

# Art and Understanding World War I

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by Ron Nash

## UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. The lessons can also be modified to conform to the C3 Framework. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original documents of historical significance. Students will learn and practice the skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on these source materials.

World War I remade the world geopolitically and transformed how societies engage and relate to military conflict. Artistic expression during the war contributed to this transformation. Before World War I, war art, created long after the fact and far from the battlefield, largely depicted heroic military leaders and romanticized battles. The First World War marked a turning point with the appearance of artwork by participants, intended to capture the moment in a realistic way.

This unit examines this form of expression from the complementary perspectives of two different artists. One was a professional artist, Harvey Dunn, who was recruited by the US Army and served in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). He was one of the first true combat artists. The other was an infantryman, Claggett Wilson, who created artwork while serving in the Marine Corps. Together, these works of art shed light on World War I in a compelling and very human way. The students will demonstrate what they have learned through their analysis of the various primary sources by writing a response to an essential questions posed for the unit.

## OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze a secondary source document using close-reading strategies
- Interpret, analyze, and demonstrate understanding of sketches, paintings, and other visual materials
- Draw logical inferences and summarize the essential message of a work of art
- Compose summaries of the major points in a visual primary source
- Compare and contrast the viewpoints and perspectives of different artists

**WORKSHOP USE ONLY—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION****ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

- To what extent can art depict and/or distort World War I history?
- To what extent can the portrayal and framing of art influence viewers' perspectives of World War I?
- How does art reflect and document history and memory?

**NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS:** 2–3**GRADE LEVEL:** 7–12**COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6: Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

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### LESSON 1

#### OVERVIEW

Students will read a secondary source that provides historical context for a selection of paintings by a World War I soldier, Claggett Wilson. They will then carefully examine each image, using the questions on an activity sheet, to identify and interpret the images. Their knowledge will be demonstrated through the completed activity sheets and class discussion.

#### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Demonstrate understanding of both literal and inferential aspects of written text- and image-based evidence
- Summarize the essential message of a visual primary source
- Draw conclusions based on direct evidence found in the visual primary source

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

American citizens vigorously debated whether the war that began in Europe in August 1914 was theirs to fight. After refusing for almost three years to engage in the conflict, the United States finally entered World War I on April 6, 1917. When the Americans decided to commit, they did so in a way that transformed American society and put the nation in a position to become a global superpower.

As the nation mobilized for war, the United States broke with its tradition of relying primarily on volunteers and used conscription to raise the bulk of its military force. One of those conscripted as a combat Marine was the 30-year-old Columbia University art instructor Claggett Wilson.

As a first lieutenant, he fought in the trenches in France, including in the month-long battle at Belleau Wood in June 1918, perhaps the bloodiest exchange the Americans endured in the war. He was mustard gassed and twice wounded, and at one point spent several days lying in the muddy “no man’s land” between American and German trenches before he was recovered and sent for medical treatment.

When the war was over, and he was hospitalized, he painted a series of watercolors depicting his experience of war. Some paintings were lost, but in 1919 he repainted roughly forty of them from memory. The paintings were first exhibited in New York in 1920 to overwhelmingly enthusiastic reviews.

A book of the watercolors was published in 1928 with text by Alexander Wolcott of *The New Yorker*. Eventually, the Smithsonian American Art Museum became the repository for 23 of Wilson’s World War I watercolors. Wilson, however, never went back to painting about the war.

Following his military experience, for which he received the Navy Cross and Croix de Guerre for his bravery and resilience, and despite his obvious talents as a watercolorist, he moved on to designing furniture and sets for Broadway plays. It is said that his lungs never completely recovered after the mustard-gas attack.

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In 1931, he designed the pool house and painted murals on the walls of Ten Chimneys, the famed summer home of the acclaimed actors Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontaine. The house was eventually declared a National Historic Landmark—partially for Wilson’s murals. In 1935, he received acclaim for designing the sets for the Broadway adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Wilson also designed costumes for Broadway productions. He gifted many of his stage costumes to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and his work is now a permanent part of their Costume Institute.

