JUXTAPOSITIONS OF POWER

MAKING MEANING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

Grades 5-8
Visual Arts, Language Arts, Social Studies, Economics
CONTENT AREAS & MAINE LEARNING RESULTS

VISUAL ARTS

ARTIST’S PURPOSE
Students compare the different purposes of artists and their artworks in the context of time and place

THE ARTS, HISTORY, AND WORLD CULTURES
Students explain how art both reflects and influences culture

MAKING MEANING
Students create work to convey a point of view

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

WRITING
Students compare and contrast historical objects and art to communicate and analyze their evolving interpretations of a painting

SOCIAL STUDIES
Students draw on major enduring themes such as Conflict and Compromise, Supply and Demand, and Continuity and Change Over Time

GEOGRAPHY
Students appreciate the global impact of trade and the global influence of art on culture, opinion, and law

HISTORY
Using primary sources and visual art from the time period, students uncover the 1844-1877 era of US history, regional tensions and civil war, appreciating the complexity of the era

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES

SOCIAL AWARENESS
Students build communication and cultural competency skills by appreciating perspective and identifying, evaluating, and reflecting on social issues and biases

NOTE: This activity examines a difficult aspect of American history. Check in with yourself throughout the lesson and take note of how you’re feeling.
OBJECTIVES
*What is the overall goal of this lesson?*

Students will explore Maine’s connection to the cotton trade and slavery through shipping prior to the US Civil War.

Students will understand the importance of historical context when interpreting visual material and primary sources.

Students will explore how art both reflects and influences the culture of a time period and how this makes art a valuable resource for interpreting history.

Students will understand that interpretation of primary source and visual art can change when viewed within different contexts.

Students will appreciate the value of multiple viewpoints and diverse sources when interpreting meaning of primary sources and visual art.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
*What questions drive this lesson and guide students’ inquiry?*

How does our understanding of history or art change when we view it in a different context or from a different perspective?

Why is it important to keep an open mind when studying the past?

VOCABULARY

**Interpretation:** The action of explaining the meaning of something

**Juxtaposition:** The placement of two things next to each other to achieve nuanced meaning or effect

**Synthesis (noun) (Ssynthesize (verb)):** The combination of ideas or information to form a more coherent or broader understanding of something

**Ship Portrait:** A painting featuring an accurate depiction of a marine vessel as its primary subject, usually commissioned by the ship’s captain or owner
INTERPRETATION

Interpretation is the process of explaining the meaning of something. You can interpret what a poet is trying to say in a poem and you can interpret what an artist wants to convey in a painting. Historians also interpret the past using visual and written evidence.

An interpretation may not always be exactly true, but is based on available evidence and a person’s opinion. This means that different people can have different interpretations of the same thing. That’s okay! As long as they have evidence to back up their conclusions.

JUXTAPOSITION

**Juxtaposition is the placement of two objects or images close together to achieve new or different meaning and effect.**

By itself, an object or image may mean certain things to different people. Is it possible to change the way people understand the meaning of an object or image by simply placing another object or image beside it?

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**Let’s try it out.**

Take a look at the picture above. What do you see? What does it make you think of? Write a list of all the things that come to your mind when you see this picture.
12-year-old girl becomes first ‘non-fishing’ shark bite victim in Maryland history

Headline from The Washington Post, August 6, 2021

How about now?
How has your understanding of the beach image changed now, when juxtaposed with a news headline and a second image? Write a second list of ideas and feelings caused by the above juxtaposition.

Compare your two lists.
See any differences? If so, then the juxtaposition successfully changed the way you viewed or understood the image of the beach. This is the power of juxtaposition.

The associations we make when we see an image, object, or text change based on what we position next to it. Anyone who presents ideas to an audience, whether it be an artist, writer, musician, museum curator, or even an advertising agency is mindful of juxtaposition. It is a powerful way to create meaning and introduce new perspectives.
LEARNING TO LOOK CLOSELY

OBSERVE
Look closely at this painting. What do you see? Every detail an artist includes is intentional. Write what you see in the box below.

