

Lesson Title: Documenting History: Photographs as Social Commentaries

Grade Level: 5-12

Connections: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Students examine photographs that make social statements, resulting from events that occurred during the artists' lives. Suggested activities encourage students to identify the social statements related to historical context, content or subject matter, purpose, visual impact, symbolism, and their personal reaction to each or the photographs.

National History Standards –

- The changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I
- The origins and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs
- Draw upon the visual data presented in photographs, paintings, cartoons, and architectural drawings

National Visual Arts Standards -

- Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes
- Chooses and evaluates a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
- Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
- Reflects upon and assesses the characteristics and merits of their work and others
- Makes connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Performance Objectives:

Students will examine the content, symbolism, and their personal reactions to works of art that make expressive statements about social issues.

Slides:

Morris Huberland

Bread Line, late 1930's.

Vintage silver print; signed, titled, and stamped on verso; 6-3/4 x 7-1/4 inches.

The Great Depression ravaged America throughout the 1930's, beginning in September 1929 on "Black Tuesday," the single most devastating day for the New York Stock Exchange in history. In January of 1931 the President's Emergency Committee for Unemployment Relief claimed 4 to 5 million people were unemployed, climbing to almost 25% by 1933. People who had always been able to support themselves found they were unable to secure a job to put food on the table and often lost their homes. Bread lines became a common sight, for innumerable families had to depend on charity in order to survive. Huberland captures the hopelessness many were feeling in this photograph of a bread line.

George Gilbert

American Faces, New York c. 1940

Vintage silver print; signed on verso; 9-1/4 x 7-3/8 inches.

George Gilbert's photo accentuates Franklin D. Roosevelt's tremendous popularity. The only president to serve more than two terms, FDR was President for four consecutive terms until 1945 when he suffered from a stroke and died. Defeating Hoover who was running for a second term in 1932, FDR promised to instill a plan for economic recovery he called the "New Deal." Upon election and the implementation of the New Deal, he implemented numerous policies to help Americans until the depression could be overcome. Leading the Americans through their recovery from the Great Depression, FDR then had to help guide U.S. citizens through World War II.

Arthur Rothstein

Wife and Child of a Sharecropper, Washington County, Arkansas, August 1935.

[Farm Security Administration]

Vintage silver print; signed ("Arthur Rothstein") on mount verso; 9-1/2 x 6-5/8 inches.

Arthur Rothstein belonged to a team of photographers that worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). FSA was a committee that was put together in attempts to aid members of rural communities suffering from severe poverty after the Great Depression as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal." Rothstein later recalled, "It was our job to document the problems of the Depression so that we could justify the New Deal legislation that was designed to alleviate them."

Jack Delano

Miner at Dougherty's Mine, near Falls Creek, Pennsylvania, August 1940. [Farm Security Administration]

Vintage silver print; signed and annotated ("41332d") on verso; ex-Delano collection; 9-3/8 x 6-7/8 inches.

The Agricultural Department also hired Jack Delano as a photographer for the FSA and this photograph focuses on the working conditions of the coal miner. Between 1880 and 1930 the coal industry expanded as the production of steel required coal to fuel the furnaces. In the 1930's mining sites could be found throughout the East and mechanization began to be implemented within coal mines but the conditions were still dirty and the risk of injury or death due to explosions or a shaft collapsing was still high. Workers were typically immigrants and were required to live in company built efficiency towns called "patches."

David Robbins

Antiwar Demonstration c. 1941

Vintage silver print; initialed by daughter and annotated ("77") on verso; 8-7/8 x 7-3/8 inches.

The year was 1941 and the world was in a tumultuous state. World War II was raging and the United States was still attempting to remain neutral. David Robbins' photograph illustrates the general feeling of American citizens who were not willing to commit to a war while still struggling to overcome the effects of the Great Depression. However, on December 7th Pearl Harbor was bombed in a surprise attack by the Japanese. The Japanese Admiral Yamamoto afterwards said, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant" and his words proved true, for the U.S. joined the Allied cause and in 1945 both the German Nazi regime and the Japanese admitted defeat.

Rosalie Gwathmey
Shout Freedom c. 1945

Vintage silver print; photographers stamp on verso; illustrate in This Is the Photo League (1948) 7 3/4x 6 1/2 inches

Shout Freedom is a photograph that emphasizes the struggles faced by African Americans in the United States. The ratification of the 13th amendment outlawing slavery in 1866 and the additions of the 14th and 15th amendments were supposed to protect African Americans as equal citizens. However, African Americans were still a long ways from being treated as the equal counterparts of other United States citizens. The Supreme Court ruled in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896 that “separate but equal” was in compliance with the 14th amendment, legalizing segregation. It would not be until 1954, in the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, that the Supreme Court would rule that segregation was a violation of African Americans’ Constitutional rights.

Vocabulary:

Photograph- an image formed on film by a camera and developed with chemicals to produce a print

Photography- the act, process, art or profession of making photographs

League - a group of people or organizations working together for a common goal

Documentary- a film or photograph that shows social conditions or records actual events without fictionalizing them

Questions for Discussion:

The photographs from the Photo League often reflected the social and economic conditions produced by war. Select a photograph and identify how it portrays a social or economic condition? What symbolism can you identify?

What do you think the photographer was trying to say?

Do you have an emotional response to any of these photographs? If so, which one and why?

What makes a photograph a documentary photograph?

Interdisciplinary Activities:

1. War and the social and economic conditions as a result of war profoundly affected the photographers who were members of the Photo League. In response members directed their attention towards documenting the way of life of the working class and explored the concepts of social and **documentary photography**. Students should create a **photo** collage that represents a **documentary** about a present social or cultural issue.
2. Students should compose a journal entry about the events of a specific war and the results of that war. They should incorporate visual illustrations in their responses.

3. One of the major activities of the Photo **League** was the publication of a monthly bulletin *Photo Notes*, which was an important source of news and ideas about photography. Have students review an editorial published in *Photo Notes* and identify any social, economic or social issues presented in the publication and create a written response to the editorial.
4. Documenting History. Students can develop a visual documentary of the Depression, World War I or World War II using photocopies of 10 to 20 pictures taken during the war. Students should select images are the most effective in conveying their personal response to the social climate at the time. Students should write a caption for each picture that explains the image and its significance. Finally, they should write an introduction to your photo essay that briefly explains the message you want to get across.
5. After reviewing the Bill of Rights, students should select one of the original provisions or an amendment or a portion of an amendment for further study. Ask the students to photograph something or create a photographic transfer collage that illustrates what life might be like without the amendment and have them discuss why the amendment might be important.
6. Using the photos from the Photo League have the students discuss what rights from the Bill of Rights might be illustrated and how it is represented.