PORTRAITS IN CONVERSATION

THE INQUIRY PATH

Observe → Interpret → Add Context → Compare → Connect → Reflect

ONE ATLANTIC WORLD

Unequal Legacies

How did the Atlantic world create different opportunities for prosperity and freedom?



John Smibert
Benjamin Colman, 1739–1740



Radcliffe Bailey
Transatlantic, 2003

Grade and subject	Time	Theme
Grade 8; adaptable for secondary U.S. History / Social Studies	60–90 minutes One or two lessons	Commerce, freedom, and cultural memory

PORTRAITS AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

John Smibert presents a Boston merchant; Radcliffe Bailey explores ancestry, forced migration, and cultural survival. Phillis Wheatley Peters adds a Black intellectual's argument for freedom. Together, these primary sources broaden the inquiry into the Atlantic world. Each reveals a perspective rather than a complete history. Keep in mind that Bailey's work is a primary source for contemporary artistic connections to historical memory, not eyewitness evidence of colonial life.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Boston in the Atlantic world • Commerce, enslavement, and freedom

PROSPERITY AND ENSLAVEMENT

Eighteenth-century Boston was a busy British North American port. Ships linked local merchants to Europe, West Africa, the Caribbean, and the North Atlantic. Cod, oil, lumber, sugar, molasses, rum, and manufactured goods moved through networks that employed shipbuilders, carters, ropemakers, and shopkeepers.

This prosperity was deeply connected to slavery. Enslaved people were bought and sold in Boston and worked in households, businesses, skilled trades, and on ships. Caribbean plantation production also supported northern commerce. Slavery shaped northern life as well as southern.

BLACK KNOWLEDGE AND AGENCY

Africans and African Americans contributed knowledge, skilled labor, art, and political ideas while sustaining families and cultural traditions under coercion. For example, Onesimus, enslaved by Cotton Mather, shared knowledge of African inoculation practice. Mather advocated for its use in Boston during the smallpox outbreak in 1721.

Phillis Wheatley Peters, born in West Africa around 1753, was brought to Boston and enslaved as a child. Her poetry collection appeared in 1773, the year she was freed. In her 1774 letter to Samson Occom, written after her emancipation, she affirmed Black people's desire for freedom and challenged those who demanded liberty while oppressing others.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR THE PAIRING

Colman's polished appearance makes his merchant status visible, while other evidence is needed to reveal the labor and systems behind colonial prosperity. Bailey brings family memory and the history of the slave trade into view. Wheatley Peters adds an eighteenth-century argument that challenges unequal access to liberty.

This portrait alone cannot establish Colman's or Smibert's specific involvement in enslaving people or trading captives. It would be necessary to investigate account books, probate records, correspondence, and shipping records before making claims about individuals. Be clear with students that no direct family or personal connection among Colman, Wheatley Peters, and Bailey is established here.

DISTINGUISH PEOPLE AND EXPERIENCES

Smibert crossed the Atlantic voluntarily and settled in Boston in 1729. The merchant Benjamin Colman was born in Boston in 1710, not to be confused with his uncle, Reverend Benjamin Colman. Africans trafficked across the Atlantic endured violent forced displacement, family separation, and death. Smibert's chosen migration is not equivalent to forced migration.

PRIMARY SOURCE TO INTEGRATE

Phillis Wheatley Peters – Letter to Samson Occom, February 11, 1774

Published in The Connecticut Gazette, March 11, 1774. Excerpt and questions: Handout 3.

ARTISTS & ART



JOHN SMIBERT · 1688–1751

Benjamin Colman, 1739–1740

Scottish-born Smibert trained in London and studied in Italy. After joining George Berkeley's unrealized venture to establish a college in Bermuda, Smibert settled in Boston. His formal portrait style served prosperous colonial patrons; his studio and collection influenced later American painters.

Colman's rich coat, composed pose, and letter present refinement and commercial identity. The letter names him as a Boston merchant.

LOOK FOR Oil painting • dark palette • red coat and waistcoat • pose • letter identifying occupation



RADCLIFFE BAILEY · 1968–2023

Transatlantic, 2003

Bailey was born in Bridgeton, New Jersey, and worked in Atlanta. He earned a B.F.A. at the Atlanta College of Art in 1991. His assemblages connect family photographs and collected materials with Black history, migration, memory, and healing.

Transatlantic layers a central photograph, painted forms, and geographic and transport imagery. The photograph is believed to come from his grandmother's family album. The work connects personal memory to the history of the Atlantic slave trade.

LOOK FOR Mixed media on wood • photograph • tree and roots • place names • house • anchor and routes • tracks

PAIRING LENS

A formal portrait presents a named individual's social standing; a layered assemblage can evoke a person, family, or collective history. Ask whose experiences each work shows and whose experiences it leaves out. Bailey's work is paired with Smibert's for this inquiry; it should not be described as a documented direct response to that portrait.

