



# THE FRIEZE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

## Introduction

The Frieze of American History was created and successively worked on by three artists — Constantino Brumidi, Filippo Costaggini and Allyn Cox. This fresco depicts the artists' choice of significant events in American History along a panorama that follows the circumference of the dome.

After a discussion of scenes from The Frieze of American History and the context within which this iconic artwork was created, students look at one image in the Frieze and consider the event pictured, the characters depicted and why this scene might have been chosen as a significant moment in our nation's history. Based on these considerations, related research and class discussion, they compose an essay related to one scene. While intended for 8th grade students, the lesson can be adapted for other grade levels.



## Estimated Time

Two to five class sessions

## National Standards

United States History National Standards

(Specific era addressed depends on selection of individual images/events to research)

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, grade 8

Reading Informational text 1, 2, 6

Writing 2, 4, 5, 7

Speaking and Listening 1, 4

Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, grade 8

Reading 1 – 3, 7

Writing 1, 4, 5, 7, 8

## Learning Skills

Group discussion, original research and writing, dramatic presentation, chronological thinking, vocabulary enrichment

## Essential Question

What historic events are featured in The Frieze of American History? How do these moments reflect both the history of our nation and the time within which they were selected to be included in the Frieze?

## Documents and Worksheets

Primary source material:

- Images of the scenes depicted in the Frieze  
<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibition-hall/the-capitol-story/the-frieze>
- Three images from the Frieze found in the primary source pdf: Landing of Columbus, Colonization of New England, Discovery of Gold in California
- For downloadable images, see annotated webography

Secondary source material:

- Annotated webography



## Suggested Activities

- As a whole class, discuss the origins of the Frieze as artwork. The Frieze is located in the Rotunda of the Capitol building and depicts significant events in American history. Constantino Brumidi, who painted many other works in the Capitol building, designed sixteen of the scenes. He finished all but eight before his death in 1880. Filippo Constagghini was selected to complete the work and did so before 1889. In 1952, artist Allyn Cox added three additional scenes and cleaned and retouched the piece. Refer to annotated webography for additional information about the artists, artwork and specific scenes.
- As a class examine the images of the Frieze. Please note, if you have online access you may view all images at <http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/online/the-capitol-story.html>. If you are unable to go online, share the three selected images listed in the Primary Source Material section.
- Referring to the annotated webography, review the Frieze scenes as listed in chronological order. Assign pairs to review two existing scenes: Why might the artist(s) have chosen to depict this particular event? What message does this scene communicate about American History?
- As a group, review students' considerations. Then ask, in students' opinions, what scenes within the time frame of the Frieze might be missing? What additional scenes might reflect our more recent history or current experience as a nation? What additional messages might we want to highlight for visitors to the Capitol today? If you could chose eight other events to add what might they be? Why? Record student responses.
- Individually or in small groups, students choose one scene from the original Frieze to explore and research more deeply. Students may use resources from the annotated webography and also additional bibliographic sources (text books, the library, etc.) Findings should be shared in an original essay that includes:
  1. The facts (brief information about the event itself, what is pictured, what is happening)
  2. The story (What moment in time does this scene represent? What are the details captured? Who are the characters depicted (and from what point of view or perspective)? What just happened? What is about to happen in the next moment?)
  3. The bigger questions (Why might this event have been selected as significant? What does the inclusion of this event tell us about the time when it was selected? And what essential story about our history and experience is shared?)
- When students have completed a first draft of their essays, they participate in peer review. They should share their original writing with a partner for feedback on grammatical structure, clarity and content and then make final edits. Final versions of student essays may be shared either in an oral presentation or mounted in a classroom exhibition with images from the Frieze.



## Teacher Tip

Depending on student interest and your classroom curriculum, you may decide to have students choose one scene from the original nineteen or include the additional scenes brainstormed by the class. Please note that if you are studying an era in time related to one of the significant events pictured in the Frieze, you may incorporate this larger discussion into student work.

## Suggested Modifications

Consider using the activities and materials in this lesson in whatever ways best meet the needs of your students. For instance, instead of assigning students to do an individual research paper, put students into mixed ability groups, assign questions for each member to answer and have students create a “labeled visual” with the information about the Frieze scene they have chosen.

