

## **Does Art Reflect Life? John Adams Standing on Thomas Jefferson's Foot**

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**Grade Level:** Elementary School

**Duration of lesson:** One class period

### **Overview:**

John Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* is a well-known painting depicting the presentation of the Declaration of Independence to Congress. Two key figures in the work are Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Close examination of the first painting Trumbull completed shows Adams standing on Jefferson's foot. In later engravings, this detail was removed.

What can be inferred by this depiction? In this lesson, students will use the Trumbull painting as a starting point to investigate the contentious relationship between Adams and Jefferson throughout their political careers. Students will analyze primary source documents written during the infancy of the United States for a clearer understanding of the complicated bond that linked these two famous men.

### **Content Standards:**

#### **Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)**

**Standard 3:** The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

### **Historical Thinking Standards:**

#### **Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities**

**B.** Obtain historical data from a variety of sources.

**D.** Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place.

**F.** Support interpretations with historical evidence.

- Students will analyze how inferences in art can elude to important topics
- Students will describe the relationship between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson
- Students will examine how the differences in John Adams and Thomas Jefferson's long range goals for the United States resulted in the formation of two distinct political parties

### **Content Narrative**

Is John Adams deliberately standing on Thomas Jefferson's foot in the first painting that John Trumbull created of the presentation of the Declaration of Independence? Most probably the pose is the result of the artist's problems in the arrangement of five founding fathers in the

painting. This would stand to reason because the pose was adjusted in the later engraving of the painting. Yet, the early pose causes one to speculate if the artist, John Trumbull, had any inside information about the relationship between Jefferson and Adams.

John Trumbull was commissioned by the United States Congress in 1817 to paint four life-sized paintings depicting moments in the American Revolutionary War to adorn the rotunda of the United States Capitol Building.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the commission, Trumbull wrote President Madison:

*I have been constantly occupied with the Declaration of Independence, feeling the uncertainty of life & health, & considering that Subject as most interesting to the Nation, as well as most decisive of my own Reputation...The universal interest which my Country feels & ever will feel in this Event will in some degree attach to the painting which will preserve the resemblance of Forty Seven of those Patriots to whom we owe this memorable Act and all its glorious consequences.<sup>2</sup>*

In Trumbull's 1786 plans for a series of historical paintings, he did not include any discussion of a depiction of the *Declaration of Independence*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Declaration* was not mentioned in Trumbull's writing until after a visit with Thomas Jefferson who was on a diplomatic mission in Paris, France.<sup>4</sup> At Jefferson's suite at the Hôtel de Langeac, Trumbull wrote, "I began the composition of the Declaration of Independence, with the assistance of his information and advice."<sup>5</sup> With Jefferson's first hand account of the events that surrounded the process of writing the document, along with Jefferson's knowledge of architecture, the collaborators were able to design a sketch which Trumbull described as "an Idea of the Room in which congress sat."

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<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Helen A., *John Trumbull The Hand and Spirit of a Painter*, New Haven, 1982, p.76

<sup>2</sup> JT to James Madison, autograph copy, December 26, 1817, YUL-JT.)

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to his brother Jonathan, Trumbull listed the events he had in mind for the series: the Battle of Bunker's Hill, Trenton, Saratoga, and Yorktown; JT to Jonathan Trumbull, Jr., September 13, 1785, YUL-JT.

<sup>4</sup> See Marie Kimball, *Jefferson: The Scene of Europe 1784-1789*, New York, 1950, pp.117-18.

<sup>5</sup> Trumbull 1841, p.96.

