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Historical insights: teaching North American history using images and material culture [introduction]

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Historical Insights: Teaching North American History using Images and Material Culture

Edited with an introduction by Catherine Armstrong

Introduction:

This guide will provide university teachers of American history with ways of using images and material culture in the classroom and it will explore some of the benefits and challenges arising from doing so. The essays collected in this volume emerged from a meeting of the North American History Teachers' Network, held at Manchester Metropolitan University in April 2012. The workshop was generously funded by the HEA and was attended by subject lead, Peter D'Sena, as well as by American history teachers working in a number of UK Higher Education Institutions. The network was founded in 2010 by Catherine Armstrong with the intention of bringing together university teachers of North American history who often find themselves working in isolation, either surrounded by historians of other geographical regions or by Americanists in the fields of film studies or literature. The network intends to explore methodologies of teaching and encourage the development of a mutual understanding of best practice.

This collection explores images and material culture from two distinct angles. First, by looking at them as representations of a fixed reality in the past, we understand them as primary sources, as alternatives to texts through which students can learn about that past. But second, and more complexly, by probing how today we understand the past, these essays will show how memory and historiography change the meaning of these artefacts over time so that they are not static snapshots of a fixed reality but mutable carriers of cultural capital. The four case studies provided are designed to give the lecturer or seminar leader teaching North American history new ideas about resources and approaches to teaching. However, they also highlight the problematic nature of using images and material culture in the classroom. As all these examples show, the thoughtless or naive use of images can cause confusion and misunderstanding among students.

The first paper shows historians what we can learn from the discipline of art history as Stephanie Pratt shares her expertise on the representation of American Indians in art. She looks at the ways that students can be trained to penetrate the meaning of paintings more deeply by thinking about the intellectual and practical contexts of their construction. Next Beth Southard and Elizabeth Rawitsch demonstrate how they used images to enhance public engagement with American history, specifically the 'wild west', among attendees at a workshop held at the 2nd Air Division Memorial Library in Norwich. Film stills and photographs were used to challenge

stereotypical views of 'cowboys' and 'Indians', while the audience enhanced their own learning experience by producing their own visual representations of the 'wild west'. Moving outside the classroom, Sam Edwards then discusses the teaching potential of memorials for UK-based university students. This approach is especially valuable for teachers of North American history who want to engage with the built environment, but who have struggled to find suitable venues in the UK. Finally, Lydia Plath explores a very different type of visual source, the lynching postcard. She explains what students might learn from their use in the classroom, and explores some of the ethical issues arising when using such a harrowing body of material.

Teaching History with Images: A case study examining the use of American Indian images as forms of 'evidence' in teaching colonial and republican era American History.

Stephanie Pratt, University of Plymouth

The work of an art historian often means making 'image-heavy' presentations for students or the general public that engage with such images from a number of perspectives, looking at them as both historical data and as forms of visual or material culture. Art history recognises that visual images require their own methods of analysis and technical considerations apart from the social and historical contexts which saw their original production. In current art historical practice, one way to address the complexity and specificity of the *image* is to consider how it may have a 'life' of its own or how such an image can reappear elsewhere and take 'heterogeneous forms'; hence, how it can carry a 'dynamic nature', which 'resists articulation in an unambiguous and definitive way.'¹ In the case of images made of American Indians, this complexity of the image is more intensified as it emerges out of an inter-cultural field of representation where the image has had to have been at least partially negotiated. In my essay for this collection, I hope to map out a few of the major concerns that should be taken into consideration when deploying American Indian images in the teaching of history.

¹ See introductory discussion in Peter Mason, *The Lives of Images* (London: Reaktion, 2001), p. 13.