

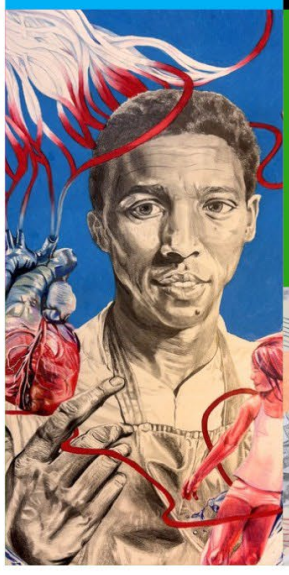
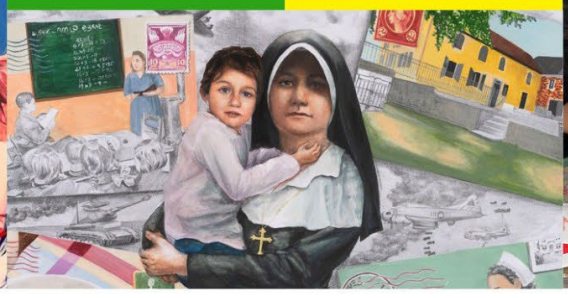

Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes

ARTEFFECT

CHARACTER & VALUES

Visual Arts Lesson Plan




Character & Values

ARTEFFECT celebrates the stories of individuals who took extraordinary actions in service to others and society through the visual arts. Unsung Heroes demonstrated altruistic character traits such as compassion, courage, perseverance, responsibility, and vision, among others. This lesson plan examines how students can effectively connect with these character traits through engaging in historical empathy as a foundational step in the creation of their visual artwork. Discussion also explores social-emotional learning, careful looking, ELA connections.

Historical empathy is the ability to understand and appreciate what life was like for people who lived in a different time and place.

Learning Objectives

1. Understand historical empathy as a tool for students to examine issues and problems from the past, placing people and events in a matrix of time and place.
2. Create approaches for teaching students the importance of individual moral standards, character traits, and heroic actions with an emphasis on the LMC Unsung Heroes.
3. Support students in visually interpreting the stories of LMC Unsung Heroes as role models who have made a difference in the lives of others by comparing the present with the past, evaluating the consequences of events and decisions, and determining the lessons that were learned.
4. Strengthen connections between visual art, English language arts, and social studies.



Time Frame

This Initial lesson can be done in a single class – 60-minute period.
Background research is a multi-day project.
Creating 2D or 3D artwork is a multi-day process.

Materials

Pencils, Paper, Mixed media.

Lesson Plan

Step 1: Explore Character Traits & Values

1. Ask students to brainstorm a word cloud listing values and character traits that they feel are important for a person to have.
2. Then, ask students to brainstorm values and characteristics that a *hero* should have. Compare and contrast the two different word clouds. If there are any differences, what are some possibilities as to why they may be different?
3. Introduce the **LMC Heroic Traits** (see page 9). Choose two of the character traits from the Unsung Hero list. Have groups of students discuss ideas of the meaning of those traits.
4. Does having a certain character trait (e.g., courage) make an individual more likely to engage in heroic actions (e.g., take a stand)? Are they linked? Why or why not? How does an individual's actions demonstrate what they value?

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Step 2: Define an Unsung Hero

Introduce students to the concept of an Unsung Hero. How do your students define the term “unsung”? What characteristics does a “hero” possess? Share with the students the definition of an Unsung Hero

