

The County Election: A History of Voting Rights in America
Lesson #2 Examining *The County Election* Painting
For Grades 9-12

Introduction to share with students

George Caleb Bingham painted *The County Election* in 1852. The scene takes place in 1850 in Missouri. From a letter Bingham wrote to fellow artist John Sartain in 1852: "There will be nothing to mar the general character of the work, which I designed to be as national as possible--applicable alike to every section of the union, and as illustrative of the manners of a free people and free institutions." This image was offered for sale as a print and was very popular. Bingham created a three-part election series which included *The County Election*, *Stump Speaking*, and *The Verdict of the People*. Links to the other two paintings in the series are at the end of the lesson plan.

Ask students to examine *The County Election*. You may choose the best method of delivery. The painting is provided to you via word document and as a slideshow.

1. Explain that students will "read" the painting by "**seeing**" and then "**observing**". The whole image can be examined or it can be divided into quadrants to be examined one at a time. You might create a chart where they record their observations for each quadrant of the painting.

First students will record what they **see**:

- What are your eyes drawn to first? Why? Where does the artist want you to look? (The focal point is on the porch.)
- What techniques did the artist use to draw your eyes to that spot? (Think about lighting. Where is it the strongest? The light is brightest in front of the porch.)
- Think about the overall shape of the painting. Is your eye drawn to the highest point or to the background because it is darker? (The overall shape is a triangle and the brightest area is a smaller triangle.)
- What does the artist's choice of colors convey? Does the painting seem to have a depressing darkness about it or do the colors make the scene seem exciting, calm, merry, sad, etc.?
- What about action? Does the painting seem "busy" to you, or is it a quiet scene? If you could place yourself in the scene, would it be noisy around you, or quiet?
- List the actions taking place.

Go over students' responses and share the following notes with them.

Notes about *The County Election*

Painting is owned by the Saint Louis, MO, Art Museum

- The boy is playing "mumble-the-peg" - a game of chance where a knife is tossed into the air
- In this time period the candidates often paid for alcoholic drinks in order to win votes
- The vote is verbal-men swear on the Bible that they had not voted before in this election and then they state their vote out loud to a commissioner
- A county clerk records the vote, but we don't really know what he records
- The blue banner says "The will of the people the supreme law"
- A barrel can be seen in the lower left. It contains hard cider.
- The scene takes place in front of a courthouse
- There are 3 drunken men--one near the table, one being held up, and one with a bandaged head

2. Now students will **observe**. Ask them to answer the questions and list what this painting teaches about voting at the time. They can either write down their observations or fill out the worksheet included in this lesson. You might also use a Kahoot quiz.

- When was this painting done? (1852) What else was going on in the country at that time?
- According to this painting, who could vote then? (white men) How do you know that from what you observe?

- As your eyes sweep up to the top of the brightest triangle of light, what do you observe? (a man is swearing on the Bible) What is happening on the outskirts of this focal point? What does that tell you about voting in this time period?
- Do you see any evidence of written votes being cast? (no) According to the picture, how did a man vote? (verbally, by calling out the name of the candidate for whom he was voting so that the clerks behind the judge could record his vote.) Was voting then a private act? (no) What evidence do you observe to make this claim?
- Find the man in blue tipping his hat. Who might he be and what might he be doing? (He's a candidate soliciting a last-minute vote.) How can you tell he's a candidate? (He's well-dressed and stands higher up in the triangle; he's handing something to a man who is about to vote)
- What evidence can you find for corruption and/or manipulation? (purposely getting someone drunk to convince them to vote a certain way, and letting someone vote who is too drunk to stand; candidate in the polling area where he can try to convince someone to vote minutes beforehand and hear how people are voting)
- What evidence can you find to support the perspective that voting was essentially a positive and vigorous part of America's democratic government? (Voting takes place in public; there's a big crowd and a party-like atmosphere; even though only white men are in the crowd, the rich and poor are in evidence and we assume education levels varied greatly)
- What questions do you have in regard to this painting? What would you like to know more about?

Suggestions for a Wrap-up

- Hold an online discussion, perhaps as a Zoom meeting where the facilitator poses one question at a time, gives each student time to respond alone, and then starts a class discussion.
- Conduct an online chat forum with written discussion
- Assign smaller groups specific questions and ask them to present as a team. They can create mini-videos (flipgrids) and the class can respond to each video.
- "Think-pair-share": divide students into pairs and give each a question to discuss. They then share their conclusions with the rest of the class.
- Use the questions as talking points for a Socratic seminar. This provides an opportunity to delve more deeply into what the students think the artist was expressing, not by debating, judging, or attempting to influence a certain premise, but by listening to each other's opinions, talking with each other, and offering alternate interpretations.

If none of the above ideas are feasible, provide a summary of the class's responses by what method works best for you and your students.

Optional Activity for Grades 11-12, or AP

Provide students with a piece of artwork and its critical review. Ask them to create a similar review for *The County Election*.

Further Resources

[The Verdict of the People](#)

[Stump Speaking](#)

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Lesson #2- Examining *The County Election* Painting
Worksheet

George Caleb Bingham painted *The County Election* in 1852. The scene takes place in 1850 in Missouri. From a letter Bingham wrote to fellow artist John Sartain in 1852: "There will be nothing to mar the general character of the work, which I designed to be as national as possible--applicable alike to every section of the union, and as illustrative of the manners of a free people and free institutions. As far as you have an opportunity to do so, you will much favor me by inculcating this idea of Nationality in reference to the subject." This image was offered for sale as a print and was very popular. Bingham created a three-part election series.

1. According to this painting, who could vote in 1852? What else was going on in the country at that time?

2. As your eyes sweep up to the top of the brightest triangle of light, what do you observe? With this as a focal point, what is happening on the outskirts of it? What does that tell you about voting in this time period?

3. Do you see any evidence of written votes being cast? According to the picture, how did a man vote? Was voting then a private act? What evidence do you observe to make this claim?

4. Find the man in blue tipping his hat. Who might he be and what might he be doing? How can you tell he's a candidate?

5. What evidence can you find for corruption and/or manipulation?

6. What evidence can you find to support the perspective that voting was essentially a positive and vigorous part of America's democratic government?

7. What questions do you have in regard to this painting? What would you like to know more about?



The County Election
John Sartain, after George Caleb Bingham, 1854