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The West in the Capitol Rotunda: Nationalism and Racism in Early 19th Century Art

Background

Reading and discussing Vivien Green Fryd's *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815-1860*¹ in class, significantly altered the way I look at early 19th century America. In the book, Fryd examines and offers a new Revisionist interpretation of the artwork on display in the United States Capitol. She argues that the art was not chosen at random. Rather, Congress deliberately commissioned the pieces illustrating and promoting the course of empire, and thus Euro-American dominance of the North American continent and the native inhabitants to create a sense of nationalism and national identity to unite white Americans. The federal government of the new United States of America used the halls of the Capitol to set social and racial hierarchies, proclaiming via sponsored artwork, which groups of people were "in" and which were "out" in the new republic.

When reading Fryd's book in class, I could not help but be amazed that such racist attitudes could be present in the Capitol building, a place that, today, represents a nation that prides itself on democracy, equality, and inclusiveness. Instead of celebrating the cultures that defined the Early Republic, the art separates out and demeans certain ethnic and cultural groups. Questioning the appropriateness of the art is unavoidable after reading Fryd, especially considering the lack of interpretive signs in the Capitol, where visitors are forced to rely on tour guides who often offer inadequate explanations for what their groups see. Given the significance of the Capitol, should art, indeed anything, with such a message be prominently, even proudly,

¹ Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815- 1860*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001).

displayed in such a place? Should the art of the Capitol and the Rotunda more accurately represent the current beliefs and feelings in the United States, rather than those of the early 19th century?

Though not exactly about the Capitol Rotunda, James W. Loewen asks similar questions in his book *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*. The book is about the importance of challenging inaccurate history at historic sites, and his ideas propel projects like this one. In his examination of mistaken history at sites across the country, Loewen identifies the preservation of these lies and half-truths as attempts to remember the good and conform to the national myth Congress worked so hard to create in *Art and Empire*, or at least local sensibilities. The mission of the historian, Loewen believes, should be to question and challenge the myth, especially in the places Americans turn to for their history, no matter how difficult it may be. We have to remember that “[p]eople who put up markers and monuments and preserve historic houses are usually pillars of the white community... Americans still work and live in a landscape of white supremacy.”² Whether or not this statement is exaggerated, the result at the sites is a “landscape of denial,” continued blatant racism, disrespect, and the omission of controversial topics such as gender, slavery, and sexual orientation.³ “Indeed, questioning the myths as told on the American landscape is intrinsically subversive, since the interrogation itself diminishes their power to motivate human behavior, a power that depends on shared belief.”⁴ Loewen successfully makes the case that despite the need for a shared belief in history to unify the country, we cannot do so at the expense of the truth or to make ourselves feel better.

² James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*, (New York: The New Press, 1999), 16.

³ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 16-19.

⁴ Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 22-23.

Though simple to ask, these questions are not easy to answer. No reasonable alternatives have been offered, at least as far as the research for this paper is concerned, and the likelihood of making significant changes to the Capitol, even just the Rotunda, is very small. In my personal opinion, the most reasonable solution would be a reinterpretation of the Capitol, with an emphasis on expanding signage to give visitors the opportunity to understand why the art is in the Capitol, most especially its original purpose, even if their tour guide, for whatever reason, fails to give a sufficient interpretation.

The project accompanying this paper, *Capitol Art: Teaching the Art of the Rotunda for 5th Graders*,⁵ presents an alternative to the weak on-site interpretation at the Capitol and another option for educators looking to find more interactive ways of teaching American history. It is also designed to be used in tandem with the website of the Architect of the Capitol.⁶ Suzie Mantz and I decided to focus on pre-collegiate education and create a resource for fifth grade teachers using Fryd's book as a starting point and central theme. Through her analysis of works of art located in the Capitol Rotunda, teachers can examine ideas such as nationalism, racism, westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, white paternalism and superiority, and American imperialism, as well as Early American art with their students in their own classrooms.

A Look At *Capitol Art*

Capitol Art was not designed as a ready-to-use lesson plan, as many classroom resources are.⁷ Instead, the goal of this website is to give teachers information and tools they may not

⁵ This website is live at www.capitolart.wordpress.com.

⁶ The website for the Architect of the Capitol is available at www.aoc.gov. It contains a significant amount of information about the artwork of the Capitol, including the Rotunda.