After consulting with John Adams and Thomas Jefferson about the goals of the painting, Trumbull decided that the portraits of those men who were opposed to the document would not be included in the painting, along with those men who did not sign the document. If a signer was dead, he was urged by them to copy the finest portrait of that signer. As always, Adams and Jefferson urged him to be above-board in his attempt to immortalize this document.<sup>6</sup> During the summer of 1787 in London, Trumbull had the privilege of painting Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. Adams, before he set sail back to the United States due to his leave from his ambassadorship to the Court of St. James, started combing the powder out of his hair. Trumbull wrote that, "Its color and natural curl were beautiful, and I took that opportunity to paint his portrait in the small Declaration of Independence."<sup>7</sup> Trumbull's next step was to return to Paris and paint Jefferson's portrait, when completed the artist was quite pleased with its outcome.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps this trip to Europe was the point at which Jefferson and Adams may have discussed some particulars of their relationship with Trumbull. Indeed, their relationship moved from cold to warm depending on their circumstances. Interesting and relatively regular correspondence between Jefferson and both John and Abigail Adams ensued after their sojourn together in Paris. As colleagues in the Constitutional Congress, Adams was at first disturbed by Jefferson's lack of adherence to traditional Christian values and Jefferson complained of Adams's vanity and temper. With Adams in the lead in the creation of the Declaration and Jefferson at the helm in the drafting of the final document, tempers and egos occasionally flared. Yet, the nation's foundational document was forged. While Jefferson, Franklin and Adams were in Paris during

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. There were fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence. Trumbull represented forty-three. For those omitted, as well as the variations between the Yale and Wadsworth Atheneum versions, see Jaffe 1975, p. 319.

<sup>7</sup> Trumbull 1841, pp.146-47.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, Helen A., *John Trumbull The Hand and Spirit of a Painter*, New Haven, 1982, p.78.

the negotiation of the treaty with Britain after the American Revolution, tempers and egos flared again. Nevertheless, their mission was successful and the Treaty of Paris was completed in 1783. Adams was called to serve in London and it was probably during this period that his relationship with Jefferson was the most congenial. Jefferson visited John and Abigail Adams in London and even asked them to keep his daughter for a period of time. Yet, when John and Abigail Adams were called to return from London to the United States in 1787, Jefferson felt that Adams had been tainted by the trappings of royalty during his time at the British Court and Adams believed that Jefferson had gone too far in his support of the French liberal spirit that led to the French Revolution beginning in 1789,

When George Washington became President of the United States, Adams became vice president and Jefferson was secretary of state. At the naissance of two political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans, Adams and Jefferson found themselves at odds. After eight years, when Washington decided not to run for the presidency again, John Adams was elected to the post, winning over Jefferson by only three electoral votes. Jefferson and his Republican allies were critical of Adam's performance as President and Jefferson supported anti-Adams publications and new articles. This publicity was designed to hinder Adams bid for a second term. Indeed, Adams was not reelected and Jefferson became President of the United States. For a long period there was no intercourse or correspondence between Jefferson and the Adams. After Jefferson's presidency, however, he and John and Abigail Adams resumed correspondence.

During January of 1817, Trumbull presented in the United States Capitol Rotunda the nearly finished painting, along with a key. It was the goal of the painter to represent the delegates in half life size figures. After seeing the painting, President Madison was adamant that

the delegates be life sized. One could wonder if Madison's was thinking of his friendship with Thomas Jefferson, as he was demanding this point of view.

After the completion of the painting, it was exhibited at the American Academy of Fine Art in New York City, where patrons paid twenty-five cents to view the painting. After the exhibit in New York, the painting went on tour. The first stop was Faneuil Hall in Boston Massachusetts, which was very close to John Adam's home in Quincy, Massachusetts. Recently his wife Abigail had died, which left him in a state of mourning. Nevertheless, Trumbull and the Adams family decided that John Adams should travel to Boston to see the painting. As John Adams wrote his son John Quincy Adams, they (Trumbull and the Quincy Family) "carried me off by storm." Eliza Susan Quincy described in her journal Adams quietly standing in front of the painting. The audience who was waiting for Adams' response saw him point to the door in the background of the painting saying, "When I nominated George Washington of Virginia for Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, he took his hat and rushed out that door."

In 1823, Trumbull wrote to Thomas Jefferson that the engraving of the painting "has been finished with great beauty" and reproduced with "uncommon success." To prove that point Trumbull sent Jefferson two engravings. Trumbull continues in his letter that "It is delightful to me that after the lapse of so many years, this work which I meditated, & which you assisted me to arrange at Chaillot in 1786, is at last completed—rarely does it occur that two Individuals, advanced as we then were on the Road of Life, remain to see the completion of a favorite project at the end of 37 years." Trumbull's thoughts moved to the production of the document when he writes that "The event was great in its consequences beyond all others in human history. The Actors in it...deserve to live in the grateful memory of mankind to the end of time."<sup>9</sup> In the later

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<sup>9</sup> Trumbull to TJ, October 17, 1823, TJP-LC.

engravings, Adams's foot no longer was atop Jefferson's. Three years later, on July 4, 1826, exactly fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, signers and former Presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both passed away within hours of one another.