Unsung Heroes

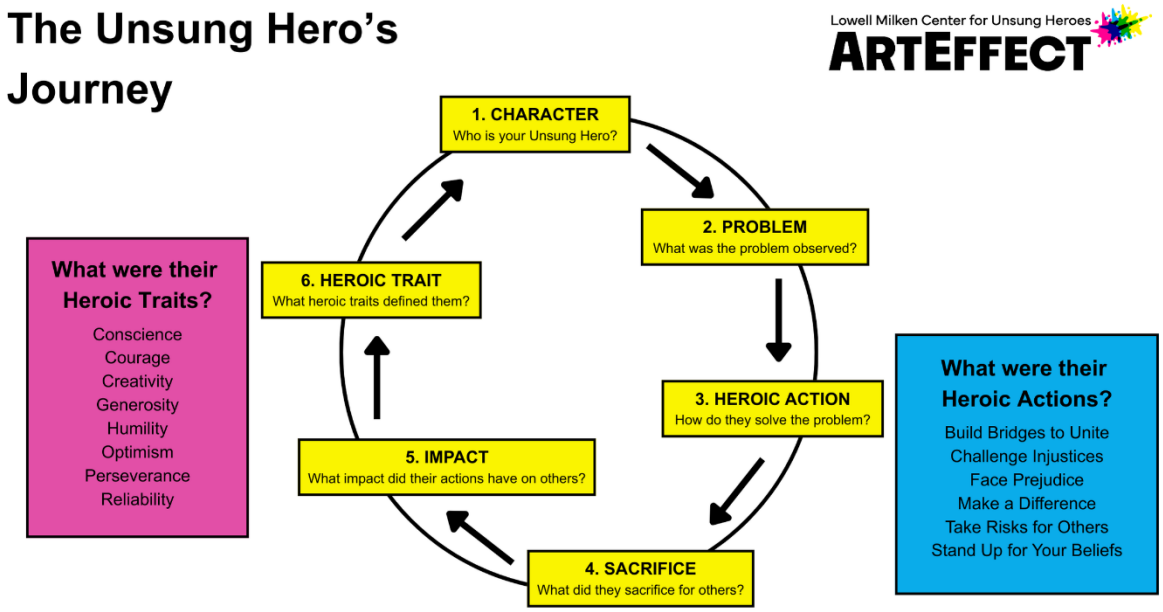
Unsung Heroes are role models, largely unrecognized by society, who demonstrated extraordinary heroic traits and actions, in service to others and made a positive and profound impact on the course of history.

Step 3: How Do Portraits Tell a Story?

A research study from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art on the educational value of field trips indicated that students looking at people from the past builds our historical empathy—the ability to understand and appreciate what life was like for people who lived in a different time and place.

Class Discussion

Introduce students to The Unsung Hero’s Journey Graphic, to explore and discuss the ways that stories reveal the heroic traits and actions of the main character.



As a class, look at an historical narrative painting of a figure from the past. In pairs, have students discuss:

- Who is the **hero** in this work of art?
- What **heroic actions** is this person displaying? What do you see that makes you think that?
- What **values and heroic traits** does this work of art invite us to think about?

For a more in-depth discussion, see The Unsung Hero's Journey Worksheet.

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Blind Contour Drawing



Looking closely at one of the figures in the painting. Instruct students to use a pencil and paper to do a *blind contour drawing*. Choose a place on the figure to look at and a place on your paper to start. Focusing solely on the subject and without looking down at your paper (hence *blind*), follow the outline of the figure in a slow, continuous line. For example, if starting with an arm, will you follow up to the face or to the underarm and body, etc.? Remember, this will not look realistic as the *point is to focus on the figure.*

Neuroscientist Terry Wu states, "Art can be a powerful way for us to gain a better understanding of human emotions and stories. It gives us a unique lens to look at artists' inner worlds. It trains our brains to slow down and think more rationally, instead of emotionally. It restores our capacity to connect with others. Art plays a unique role in re-establishing humanity in this technology-dominated world."

Do students agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?

Using the elements of art and principles of design, ask students to describe the elements and principles used by the artist. Was it an effective way to tell the person's story? Why or why not?

Step 4: Choose Your LMC Unsung Hero

Your turn! Students choose an Unsung Hero from the approved Unsung Heroes Directory. Students should invest some time in background **reading and research** on their chosen Unsung Hero.

Journal Exercise

To get to know the Unsung Hero in more depth, ask students to reflect on the following prompts about their Unsung Hero's **heroic actions and impact** in their notebooks, or to use The Unsung Hero's Journey Worksheet to identify and develop ideas about the heroic actions and traits of their selected Unsung Hero.

- What was the problem observed by your Unsung Hero?
- What heroic actions did they display?
- How was the individual's action(s) influenced by the time and place she/he lived? What were the central issues and problems that the Unsung Hero was trying to address at that time?
- What did this person sacrifice for others?
- What impact did their actions have on others?
- What heroic traits defined your Unsung Hero?

