

FLAGS - ART OR 'ART'?

Can a flag be 'Art'?

Level: High School
(grades 9-12)



Natalia Kashevaroff's entry, Juneau, Alaska, MS 14-1-3-42

"The flag is lyrically simple, the most beautiful of all American flags."

John McPhee, Coming Into the Country, 1976, p. 387

Studying flags provides an opportunity to wrestle with the age-old question, "What is art?"

Summary

Students consider varied definitions for what makes 'Art', and consider common criteria. They examine a sampling of flags from various times and places. In a persuasive essay they then defend or refute the idea that flags can be considered 'Art', citing definitions and examples to defend their position.

Estimated Time

150 minutes + homework, should the drafting of the essay be assigned as such

** This activity would be most pertinent close to a state or national holiday when flags are prominently displayed.*

In this activity students will focus on the following:

Alaska Content Standards

Arts

- C.1 Know the criteria used to evaluate the arts
- D.2 Discuss what makes an object a work of art
- D.4 Listen to another individual's beliefs about a work of art and consider the individual's reasons for holding those beliefs

Technology

- B.1 Identify and locate information sources using technology
- B.2 Choose sources of information from a variety of media

English/Language Arts

- A.4 Write well to inform and persuade
- A.6 When appropriate, use visual techniques to communicate ideas
- D.1 Develop a position by identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing a variety of pertinent sources of information
- D.3 Give credit and cite references as appropriate

Activities

Step One: Research and select a definition of 'Art'

- Students will research and define what 'Art' is. Have them start with a fast-write, giving their own definition of art. Pass out the 'What is Art' handout. Tell students they can begin their research with the handout and must then find at least two additional sources that define art. Good sources include: Internet, library texts, reference books, encyclopedias, dictionaries, art criticism books, essays about the fine arts, etc. During their reading and research they should select and write down at least two definitions of what they think constitutes 'Art' (with a capital A). Each definition should include a citation of the author(s) and the date/time period when it was written. Encourage students to include additional interesting information about the author or the definition.
- In a class discussion have students share their two definitions and the reasons for selecting them. Discuss the varied definitions of what makes a work of art. Consider: Which definitions seem more contextual – rooted in their particular time period – and which seem more universal and timeless? Which are broadest in scope, able to encompass a range of art forms? Which are most easily understood? Which definitions were crafted by artists? If not artists, who were the authors, and what their roles with the arts? Consider who you would cite as authorities in the field. Consider how long the definition was held important by the public as "the definition" and/or how widespread the definition was circulated.
- As a class, select the definitions that seem most true to the group. List any reasoning/rationale for the choices, cited from the class discussion.
- Post the class definitions for all to see and consider.

Step Two: Discuss and research flag designs as art

- Brainstorm the nature of flags, their symbolic representations, and their multiple uses/functions. (e.g., nautical, heraldic, national, tribal)
- Individually, or in pairs or small groups, select a time frame, region of the world, or human interaction where flags were used. Students research samples of flags from the area/time selected, using the Internet and other library resources. (See Resources)
- Each student or pair of students should assemble at least six examples from their research, using scanning, photocopying or drawings of the flags.
- After reviewing them, individuals or pairs should select one that they like the best, keeping in mind the previous class discussion and personal reflection on the definitions of art.

Step Three: Write a persuasive essay and defend position

- Students write at least a one page persuasive essay on whether the flag selected could be considered 'Art' with a capital A, using other examples as points of comparison to defend their position.

Assessment

Using the persuasive essay as background, students participate in an informal debate on the question, "Can flags be considered 'Art'? Why or why not?" Complete a self-reflection on your part in the debate and use the sample Scoring Guide, or another like it, to evaluate the presentations of your peers.

Materials

What is 'Art'? Handout
Debate Scoring Guide (sample)

Resources

Exhibit catalog: Spartz, India. *Eight Stars of Gold: The Story of Alaska's Flag*. Juneau: Alaska State Museum, 2001.

Gardner, Howard. *The Arts and Human Development*. New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1994. ISBN 0-465-00440-7

Henri, Robert. *The Art Spirit*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1923.

Flags of the World
www.fotw.net/flags/index.html

Native American Tribe flags
<http://users.aol.com/Donh523/navapage/indexdb.htm>

Flags of the 19th and 20th Centuries
http://home01.wxs.nl/_marksens
Click on alphabetical index listing

Flags of the Nations
www.fortunecity.com/victorian/crayon/1098/index.html

House Flags of the U.S. Navy Ships
<http://home.sprintmail.com/~ibasigs/>
Click on Ship Listings

World Flags
www.geographicorg/flags
This source also gives information such as maps, climate, geography, and country facts. Click on "easy flag identifiers" for an approach to analyzing flag designs.

