



Lesson Plan: Should Tax Dollars Fund Controversial Art?

OVERVIEW

This lesson plan is designed to be used with the film *The Last Conquistador*, the story of a controversial public arts project that some view as a monument to culture and others view as a glorification of genocide. Classrooms can use this lesson to role-play how city leaders might make a decision about spending tax dollars on art that is divisive. Students can also consider public art in their community and develop proposals for new art projects that would portray the perspectives of underrepresented communities.

POV documentaries can be recorded off the air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year -- FOR FREE!

Please visit our Film Library at http://www.amdoc.org/outreach_filmlibrary.php to find other films suitable for classroom use or to make this film a part of your school's permanent collection.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Use viewing skills and note-taking strategies to understand and interpret a video clip.
- Discuss issues related to the intersection of art, politics and history.
- Role-play the decision-making process of a city council.
- Form and defend a position on whether public funds should be spent on a monumental sculpture depicting a controversial historical figure.
- Research and present one segment of a class directory on local public art.
- Develop a proposal for a new public art project that would portray the perspective of an underrepresented part of the community.

GRADE LEVELS

6-12

SUBJECTS

Civics, U.S. History, Current Events, Language Arts, Visual Art

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Method (varies by school) of showing the class online video clips
- Computers with access to the Internet
- Map showing the location of El Paso, Texas
- Materials to create a class directory of local public art, in the form of a poster, brochure, video or website

ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION

This lesson requires four 50-minute class periods, plus research time outside class.

SUGGESTED CLIP

Clip 1: "The Controversy Surrounding the Sculpture" (length 9:42)

The clip begins at 6:35 with a shot of smokestacks and the text "El Paso, Texas." The clip ends at 16:17 after the quote "... good and bad, the whole thing, the history."

Clip 2: "City Council Meeting" (length 3:42)

The clip begins at 27:14 with the quote "We wanted the city of El Paso"

The clip ends at 31:10 with the quote "The motion fails, 5-3."

BACKGROUND

As part of an El Paso revitalization program known as the XII Travelers Memorial of the Southwest, a series of sculptures was commissioned to feature the likenesses of historic figures from the communities that came together to make up El Paso's population. The second statue of this project, "The Equestrian," depicts Juan de Oñate, a Spanish conquistador who named the city of El Paso and brought the Spanish language and culture to the region. Oñate proclaimed that parts of what is now the southwestern United States were the possession of Spain. He brought colonists, set up settlements and taxed the native populations.

In 1599, the Acoma Pueblo Indians refused to deliver the required food tax to the Spanish. An altercation ensued, and the Acoma killed 13 Spaniards, including Oñate's nephew. Oñate ordered that the village be destroyed. There were only about 200 Acoma survivors out of a population of nearly 2,000. Acoma Indian males of fighting age were sentenced to foot amputation, followed by 20 years of servitude. Others were sentenced to the amputation of their hands. Children were sent to Mexico to be raised by missionaries, but some scholars believe they were eventually sold on the slave market. Years later, Oñate was tried in Mexico City and convicted on a dozen charges, including using excessive force at Acoma. He was banished from New Mexico and lived the rest of his life in Spain.

"The Equestrian" is considered public art, which differs from art displayed in a gallery or museum in that it is generally created specifically for public display. It can be a way to spotlight local artists, encourage communities to come together over a shared history or prompt people to question urban environments in relation to artistic visions. Public art can be funded by numerous sources, including through public and private collaborations, government/taxpayer dollars, developers, and other funding resources specifically set aside for public art projects. Altogether, "The Equestrian" cost more than \$2 million, with about 40 percent of the funds coming from the public, in the form of \$713,000 granted by the El Paso City Council from airport revenue funds.

ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to imagine that they are members of the El Paso City Council. Show students where El Paso is on a map. Explain that the council makes decisions on behalf of a population of approximately 600,000 people, 20 percent of whom are white, 80 percent of whom are Latino. El Paso is the 10th-poorest city in the United States.
2. Tell the class that as members of the city council, they are looking for ideas on how to revitalize El Paso and boost the local economy. One idea that has been presented

features the creation of public art that could attract tourism and raise awareness of city history. Explain that public art differs from art displayed in a gallery or museum in that it is generally created specifically for public display. It can be a way to spotlight local artists, encourage communities to come together over a shared history or prompt people to question urban environments in relation to artistic visions. (See "What Is Public Art?" in the Resources section to find a more in-depth description of this topic.)

3. Pass out the Note-Taking Guide and tell the students that they are going to watch a brief video clip to learn more about the public art project proposed for El Paso. Then watch Clip 1, "The Controversy Surrounding the Sculpture."

4. After the class watches the clip, go over the questions in the Note-Taking Guide to ensure that students understand the issues surrounding the sculpture of Oñate. Ask the city council if tax dollars should be spent on such a controversial sculpture. Then choose from the following questions to guide the discussion:

- Should tax dollars be spent on public art when there is significant need in the city for better housing, education, safety and so on?
- How can art contribute to a community's sense of history?
- What role does the public play in determining the value of a piece of art?
- How does the sculptor's intent compare with the public's interpretation?
- Is it a function of art to be pleasing? Is the answer to that question different if the art is funded by tax dollars? Why or why not?
- To what degree, if any, does the statue of Oñate help encourage dialogue and healing about painful events in history?
- How might the sculpture look different if an Acoma Pueblo Indian were the sculptor? How do artists influence how history is told and remembered?
- Whose stories in history should be given public voice?
- Is there a way to represent the diverse perspectives in the community about Oñate the man? If so, how?