⁷ Some examples of ready-to-use lesson plans include Teaching with Historic Places (<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/>), Teaching with Museum Collections

otherwise have access to or know about. As detailed below, *Capitol Art* does provide classroom activities, but the background information is not necessarily interpreted for students, as it is in lesson plans such as those from the Teaching with Historic Places program for example. Instead, teachers are encouraged to take what they need from the website and leave feedback via the comment feature of Wordpress.com so other teachers can see how they used the information and interact with one another.

The first section of *Capitol Art*, “Using Visual Culture,” is designed to give educators and other visitors an idea of the importance of visual culture and where the field is now. Teachers need to know why we are suggesting they study the art of the early 19th century when they study the period in their classrooms. The section also contains an explanation of iconography. For the most part, it relies on books and articles read in class, particularly Peter Burke’s *Eyewitnessing*.⁸

The second part, “History of the Art,” primarily contains a review of Fryd’s *Art and Empire*. Considering the extent to which we utilize the book, we felt it was important to provide teachers with a thorough background as to what Fryd argues and the examples she uses. This section therefore also includes an introduction to the art of the Capitol Rotunda. As Fryd does, we place an emphasis on race and ethnicity, especially ideas of subjugation of the native people and, to a lesser extent, the absence of African-Americans from the walls of the Rotunda.

The next section a set of four “Classroom Activities” teachers can use in class after going through the information provided at *Capitol Art* and by the Architect of the Capitol. The activities were designed to be used together, as each builds on the previous one, but teachers have the option of using as many as they wish and modifying them to suit their needs. The goal

(<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/tmc/index.htm>), Smithsonian American Art Museum (<http://americanart.si.edu/education/classroom/results/>), and PBS (<http://www.pbs.org/art21/education/naturalworld/lesson2.html>).

⁸ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001).

of the activities is for students to think critically about what they are looking at and relate it to their own lives.

The first activity, “Buzz Words,” is a brain-storming activity for the whole class. Students are asked to think about the material they have seen and come up with “buzz words” or themes they see. While there are set answers, we do provide teachers with a list of words expected to come up. For the second activity, “Rewrite the Picture Plaque,” students are to choose a piece of art from the list at the Architect of the Capitol and write a label that describes the art. They are to go beyond simply the name-and-date formula currently employed by the Capitol and use their label to tell visitors, and their classmates, about the social and cultural implications of the art. “Who’s Missing” utilizes questions to get at the misrepresentation of the American people in the Rotunda art. By identifying the people they see and how they relate to American history and art, they can see who is not shown. Students are given the opportunity to come up with what they might like to see in the Rotunda. The final activity, “Paint A New Picture,” comes directly off “Who’s Missing.” Students are given a blank picture frame and told to choose a person or event, not already shown in the Rotunda, important to American history. They are to “paint” a new picture, one significant to them. At this point, the teacher can engage students in a discussion about some of the ethical questions of the Capitol artwork, such as the place of the racist reliefs, and what could possibly be done about them, much like the discussion we had in class after reading *Art and Empire* and visiting the Capitol.

The fourth section of *Capitol Art* is an image gallery containing images of artwork mentioned in the informational text sections of the website. Given the centrality of art and the visual to this project, not providing images would be unthinkable. The image gallery does not interpret each piece of art, but it does give users a place to quickly find the images without doing

too much extra searching. It also contains images not located in the Rotunda, but that do exemplify the themes *Capitol Art* highlights, namely, racism in early 19th century art.

The final section of the website is a comprehensive bibliography of books, articles, and websites used in the creation of the website and for this paper. Teachers interested in any of the range of topics covered by the website should have a starting point for exploring them more in depth. Knowing what we used in the creation of the website might be useful to them also as well. The bibliography also includes some of the digital resources available and some examples of ready-made lesson plans, namely the ones we used as models for *Capitol Art*.

Fryd in Context

Visual Culture as Evidence

Placing Fryd's work in artistic and historical context was an important first step in this project. Even more important, however, is the case for the use of visual culture as evidence. Without a solid foundation on the importance of visual culture the entire ideological basis of this project falls apart. Three class readings argued for the use of visual culture, all of which were used to promote the concept to teachers in the "Using Visual Culture" section of *Capitol Art*, where a basic discussion of what visual culture is and why it should be used can be found.

