American Illustration & the Art of Howard Pyle

Teacher’s Curriculum Guide

So the Treasure Was Divided, 1905
Howard Pyle

DELaware art museum
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**NOTICE:**

Several works of art in the Delaware Art Museum’s collection contain partial or full nudity. While we maintain the artistic integrity of these pieces and do not encourage censorship we have marked these pieces in an effort to provide educators with pertinent information. You will see a green inverted triangle (▼) next to any works that contain partial or full nudity, or mature content. This packet is intended for educators; please preview all materials before distributing to your class.
HOW TO USE THESE MATERIALS

These materials are designed to provide teachers with an overview of the artists and their work in this exhibition. This information can be used before and/or after a visit to the Delaware Art Museum, or as a substitute for teachers and schools that are unable to visit. Teachers should adapt these materials according to the grade level and ability of their students.

GOALS FOR LEARNING

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LOOKING AT ART WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Museums are among the best places for teaching people how to look carefully and to learn from looking. These skills, obviously critical to understanding art, are also important for experiencing the everyday world. Frequently referred to as "visual literacy", these skills are seldom taught, despite their usefulness.

There are many ways to approach looking at art. All of them are appropriate at different times. With young people, it is important to discover what catches their attention and try to pursue that interest. At other times, it might be useful to point out things you have noticed. In so doing, you help young people expand on their experiences and their capacities to think, analyze, and understand.

Identifying and talking about recognizable subject matter is a frequent beginning point. Inherent or imagined stories are too. Abstract issues can also be observed and discussed; for example, even quite young children can suggest meanings for colors and see the implied energy in a line or brushstroke.

Background information and biographies of artists have less relevance to younger children, although they are almost always of interest to older people. Instead, one can accomplish more by helping young children concentrate on and appreciate the images at hand. An excellent use of time in the Museum, therefore, is for adults and children to point out things to each other, and share their thoughts and feelings about what they might mean. You can, of course, make mental notes of things you might like to ask the artist if he or she were there, but emphasize what you can see and think about, instead of fretting about what you do not know. The process of discovering information in paintings can be fun and serious, in part because there are few rights and wrongs.

*From the Museum of Modern Art’s A Brief Guide for Looking at Art*
ABOUT HOWARD PYLE

From delart.org

**Howard Pyle (1853 – 1911)**

*American artist, illustrator, author, and teacher*

Today, Howard Pyle is not nearly as well-known as his images. However, he was one of America’s most popular illustrators and storytellers at a time when top illustrators were celebrities. At his death, he was designated by the *New York Times* “the father of American magazine illustration as it is known to-day.” His illustrations appeared in magazines like *Harper’s Monthly, Collier’s Weekly, St. Nicholas,* and *Scribner’s Magazine,* gaining him national and international exposure. And because magazines so influenced the nation’s visual culture, Pyle’s images and stories—including American history and tales of pirates and medieval adventurers—reached millions, helping to shape the American imagination.

Pyle’s influence and images continue to inform popular culture. Norman Rockwell described him as his “hero,” and contemporary illustrator James Gurney (the Dinotopia series) is an unabashed Pyle fan. Many cinematographers and filmmakers revere Pyle’s art, reflected in Hollywood images of medieval heroes and Caribbean pirates. Early filmmakers were influenced by Pyle’s techniques of storytelling, and costume designers and actors (like Errol Flynn) referenced Pyle’s depictions of pirates and Robin Hood. This legacy continues in later 20th- and early-21st-century film, illustration, and animation, where artists continue to use his work as both a source and an inspiration. Pyle’s experiences as an artist, writer, illustrator, and celebrity brought him in contact with fascinating figures in American history. He illustrated fiction by Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as poetry by William Dean Howells and history by Henry Cabot Lodge and Woodrow Wilson. Many students’ visions of American history were shaped by Pyle’s vivid illustrations. As part of the mainstream artist community in New York, he belonged to the Salmagundi Club, the Century Club, and the Players Club, where he socialized with the nation’s most famous artists, including Winslow Homer, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and William Merritt Chase, among others.
What is Illustration? The term refers to many different styles, artists, and interpretations—but at its simplest core an illustration is any picture accompanied by text. American Illustration experienced its height of popularity in the period between 1880 and 1930. At the beginning of this era illustrated periodicals became a widely sought after form of entertainment for the public at large and continued until the rise of the motion picture which soon drew more popularity (Elzea 7). During this time Americans enjoyed increased literacy due to greater access to public education and increased leisure time, both of which encouraged the rapid production and publication of illustrated periodicals. The advance of illustration as a widespread art form depended heavily upon the technological advances of the era. Wood engraving changed significantly during this time period, as innovators like Pyle began to push the limits of the linear medium with more expressive line work. The halftone process was also invented in the latter part of the century which allowed artists to work in a variety of black-and-white tones due to advances in the photomechanical reproduction process of tones. This eventually gave way to the four-color halftone process which enabled artist to reproduce their work in full color (7). Slowly these advances became less cost prohibitive and kept the emergence of illustration moving steadily forward.

