi (2015) and used with permission.

These critical engagements and self-reflections about contemporary society and our own campus prompted the students to think about how to annotate or convey these concepts further. Working not only from Trumbull's original painting but also the widely-circulated printed copies of the work (Fig. 10), the group considered issues of transmission and circulation. Thus, this group inventively selected to frame their *tableau vivant* as an Instagram post, complete with hashtags (Fig. 11). This social media format allowed for further commentary on the privilege (and whiteness) still evident in their own performance, even if it was "updated" with the inclusion of women typing on laptops and networking on their smartphones. As one member mused,

We also thought a lot about the racial [homogeneity] of our group, and how we failed to represent everyone, so we used commentary from Audre Lorde and Frances Beal on the Instagram image to acknowledge the dynamic nature of a document like the Declaration, and how it can always be expanded to more people or identities. American freedom is limited in different ways for different people, and we wanted to display an awareness of that.<sup>31</sup>

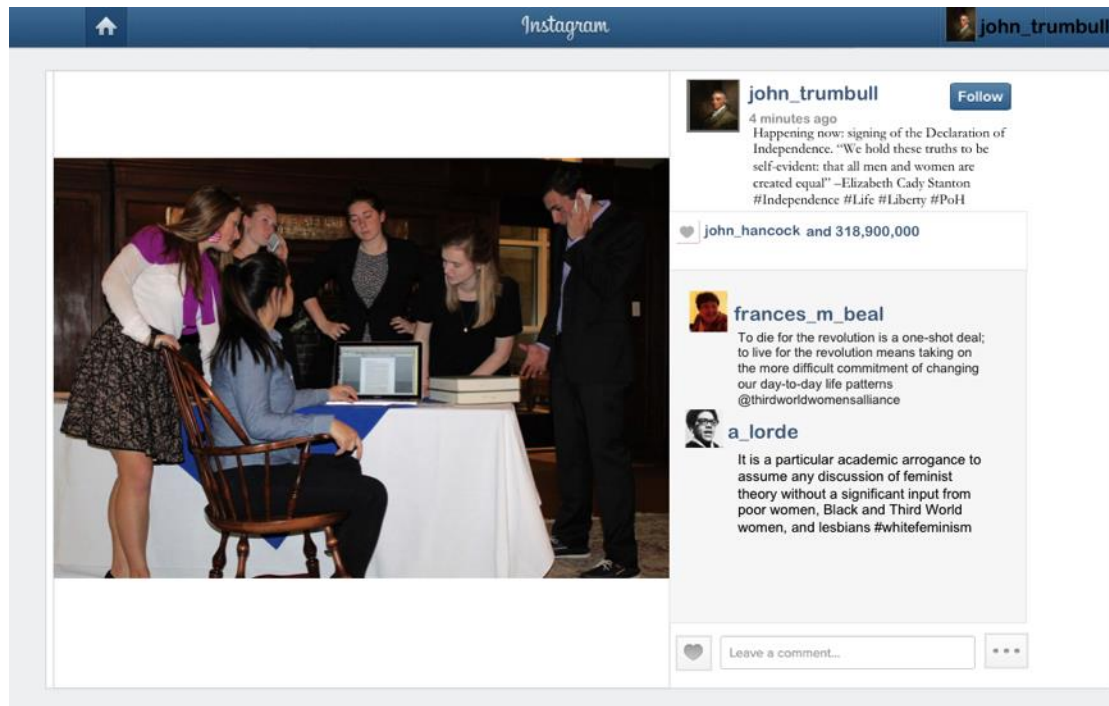


Figure 11. Instagramming the Declaration of Independence, Middlebury College AMST 209 students, Fall 2015.

Not only was the Instagram format a means to bring in critical race theory, but it provided fertile ground for thinking through issues of medium, media, circulation, and the multiple, as well as self-presentation and celebrity. While John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* was widely disseminated through print technologies of engraving and its circulation on the back of the two dollar bill, the students considered what the primary means of image distribution in 2015 might

<sup>31</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Katherine Brown (2015) and used with permission.

be. The social media format invoked Trumbull's own practices of self-promotion and embrace of imaging technologies, as well as the distribution of the news of the original *Declaration* across the colonies. As one student remarked,

