

Art & Activities / Hammer & Sickle: Interpreting Symbols and Meaning



Overview:

This lesson features artworks that incorporate powerful symbols: the hammer and sickle and the American flag. Students first deconstruct how the symbol is treated in the artwork and then infer meaning by comparing and contrasting the aesthetic qualities of the artworks. This lesson can be extended into a research project into the historic and cultural contexts behind each one of the featured works.

Grades: 8 to 12

Subjects: Art, Aesthetics, History, Social Studies, Language Arts.

Pennsylvania State Standards:

Arts and Humanities:

9.2. E Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts
9.2. J Identify, explain and analyze historical and cultural differences as they relate to works in the arts

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening:

1.6.11 D Contribute to discussions

Objectives:

- Students will list and categorize common symbols and meanings
- Students will intuitively respond to works of contemporary art
- Students will connect symbols to meanings
- Students will associate personal feelings and thoughts to artworks
- Students will create new meanings for symbols based upon personal responses
- Students will formulate ideas for new artworks referencing either the hammer and sickle symbol or the American flag

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Andy Warhol, Hammer and Sickle, 1976

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About the Art:

Andy Warhol created his Hammer and Sickle series in 1976 after a trip to Italy where the most common graffiti in public spaces was this symbol found on Soviet flags. Under communist control it signified the union of industrial and farm workers' interests. In Italy, a democratic country since the end of WWII, the repeated graffiti symbol was to Warhol more Pop than political. After returning to the United States, Warhol asked his studio assistant Ronnie Cutrone to find source pictures of this symbol. The reproductions found in books were like the Soviet flag, flat in appearance, and Warhol wanted something different. Cutrone purchased a double-headed hammer and a sickle at a local hardware store and arranged and photographed the tools in many positions. Warhol used the Cutrone photographs for his silkscreened series.

In 1977, these works were exhibited under the ambiguous title *Still Lives* at the Castelli Gallery in New York City. Warhol disavowed any political ties to his work, while he was simultaneously aware of the power of symbols and the cultural climate of the Cold War. This war between superpowers, America and the Soviet Union, from the early 1940s through the 1980s was characterized not by actual military combat but by a climate of tension and mutual perceptions of hostility between East and West, communism and capitalism, resulting in the build-up of arms, nuclear weapons, and influence peddling around the globe.

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Points of View:

Little did I know that I would also be included on an FBI list, probably for this little art project of ours. I would find my-self sneaking along the skyscrapers of the Big Apple and darting into a Red bookstore, looking over my shoulder, I'd find a couple of books and brown-bag them and nonchalantly walk out into the broad daylight.

I'd return with the books, heart racing, and Andy would say, half-joking, half-serious, "Were you followed by anybody?" I would answer, "I don't think so, but if I was, I think I'm a little too old to say I'm a college student studying the Russian Revolution." Then he'd say, "Did you find any good ones?" I never really did. They were too flat or too graphic. The answer was to go down to Canal Street, into a hardware store, and buy a real hammer and a real sickle. Then I could shoot them, lit with long menacing shadows. And add the drama that was missing from the flat-stenciled book versions. A third dimension of rough outlines would be added and when the paintings were finished they always looked like Amusement Park rides to me. Step right up and ride The Hammer and Sickle. Only 25 cents, if you dare. Not for the weak or faint of heart. It always amused me that Andy the ultimate Capitalist, and me, the ultimate Libertarian, could be suspected of Communist activity.

Ronnie Cutrone, Warhol's assistant, Hammer and Sickle exhibition catalogue, C&M Arts, New York: 2002

Politics cannot be banished entirely from this image, of course. But even if Mr. Warhol is not exactly in the forefront of the international labor movement he can certainly claim the status of an experienced (he is 50 this year) and industrious workman. In these new paintings he has taken something from sculpture (Calder's stabiles, Claes Oldenburg's giant variants of household objects,), something from architecture (from the towers of San Gimignano to the World Trade Center), and something of painting (spreading the color as a schoolboy spreads jam on his first day at summer camp) and come up with an end result that combines imagination with punch.

John Russell, "Art: Warhol's Hammer and Sickles," The New York Times Jan. 21, 1977

Most of the people buying the Soviet paraphernalia were Americans and West Europeans. All would be sickened by the thought of wearing a swastika. None objected, however, to wearing the hammer and sickle on a T-shirt or a hat. It was a minor observation, but sometimes, it is through just such minor observations that a cultural mood is best observed. For here, the lesson could not have been clearer: while the symbol of one mass murder fills us with horror, the symbol of another mass murder makes us laugh.

