

# MYTHMAKING AS SPECTACLE

THIS PMA CLASSROOM LESSON WAS DEVELOPED IN  
COLLABORATION WITH THE MAINE MARITIME MUSEUM.



PMA CLASSROOM  
BEST FOR  
High School



## THEMES

- WORLD HISTORY
- COLONIALISM, POST-COLONIALISM, AND DECOLONIZATION
- MEDIA LITERACY
- IDENTITY
- MYTHMAKING
- REDUCTION OF CULTURE
- VISUAL CULTURE FUELING STEREOTYPES



Edwin Lord Weeks (United States, 1849–1903), *The Great Mogul and His Court Returning from the Great Mosque at Delhi, India* (detail), circa 1886, oil on canvas, 33 5/8 x 54 1/4 inches. Gift of Marion R. Weeks in memory of her father, Dr. Stephen Holmes Weeks, 1918.1. Image courtesy Luc Demers

Artist Unknown (United States), *Photograph of The Great Adam Forepaugh Show Circus Parade* (detail), July 1892, photograph, Gift of Catherine E. Leonard, 65.1029. Maine Maritime Museum

# CONTENT AREAS AND STANDARDS MET

## VISUAL ARTS

D.C1.9-Diploma.a-b

D.C2.9-Diploma

D.D2.9-Diploma

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES

### RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Communicating effectively

### SOCIAL SKILLS

Understanding others' perspectives;  
demonstrating empathy and compassion

### SELF-AWARENESS

Integrating personal and social identities;  
linking feelings, values and thoughts

## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore how societal perspectives shift over time
- Understand how artists utilize travel and their imagination to inspire their artwork, and how these images can be understood by various publics as “authentic” representations
- Learn about how political agendas of governments influence artwork
- Consider how even seemingly “realistic” or “authentic” images can have a political agenda or point of view
- Consider how artists bring their own perspectives and identities to the work that they create

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How do artists use historical images to tell a story?
- How can art influence intercultural understandings?
- Why is it important to question visual culture?

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- COPIES OF BOTH ARTWORKS *(optional)*
- A WRITING UTENSIL

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## INSTRUCTIONS

### LOOK

Take a few minutes to closely observe this artwork. Look carefully at the whole picture and notice the tiny details.

### COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE WEEKS' PAINTING AND THE PHOTOGRAPH.

### WHAT DO YOU THINK THE STORY IS IN EACH OF THESE IMAGES?

### ONE OF THESE OBJECTS IS A PAINTING, AND THE OTHER IS A PHOTOGRAPH.

### RESPOND

Think about and respond to these questions: *Write down your responses, share them with someone, or discuss.*

What are you noticing for similarities?  
What are you observing for differences?

What are you seeing that makes you say that?

How do the materials or processes used to create these works affect the way you interpret them?



## LEARN

Use this section to learn more about the artist, subject, and context of the artworks & objects.

### STUCK IN THE PAST

A procession occurs as three figures on horseback lead riders on elephants, surrounded by other figures on foot. People line the sides of the procession, with some figures in the front appearing to bow down toward the procession. In the background, we see a large building with white domes and a large stair area where more figures have gathered. The detail on each figure is precise, with gold glimmering in what appears to be a hot, sunny day. This level of detail seems to suggest that we might be witnessing an event that could reflect the current reality of this particular area of India.



Edwin Lord Weeks (United States, 1849–1903), *The Great Mogul and His Court Returning from the Great Mosque at Delhi, India*, circa 1886, oil on canvas, 33 5/8 x 54 1/4 inches. Gift of Marion R. Weeks in memory of her father, Dr. Stephen Holmes Weeks, 1918.1. Image courtesy Luc Demers

### THE ARTIST

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1849, Edwin Lord Weeks was an American painter, traveler, travel-writer, collector, and expatriate. In 1872, Weeks moved to Paris, France, where he was trained in “Orientalist” subject matter by another artist and professor, Jean-Léon Gérôme. Originally “Orientalist” was considered to be a positive term

describing the study of Eastern culture in hopes of preserving it from sociopolitical changes caused by Western imperialism.