In many ways Howard Pyle is considered the father of American illustration. Previously, most artists were trained with a heavy European influence that dictated stiff forms and predictable subjects. Pyle questioned the rigid guidelines set forth by European academic training and began to push out into new ways of depicting stories through illustration. Academically trained painters did not explore the multiple affordances between outdoor light and indoor lighting, deal with movement, or search out expressive feelings in their subjects. Pyle explored by challenging these conventions of academic painting and made illustration imaginative in a way that it had not been in picture making before this time (Pitz 49).

While Pyle led the charge, illustration in America flourished during this time period and produced many new names: Katharine Richardson Wireman, Elizabeth Shippen Green, N. C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell, and countless others. Illustration allowed artists to expand the smallest moments of life in order to be considered, processed, and examined. Illustration enabled humor, fantasy, imagination, and history—it told stories and remembered times past, and for that reason it is woven deeply into the history of this country.
Howard Pyle was intensely interested in matters of historical fantasy—the stuff of legends and myth. He is best known for his work of pirates, specifically in reference to the illustrations he created for the book Robinson Crusoe. Through Pyle’s work with pirates he depicted hero-villains such as Blackbeard and other unsavory characters and buccaneers and largely shaped the way we view these characters today in our imaginations and even on the silver screen (Loechle 59). Pyle took the elements of piracy that were the most provocative (pillaging, marooning, mutiny, battles, treasure, etc…) and penned images of characters that embody those ideals in depiction as well as description. Previously, drawings of pirates were overly-simplistic or too gentlemanly—he transformed and consistently influences our collective idea of piracy today. While these characters were influenced largely by Pyle’s imagination, there is an element of truth to his work that remains to be one of the key defining features of his illustrations. Even in the midst of a blue sea where we as the viewer are privy to a private moment between a stranded sailor and a beautiful mermaid emerging from the deep there is an emotion present that resonates—it was this ability to portray emotional reality through imaginary moments that set Pyle apart from his contemporaries.

Not only was Pyle an illustrator, but also a writer. His interest in Arthurian legends is enjoyed through the tetralogy he wrote in the early 1900s retelling the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table that Pyle recalled from his youth. However his first work was a color illustration of “The Lady of Shalott” by Alfred Lord Tennyson (Lupack 47). As with all his work, Pyle continued to depict flawed heroes in the ancient legends, turning men like Sir Launcelot into examples of “flawed perfection” (52) thus giving the stories a life and depth which had previously been absent. His dealings with Arthurian legend also inspired his students, namely N.C. Wyeth to continue exploring these tales as fodder for imaginative illustration. Wyeth would go on to pass the tradition on to his son Andrew, who also created some illustrated works of Arthurian legend.

Regardless of subject matter, Pyle consistently “looked for what he called the ‘supreme moment,’ the phase of action that conveys the most suspense, often a fateful encounter or a moment of decision” (Gurney 38). This moment presented intense emotion without giving away the story to the wandering eyes of the reader before it was time, thus enhancing enjoyment.
Howard Pyle not only concerned himself with issues of fantasy and legend, he was also heavily immersed in documenting the history of America. He painted important scenes like the Battle of Lexington, the Battle of Bunker Hill, Thomas Jefferson writing in private the Declaration of Independence, and many other instances from the American Revolution. Pyle “helped the nation visualize its own history” (Campbell Coyle 73) by providing the public with a visual memory for moments of great historical and national import.