One of the goals of this project was to reinforce the idea of using visual culture, objects such as paintings, reliefs, statues, frescoes, etc., as part of studying early America. As Michael L. Wilson notes, historians are often more than happy to use visual sources in their work, but most often, they utilize them not as sources in their own right. "Historians regard images as *supplemental*... Visual sources are of interest insofar as they confirm what historians learn by

examining other kinds of records.”⁹ Wilson goes on to posit that historians and visual culture scholars have much to offer each other, at the very least new sources and analytical skills for one another, as well as a combined effort at starting to answer methodological questions both fields struggle with.¹⁰

Visual sources offer historians a fresh, new way of looking at the past. Peter Burke suggests “[p]aintings, statues, prints, and so on allow us, posterity, to share the non-verbal experiences or knowledge of past cultures... They bring home to us what we may have known but did not take so seriously before. In short, images allow us to ‘imagine’ the past more vividly.”¹¹ Recent studies in 19th century French spa culture by Douglas Mackman and of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, a 19th century American women’s periodical, by Isabelle Lehuu, support Burke’s assertion. In both cases, the historians noticed a large discrepancy between the visual and textual culture of the time, suggesting that what was really happening was not what was being *written* about.¹² In these cases, the experience did not match the reported events, something modern historians only know now through the visual culture of the time, in one case souvenir photo books, in the other, the magazine itself.

By re-inserting the study of images into the study of early 19th century America in classrooms, students will get the opportunity to not only learn what those Americans wrote down, but what they were exposed to and what they were thinking and feeling off the record. Vanessa R. Schwarz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski argue that “visual culture studies is constituted less by its topical repertoire and more to the degree that it produces a discursive space where

⁹ Michael L. Wilson, “Visual Culture: A useful category of historical analysis?” in eds. Vanessa R. Schwarz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, *Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.

¹⁰ Wilson, “Visual Culture,” 31.

¹¹ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 13.

¹² Wilson, “Visual Culture,” 30.

questions and materials that have been traditionally marginalized within the established disciplines become central.”¹³ Using the visual sources of evidence bring questions of racism, white superiority, and subjugation directly into the conversation about 19th century America in a way these ideas are not often talked about, especially in a pre-collegiate classroom.

Artistic and Historical Context

Part of putting together *Capitol Art* was gaining an understanding of where exactly Fryd’s analysis of the art of the Capitol falls in the related scholarship. Given the breadth of *Art and Empire*, this research led to a variety of topics, though they all focused primarily on images of the past. Other themes ranged from traditionally historical topics to art to iconography and symbology.

William H. Truettner’s catalog accompanying the 1991 exhibit *West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* at the Smithsonian National Art Museum examines through art many of the same themes as Fryd’s *Art and Empire*: westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, and subjugation of the North American continent and native people.¹⁴ This text, however, takes it one step further than Fryd, when Elizabeth Broun says in the forward that Americans have noticed the “inadequacies and insensitivities” in the traditional American myth and are beginning to take steps to change it.¹⁵ The *West as America* exhibit not only covered the art found in the United States Capitol, but other paintings of the same time period not commissioned by the government. The book goes into detail concerning the historical events

¹³ Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, “Visual Culture’s History: Twenty-first Century Interdisciplinarity and Its Nineteenth Century Objects,” in eds. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, *Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

¹⁴ William H. Truettner, ed., *West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Broun, “Forward,” in Truettner, *West As America*, ix.

surrounding what the paintings show as well as the trends in art. Together, these components make the point that the themes that bother the modern conscience were a strong influence in American life in the early 19th century. More than anything else, this validates Fryd's interpretation and places it within a national ideological movement.

As Truettner validates Fryd's interpretation of westward expansion, Robert F. Berkhofer validates Fryd's interpretation of the status of Native Americans in early 19th century art. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* examines the portrayal of Indians in American art, policy, and science. Berkhofer shows how natives are either the free, simple, and innocent noble savage and "good" Indian, or the brutal, deceitful, licentious "bad" Indian. Natives represent the subjugation of the American continent. Images of conquered Indians represented America's conquest of the west, progress, and white superiority.¹⁶

Iconography, iconology, and symbology are critical to placing Fryd and understanding the art of the early 19th century. If images, as Peter Burke says, "record acts of eyewitnessing," then iconography is the language they communicate their message in.¹⁷ In *American Iconology*, a book of essays edited by David Miller, the essays on early 19th century art reflect "the role of images in consolidating and reinforcing dominant ideologies,"¹⁸ such as the ones Congress wanted to portray in the creation of national identity and myth. The "dominant ideology" of territorial expansion even spread to the exhibitions at Charles Wilson Peale's museum in Philadelphia, where animal specimens collected by the Lewis and Clark expedition after the Louisiana Purchase were sent for preservation and display.¹⁹

¹⁶ Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

¹⁷ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 14.

