THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | *Primary Documents*

Using Art to Study the Past

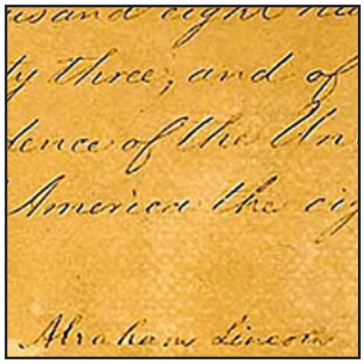
Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation : 1863

When studying events that occurred before the widespread use of photography, historians have used artwork to supplement resources such as documents, diaries, and artifacts. While an artist's view of an event is less accurate than first-hand written accounts, many paintings and engravings can tell us what events were found important enough to document in this way. Artists, after all, were in the business of selling their works, and would often offer popular images that were attractive to buyers. Using symbols, an artist can tell a story beyond the actual event that a photographer cannot. The engraving used in this lesson, "First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before Lincoln's Cabinet," is derived from one of the best-known historical paintings in American history, along with John Trumbull's paintings of the Battle of Bunker Hill and the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Objectives

1. To analyze artwork as historical artifact. By observing the composition of the artwork, students will develop questions about the historical event depicted, the use of symbols, and the artist's role in documenting events.

2. To recognize that the Emancipation Proclamation was a major turning point in the Civil War, that it turned the war into a fight for freedom, and weakened the Confederate cause by providing freed slaves the opportunity to fight in the Union forces against their former owners. They will also understand that the Proclamation was not universally supported in the north, or even within Lincoln's own cabinet.



Lincoln's signature on the Emancipation Proclamation. National Archives

Introduction

At the beginning of the Civil War, the U.S. Congress had passed a resolution stating that it had no interest in destroying slavery, simply in preserving the Union. The more radical members of the Republican Party, however, saw the war in moral terms and insisted that slaves should be emancipated. As the number of casualties rose and it became clear that victory would not come easily, more and more Northerners began to favor freeing the slaves, some for moral reasons, but others wanted to punish Southern slaveholders or simply thought freeing the slaves would be a good way of disrupting the Southern war effort.

President Abraham Lincoln drafted a proclamation freeing the slaves, which he first read to his Cabinet on July 22, 1862, an event captured on canvas by Francis Carpenter. Secretary of State William Seward suggested that the proclamation should not be issued until after a Union victory, so that it would not seem to be a desperate measure. In September 1862, after Union troops won the battle of Antietam, President Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, announcing that he would officially sign the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, unless the Southern states ended the war. On the first day of 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. It expanded the aim of the war: to the preservation of the union was added a battle for freedom. Lincoln stated that "all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." Those slaves held in any Union state were not affected, nor were those slaves in the South who lived in territory that had already come under Union control. The Proclamation also invited people of color to join the U.S. Army and Navy.

Some northerners felt Lincoln did not go far enough, that he did not speak in strong moral terms and should not have allowed slavery to remain in such places as the Union border states. Other northerners opposed emancipation: some owned slaves and feared that eventually their own slaves would be liberated by the order, and some northerners thought that they might lose their jobs when freed slaves flooded to their cities and towns looking for work. Lincoln himself believed the Emancipation Proclamation was "the central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century."

Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet discuss the Emancipation Proclamation. Library of Congress

Activity

Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet discuss the Emancipation Proclamation. Library of Congress

Artists in the 19th century often painted or engraved historical scenes, and they can be used to better understand dramatic events of the American past. When evaluating artwork as a historical document one should consider the artist's knowledge of the event he or she is depicting. Did the artist know the subjects? Did he have access to those who were present at the event so he could faithfully record it? The artist's point of view, or his attempt to symbolize larger ideas in a painting, must be considered when studying the historical artwork. Did the artist want to make a statement?

