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March 2012

LESSON PLAN

## American Treasures

### CLASS DISCUSSION

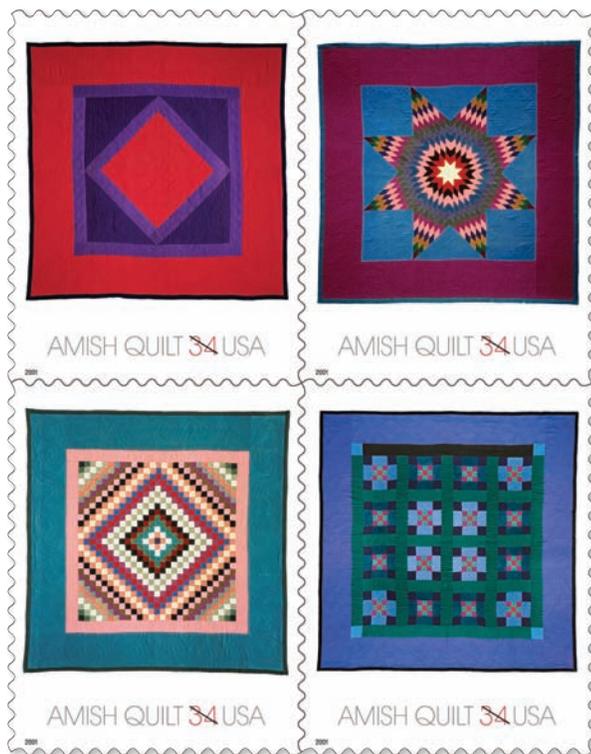
As so eloquently expressed in *USA Philatelic*, "U.S. postage stamps honor significant people, major events, and lasting achievements. Yet sometimes, people just want beautiful stamps." To that end, the

U.S. Postal Service created the American Treasures stamp series in 2001 to give the public what it wanted: miniature works of art to grace the US mail. The American Treasures series honors American fine art, featuring works of various artists, schools and eras. The stamp art tells stories of ethnic histories, daily life, and cultural mores.

The works featured on the American Treasures stamps include paintings, glasswork, and tapestries, and are the labors of individual masters as well as regional communities. They include:

#### Amish Quilts, 2001

The four quilts in the first American Treasures stamps reflect the Amish ethics of humility, simplicity, modesty and serviceability. Their bold geometric patterns and colors are distinct to 20th century pieces from Lancaster County.



Lesson Plan Continued

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**John James Audubon, 2002**

John James Audubon was a skilled illustrator and avid bird enthusiast who embarked on a quest to describe and paint every American bird species in the early half of the 19th century. His four-volume classic, *Birds of America*, remains the standard against which other ornithological artists are measured.

**Mary Cassatt, 2003**

Leaving her American homeland for Paris, Mary Cassatt befriended a group of artists known as the Impressionists and became one of their most famous members. With a light touch, soft colors, and delicate strokes, Cassatt is best known for her paintings of mothers with their children.

**Martin Johnson Heade, 2004**

Martin Johnson Heade was known for his paintings of coastal salt marshes, which emanated light

and atmosphere, leading some experts to label him a Luminist. He is also known for his magnificent still life paintings of flowers, and is the only 19th century artist with such extensive work in both landscapes and still life.

**New Mexico Rio Grande Blankets, 2005**

18th century communities in the Rio Grande valley expressed their heritage through hand-dyed blankets woven from yarn. These blankets bore Navajo, Hispanic, Mexican and Pueblo designs, reflecting the colorful diversity of the American Southwest.

**Quilts of Gee's Bend, 2006**

Throughout the 20th century, a group of African American women from a small Alabama community named Gee's Bend produced magnificent quilts. One woman would "piece" the "top" of the quilt alone, reflecting her own artistic vision, with the rest of the quilt work done communally.

