

# WOODMERE

## Teacher Resource

### Art & Literature: A Reflection of History

NOTE to the Teacher / Parent / Homeschooler:

This teaching resource packet is our way of bringing the educational ideas of the many class tours and teacher workshops provided by the Woodmere Art Museum to your home or classroom.

Each resource highlights specific learning skills and focuses on key works from Woodmere's collection. These resources are also designed to be interdisciplinary and include links to other information sites, as well as suggestions for extensions to meet the unique interests of your students/children.

We hope to expand on these resources and welcome your feedback. If you use this resource, please take a minute to tell us of your successes and struggles.

E-mail your feedback to: [education@woodmereartmuseum.org](mailto:education@woodmereartmuseum.org)

## The “Big Idea” of this teaching resource:



*The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow, No. 4, 1957, by George Biddle*  
(Promised gift of the Michael Biddle Family)

This teaching resource is designed to reveal connections that naturally exist between the visual arts and literature. Additionally, this resource will offer connections to history – specifically through the historical events such as the American Revolution, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, WWI, WWII, and ancient tales from other countries and cultures.

These connections reinforce both the study of history (with added concentration of visual details) and the study and appreciation of the visual arts as an avenue for furthering interdisciplinary instruction.

Additionally, this teaching resource highlights the use of critical thinking skills – promoting this most-important aspect of real-world education.

## Process Part I: (Close Looking)

1. Make three columns on a piece of notepaper and create three lists: First, list those things you KNOW about the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow. In the second column list things YOU THINK YOU KNOW, and in the third column list things YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW. Discuss a few items from these lists and combine to create a general three-column list for the class. (NOTE: you will return to this list to edit and add as the lesson progresses.)
2. [Click Here](#) to open the image *The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow, No. 4*, 1957, by George Biddle or go to:  
<https://woodmereartmuseum.org/explore-online/collection/headless-horseman-of-sleepy-hollow-no-4>  
Take a minute to look closely. Make a list of 10 things you see in this painting and add to that list 5 things that were unexpected. (NOTE: When integrating the visual arts in your classroom, the first thing of importance is encouraging students to slow down so that they can observe in detail. Lists are often simple ways of slowing and intensifying observation. Without close looking, students will not have the details they will need to engage with the art or the critical thinking skills to come.) Share a few of these lists.
3. Review the “unexpected” items on your list, select one or two and offer a hypothesis regarding why Biddle chose to include or highlight this in his painting. (NOTE: Using evidence to form a hypothesis is the second step in the Critical Thinking routine.) Discuss a few of these hypotheses, asking students to review their evidence (observations) which formed the basis of their hypotheses. For reluctant students,

simply ask “Why do you think so?” or “What do you see that makes you say that?”

4. At this point, it would be good to offer some background to the artist George Biddle.  
(See link to the following biographical information in “Suggested Resources” at the end of this guide.)

George Biddle (1885–1973) was a leading American artist whose work engaged with the human condition, in particular the social injustices he encountered in his journeys across the United States and abroad. Lithographer, muralist, and painter Biddle was instrumental in the formation of the US government-funded [Federal Art Project](#). Born into a prestigious Philadelphia family, he earned a Harvard law degree and was admitted to the Philadelphia Bar in 1911. He abruptly switched careers, however, and left for Paris to study art at the [Académie Julian](#). A year later he returned to Philadelphia to attend the [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts](#), and then traveled back to Europe to study printmaking, spending summers with American impressionist [Frederick Carl Frieseke](#). After serving in World War I, Biddle escaped to Tahiti, where he painted and experimented with a variety of print techniques. When he returned to the United States, his work was shown at well-known galleries in New York.

