

OUR AMERICA: THE LATINO PRESENCE IN AMERICAN ART

Curriculum Connections

About the exhibition: “This exhibition features art created since the 1950s, when long-standing Latino communities increasingly demanded equal rights, the island of Puerto Rico became a commonwealth of the United States, and newer arrivals reached the American mainland. As more and more Latino artists entered art schools, they created works stimulated by their collective group histories and U.S. artistic context. Their related cultural and historical experiences, which for some included being marginalized within American society, often shaped their artistic perspectives¹.”

This packet will address, in varying degrees, the below listed standards. The texts and concepts contained are most appropriate for students in Middle and High School.

DE Visual Art Standards

- 2.1: Identify the elements of art.
- 2.4: Analyze the elements of art.
- 3.5: Describe and differentiate the origins of specific subject matter, symbols, and ideas in works of art.
- 3.6: Analyze how the use of subject matter, symbols, and ideas are used in works of art.
- 4.3: Describe how the arts and artists influence each other across history and cultures.
- 4.4: Speculate on how history and culture give meaning to a work of art.
- 5.5: Evaluate the artist’s intent and effectiveness in communicating ideas and emotions in works of art.
- 6.1 Compare and contrast relationships and characteristics between the visual arts and other disciplines.
- 6.3: Describe how skills transfer between the visual arts and other disciplines.

National Core Art Standards

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| Creating | #1—Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. |
| Producing | #6 Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. |
| Responding | #7—Perceive and analyze artistic work.
#8—Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
#9—Evaluate and apply criteria to evaluate artistic work |

¹ Excerpted from Smithsonian exhibition website: http://www.americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/our_america/online_exhibition.cfm

SELECTED EXHIBITION THEMES

Images and discussion of the artwork in this exhibition are available at:

http://www.americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/our_america/online_exhibition.cfm

Visit the site, created by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, to locate images and descriptions of exhibition themes. This guide functions as a companion piece to the site and suggests possible project applications for selected themes. Be sure to browse the entirety of the site in order to view all of the works in the exhibition.

< WE INTERRUPT THIS MESSAGE >

Throughout American history the portrayal of minority groups in the media and in film has been largely stereotyped or absent. Look at *À la Mode* by the conceptual art group Asco. This image is a movie still from a non-existent movie, the still was distributed to the media and taken as a real film initially.

- Why do you think the artists might want to fool the public into thinking this film was really being made?
- What does this image hint at with regards to the plot line of the “No Movie”
- What roles do you think Latin Americans typically get cast in movies? What about in our collective memory?

PROJECT IDEAS:

1. Stage your own “No Movie” still. Think about another group or idea that typically is not celebrated in a positive way and craft a scene with characters that move your idea to the lead role. Snap the photo and share with the class—or better yet print it in the school newspaper as a film release!
2. Grab stills from some of today’s most popular movies. Look at them as a group and try to determine themes, similarities, categories, that stick out to you. Does examining the movies we consume today as a group tell you anything about who or what we value as a society?

< REFRAMING THE PAST AND PRESENT >

What does it mean to be an American? Several of the artists in this show ask this question and attempt to answer it with their work. The artists are engaging in a visual representation or reminder of American history and Latino history. Look at *Platanal* by Myrna Báez. As a class, discuss the meaning of the piece in three ways.

- Begin the discussion with only the image, name, and title of the work. What can you understand about the piece only knowing these things?
- Next, introduce a new fact: this is Puerto Rico, the artist’s home. Does this add to your discussion?
- Finally, introduce the last fact: the Spanish-American War (1898) resulted in Spain ceding Puerto Rico to the United States. If we understand history as a seed idea for this piece does it alter the meaning? How?

PROJECT IDEAS:

1. For Báez, painting and drawing something gives a sense of control or ownership—by painting Puerto Rico she can claim it as hers and not a place owned by tourists or another country. Choose something or someplace you want to reclaim and draw it as it looks to you, not to anyone else.
2. Look at the images of Puerto Rico from tourism websites, magazines, travel pamphlets, etc. and compare and contrast the images in the published media versus Báez’s painting. Do they match? Where are the differences? Discuss perspective.

< THE GRAPHICS BOOM >

The Latino civil rights movement was heavily influenced by the graphic arts. Latino artists used their access to printing presses to swiftly and publicly respond to the injustice they saw running rampant amongst their workers, women, and wars. Look at Ester Hernandez' piece *Sun Mad*.

- This piece is somewhat familiar to us as Americans; work through its meaning and purpose with Visual Thinking Strategies by answering the following questions as a group.
 - What is going on in this picture?
 - What do you see that makes you say that?
 - What else can we find?

PROJECT IDEAS:

1. This mode of advertisement *subversion* or *appropriation* is still used today to publicize opinion and mount public following. Look up the terms *subvert* and *appropriate* and in pairs, search online for another (possibly more recent) example of this kind of graphic art. Compare the subverted image to the commercial image and present the differences and artist's argument to the class.
2. Make your own graphic art statement. Choose the logo of a company or product that has created some kind of public misdeed (in your opinion) and reinvent the logo to reflect your argument.

< MIGRATING THROUGH HISTORY >

While many Latinos immigrated to America hoping to escape the political uncertainty of their homelands others (like Puerto Ricans and Mexicans) were incorporated into the United States and granted citizenship. Many of the works in this exhibition consider the repercussions of immigration, displacement, and identity. Look at *Unknown Distances* by Iliana Emilia García.

- When you look at this photo, what do you immediately feel?
- Imagine the piece with many more chairs, or with people on the beach, how would this affect the meaning of the image?
- If the chairs were set in a city street or an open field, would that change the meaning?

PROJECT IDEAS:

1. García is able to convey meaning and feeling about a complex subject (immigration) with a mostly empty frame and two chairs. Try and visually represent another complex subject with minimal elements through a photograph or drawing.
2. Read some first-person accounts of refugees or immigrants. Can you identify some of the same feelings in the writings as are portrayed in García and the other artists' works?