Howard Pyle, along with several other illustrators, was commissioned in the late nineteenth century to produce twelve paintings that would be run in *Scribner’s Magazine* as illustrations for Henry Cabot Lodge’s serialized story, “Story of the American Revolution” (Evans 52). The imagery Pyle creates around the American Revolution is infused with his trademark style—intense feeling and emotion etched onto the faces of every person in the frame. While evidencing a high level of American patriotism, his pieces were founded in concrete evidence. Pyle drew his illustrations from historical documents regarding the battles and sought to create historical accuracy (Campbell Coyle 75). Thus authenticity, in feeling and event, becomes a defining feature of these works. Through these works Pyle can be seen as an essentially American artist. His work did show some likeness to European artists of the time as he would have been familiar with international work, but he makes clear his allegiance is in creating and taking part in a new national art. In his article, “A Small School of Art” printed in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1897 he questions the existence of a developed American artistic style. Pyle writes, “Why have we no national art?” (85) and goes on to suggest the development of an American identity through art (see Curriculum Connection “Being American”), an ideal represented often in his work.
CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

This information can be taught before and/or after a visit to a museum. Please adapt the information and activities to the grade level, ability, and learning styles of your students. Teachers may find some of them more suitable than others for meeting specific classroom goals. These materials may be reproduced for educational purposes.

ALL LEVELS

Visual Thinking Strategies—Sometimes artwork is off-putting, sometimes it looks complicated, and sometimes it looks like a child could have made it. In order to break down students’ pre-conceptions or misconceptions use the screencast tutorial on VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies) to help you and your students feel confident about discussing new art, or discussing art at all! This is especially helpful for use in non-art classrooms.

Visual Analysis—Using works of art from E-Museum, have students discuss the basic elements of art. Examining the artist’s use of line, color, shape, space, light, and texture encourages students to look beyond the image itself to the ways in which it was painted.

ELEMENTARY LEVEL

Playing Illustrator—Pyle and other illustrators often were tasked with creating images that reflected the time in which they lived. Use the magazine cover template in the appendix and have students draw a cover image. Ask them to write an explanation of why that image relates to their current life.

Describing the Imaginary—Pyle was a master of creating reality in the form of the imaginary, ask students to pick their favorite tall tale, legend, or imaginary thing (e.g. mermaid, unicorn, Paul Bunyan, Abominable Snowman, Dragon, etc.) and describe it in great detail—so much detail that it feels real. Optional: Have students accompany their description with a drawing.

Noticing Detail—Pyle was a master of minimizing unnecessary detail. Using the downloadable Power Point of images or E-Museum, ask students to look at several of Pyle’s works and point out areas that let them know what is going on. They might point to the eyes of the soldier and say he looks scared, or mention the embrace of the mermaid (❤️) and say she looks like she is in love. Talk about how the pieces Pyle chose to include were important and discuss what he might have left out on purpose.

Creating a Story—Print out or project one of the images from our collection on E-Museum, or choose one from the companion Power Point and ask students to tell a story based on the moment they see in the illustration. What happened before this moment? After?
SECONDARY LEVEL

**Playing Illustrator**—Ask students to use a class text (suggested: multi-chapter novel) and select an instance of the “supreme moment.” They will select a line or two of text that will serve as the direction for their illustration. Ask them to depict the supreme moment they chose and discuss why it fits the description to the class or in a writing assignment. Alternative: Assign lines of text from the book to groups of students and have them work together to depict the supreme moment and explain why the lines might have been chosen.

