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Teaching History and Civics with Environmental Art

Julie Anne Taylor
University of Michigan-Dearborn

Abstract

This article explores inquiry-based teaching and learning with environmental art in secondary history and civics. The study of environmental art raises awareness of critical issues, such as deforestation, industrial pollution, mining, and climate change. For this article, extensive research was conducted in the collections of two national art museums and one library in the United States. The author presents 12 works of art, which are appropriate for instruction at the secondary level, as well as original prompts to address the need for curricular materials on environmental topics. Arts integration as a pedagogic practice is examined.

Keywords: social studies, environmental education, arts integration, history education, civic education

Arts integration has transformative potential in social studies education. Through cross-disciplinary teaching and learning, students gain appreciation of the interconnectedness of knowledge. The study of environmental art raises awareness of critical issues, such as deforestation, industrial pollution, mining, and climate change. Environmental artists depict the past and present, envision the future, and seek to influence viewers. When engaging with their work, students hone their analytical skills.

This article addresses an essential question: Which works of art in the public collections of the United States would be appropriate for inquiry-based instruction on environmental topics in history and civics at the secondary level? As a result of extensive research in the online collections of the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. as well as the Library of Congress, which is the national library of the United States, 12 works of art were identified. Because many works of art in these institutions are discoverable online but are not on display, the investigation was conducted virtually.

At the start of the research process, keyword searches were done to find the relevant holdings. On the sites of the museums, the queries were not restricted to specific types of art. By contrast, due to the diverse formats of the sources in the Library of Congress' digital collections, searches were limited to photographs, prints, and drawings. Variations of keywords such as *environment, earth, climate change, global warming, deforestation, logging, lumber, pollution, plastic*, *industry, factory, mining, endangered,* and *extinct* were entered into the search engines of the institutions. Additionally, the names of creatures, such as *penguins* and *frogs*, which are at risk due to climate change, were included. The searches collectively yielded hundreds of images. During the examination of the findings, paintings, drawings, and photographs became the foci.

In many middle and high schools, geography is interwoven in world and United States history courses. Geographic concepts are taught using five themes: location, place, human-environment interaction, movement, and regions (Bednarz, 2016). For this article, works of art were selected based on these criteria: the artwork's relevance to the theme, human-environment interaction; the artwork's appropriateness for use in history and/or civics instruction; and the online accessibility of the artwork to educators and students in- and outside the United States.

Pursuing knowledge through questioning is a process that is central to the teaching of social studies in the United States today (Swan et al., 2018). At the heart of the *College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, the national, nonbinding standards for social studies, is an Inquiry Arc comprised of four dimensions: developing questions and planning inquiries, applying disciplinary tools and concepts, evaluating sources and using evidence, and communicating conclusions and taking informed action (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). This article was prepared to fill a need for inquiry-based curricular materials on environmental topics. In addition to increasing environmental literacy, art analysis has the potential to hone social and communication skills, to foster empathy and the recognition of diverse perspectives, and to promote creativity

The artwork and prompts for inquiry-based, instructional practice

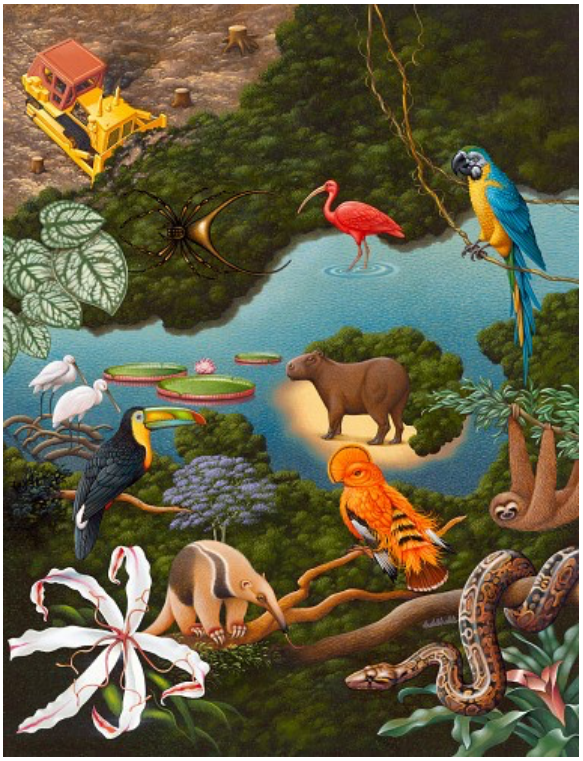
Nine paintings, one lithograph, and two photographs in the holdings of the National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Library of Congress were identified for use in secondary social studies education. Artists often work in collaboration with journalists to inform the public and to raise awareness of pressing issues. From *Time* in 1978, the National Portrait Gallery received in donation about 800 works of art, which had been made for the magazine's cover. Some of the artwork, which was donated by *Time*, addressed environmental topics. Artist Bradlt Bralds created the oil painting, *Amazon*, in 1982 to raise awareness of the threats which clearcutting posed to biodiversity (see Figure 1).

