N.C. Wyeth's America in the Making

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Exploring History through Visual Literacy and Learning

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The illustrations in N.C. Wyeth’s *America in the Making* series are full of visual clues that, when read together, allow the viewer to develop an understanding of significant events in American history. These clues can be found in parts of the image and when viewing the image as a whole. Visually identifying these clues will help identify the subject, plot, location, and narrative of each illustration. The text included with Wyeth’s paintings will provide direct insight into the depicted scene, and understanding of the image will develop and deepen when ideas are inferred from the image itself. When reading a work of art, make informed judgments that are supported by what you see. Asking questions during the research process will lead to continued learning about ourselves and our history. Use facts that you know about the world, history, culture, science, government, or technology, all of which will contribute to your understanding.

Visual literacy is a critical life skill and, when practiced regularly, will increase creative problem solving, critical thinking, and evidential reasoning skills in all academic disciplines. For example, being more visually literate will help a biologist examine cultured cells in a Petri dish. Practicing visual literacy will benefit economists as they develop and evaluate graphic organizers that explain the circulation of macroeconomics. Agronomists can use visual literacy skills to visually identify the effects of erosion. Visual literacy goes beyond simple literal description to incorporate explanation and results in understanding. Visual literacy and learning makes connections with art, history, technology, culture, and integrates these primary educational resources into our everyday lives. Objects and images are distinct means of making sense of reality, and the practice of visual literacy provides people a basic form of access to knowledge and understanding. All people do not “see” the same things when looking at a visual image or object, but visual literacy can bring everyone to an informed understanding. Just as books are a primary research tool, so too are objects a source of primary information.

We live in the information age, with ever increasing amounts of information being presented to us visually. This makes it even more important to focus on visual literacy so that we are able to understand the world around us. The description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment of daily messages form the foundation of visual literacy. Children learn to read images before words, but often teaching visual literacy stops as soon as the child learns to read text. Continuing our visual literacy education will teach us to analyze what we see and make educated judgments. History is constantly being reinterpreted, inviting viewers to examine these N.C. Wyeth paintings using visual literacy techniques to describe, interpret, and evaluate them in light of current events and contemporary reevaluations of history. How has the perception of significant moments in our nation’s history changed?