In 1978, Edward Said, Palestinian-American professor of literature at Columbia University, redefined the term “Orientalism” with his book *Orientalism*. Said’s book examined the politics behind Western art created in support of colonization of Eastern nations. Through this lens, we now consider “Orientalist” paintings to be romanticized portrayals of the “East” including Turkey, Egypt, India, China, and Algeria. Artists created “Orientalist” paintings as exotic fantasies for European consumption. Many of these artworks distorted reality and utilized oversimplified and negative stereotypes of the people from the region. Furthermore, the images were made to justify the colonizer’s rule and domination over people by framing them as cultures who were stuck in the past.

Like other “Orientalist” artists of the time, Weeks was an outsider looking in, depicting a culture that was not his own. Yet to the Western public, he was an authentic documenter of Indian society. Between 1882 and 1893, over three separate trips, Weeks spent a total of 13 months traveling in India. His paintings were a combination of what he witnessed and captured in his sketches and photographs, and scenes created from his imagination. Though Weeks was never employed by the British Empire, he displayed his works extensively in London, where he received prizes and acclaim for his paintings.

## LEARN

In his travel writings, Weeks endorsed British colonial authority. He wrote, "One cannot but carry away the impression that India is a well-governed country, and that much of the credit is due to the men chosen to fill the higher offices and to the superior equipment of those whose position is gained through competition." In this statement, Weeks reinforced the ideas expressed in Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden," a famous poem in 1899 that championed white man's responsibility to govern non-white people and justified colonization.

### THE SUBJECT

The scene that Weeks depicted in *The Great Mogul and His Court Returning from the Great Mosque at Delhi, India* portrays the artist's imagined idea of an India that might have existed prior to British colonization, not the India Weeks witnessed in 1886 while creating the painting. It is an example of Weeks' interest in the past. Weeks often painted Mughal (also spelled as Mogul) architecture, colorful clothing, and animals such as elephants. The Mughal dynasty was the Muslim Turkic-Mongal dynasty that ruled over Northern India in the early 16th to the mid-18th century. By the time that Weeks was painting the Mughal dynasty, they had been slowly losing their power and influence for over a century. The "Great Mosque at Delhi" in Weeks' painting is the Masjid-i Jahan Numa, which translates to the "World-reflecting Mosque" or "Mosque of the Celestial Sphere."

It is one of the largest mosques in India and was built in 1656 by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, a reflection of the dynasty's power and wealth at the time.

By the time Weeks made this painting, the British government had colonized India and had installed a self-appointed governor-general, known as the British Raj. Queen Victoria crowned herself the Empress of India. India was known as "the Jewel in the Crown" as India amplified the British Empire's economic and political power. The British Empire colonized the land and peoples of India, and applied their own British system of laws.

*The Great Mogul and His Court Returning from the Great Mosque at Delhi, India* did not reflect the contemporary reality of British colonial suppression of Indigenous populations in India. Weeks' paintings never portrayed British imperialism through a negative lens. Death, hunger, famine, and political prisoners were not part of the picturesque romanticism of "Orientalist" art. At the time of the painting, in the late 19th century, there were also a series of crop failures that led to famine across India. It is estimated that over 15 million people died from these famines, a reality far from the romanticized processional scene that Weeks painted.

## SPECTACLE

On July 5, 1892, The Great Adam Forepaugh Show paraded down the main streets of Bath, Maine. This spectacle was a marketing ploy to generate interest in the Forepaugh circus show. In the photo, elephants march down Centre Street, flanked by their handlers and men on horseback. Men dressed in robes and headdresses ride atop the two leading elephants. The styling of their robed costumes, and the fringed decorative fabric they sit upon, generally references Eastern cultures of the Middle East or South Asia.



Adam Forepaugh (1831-1890) owned one of two of the largest traveling circuses in the United States during the 1870s and 1880s. His biggest rival was P.T. Barnum. Forepaugh's circus innovated the idea of using rail passage to expand the geographic reach of a single circus season. Towns previously too far off the circus route could now be reached for the first time. Forepaugh's shows were known to have a large animal menagerie that was prominently featured as part of the arrival parades. The circus animals,

including elephants, lions, and tigers, already considered exotic to American viewers, were further exoticized through elaborate costume or physical alterations, such as painted skin and fur.

