

## Sherry Hatton - History Through an Artist's Lens Transcript

- Hello, friends. My name is Sherry Hatton. I am a middle school band director in Smithfield, Virginia and an Educator in Residence for the Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM. I'd like to take you on a trip, a visual trip. The visual arts recount stories of our past and allow us to look back and understand how civilization evolved over the centuries. Art and artifacts provide a means by which we can understand our past and its relationship to our present. It refines our understanding of the past and teaches us how people have seen themselves in their world and how they want to portray themselves to others. Think of the Chauvet Caves in Southeastern France. They contain some of the best preserved figurative cave paintings in the world. The paintings show proof of human life, as well as 13 different species that rarely have been found in ice age paintings. These artistic images lead us to believe that those that lived at this time practiced rituals, or shamanism, possibly depicted the first volcano eruption. And that was 30,000 years ago. Or the Cave of Hands in Patagonia. Shows a collage of hand prints, 800 silhouettes, what are believed to be male hands, possibly a rite of passage, or maybe a ritual before hunting. What a beautiful way to view a civilization from thousands of years before us. Right now, we live in a time where history is questioned all around us. In the classroom, this questioning can stimulate purposeful discussion, promote higher order thinking, and help children to understand and develop their thinking skills. Let's explore history, but through a different lens. Do you remember me talking about that trip? Well, are you ready to jump in your DeLorean and go back in time? What if we could view and question history, politics, culture, war and peace, occupations, entertainment, hobbies, interests, and fashion, all through art and artifacts? What can artwork and artifacts tell us about the people, the politics, the society? Aren't you curious? Don't you have questions? And I'm sure your students do too. Art preserves what fact based historical records cannot, how it felt to exist in a particular place at a particular time. In this lesson, we will examine, analyze, and compare historical works of art as primary sources, then use this visual evidence to generate inferences about the people, time period, and relationships of the subjects. Students will identify the artist choices and interpret those choices and why they were used to convey the historical, cultural, or political point of view at this time. Are you ready? All right, let's go. Now, you can use this lesson in any time period and almost any subject. Let's take a look at a piece from Colonial America. Let's start with one of my favorite strategies, "think, see, wonder." This strategy allows your students to begin focusing and creates a space to explore and share their thoughts. First, give your students a few minutes to look at the piece of art and write down what they see, a man sitting alone, a teapot, some tools, not much color or background. Next, give students a few minutes to look at the piece again and write down what they think of the picture. Is this a current painting? What time is it from? Is it just a man getting some tea, or maybe he's polishing a prize? Next, allow your students to write down what they wonder. "I wonder why he has those tools." "I wonder why he's holding that teapot." "I wonder why he's wearing that shirt and vest." "I wonder why he's sitting in the dark." You may choose to have an open discussion regarding each of these items or allow students to put their thoughts on post-it notes and add

it to a sharing board. Some students are not keen on sharing thoughts out loud, and by doing a combination of these activities, it allows students to share their thoughts and take the pressure off of public speaking at this time. As students start discussing the clothing, the time period, the teapot, tools, et cetera, start making a list of these descriptions and interpretations, sort of an inventory of what's going on, and gear their thoughts toward what this person might do for a living, or maybe it's a hobby. What is the time period? Was he wealthy? How can you tell? What is he engraving? The portrait captures a critical moment in this silversmith's work. He appears to be engraving the teapot using the tools that rest on the table before him. But would a working craftsman be wearing such a clean shirt or waist coat, and buttons made of gold? This man seems to be a professional workman with a very noble trade, yet the workspace is spotless, outside of those tools. Things that make you go, "hmm." What other inferences can your students make before you explain who this really is? Why would this artist choose this particular setting for this workman? I know, the suspense is killing you, isn't it? All right. This painting was created by John Singleton Copley, and is none other than Paul Revere. Through the eyes of the artist, you see John Singleton Copley chose to portray Paul Revere as a workman and gentleman. Paul Revere was proud to be a silversmith. You notice there's no inference of his famous ride because this painting was created in 1768, while that historical ride didn't take place until 1775. Copley captures the qualities of Paul Revere that you may think of when you study him. And although there are no signs of revolutionary politics, you see the qualities that made him a great Patriot of colonial history. His strength, intelligence, hard work, attention to detail, wealth, trade, and importance. When discussing this in your class, you can now start to take an inventory of why it was created this way, where before, it was "what do you see?" And now you have set the stage for your lesson to begin. You can dive deeper into analyzing other pieces, making inferences to artistic thoughts and ideas while creating an atmosphere to begin questioning and searching for answers. We found out quite a bit about Paul Revere in the last painting, his trade, his importance, wealth, stature in the community, and could make inferences as to his role in the Sons of Liberty and what transpired from the time this painting was created until his famous ride. This exercise was a strategy to get started looking at art with more depth and a historical lens. So let's continue this lesson with a deeper analysis, analyzing and deciphering art, whether it be painting, architecture, or an artifact. Art influences society by changing opinions, instilling values, and translating experiences across space and time, and studying the history behind it provides a context for understanding. Because we are analyzing art with a historical lens, it's a bit different than a formal analysis of a piece. We will use three basic concepts for this. Form, content, and context. We will not conduct a formal analysis of the work. We do not expect you and your students to be experts in the elements of art, but we want to equip our students with the knowledge to understand what they like and dislike, avoiding the, "I like this, I don't like this," without any further explanation or justification. Description is important, but students should include artistic elements and why the artist used them to portray the subject. Can you determine if there is a free flow to the art or geometrical shapes? Are shapes grouped together or distant? Does it have the appearance of 3D or 2D? Just a very brief look at that form. Next, we will look at content, who or what is being depicted. Is it religious, historical? Are there relationships