Bralds' painting illustrates how human activity has jeopardized a complex web of plant and animal life. *Amazon* would enhance environmental studies in world history classes. The students' visualization of biodiversity and habitat destruction would promote critical thinking. Questions for students are:

- About what environmental issue did the artist, Braldt Bralds, create this painting? How do you know?
- What types of animals, birds, and insects do you see?
- What are the impacts of the clearcutting?
- What does the artist suggest about the long-term effects of unmitigated logging?

- In which part of the painting would you prefer to be? Why?

Figure 1
Amazon



Note. From Braldt Bralds, 1982. [Oil on board]. NPG.84.TC5. Gift of *Time* magazine. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Copyright by Braldt Bralds.

Figure 2
Torching the Amazon

Note. From Robert G. Giusti, 1989. [Acrylic on canvas board]. NPG.90.TC9. Gift of *Time* magazine. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Copyright by Robert G. Giusti.

Fire was and still is employed in the clearing of trees in order to prepare land for farming and ranching. For *Time* magazine, Robert G. Giusti made the painting, *Torching the Amazon*, in 1989 (see Figure 2). He depicted the burning process starkly. The viewer's eye is guided by the path to a ghostlike skeletal image. Teaching with this painting would require students to decipher the meaning of a symbol. Questions for students are:

- What do you see in the billows of smoke at the end of the path?
- What is the artist's view of the burning of the Amazon forest?
- Who and what are endangered by the fires?

In history and civics education, students analyze multiple sources of evidence to gain comprehensive understanding and to draw informed conclusions (Nice, 2023). Giusti's painting

could be combined with recent satellite photographs of fires in the Amazon by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (2020). Despite warnings by artists and scientists, the pursuit of economic interests has resulted in continued deforestation.

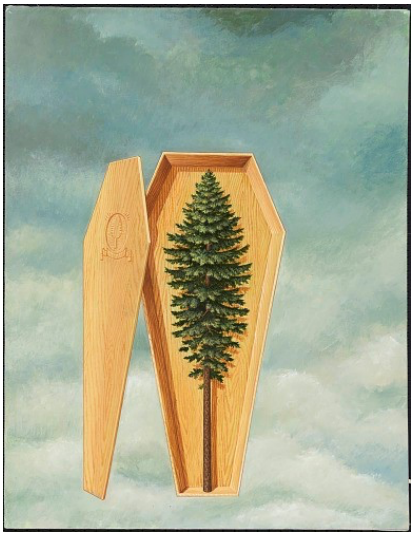
Figure 3
Northwest Logging

Note. From Ernest Ralph Norling, ca. 1938. [Watercolor on illustration board]. 1962.8.55. Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the public domain.

Figure 4
Falling a Tree

Note. From Russell Lee, 1941. [Safety film negatives]. LC-USF33-013178-M5 [P&P] LOT 126. Library of Congress. In the public domain.

Figure 5
Dying Forest



Note. From Mark Hess, 1985. [Acrylic on canvas]. NPG.90.TC44. Gift of *Time* magazine. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Copyright by Mark Hess.

