

America's Signs & Symbols

Communicating with Symbols

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the American values and symbolism embodied by the Statue of Liberty.

Age Group/Grade Level: 8-10 years, grades 3-5

Subject Area: Social Studies, Reading, Language Arts

Duration: approximately 40 min.

Background

The Statue of Liberty's formal name is "Liberty Enlightening the World." In 1865, a French anti-slavery activist originally proposed this huge artwork as a gift of friendship and to honor the US's centennial of independence. The symbols ultimately incorporated into the statue by sculptor Auguste Bartholdi articulate this vision. Lady Liberty holds a burning torch in her right hand, representing liberty. A tablet bearing "July 4, 1776" in Roman numerals is clasped in her left hand, citing the day the United States declared its independence from England. Broken shackles lie at her feet.

Other symbols link to the statue's role in welcoming immigrants from across the world. The seven spikes in her crown stand for the seven seas and continents. In 1883, Emma Lazarus wrote the poem "The New Colossus" to raise money for the construction of a pedestal, but it was not added to the base of the statue until 1945.

Discussion

Have students look closely at Malcah Zeldis's artwork *Miss Liberty Celebration*. Pose one or more of the following questions:

- Where is your eye drawn first? Why do you think it landed there?
- What is the mood of this painting?
- How can you tell that this is the Statue of Liberty?
[introduce symbolic meanings as students identify defining features of this American icon]

Read Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" (on page 2) aloud. Have students stand and pose in the way they imagine this woman would stand. Ask students to identify textual evidence from the poem to explain why they positioned themselves in the way they did. Link the artwork to the poem by asking students:

- The Statue of Liberty welcomed immigrants moving to the United States. Based on the poem's description, how might immigrants feel about this statue?
- How does the woman described in the poem compare to the Statue of Liberty in the painting? Why might these depictions be different?



Malcah Zeldis, *Miss Liberty Celebration*, 1987, oil on corrugated cardboard, 54 1/2 x 36 1/2 in., Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., 1988.74.14. © 1987, Malcah Zeldis

Activity

Explain that the Statue of Liberty is a national symbol that represents ideas we find important as Americans. It also can be a personal symbol. The artist, Malcah Zeldis, calls *Miss Liberty Celebration* an "exultation of survival." She painted it after recovering from cancer in 1986, the same year as the centennial celebration of the Statue of Liberty.

- Based on what you've learned, why might the artist have selected the Statue of Liberty as the subject of her painting?
- Why might she have depicted the Statue of Liberty this way instead of as it looks in real life?

Have students brainstorm a list of perspectives or ideas about the many meanings the Statue of Liberty might embody. Acknowledge any themes that arise from this list, and then have each student adopt one of the perspectives listed. Have each student write a haiku reflecting their view. The five syllables in the first line should describe the Statue physically. The seven syllables in the second line should describe what the Statue symbolizes. The five syllables in the last line should summarize the student's perspective.

The New Colossus

Emma Lazarus, 1883

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”