Artcyclopedia
www.artcyclopedia.com/
Search "All Posters" link and use "Flag Artists" as your key phrase. (33 items can be found)

Vocabulary

aesthetics n. pl. The philosophy of art and beauty

conceptual art n. Art rooted in an idea or general notion

WHAT IS 'ART'?

Ideas and opinions about art from a variety of sources.

★ In the State Standards a listing of the criteria used to evaluate works of art includes: craftsmanship, function, organization, originality, technique, and theme. The Standards also list things to be considered when examining works of art: use of basic elements and principles of art, meaning and intent of the artist.

Alaska State Content Standards

★ "As soon as a real artist finds out what art is, the more is he likely to feel the need of keeping silent about it, and about himself in connection with it."

American artist Marsden Hartley, 1928

★ "The aesthetic involves an attempt to communicate. It is deliberate, intentional. The artist fashions something that would have an effect on someone else.... Artists seek to recreate, comment on, or react against aspects of the world or facets of subjective experience, vivifying them or an audience rather than reducing them to fundamentals."

The Arts and Human Development,
by Howard Gardner, 1994

★ "Art tends towards balance, order, judgment of relative values (color values), the laws of growth, the economy of living..."

The Art Spirit by Robert Henri, 1923

★ 'Art' to be meaningful, must be exclusive and inclusive. It must exclude some objects in the world from being art, else the word comes to be a synonym for "everything" (or perhaps even more). It must also include some objects as art, with admission to that group characterized by consideration or "testing."

"Why Define Art?" by David E.W. Fenner,
Journal of Aesthetic Education,
Vol. 28, No.1, spring, 1994

★ "...In order to learn about art it is necessary to become familiar with examples of art. It follows that in order to learn about the concept 'art' it is necessary to become familiar with concepts associated with it and that this can be achieved most effectively through exposure to visual exemplars, combined with verbal information.

"Commentaries – Adolescents'
conception of the concept of 'art'"
By Richard Hickman,
Journal of Aesthetic Education,
Vol. 34, No.1, 2000

★ "Every element in the picture will be constructive, of an idea, and expressive of an emotion. Every factor in the painting will have beauty because in its place in the organization it is doing its living part. It will be living line, living form, living color."

"Letter to the Class"
Art Students League, 1915
Lecture by Robert Henri

★ Dan Deroux, an Alaska artist, uses the following three concepts in his on-line art course for students.

Concept 1

"It has been suggested that art museums and concert halls are gymnasiums where people stretch and exercise their consciousness on works of art."

Concept 2

A variety of definitions of art:

skill fineness and complexity of execution, cunning or craft – as in "artful dodger"

artifice something done to or added to, artificial rather than real

beauty pleasure, sensual quality of things (color, shape, sound)

order or harmonizing organizing, shaping, pattern working, interpreting, giving unity

innovation exploration, originality, creation, invention, imagination, revising the old order, surprise

the urge to beautify embellish, adorn, decorate

self-expression personal view of the world

communication information, symbolizing in a special way

make-believe fantasy, illusion

heightened emotion, entertainment, ecstasy

existence extraordinary experience

Concept 3

The definition of art is not held in all societies. In some cultures there is no word for art – but what we call "art" does exist in those societies.

DEBATE SCORING GUIDE

5

- Speaker presents a respectful and appropriate appearance
- Speaker demonstrates an excellent understanding of the subject matter
- Speaker responds exceptionally well to opposing arguments
- Speaker demonstrates mastery of speech components: volume, pacing, eye contact, posture, tone
- Speaker adheres to time guidelines and is excellently prepared

4

- Speaker presents a respectful and appropriate appearance
- Speaker demonstrates an above average understanding of the subject matter
- Speaker responds very well to opposing arguments
- Speaker demonstrates above average understanding of speech components: volume, pacing, eye contact, posture, tone
- Speaker adheres to time guidelines and is well prepared

3

- Speaker presents a respectful appearance
- Speaker demonstrates an average understanding of the subject matter
- Speaker responds adequately to opposing arguments
- Speaker demonstrates average understanding of speech components though may demonstrate a marked weakness in one or more areas
- Speaker may adhere to time guidelines and is adequately prepared

2

- Speaker may not present an appropriate appearance
- Speaker demonstrates a below average understanding of the subject matter
- Speaker may struggle in responding to opposing arguments
- Speaker does not demonstrate understanding of speech components with weaknesses in several areas
- Presentation indicates that time and preparation are minimal

1

- Appearance is not adequate
- Speaker demonstrates little to no understanding of the subject matter
- Speaker responds ineffectively to opposing arguments
- Speaker generally has poor speaking skills with little attention to components
- Preparation is not apparent