

Teacher Guide: Revolutionary Art

Activity: This activity emphasizes the importance of looking closely at primary source documents, and what they can tell us about the past. This lesson is also designed to open up a dialogue about historic documents, and how when viewing or reading accounts, students should be aware of biases. The list of questions can be used either as a tool for class discussion or as individual or group work.

Background: In this famous print of the Boston Massacre, Paul Revere shows the British soldiers at the right opening fire while colonists, pictured on the left, try help the wounded victims. Because it is an engraving, this scene would have been reprinted several times and seen by many.

Responses

Question 1: Students should spend time looking at the image and writing down any initial observations or reactions that they may have. This question is open-ended and should allow students to think freely about what this image might mean.

Question 2 and 3: While the British Regulars are uniformly standing and firing their weapons with stern facial expressions, the colonists look disorganized and scared. With many figures on the colonist side depicted as injured or dead, it appears as though the Regulars have ambushed the colonists with a planned attack. In reality, this event was not a planned attack, but rather a fight initiated by a few Boston residents themselves which took a turn for the worse. The number of colonists present actually reached close to 400, while a mere thirteen British Regulars struggled to defend themselves from an angry crowd armed with clubs, stones, and snowballs. Although it did result in five colonists dead, it is unlikely that the Regulars fired into the crowd in the manner shown here. The small dog placed on the side of the colonists may also be there to reinforce their supposed innocence.

Question 4: Revere and his fellow patriots chose to use this event as an opportunity to capitalize on the growing anti-government sentiment among the colonists. To help students grasp how important an image like this would have been, it may be helpful to draw a comparison between the endless ways that news can be spread today (television, print and online newspapers, Twitter, Youtube, etc.) to the very few forms of media that existed during colonial times. Because of this, the Patriots were able to effectively create and publicize their own version of events.

Question 5: This is an opportunity for students to read carefully and relate the description to the visual depiction of the event. Students should pick out such words as “murdr’ous”, “savage”, and “barbarians” to describe the British Regulars. Note that the Bostonians are portrayed as “guiltless” victims.

Question 6: Students should use what they’ve learned about the Boston Massacre to judge whether or not this is an accurate depiction of history. It should also prompt students to imagine what another interpretation might look like. This is an opportunity to talk about propaganda during the Revolution and throughout history.

Name: _____

Revolutionary Art

This is an engraving by Paul Revere depicting the famous Boston Massacre. Also known as the Bloody Massacre, this event took place on the night of March 5, 1770. British soldiers had been present in Boston since 1768 in order to enforce the King's taxes and were largely regarded as an unwelcome presence by colonists. The event began as a shouting match accompanied by the throwing of snowballs and rocks, but ended with five colonists being shot and killed.



The Bloody Massacre, Paul Revere
Courtesy Concord Museum

Looking Closely

Look closely at this print and respond to the questions.

1. What is happening in this image? Describe what you see.

2. What do you notice about the facial expressions and body language of the two opposing sides? Are they similar or different?

3. Does one side come across more sympathetically to the viewer? Why?

4. Based on what you see, what message do you think Paul Revere wanted to send to the viewer?

Reading Closely

Read this part of the poem taken from the bottom of Paul Revere's engraving and respond to the following prompts.

*Unhappy Boston! See thy sons deplore,
Thy Hallow'd Walks, besmear'd with guiltless Gore:
While faithless — and his savage Bands,
With murd'rous Rancour stretch their bloody Hands;
Like fierce Barbarians grinning o'er their Prey,
Approve the Carnage, and enjoy the Day.*

5. Look closely at the language in this poem. How does Paul Revere describe the British soldiers?
6. In your opinion, is this a fair portrayal of events? How might a British Regular portray the events differently?