between the figures? What clothes are they wearing? What are the expressions on their faces? And does the title of the piece change your opinion of the work? Are there recognizable objects, props, or scenes, and how are they presented? Blurred, focused, hidden, exaggerated, reduced, abstracted? And last, we will look at the context. This is where we explore and evaluate the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that may have had a bearing on the artwork. We begin to make inferences as to the artist's thoughts and intentions, and can also compare works between other pieces and other artists. And this is at the point that we ask, "what is the artist's original intention in creating the artwork?" Using these three areas will allow your students to demonstrate higher order thinking and the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information and ideas. Your students will be able to analyze art not just by their personal opinions, but supported through explanation of evidence and justification. Now let's take our FCC, that's form, content, and context. For analyzing, apply it to another painting of this time period. Form. Well, we all know who this is, right? This is a landscape painting of Washington crossing the Delaware. Let's look at content. What catches your eye first? By the clothing they are wearing, it looks cold. It seems they are wearing warm clothing, but various styles of clothing. We see an American flag, and they are all facing the same direction. And the wind looks strong. We see horses, so the water depth cannot be that high in the picture. Maybe it's early in their trip. It looks like they are trying very hard to get through that ice. We see those in the first boat have warm colors applied to them. Those in the back have cooler colors. Let's apply that context. We all know this is Washington's trip across the Delaware to fight the Haitians. Many pieces like this one have a contextual representation. And although the image really happened, you must understand the context beyond the aesthetic. This piece represents unity. This was commissioned 75 years after Washington crossed the Delaware River, but it shows Washington leading people of different backgrounds and race, coming together under a common goal, to beat the British. Further investigation and questioning provide information about this moment in time, but Benjamin Webb's perspective allows us to see many other qualities. This event really happened in the middle of the night, didn't it? But the artist shows it at dawn. Washington would truly not be able to stand on that small boat. Look at the ice they are running into and the horses in the background struggling. But this artist has him prominently standing with a very determined look. After analyzing these works, what can you tell me about this particular time period? What did the people dress like, look like, do for a living? What were their struggles? What similar qualities do you see between two or three of these pieces? What is different? So many questions that allow your students to search for answers. Now, for this lesson, we certainly do not need to stick to artwork of all the same time period or genre. Maybe we compare two portraits, Paul Revere and Queen Elizabeth. You can see this is a painted portrait with many symbolic props around her, ornate and colorful. Content, lots of colors and ornate clothing, bows, pearls, the crown on her right. She is looking towards the right as well, it seems. A mermaid statue on her left. Interestingly, her hand is on the globe, and she is calm, but strong look on her face. Let's look at the context. This portrait commemorates the most famous battle of Elizabeth the First's reign, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. She faces the calm seas and away from the floundering Spanish ships you see in the pictures behind her, and is positioned as a calm force for good. She doesn't even need

to wear that crown to show how powerful she is. Her hand on the globe with her fingers covering the Americas, maybe showing her ambition. The mermaid carved on the chair of state, many claim that either represents females luring sailors to their doom or the mermaid symbolizes the executed Queen Mary of Scots. And she faces away from it. Two portraits with many similarities and many differences. What will your students see, and inquire, and learn about these periods of time? Now that we have analyzed a few pieces, we can begin to synthesize these ideas and allow students to put their observations into words. There are so many activities you can use for students to apply their learning. For many, this process of analyzing, questioning, interpreting, and drawing conclusions may feel uncomfortably slow, but by practicing and discussing the process, students will begin to respond more thoughtfully and critically to images they encounter every day. Here are just a few ideas to demonstrate student learning. Why not play devil's advocate? Create a monologue or short story from the opposing point of view. For example, what was the point of view of the Haitians as Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware and attacked? What did the artist say? Given the historical context and the subject of a piece, ask students what they think the artist is trying to say. Who do they think is the intended audience? And support their views by referring to specific elements of the image. I spy. I love playing "I spy." Create a narrative based on the figures that they have spied in the art, or have students work collaboratively and create a story of an object like the teapot in Paul Revere's hand. What about a tableau? Create a series of motionless figures, recreating a scene based on their analysis. Why not tell a story? Your students can create a story, describing each piece of art from the perspective of those in the portrait, or create a story discussing how all of the events are linked together. Students can create a short dialogue or story about the portraits, what happened before, during, and after, as if they were walking through time with their characters. Why not create a timeline and recount the story or the actions you interpret from the piece of art that you are analyzing? Or maybe tell a story of the painting, but from the perspective of an inanimate object like Queen Elizabeth's globe or crown. So many ways to have your students applying learning and demonstrate knowledge in a collaborative environment. They will have the knowledge of how to interpret artist ideas and why they were used to convey history, culture, or political points of view. They will have a better sense of how it felt to exist in a particular place at a particular time. And of course, this can be done in any subject and use more than visual arts. Try music. Dive into the music of different eras and why that particular sound was created, who created it, and why was it important to the development of that time? Why not try theatre? This can be done in a very similar way. Use clips of theatrical pieces or musicals that depict a particular time, or even poetry in a similar manner. Once your students are more aware of what they see and hear, they will begin questioning the world around them with greater understanding of social influences, changing opinions, values, and experiences from another time. So what time period will you be discussing in your classroom? Where can you implement a historical lens to your lesson? Every subject, not just history, can benefit from this approach. English, science, math, and the arts. Students will gain an in depth look at the time period, the culture, the lifestyle, and perspective that you are going to study. My name is Sherry Hatton, and I wish you all the best in your arts integration endeavors. Bye-bye for now, friends.