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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2006 Volume IV: Native America: Understanding the Past through Things

Noble Savage: Depictions of Native Americans throughout U.S. History

Guide for Curriculum Unit 06.04.07, published September 2006

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This unit uses images to illustrate Euro-American views of Native Americans throughout history. The unit shows that the colonial era uses the idea that the "New World" was a "New Eden." The Native Americans were portrayed as noble and exotic. This changed when colonists and Native Americans began the unavoidable clash of cultures. The savage image emerged and portrayed Native Americans kidnapping, scalping, killing, and burning villages. Next, the unit examines Manifest Destiny in visual form. The Native Americans are pushed out of the way as "progress" is made. Marginalized, driven west, and passed by, their way of life appears to become extinct. Concurrently, there are paintings that celebrate Native Americans. Many of the artists who portray Native Americans as a noble model were painting them because the artists believed Native Americans to be dying out. To examine assimilation efforts, the unit uses photographs taken at Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools, in particular photos of children arriving in their traditional garb and after they have been "processed." The new clothes and haircuts make a stark contrast to the before pictures. The unit will use photographs to capture 20th century points of view, including pictures of steel workers building high rise buildings. These can be used to contrast the stereotypical modern images using advertisements, mascots and video.

(Developed for U.S. History and Social Studies, grade 11; recommended for U.S. History and Social Studies, grade 11)

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