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Step 5: Develop Your Concept

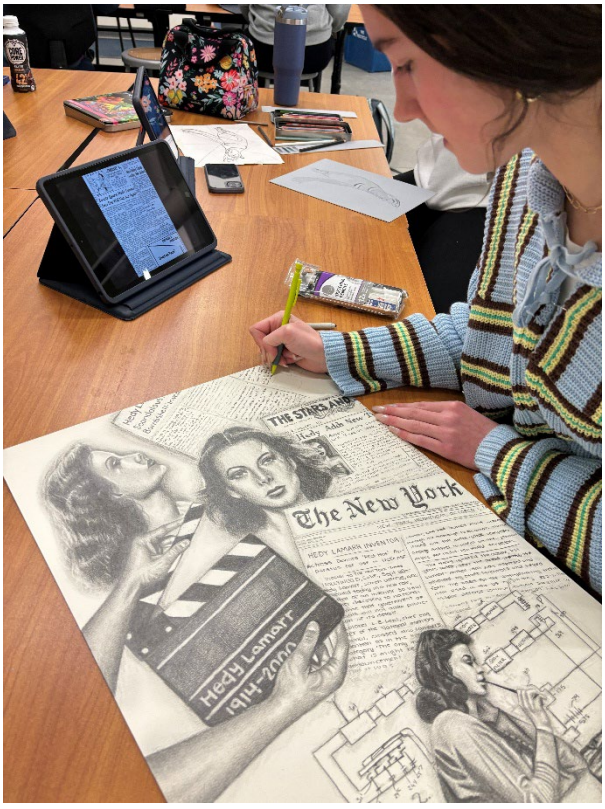
Sketching Exercise



Students can make notes and sketch ideas around the following prompts in their notebooks:

- What is the strongest character trait of your Unsung Hero?
- What heroic action is best to illustrate in your artwork?
- How will you communicate what the Unsung Hero valued?
- What objects or details will you incorporate into your artwork that communicate their values? Do you want to demonstrate a heroic action or character trait – or both? How are they linked? What will you emphasize in your Unsung Hero's story?
- What elements of art and principles of design will you incorporate into your artwork?
- What is the best media to help you tell your story? Will you create a 2D, 3D, mixed media work of art that clearly communicates the Unsung Hero's character and values?
- Consider using the Unsung Hero's appearance, words, and identifying attributes while developing an original interpretation. Source images and historical photos can be used for reference and inspiration but should not be directly copied.
- Decide whether to pursue a realistic, abstract and/or non-objective interpretation.

Step 6: Select Process & Media



Two-dimensional

- **Dry Media:** graphite, charcoal, colored pencil, pastel, etc.
- **Wet Media:** acrylic, oil, watercolor, gouache, ink wash, printmaking, etc.
- **Mixed Media:** photography, graphic design, textile, collage, paper
- **Digital Media** (must be printed)

Three-dimensional

sculpture, assemblage, ceramic, etc.

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Step 7: Introduce Project Criteria & Evaluation

Visit the LMC website to view student award winners and finalists from previous years. Using the Judging Criteria Rubric, have students work in teams to assess the example artworks. When finished, have each group share their totals and discuss how they arrived at their scores with their peers. Scoring is weighted as follows:

- Creative Interpretation (40%)
- Aesthetic Value (40%)
- Impact Paper (20%)



Step 8: Produce Artwork

Students will need to invest a significant amount of time creating their artwork. Questions they should consider include:

- How will they arrange their composition (e.g., perspective)?
- What media and materials will they use (e.g., paper, wood, canvas, digital)?

Step 9: Critique Artwork

Set an internal deadline in your classroom and provide an opportunity for your students to discuss their artwork with their peers. This is an important part of the project and allows students to advocate for their Unsung Hero's story while making meaningful connections. Encourage students to describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate their finished artworks while providing each other with constructive feedback on ways in which the works can be improved.

Use the Judging Criteria Rubric as a guideline when conversing about the aesthetic value and how well each work

Step 10: Write Impact Statement

As a class, review the ARTEFFECT Impact Statement Outline. Students write an impact statement (500-1000 words) that covers these points:

1. Introduces Your Unsung Hero and why you chose this individual.
2. Addresses what is most important about your Unsung Hero. Discuss what you most admire about this individual (e.g., as a role model, character traits, actions, values, their challenge or cause).
3. Explains your creative interpretation of your Unsung Hero's story, character traits and heroic acts in your artwork.
4. Describes the impact that creating your artwork has had on your outlook on life and how you will share your artwork and your Unsung Hero's story with your community.



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Modifications/Extension Activity

For elementary age students, the teacher may have to review narrative paintings as an artistic subject. Ask students how artists communicate plot, setting, and character. Using a Venn Diagram, have them compare and contrast how writers and artists can tell stories using characters/plot/ and setting.

For older students, use Harvard Project Zero's thinking routine, Projecting Across Time to help guide students to think about a broad span of time reaching backward into the past, and forward into the future. They can then apply this learning to better understand their hero and the time s/he lived in.

To build on historical empathy, in addition to the blind contour drawing, students can write an "I AM" poem of one figure in the painting. Use this I AM worksheet for a class activity.

In order to highlight innovative Unsung Heroes, you can do a similar analysis of a painting such as Gerrit Dou's Astronomer by Candlelight. In pairs, have students discuss:

- What can you tell about the person in the artwork?
- What does his body language (pose) and expression communicate about him?
- What values and character traits does this work of art invite us to think about?
- What else is included in the artwork? Describe the setting and objects that are included in the painting. Based on your observations, what values or character traits is the person communicating?

Vocabulary

Blind contour is a drawing exercise where an artist draws the contour of a subject without looking down at the paper.

Empathy is a stimulated emotional state that relies on the ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences or perspectives of another person.

Historical empathy is the ability to understand and appreciate what life was like for people who lived in a different time and place.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which people develop skills like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making.

Resources

Pre-reading: Logan, *The Art of Empathy*. SAIC.

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art & University of Arkansas Department of Education: Research on the benefits of school field trips.

Project Zero's Thinking Routine Toolbox: Thinking routines are a set of questions or a brief sequence of steps used to scaffold and support student thinking developed by Harvard's Graduate School of Education.

Ritchhart, R., Church, M., Morrison, K. (2011) *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for all Learners.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Press.

Social Emotional Learning: CASEL framework .

ARTEFFECT Annual Competition

The 2027 ARTEFFECT annual competition is open to middle and high school students and accepts submissions on artworks about the LMC Unsung Heroes from October 1, 2026 – April 19, 2027.

ARTEFFECT Website
ARTEFFECT Introduction Video
ARTEFFECT Competitions
ARTEFFECT Unsung Heroes Directory
ARTEFFECT Judging Rubric
ARTEFFECT Impact Statement Outline
Student FAQs

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Curriculum Connections / Standards

ELA: College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards

Key ideas and details

1.Read closely to determine what the text [Artwork] says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats; including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Social Studies

- Students understand the importance of individual action and character and explain how heroes from long ago and the recent past have made a difference in others' lives.
- Students explain the central issues and problems from the past, placing people and events in a matrix of time and place.
- Students compare the present with the past, evaluating the consequences of past events and decisions and determining the lessons that were learned.

5.6 Students understand the course and consequences of the American Revolution.

3. Identify the different roles women played during the Revolution (e.g., Abigail Adams, Martha Washington, Molly Pitcher, Phillis Wheatley, Mercy Otis Warren).

English Development Standards

Collaborative

1. Exchanging information and ideas with others through oral collaborative conversations on range of social and academic topics

2. Interacting with others in written English in various communicative forms (print, communicative technology, and multimedia).

3. Offering and supporting opinions and negotiating with others in communicative exchanges

Interpretive

5. Listening actively to spoken English in a range of social and academic contexts.

6. Reading closely literary and informational texts and viewing multimedia to determine how meaning is conveyed explicitly and implicitly through language.

VAPA Standards

CREATING—Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Essential Questions: How does art help us understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures? How is art used to impact the views of a society?

8.VA:Cr2.1 Demonstrate willingness to experiment, innovate, and take risks to pursue ideas, forms, and meanings that emerge in the process of artmaking or designing.

Acc.VA:Cr3 Engage in constructive critique with peers, then reflect on, reengage, revise, and refine works of art and design in response to personal artistic vision.

5.VA:Re7.1

Compare one's own interpretation of a work of art with the interpretation of others.

Acc.VA:Re7.2

Evaluate the effectiveness of an image or images to influence ideas, feelings, and behaviors of specific audiences.

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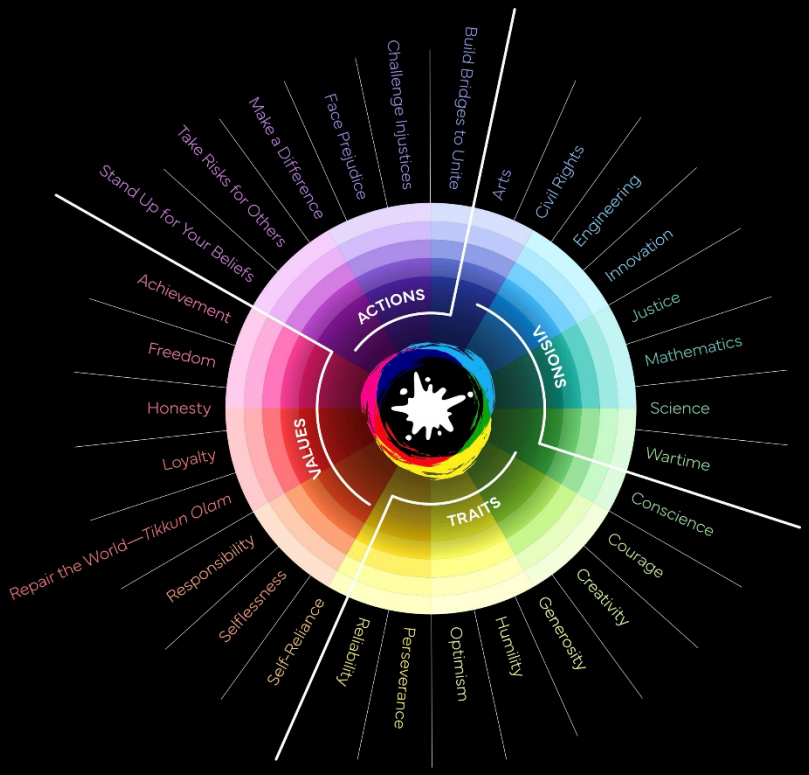
LMC Unsung Heroes—Heroic Traits and Actions

Unsung Heroes as Role Models

Unsung Heroes offer invaluable lessons as role models. They demonstrated heroic traits and actions, achieved new visions, and championed altruistic values.

Educators and students consider Unsung Heroes as roles models in deep and engaging ways. Teaching and learning with these concepts fosters creative storytelling, critical inquiry, historical awareness, and research skills.



Download ARTEFFECT Word Wheel graphic: https://bit.ly/ARTEFFECT-WORD-WHEEL

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Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes

ARTEFFECT



The Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes (LMC) celebrates individuals from history who created positive change by improving the lives of others through their extraordinary actions in service to others and society. By sharing the stories of these individuals who did extraordinary things, LMC seeks to inspire the hero within everyone.

Expanding the Unsung Heroes mission, ARTEFFECT invites educators and their students to explore the diverse stories of LMC Unsung Heroes and their invaluable lessons as role models from history through the visual arts. ARTEFFECT offers student competitions, professional development, and exhibitions. The ARTEFFECT lesson plans support teaching and learning to generate unique, creative interpretations of these stories in an array of artistic mediums. Students are encouraged to showcase their artworks beyond the classroom to explore the potential of their art to create positive community impact and inspire social action.

The ARTEFFECT competitions invite students in grades 6-12 to consider, interpret, and create original visual artworks and impact statements about LMC Unsung Heroes. ARTEFFECT runs an annual competition and a summer competition offering over $70,000 in financial prize. Various 2D & 3D media are accepted. The judging criteria emphasize creative interpretation and aesthetics. Learn more about the competitions, previous winners, prize categories, rules and eligibility.

Lesson plan created by Dr. Veronica Alvarez. Dr. Alvarez is an educator, historian, and arts advocate. She has worked with students of all ages, teaching subjects such as Spanish, ancient Greek and Roman history, and inclusive pedagogy. She was a museum practitioner for over 20 years, working at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art where she wrote curricula and led professional development for teachers. Dr. Alvarez has served as an education consultant for various entities including UCLA's Fowler's Museum, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the U.S. State Department, and the State Department of Cultural Affairs in Chiapas, Mexico. Dr. Alvarez has also created blended learning models on arts integration with the Teaching Channel and the Los Angeles County Office of Education. She holds a bachelor's degree in liberal studies, a master's degree in history, and a doctorate in educational leadership for social justice.

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