### **Bibliography:**

Cooper, Helen A., John Trumbull – The Hand and Spirit of a Painter, Yale University Art Gallery, 1982.

Ellis, Joseph J., Founding Brothers – The Revolutionary Generations, Vintage Books, 2002.

McCullough, David, John Adams, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2001.

### **Vocabulary:**

**Archive:** A place where public records or other historical documents are kept.

**Electoral College:** The presidential electors who meet after the citizens vote for president and cast ballots for the president and vice president. Each state is granted the same number of electors as it has senators and representatives combined. These electors, rather than the public, actually elect the president and the vice president. The Founding Fathers assumed that electors would exercise discretion and not necessarily be bound by the popular vote, but the rise of political parties undermined this assumption. Electors are now pledged in advance to vote for the candidate of their party, and nearly always do so. Thus, the vote of the Electoral College is largely a formality.

**Federalist Political Party:** A United States political party founded in 1787 to advocate the establishment of a strong federal government and the adoption by the states of the Constitution.

**Jefferson's Republicanism:** A political order whose head of state is not a monarch and in modern times is usually a president. A political order in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who are entitled to vote for officers and representatives responsible to them.

### **Procedures:**

### **Motivation:**

1. Project image of Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* painting and the picture of Declaration Hall on the overhead. Ask students to compare and contrast the images using their Venn diagram.

RS #1 -Trumbull's painting and picture of Declaration Hall.

RS #2 -Venn diagram.

2. After allotting the students six minutes for this activity, announce a two-minute warning. Returning to a whole group setting, have students help complete the teacher's transparency of the Venn diagram. This enables the teacher to direct the students' thinking. Present the following discussion points to the class:
  - a. Describe the Trumbull painting.
  - b. Describe the Havilland photograph.
  - c. What are the similarities? What are the differences?
  - d. Why is John Adams standing on Thomas Jefferson's foot?

**Procedures:**

1. After completing the motivation activity, announce to students the objectives of the lesson.
2. Partner students. Once students are organized, they should review/discuss the vocabulary for the lesson.
3. Distribute the 5 W's and H graphic organizer to each student (RS #3).
4. Distribute to each partnership a laminated primary or secondary document. (Laminated documents can be reused each year)

RS#4 - Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 1 March 1796.

RS #5 - Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 25 March 1796.

RS #6 - Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 27 November 1796.

RS #7 - Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 4 December 1796.

RS #8 - Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, December 17, 1796.

RS #9 - Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, December 28, 1796.

5. Each partnership will begin the process of analyzing the primary documents. When a partnership has completed the task with one document, have them switch with another pair until each document has been analyzed. During this activity, monitor the class for on task behavior and student understanding.
6. After completing RS#3, students regroup as a class while the teacher models how to complete the graphic organizer. This activity enables the teacher to model, assess, and re-direct student thinking. Ask if there are any student questions.

7. Distribute BCR (RS #10) and have students complete. Ask for student volunteers to share their BCR with the class.

**Declaration of Independence, painting by John Trumbull.** Retrieved from

<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/images/trumbull-large1.jpg>

This painting was commissioned by Congress in 1817. Trumbull has captured the presentation of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia's Independence Hall from life. The painting features the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence — John Adams, Roger Sherman, Thomas Jefferson (presenting the document), and Benjamin Franklin — standing before John Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress. The painting includes portraits of 42 of the 56 signers and 5 other patriots. Students will analyze this image to identify the signers of the Declaration and scrutinize and discuss the implied message behind the relationship of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Students could compare this image to a similar one on the back of the \$2.00 bill. There is a subtle difference that could spark discussion as students compare/contrast each image.

**Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 1 March 1796 [electronic edition].** *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.* Massachusetts Historical Society.