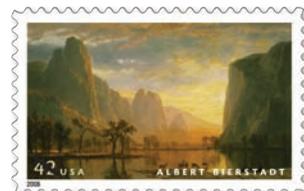
**Louis Comfort Tiffany, 2007**

Son of the famed jeweler, Louis Comfort Tiffany worked in nearly every visual art medium, but is best known for his magnificent glassworks. He created nature-inspired masterpieces in his patented opalescent glass for wealthy patrons, and his lamps, vases and glass panels are treasures of the Art Nouveau Movement of the early 20th century.

**Albert Bierstadt, 2008**

A German-American painter and member of the Hudson River School of painting, Albert Bierstadt's work was sweeping, romantic, and meticulous. He joined expeditions to the American frontier where he painted magnificent natural landscapes of the West, and became the foremost Westward Expansion painter of the 19th century.

Albert Bierstadt, American (born in Germany), 1830-1902  
Valley of the Yosemite, 1864 Oil on paperboard, 30.16 x 48.89 cm, (11 7/8 x 19 1/4 in.)

**Winslow Homer, 2010**

Winslow Homer began his career as a Civil War correspondent, illustrating battle scenes for *Harper's Weekly*. After the war, he spent most of his life in coastal towns where he painted delicate scenes of every day life, as well as powerful depictions of the sea. He is considered one of the finest painters of the 20th century.



Photograph © 2010 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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### Edward Hopper, 2011

Edward Hopper was a member of a group of painters known as the Ashcan School in New York, whose revolutionary style and subject was everyday life. Hopper adopted a signature style of realism, which featured bold geometric shapes and flat masses of color.

Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California



### William H. Johnson, 2012

African American artist William H. Johnson rose from poverty in the rural South to study art at prestigious schools in New York and Europe. His interest in primitivism and folk art, as well as African American traditions, are evident throughout his paintings.

Photo Credit: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC/Art Resource, NY

## ACTIVITY

### What you will need:

- 8x11" cardstock, preferably white, one per student
- Writing utensils
- Coloring utensils: the more variety the better!  
Try to use markers and crayons as well as pastels, chalks, pencils and paints!
- Time in class for writing composition and art

**March is Youth Art Month**, and in the pursuit of Youth Art, your students will copy one of American Treasures works of art!

In class, review the 11 American Treasures stamps, and their artists, with your students. Review important information about the pieces; where, when, and by whom they were produced. This step will help your students in the recreation of their subjects later on. As extra research, ask students to find additional information about the art/artist and style online during a library session.

Hand out one or two cards per student (you may also use regular blank paper). On the back of the card, have students write:

- Student's name
- The name of the original artist
- Where and when the original artist lived
- Three emotions that the original artwork evokes from the student, such as "curious," "sad," "happy" or "frustrated"

Next, take time to allow your students to recreate the artwork on the other side of their "canvas". Accuracy is not at stake in this exercise; rather stylistic interpretation is the goal. Is the artist realistic or abstract? What kind of shapes do you see in the design? Are there many colors or just a few? Are the colors bright or dull? Students should focus on recreating the artist's emotion – not simply the subject!

After your students' artwork is done, have them share with the class! Ask your students to identify the style of the painting, and what it means. If you are following the 2011-2012 *School Days & American Ways* calendar set, you will find out how to display your works of art in a local Youth Art Month Exposition!

## DESIRED OUTCOME

As one of the major themes of social studies, culture is an integral component in the way we distinguish civilizations and subgroups from one another. Embracing music, literature, visual and the performing arts, culture reflects the values and traditions of various groups of people. Each of the stamps in the American Treasures series represents a particular American artistic group, era or individual – from the interior whimsy of the Art Nouveau Movement to the rural intimacy of Gee's Bend, the Southwest, and Lancaster County. By investigating and reproducing these works your students will be challenged to identify the inspiration behind them. They will begin to discover that art and culture are a direct reflection of the social, political, and economical factors that influence a nation. Art and art history will be critical to their future exploration of the humanities.

## CURRICULUM STANDARDS

**Social Studies:** Culture relates to the behaviors, traditions, and values of a specific people

**Visual Arts:** Understanding the Visual Arts in relation to history and culture; Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes