

# Public Art as Social Commentary

**Unit Designer:** Candace Banks

**Grade:** 8

**Subject/Topic Areas:** Social Studies, Art

**Anchor Work and Artist:** Murals by John Singer Sargent at the Boston Public Library

**Time Frame:** Five classes

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## Unit Overview:

The Boston Public Library is home to many forms of art, one of which is a mural series painted by [John Singer Sargent](#). These murals serve as a focus of discussion for students creating their own mural designs based on themes they choose as a group. Students will discuss themes that relate to current events, look at a variety of murals found locally as well as around the globe, and discuss the idea that art reflects culture, and that public art, especially, can be a communicator of the ideas, values, and events of the times for everyone.

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## Essential Questions

1. **What is public art?**
2. **How does public art reflect the community in which it is found?**
3. **Can public art be influential in igniting cultural change? If so, how?**
4. **What are your values and how would you express those values in a mural?**

## Massachusetts Arts Curriculum Framework, Grade 8

- 2.11 For space and composition, create unified 2D or 3D compositions that demonstrate an understanding of balance, scale, unity, harmony, and emphasis.
- 3.5 Create symbolic art work by substituting symbols for objects, relationships, or ideas.
- 3.6 Create artwork that employs the use of free form symbolic imagery that demonstrates personal invention and/or conveys ideas and emotions. For example, creating works that convey paired concepts such as conflict and cooperation, positive/negative aspects of a topic, behavior that is fun but destructive, etc.

- 3.10 Create 2D images that are original, convey a distinct point of view, and communicate ideas.
- 4.5 Demonstrate the ability to describe preliminary concepts verbally, visualize concepts in clear schematic layouts, and organize and complete projects.
- 4.6 Demonstrate the ability to articulate criteria for artistic work, describe personal style, assess and reflect on work orally and in writing and to revise work based on criteria developed in the classroom.
- 4.8 Create and prepare artwork for group or individual public exhibitions.
- 5.5 Demonstrate the ability to recognize and describe the visual, spatial, and tactile characteristics of their own work and that of others.
- 5.6 Demonstrate the ability to describe the kinds of imagery used to represent subject matter and ideas, for ex) literal representation, simplification, abstraction, or symbolism.

## Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

1. Research their topic in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the topic affects them in their lives today, individually as well as a team. Students will be able to express this understanding through team discussion, with the teacher, and at home.
2. Choose a variety of images related to their theme, and design a mural based on the elements and principles of design discussed throughout this project. They will be able to articulate to each other and the teacher why they have chosen specific layouts for their imagery in order to reach their goal.
3. Define public art in an in-depth discussion in class and as part of their final assessment and evaluation. A public discussion with their peers, teachers, and other interested adults about their project will allow students to express their knowledge and experience. Written final evaluations will be handed in at the end.
4. Gain a broader understanding of the use of public art as a means of conveying ideas and values to the community, and the impact that can have on people's lives.

## Prior Learning Required

1. Computer lab work required for research.
2. Library book/periodical searches for imagery and information.
3. General understanding of the elements and principles of design.
4. Ability to participate successfully as a team member on a group project.

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*The Prophets from the Boston Library Mural*



## Lesson 1 **Cartooning: The Teenage Years**

### Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

- Create a [cartoon](#) strip using their own ideas about their lives.
- Use symbolic imagery to express and define their ideas.
- Describe the imagery as it relates to their statement.

### Vocabulary

**Style:** individual manner of expression.

**Cartoon:** a humorous drawing often including captions.

**Personal Statement:** a unique comment or remark about a topic.

### Materials

Pencils, rulers, colored pencils.

### Activities

1. Lead students in a discussion about comics and participate in brainstorming session about things that happen in their world that they could make a statement about.
2. Discuss the various comic strips found in the Sunday funny papers and ask students which ones are their favorites.
3. Note the different types of comics found: funny, serious, fantasy, political, workplace, etc.
4. Ask students if they've ever designed their own comics and what their characters were like.
5. Show examples of comic strips; ask students to read one or two, and discuss what the topic might be, or the statement made.
6. Let students know that they can be thinking about characters or statements they are drawn to and how they might create their own.
7. Provide guiding instructions for the creation of a simple cartoon strip, anywhere from 1-8 blocks long.
8. Students will do preliminary work involving selecting their main idea, developing characters and background placement, and make decisions about color and style.
  - Make changes to prepare for final piece through evaluation with teacher.
  - Students will prepare final drafts on white construction paper, using all materials needed for a good quality design.
  - Discuss and assess progress with students and hand in for final grade.