¹⁸ David Miller, ed., *American Iconology*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 17.

¹⁹ Laura Rigal, "Peale's Mammoth," in Miller, ed., *American Iconology*, 32.

In the same book, Kenneth John Myers goes on to examine how the landscape of progress was naturalized to the extent that viewers of early 19th century art to the point were able to forget the role of the self and the mental labor in reading a landscape.²⁰ Myer's essay suggests a similar theme to the article "Perpetuating the Past: Plantation Landscapes Then and Now" wherein John Michael Vlach discusses how in antebellum America, paintings of plantations often idealized. Since artists could not include the "brutality of forced labor" in their picturesque views of nature, they simply removed any reference to slavery, from depictions of the villages slaves lived in to the people themselves.²¹

Angela Miller's *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*, argues that landscape paintings of the early 19th century were politically and culturally charged and were important to American cultural identity. Angela Miller examines the work of Thomas Cole, especially his critique of Jacksonian expansion, and the Hudson River School, the artists of which used their landscapes as a metaphor for cultural expansion in the west.²² Like Truetnner, she uses land itself to study westward expansion and the formation of a national identity.

Education and Theory

Works on educational theory, how to teach history, and the role of digital technology in the classroom underlay the *Capitol Art* website. The most important educational resources utilized are the National History Standards and the State (in this case, Virginia) History

²⁰ Kenneth John Myers, "On the Cultural Construction of Landscape Experience: Contact to 1830," in Miller, ed., *American Iconology*, 59.

²¹ John Michael Vlach, "Perpetuating the Past: Plantation Landscapes Then and Now," in Angela Mack and Stephan G. Hoffius, eds., *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 16.

²² Angela Miller, ed., *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Standards.²³ These standards, created to raise the standard of history education in schools, define what the federal and state governments think is important to teach students. Educators are required to meet them when creating their lessons, and as a result, any resource designed for teachers should strive to meet them as well. In the National Standards, this resource strives to help teachers meet Era 4, Standards 1B and 1C. We also chose to work under the standards for Virginia, where *Capitol Art* helps meet Indicator/Standard US1.8.

History in Pre-Collegiate Classrooms

Much the educational literature we utilized focused on how to effectively teach history in pre-collegiate classrooms. Even though *Capitol Art* was not designed to be simply be printed out and used, the material still needs to be effective in the classroom.

Any project that involves history education at the pre-collegiate level must consider Sam Wineburg's *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, a book primarily made up of case studies on why and how students learn history and the challenges they have when faced with primary source material. One of the main focuses of the book deals with the uncomfortable nature of history as national memory. Wineburg points out that "history teaches us a way to make choices, to balance opinions, to tell stories, and to become uneasy- when necessary- about the stories we tell,"²⁴ an attitude that cannot be abandoned simply because the learners are children. Wineburg ties nicely into Freeman Tilden's Sixth Principle of Interpretation in his classic *Interpreting Our Heritage*: "Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of

²³ The National History Standards available online through UCLA, via the National Center for History in the Schools at <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards.html>. State History Standards are available through the National History Education Clearinghouse; Virginia's Fifth Grade Standards are at <http://teachinghistory.org/fifth-grade/21495>.

²⁴ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), ix.

twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.”²⁵ Dumbing the history down so children would understand the words was not an option, nor is hiding the truth because it makes us uncomfortable.

James A. Percoco brings also techniques to the discussion of teaching history. In *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of US History*, he argues for a hand-on approach to teaching history. He advocates for the use of alternate sources, including historic sites, archives, and primary source materials. A reader can interpret his book to include the use of visual materials, even if he does not mention them specifically.²⁶

Using the Web

Making information available to teachers via the Internet is incredibly important, and now, rather common. Teachers can find lesson plans and teaching suggestions for almost every age on almost any topic they could even think of teaching. As a result, this project drew from a number of successful teacher resources and lesson plans available online. Looking at teacher’s blogs helped give us an understanding of exactly how teachers expect to use technology and digital resources in their classrooms.²⁷ Like the successful examples, this information is invaluable because it helps us to create something teachers will actually consider using, and

²⁵ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 76.

