How do images created both during and after the United States Civil War shape our understanding of this seminal historical event?

How do artists’ perspectives on the war broaden our understanding of this complex event and its legacy?

The United States Civil War was one of the first major military conflicts to be photographed, which creates provocative comparisons to other methods and formats of documentation. This Portfolio Guide of historic and contemporary photographs and prints, and works in oil and pencil, features a sampling of works from the Addison’s collection offering varied perspectives and discussion points for this formative period.

Educators are encouraged to use this Guide and the expanded Portfolio Image List as a starting point, a place from which to dig deeper, ask questions, and make new connections for class plans and projects.

For online use, click the images in this guide to access digital images in the Addison’s online database.

SELECTED THEMATIC APPROACHES

War Photography — What stories do Civil War photographs tell? How do the intentions of Civil War documentarians compare to subsequent and recent war photographers?

Documenting History — What stories do different image formats and mediums tell?

Technology and The Media — What was the role of popular print media, and the illustrations within them, in disseminating news, effecting opinion, and garnering change?

Comparing Perspectives — How do we come to understand history through various images?

Portraits and Types — What are the differences between a portrait, a type, and a stereotype?

Contemporary Perspectives — How and why do the interpretations of events and images change over time?
War Photography

What stories do Civil War photographs tell? What can they not tell?

How do the intentions of Civil War photographers compare to subsequent and recent war photographers and the current ethical codes of photojournalism?

America’s Civil War was one of the first major military conflicts to be documented through photography. In 1861, photographer Mathew Brady took out a loan on his New York gallery in order to finance his dream of photographing the Civil War. Because of the unofficial status of photographers and the limitations of capturing motion, photographers mostly documented still, posed, and composed scenes, rather than action or battles. The debate continues over the value of Alexander Gardner’s *A Harvest of Death* photograph as a document of the Civil War since it has become known that he manipulated the bodies on the battlefield to highlight the devastation of Gettysburg.
Documenting History

How do Gardner’s albums tell the story of the war compared to an individual photograph or to a painted record?

How does a composite image compare to a single image? or to a series of images?

Serving as a captain’s clerk aboard a Union Quartermaster’s supply transport, Edward Lamson Henry made sketches to document the non-combat side of a soldier’s life. From 1865 to 1873 he worked on combining these sketches to create the post-war composite scene of the painting, City Point, Virginia, Headquarters of General Grant. This large-scale, complex composition emphasizes the bustling transportation network as a new basis for national identity.
Technology and The Media

How were Winslow Homer’s engravings in Harper’s Weekly read differently from Gardner’s photographs?

How did the audience, format, and choice of subject influence the creation and interpretation of the engraving and photographs?

Because the technology to reproduce photographs was not yet practical for mass distribution during the Civil War, newspapers relied on artists to provide images for their stories. Photographs and drawings were engraved on wood plates to enable them to be printed in publications such as Harper’s Weekly: A Journal of Civilization. Winslow Homer was one of Harper’s most noted illustrators, creating many images from the front lines of the Civil War. Military camp scenes, sometimes illustrating the positions of African Americans, and scenes showing women’s changing roles on the home front were also among Homer’s commissions for this New York-based political magazine featuring news, essays, fiction, and humor.
Comparing Perspectives

How do we understand the reality and representation of history in Harper’s Weekly illustrations and Gardner’s photographic Sketch Books?

How can they be used as primary sources today?

Having left Brady’s photographing team to form his own, Alexander Gardner bound one hundred of the Civil War photographs taken by his team into two albums published in 1865 and 1866, which he entitled Garden’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War. Also published in 1866 was Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War, a compilation of Harper’s Weekly stories and illustrations. Exploration of these compendiums designed to document the northern perspective on the Civil War alongside images, stories, and books from other personal, cultural, and national perspectives foster provocative investigations into the role of storytelling and history.

Note: Reproductions of both the Gardner and Harper’s publications are currently available in print.
Portraits and Types

What makes a portrait a portrait? How and why does a portrait become a generalized type — or a limiting stereotype?

How are status and meaning conveyed through body language, setting, props, and composition?

The development of more efficient and affordable photographic techniques in the second half of the nineteenth century extended the range of who could be memorialized through an image, while it allowed for expanded use of images to convey and confirm rank across the military and social spectrum. Oliver H. Willard’s hand-colored, studio portrait commemorates the uniforms made under the U.S. Quartermaster General’s contracts. Alexander Gardner’s studio and in situ portraits convey the authoritative yet relaxed countenance of the men in charge of the Civil War, while Winslow Homer’s Campaign Sketch distinguishes the rank of African American participants in the war.
Contemporary Perspectives

*How and why do the interpretations of historical images change over time?*

*How does the perspective of contemporary artist Kara Walker impact the reading of images created during and just after the Civil War?*

Nearly 150 years after the Civil War artist Kara Walker - whose work makes visible persistent issues of race, gender, and cultural violence in this country - published a portfolio of fifteen prints entitled *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*. By overlaying reproduced *Harper’s Weekly* illustrations with often grotesque silhouettes of African American stereotypes Walker revisits this national and racial conflict and creates a dialog between past and present. These combinations of fact, fiction, and fantasy reflect the artist’s understanding of official history as selectively remembered and presented.
Curriculum Connections and Resources

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

History/Social Studies
- the art of war
- secession
- race relations
- gender roles in war time
- print media

English
- Bull Run
- Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman
- The Red Badge of Courage

Art
- Uncle Tom’s Cabin
- Beloved
- The Life of Olaudah Equiano
- representation
- portraits and types
- narrative
- works in series
- printmaking
- social documentation

Science
- war technology
- media technology
- photographic technology and chemical reactions
- environmental impact of war
- biology and race

CONNECTIONS TO ADDITIONAL THEMATIC PORTFOLIOS

Representing the Land
American Identity
African American Identity
Gender
Race and Otherness
Documentation vs. Art
Representation and Reality
Images and the Media
The Power of Photography

TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES


Library of Congress. Selected Civil War Photographs: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwphome.html. Images made under Mathew Brady’s supervision including scenes of preparations for battle and battle after-effects, and portraits of Confederate officers, Union officers, and enlisted men.