Anne Applebaum, columnist and member of the editorial board of the Washington Post, from her book Gulag, <http://www.economicswithaface.com/quotes.htm>

"The punk period witnessed a renaissance of tattooing—a practice which visibly asserts our ritualistic 'uncivilized' past and in whose pictorial language the skull looms large. Because of a slew of 'primitive' and sexual associations, the tattoo is proscribed by traditional western conventions. But tattoos persist, serving to decorate, seduce, shock, scare, to declare nonconformity . . . [Warhol's] own tattoo-like exhibitionism at the 1977 opening for his 'Hammer and Sickle' paintings drew together various structures of power and pleasure: the art world/gallery system brand of capitalism; a communist emblem rendered in paintings titled Still Lives, in which the shadow seems more real (threatening) association with leather, homosexuality, and gay rights and aesthetics; disco madness as the latest social marketplace and entertainment industry."

The Work of Andy Warhol, Dia Art Foundation, "Discussions in Contemporary Culture, No. 2," ed. Gary Garrels, Bay Press, Seattle: 1989, p.107

Art & Activities / Hammer & Sickle: Interpreting Symbols and Meaning

Discussion Questions:

1. Andy Warhol exhibited his Hammer and Sickle paintings in an exhibition titled Still Lives. Does this title fit the subject matter of the artwork? Why and why not?
2. What controversy surrounds this symbol?
3. Create a list of symbols. Classify them into categories: political, cultural, functional, and religious— create your own categories as needed.
4. Discuss the symbols that have power in American (Russian) culture.

Activity: Personal Response

Materials:

Handout (pages 9-11 of this PDF)

Pencils

Procedure:

1. Discuss: The world is supported by useful symbols whether they function in math, science and new technology, or in fields of communication and cultural expression. Artists often focus upon symbols. American artists have taken many national symbols representing both political and cultural values and explored their meaning and impact. Jasper Johns, Barbara Kruger, and Donald Lipski have all worked with the symbolism of the American flag to explore political and cultural messages. Likewise, Leonid Sokov and Alexej Kalima use the communist symbol to vary meaning and impact in artworks.
2. Define symbol.
3. Using the activity handout, record your personal response to either the hammer and sickle works or to the American flag artworks.

Assessment and Wrap-up:

As a class, discuss the student's descriptions, associations, and interpretations from their grids. On the back of their handout, have students answer the following questions:

