

# An Artist's Perspective: Portraits of Native Americans

## LESSON PLANNING

### C-3 STANDARDS

#### *Perspectives*

D.2.His.5.3-5 Explain connections among historical context and peoples' perspectives at the time.

#### *Historical Sources and Evidence*

D2.His.10.3-5 Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past.

D2.His.13.3-5 Use information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean "to take a perspective?"
2. How does understanding others' perspectives bring deeper meaning to the study of people, places, and issues?
3. How can artwork serve as primary source evidence to help us understand others' perspectives in the course of history?
4. How do our own experiences influence our perspectives?

### Materials\*



[George Catlin, Mew-Hew-She-Kaw, The White Cloud, Chief of the Loways, 1816-1872](#)



[George Catlin, Chesh-Oo-Honga-All, 1816-1872](#)



[George Catlin, Buffalo Hunt in Snow Shoes, 1816-1872](#)

\* Click the link below each image for information from the NBMAA e-museum on the artist and the painting.

**Art Vocabulary:** Portrait—an artistic representation of a person/people.

**OBJECTIVES:** students will be able to

1. Interpret George Catlin's two portraits to identify appearance, customs, culture of Native Americans.
2. Connect to social studies content identified by the teacher.

### INTRODUCTION

Pose an interesting question or scenario to hook students' interest, such as "Think of a photo of yourself that you really like. Why is this one special to you?" Share a photo of yourself that you really like and explain why it is special to you.

Discuss "perspective" and the ways in which you and students took a perspective in choosing the photo.

Introduce Catlin's Indian Gallery, explaining that the portraits students will view are just two of 500 drawn from more than 50 tribes, and that most of the portraits are now at the Smithsonian.

### ENGAGING LEARNING

- Provide the images of *Mew-Hew-She-Kaw* and *Chesh-Oo-Gonga-All* on paper or digitally.
- Work as a whole class or with students in pairs or groups of three.

#### Observe Closely

Use VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies) to help students explore the works.

- Ask students look at the works for a minute. Ask students to discuss three things they notice with a partner.
- Ask students to share their observations about each work with the whole class. As they do, follow-up with the question, "What makes you say that?" or "Tell me more about that."
- Ask further open-ended questions, such as
  - "How did the artist capture your attention in each painting?" "Where did your eyes go first in each work?"
  - "What story is told by this work? From whose perspective is it being told? What evidence do we have that Catlin respected the person in the portrait, or not?"
  - "What are some questions these portraits bring up for you?"

#### Use Inquiry

Provide relevant background information on Catlin and his process in creating the Indian Gallery. Catlin was welcomed into the daily life of the tribes he visited, demonstrating how important relationships between people were to Native Americans. From this experience, he was able to authentically depict people, their customs, and their culture.

- “How does this work reflect the time in which it was painted?”
- “How does the artist’s intention influence the work? Do you have any evidence that the artist was biased?”
- “What do you think the artist wanted to communicate?”
- “What do you think it was like to be Catlin living in a culture that was not his own?”
- “Beside portraits of many warriors, who else or what else might he have painted to reflect the Native American communities in which he resided?”

### Interpret: Personalize and Connect

Help students connect with tribal people today with investigative questions.

- “If one of the persons in this portrait were here, what questions might you ask? What questions might you be asked?”
- “What does someone need to know about you in order to depict your identity accurately?”  
“What do you think Mew-Hew-She-Kaw would say about Catlin’s portrayal of him?”
- “If you were an ancestor of Mew-Hew-She-Kaw, what would this work mean to you?”

### Think Critically

Ask students, “Do you agree or disagree with George Catlin’s statement, *Art may mourn when these people are swept from the earth,*” he wrote, *“and the artists of future ages may look in vain for another race so picturesque in their costumes, their weapons, their colors, their manly games, and their chase.* What are the reasons for your decision?”

### Evaluate: Draw a Conclusion

Connect this work to contemporary perspectives.

- “Is this work a meaningful primary source to learn about Native American culture? Why or why not?”
- “How is this work meaningful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?”
- “What more would you like to know about Native American culture?”

## **CLOSURE**

Summarize the connections between Catlin’s portraits and the social studies content objectives you established for this lesson.

### **EXTENSION: *Expanding our Perspectives***

Imagine that you are on the buffalo hunt as shown in Catlin’s *Buffalo Hunt with Snowshoes*.

1. How is a buffalo hunted according to this painting? What is the equipment you might need based on Catlin's painting? (Discuss that Native Americans created the equipment/artifacts they needed to fulfill various needs.)
2. Describe what the experience would be like to be the person in the middle of the painting. Would the people on the hunt be the same people from the portraits? Why or why not? (Members of the tribe have different and significant roles in the community.)
3. What is happening to the buffalo? Why aren't the buffalo being killed rather than wounded? (The buffalo are too heavy to carry, so are slowly driven back to the community according to tribal rules/customs of the hunt.)
4. What is the importance of the buffalo hunt to the Native American community? (The community uses of all parts of the animal for daily living.)
5. What would be the impact on the native community if buffalo were not available? (Who owns the land? Who has access to the land? What is the importance of the land in native culture?)
6. Is this work a reliable source of information about a buffalo hunt? Why or why not?

For a PDF of this document, [click here](#).