Analyzing Patriotic Iconography: Illustrated Civil War Envelopes

an in-archives exercise by Jennifer Wingate

featured on TeachArchives.org at http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/civil-war-envelopes/

Students analyze Civil War-era envelopes as representations of popular imagery in the mid-19th century.

Introduction

This exercise introduces students to illustrated Civil War-era envelopes in order to study the growth of popular imagery in 19th-century American culture. I drew on Steven R. Boyd’s book, *Patriotic Envelopes of the Civil War: The Iconography of Union and Confederate Covers* (LSU Press, 2010). This accessible book shows how envelope-sized illustrations succinctly and forcefully expressed political themes and attitudes during the Civil War.

In the archives, my students were interested in the envelopes themselves and in the way that they were compiled in scrapbooks by collectors. They were engaged in the challenge of interpreting individual illustrations and they had fun looking at some of the more unusual designs. They also demonstrated strong analytical skills, whether observing representations of race and gender or changing depictions of Abraham Lincoln.

Looking at a large collection of these envelopes in the archives enables students to recognize common subjects (such as eagles, snakes, soldiers, and flags) which frequently appear in other contemporary media. Seeing so many envelopes at once also means students will inevitably encounter images unlike those selected for reproduction for Boyd’s book and unlike other media of the era.

Objectives

In *American Art*, students should be able to:

- Identify and differentiate among the print making processes (wood engraving, lithography, and chromolithography) used on the envelopes
- Compare and contrast various representations of abstract concepts, allegorical figures, historical actors and events, and everyday people on the envelopes
- Compare and contrast representations on the envelopes with representations in 19th-century American paintings, sculptures, photographs, and lithographs previously studied in class

In addition, *Visual Culture of the Civil War* students should be able to:

- Articulate in a presentation how these images were used to promote patriotism in the North or South
• Articulate in a presentation how these images perpetuated and challenged attitudes toward race and gender

**Context**

Before visiting the archives, I use online collections (such as this one from The Library Company of Philadelphia) to show students examples of Civil War envelopes in class. I teach them how to identify the printmaking processes of wood engraving and lithography.

I also lead a comparison activity in which I project two images side-by-side. Students take a couple of minutes to jot down observations about how the images are similar and how they are different, and then I lead a class discussion. Here are two example prompts. To provide students with a framework to analyze the envelopes, I assign excerpts from Boyd’s book. Each student is required to post a question about the reading on our class blog.

**Visit**

Number of Visits: 1  
Duration of Visit: 1 hour 15 minutes

**Agenda**

- 15 minutes  **Standard introduction**
- 45 minutes  **Small group work**
- 15 minutes  **Wrap up**

Students work in three groups of no more than four to five students. Each group is assigned a scrapbook of illustrated Civil War-era patriotic envelopes. Students spend 45 minutes looking through a single scrapbook and completing the handout.

The handout prompts students to find examples of particular types of imagery, and models analysis of the envelopes. See handouts for *American Art* and for *Visual Culture of the Civil War*.

**Wrap Up**

By the end of class, students should have selected an envelope that they will analyze in a follow-up assignment. In the last 15 minutes of class, students share which envelope they chose and why.
End Products

In American Art:

In a two paragraph essay, students compare and contrast an envelope chosen in the archives and a work of art from their “study list” consisting of images reproduced in the class textbook, Frances Pohl’s Framing America, 3rd ed. The essay counts toward the midterm exam.

In Visual Culture of the Civil War:

For homework, students post an interpretation of an envelope to the class blog. Students also give a 5 minute in-class presentation to fulfill the oral presentation requirement of my college’s honors seminar program. Students have one class period to prepare so that I can circulate, offer suggestions, and answer questions. I developed criteria to assess these presentations.

Archival Material Used

Scrapbook of Civil War envelopes, 1861-1865; William Irwin Martin Civil War envelopes, 1974.259, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society. click for images

Civil War era scrapbook, volume 2, 1861-1866; C.B. Nichols scrapbooks, 1974.134, box 1, folder 1; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Civil War era scrapbook, volume 3, circa 1861-1865; C.B. Nichols scrapbooks, 1974.134, box 1, folder 2; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Artworks Used

In American Art:

See the study list given to students in preparation for the midterm exam.

In the comparison activities described in Context above:

Crawford, Thomas. Freedom, bronze, 1863; Dome of the United States Capitol.

Galle, Theodor. Vespucci Discovering America, engraving, circa 1580; Brooklyn Museum.
After *Discovery of America*, a drawing by Jan van der Straet, circa 1587-1589; The Metropolitan Museum of Art.