What thoughts or emotions come to mind when you see this painting?

To interpret the painting, pay attention to every little thing you see. Make a guess – why do you think the artist painted this painting? What is the painting’s purpose? Write your response in the box below.
THINKING ABOUT HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This painting is an example of a “ship portrait.” Ship owners and captains often paid artists to paint a portrait of their ships. What are some reasons a ship owner or captain would want a painting like this? Write your answer in the box below.

The artist, William Gay York, painted this ship portrait in 1859. It depicts the ship Rappahannock approaching Liverpool, England. Captain William Drummond, the ship's first captain, likely commissioned this painting, meaning he paid the artist to make it for him. The Rappahannock was built in Bath, Maine in 1841 by Clark & Sewall Co., a prominent Bath-based shipbuilding company. At the time of its launch, the Rappahannock was the largest ship ever built. The ship was built to transport cotton across the Atlantic to European ports. The shipbuilders of the Rappahannock pioneered the “cotton box” design, adapting the shape of the ship hull to better fit rectangular cotton bales and thereby increasing the ship's carrying capacity.

RESEARCH: THE NAME
A vessel’s name is important. It can tell you a lot about who paid for the ship or the shipowner’s values and interests. Do some outside research to find out what this ship is named after. Write down some ideas about why the ship was named Rappahannock.

RESEARCH: THE PLACE
The lighthouse and coastline would have been easily recognizable as Liverpool Harbor to others in the maritime trades. Research common imports to Liverpool in the 19th century. Why would Captain Drummond want the Rappahannock to be shown entering Liverpool Harbor?

Write your answers using full sentences on a separate piece of paper.
THINKING ABOUT HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Do you know what this is?

Chances are you’re wearing something made from it right now. It’s a bale of cotton. Today we think of cotton as a cheap and common fabric, but in the 1800s it was considered luxurious and expensive. In the 1800s, cotton was a cash crop grown and harvested on plantations in the southern United States. Enslaved people working on southern plantations harvested the fibers and prepared them for transport.

Ships were the most common mode of transportation of cotton bales to American and European ports. As we already know, the Rappahannock pioneered a new hull design that allowed it to transport more cotton and thus bring in more profit. Many Maine communities economically prospered off the shipment and manufacturing of cotton, providing reason to be proud of the Rappahannock.

REFLECT

Now you have learned the ship portrait’s historical context. Using what you now know about the ship, the cotton trade, and Liverpool, what ideas or feelings do you think of when you look at the painting a second time? Make a new list of all the words that come to mind when viewing the ship portrait and cotton bale together in juxtaposition.  

Write your answer in the box below.
OBSERVE: Describe what you see in this image. Write a list of things that stand out, paying close attention to background objects as well as the events in the foreground.

REFLECT: What impact, message, or feelings might the artist intend to invoke with this picture? Consider that artists can make political as well as personal statements in their creations. Use at least three specific details from the image to support your interpretation.
The print on the previous page, engraved in 1844 by Charles E. Wagstaff, is a British reproduction of the 1833 painting (above) by a French artist and abolitionist.

An abolitionist is someone who wants to abolish (or outlaw) slavery. The scene depicts the capture and sale of Africans bound for the Americas to work as enslaved laborers. Many Africans were kidnapped by rival African tribes and sold to European or American crews on the African coast. In this scene, we see a European crew inspecting captured Africans’ physical features to determine their “value.” This determined what the Europeans would pay the African captors (seen in the center wearing decorative headdresses and arm bands) and the price of the kidnapped Africans (depicted in ragged clothing) at a slave market in the Americas.

On the left side of the scene, captives whose prices have already been determined are being forcibly loaded onto small boats that will carry them to the larger slave ship. On the right side of the scene, captives are lined up to be evaluated. The slave ship that will eventually carry these captives across the Atlantic can be seen in the background.
LEARNING TO INTERPRET

Let’s interpret the meaning of specific figures in the image. Write your answers in the boxes below.

1) Find the reclining European man in the right foreground. What do you think he is supposed to represent? What is he a symbol of? Use specific details to support your conclusion.