### MATERIALS

- Historical Background: Soldier-Artist Claggett Wilson
- Details, Description, and Decision activity sheet
- Paintings by Claggett Wilson. Source: Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/claggett-wilson-5422>
  - #1: “Flower of Death--The Bursting of a Heavy Shell--Not as It Looks, but as It Feels and Sounds and Smells”
  - #2: “Dance of Death”
  - #3: “Symphony of Terror”
  - #4: “First Attack on the Bois de Belleau, June 6, 1918, at Five O’Clock--3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment of Marines Advancing”
  - #5: “Early June Morning, Bois de Belleau--Sniper Who Had Been Potted During the Night”
  - #6: “Front Line Stuff”
  - #7: “Runner through the Barrage, Bois de Belleau, Chateau Thierry Sector; His Arm Shot Away, His Mind Gone”
  - #8: “Stragglers--French Wounded in the Retreat of Chateau-Thierry”
  - #9: “Grenadier Cut Off in the Flaming Woods”
  - #10: “Salad--A Cleaned-Up Machine-Gun Nest, Bois de Belleau”
  - #11: “Rosalie, Rosalie! Rosalie Is the Nickname for the French Bayonet”
  - #12: “Marine Scout on the Lucy-Torcy Road at Dusk, Chateau Thierry Sector”

### PROCEDURE

1. Distribute the Historical Background on Claggett Wilson. “Share read” the Historical Background with the class. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).

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2. Introduce the Essential Questions:
  - To what extent can art depict and/or distort World War I history?
  - To what extent can the portrayal and framing of art influence viewers' perspectives of World War I?
  - How does art reflect and document history and memory?
3. For the rest of the class period you may choose to have the students do the activity individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than three or four students. Depending on the time available, you may choose to provide a selection of the images or assign some image analysis as homework.
4. Distribute paintings #1–#2 by Claggett Wilson and two copies per student of the “Details, Description, and Decision” activity sheet.
5. Model the activity with the class for the first two paintings, eliciting answers to the questions through class discussion.
6. After analyzing the first two paintings with the class, distribute paintings #3–#12 and the activity sheets (10 per student or group).
7. After giving the class enough time to complete the worksheets, reconvene the whole class and discuss different interpretations developed by the individual students or groups.

### ASSESSMENT

The strategy for this lesson will involve an informal assessment of the students' understanding through the completed activity sheets and the class discussion. The students should be able to demonstrate understanding of the connection between art and history in the context of World War I.

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### LESSON 2

#### OVERVIEW

Students will read a secondary source that provides historical context for a selection of paintings by World War I military artist Harvey Dunn. They will then carefully examine each image, using an activity sheet as a guide, to identify and interpret the images. Their knowledge will be demonstrated through the completed activity sheets, class discussion, and a written response to one of the unit's essential questions.

#### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Demonstrate understanding of both literal and inferential aspects of text- and image-based evidence
- Summarize the essential message of a visual primary source
- Draw conclusions based on direct evidence found in the visual primary source

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In February 1918, eight civilian illustrators were inducted as captains in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), the US army that was mobilized to support the French, British, and other Allies in order to defeat the Central Powers. The mission of the AEF Eight, as the artists came to be known, was to make a pictorial record of the war for posterity. The artists' duty was to prepare oil paintings, portraits, and sketches within the war zone for historical purposes. There was no mention of sensationalism or propaganda. The AEF Eight were to authentically depict the daily life of US soldiers at the front. In modern terms they were embedded journalists who were quartered with the troops. They were given permission to roam combat areas but were expected to avoid combat engagements.

The best-known member of the AEF Eight was Harvey Dunn. He was born and raised on a farm in rural South Dakota. Dunn attended the South Dakota Agricultural College, but soon left to pursue studies at the Art Institute of Chicago. He became an avid follower of the adventure-book illustrator Howard Pyle. As a result Dunn moved to Wilmington, Delaware, to train with Pyle. Later, Dunn launched his own studio in Wilmington and became a successful teacher as well as a successful illustrator of magazines, books, and advertisements.

