

————— **Special Interest** —————

**African American Participation in America's Wars:  
An Artist's View**

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**Abstract**

From the American Revolution to the present, African Americans have fought courageously but with little recognition- a community of unsung heroes. They have not only been underrepresented in the story of America but sadly in social studies texts at the K-12 levels, as well. American artists have told the true story of African American contributions in times of war. This essay will explore the role that art has played in telling the story of African Americans, a visual history that has been often forgotten and excluded from history tests. It will also present several critical thinking teaching activities. The images reveal the courageous participation of African Americans in our country's historical narrative.

**Key Words**

Civic participation, visual interpretation and critical analysis, historical omission

**African American Participation in America's Wars: An Artist's View**

African Americans have fought in all American wars from the American Revolution to the present. Though often underreported and certainly absent from the pages of history books, including state approved textbooks, their courage and participation has

been illustrated and painted by artists and photographed by photographers. The following will present two wars; the American Revolution and the Spanish-American War that concludes with two critical thinking activities to illustrate my view.

## American Revolution

We all grew up with the story of Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave of African American and Native American heritage who was the first person of color to die in the American Revolution. Nathaniel Philbrick in his book, *Bunker Hill: A City, A Siege, A Revolution* offers the following of African American participation in the American Revolution. George Washington was initially reluctant to allow free blacks to become soldiers in the Continental Army. On December 5, 1775, thirteen of Washington's officers filed a petition to the Massachusetts General Court, requesting that the African American Salem Poor be rewarded for his bravery on June 17, 1775. Poor had "behaved," the petition read, "like an experienced officer as well as an excellent soldier." It had been Poor, many claimed, who shot Major Pitcairn as the British officers mounted the wall of the redoubt, shouting "the day is ours." Washington appears to have taken this kind of testimony to heart, and by the beginning of the new year Salem Poor, who had purchased his freedom for the price of twenty-seven pounds in 1769, was a soldier in the Continental Army. In fact, 5,000 African Americans served in the American Revolution.

John Trumbull painted *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill, 17 June 1775* one of the most popular American Revolutionary War heroes. Had Warren not been slain at Bunker Hill, he may have become America's first president. Although more than 100 African Americans and Native Americans fought at Bunker Hill, Trumbull

only portrays two in this painting (see teaching activity). The black man holding a musket in the lower right corner has been "identified as either Salem Poor or Peter Salem, two African American soldiers (sometimes conflated with one another) who are known to have served that day. It seems more likely, however, that the figure represents Asaba, an enslaved man owned by Lieutenant Thomas Grosvenor, the officer in the plumed hat who stands before him with a sword (MFA, Boston, p.2)."

On Christmas Eve, December 25, 1776, George Washington led a band of patriots across the Delaware River to surprise Hessian troops at Trenton, New Jersey, a battle that became the turning point in the American Revolution. In 1851, Emanuel Leitzke, a German artist, painted the now famous, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Though historically inaccurate, symbolically, the painting was a success. Among the twelve individuals in the boat (one may have been a woman), was an African American. Recent research indicates that he was a seaman from Bedford, Massachusetts, one of the many who ferried soldiers across the Delaware River that bitterly cold night.

Due to the slave trade and proximity to Indians, primarily Cherokees, South Carolina was the most ethnically diverse among the colonies. Of the more than 2,000 men that fought at the Battle of Cowpens on January 17, 1781, the National Park Service, can identify 15 African Americans who fought with the continental army. William Ranney's painting, *Battle of Cowpens* "shows the famous William Washington-Banastre Tarleton

sword fight in which Washington's servant (slave) rode up, fired his pistol at a British officer, and saved Washington's life. Since most waiters were African American, Ranney painted him as such (Unsung Patriots, p.2).” As a military strategy, Great Britain promised African Americans their freedom if they would escape slavery and become British marines. Artists also painted African Americans in the War of 1812 and the Civil War including one of America's most famous artists, Winslow Homer. The Buffalo Soldiers of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary brought their fame from the Indian Wars to the Spanish American War. The Spanish American War provides teachers an opportunity to engage students in critical analysis of both paintings and photographs.