²⁶ James A. Percoco, *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998.)

²⁷ One example is *Speaking of History* at <http://speakingofhistory.blogspot.com/>, kept by Eric Langhorst, an 8th grade history teacher in Liberty, Missouri. An AU student in the Department of Education, Danna, kept *Social Studies Methods* at <http://dbrsocialstudiesmethods.blogspot.com/>.

perhaps even like. The teachers know what works the best and is most effective, so it would be impractical not to consider what they have to say.

Although the content was unrelated, the website for *Teaching the Civil War with Technology* brings together a variety of digital resources teachers can take advantage of when teaching the Civil War.²⁸ The blog section of the website features posts related to the Civil War, often including primary sources, lesson ideas, and historic sites. Eric Langhorst's blog, *Speaking of History*, provides similar resources, although not limited to the Civil War. Especially interesting on *Speaking of History* is his interest in podcasts, of which he has over 200 on various historical subjects, including the use of documents and historic site visits. Both bloggers link to other teacher's websites and blogs, though Langhorst's list is more extensive.

In addition to the teachers themselves, we also turned to lesson plans and other websites available online for ideas on how to create *Capitol Art*. The Smithsonian American Art Museum has an extensive list of lesson plans, including one on Manifest Destiny in art called "Envisioning Manifest Destiny" which uses Emanuel Leutze's *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* to study history and art.²⁹ Similarly, the Visual and Performing Arts School in Riversdale, CA also turned to the Leutze painting to study "Manifest Destiny and Heroic Art." The lesson focuses heavily on the artistic interpretation of the painting, though, as much as the historical, and it does not question the interpretation as Fryd does.³⁰ The Public Broadcasting Service also studies the topic briefly in a larger lesson on "Landscape and Place," which links

²⁸ Teaching the Civil War with Technology, <http://www.teachthecivilwar.com/>.

²⁹ "Resources and Tours: Classroom Resources," Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://dbrsocialstudiesmethods.blogspot.com/>. All lesson plans are PDFs linked from this website.

³⁰ VAPA Instructional Services, "Manifest Destiny and Heroic Art," June 2008, <http://vapa.rusd.k12.ca.us/VAPA%20Documents/5th%20grade/Manifest%20Destiny%20and%20Art%20Heroic.pdf>.

westward expansion to the Hudson River Group of artists. The lesson does, however, contain an impressive list of other resources.³¹

Capitol Art is the final product of the mixing of diverse sources, from early America to art and iconography to education. It combines interpretations of history guided by visual sources and the movements for social and cultural history with developments in digital history and the increased use of technology in the classroom. The National Council for Social Studies recognizes the 21st century as a “multimedia age” and a “digital society,” the growth of which requires social studies educators “to link participatory media literacy with civic education.” The NCSS encourages teachers to connect students with independent sources of digital information such as podcasts, wikis, and blogs. In their eyes, to successfully insert media into classrooms, teachers must expand the definition of “legitimate texts” to include the Internet, popular culture, and various forms of visual culture and learn how to utilize these mediums for their own research and presentations.³²

There is no reason why these same technologies cannot be used to study early America, and given the resources available online, they clearly have been. As classrooms make the switch to digital learning and from pressure from the NCSS, teachers will increasingly use images as sources in their lessons. As said above, images provide a glimpse into life in the past that written sources do not allow for. As shown by Fryd, Truettner, and Miller, the illustrations of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion in the early 19th century say a lot that their contemporary documentary sources do not always make clear. The feelings of white superiority and the

³¹ Public Broadcasting Services, “Lesson 2- Landscape and Place,” from *Art in the 21st Century*, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/education/naturalworld/lesson2.html>.

³² National Council for Social Studies, “NCSS Position Statement on Media Literacy,” National Council for Social Studies, 2009, <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/medialiteracy>.

subjugation of the American continent and indigenous peoples were an integral part of that society, and Congress used them to establish a world in which they, white men, reigned supreme.