

SECONDARY LESSONS

Lesson Theme: Visual Literacy and Propaganda

Target Grade Level: Grades 7-12

State Standards:

- Standard 2: Students will find meaning by analyzing, criticizing, and evaluating drawings
- Standard 3: Students will create meaning in drawings
- Standard 4: Students will find meaning in drawings through settings and other modes of learning

Objectives:

- Students will understand the need for visual literacy in our modern society
- Students will understand the printmaking process
- Students will interpret several visual messages including examples from fine art and from WWII posters
- Students will investigate how to “read” and interpret visual literature
- Students will create a written response to a piece of visual literature
- Students will create their own visual message that pertains to society today.



<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwii-posters/>

Learning Tasks:

1. Read and discuss the following information

“Guns, tanks, and bombs were the principal weapons of World War II, but there were other, more subtle forms of warfare as well. Words, posters, and films waged a constant battle for the hearts and minds of the American citizenry just as surely as military weapons engaged the enemy. Persuading the American public became a wartime industry, almost as important as the manufacturing of bullets and planes. The Government launched an aggressive propaganda campaign with clearly articulated goals and strategies to galvanize public support, and it recruited some of the nation's foremost intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers to wage the war on that front.”

http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/powers_of_persuasion/powers_of_persuasion_intro.html

Discussion questions:

- How did artists, writers and filmmakers become an important part of the war effort?
- How can words and images be as important as bullets?

- Emphasize that printmaking is one art form that distributes information to the masses
- What are common printed materials that spread information? (books, newspapers, magazines, postal stamps, comic books)

2. Show examples of war posters

(Multiple images can be found at the following address:

<http://www.bridgeboymusic.com/billyboy/posters.htm>)

Explain that the posters can be divided into two parts, which “represent two psychological approaches used in rallying public support.” Without explaining the two philosophies, allow students to place the posters into two groups. When they have finished, explain the two categories, which are posters that motivate, and posters that threaten. Share the following examples:



“These posters motivate the viewer by instilling patriotism, confidence, and a positive outlook. Patriotic colors of red, white and blue predominate. Pictures of fists, muscles, tools and artillery convey American strength. American heroes and familiar national symbols appeal to patriotism.

“These posters rock people out of their complacency with grim, unromantic visions of war.

They depict the human cost of war, confronting the viewer with corpses, bloodshed, and gravestones. These images appeal to darker impulses, fostering feelings of suspicion, fear, and even hate.”

3. Discuss questions such as the following:

- Are these pieces more than just “art”?
- What kinds of visual messages are being portrayed?
- Are these posters as powerful as a newspaper article?
- Why has the government chosen to add words to this artwork?
- Which posters are more powerful to you? Posters that threaten, or posters that motivate?

4. Invite students to choose one poster that appeals to them. Students will write a one-page response to the poster. They may choose to write as if they were the artist, the enemy, someone in the poster, a member of the U.S. army, or a U.S. civilian. Students must explain how the poster makes them feel. What effect does the poster have on them?

5. Introduce students to Käthe Kollwitz and Elizabeth Catlett. Share brief biographies and artwork of both women. Emphasize that both Kollwitz and Catlett focused on societal concerns. As a class, list all areas of modern-day societal concerns. Examples may include the following ideas:

environment, overcrowding, drugs, gangs, famine, wars, animal rights, etc.

6. Encourage students to choose a concern that appeals to them. Using their topic, students must brainstorm how they might depict that concern. When they have a few good ideas, students will complete two thumbnail sketches.

7. Explain and demonstrate the process of linoleum block printing. Show materials and explain tools (brayer, linoleum cutter, burnishing tool, etc). Students will then transfer their drawing to the linoleum block.

8. When the print is complete, students are encouraged to make multiple prints in order to “distribute them to the masses”. Remind students that they have created a visual message to help the world become more literate about a specific issue.

On the following page is an example of an updated WWII poster and the original poster. The updated version is by Bill Maher, a writer who believes the government’s approach to US citizens about what they can do as part of the “War on Terrorism” is too soft. The poster is on the cover of Maher’s new book, which amazon.com describes as follows: “Political provocateur Bill Maher tells it like it is in a useful and hilarious guide for the many Americans who want to do more here at home to help in the war effort, but are at a loss as to how.”



The WWII poster



Bill Maher's version