### Assessment

Students will have informal ongoing evaluations of their understanding of the project and their ability to translate, integrate and organize their ideas into a final piece.

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## Lesson 2 **What's So Political about a Political Cartoon?**



Cartoon by Thomas Nast who originated the donkey and elephant symbols for our national parties

### Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

1. Examine how artists convey political messages through a humorous format and how these works of art influence viewers.
2. Learn the definition of a political cartoon.
3. Answer questions about the things they see in the cartoon and will be able to interpret the symbolism of the content, and paraphrase the meaning of the cartoon.
4. Learn how political cartoons can express opinion and generate discussion about events that happen in our world every day.
5. Learn that they can be a part of this kind of discussion and that their thoughts and feelings about events can be triggered by a simple cartoon.

### Vocabulary

**Political cartoon:** an illustration or comic strip containing a political or social message that usually relates to current events or personalities.

### Materials

Pen or pencil, computer, magazines, newspapers as needed.

### Activities

1. Lead a discussion around current events. Ask questions such as:
  - What has been happening that is attracting our attention?
  - Do we ever talk about these issues with anyone?
  - How do we feel about them?
  - Some of these topics could be the war, global warming, celebrity news, sports events, etc. What can we do about these thoughts or feelings to help us understand them or make a point?
  - How do political cartoons do this?
  - Who are political cartoonists?
  - How do political cartoonists demonstrate their points?
  - Does humor help us understand the issue better?
  - Do news topics such as politics or global warming catch our attention?
  - Is it more interesting if it is presented in a humorous format?

2. After the class discussion, give a guideline sheet to all students with the questions they should answer about the cartoon they select. They will be looking for the definition of a political cartoon; they need a relatively current cartoon, and they need to answer the questions about the cartoon in their sketchbooks.
3. As this assignment is a homework assignment, hand back sketchbooks to students and give them the due date.
4. They will bring sketchbooks in when due and we will have a final discussion about the assignment and what they discovered.

### Assessment

Assessment is based on discussion in the classroom and on the completion of the project. This lesson will enrich the work that culminates in murals.

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## Lesson 3 **Public Art: It's Everywhere!**



### Objectives

*Students will:*

1. Be able to define public art.
2. Have a broader perspective of public art, especially murals.
3. Have a deeper understanding about culture and how the events of the day can be translated into a public and powerful work of art.
4. Ultimately be able to assess how art communicates visually to the public.

### Vocabulary

**Mural:** a painting or collage applied directly to a wall or ceiling.

**Public art:** art that is intended to be seen by everyone.

### Materials

PowerPoint presentation, paper for note taking.

### Activities

1. Begin by asking students the definition of public art, and then talk about things they have seen that could be considered "public art."
2. Discuss whether they have seen things in their own town, or another town, that could be considered public art.

3. Ask where they've seen large murals, whether they are inside or outside, and discuss the imagery.
4. Ask if anyone has painted anything large that could be considered a mural.
5. Present PowerPoint images of murals from the Boston area and around the world as well as the Sargent murals from the Boston Public Library.
6. Discuss public art, murals, and messages found in them and try to elicit emotional reactions from some of the works.

### Assessment

Assessment is based on participation in this discussion of the presentation, which will motivate students to begin thinking about what it is they may be pursuing for their own murals in the upcoming lesson.

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## Lesson 4 **Mural Project**

### Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

1. Understand the concept of a mural as a work of art.
2. Use critical thinking skills to determine how they will express to the viewer the theme they have chosen for their mural.
3. Use their pre-existing knowledge of the elements/principles of design to create a unique work of art.
4. Gain a deeper understanding of the topic they have chosen through in-depth research, discussion, and arrangement of their final design.

### Vocabulary

**Oil pastels:** a crayon-like tool with a soft, oily consistency which offers a paint-like ability to blend colors and create a product with a stronger, more brilliant final look.