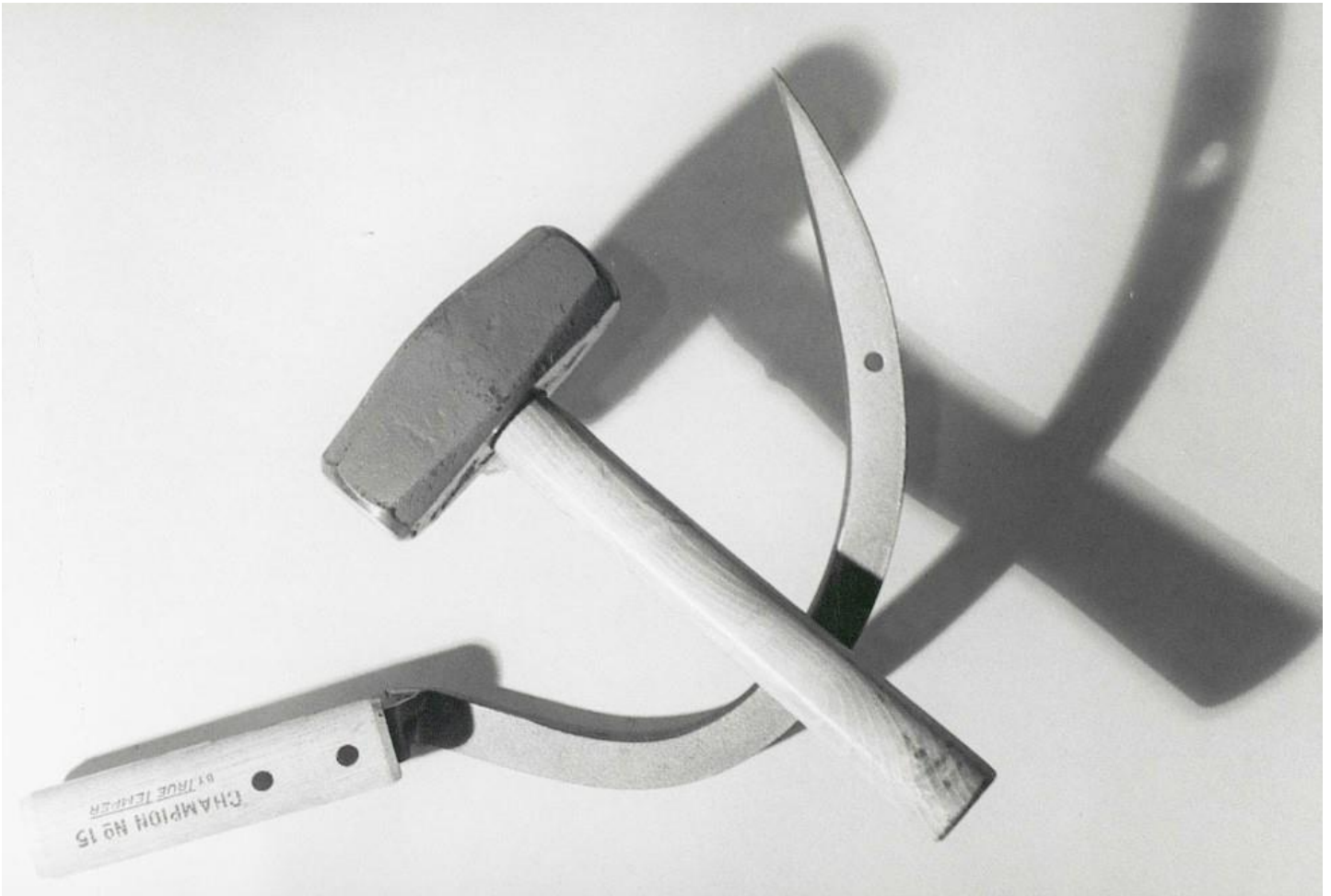
- In your opinion, which representation of the American flag or hammer and sickle is the most powerful? Support your position with reasoning.
- If you were to create an artwork using the hammer and sickle or the American flag, how would you represent it? (Discuss: materials, colors, meanings, etc.)



Jasper Johns, Flag, 1954-55, Museum of Modern Art, gift of Philip Johnson in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.



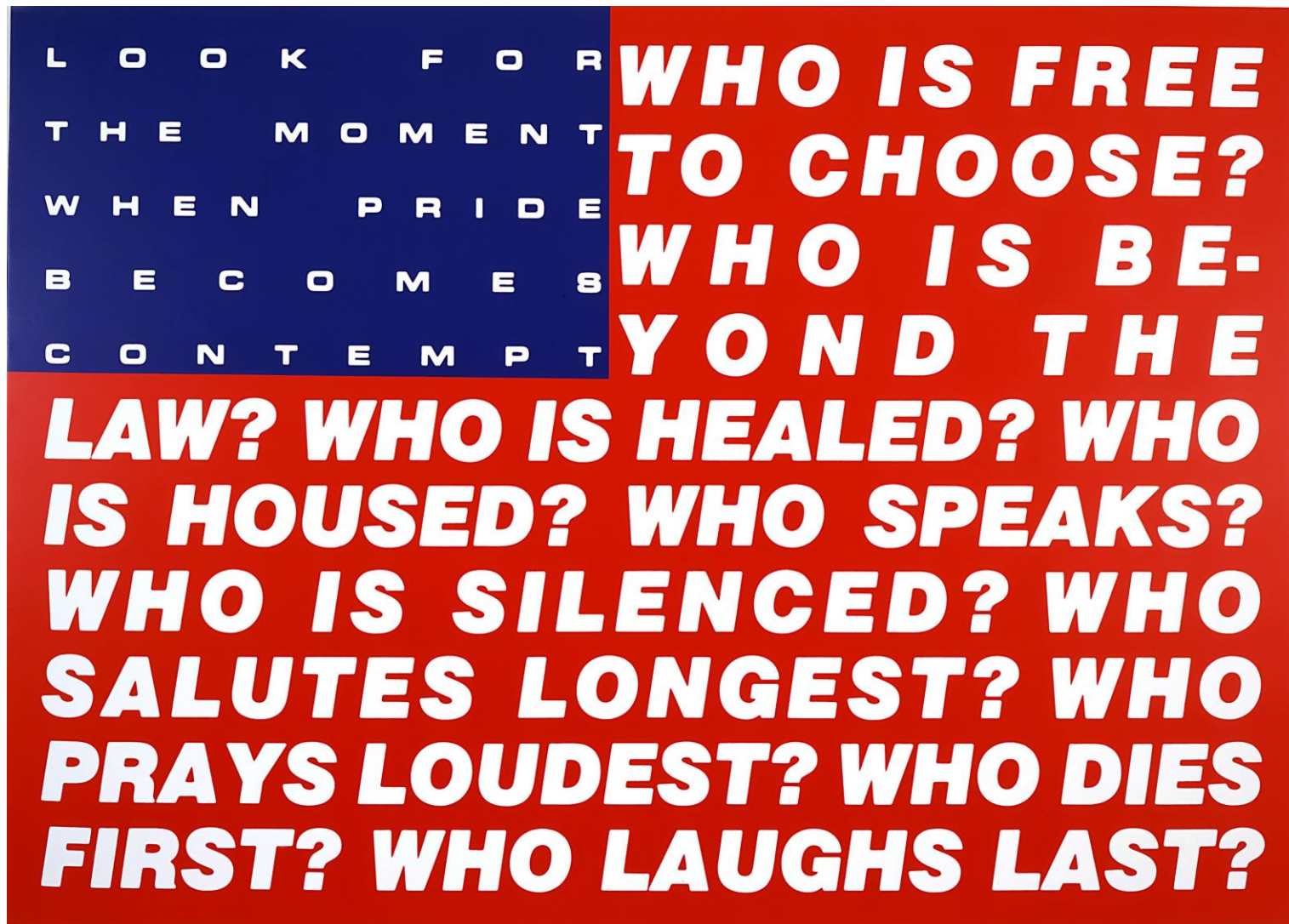
Andy Warhol, Hammer and Sickle, 1976
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Andy Warhol
Hammer and Sickle, 1977
Screen print on Strathmore Bristol
paper 30 1/8 x 40 in. (76.5 x 101.6
cm.)
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh
Founding Collection, Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the
Visual Arts, Inc.