Human demands for wood and land have led to the felling of trees for centuries in different parts of the world. As a result, ecosystems have been radically altered. During the Great Depression in the United States, artists were employed to create public works of art (Kennedy, 2009). Around 1938, as a mural study for the post office in Bremerton, Washington, Ernest Ralph Norling prepared a watercolor painting titled *Northwest Logging* (see Figure 3). In history lessons, the painting could be coupled with a photograph of logging, which was taken about three years later, by Russell Lee (see Figure 4). In the photograph, on the ground to the right, is a two-man, crosscut saw that is similar to the one depicted by Norling. When studying the two images, students would respond to these prompts:

- Look at each human figure in Ernest Ralph Norling's painting. What roles did people play in logging?
- In the painting, how was lumber transported from the logging site?
- How would you describe the trees in the painting and photograph?
- What equipment did lumberjacks use in 1938 and 1941? Give specific examples from the painting and photograph.
- Based on what you see in the painting, how do you think the site looked after the completion of the logging? With colored pencils, create an illustration.

Mark Hess' painting, *Dying Forest,* was among the works of art that *Time* magazine donated to the National Portrait Gallery (see Figure 5). In recent years, the death of forests has been hastened by climate change and the proliferation of pests such as bark beetles. In its use of symbols, this work of art is accessible to learners. Prompts to use when teaching with *Dying Forest* are:

- Why do you think Mark Hess created this painting?
- Ironically, of what material is the casket made?
- Did the artist convey his message effectively? Why or why not?
- Based on news reports, write an article on current threats to forests.

By observing and representing the world around them, artists create visual records. Their depictions of steel plants, coal mines, and factories offer insights into the historical roots of climate change. Frank C. Kirk, a social realist, painted *Industry,* which is now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum (see Figure 6). When analyzing Kirk's work, students would consider these questions:

- How would you describe the location of the steel factory?
- What does the painting suggest about the impact of the factory on air quality?

- Identify the main colors used in the painting. What do the colors convey?
- How do you think the factory affected the lives of people?

Figure 6
Industry

Note. From Frank C. Kirk, n.d. [Oil on canvas]. 1964.19.3. Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the public domain.

The center of U.S. steel production is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Between 1935 and 1940, Elizabeth Olds made a color lithograph of the city (see Figure 7). The print pairs well with a historic photograph, *Steel and Smoke*, by Chao-Chen Yang (see Figure 8). When comparing the artist's representation to the picture, the students would delve deeply into the third dimension of the Inquiry Arc: evaluating sources and using evidence. In U.S. history classes, they would address these prompts:

- Look closely at Elizabeth Olds' lithograph. Why do you think Pittsburgh became the center of steel production?
- Based on the print, how would you describe the life of a steelworker in Pittsburgh in the 1930s?
- How realistic is Olds' depiction of the steel industry? Compare her print to the photograph, *Steel and Smoke*, by Chao-Chen Yang.

Figure 7
Pittsburgh

Note. From Elizabeth Olds, ca. 1935-1940. [Color lithograph on paper]. 1984.31.39. Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the public domain.

Figure 8
Steel and Smoke

Note. From Chao-Chen Yang, 1939. [Gelatin silver print]. 2023.31.3. Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the public domain.

Figure 9
Changing Shifts

Note. From Maurice Kish, 1942. [Oil on canvas]. 1977.82.2. Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the public domain.

Maurice Kish's oil painting, *Changing Shifts*, reflects the significant role that the coal industry played in the United States economy (see Figure 9). As large numbers of coal miners exit the mines on underground trolleys, new workers arrive to relieve them. The harshness of the working conditions is rendered by the stern expressions on the men's faces, the leafless trees, and the dark color palette. Students will notice details, such as the lights, which are affixed to the miners' helmets. When facilitating the study of the coal industry, educators would pose these questions:

- What is happening at this coal mine?
- What does this painting suggest about the importance of coal to the economy of the United States in the 1940s?
- Based on this painting, how would you describe the working conditions of coal miners in the early 1940s?

Figure 10
Manifest Destiny

Note. From Alexis Rockman, 2004. [Oil and acrylic on wood]. 2011.36A-D. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Copyright by Alexis Rockman.

In addition to recording the past and present, artists envision the future. Alexis Rockman depicted the potential multifarious effects of climate change and pollution in a futuristic, dystopian image of the waterfront in Brooklyn, New York. *Manifest Destiny* would be a strong springboard for students' exploration of environmental questions and creative problem-solving (see Figure 10). For the instructional use of the painting, the following prompts were written:

- How would you describe the Brooklyn waterfront in Alexis Rockman's painting?
- What sources of pollution do you see?

- What feelings do the colors in the painting evoke?
- How could people protect this environment?
- Please draw the waterfront as you would like it to be in the future.

Figure 11
Repaying Nature's Riches

Note. From Jean Carlu, 1941. [Gouache on paperboard]. 1984.124.47. Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the public domain.

Figure 12
Emperor Penguin, Admiralty Inlet Snow Hill, Antarctic

Note. Frank Wilbert Stokes, n.d. [Oil on canvas]. 1950.8.14. Smithsonian American Art Museum. In the public domain.

As students complete the Inquiry Arc, they communicate conclusions and take informed action. Engaging students in the creation of environmental artwork is recommended at this stage. They might advocate for the planting of trees or the protection of endangered species. Inspirational paintings include Jean Carlu's *Repaying Nature's Riches* and Frank Wilbert Stokes' *Emperor Penguin*. Exhibiting the students' artwork would offer positive reinforcement and enrich the learning environment. The questions on *Repaying Nature's Riches* and *Emperor Penguin* are:

- Look closely at *Repaying Nature's Riches*. According to the artist, Jean Carlu, what actions should people take to support nature?
- How does Carlu's work relate to the theme, human-environment interaction?
- What thoughts do you have when you look at Frank Wilbert Stokes' painting, *Emperor Penguin*?

- How would you describe the habitat of the emperor penguin?
- Why would global warming pose a danger to the penguin?

Art, discursive teaching, and literacy

The National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Library of Congress have numerous works of art that support environmental education in history and civics classes. To foster understanding of environmental exigencies, the employment of diverse sources in instruction is necessary. Art on environmental subjects has enormous potential to inform, influence, and inspire.

Art lends itself to discursive teaching methods. Students consider how subjects are represented. Among the social skills that derive from engagement with art are perspective-taking and empathy (Winner et al., 2013). When studying the works of art which were selected for this article, students will consider competing economic and environmental interests. Amy Charleroy and Pamela Paulson (2017) observed, "By joining together different disciplines and looking at an issue or idea from multiple perspectives, a new understanding or new level of creativity is often developed" (p. 39).

Arts integration utilizes diverse modalities and offers "multiple entry points," thereby making learning more accessible (Cowan & Leigh, 2021, p. 12; Diaz & McKenna, 2017). As the term, *multi-literacies,* suggests, texts take different forms, including images (New London Group, 1996). Representation and visualization enhance the learning process and the acquisition of literacy skills (Cowan & Leigh, 2021). Merryl Goldberg (2021) has written about the arts as "languages of learning" in diverse content areas, including the social studies (p. xv).

When studying art, students identify metaphors. They recognize that symbols represent and convey different meanings, and they engage in analogic thinking (Cowan & Leigh, 2021). When art analysis is combined with artmaking in history and civics classes, students explore new forms of expression. "The arts provide languages that afford students a variety of ways to express understanding," wrote Don Glass and Lisa Donovan (2017, p. 47).

Arts integration, national standards, and the Four C's

When teaching with artwork on environmental topics, educators address national standards in both the social studies and the arts. *The College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework* and the *National Core Arts Standards* emphasize analysis, interpretation, and communication (NCSS, 2013; National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). In the latter document, Anchor Standard 8 recommends that students "interpret intent and meaning in artistic work" (n.p). Anchor Standard 11 calls for students to "relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding" (n.p.).

In knowledge-based economies that rely on innovation, there is a need for people, who can develop creative solutions to complex problems. Creativity and innovation, critical

thinking and problem-solving, communication, and collaboration are the Four C's that have been identified by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009). Environmental literacy is among the Partnership's core subjects and themes. By engaging students in examinations of environmental art, educators encourage investigations of critical issues. Textbooks alone are insufficient for the study of global environmental challenges (Özdemir, 2022).