### **The Role of the Buffalo Soldiers**

In 1863, the United States Government organized the United States Colored Troops, (USCT), and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary, and the four all-Black infantry regiments in 1866. “The men of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary came from various social and economic backgrounds. Many were veterans of the Civil War. The ranks of the new cavalry units were filled with ex-slaves but now they had a new perspective-freedom (Hill, p.3).” The organization of the 9<sup>th</sup> Calvary took place in New Orleans, Louisiana, under the auspices of the Division of the Gulf (covering Florida, Louisiana, and Texas, August 1866). The unit was immediately sent to San Antonio, where they patrolled the Rio Grande River and the Mexican border. Their job also included escorting and protecting government

mail and settlers, and containing Indians, Mexicans, and lawless Americans.

As Americans migrated westward in large numbers after the Civil War, the U.S. Army built forts to protect the settlers from bands of Indians whose culture it was determined to destroy. Buffalo Soldiers, African American troops “fought the Comanche's and Kiowa in the 1860s and 1870s and the Apaches between 1879 and 1886, and they had some service in the Pine Ridge campaign of 1890-91. Most of this duty performed had been in obscurity (Schubert, 1998, p.3). No one knows for certain why, but the soldiers of the all-Black 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary Regiments were dubbed “buffalo soldiers” by the Native Americas, but “one theory claims that the nickname arose because the soldiers' dark curly hair resembled the fur of a buffalo. Another assumption is the soldiers fought so valiantly and fiercely that the Indians revered them as they did the mighty buffalo (Buffalo Soldiers p.2).” Isaiah Dorman, an African American interpreter for George Armstrong Custer lost his life at the Battle of Little Big Horn.

### **Spanish American War**

After the *U.S.S. Maine* blew up in Havana Harbor, the United States entered the Spanish \_American War. Though controversial from the beginning, America became involved in its first war with imperialistic tendencies. Four African American units from the plains, “Buffalo Soldiers” were re-deployed to Cuba. “In the Spanish-American War of 1898, veteran Black troops...were more responsible than any other group for

United States victory,” writes Edward Van Zile in his 1996 book, *The Unwept*.

One of the paintings, *A Day of Honor*, by Don Stivers illustrates an example of the courage of the “Buffalo Soldiers” exhibited during that conflict. During the Battle of Las Gusaimus, Cuba, June 24, 1898, Major Bell of the 1<sup>st</sup> Calvary had gone down with a wound to his leg. The fire was so intense that in a plot of ground fifty feet square sixteen men were killed or wounded. Still, there was a fellow American soldier badly hurt and in need of assistance, and Private Augustus Walley of the famed “Buffalo Soldiers” his compassion overcoming self-preservation, ran to help Bell who was dragged to safety.

Frederic Remington painted Teddy Roosevelt’s charge up San Juan Hill, a glorious charge that became part of our national lore. A different account emerges when battlefield action reports are read. The now-famous charge did not have horses. No horses participated in the famous battle. The animals never arrived from their training grounds in Texas. The Rough Riders did indeed charge up San Juan Hill on foot. They were, however, surrounded on all sides and in great danger of being annihilated. It was this action that led a grateful Rough Rider to proclaim, “If it hadn’t been for the black cavalry, the Rough Riders would have been exterminated (Akiboh, retrieved 2018).”

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### Notes

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### Teaching Activities

To successfully engage students in understanding how a painting or photograph can enhance their knowledge of history over my teaching career, I have developed methods to help students engage in understanding how a painting or photograph can enhance their knowledge of history. A painting or a photograph by itself without a context is meaningless. To begin students need a basic understanding of the time period showcased in the art. I have included two short sketches (*Historical Sketch*) that I have found to be successful. Each sketch includes a brief biography of the artist/photographer, a description of the work, and the social /political attitudes at the time

#### Teaching the Lesson:

**Materials-** Your students will need the following materials; *Historical Sketch*, *Art Analysis Worksheet* or *Photograph Analysis Worksheet*, and *Formal Elements Worksheet*.

1. Show the painting to your students and ask them to fill out the *Art Analysis Worksheet* and the *Formal Elements Worksheet*. They can work in pairs or individually. I have found that students working in pairs observe more elements in a painting than working individually.
2. Summarize their observations.
3. Present the *Historical Sketch* to your students either a lecture/discussion format or allowing them to read and compare with their analysis.
4. Once the students complete this stage of the lesson, they need to be able to answer the following question: What was the reason the painting or photograph was commissioned and by whom?
5. As a final segment to your lesson, discuss the final question in this paper **Artist versus Historian**.

