

# A Head Start on *Picturing America*

## Background



Chairman Bruce Cole at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.  
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*"My own experience testifies to art's power to stimulate intellectual awakenings. When I was a young child my parents visited the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and they brought home a souvenir that would alter my life: a portfolio of illustrations from the collections of the National Gallery. As I pondered these great works of art, I had the first glimmerings of what would become a lifelong pursuit: to study and understand the form, history, and meaning of art. This was my gateway to a wider intellectual world. Through that open door, I would delve into history, philosophy, religion, architecture, and literature—the entire universe of the humanities."*

Bruce Cole, Chairman  
National Endowment for the Humanities

*Picturing America*<sup>SM</sup> is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities which offers a set of 40 high-quality, color reproductions of American art that range from paintings, sculpture, photographs, and architecture to book arts, decorative arts, and fine crafts. The project was designed to provide kindergarten through twelfth grade students and adults with an opportunity to learn about the art and history of America. For younger children, their families, and their communities, the project has expanded to include developmentally appropriate learning experiences and resources. **A Head Start on Picturing America** offers a flexible blueprint to guide and enhance interaction with the art. This publication is a practical tool that shows you how to enrich your preschool curriculum by using the artworks in a way that engages children and adds excitement to their learning. **A Head Start on Picturing America** helps Head Start staff introduce the art and enhance discussions about the images. It also includes suggestions for books, new vocabulary, related learning experiences, and family literacy activities that support children's school readiness.

In addition, Head Start teaching teams, family service workers, family literacy coordinators, parent educators, other Head Start staff, and volunteers may collaborate to organize family and parent focused activities such as Family Night at the Museum. Family Night at the Museum, as described in **A Head Start on Picturing America**, is a family-focused experience designed to give parents and children the opportunity to discover the *Picturing America* artworks through conversation, creativity, and sensory experiences. Family Night at the Museum supports family literacy goals and enhances implementation of **A Head Start on Picturing America**. Children and families are invited to create arts and crafts, make bold bright prints, create collages, or develop cityscapes as they experience the world of art.

## The Artworks

The 40 images span centuries of painting, sculpture, architecture, and decorative arts. The works, which belong to American collections that are accessible to the public, were selected for their quality, range of media and time period, and ability to be grouped in ways that expand educational potential.

Artworks like these help us experience the humanity of history and enhance the teaching and understanding of America's past. These aesthetic achievements are a pleasure to see and think about, and also provide part of the historical record of our nation. The collection is a flexible sampler that brings a fresh perspective to curriculum implementation and offers a simple and effective way to introduce art into the lives of young children

and their families. Through the variety of subjects and styles, adults as well as children may discover and define their own interests and feelings.

For ease of use, each picture in the set of 20 posters is numbered (for example, 1-A is one side of the poster and 1-B is the second side of the poster) for a total of 40 images. They are large (24" x 36"), so that a whole group or class might view them at the same time. The posters are laminated and durable, and they can be hung on the wall with pins or even tape. *Picturing America* encourages teachers and staff to stretch their own creativity—to use the images freely in ways that will enrich learning experiences. There is no set order or regimen for use at the early childhood level. Child-initiated interests can guide discussions and experiences, as well as the number of images introduced and the length of time spent on each one.

Presentation of the art will vary. A teacher may hang up one of the reproductions and let it remain in place to occasionally catch the attention of the children. Another teacher may intentionally use an artwork, for example, Audubon's *American Flamingo*, to stimulate discussion about birds and expand on a child-initiated inquiry about why some other birds cannot fly. When considering why an artist chose a specific medium, subject, color, or texture over another, children are exposed to art and learn to describe what they feel about the image. At an early age, children are capable of forming richly layered ideas as they experience how art communicates.

The visual arts stimulate creative and analytical thinking. The arts delight and engage the senses, providing teachers and parents with a refreshing way to reach even the youngest children. Head Start staff, teaching teams, and parents can extend children's early experiences by using creative, thought-provoking, and imaginative conversations about the artworks. **A Head Start on Picturing America** offers connections with existing library books and materials. Using these connections with the artwork fosters curiosity, promotes interest, and invites the kinds of interaction that reinforce both school readiness and family literacy goals.

Further, **A Head Start on Picturing America** helps local program staff design experiences related to the *Head Start Child Outcomes Framework* for children of all abilities, diverse cultures, and language backgrounds. The presence of this art within the local program's curriculum enables teaching teams to approach child outcomes using interesting and challenging material.

Through observations and conversations, children practice and use new language and vocabulary. As they describe pictures, they respond to questions and ask their own. They have experiences with counting, comparing, contrasting, and finding patterns. They develop social abilities: take turns, develop confidence in making choices, and grow in eagerness to learn with others, while sharing opportunities to sing songs, read books, create their own art, and participate in dramatic play and movement.

When children expand their interests, they are more likely to engage in extended conversations, to ask questions, to create their own art work or creative projects,

## Head Start Child Outcomes

### Language

Children understand and use more complex and varied vocabulary to:

- improve communication ability;
- express opinions, feelings, and ideas;
- improve conversational ability;
- use more and different words, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions; and
- express ideas.

### Literacy

Children gain:

- the ability to discriminate among sounds in words;
- knowledge and interest in a broad range of subjects;
- awareness that print has meaning;
- additional experience with the alphabet; and
- an understanding of how to use books.

### Mathematics

Children develop abilities to:

- count and compare;
- recognize and name shapes;
- measure using unconventional and standard methods;
- compare sizes by finding interesting ways to measure; and
- identify and develop patterns.

### Science

Children develop observation skills and problem-solving abilities to:

- learn to discuss observations, predict, generalize, and develop explanations of things they see;
- discover common features;
- participate in simple investigations;
- draw conclusions based on their experiences.

## Head Start Child Outcomes

### Creative Arts

Children experience creative processes in art. They:

- explore different art materials and media;
- use a variety of tools for creative expression;
- sing songs;
- play musical instruments;
- dance to different rhythms; and
- act out a variety of roles.

### Social Emotional Development

Children develop:

- their own interests;
- self-confidence;
- pride in their work; and
- cooperation with each other.

### Approaches to Learning

When children are engaged in experiences related to their interests, their:

- attention span increases;
- problem-solving strategies expand;
- curiosity and initiative increase;
- reasoning and problem-solving develop; and
- concentration, persistence, and engagement improve.

### Physical Development

When children are physically active, they improve their:

- gross motor skills; and
- fine motor skills, including manual dexterity by:
  - building with small manipulatives;
  - writing;
  - drawing; and
  - painting.

and to enjoy books about their special topics. Such motivation is essential to learning and development across all of the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework Domains.

The Office of Head Start will provide *Picturing America* works of art, and print and distribute **A Head Start on Picturing America** to all Head Start programs across the nation. Additional web-based resources will be disseminated through the Office of Head Start's Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website, [www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov).

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) *Picturing America* website, [www.picturingamerica.neh.gov](http://www.picturingamerica.neh.gov), offers information on each artwork in the Teachers Resource Book.

### TOP Ten — TIPS for success with *A Head Start on Picturing America*

- 1 Follow the children's lead.
- 2 Find the fit with your curriculum.
- 3 Select artworks that reflect your children, families, and community.
- 4 Create ways to extend learning and conversations.
- 5 Connect with Head Start child outcomes.
- 6 Sow seeds of creativity—yours and theirs.
- 7 Encourage connections between the present and past.
- 8 Consider sequence and time—pacing.
- 9 Involve families and parents.
- 10 ENJOY!