Leonid Sokov (Russian, b. 1941)
Sickle and Hammer, 1988
wood and fur
23.6 x 23.6 x 2.76 in. (59.9 x 59.9 x 7 cm.)
Courtesy and collection of Galerie Farideh Cadot, Paris



Barbara Kruger (American b. 1945)

"Untitled" (Questions) 1991

photographic silkscreen/vinyl

66 by 93 in. (167.6 x 236.2 cm.)






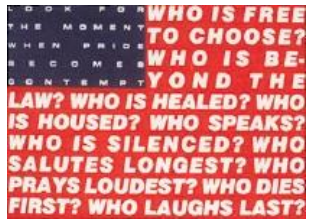
Collection: Marieluise Hessel Collection, Center For Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-On-Hudson, New York.

Courtesy: Mary Boone Gallery, New York

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Art & Activities / Hammer & Sickle / Handout

 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pop Art • Cold War <p>Andy Warhol, Hammer and Sickle, 1976</p>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Pop Art • Age of Baby Boomers • Youth Revolution <p>Jasper Johns, Flag, 1954-55</p>
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sotz Art • Soviet Union withdraws troops from Afghanistan <p>Leonid Sokov, Sickle and Hammer, 1988</p>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-Reagan years • Cuts in welfare and healthcare in the U.S. <p>Donald Lipski, "No. 10, from Who's Afraid of Red, White, and Blue," 1990</p>
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-Soviet Russia • Chechen Conflict 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-9/11 climate in the U.S. • Global protests of war in Iraq <p>Barbara Kruger, Untitled (Questions) 1991</p>



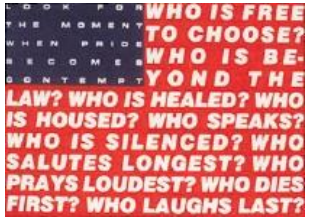
Research the historical and cultural context of each artwork; use the following information to help guide your research.

Hypothesize about the intended audience for each artwork. What do you think the artist might be trying to communicate to this audience?

Art & Activities / Hammer & Sickle / Handout

Work of Art	Adjectives: List characteristics that describe this artwork.	Associations: Using the word "like" or "as," list connections you can make to this artwork.	Ideas: List the ideas, feelings, and meanings that this artwork conveys.
 <p data-bbox="136 706 472 738">Andy Warhol, Hammer and Sickle, 1976</p>			
 <p data-bbox="136 1071 472 1104">Leonid Sokov, Sickle and Hammer, 1988</p>			
 <p data-bbox="136 1469 451 1502">Alexej Kallima, Metamorphoses, 2005</p>			

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