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/> Retrieved from

<http://masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17960301ja>

This is one of many in the multitude of letters written by John Adams to his wife, Abigail Adams. It was during this year, 1796, when Adams was Vice-President under George Washington and James Hoban's plans for the White House was underway. As students interact with the letter, they will find mention of a play with low attendance (due to weather), John's trust in Abigail's determination of what to pay for agricultural services on their farm, scarcity and dear (expensiveness) of seeds, and a man who grapples with many political decisions that affect him personally. The letter also contains evidence of George Washington's inclination to retire. This letter reveals a man who is torn between what he should do and what he wants to do. Students can identify with those feelings.

**Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 25 March 1796 [electronic edition].** *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.* Massachusetts Historical Society.

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/> Retrieved from

<http://masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17960325ja>

This letter from John Adams to his wife, Abigail Adams, sheds the covert news about George Washington's impending "retirement." This is an important source because Adams confirms the fact that Washington will leave office. Students will also find evidence of the turbulent or strained relationship that exists between the Americans and the British. John Adams mentioned a "Mr. Adams," which is a reference to his son, John Quincy Adams. It was at this time that John Quincy Adams was appointed Minister to the Netherlands two years earlier by Washington.



John must have been concerned for his son's safety since France occupied the Netherlands for two years. Students will find evidence of how people in other countries exist in poverty and are heavily influenced by governmental leaders.

**Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 27 November 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.**  
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/> Retrieved from

<http://masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17961127ja&archive=all&hi=on&mode=&noimages=&numrecs=1&query=We%20lodged%20at%20Monroe%27s%20in%20Marlborough%20on%20Wednesday%20night&queryid=&rec=&start=1&tag=text>

This letter outlines the emotions experienced by John Adams as he considered the untrusting relationships with France and England. He speaks of envy he feels about his political colleagues. Adams is concerned about employment at the farm and how the French or English may be surprised in what they find in the American people. Students could identify with many of Adams's sentiments today as they consider social, political, and economic events currently taking hold. Students may be surprised to find the two-sides of Adams's emotions. Often he is fearful or scared but will then follow that sentiment with notions of being steadfast and not filled with dread. He is open with his emotions and explains why he feels as he does. This provides students with an inside look at the ups and downs of a President.

**Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 4 December 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.**  
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/> Retrieved from

<http://masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17961204aa&numrecs=1&archive=all&hi=on&mode=&query=The%20Weather%20has%20been%20and%20held%20so%20uncommonly%20cold%20ever%20since%20you%20left%20me&queryid=&rec=1&start=1&tag=text#firstmatch>

This letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams conveys difficult times, in terms of political, economic and social happenings. To be specific, Abigail tells of the political news in several newspapers. She keenly writes that we, in America, should "reflect upon our conduct," which shows how involved and aware she is in American politics. She is concerned about the extreme weather conditions and the lack of water, especially for the animals. Abigail appears to support her husband in decisions about his political future. Students could identify with what it means to be American and how we conduct ourselves with other nations. Students could also identify with how important it is to support family members in their endeavors. Students may also consider the age and motivations of Abigail and John Adams. Why would they continue life in the public eye?

**Library of Congress. American Memory. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, December 17, 1796. The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.** Retrieved from

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(tj080112\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(tj080112)))

This letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison conveys two main messages. One, Jefferson cites the Constitution as not providing a means to a solution if the Representatives are divided in their vote. Second, Jefferson asks Madison to solicit John Adams on behalf of Jefferson. Jefferson remarks that Adams is his senior and he should be given preference. This shows the respect that Jefferson felt for his friend. Jefferson also comments on the extreme cold weather he has experienced since November and how it has impacted work at Monticello. Jefferson appears to hold Madison in great regard and has a longing to spend time at his beloved Monticello. Students would find common ground between Jefferson's and Adams's sentiments and may be surprised to know that two very different men, such as Jefferson and Adams, maintained a friendship.

**Library of Congress. American Memory. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, December 28, 1796. The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.** Retrieved from

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(tj080114\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(tj080114)))

This letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams provides insight into their relationship. Jefferson clearly feels differently than what is portrayed in print and communicated publicly about their relationship. Jefferson's states he has no interest in governing men and it is a painful and thankless office. He also mentions enemies and friends. Jefferson closes by reminiscing about their time spent together amidst earlier days. This provides evidence of their history together as political and social colleagues. Although students don't have the experience to empathize with political issues, they can identify with feelings of competition and cooperation, as well as how to take caution with what is communicated as it may not be true.