LEARN MORE / SOURCES

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Phillis Wheatley Peters – Letter to Samson Occom, February 11, 1774
Published in The Connecticut Gazette, March 11, 1774. Excerpt and questions: Handout 3.

National Women's History Museum – Phillis Wheatley

City of Boston Archaeology – Boston Slavery Exhibit

Robert E. Desrochers, "Slave-for-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704–1781," William and Mary Quarterly 59, no. 3 (2002).

Onesimus: The enslaved man who helped save Bostonians during a smallpox epidemic.

ARTISTS AND ARTWORKS

NBMAA eMuseum – John Smibert, Benjamin Colman
Oil on canvas, ca. 1740; painted 1739. Harriet Russell Stanley Fund, 1948.01.

NBMAA – John Smibert biography and portrait essay

NBMAA eMuseum – Radcliffe Bailey, Transatlantic
Mixed media on wood, 2003. General Purchase Fund, 2004.01.

High Museum of Art – Radcliffe Bailey: Memory as Medicine

Radcliffe Bailey – Some Say Art History, I Say Art Mystery (TEDx, 17:15)

Artnet – Radcliffe Bailey

Wayne Craven, Colonial American Portraiture (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Richard H. Saunders, American Faces: A Cultural History of Portraiture and Identity (University Press of New England, 2016).

TEACHER TOOLKIT

Plan the inquiry, select evidence, and assess student thinking

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Analyze artworks as sources with points of view.
- Use details to support interpretations.
- Explain how Atlantic commerce and enslavement produced unequal experiences.
- Recognize Black knowledge, creativity, and arguments for freedom.
- Identify what each source can and cannot establish.

STANDARDS FOCUS

NCSS: Time, Continuity and Change
How do artists revisit or interpret the past?

NCSS: Production, Distribution, and Consumption
Who benefited from the Atlantic commerce, and whose labor sustained it?

Supporting: Civic Ideals and Practices
How did demands for liberty co-exist with slavery?

C3 PRACTICES

Question, use evidence, compare sources, and communicate conclusions.

C3 Indicators	Evidence
D2.His.6.6-8: Analyze how people's perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.	Handout 1: Artwork interpretation and comparison
D2.His.10.6-8: Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources.	Handout 3: question 3; CER writing
D4.1.6-8: Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.	Handout 4

VOCABULARY

Assemblage An artwork combining objects, images, and materials.

Atlantic world Connections among Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean through trade, colonization, and migration.

Inference A conclusion based on evidence and reasoning.

Interpretation An explanation supported by evidence.

Liberty Freedom from unjust control.

Portrait A representation of a particular individual, usually intended to capture their likeness or personality. (MoMA)

Primary source Original documents and objects that were created at the time under study. They differ from secondary sources, accounts that retell, analyze, or interpret events, usually from a distance in time or place. (Library of Congress)

Transatlantic slave trade The capture, forced transport, buying, and selling of enslaved people.

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Select prompts and handouts, if desired, to fit your goals and available time.

VISUAL INQUIRY
Handout 1
Separate observation from inference; cite details.

HISTORICAL COMPARISON
Handout 2
Note what the artworks make visible.

PRIMARY SOURCE READING
Handout 3
Consider how a third source adds to the story.

CER OPTION
Handout 4
Make a claim; support it with visual/historical evidence.

REFLECTION
Handout 5
Consider how students' thinking has changed.

PERFORMANCE OPTIONS
Communicate a clear idea with accurate evidence and context. Examples: museum label, collage, artist statement.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT OPTION

Students create a mixed-media artwork exploring freedom, equality, opportunity, or another theme related to the lesson. They include an artist's statement citing at least two historical sources. (Art and Social Studies teachers co-plan the rubric.)

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

- A claim that answers the inquiry question.
- Accurate evidence from the required sources.
- Reasoning explaining how the evidence supports the claim.
- Recognition of a source limitation.

Teacher facilitation note

The lesson addresses enslavement, forced migration, family separation, and death. Establish respectful discussion norms; do not ask students to represent, reenact, or speak for a group. Offer multiple ways to participate, including written responses. Avoid treating traumatic experiences as debatable or equating voluntary migration with forced displacement.

SIX-STEP PORTRAIT PAIRING PROTOCOL

Across all work, students explain how evidence supports their interpretations.