2) Find the African man in the right foreground. Do you think he is a captor or captive? How does he complicate your understanding of the scene?

For the next two prompts, write your answers using full sentences on a separate piece of paper.

3) What other figures or details do you see that help you interpret the purpose of the image? What did the abolitionist artist hope to achieve by creating this image?

4) For whom do you think this image was created? To convince whom that slavery was bad?
FINAL REFLECTION

REFLECT:
Describe your reactions or emotions when viewing these three images together. Use your new understanding of Maine ships’ involvement in the cotton and slave trade and create a new list of thoughts or emotions that come to mind.

Compare this new list to your initial perception of the Rappahannock painting. What has changed? Why? How did that happen? Write your answers using full sentences on a separate piece of paper.
SYNTHESIZE & DISCUSS

COMPARE & CONTRAST:
What do these two images have in common? How are they different?

CONNECT: What does slavery have to do with the portrait of the Rappahannock in Liverpool, England? Use the juxtaposition of these three images to make your own conclusion.

Write your answers using full sentences on a separate piece of paper.
John Todd was a Bath citizen in the 1850s. In his autobiography, he had this to say about Bath shipbuilders who helped bring the Black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, to Bath.

Excerpt from John M. Todd’s *A Sketch of the Life of John M. Todd*, pages 120-121

I heard [Frederick Douglass speak] in Bath. There were but few Abolitionists in Bath at the time. It was a great shipowning place and they did not wish to offend the cotton growers of the south, for the Bath ships were carrying cotton raised by the slaves from southern ports to Liverpool, England, and it might interfere with those ships getting freight if the abolitionists held meetings to agitate the question of chattel slavery.

No [speaking] hall could be had for Douglass. After a hard fight, [three men from Bath] secured the vestry of their church. They being shipowners, it was a great surprise to most of the people that they did not consult their pockets at all in deciding a moral question.

What can we infer about attitudes towards abolitionists (and by extension slavery) in Bath in the 1850s? Write your answer in the box below.

New Englanders also profited by directly transporting enslaved people for auctions in the American South. Recent research by Dr. Kate McMahon of the Center for the Study of Global Slavery indicates that "in the 1850s and 60s, Maine’s slave ship fleet was nearly four times as profitable as its timber industry." In fact, recently discovered letters prove that Clark & Sewall, Co. (the same company that operated the *Rappahannock*) transported enslaved people on other ships.

Maine ships are also known to have illegally transported captured Africans, many of whom were sold to cotton plantations. Based on this information, it is not unreasonable to speculate that Maine-built and operated ships participated in events similar to those pictured in *Scene on the Coast of Africa*. 
ART IN HISTORY

History is full of mysteries that require thoughtful research to resolve. Historians are constantly uncovering new facts that change previous understandings of an era or event. To gain an honest, accurate understanding of the past, we have to keep an open mind and be prepared for our initial ideas to change. Just as additional images and sources changed the way you viewed the painting of the Rappahannock, new research uncovering Maine’s involvement in the slave trade is changing the way many people view the history of northern states in the years leading up to the Civil War.

When William Gay York painted the ship portrait of the Rappahannock, he likely did not intend for it to be part of a middle school history lesson on slavery. But after an artwork is released into the world, the artist’s purpose is no longer as powerful as the viewer’s perception. By juxtaposing different artworks, documents, or objects, people can interpret new meanings, making them relevant in the present day.

Achieving a more complete, accurate understanding of history is essential for understanding and improving life in the present for all people. Why is a better understanding of the past important for people living today? Write your answer using full sentences on another piece of paper.

YOUR TURN

Now that you understand the power of juxtaposition, it’s your turn to make meaning. Using this portrait of George Washington as your primary image, find a second image, object, headline, song, sculpture, or anything else to create a juxtaposition.

Be mindful of how your juxtaposition is creating new meaning and changing the way a viewer would see the portrait on its own. Write a paragraph that describes your juxtaposition and explains how it achieves greater meaning.
