

Lesson 2: The French and Indian War

Historical Career Assumed:

- Art Historian

Historical Skills Practiced

- Close reading
- Interpreting information
- Challenging the credibility of sources

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the causes of the American Revolution by considering the role of an earlier war, The French and Indian War, in sowing discontent among the colonists. Today, students will learn about the events and effects of the French and Indian War by reading a summary, having small group and whole class discussions, and examining Benjamin West's *the Death of General Wolfe* painting.

For the first half of this lesson, students will read and annotate with a partner a summary of the French and Indian War. While they are reading, they will be answering corresponding questions in their almanac. After this, the whole class will come together to discuss the main motives for the war from the perspective of the French and the British and examine why many Indigenous Tribes became involved in the war.

After this activity, students will work in small groups taking the role of an art historian and respond to questions about Benjamin West's "The Death of General Wolfe" painting. The whole class will then come back together to discuss these questions and inquire if they believe that the painting was an accurate portrayal of the death of General Wolfe signaling the end of the French and Indian War. Students will then read a brief summary from the Clements Library Quarto explaining how "many people in the present expect illustrations of historic events to be journalistic reports of what actually happened" and identifying the many discrepancies the painting expresses. Students will then discuss why Benjamin West would have exaggerated the truth with his painting and how they can critically examine primary sources in the future to make sure they always question their credibility, intentions, and sincerity.

Concept Questions:

- Throughout the French and Indian War, what the British fighting for? What were the French fighting for? What were the Native Americans fighting for?
- Why isn't the artistic portrayal of "The Death of General Wolfe" by Benjamin West a credible representation of the actual event?

Topical Essential Question:

- How do you know if a primary source is trustworthy, unbiased, and credible?

Overarching Essential Question:

- What are the causes of the American Revolution?

Learning Objectives:

- Students will read and annotate a summary of the French and Indian War.
- Students will analyze, interpret, and challenge the trustworthiness of Benjamin West's painting, "The Death of General Wolfe."
- Students will learn to question the credibility of primary and secondary sources.

Instructional Plan

Do Now:

Are all primary sources trustworthy? Why or why not?

After students share a few of their responses with the class, explain that for all primary sources, a historian must question its purpose, trustworthiness, and bias. Every primary source was written from a certain perspective, and it is important to investigate whether or not that perspective is reliable before making assumptions about the trustworthiness of the source.

Share the goals of today's lesson.

Start off the lesson explaining to students that today they will be given a brief introduction to the French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Years War, to start their framework for why the colonists became restless under British control which contributed to the start of the American Revolution. In this lesson, students will read and answer corresponding questions on a summary of the French and Indian War, act as an art critic to analyze the intentions of the painting, "The Death of General Wolfe" by Benjamin West, and lastly will read a Clements Library article about "The Death of General Wolfe" painting that questions whether or not the painting is credible. After these activities, we will have a whole class discussion about analyzing primary sources and understanding that they are not always completely accurate portrayals of events of the past. Explain that tomorrow, we will learn about the impacts the French and Indian War had on the colonists, Native Americans, British, and French.

Activate students' knowledge.

Have students write for 3 minutes responding to the following question, "When we think about historical events, like wars, why is it important to think about other things that happened around the same time? In their writing, have students give an example.

Small group discussion.

Turning and talking to the people sitting next to them, have students share their ideas with each other. Remind students that while sharing, they should also listen to similarities and differences of other people's ideas. In their group, students should support, extend, and challenge each other's assumptions and work together to revise their original thought to make one thought that encompasses the thoughts of everyone in the group.

Whole class conversation.

Explain to students that it is critical for historians to recognize the connections in historical events for them to understand the big picture of how seemingly small events and ideas escalate into big systems. Share that they will soon start reading a summary of the French and Indian War, and that they should keep in mind while they are reading to think about how the events that happened during the French and Indian War may have larger impacts.

Partner work time.

With a partner, students will read and annotate an article in their almanac summarizing the major causes and events of the French and Indian War. This article will be split up one paragraph at a time. After each paragraph, students will be provided with a question to respond to. At the end of their reading, students will write a brief letter from the perspective of a colonist explaining how they would feel during the French and Indian War. If students finish early, they should share their letter and their responses to the questions with their partner and *corroborate* ideas.

Whole class conversation.

After students finish their reading and writing (this should have taken up about 1/2 of the class) have students come back together to discuss the main causes and events of the French and Indian War. In this discussion, students should be aware of how these causes and impacts may relate to a broader historical narrative. Have students share what they believe that narrative may be.

Who are Art Historians?

Have students flip their almanacs to the front page of their almanac titled “Historical Jobs” and write “Art Historian.” Ask students what they know about art historians and then have them write down that an art historian is someone who specializes in analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating art. Say that there are many art historians who solely study historic art pieces as a way to understand the past.

Art Historian activity

Show students the “Death of General Wolfe” painting on the overhead. Have them first silently look at the painting for about a minute thinking about the following questions:

- What is this image depicting?
- Who do you think the focal person of the painting is?
- What is the story Benjamin West is telling in this painting?
- Why do you think Benjamin West depicted the battle in this way?