***Historical Sketch***

*The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775*

By John Trumbull

**The Artist**

John Trumbull was in the colonial army during the American Revolution and stationed in a camp at Roxbury, Massachusetts the day of the Battle of Bunker Hill. He viewed the battle with field glasses in 1775 and later in 1786 decided to recreate the scene. During the American Revolution, he rose to the rank of colonel and became an aide-de-camp to General George Washington. The Congress of the United States commissioned Trumbull to paint four historic paintings depicting the American Revolution. Trumbull's subscribers for his paintings included George Washington, Sam Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson. Abigail Adams claimed her "blood shivered" at John Trumbull's vivid description of the tragic event.

**The Painting**

The painting is one of the earliest battles, an icon of the American Revolution. The focus of the painting is General Warren, an influential Massachusetts physician, and politician who, had he not been killed may have become the first president of the United States. Over Warren's body is British Major John Small shown holding a sword preventing a British soldier from bayoneting Warren. Trumbull wanted to show that Warren and Small had served together in earlier conflicts. The painting itself is a pantheon of British and Colonial officers almost as if they all showed up to have their pictures taken. Major John Pitcairn dying in his son's arms, shot by African American, Salem Poor. Also included are Generals Henry Clinton and William Howe and Lord Rawdon who holds the British colors at the center-right.

To the left of Warren and below the flags is a black freeman unidentified. Standing over Warren is Thomas Knowlton holding a musket and to his left sitting wounded is Lieutenant-Colonel Moses Parker of Chelmsford. On the far right of the painting standing behind Thomas Grosvenor with a musket is Asaba, a Black man who is Grosvenor's slave. And finally, Colonel William Prescott, who presumably ordered his soldiers not to fire until "you see the whites of their eyes."

In the distance are ships moored in Boston Harbor and a slight indication of the city's skyline.

Boston in 1775\*

The landscape in and around Boston was far different than today. It was smaller, hillier and more watery. Back Bay was still a bay and the South End was under water. Boston proper was an island reachable by a narrow neck of land. Though settled by Puritans, it was no longer Puritanical. One rise near Beacon Hill, known for its prostitutes, was marked on maps as "Mount Whoredom."

We have been taught that Boston was a "cradle of liberty", an attribution after the revo-

lution, not before. One in five Boston families owned slaves. Political divisions divided the city between Patriots and Loyalists. As Horwitz writes, “There’s an ugly civil war side to revolutionary Boston that we don’t often talk about and a lot of thuggish, vigilante behavior by groups like the Sons of Liberty.” The freedoms that the Minutemen of Lexington and Concord fought for weren’t intended for slaves, Indians, women or Catholics. It was a profoundly conservative cause. In fact, what they wanted was the liberties of British subjects, not independence.

With the blood spilled at Lexington and Concord, attitudes toward the British began to change, which is why the Bunker Hill battle is pivotal. After Lexington and Concord, the British retreated to Boston. Immediately the colonists occupied the surrounding hills. It was unclear whether the rebels could survive a pitched battle against the British. A thousand colonials marched from Cambridge to fortify Bunker Hill on the Charleston peninsula jutting into Boston Harbor. What is unclear is why the Americans bypassed Bunker Hill and instead fortified Breed’s Hill, a smaller rise much closer to Boston. “The reasons for this maneuver are murky. But Philbrick believes it was a ‘purposeful act, a provocation and not the smartest move militarily.’ Short on cannons and the know-how to fire those with accuracy, the rebels couldn’t do much damage from Breed’s Hill. But their threatening position, on high ground just across the water from Boston forced the British to try to dislodge the Americans before they were reinforced or fully entrenched (p. 2-3).”

On the morning of June 17, 1775, as the rebels frantically threw up breastworks of earth, fence posts, and stone the British began a bombardment. At midday, the British, among the best-trained troops in Europe disembarked from their boats close to the American position. “And they were led by seasoned commanders, one of whom marched confidently at the head of his men accompanied by a servant carrying a bottle of wine (p.3).” The British suffered severe losses at first; they were slowed by high and unmown hay, obscured rocks, holes, and other hazards in addition to fences and stone walls. The close-packed British soldiers fell in clumps and when their lines became entangled, they were easier targets. They were repulsed at every point. One American officer wrote, “The dead lay as thick as sheep in a fold.”