**Being “American”**—(for advanced grades/readers) Howard Pyle engaged in the discussion of developing an American style of painting (see his article in the appendix). Today, we might not always think about whether or not something is truly American or the importance of that. Have your students read excerpts from Pyle’s article “A Small School of Art” in conjunction with excerpts from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (see appendix) and ask them to attempt to summarize what the authors/artists are saying about America or Americans. What are the similarities? Differences? Why were people concerned about the identity associated with the artwork (writing and visual) produced during the 19th century? Make sure to show them some of Pyle’s paintings that typify this idea of an “American art” such as *Thomas Jefferson Writing the Declaration of Independence* or *The Fight at Lexington Common*. Extended learning: Can your students think of any discussions of this nature happening in our world today? Is it still important to define ourselves as American in our writing, art, etc.?

**The Anti-Hero**—Pyle had a fixation with creating complex heroes, like his pirates that clearly had flaws, but were painted as heroic in many instances. Ask your students to think critically about the make-up of an anti-hero. As a class make a “dossier” of the characteristics of an anti-hero. Who in your reading might fit the bill? Are flawed heroes better or worse than perfect heroes? Are there any examples in the world today (politics, humanitarianism, pop-culture) that have examples of perfect or anti-heroes? Additional: As a good discussion starter ask students to brainstorm a list of popular television shows/movies that have anti-heroes as a central character. Examples might include Breaking Bad, Batman, Pirates of the Caribbean, etc.
APPENDIX

Please find in the following materials items referenced in the Curriculum Guide which may aid in classroom learning. Please also consider downloading the companion PowerPoint document for images of the artwork referenced in this guide.

Contents:

- Harper’s Weekly Magazine excerpt of Howard Pyle’s article “A Small School of Art”
- Harper’s Weekly illustration activity page
- Selections from Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman
A SMALL SCHOOL OF ART.

BY RODMAN JETSCH.

Every now and then an isolated incident or the world that lies beyond the limits of the studios. Why have we not admired art? To this we say, "in the study, re-

Blessed, there is to be no such thing as a strictly national art. The study is not limited in any sens-

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MUSIC NOTES

The "Baron de Poinci" has published an interesting article by Georges Bizet, in the issue of Généza's "Musique." The theme is in very warm and brilliant colors, and should certainly hold the interest of any musician. It is a study on the art of counterpoint, and contains some valuable observations on the subject. The article is concise and well-written, and should be of great interest to all who are engaged in the study of music.

The article is published in the June issue of Généza, and is well worth reading. It contains some very interesting observations on the art of counterpoint, and should be of great interest to all who are engaged in the study of music.

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WHITMAN EXCERPTS

Some of these selections can be quite difficult for students. It may be a good idea to summarize as a class before asking them to look for elements of Whitman’s writing in Pyle’s writing or images.

Democratic Vistas

“I suggest, therefore, the possibility, should some two or three really original American poets, (perhaps artists or lecturers,) arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that, from their eminence, fusing contributions, races, far localities, &c., together, they would give more compaction and more moral identity, (the quality to-day most needed,) to these States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike, or materialistic experiences.”

Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass

“The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes... . Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves. Here the performance disdaining the trivial unapproached in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings and the push of its perspective spreads with crampless and flowing breadth and showers its proflic and splendid extravagance. One sees it must indeed own the riches of the summer and winter, and need never be bankrupt while corn grows from the ground or the orchards drop apples or the bays contain fish or men beget children upon women.”
GLOSSARY

**Academic**: A general term for artworks that seem to be based upon rules set up by some person or group other than the artist. Artists created academic artworks by following established, traditional rules emphasized by leaders of European art schools or academies in the 1700s and 1800s.

**Buccaneer**: A specific term for pirates that attacked ships moving valuable goods during the 17th century in the Caribbean Sea. The term has become synonymous with pirate.

**Illustration**: A painting or drawing that was originally created to be viewed with corresponding text. Illustrations were typically found in magazines, periodicals, and books in the early twentieth-century.

**Supreme Moment**: Refers to the exact scene in a text that can display intense emotion and a pivotal moment without giving up the ending when portrayed in a visual medium.
WORKS CONSULTED


Lupack, Alan, and Barbara Tepa Lupack. “Howard Pyle and the Arthurian Legends.” Campbell Coyle 47-55.

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