



FLAG GATE

Artist unidentified

Jefferson County, New York; c. 1876

Paint on wood with iron and brass; 39 ½ × 57 × 3 ¾"

Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., 1962.1.1

Photo by John Parnell, New York

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE OBJECT

The flag of the United States is perhaps the most potent national symbol—and certainly the most recognizable. This wooden gate was fashioned in the shape of a U.S. flag with wavy stripes that appear to be rippling in the breeze.

Flag Gate, the first object donated to the collection of the American Folk Art Museum, in 1962, exemplifies the multitude of meanings that may be encoded or depicted in works of folk art. The object's utilitarian function was that of a gate, possibly made for Robert Darling's farm in the Upstate New York town of Antwerp. Its unconventional form is an expression of its maker's creative imagination. It is thought that the gate was created in 1876 as a response to the nation's centennial celebration, which evokes both the national American spirit and the personal patriotism of its maker. Interestingly, the flag has thirty-seven stars on one side and thirty-eight on the other. Colorado, the thirty-eighth state, joined the Union in 1876.

RELATED LESSONS

- "The Stars and Stripes" (2-3)
- "Exploring Folk Art Through Poetry" (2-3)

THE STARS AND STRIPES

2-3

GRADE LEVEL: 2-3

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

ESTIMATED TIME: ONE 60- TO 75-MINUTE PERIOD

OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about the significance and symbolism of the U.S. flag as a national symbol.
- Students will recognize, through the observation and exploration of a work of folk art, that art objects are often representative of the culture and country in which they originate.
- Students will collaboratively design and create a class flag, applying their understanding of flags as symbolic representations of communities.

MATERIALS

- Images of *Flag Gate*
- A U.S. flag
- Construction paper
- Markers, crayons, and colored pencils
- Collage materials, including scissors and glue sticks

LESSON ACTIVITIES AND PROCESSES

Introduction

- Ask the students to describe the U.S. flag from memory.
- Where can they see the U.S. flag or flags of other countries?
- We often see the image of the U.S. flag on objects such as T-shirts, key chains, hats, etc. Why do people like everyday objects decorated with flag images?
- What does the flag mean to people? Why do they display their flag?

Discussion

- The students will view and discuss a reproduction of *Flag Gate*. Relate the observation of *Flag Gate* to ideas expressed in the introductory discussion.
 - In what ways does *Flag Gate* look like the U.S. flag; how is it different?
 - What materials did the artist use to create this work?
 - Why do you think the artist chose to make *Flag Gate*?
- Introduce the symbolism of the U.S. flag and review the concept of a symbol.
 - What does the flag symbolize? Identify the symbols within the flag.
- The students will probably be able to discern that each star represents a state and make the connection between the stars and the heavens. The more abstract symbolism of the colors and the stripes will most likely need to be introduced and explained.

- Discuss how this art object is representative of how the U.S. flag changed as our nation grew over the years.

Activity

- Working in small groups or as a class, ask the students to consider the characteristics and attributes their group or class flag will celebrate. The students will brainstorm ideas and possible items to include on their own flag.
- As each state is represented by a star on the U.S. flag, each student will be represented by a symbol on the group or class flag. Facilitate negotiations and agreement on a common symbol that represents the group or class. The arrangement and composition of these symbols, as well as any other symbols that will be included on the flag, are to be determined collaboratively.
- Observe and assist the students as they create their flag; drawing and/or collage materials may be used.

PRE- AND POST-LESSON ACTIVITY SUGGESTIONS

- Have the students write newspaper articles introducing their group or class flag and explaining its symbolism and intent.
- Research the symbolism and significance of another country's flag, perhaps a country being studied in class or a student's country of origin or ancestry. The students may present their findings in oral presentations or poster displays.
- Visit the American Folk Art Museum for a guided tour. Conduct this lesson before or after your museum visit.
- The "Symmetry and Symbols" lesson may be used in conjunction with this lesson, continuing the students' exploration of symbolism in folk art and in their own artwork.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION METHODS

- In discussion, students expressed an understanding of the symbolism of the U.S. flag and its significance as a national symbol.
- Students were able to represent symbolically the group or class's characteristics that they chose to celebrate in their flag(s).
- Students successfully collaborated, negotiating and making decisions as a group or class.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Recommended Books for Students

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. *The Flag Maker*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

The story of the 13-year-old girl who helps her mother sew the Star Spangled Banner that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the National Anthem.

Bates, Katharine Lee. *America the Beautiful*. Illustrated by Chris Gall Boston: Little, Brown, 2004. The poem “America the Beautiful” illustrated with images of the United States from the beginnings to the recent past.

Giblin, James Cross. *Fireworks, Picnics, and Flags: The Story of the Fourth of July Symbols*. New York : Clarion Books, 1983.

The true story behind the origins and history of our national symbols; a good resource for students and teachers alike.

Sis, Peter. *The Train of States*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 2004.

Illustrations of Uncle Sam conducting a train of 50 railroad cars, one for each state. The cars’ intricate designs, which incorporate each state’s bird, flower, flag, motto, landmarks, and much more, are based on antique carved wooden circus trains. More information on the states, introduced in the chronological order in which they joined the union, is included in the text.

Recommended Books for Teachers

Bishop, Robert, and Carter Houck. *All Flags Flying: American Patriotic Quilts as Expressions of Liberty*. New York: E.P. Dutton in association with Museum of American Folk Art, 1986.

Catalog published in conjunction with an exhibition of patriotic quilts from the 19th and 20th centuries. Includes commentary on the political events that may have influenced the quiltmakers.

Harding, Deborah. *Stars and Stripes: Patriotic Motifs in American Folk Art*. New York: Rizzoli, 2002.

The signs and symbols of the United States depicted in weathervanes, pottery, quilts, and assorted folk art objects.

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001. An exploration of American folk art from the colonial period through the present as seen through highlights from the American Folk Art Museum’s collection. *Flag Gate* is illustrated and discussed on pages 140 and 347.

Recommended Website

The Flag of the United States of America:

www.usflag.org

Includes images of the complete history of official U.S. flags, from the first 13-star to today’s 50-star flag.