Then have students talk with the person sitting next to them using these questions as guides for discussion. Finally, have students share as a whole class what story they think this painting is trying to tell. Explain to students that this painting is a depiction from a man named Benjamin West who painted this only a few years after the French and Indian War. His depiction was of the death of a British General, James Wolfe, during the Battle of Quebec. Many leaders urged General West against painting this piece with a contemporary lens because they believed it would make it less timeless, but he stated that, “The same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil (paintbrush) of the artist.” Ask students what they think of this quote, what does it mean?

Primary source analysis conversation.

Explain to students that this painting is one of the most iconic and well-known paintings of the French and Indian War, and of American history. This painting was created with a specific motive and intention behind it. Share with students a few excerpts from an article from the Clements Library sharing the significance of the “Death of General Wolfe” painting in American history, but also its misgivings. Explain that while West said that artists should be guided by truth, this image does not contain many truths. All but one of the other officers next to Wolfe in

the painting were not actually there for his actual death and a Native American man was most likely not sitting directly beside him either. Additionally, West attempted to mirror Wolfe's expressions and holy aura to mimic the death of Jesus Christ. Ask students why they think West would have exaggerated so much in this painting? While there are many possible answers, explain that this painting was a way to promote the British cause by showing the heroism of those who fought for the British.

Final thoughts.

Explain to students that primary sources, especially paintings, are excellent ways for historians to attempt to think from the perspective of people of the past to understand history. While students should read and analyze many primary sources through their inquiries, they should also be aware that many times primary sources are exaggerated, biased, and untruthful representations of historical events. It is important for students to *corroborate* sources together, so they are getting a more well-rounded interpretation of the past and are not just looking at it from one side. Share that tomorrow they will *corroborate* maps to see the many biases that are involved in mapmaking and learn about the impacts that the French and Indian War had on the colonists, Native Americans, British, and French.

Exit slip.

Why are many primary sources exaggerated, biased, and untruthful representations of historical events? How can historians interpret primary sources to understand the full picture?



APPROPRIATE ATTIRE REQUIRED

The single most recognizable item from the Clements Library's collections is also the most recognizable image of the French and Indian War—a massive oil painting by Benjamin West, “The Death of General Wolfe,” depicting the climactic battle at Québec in 1759 and celebrating the British conquest of New France. Hanging high on the north wall of the Main Room, “The Death of General Wolfe” reflects the Library’s holdings on the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. This painting’s value goes beyond illustration of a historic event. It also symbolizes the popular sentiment for Wolfe, patriotic feeling in Britain at the beginning of the Revolution, and the peak of British imperial power in North America.

Born in rural Pennsylvania, Benjamin West, a precocious artist, studied briefly at the College of Philadelphia and then made a pilgrimage to Italy to study Renaissance masterworks. West permanently settled in London in 1763 and quickly established himself as a leading academic portrait and history painter. He became president of the Royal Academy and taught many of England’s and America’s finest portrait artists, including Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, Thomas Sully, and John Trumbull. Known in London as “the American Raphael,”

he was “Historical Painter to the King of England” when history painting was considered to be the pinnacle of art forms and American artists were still subject to condescension from the English art establishment. West expressed support for American independence yet enjoyed the patronage of King George III.

Viewpoints and prejudices about the past are always more visible than those about the present. Today’s society expects illustrations of historic events to be journalistic reports of what actually happened. In the case of “The Death of General Wolfe,” other accounts reveal significant discrepancies in this regard, despite West’s assertion that “the same truth which gives law to the historian should rule the painter.” This by no means indicates a failure on West’s part. He worked at a time when the purpose of art and the recording of history had different objectives. The modern concept of journalistic or historical truth would have been an unwelcome vulgarization, obscuring West’s visualization of a higher truth.

In the eighteenth century, successful academic history paintings were expected to address moral, spiritual, and nationally uplifting themes. Subject matter was generally limited to Biblical episodes and events from classical antiquity. Known as the “grand style” or “true style,” the predominant neoclassicism of the eighteenth century

was grounded in ancient mythology and classical iconography and structured to serve the agenda of the contemporary empires that steadily sponsored artists. The king was naturally interested in images of virtue that would reinforce the glory and position of his empire.

Wolfe’s death was seen as an inspiring sacrifice for the greater good and worthy of the “grand style.” It was not considered incongruous to memorialize contemporary national heroes in the neoclassical style. Incorporating robes and postures based on Greek and Roman statuary implied a connection with lofty past ideals and timeless glory. The composition of neoclassical paintings frequently followed the designs of classical frieze statuary, with a horizontal array of figures arranged in harmony before a deep space. In successful examples, all the elements contribute to the didactic purpose of the whole. West certainly supported these ideals, but with “The Death of General Wolfe” he would begin the dissolution of the formula by using modern attire in place of classical dress.

Details of West’s painting are a joy to examine. The carefully observed and rendered clothing indicates that he worked from props that were representative of the variety of uniforms worn by British troops at Québec. Many items of dress of the Native American and the light infantryman were painted from examples gathered in America by

Lesson sources

<https://clements.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/quarto21-french-indian-war.pdf>

<https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/lessonplan/frenchindian.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9n-gsgqaUo0>