**Acrylic varnish:** a liquid varnish that can be brushed over the oil pastel work for a protective finish.

### Materials

Computer, books, mural paper, oil pastels, acrylic varnish.

### Activities

1. Discuss the concept of creating a piece of political art in mural format.
2. Discuss the team format used to create this piece and form teams of three or four.
3. Take class to the library where the librarian will help students look for images in a variety of places including computer search engines, books, periodicals.
4. Students will print out images that will assist them in the beginning stages of their design.

5. Discuss the various ways to develop a unified and stimulating design that will ultimately express the message the team has decided on.
6. Allow students to practice design on small paper to get organized.
7. Have them draw final images on large mural paper, 30x45”.
8. Students color in with oil pastels and markers as needed for fine detail.
9. Help them spray if needed with a fixative, and then varnish when done.

### Assessment

Assessment is based on their ability to work well as a team as well as the effectiveness of how well they communicate their chosen statement with the colors and symbols used.

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## Lesson 5 **Public Art: Let's Talk About It!**

### Objectives

*Students will be able to:*

- Articulate to an audience a short summary the theme of their project.
- Answer questions that will be asked by an audience in a mature and informative manner.
- Evaluate their peers' work by filling out a final assessment sheet after their presentations.

### Vocabulary

All previously learned vocabulary words will be included in this public discussion.

### Materials

Murals and masking tape for the wall.

### Activities

1. Students display their murals in a public place such as the library.
2. Explain the project to the guests who may or may not know about the goals of this project.
3. Remind groups about honoring each other and being respectful when others are presenting.
4. Invite each group to present their mural and speak about their specific intent as well as possible unexpected ideas or occurrences that may have happened while working on the project.
5. Teams engage in question and answer with audience about the design features of the mural and their personal reason for choosing the idea.
6. Summarize and assimilate.

## Assessment

Students discuss what can be learned about the issues facing a culture by examining public art and will fill out final assessment sheets on each teams' project.

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## About John Singer Sargent Adapted from Wikipedia



Daughters of Edward Darley Boit (1882),

(January 12, 1856 – April 14, 1925) was the most successful portrait painter of his era. During his career, he created roughly 900 oil paintings and more than 2,000 watercolors, as well as countless sketches and charcoal drawings. His oeuvre documents worldwide travel, from Venice to the Tyrol, Corfu, the Middle East, Montana, Maine, and Florida.

**Training** Sargent began art studies with [Carolus-Duran](#), a French portrait artist who was noted for his bold technique and modern teaching methods. Carolus-Duran's atelier was progressive, dispensing with the traditional academic approach which <sup>The</sup> required careful drawing and underpainting, in favor of the [alla prima](#) method of working directly on the canvas with a loaded brush. Sargent was the star student in short order. Weir met Sargent in 1874 and noted that Sargent was "one of the most talented fellows I have ever come across; his drawings are like the old masters, and his color is equally fine." Sargent's command of French and his talent made him both popular and admired. Through his friendship with [Paul César Helleu](#), Sargent would meet the art world's giants including [Degas](#), [Rodin](#), [Monet](#), and [Whistler](#).

Sargent's early enthusiasm was for landscapes as evidenced by his voluminous sketches full of mountains, seascapes, and buildings. However, Carolus-Duran's expertise in portraiture finally influenced Sargent. Commissions for history paintings were considered more prestigious but much harder to get. Portrait painting, on the other hand, was the best way of promoting an art career, getting exhibited in the [Salon](#), and gaining commissions to earn a livelihood. Sargent's first major portrait was of his friend Fanny Watts in 1877, which was also his first Salon admission. It's particularly well-executed pose drew attention. His second salon entry was the *Oyster Gatherers of Cançale*, an impressionistic painting of which he made two copies, one of which he sent back to America, and both received warm reviews.

Spanish Dancer by John Singer Sargent



**Early career** In 1879, at age 23, Sargent painted Carolus-Duran; the virtuoso effort met with public approval, and announced the direction his mature work would take. Its showing at the [Paris Salon](#) was both a tribute to his teacher and an advertisement for portrait

commissions. After leaving Carolus-Duran's atelier, Sargent visited Spain. There he studied the paintings of [Velazquez](#). He was entranced with Spanish music and dance. Trips to Italy provided sketches and ideas for several paintings of Venetian street scenes which captured gestures and postures he would find useful in later portraiture. Upon his return, Sargent received portrait commissions quickly launching his career. He immediately demonstrated the concentration and stamina which enabled him to paint with workman-like steadiness for the next 25 years.