## Extended Activity

- Students create a dramatic reenactment of one scene from the Frieze (a tableau), developing a character sketch of one figure from that scene and stepping forward to share his/her point of view at that moment.
- Modeled on the elements/format of the Frieze (select moments in history), students create a Frieze that captures the history of their neighborhood, state or personal life story. Frieze scenes can be described as stills or frames in a movie or drawn to create a graphic novel narration.
- Ask students to explore the scene in terms of events in a timeline. What happened (historically) before and after the particular scene depicted? Did/How did this event affect the history of America?
- Use this lesson as a year-end wrap up, asking students to create their own Frieze scene to add to the nineteen. Students may choose their scene based on an event they have studied during the year that they feel is important enough to be included. Ask students to use questions similar to those outlined in this lesson in order to describe their scene. Then, students may illustrate their event (via drawing, printing, collage).



## Annotated webography of sources related to the Frieze

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/online/the-capitol-story.html>

This interactive element of the Capitol Visitor Center’s online exhibition details each of the 19 scenes depicted in the Frieze as well as more general background information about the entire work. Users can scroll along the Frieze to experience sequence of scenes.

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/murals/frieze-american-history>

Here you will find additional background information on the Frieze including its original commission and brief biographical information about the three artists who worked on it - Constantino Brumidi, Filippo Costaggini, and Allyn Cox. Towards the bottom of the page is a listing, in sequence, of the 19 scenes depicted.

Biographical information about Constantino Brumidi can be found at <http://www.aoc.gov/constantino-brumidi>. For biographical information specifically about the artist Allyn Cox, see <http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/artists/allyn-cox>

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/exhibitions/online/1945-to-present/the-capitol-1945-present/new-additions-to-the-capitol-collection.html>

Here is information about the Frieze and other artwork in the collection of the Capitol including photographs of artist Allyn Cox as well as conservators working on cleaning and restoring portions of the Frieze.

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/battle-lexington>

This is a photograph of one Frieze scene (“Battle of Lexington,”) which was designed by Constantino Brumidi and completed by Filippo Costaggini in 1889. Allyn Cox designed and finished painting the rest of the Frieze between 1952 and 1953.

Downloadable images of each scene depicted in the Frieze, listed here in chronological order via the Architect of the Capitol website as well as on Flickr at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/uscapitol/sets/72157627760453359/with/6240324511/>

### 1. “American and History”

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/america-and-history>

### 2. “Landing of Columbus” (1492)

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/landing-columbus>

### 3. “Cortez and Montezuma at Mexican Temple” (1520)

<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/cortez-and-montezuma-mexican-temple>



4. **“Pizarro Going to Peru”** (1533)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/pizarro-going-peru>
5. **“Burial of DeSoto”** (1542)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/burial-desoto>
6. **“Captain Smith and Pocahontas”** (1607)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/captain-smith-and-pocahontas>
7. **“Landing of the Pilgrims”** (1620)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/landing-pilgrims>
8. **“William Penn and the Indians”** (1682)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/william-penn-and-indians>
9. **“Colonization of New England”**  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/colonization-new-england>
10. **“Oglethorpe and the Indians”** (1732)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/oglethorpe-and-indians>
11. **“Battle of Lexington”** (1775)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/battle-lexington>
12. **“Declaration of Independence”** (1776)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/declaration-independence>
13. **“Surrender of Cornwallis”** (1781)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/surrender-cornwallis>
14. **“Death of Tecumseh”** (1813)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/death-tecumseh>
15. **“American Army Entering the city of Mexico”** (1847)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/american-army-entering-city-mexico>
16. **“Discovery of Gold in California”** (1848)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/discovery-gold-california>
17. **“Peace at the End of the Civil War”** (1865)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/peace-end-civil-war>
18. **“Naval Gun Crew in the Spanish-American War”** (1898)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/naval-gun-crew-spanish-american-war>
19. **“The Birth of Aviation”** (1903)  
<http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/birth-aviation>