	Portrait Pairing Protocol	Personalized for the Smibert and Bailey Artworks
1	**OBSERVE** Let students look before giving background. Begin with 30 seconds of quiet observation. **Consider Handout 1**	Ask: What is going on? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find? Notice people, objects, color, texture, photographs, materials, and placement. Record visible details without assigning meanings yet.
2	**INTERPRET** Help students to move from description to possible meanings. Ask them to connect each interpretation to a visible detail and to distinguish between what they observe and what they infer.	Ask how Smibert presents status and how Bailey suggests memory or movement. Require a visible detail for each idea. Reveal titles and dates. What remains mysterious? Which questions require evidence beyond the artworks?
3	**ADD CONTEXT** Introduce the artists, the dates, and concise historical context. Add primary sources so portraits are not treated as complete biographies. **Ask: What changes when we know more?**	Introduce Boston's trade networks, enslaved labor, and Black cultural and intellectual life. Read Wheatley Peters's short excerpt together; explain its date, audience, and argument.
4	**COMPARE** Ask students to study the relationship between the works. Consider: • What connects these portraits? • How do the works approach the theme differently? • How does one portrait affect the way you understand the other? Is there a third story as a result? **Consider Handout 2**	Ask whose experiences the portrait and assemblage show and whose they leave out. Compare voluntary migration and forced displacement without equating them. Identify an additional source needed to test any claims about Colman.
5	**CONNECT** Connect students' visual evidence and interpretations to history, civics, geography, economics, culture, or contemporary life. Encourage students to test their ideas against additional sources. **Consider Handouts 3 or 4.**	Ask how Wheatley Peters's argument changes the conversation between the artworks. How could museums show merchant prosperity and the labor behind it? What evidence might connect a local place or object to Atlantic history? Avoid claiming direct personal connections among the sources.
6	**REFLECT** Ask students to reconsider their thinking and communicate their insights. **Consider Handout 5**	Return to the inquiry question. Students identify one changed interpretation, the evidence that influenced it, and a remaining question. Collect the exit ticket. Extend with CER writing or a mixed-media response in a second lesson.

HANDOUT 1

OBSERVE + INTERPRET

Look Closely and Interpret

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Record visible details first. Then explain what they suggest about identity, status, or memory. Separate what you see from what you infer.

APPROACH: ☐ Whole Class ☐ Small Group ☐ Pairs ☐ Alone

VISUAL ELEMENT	SMIBERT BENJAMIN COLMAN	BAILEY TRANSATLANTIC
People		
Objects and images		
Color		
Materials/texture		
Composition/ placement		
Symbols/details		

EVIDENCE CHECK

Choose one detail from each portrait. What might it suggest? What other explanation is possible?

HANDOUT 2

COMPARE

Two Views of the Atlantic World

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Use artwork details and historical context. Distinguish the date of an artwork from the history it recalls. Keep in mind that voluntary and forced migration are not equivalent.

APPROACH: ☐ Whole Class ☐ Small Group ☐ Pairs ☐ Alone

WHAT TO COMPARE	SMIBERT	BAILEY
Time and place of the artwork		
What the artworks make visible		
What the artwork does not show		

COMPARE FINDINGS

How does comparing the works expand the story? Support your answer with a specific detail.

HANDOUT 3

CONNECT

Primary Source Reading and Discussion

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Read the excerpt and context. Underline the claim about freedom. Use the letter as evidence of its author's argument, not as a description of every Black person's experience.

SOURCE AND CONTEXT

Phillis Wheatley Peters gained her freedom in 1773. She wrote to Samson Occom, a Mohegan minister, on February 11, 1774. Her letter was printed in The Connecticut Gazette on March 11. Brought from West Africa to Boston and enslaved as a child, she became a published poet. Here she affirms Black people's claim to freedom.

"…in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance…"— Phillis Wheatley Peters, letter to Samson Occom, 1774
(Reference: Letter to Samson Occom, 1774.)

In the rest of the letter, Wheatley Peters asserts that this desire also lives in Black people and challenges the contradiction between demanding liberty and exercising oppressive power over others.

1 What claim does she make, and which words support your answer?

2 How does her argument challenge the impression of prosperity in Colman's portrait or connect to Bailey's work?

3 What can the letter tell us that the artworks cannot? What can it not establish about Colman or Bailey's family?

HANDOUT 4

CER WRITING

Add a Voice to the Pairing

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: How does Wheatley Peters's 1774 letter deepen your understanding of Smibert and Bailey? Explain what it adds to the inquiry about prosperity and freedom.

CLAIM

State what Wheatley Peters's argument adds to your interpretation of the pairing.

EVIDENCE

Use a specific detail from the letter and at least one artwork. Identify each source.

REASONING

Explain how the evidence supports your claim. Include one limit on what these sources can establish about the past.

HANDOUT 5

REFLECT

Reflection / Exit Ticket

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Return to your first impressions. Use evidence from the portraits, historical sources, or class discussion.

LOOK AGAIN

What did you first think about Smibert's portrait and Bailey's assemblage? What do you think now? Identify the detail or source that influenced you.

OPPORTUNITY AND FREEDOM

How has your thinking about opportunity, freedom, or inequality in the Atlantic world changed or become more complex?

ART AND HISTORY

How can art help us ask more questions about history? Support your answer with one piece of evidence from today's lesson.

KEEP ASKING

One question I still have is…