**Further Reading**


> “The Meteor of War,” a section in this essay, is a particularly nice pairing with “Star of the North, or the Comet of 1861,” an envelope in BHS’s collection showing Lincoln’s head as a comet.


**This Exercise Was Used In**

FA 1420: American Art A year-long freshman honors seminar on the visual culture of the Civil War.

HON 5101-2: Visual Culture of Civil War Also adapted for use in a survey class for non-majors.
Course Materials (included)

In-Class Comparison Activity
In-Archives Handout - American Art
In-Archives Handout - Civil War
Midterm Study List
Presentation Criteria

Cite This Exercise

Two In-Class Comparison Activities
by Jennifer Wingate

Part of an in-archives exercise at [http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/civil-war-envelopes](http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/civil-war-envelopes)

TWO NUDES

Civil War envelope *Dixie!*  
Hiram Power’s *Greek Slave*

*Dixie!* from Scrapbook of Civil War envelopes, 1861-1865; William Irwin Martin Civil War envelopes, 1974.259, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society.


**Say to students:** Take a few minutes to look at the sculpture *Greek Slave* by Hiram Powers and the envelope illustration *Dixie*.

- What do these two images have in common?
- How are they different?

* Differences include medium (print/sculpture) and size. Both allude to Christianity and slavery. Discussions usually focus on the differing symbolism of the women’s nude bodies, and on viewership and display (both images reached a wide audience in the nineteenth century).
Ask students: How does the artist depict America and why?
Next, look at more allegories, such as:

*Thomas Crawford’s bronze sculpture of *Freedom* on the Capitol dome, 1863.*

*Details from decorated envelopes, Scrapbook of Civil War envelopes, 1861-1865; William Irwin Martin Civil War envelopes, 1974.259, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society.*

*Details from decorated envelopes, Scrapbook of Civil War envelopes, 1861-1865; William Irwin Martin Civil War envelopes, 1974.259, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society.*

Ask students to notice how personifications of America change over the years, and to consider why.

*America is first represented as a vulnerable and inviting Native American princess and eventually becomes more westernized. I like to end with the image of Liberty looking down at America, which may reflect the enforced dependency of native people on the federal government during the 19th century.*

Ask students to compare the above Civil War envelopes featuring different allegories of America with each other and with personifications of liberty, freedom, or Columbia in American visual culture.
Group 1: Scrapbook of Civil War envelopes, 1861-1865; William Irwin Martin Civil War envelopes, 1974.259, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society.

**Please follow the handling instructions given by archives staff. The album is fragile, and Prof. Wingate or a BHS staff member may need to help turn pages.**

You may work on these exercises as a group, but each student should fill in his or her own worksheet.

By the late 1840s, the development of new cheap printing techniques led to the production of illustrated advertising envelopes. By the spring of 1861, many took on patriotic and political themes, like the ones collected by William Irwin Martin in this scrapbook.

Identify and photograph examples of envelopes made by the following processes (one each). What is it about the way the image looks that helps you identify the process?

Wood engraving □ _______________________________________________________________________

Lithograph □ _________________________________________________________________________

Chromolithograph □ ____________________________________________________________________

Find and photograph an envelope that features an allegorical figure or personification (a person that stands for or represents an abstract concept). Describe the figure and his or her attributes.
What abstract concept or idea might this figure have represented? What do you see that makes you think that?

How does the way the figure is represented affect the meaning of the abstract idea? For example, what does this figure, its attributes, and the way it was designed, tell us about “America” or “Liberty” or another abstract idea?

Find an envelope with a political message and attempt to summarize its message. Describe the image and the message. Does the envelope support the campaign of a presidential candidate? Does it make a case for Northern rejection of secession? Does it support or promote another cause?

How was the illustration designed to enhance that message? What specific details or design choices do you think affected its overall impact? Have you seen anything similar to this image in the art we’ve studied in class so far? If so, where? If not, how is it different?
Choose an envelope to study in more depth and take a picture of it. It may be one that you’ve already described for this worksheet, but it should relate in some way to art we’ve studied in class so far.

You will be given a separate assignment asking you to compare and contrast the envelope you choose with a work of art that we’ve studied in class. The assignment will be due on the day of the midterm exam and will count as _________ points toward your midterm exam grade.
Group 1: Scrapbook of Civil War envelopes, 1861-1865; William Irwin Martin Civil War envelopes, 1974.259, box 1; Brooklyn Historical Society.