During a 1928 trip to Mexico with artist [Diego Rivera](#), Biddle was inspired by the political activism of the Mexican muralists and sought to bring the tradition home. In 1933, he contacted President Franklin Roosevelt, his childhood classmate and friend, to propose that the government set up a program to support mural painting. The [Federal Art Project](#) was soon born, providing funds for muralists as well as artists working in other media. Biddle would execute murals nationally and internationally over the next twenty years, notably for the National Library of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro and the Supreme Court building in Mexico City.

In 1936, Biddle completed *Society Freed Through Justice*, an ambitious, multi-panel mural for the Department of Justice Building in Washington, DC. During World War II, Biddle was asked to create and chair the [War Department Advisory Committee](#) that would send artists to the frontlines. He traveled with his unit to Europe and Africa, making watercolors and drawings of what he saw. In 1946 *Look* magazine hired Biddle as an artist correspondent to the Nuremberg trials, at which his brother Francis served as one of four judges. Biddle’s drawings depict some of the most notorious Nazi leaders, many of whom were sentenced to death. These and other illustrations were published in *Look* with Biddle’s written descriptions of the trials. In 1950, President Harry Truman appointed him to the [Fine Arts Commission](#), and a year later in 1951 Biddle accepted a

professorship at the [American Academy in Rome](#). Biddle's work is in the collections of many prestigious museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art.

## Process Part 2: (Historical Connections)

1. [Click here](#) to link to the Power Point presentation about historical references to the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow or go to: <https://woodmereartmuseum.org/experience/exhibitions/george-biddle-the-art-of-american-social-conscience>
2. Discuss the questions indicated on the final slide (and add additional questions as they arise). These reflect the way readers react to both literature and the study of history. Discussion invariably leads to hypotheses regarding human nature and the human condition.
3. Discuss history of Hessians, British, and colonists in battle in areas near Sleepy Hollow (see link to historical materials in "Suggested Resources").  
How does living in terror and uncertainty affect people? One recognized effect is an increased willingness to accept superstition or supernatural explanations as an aspect of our need to find cause and effect, even when it is obscure.

## Formative Assessment:

Select one of the questions from the previous exercise and write a persuasive opinion piece – stating your viewpoint, offering both your reasoning and background examples/evidence, and responding to expected questions about your views.

## Process Part 3: Refocus

1. Return to the painting: *The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow*, by George Biddle. Now that we have a deeper context for the story, what aspects of Biddle's painting are true to Irving's story?

(Possible responses: two horses, countryside, one rider slumped in terror).

What different elements does Biddle add? (Possible responses: emaciated appearance of the horses; no forest, stream, or bridge; the visual contrasts of red and green colors that increase the intensity of the image.)

Does Biddle's version change the way someone views or reacts to the story? If so, how - and why do you say that? (NOTE: This last question emerges from the discussion points on the final slide of the previous presentation.)

## Process Part 4: Starvation



*Starvation*, 1933, by George Biddle (Promised gift of the Michael Biddle Family)

1. [Click Here](#) to open the image *Starvation*, by George Biddle (1933) or go to:

<https://woodmereartmuseum.org/explore-online/collection/starvation>

Look closely at this painting, and consider whether this scene represents the beginning, the middle, or the end of a story. If you think this may be the beginning, write down your ideas of what will happen next. If you think this may be the middle, write down what you think is happening at this point. If you think this is the end, write down what led up to this point. (NOTE: This exercise

not only forces closer looking, but also encourages the discovery of possible context – necessary for any consideration of a story.)

2. Historical context: What was happening in 1933 in the US? What was Biddle’s connection to this time in history from what you discovered earlier about his career? Discuss causes and outcomes for people during the Dust Bowl. (See Suggested Resources).
3. What do you see in this painting other than the images of people? What effect do these items have on your reaction to the painting?
4. [Click here](#) to see *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange. Compare Biddle’s painting, *Starvation*, to the photograph, *Migrant Mother*, taken by Dorothea Lange in 1936.



(NOTE: Print and pass around copies of this photograph, or pull the image up from the Internet.)

