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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2023 Volume I: Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865

Clothing and Identity in Early America: Black Women and AmerIndian Men

Guide for Curriculum Unit 23.01.06, published September 2023
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This unit is designed for a US History or Ethnic Studies Class. Its content is historical images from North America in the Colonial and Antebellum periods. It focuses on two groups of people who do not “speak” loudly in most standard narratives of US History. This unit seeks to amplify the voices of marginalized groups and center their experiences as much as possible. This unit uses visual images to humanize people who are often “invisible” in the mythology of American history.

The skills goal of the unit is to teach students the tools they need to critically analyze visual information from the past. We need to be as critical of visual sources as we are of written sources. This uncritical use of sources fails to account for the conventions of the time, the ideological position of the artist and the extent to which the person(s) depicted controlled the manner in which they were depicted. Additionally, the language of fashion, and its contemporary associations are difficult to interpret without the historical context. Focus questions for each work are provided at the end of the unit plan.

(Developed for U. S. History Ethnic Studies, grade 11; recommended for U. S. History, grades 10-12)

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