When war was declared, Dunn, at 34, was too old to enlist, but he volunteered for a combat artist position. He left behind a wife and two young children.

The tall and physically imposing Dunn quickly established a reputation as a bold, even foolhardy, combat artist. His work very much centered on frontline action. He was determined to use his skills to show war as it really was. He wanted to be the eyes on the ground for those who would never see war for themselves.

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Dunn sketched scenes of doughboy life from a dangerous vantage point that apparently contradicted General John Pershing’s order to maintain a safe distance from the battlefield.

Dunn worked with charcoal sketches so he could set down his impressions in a rapid-fire manner. He devised a unique machine to facilitate his work. A large, flat wooden box containing an unbroken roll of paper that was advanced with a turn of a knob enabled Dunn to produce a fresh surface quickly.

Dunn’s works from 1918 never gloss over violence and brutality.

### MATERIALS

- Historical Background: The AEF Eight and Harvey Dunn
- Details, Description, and Decision activity sheet
- Drawings by Harvey Dunn
  - #13: “The Engineer,” National Museum of American History, <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/official-artwork-wwi/dunn>
  - #14: “The Machine Gunner,” National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55222537>
  - #15: “Doughboy Fighting through Barbed Wire Entanglements,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55234973>
  - #16: “Among the Wreckage. Troops Going Forward at Night,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55222600>
  - #17: “The Tanks at Seicheprey,” US Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/html/artphoto/pripos/wwi1.html>
  - #18: “The Flare,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55234863>
  - #19: “The Hand Grenade,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55221478>
  - #20: “The Harvest Moon,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55222553>
  - #21: “Prisoners and Wounded,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55234875>
  - #22: “In the Front Line at Early Morning,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55234785>
  - #23: “Walking Cases,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55222555>
  - #24: “The Home Coming,” NARA, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/55222543>

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### PROCEDURE

1. Distribute the Historical Background related to the AEF Eight and Harvey Dunn. Share read the text as described in Lesson 1.
2. Introduce the following Essential Questions:
  - To what extent can art depict and/or distort World War I history?
  - To what extent can the portrayal and framing of art influence viewers’ perspectives of World War I?
  - How does art reflect and document history and memory?
3. For the rest of the class period you may choose to have the students do the lesson individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than three or four students.
4. Distribute artwork #13–#14 and the “Details, Description, and Decision” activity sheet (2 per student).
5. Model the activity with the class and have the students answer the questions for each image. For the first two images, this will be done as a whole-class activity with discussion.
6. After analyzing the first two images with the class, hand out #15–#24 and the “Details, Description, and Decision” activity sheets (10 per student or group).
7. After giving the class enough time to complete the worksheets, reconvene the whole class and discuss different interpretations developed by the individual students or groups.

### ASSESSMENT

Depending on the amount of time available, you can assign the Exit Card for homework or have the students complete it as a class activity on the following day.

Based on the visual evidence in the primary sources, completed “Details, Description, and Decision” activity sheets, and class discussions, the students should develop a viewpoint and write a brief essay response to one of the unit’s Essential Questions. Remind them to support their answers with visual evidence and analysis based on the historical source materials.

- To what extent can art depict and/or distort World War I history?
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Dunn's works from 1918 never gloss over violence and brutality.

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### Exit Card

Based on the visual evidence in the primary sources, the completed “Details, Description, and Decision” activity sheets, and the class discussions, develop a viewpoint and write a brief essay response to **any one** of the following questions. Support your viewpoint and response with visual evidence and analysis based on the historical source materials.

Choice No. 1: “To what extent can art depict and/or distort WWI history?”

or

Choice No. 2: “To what extent can the portrayal and ‘framing’ of art influence viewers’ perspectives and understandings of WWI?”

or

Choice No. 3: “How accurately does art reflect and document history and memory?”

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