Undeterred and well-disciplined, on the third assault, the British were successful. “In just two hours of fighting, 1,054 British soldiers—almost half of all those engaged—had been killed or wounded, including many officers. American losses totaled over 400. The first true battle of the Revolutionary War was to prove the bloodiest of the entire conflict. Though the British had achieved their aim in capturing the hill, it was truly a Pyrrhic victory. ‘The success is too dearly bought,’ wrote Gen. William Howe, who lost every member of his staff (as well as the bottle of wine his servant carried into battle (p.3).”

A synopsis from Horwitz, Tony *The True Story of the Battle of Bunker Hill*, Smithsonian Magazine, May 2013 and Nathaniel Philbrick *Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution*.

### **Artist versus Historian**

The paintings you have read about and analyzed in this essay invite controversy. The first criticism is usually, they are not accurate. Point well taken. Most of the paintings were painted many years after the event. And, in the case of *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill, 17 June, 1775* and *Washington Crossing the Delaware* the use of symbolism for many detract from historical accuracy. On this matter, art historian, and former MET curator, John K. Howat wrote:

Listing the inaccuracies...misses the whole intention of the artist and the meaning of the picture, particularly in view of Leutze's insistence that a picture should revolve about one central idea rather than concern itself with minutia. Leutze had no desire to paint a thorough reconstruction of the scene—he was trying to capture the spirit of a great leader and the importance of a great event.

After your students analyze individual paintings using the *Art Analysis and Formal Elements Worksheets* let them struggle with John K. Howat's observation.

#### ***Historical Sketch***

*Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders July 1, 1898*

**Reproduction Number:** LC-USZC4-7934

**Repository:** Library of Congress Prints and Photograph Division, Washington, DC 220450  
USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

### **The Photograph**

Teddy Roosevelt is shown with members of The First United States Volunteer Cavalry after seizing San Juan Hill, the highest point on San Juan Ridge. The Rough Riders consisted of a rag tag group of volunteers that included cowboys, miners, Native Americans, elite Eastern school athletes, and law enforcement officials.

## Photograph Analysis Worksheet

### Observation

Study the photograph for two minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items.

Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

**People**

**Objects**

**Activities**

### Inference:

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from the photograph.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**When was the photograph taken?**

**List two things this photograph tells us about the United States at the time it was taken.**

1.

2.

**Write a question that is left unanswered by the photograph.**

**Did the photographer have a bias when he/she took the picture?**

**Give the photograph a title.**

## Formal Elements Worksheet

**Medium/technique:** Why did the artist use this medium? What are its advantages and limitations? How does the medium affect the viewer's impression? (For example, stone gives it a sense of permanence).

**Physical condition:**

Is it clean, dirty, crumpled, or restored?

**Size and scale:**

Is the piece unusually large or small? What is the relationship between the artwork and the viewer?

**Texture:**

How would you characterize it; bumpy, grainy, seamless, rough or smooth?

**Line/axis:**

Are the lines thick or thin? Does it make a difference? Are the lines, vertical, horizontal or diagonal? How do they function?

**Composition/principles of design:**

How do the various formal elements of the work interact? Is it centered, balanced, symmetrical, stable, unified, chaotic or varied? Does the eye move across the piece?

**Color/palette:**

Is there a lot of color in the work or is it monochromatic? How does the artist use color? Are there stark contrasts; and to what effect?

The final element of analysis is the student's interpretation of the work. When the answers from the Art Analysis Worksheet are combined with the Formal Elements Worksheet students can draw some conclusions about its meaning. Ask students the following questions: Do you see a connection between what the artist has done, formally, and your own response? Turn to the answers on the work's context. Does analysis of the formal elements shed any light on contextual matters? (Adapted from Rachel Perry, Ph.D. *The Holocaust and Art*, January 11, 2010, Yad Vashem)

## Art Analysis Worksheet

### Observation:

Study the painting or drawing for two minutes. Form an overall impression of the work. What emotion does it raise?

Use the chart below to list the people, objects, and activities in the work of art.

**People**

**Objects**

**Activities**

### Inference:

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from the work.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**When was the painting/drawing executed?**

**Where was the painting/drawing taken?**

**Why was the painting/drawing commissioned?**

**List two things the work tells us about the United States at the time it was painted.**

- 1.
- 2.

**Write a question that is unanswered by the work.**

**Did the artist have a bias when the work was executed?**