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You may work on these exercises as a group, but each student should fill in his or her own worksheet.

1) In the spring of 1861, printers in the North and the South began to produce patriotic envelopes that expressed support for their respective causes.

Looking through the scrapbook, identify a Union envelope design that helped make a case for Northern rejection of secession (destruction of the Constitution, threat to the future of the nation, etc. - See Boyd, Chapter 1).

Take a photo and describe the elements that help articulate and give visual form to Northern views.

Can you identify a Confederate envelope? If so, take a photo of one and describe what you see that helps you identify it as such.
2) Printers used the images of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis as “vehicles to rally citizens to the cause as well as to articulate the issues for which both presidents and soldiers fought.” (See Boyd, Chapter 3). Images of the two presidents helped create a shared public understanding of the men and helped personalize the issues at stake.

Try to identify one Union OR one Confederate envelope that features an image of Lincoln or Jefferson. Analyze the representation of the man. Is he isolated on the envelope or surrounded by other images and designs? Why?

3) What other kinds of images do you see that Boyd discusses in the excerpts you read for today? Depictions of African Americans? Soldiers? Women? List three types by giving one or two sentence descriptions.

a) 
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

b) 
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

c) 
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
4) Choose one envelope that you find especially interesting. Each member of the group should choose his or her own. Take a photo and prepare to give a presentation about your chosen envelope using Boyd to help you in your analysis of the imagery, what it was intended to convey and what causes it was intended to promote. Post a summary of what you will present on the class blog (category: Patriotic Envelopes).
Study List for Midterm
by Jennifer Wingate


1.61 John White, watercolor of Algonquian man and woman [Theire sitting at meate]

Colonial, 1620-1775

1.67 Unknown, Elizabeth Freake and Baby Mary
1.78 Kühn, Henry Darnall III
1.83 Unknown, Gravestone

Federal, 1776-1820

2.5 Copley, Watson and the Shark
2.10 Gilbert Stuart, George Washington
2.25 Thomas Jefferson, Virginia State Capitol
2.48 Anonymous, America
2.65 Copley, The Copley Family
2.68 Johnston, The McCormick Family
4.18 Krimmel, Quilting Frolic

Antebellum, 1820-1860

3.11 Cole, The Falls of Kaaterskill
3.14 Cole, The Course of the Empire: Consummation
3.17 Duncanson, Blue Hole, Little Miami River
3.28 Church, Twilight in the Wilderness
3.49 Mount, Bargaining for a Horse
3.54 Lilly Martin Spencer, Kiss Me and You’ll Kiss the ‘Lasses
4.4 Woodville, War News from Mexico
4.23 Eastman Johnson, Negro Life in the South
5.5 Crawford, The Progress of Civilization, U.S. Capitol pediment
5.16 Powers, The Greek Slave

Civil War, 1861-1865

3.32 Bierstadt, Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak
4.27 Homer, Illustration for Harper’s Weekly [A Bivouac Fire on the Potomac]
4.33 Reekie, A Burial Party [from Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War]
Reconstruction, 1865-1877

4.39  Edmonia Lewis, Forever Free
4.42  Thomas Ball, Freedmen’s Memorial
5.6   Homer, The Old Mill (The Morning Bell)
5.13  Eakins, The Gross Clinic
5.18  Franny Palmer and James Ives, Across the Continent [“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”]

Gilded Age, 1878-1890

5.34  Chase, In the Studio
5.8   Anshutz, The Ironworker’s Noontime
5.11  Muybridge, Female Figure Hopping

Progressive Era, 1890-1920

4.44  Saint-Gaudens, Shaw and 54th Massachusetts Regiment Memorial
5.43  Cecilia Beaux, Sita and Sarita
5.48  Haberle, A Bachelor’s Drawer
5.55  Richard Morris Hunt, Metropolitan Museum
5.62  Court of Honor, World’s Columbian Exposition [sculpture is by Daniel Chester French]
Presentation Criteria
by Jennifer Wingate

Part of an in-archives exercise at http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/civil-war-envelopes

Name: ________________________________

☐ visual analysis of chosen envelope(s):
   analysis of formal elements, design choices, and iconography

☐ knowledge of related topics in Boyd

☐ ability to relate image to the larger history of Civil War events and material culture

☐ strength and clarity of an identifiable thesis (or main argument)

☐ level of detail in interpretation (avoidance of vague generalities)

☐ clarity of expression

☐ professional demeanor

☐ visual aids

☐ ability to abide by the 5-minute limit

Notes: