

ACTIVITY

Supporting Question 4: Memory of the Founding

Overview

About This Activity

Students explore Supporting Question 4 through a series of activities that help them consider how the founding is remembered. First they explore popular representations of our nation's origins. Then they consider how art can be a corrective to single stories about the founding by analyzing a painting by contemporary artist Titus Kaphur. They conclude with a Formative Assessment Task featuring the Stories thinking routine.

Supporting Question	How should we remember the nation's founding?
Formative Task	Students use the Stories thinking routine to discuss how we should remember the nation's founding.
Featured Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image: Portrait of George Washington on the Dollar Bill • Image "Absconded from the Household of the President of the United States" (2016) by Titus Kaphar • Handout: Image Analysis Procedure: "Absconded from the Household of the President of the United States" • Reading: Quote from Titus Kaphar • Reading: Quote from Sophia Rosenfeld <p>Find these materials in this Google Folder.</p>

Procedure

Day 1

Activity 1: Reflect on the Image of George Washington on the Dollar Bill

Project the **Portrait of George Washington on the Dollar Bill** image. Ask students to study the image and write a journal reflection in response to the following prompts:

- What does it say about George Washington that his image is on our money?
- What story about George Washington does this bill tell? What story does it leave out?

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Have students share their ideas with the class, making sure that they are familiar with some basic information about Washington—that he was the nation’s first president, a Revolutionary War hero, and a framer of the US Constitution. Then ask student volunteers to share their prior knowledge and associations with the Founding Fathers and the founding of the United States. Ask: How is the founding of the United States typically depicted in art, popular culture, or monuments? What story is often told about our country’s origins?

Have students share their ideas, noting any common themes or patterns that emerge. Be sure students understand that the founders, especially Washington, are often portrayed as heroes and symbols of the origins of our nation and American democracy.

(Note that some students, especially newcomers to the country, may need extra support to respond to this prompt. If this is the case, you might use the [Gallery Walk](#) teaching strategy to show them popular images and objects associated with the founding. Some ideas include this [painting](#) of the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the [Jefferson](#) or [Washington](#) monuments in Washington, DC, the portrait of Thomas Jefferson on the [nickel](#), and the [Mount Rushmore National Memorial](#).)

Activity 2: Explore a Painting Depicting the Contradictions of George Washington

Next, students will examine the painting [“Absconded from the Household of the President of the United States” \(2016\) by Titus Kaphar](#). Kaphar is a contemporary artist whose art functions as both a critique of the racial history of fine art and a corrective for myths in American history. In this painting, he draws attention to the slaveholding practices of Founding Father and first president of the United States George Washington. The painting shows Washington’s portrait partially obscured by the tattered remnants of an advertisement for the capture of an enslaved woman named Ona Judge. The Washingtons placed the ad in the *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser* after Judge ran away from their household in 1796, while George Washington was president. The title of the painting, “Absconded from the Household of the President of the United States,” is an excerpt from that ad.

Share your screen to project the painting and reveal the title and date of the piece, but do not reveal its historical context. Give students a chance to emotionally process the painting by recording in their journals the initial feelings, thoughts, and questions it evokes for them. Then pass out copies of the **Image Analysis Procedure: “Absconded from the Household of the President of the United States”** handout. Model the strategy by examining the image and capturing your ideas on the board or a piece of chart paper.

Lead students through the steps on the handout, giving them about two minutes for each step. Discuss as a class students’ answers to step 3 and step 4 before revealing more details about the image. Have students read the [original advertisement](#) that inspired the painting to enable them to discover the context of the painting for themselves.

Activity 3: Consider a Quote from Artist Titus Kaphar

Then project the **Quote from Titus Kaphar** source, which is from a TED Talk by the artist who created the painting, Titus Kaphar (access the full version [here](#)).

Lead a class discussion of the quote by choosing from the following questions:

1. Why does Kaphar not want to take an “eraser” to the art of the past? What is at stake,

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- according to Kaphar?
2. How does Kaphar's approach speak to the complexities of US history?
 3. To what extent do you think is it important for Americans to have a shared understanding of the history of the founding of our nation? How can art help to shape that public understanding?

Day 2

Activity 1: Reflect on the Connection between Democracy and History

On Day 1, students explored popular representations of our nation's origins. They also began to explore, through the work of contemporary artist Titus Kaphar, the ways that art can serve as a corrective for a single story about the founding. Today, students will continue their exploration of how the founding is remembered, this time connecting back to the themes of democracy and democratic ideals that they have explored throughout the inquiry.

To get students thinking about the connection between democracy and history, share this quote from First Nations leader Georges Erasmus:

"Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created."¹

Ask students to respond to the quote in an activity based on the [Barometer](#) strategy. Read the quote above, and then have students indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement by standing along a continuum between "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree" signs. After students have lined up, lead a discussion in which you ask them to explain why they chose to stand where they are standing

Activity 2: Reflect on the Connection between Truth and Democracy

Provide students with the opportunity to deepen their understanding of the connection between truth and democracy by reading the perspective of historian Sophia Rosenfeld. Break the class into pairs or small groups and pass out the **Quote from Sophia Rosenfeld**. Ask students to read and annotate the source and discuss the following questions:

1. According to Sophia Rosenfeld, what is the relationship between truth and trust among members of a democracy? What is the cost of losing trust?
2. What is the relationship between truth and progress in a democracy? How does truth drive progress, according to Rosenfeld?
3. How might Rosenfeld's arguments about the importance of truth relate to the way we understand and remember history?

Reconvene as a class and have volunteers share summaries of their discussions.

¹ George Erasmus, quoted in Mark Charles, "[A Native Perspective on Memorial Day](#)," wirelesshogan.com (personal website), June 1, 2017.

Activity 3: Reflect on “Common Memory”

Finally, return to the Georges Erasmus quote that students explored in Activity 1 and the quote from James Baldwin that they considered in the “Staging the Compelling Question” activity at the beginning of the inquiry: “American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.” Have students discuss the following questions:

- What would it mean for Americans to develop a “common memory” about the past? What would need to happen for this common memory to form?
- What would it mean for Americans to prioritize truth-telling in developing a common memory about the past?
- How does confronting the “beautiful and terrible” aspects of US history help us create a common memory and build community?
- In your opinion, what “common memory” should all Americans have about the founding of the United States? What should all Americans know and understand about this topic?
- How might a common memory build a deeper sense of community among Americans? How might it provide a foundation for a more just and equitable future?

Formative Task

Consider Founding Stories

Ask students to complete a modified version of Project Zero’s [Stories](#) thinking routine by writing a response to each of the following questions:

- What is the story that is typically told about the founding of the United States?
- How has that story been important or influential in US history and American society?
- What is the story about the founding of the United States that is often left out?
- What is the story about the founding of the United States that all Americans should know and understand?
- How might that story impact your community and the nation?

Ask students to submit their responses.