What similarities tie these two images together? How is the painting different from the photograph? What could be a reason for Biddle’s inclusion of the grave site, the landscape and sky, and the ways in which the children are depicted?

5. Read the passage from John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. (NOTE: You can find this passage near the end of Chapter 16, that begins with:  
“The ragged man drew himself up...”

What does the passage from the novel add to the situation depicted in the photograph and the painting?

### Formative Assessment:

You have seen a painting, a photograph, and have read a literary selection. How do you react differently to each medium? Be sure to explain your choice with references to aesthetic responses.

### Summative Assessment:

What does art add to our understanding of legend and of history? This can be offered as a writing assignment or may be broken down and offered as small-group presentations.

### Suggested Resources:

- Click on [Life of George Biddle](https://woodmereartmuseum.org/explore-online/collection/artist/george-biddle) or go to:  
<https://woodmereartmuseum.org/explore-online/collection/artist/george-biddle>
- [Click here](#) to view the Power Point presentation on the historical connections of the “Headless Horseman” and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or go to:  
<https://woodmereartmuseum.org/experience/exhibitions/george-biddle-the-art-of-american-social-conscience>
- National Standards for U.S. History, Great Depression [United States Era 8 | Public History Initiative \(ucla.edu\)](#)  
or go to:  
<https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/united-states-history-content-standards/united-states-era-8/#section-0>
- [Click here](#) for “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow: Hidden History in an American Ghost Story” or go to:  
<https://www.iyfmuseums.org/Home/Components/News/News/84/>
- [Click here](#) for “The Legends and Reality of Sleepy Hollow, Part 1: Headless Hessians” or go to:

<https://loyalist.lib.unb.ca/atlantic-loyalist-connections/legends-and-reality-sleepy-hollow-part-1-headless-hessians>

- [Click here](#) for “The Truth Behind the Legend: Historical Inspirations for Irving’s Horseman-Haunted Sleepy Hollow or go to: <https://www.oldstyletales.com/single-post/2018/09/04/the-history-behind-sleepy-hollow-a-spooky-spotlight-on-the-real-life-inspirations-behind>
- [Click here](#) for EdSitement’s lesson plan on *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or go to <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/legend-sleepy-hollow>
- From the History Channel, overview, causes, and additional resources on the Dust Bowl. [Dust Bowl: Causes, Definition & Years - HISTORY - HISTORY](#)  
or go to: <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/dust-bowl>
- [Click here](#) for quotes from *The Grapes of Wrath* that specifically reference the Dust Bowl or go to: [https://www.softschools.com/literature/summary/the\\_grapes\\_of\\_wrath/the\\_grapes\\_of\\_wrath\\_quotes/](https://www.softschools.com/literature/summary/the_grapes_of_wrath/the_grapes_of_wrath_quotes/)
- [Click here](#) for EdSitement’s lesson plan on *The Grapes of Wrath* or go to: [https://www.softschools.com/literature/summary/the\\_grapes\\_of\\_wrath/the\\_grapes\\_of\\_wrath\\_quotes/](https://www.softschools.com/literature/summary/the_grapes_of_wrath/the_grapes_of_wrath_quotes/)
- Discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath* from *National Geographic* [The Grapes of Wrath | National Geographic Society](#)  
or go to: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/grapes-wrath>
- [Click here](#) to view Woodmere’s exhibition page on *George Biddle: The Art of American Social Conscience* or go to: <https://woodmereartmuseum.org/experience/exhibitions/george-biddle-the-art-of-american-social-conscience>

- [Click here](#) for information on *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange or go to:  
[https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/dorothea-lange-migrant-mother-nipomo-california-1936/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/dorothea-lange-migrant-mother-nipomo-california-1936/)

What you **know** about  
the Headless Horseman of  
Sleepy Hollow

What you **think you know** about  
the Headless Horseman of  
Sleepy Hollow

What you **would like to know** about  
the Headless Horseman of  
Sleepy Hollow

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