Using an Instagram frame really forced us to reflect on the changing nature of communication between our government and its people. To think that a document that was publicized by readings in town squares during its time would now be shared instantaneously across the nation is absolutely remarkable. The very same government being shaped in Trumbull's painting now announces its progress through its Instagram feed and tweets.<sup>32</sup>

As another group member commented, "...we used Instagram as a frame for the photo in order to reimagine how the message of the Declaration might be disseminated. In 1776 it was read aloud in town squares; in 2015 it would be hashtagged and filtered."<sup>33</sup>

The students' own research into the painting—and the fact that they were responsible for staging a recreation and providing reasoning for their reinterpretation—led them to pay closer attention to the significance of scholarly findings, such as the divergences between historical reality and Trumbull's representation of it. As one student remarked,

I liked that the painting was not historically accurate (i.e. John Hancock was not actually present at the first signing on July 4, 1776), because it speaks to the human desire to modify art to reflect our ideals more accurately, to tell a story that excites people's imaginations and does not bog them down with petty technicalities. We chose to put our re-enactment in an Instagram template because that app speaks to the same human urge to edit and glamorize reality so that it sparks more human engagement. Public political profiles on social media platforms like Instagram also embody American democracy, as the majority of citizens can access them and share their thoughts on them.<sup>34</sup>

This group achieved a nuanced understanding of the work itself and its broader resonance, noting: "Trumbull's image is powerful, and has been used as an icon of the Revolution, so we knew that a 'modern' re-staging could be an interesting way to make poignant points about the nation today, and who the Declaration does, or should, apply to."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Addie Mahdavi (2015) and used with permission. Earlier in the semester, the class read selections from Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993). This work has clearly influenced their interpretations. The students' bibliography also cited Tanya Pohrt, "Reception and Meaning in John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence*," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2013), 116-119; Helen A. Cooper, "Trumbull, John," Grove Art Online; Irma B. Jaffe, "Trumbull's 'The Declaration of Independence': Keys and Dates," *American Art Journal* 3, no. 2 (1971), 41-49.

<sup>33</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Katherine Brown (2015) and used with permission.

<sup>34</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Marney Kline (2015) and used with permission.

<sup>35</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Katherine Brown (2015) and used with permission.



## Conclusions: Pedagogical Framework

Most students appreciated the opportunity to work closely on a single work of art—and to think creatively. Although they might not have been familiar with the pedagogical literature, I was pushing them to achieve the highest level of Bloom’s taxonomy, creating their own, original works.<sup>36</sup> As one student’s reflection noted, “Very little **creativity** is included in our academic research projects and this assignment added that crucial and often missing element.”<sup>37</sup> Students realized that they were indeed looking more closely at the historical works of art and conducting scholarly research, but they valued the opportunity to think more deeply about the work and create contemporary parallels; as one student wrote, “I enjoyed the experience of the actual staging, but I think I valued the thought process the most, because it made us all **reimagine and reanalyze** Trumbull’s famous image.”<sup>38</sup>

I originally conceived of the project as a way to engage a variety of learning styles or ways of thinking, moving beyond the emphasis upon the verbal and textual to the kinesthetic and the visual, in keeping with UDL principles of offering multiple means of representation, of action and expression, and of engagement. But I was additionally rewarded with the students’ metacognitive engagement and their enthusiastic embrace of a “creative” project. Beyond a mode of “active learning,” this project allowed us to discuss issues of social justice and identity in American culture, past and present. As one student summarized,

I was glad to focus on **learning about just one image in depth**—which is a unique opportunity. I found the experience of putting together **our own interpretation** rich, because it required understanding the original image on a more detailed level, including the author’s motivations for painting it, what she was hoping to convey, and why certain objects in the frame held significance. I also enjoyed extrapolating the ideas of the painting to today’s world, thinking about the concept of modernization. Ideas and themes from the early 1800s are still very much relevant today, and I appreciated getting to learn about the cross over between eras in American history.<sup>39</sup>

The students thus not only thought critically about American art and culture prior to 1830, but also about our own historical moment, radical and creative acts of historical empathy, metacognition, and meaningful learning. The *tableau vivant* holds far-reaching possibilities, even beyond James Head’s idealized rhapsody of the practice.

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956); Lorin W. Anderson *et al*, *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> Email correspondence from student Joanna Balla (2015); used with permission.

<sup>38</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Katherine Brown (2015) and used with permission.

<sup>39</sup> Excerpt from assigned reflection, written by Liz Stasior (2015) and used with permission.

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