



## LEARNING THE ABCs

Attributed to Mary B. Tucker (dates unknown)

Probably Massachusetts; c. 1840–1844

Watercolor and pencil on paper; 19 ¼ × 23"

Promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.45

Photo © 2000 John Bigelow Taylor, New York

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

This double portrait pictures a school-age boy and his baby sibling. In the mid-nineteenth century, even very young children were sent to local district schools. There they learned the ABCs and other simple lessons with primers—books like the one the boy in the picture has in his hand. The toddler is holding a rattle, a typical item babies were portrayed with at the time. The older child is wearing a buttoned suit with pants, indicating that he is “breeched” and therefore over the age of 5. In addition, his side-parted hair suggests his gender as male; it is less clear whether his younger sibling is male or female.

The school the boy attended was probably quite different from the preschools and elementary schools children attend today. Most likely he went to a single-room schoolhouse, where four- to nineteen-year-olds all shared one classroom. Single-room schoolhouses were crowded and loud, with as many as twenty-five different classes being conducted at once by only one teacher.

### RELATED LESSONS

- “Going to School” (pre-K–1)
- “Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry” (2–3)



Painted by Peter J. Dummitt. April 22 - Feb 26, 1836.

## JOHN F. DEMERITT

Joseph H. Davis (act. 1832–1837)

Probably Barrington, New Hampshire; 1836

Watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper; 9 11/16 × 11"

Promised gift of Ralph Esmerian, P1.2001.33

Photo © 2000 John Bigelow Taylor, New York

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

John F. Demeritt, a schoolmaster or teacher, is painted here sitting at a desk, surrounded by the tools of a nineteenth-century teacher—quills and paper, books, and a map of the world. At the time this portrait was painted, it was not unusual for the school year to be divided between male and female teachers, as the male teachers were often also farmers and couldn't leave to teach during the harvest. Schoolmasters were considered important members of the community.

The painter, Joseph H. Davis, is noted for having portrayed his sitters in profile, often seated at a table. He usually included a bright decorative floor cover across the bottom and a hand-calligraphed legend identifying the sitter and the date.

### RELATED LESSONS

- “Going to School” (pre-K–1)
- “Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry” (2–3)

**GRADE LEVEL: PRE-K-1**

**NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS: THE ARTS, ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS, AND SOCIAL STUDIES**

**ESTIMATED TIME: TWO 45-MINUTE PERIODS, ONE HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT**

**OBJECTIVES**

- Students will look at portraits of children and teachers from the nineteenth century, relating these portraits to their own life experiences as students and with teachers.
- Students will explore and record their parents' memories of school, looking for similarities with and differences from their own school lives.
- Students will consider the concept of a class or a school as a community of learners and friends bonded together through shared experiences.

**MATERIALS**

- Images of *Learning the ABCs* and *John F. Demeritt*
- Chart paper and markers
- Homework assignment letters or worksheets
- Drawing materials (paper, crayons, markers, or colored pencils)

**LESSON ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES**

**Day One**

**Introduction**

- Tell the students that over the course of time, some things stay the same, while others change. In the United States, children have been going to school for hundreds of years; however, schools have changed a great deal during that time.
- Introduce a homework assignment in which the students will interview their parents about their school experiences.
- Each student must write down or have their parent record "Three things that were the same when I went to school" and "Three things that were different when I went to school." The students will share their parents' responses the following day.
- The students may encourage their parents to think about how they got to school, what they wore to school, what they learned or didn't learn, their school friends, etc. For younger students, a letter from the teacher or a handout may suggest topics to think about.

**Day Two**

**Discussion**

- Chart the parents' responses as the students share them in a class discussion.

- Looking at reproductions of *Learning the ABCs* and *John F. Demeritt* individually and then together, discuss the students' observations of the paintings. Begin the discussion with the students' interests and ideas about the paintings, offering information as questions surface or after an initial open-ended discussion.
- Tell the children that these paintings were created more than 150 years ago—long before their parents or even their grandparents were born. Throughout history, though, schools have always had students and teachers. “School portraits” such as these were painted in the days before photography was commonly available; classes did not have school pictures taken the way we do today.
- Introduce the background information as a “story” about the children and the teacher depicted here, at a level appropriate for your students.
- In which ways are the portrayed children and teacher similar to the students and teachers in their own school; in which ways are they different?

#### **Activity**

- Establish the idea of a class or school as a community of adults and children that work together, share things, and help one another.
- Ask the students to consider how they each contribute to the community of their classroom (or school). How do they support one another, help one another, and learn together, and how are they good friends and community members to one another?
- Have each student choose one of the ways he or she contributes to the class community, illustrating it in a drawing.
- Instruct the students to write captions for their drawings that explain how they make their class (or school) a better community. Younger students can dictate their explanations.
- You should also contribute a drawing and caption, as teachers are integral members of class communities.
- Drawings can be assembled into a class book or displayed in the classroom.

#### **PRE- AND POST-LESSON ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS**

- For the homework, have students ask their parents to share a story or memory from their own school days. The students should write the story, with the parents' help if necessary. The story can be illustrated either by the student or both the parent and the student, creating individual or collaborative drawings. Create a classroom exhibition combining children's and parents' school-memory drawings.
- Visit the American Folk Art Museum for a guided tour. Conduct this lesson before or after your museum visit.
- The “Family Portraits” lesson plan, in which students create individual portraits of each of their family members unified by one recurring visual element in the manner of folk painter Jacob Maentel, can be used in conjunction with this lesson.

## ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION METHODS

- Students related their own experiences to the observation and discussion of the artwork.
- Students were able to recognize and identify differences in schools and education in the past and present.
- Students considered themselves as members of a classroom or school community, identifying and illustrating one way they individually contribute to this community in a drawing-and-writing project.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Recommended Books for Students

Barasch, Lynne. *A Country Schoolhouse*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

A picture book in which a grandfather shares his recollections of going to a three-room schoolhouse in 1940s Illinois. Based on the author's own family history.

Nelson, Robin. *School Then and Now*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2003.

Features historical and contemporary photographs to illustrate how school in the United States has changed through the years. Transportation, school supplies, and subjects learned are compared and contrasted.

Pringle, Laurence. *One Room School*. Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mills Press, 1998.

The story of the last year of the one-room school of the author's childhood—School 14 in Monroe Co., N.Y.

Roalf, Peggy. *Children*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1993.

A collection of paintings of children from a wide variety of cultures, time periods, and artistic movements. Part of the *Looking at Paintings* series.

Taulbert, Clifton L. *Little Cliff's First Day of School*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2001.

The story set in the rural South of the 1950s of a boy's anxiety approaching his first day of school and the joy he finds in his classmates—a timeless book despite the differences to modern-day schools.

### Recommended Book for Teachers

Hollander, Stacy C. *American Radiancance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum*.

New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Catalog of this once private collection of American folk art, comprising hundreds of pieces of furniture, signs, ceramics, textiles, weathervanes, walking sticks, and other objects. *Learning the ABCs* is illustrated and discussed on pages 71 and 402–403. *John F. Demeritt* is illustrated and discussed on pages 58 and 394.