



## SCHOOL PROGRAMS

800 Main Street Hartford, CT 06103 | (860) 522-6766 | [www.ctoldstatehouse.org](http://www.ctoldstatehouse.org)

**Lesson Title:** Memorializing Independence: John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence*

**Grades:** 6–12

**Time Required:** 1–2 class periods

**Subject Areas:** Social Studies, Visual Art

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**Lesson Overview:** Students will closely examine John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776* painting to consider how our country memorialized, and now understands, this pivotal moment in American history.

*Note: this lesson can be taught in conjunction with The Place Where You Live Multisite Visit with Connecticut's Old State House. For more information see [School Programs](#) at the Wadsworth*

### Common Core Standards

English Language Arts

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1.C](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.2](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.2](#)

History/Social Studies

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.3](#)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6](#)

### National Core Arts Standards

VA:Cn11.1.7a

Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

VA:Re.7.1.1a

Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.

### Learning Objectives:

*Students will be able to:*

- Analyze and identify the way an artist uses key details in a painting to convey a point of view
- Identify a key moment in American history

### Materials:

- Image of *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*
- Projector and screen/SMART board or equivalent
- Background Information (included in lesson plan)

### Artwork in Focus:

Click on the link below to access this image through the Wadsworth's Public Portal. Once on the portal, click on the image to view the object information. Click on the image again to download a jpeg version of the work. *NOTE: Works of art used in lesson plans may not currently be on view at the museum.*

**John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, 1832***



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### Lesson Procedures:

#### Part One: Guided Looking

Project John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*, without the painting's title, and allow students to quietly study the image. Guide the students through an inquiry exercise around the image, using questions such as:

- What do you see in this painting?
- How would you describe the people?
- How would you describe the expressions on the men's faces? Why do you think the artist portrayed them as such? What do their expressions suggest about what is happening?
- What does this scene tell you about society at the time?
- Describe the colors and lighting used in the painting. What do they suggest about the scene?
- Study the setting of this scene (room, walls, furniture). Where do you think these men are?
- Do you recognize any of the men in this painting?
- What do you think is happening in this painting?
- *Reveal the artist's name and the title of the painting and ask:*
  - Have you seen this painting before? Do you think this is what really happened?
  - Do you think the artist was a patriot or loyalist?

#### Part Two: Class Discussion

Students will discuss John Trumbull's painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the artistic liberties Trumbull took, and how the painting has shaped our understanding of this event.

Before beginning the discussion, share background information on the artist and painting (below).

- Why do you think Thomas Jefferson and John Adams felt this was a good way to portray this scene?
- Why do you think Jefferson encouraged Trumbull to depict all members of the Continental Congress, including those who did not sign or support the document?
- Why do you think Jefferson and Trumbull wanted to depict exact likenesses of the Congressman?
- Why do you think Trumbull depicted the Assembly Room, furniture, etc. as he did? What were the benefits of doing so?
- Rather than focus on historic accuracy in this painting, Trumbull wanted to memorialize the monumentality of declaring independence. Which do you think is more important: accuracy or capturing the importance/spirit of an event?
- How have Trumbull's artistic liberties changed how we understand and remember this historic moment?
- How has your perception of this painting changed?
- How would you have painted this scene?



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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

#### *The Painting*

*The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776* is one of the most iconic depictions of the Revolutionary War period. It is one of eight Revolutionary scenes by artist John Trumbull, is often found in history textbooks, and was once on the reverse of the United States \$2 bill. Trumbull began the first version of this painting in Paris in 1785, likely at the suggestion of Thomas Jefferson; Jefferson was the chief author of the Declaration and gave Trumbull a first-hand account of the historic meeting in Independence Hall (Philadelphia) where the Continental Congress voted for independence. Jefferson stands to the right of center presenting the document to John Hancock, president of Congress. He is surrounded by (left to right) John Adams, Connecticut's Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Benjamin Franklin, the "Committee of Five" that drafted the Declaration.

Because Trumbull was not actually present for the meeting of the Continental Congress, he took some liberties with his painting. At the suggestion of both Jefferson and John Adams, Trumbull depicted all members of Congress, even those not present and those who opposed the Declaration and did not sign. In addition, there was never a time in which all the depicted delegates to Congress were assembled in Independence Hall at the same time; the scene itself is fictitious. Trumbull did, however, spend nearly 30 years sketching or painting from-life portraits of nearly every man depicted, copying existing portraits when necessary (also at the suggestion of Jefferson and Adams). He also chose to represent the entire Committee of Five presenting the draft Declaration to Hancock, even though a single delegate would have presented the document.

Trumbull also took some artistic liberties with the room's design and each of his three versions of this scene has a slightly different interior. In this version, he covered the windows with green velvet draperies instead of the venetian blinds that were actually in place and featured elegant arm chairs instead of the simple Windsor chairs that furnished the room. Furthermore, he decided to use the date "July 4, 1776," even though the Committee submitted the final draft of the Declaration the week prior on June 28, and John Adams felt "The *Second* Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America." This painting is Trumbull's third version of this scene. He began his first copy in 1787 and painted the last portrait in 1820; this version is in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery. The second copy, on display in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., was commissioned in 1817 and installed in the Capitol in 1826. This third version was painted in 1832 and is owned by the Wadsworth Atheneum.



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### *The Artist*

John Trumbull was born in Lebanon, Connecticut, in 1756 into a politically prominent family. His father, Jonathan Trumbull Sr., served as Connecticut's governor during the American Revolution and his brother Jonathan Trumbull Jr. also served as governor. In 1775, Trumbull embarked upon a military career, eventually serving as a second aide-de-camp to General George Washington before resigning his post in 1777. In 1780, he sailed to England for family business and while there started formal art study under artist Benjamin West. An arrest for suspected treason interrupted his studies and he was imprisoned for seven months. After the war ended, Trumbull returned to Europe in 1784 and began his series of paintings on the American Revolution for which he is best known today.



John Trumbull

American, 1756–1843

*The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*, 1832

Oil on canvas

Purchased by Daniel Wadsworth and members of the Atheneum Committee, 1844.3