From February through July 1864, artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter (1830-1900) worked at the White House creating a painting entitled, "First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before Lincoln's Cabinet." Carpenter was a strong opponent of slavery and had already gained some fame for his portraits of political leaders. This painting shows President Lincoln in his White House office reading a draft of the proclamation, an event that occurred on July 22, 1862. While Carpenter was not present for the actual event, he spoke extensively with the president and others about the occasion and wrote about his experiences in *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

In the painting, the president is testing his Cabinet's reactions to the idea of proclaiming freedom for slaves. From left to right, the men in the portrait are:

Secretary of War Edward Stanton (seated), Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, President Lincoln, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Interior Caleb B. Smith, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, Attorney General Edward Bates, Secretary of State William Seward (seated in front of the table)

A parchment copy of the U.S. Constitution lies on the cabinet table, and a portrait of Andrew Jackson can be seen through the chandelier. Jackson, who served as president thirty years before Lincoln, was known for his strong union stance.

Have students examine the picture and answer these questions using information they already know, added to knowledge they gain from studying the picture.

1. Carpenter was very careful about where he placed the various people in the painting; his purpose, he said, "was to give that prominence to the different individuals which belonged to them respectively in the Administration." Based on that intention, who were the most prominent people? Who were the least prominent? Based on where people were in relation to Lincoln (nearer, farther), who were the people likeliest to support his program?

2. Study each cabinet member. Look at their facial expressions and body language. How do you think each cabinet member reacted to the Proclamation based on your observations?

3. There are two documents in the picture, the Emancipation Proclamation and the U.S. Constitution. Where are they located and why are they in the picture?

4. The painting hanging on the wall behind the chandelier is a portrait of Andrew Jackson. Why is it in the picture?

5. Lighting can also be used symbolically. What parts of the painting are well lit? What parts are dark? What might Carpenter be trying to convey by this lighting?

6. What kind of overall impression does the painting give? How would you describe in words the event that Carpenter painted?

Afterword

According to Carpenter, Postmaster General Blair opposed the Emancipation Proclamation, because he believed it would prove costly to the Republican Party in the fall congressional elections that year. Secretary of the Interior Smith was similarly concerned about the voters' reaction, while Attorney General Bates doubted that the Proclamation was constitutional. Secretary of the Treasury Chase was a longtime opponent of slavery, as was Secretary of State Seward, and strongly supported the Emancipation Proclamation. Secretary of War Stanton had long advocated using African-American troops. Secretary of the Navy Welles also supported the Proclamation.

Enrichment and Extension

1. Have students find a photograph that captured a famous historical event (John F. Kennedy's funeral, Charles Lindbergh landing in Paris, etc.) and do some background research so they understand the figures and setting. Have them imagine that the photograph is their memory of being at the event, and then have students put the photograph away and draw or paint the scene. Compare the photo with their artwork. How accurate were they? Did certain figures become more or less prominent? How important did the subjects vs. the setting become in their artwork? Did some figures become "larger than life?" Did their artwork have a message?

2. The use of symbols in art to represent larger ideas is as old as art itself. Books on the table in a portrait represent an educated gentleman. The lion stands for courage in a coat of arms. An olive branch indicates a striving for peace. Today, symbols take many forms: a flag represents a nation, a logo represents a company or product, the elephant and donkey represent the Republican and Democratic political parties. From looking around the classroom, students should be able to locate symbols. Ask students to go further and search through magazines and newspapers and collect symbols. Cut and paste the symbols, display them to classmates and quiz them on the meaning of the symbols. Are some symbols more easily recognized than others? Is there room for disagreement on what a symbol represents, or should it be universally understood? Have each student research the origins of one symbol that they collected.

Bibliography

Carpenter, Francis B. *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Donald, David Herbert. *Lincoln*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

Franklin, John Hope. "The Emancipation Proclamation: An Act of Justice," Prologue: *Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration*, Summer 1993. Online at *http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1993/summer/emancipation-proclamation.html*

National History Standards

This lesson meets the following National History Standards:

Draw upon visual sources (Historical Comprehension, Standard 2G); identify issues and problems in the past; evaluate the implementation of a decision (Historical Issues – Analysis and Decision-Making, Standards 5A and 5F)

The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people (United States History Standards, Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction, 1850-1877, Standard 2