**Portraits** In the early 1880s Sargent regularly exhibited portraits at the Salon. He continued to receive positive critical notice. Sargent's best portraits reveal the individuality and personality of the sitters; his most ardent admirers think he is matched only by Velázquez, who was one of his great influences.

His most controversial work, [Portrait of Madame X](#), done in 1884, is now considered one of his best works, and was the artist's personal favorite. However, when it was unveiled in Paris at the 1884 Salon, it aroused such a negative reaction that it likely prompted Sargent's move to [London](#). His self-confidence had led him to attempt another risky experiment in portraiture—but this time it unexpectedly back-fired. The painting was not commissioned by her and he pursued her for the opportunity, quite unlike most of his portrait work where clients sought him out. It took well over a year to complete the painting. The first version of the portrait of Madame Gautreau, with her famously plunging neckline, white-powdered skin, and arrogantly cocked head, featured an off-the-shoulder strap which made the overall effect even more daring and sensual. He soon changed the strap to try to dampen the furor, but the damage had been done. French commissions dried up and he even admitted to friend Edmund Gosse in 1885 that he contemplated giving up painting for music or business.



[Frederick Law Olmsted](#), 1895,



Before his arrival in England, Sargent began sending paintings for exhibition at the [Royal Academy](#). These included the portraits of *Dr. Pozzi at Home* (1881), his first full-length male portrait. The ensuing portrait commissions encouraged Sargent to finalize his move to London in 1886. English critics were not warm at first, faulting Sargent for his “clever” “Frenchified” handling of paint. With help from Mrs. White herself, however, Sargent soon gained the admiration of English patrons and critics. Henry James gave the artist “a push to the best of my ability”. Sargent spent much time painting outdoors in the English countryside. On a visit to Monet at [Giverny](#) in 1885, he painted one of his most Impressionistic portraits, of Monet at work painting outdoors with his new bride nearby. Sargent is usually not thought of as an [Impressionist](#) painter, but he sometimes used impressionistic techniques. In the 1880's, he attended Impressionist exhibitions and began to paint outdoors in the plein-air manner, Though the British critics classified Sargent in the Impressionist camp, the French Impressionists thought otherwise, as Monet later stated, “He is not an Impressionist in the sense that we use the word, he is too much under the influence of Carolus-Duran.”

Sargent's first major success at the Royal Academy came in 1887, with the enthusiastic response to [Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose](#), a large piece, painted on site, of two young girls lighting lanterns in an English garden. The painting was immediately purchased by the [Tate Gallery](#). His first trip to New York and Boston as a professional artist in 1887-88 produced over 20 important commissions, including a portrait of [Isabella Stewart Gardner](#), famed Boston art patron. In Boston, he was honored with his first solo exhibition which presented 22 of his paintings.

*Lady Agnew of Lochnaw* 1893



Back in London, Sargent was quickly busy again. His working methods were by then well-established, following many steps employed by other master [portrait painters](#). After securing a commission through negotiations he carried out himself, Sargent visited the client's home to see where the painting was to hang and reviewed a client's wardrobe to pick suitable attire. Some portraits were done in the client's home, but more often in his studio which was well-stocked with furniture and background materials..He required eight to ten sittings from clients, and would try to capture the face in one sitting. He kept up

pleasant conversation and sometimes would take a break and play the piano for his sitter. Sargent seldom used pencil or oil sketches, and instead went about laying down oil paint directly. Sargent had no assistants and handled all the mundane tasks, such as preparing his canvases, varnishing the painting, arranging for photography, shipping, and documentation. For all his efforts, he was commanding about \$5,000 per portrait, or about \$130,000 in current dollars

Around 1890, Sargent painted two daring non-commissioned portraits as show pieces—one of actress [Ellen Terry](#) as Lady MacBeth and one of the popular Spanish dancer La Carmecita. He was elected an associate of the Royal Academy, and was made a full member three years later. With little fear of contradiction, Sargent was referred to as 'the Van Dyck of our times'. Although he was an American expatriate, he returned to the US many times to answer the demand for portraits. Many of his most important works are in U.S. museums. Sargent painted a series of three portraits of [Robert Louis Stevenson](#). He also completed portraits of two presidents [Theodore Roosevelt](#) and [Woodrow Wilson](#).