5. In their capacity as council members, have the class use the interactive map at the POV website to look at other examples of controversial public art, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the Tupac Shakur Memorial near Atlanta. How have other communities addressed situations like this?

6. For homework, ask students to reflect on this issue and write a one-page position statement that states how they will vote (for or against using public funds for the statue) and why.

7. When students return to class, collect the position papers and find out how students voted by a show of hands. Then play Clip 2, "City Council Meeting," to show the class what actually happened at the city council meeting in El Paso when public input was received on this issue. You may want to explain to students that the "Oñate My Foot" signs refer to an order given by Oñate to amputate a foot of every male Acoma Indian of fighting age.

8. After the class watches the clip, compare the students' vote with that of the El Paso City Council. What do the students think of how the real city council's vote went?

9. Next, focus on the public art in your community. Ask student pairs to choose a piece of public art and find out as much as possible about how it was funded, who or what the art represents, why it was selected for public display, and who selected it. Have students aggregate their research findings to form a directory of local art in the form of a website, brochure, video or group poster.

10. Invite students to analyze the information in their finished directory. How is local public art typically funded? How is it approved and created? To what degree does local public art reflect the community? Are there any perspectives that are missing? It is said that the victor writes history. Whose histories are represented in your community? Whose are left out? Brainstorm a list of subjects for public art projects that could fill in any missing perspectives.

11. Have student pairs regroup, choose a project from the brainstormed list and develop a proposal addressed to your local government body for a new public art project. Proposals should detail the subject matter for the art, which underrepresented perspective the art would portray for the community, and a plan for how this new public art project could be funded and created.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- Completion of the Note-Taking Guide.
- Participation in class discussion.
- The reasoning in their position statements.
- The quality of research and its presentation in the class directory of local public art.
- The logic, organization and detail of the public art proposal.

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

- Have students look carefully at online images of the sculpture of Oñate or at stills from the film before learning about who he was. As the students share their observations with the class, make a list of the details they observed. Analyze this list of observations to interpret what the sculpture communicates about its subject. Refer back to this observation activity after students have watched the first video clip. Do the students look at the sculpture in the same way now that they know more about Oñate? Ask the students to include their initial thinking about the sculpture's messages in their position statements.
- Invite students to create proposals for how the still-unfinished base of the sculpture of Oñate could be completed. Designs could include sculpture or text or both. Encourage students to consider how or if additional perspectives about Oñate should be represented on the base. Display the proposals without names attached and have students vote to determine the winning design.
- Ask students to share details from their class directory of local public art with the Internet community. The interactive map at the POV website features public art projects around the United States. Students can add the names, locations and descriptions for the art they've researched and literally put their community on the map!

- Read the article "No More Heroes on Horses" (<http://www.utne.com/1996-05-01/Arts/Nomoreheroesonhorses.aspx>) by Keith Goetzman, who asserts that public art is evolving away from traditional bronze statues to include a variety of formats. Discuss the role public art should play in a community and assess the merits of some of the types of public art mentioned in the article. Then work in groups to design a piece of public art that can be displayed at your school.

RESOURCES

Community Arts 101

<http://www.communityarts.net>

The Community Arts Network provides a collection of essays that provide in-depth examinations of community art. The essays are organized by discipline, population and social context. The site also features numerous articles and blog posts related to community art.

Funding Sources for Public Art

http://www.pps.org/info/pub_art/art_funding

The Project for Public Spaces describes a number of approaches for securing funding for public art. This resource may be useful for students as they put together the funding section of their proposals for new public art projects.

What Is Public Art?

http://www.nnpaf.org/what_is_art.html

The Newport News Public Art Foundation provides a useful definition of public art and describes its benefits and sources of funding. This resource may be a helpful reference to students as they develop their proposals for new public art projects.

STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Civics

Standard 11: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society.

Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity.

Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

Geography

Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

Language Arts

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

U.S. History

Standard 3: Understands why the Americas attracted Europeans, why they brought enslaved Africans to their colonies, and how they struggled for control of North America and the Caribbean.

Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

Visual Arts

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as director of PBS Interactive's Education division, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and northern Virginia.

BACKGROUND SOURCES

"A Man of His Times," *Albuquerque Journal* (January 18, 1998); "As a Sculpture Takes Shape in Mexico, Opposition Takes Shape in the U.S.," *The New York Times* (January 17, 2002), www.nytimes.com/2002/01/17/arts/17MEXI.html; "El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro Trail," International Heritage Center, <http://www.caminorealheritage.org/camino/camino.htm>; "The Handbook of Texas Online," Gerald F. Kozlowski, www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/OO/fon2.html, www.nmhcpl.org, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/topic-411755/New-Laws-of-the-Indies>; "Many Months Away, El Paso's Giant Horseman Stirs Passions," *The New York Times* (January 10, 2004), www.nytimes.com/2004/01/10/national/10STAT.html; XII Travelers: Memorial of the Southwest, www.12travelers.org



The Last Conquistador Note-Taking Guide

Name: _____

Directions: Respond to the items below based on information in the video clips.

1. Describe the XII Travelers project.
2. Why was Juan de Oñate chosen to be the subject of one of the sculptures? What contributions did he make?
3. Describe what happened between the Acoma Indians and the Spanish led by Oñate.
4. Why are some people against the Oñate sculpture?
5. What does sculptor John Houser say he wants his statues to accomplish?