Art, equity, and community

All students deserve to have access to powerful teaching through art. Students from low- income families have historically not had equal access to deeper learning experiences (Mehta & Fine, 2019). Families, who have limited resources, are often unable to provide opportunities to build children's social capital (Cowan & Leigh, 2021). Low-income students and students of color are also more likely to live in communities, which are experiencing environmental degradation (Banzhaf, Ma, & Timmins, 2019).

By providing outlets for self-expression and reflection, art exhibits build a sense of community (Engdahl & Winkelman, 2017). As students view art in hallways, cafeterias, and other sites, they learn from one another. The interaction is generative. In the process of teaching and learning, visibility also leads to accountability and dialogue among both students and educators
(Meha & Fine, 2019). "Habits of responding, analyzing, and reflecting are also authentic artistic processes, and including these in arts-integration plans may allow for deeper cross-disciplinary investigations," wrote Charleroy and Paulson (2017, p. 38).

Creativity and deeper learning

When students create artwork on environmental topics, they transfer knowledge (Taylor, 2020). Participating in creative processes cultivates intrapersonal skills, such as initiative and self- direction, that are associated with deeper learning (Manalo, 2020). Creative work requires planning, persistence, and organization (Ivcevic & Nusbaum, 2017). Reformulations are part of the process (Ivcevic & Nusbaum, 2017). In addition to facilitating expression, creative commitments contribute to resiliency (Barbot & Heuser, 2017). Baptiste Barbot and Brianna Heuser (2017) argue that creative thinking fosters identity formation. Creativity can be developed (Karwowski & Brzeski, 2017).

Creative people are initiators, who influence others (Simonton, 2017). The artists, whose works were selected for this article, utilized their talents to warn, to record, and to inspire. Positive emotions are inherent in innovative processes (St-Louis and Vallerand, 2015). Artists often seek to make products that are pleasing emotionally, intellectually, and/or morally (Luria & Kaufman, 2017). Six dynamic forces or needs are experienced by creative people: beauty, power, discovery, communication, individuality, and pleasure (Luria & Kaufman, 2017). Interestingly, experiencing art positively affects brain systems, including systems of reward and motivation, executive control and attention, and emotional regulation (Stixrud & Marlowe,

2018).

Creative people engage in a process of discovery that may result in cultural and/or intellectual contributions to communities (Luria & Kaufman, 2017). Because people derive pleasure and meaning from the arts, artistic engagement in schools could have societal benefits (Winner et al., 2013). The study of environmental art has the potential to inspire students to address environmental challenges. Charleroy and Paulson (2017) wrote, "At the core of arts integration is the notion of alignment: that arts and non-arts content and practices are merged in the service of a common good" (p. 29).

Collaboration and cross-disciplinary work

"The arts provide a means and form to express our understanding of the world in an aesthetic as well as objective manner. Just as we can learn subject matter through the arts, the arts can teach us about the world in which we live," wrote Goldberg (2021, p. 223). To use a plurality of methods effectively in the teaching of environmental topics in history and civics courses, collaboration and professional development are needed. Many content-area teachers have yet to integrate the arts (Mears et al., 2017). Partnerships between schools, colleges of education, and museums hold promise. Teaching and visiting artists offer valuable insights and skills (Ayers, 2018; Barnum, 2017). "Collaboration is a powerful teaching and learning tool, allowing the strengths of each partner to inform the other's practice," wrote Barnum (2017, p. 133).

Conclusion

The use of visual art in history and civics courses has the potential to advance students' understanding of complex historical, civic, and environmental topics. The analysis of environmental art sheds light on the impacts of human behavior. Environmental arts integration supports critical thinking, mastery of content, creative expression, and, potentially, solution design. By facilitating work that is at disciplinary intersections and by offering intertextual experiences, educators will foster comprehensive learning. Environmental arts integration is a pedagogic practice that warrants the consideration of educators.

Julie Anne Taylor is a professor in the Department of Education at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She specializes in history education and arts integration. Dr. Taylor may be contacted at julietay@umich.edu.

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