By 1900, Sargent was at the height of his fame. Though only in his forties, Sargent began to travel more and to devote relatively less time to portrait painting. His "An Interior in Venice" (1900), a portrait of four members of the Curtis family in their elegant palatial home, was a resounding success, though [Whistler](#) did not approve of the looseness of Sargent's brushwork, which he summed up as "Smudge everywhere." One of Sargent's last major portraits was that of Lord Ribblesdale. Between 1900 and 1907, Sargent continued his high productivity which included in addition to dozens of oil portraits, hundreds of portrait drawings at about \$400 each.

"Gondoliers' Siesta", c. 1904



In 1907, at the age of fifty-one, Sargent officially closed his studio. Relieved he stated, "Painting a portrait would be quite amusing if one were not forced to talk while working...What a nuisance having to entertain the sitter and to look happy when one feels wretched." In that same year, Sargent painted his modest and serious self-portrait, his last, for the celebrated self-portrait collection of the [Uffizi Gallery](#) in Florence, Italy. Sargent's fame was still considerable and museums eagerly bought his works. From 1907 on, Sargent largely forsook portraits and focused on landscapes. By the time Sargent finished his portrait of [John D. Rockefeller](#) in 1917, most critics began to consign him to the masters of the past, "a brilliant ambassador between his patrons and posterity". Modernists treated him more harshly, considering him completely out of touch with the reality of American life and with emerging artistic trends. Sargent quietly accepted the criticism but refused to alter his negative opinions of modern art. He retorted, "Ingres, Raphael and El Greco, these are now my admirations, these are what I like." In 1925, soon before he died, Sargent painted his last oil portrait, a canvas of [Grace Curzon, Marchioness Curzon of Kedleston](#). The painting was purchased in 1936 by The [Currier Museum of Art](#).

**Watercolors** Sargent painted more than 2,000 watercolors, roving from the English countryside to Venice to the Tyrol, Corfu, the Middle East, Montana, Maine, and Florida, and each destination offered pictorial stimulation and treasure. His hundreds of Venice watercolors are notable, many done from the perspective of a gondola. His colors were extremely vivid and as one reviewer noted, "Everything is given with the intensity of a dream." In the Middle East and North Africa, Sargent painted [Bedouins](#), goatherds, and fisherman. In the last decade of his life, he produced many watercolors in Maine, Florida, and in the American West, of fauna, flora, and native peoples.

**Legacy** In a time when the art world focused on [Impressionism](#), [Fauvism](#), and [Cubism](#), Sargent practiced his own form of [Realism](#), which made brilliant references to Velázquez, [Van Dyck](#), and [Gainsborough](#). His facility for paraphrasing the masters led to a stream of portraits of remarkable virtuosity and earned Sargent the moniker, "the [Van Dyck](#) of our times." However, by the time of his death, he was dismissed as an anachronism and out of step with the artistic sentiments of post-[World War I](#) Europe. Prettejohn suggests that the decline of Sargent's reputation was due partly to the rise of anti-Semitism, and the resultant intolerance of 'celebrations of Jewish prosperity.'

Lewis Mumford led a chorus of severe critics, "Sargent remained to the end an illustrator...the most adroit appearance of workmanship, the most dashing eye for effect, cannot conceal the essential emptiness of Sargent's mind, or the contemptuous and cynical superficiality of a certain part of his execution." Part of

Sargent's devaluation is also attributed to his expatriate life which made him seem less American at a time when "authentic" socially-conscious American art was on the ascent. However, Sargent's popularity has increased steadily since the '50s. In the '60s, a revival of Victorian art and new scholarship directed at Sargent strengthened his reputation. Sargent has been the subject of large exhibitions in major museums, the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) in 1986, and a 1999 "blockbuster" travelling show at the [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#), the [National Gallery of Art Washington](#), and the [National Gallery, London](#). In 1986 critic [Robert Hughes](#) praised Sargent as "the unrivaled recorder of male power and female beauty in a day that, like ours, paid excessive court to both."<sup>1</sup>