The Forepaugh Circus, like many other circuses of the period, understood that many American audiences were fascinated with the cultures of Northern Africa, South Asia, and East Asia, and willing to pay high ticket prices to gain a glimpse of people and animals claiming to be from these regions. This was especially true in Bath, Maine. In the late 1800s, Bath was a center of great wealth earned from shipbuilding and shipping. The owners of shipyards and ship captains profited from the growing demand for the transportation of goods and raw materials around the world. During this period, the United States was the global leader in merchant shipping; American ships and crew traveled the world delivering cargo to ports in Japan, China, India, Indonesia, the Caribbean, and Europe. As a result, cargo ships returning to the United States brought back foreign goods that shaped American tastes and fashion. Chinese tea and ceramics, Japanese lacquer furniture, and Indian textiles became staples of Victorian homes.

## DISTORTED VIEWS

While Americans viewed imports from Asia and Africa as luxurious status symbols, the same cannot be said of the American view towards the people of these regions. American popular culture, swayed by biases about cultures other than their own, viewed these populations as exotic and primitive, or not as developed or advanced. Americans, by exoticizing or

# LEARN

reducing the complexity of a culture they do not understand to a series of stereotypes and symbols, reinforced their own identities as a civilized world leader. During the late 1800s, immigration was a contentious topic in the United States. An influx of Chinese immigrants to America caused cultural panic among American nationalists who feared the arrival of new people and customs to the country would disrupt the cultural and economic status quo. This fear culminated in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that banned all Chinese laborers from entering the United States.

In contrast, the American demand for foreign products and exotic spectacle was growing ever stronger. Circuses appeal to people's desire to be entertained, constantly adapting to changing tastes and expectations to drive ticket sales. Truth was often sacrificed for spectacle; circuses embellished or completely fabricated the stories and representations of their animals and performers to appeal to the audience's desire to see the unfamiliar. An elephant parade is already a spectacle, but dressing the elephant and its handler in exotic costumes plays all the more toward American curiosity to see the unfamiliar and reinforces their distorted views of these cultures as primitive and backward.

## CONNECTIONS

Weeks' *The Great Mogul and His Court Returning from the Great Mosque at Delhi, India* reinforced a colonial conception of India as an exotic and unchanging culture to satisfy the curiosity of British subjects eager to confirm their cultural superiority. The subject of Weeks' painting is specific in its details, but it lacks contemporary

and realistic views of India. The photograph of *The Great Adam Forepaugh Show Circus Parade in Bath* pushes colonial stereotypes of Eastern cultures one step further in its ambiguity. The elephants and their riders represent no specific location or culture but are reduced to symbols of "the exotic" in general. Weeks' painting and the Bath Circus parade photograph both document spectacles fashioned from Western perspectives and stereotypes of Eastern cultures, further "othering" cultures different from their own and driving the market value of artworks and events that align with harmful stereotypes.

## VOCABULARY LIST

**EXPATRIATE:** someone who lives outside of their native home for extended periods of time

**EASTERN:** mostly referring to Asia and parts of Africa

**WESTERN:** mostly referring to Europe and United States

**COLONIZATION:** the practice of settling in another territory and seizing political control

**IMPERIALISM:** intentionally and systematically extending one group's power and influence through military force or diplomacy, the act of managing international relations

# ACTIVITY 1: ANNOTATE THE PAINTING

This activity is inspired by the artwork of Wendy Red Star, a multimedia artist from the Apsáalooke (Crow) nation. Her works often explore stereotypes of Indigenous peoples depicted in dominant visual culture. One of her practices is to take artworks of the perceived West (Europe and North America), and annotate them, sometimes in conversation with her daughter.

## **WendyRedStar.com/1880-crow-peace-delegation**

Like British-colonized India, Indigenous peoples in the United States have experienced the erasure of their subjectivity (personal agency and self-determination) in visual culture produced by white artists. Red Star's work decolonizes historic images by adding her

perspective on top of the original image. Decolonization is the process of responding to the impacts of colonialism through acts of self-determination (an individual or community's control of their own life).

In *The Great Mogul and His Court Returning from the Great Mosque at Delhi, India*, Weeks was mythologizing this part of India and its people. He was looking back in time rather than painting contemporary realities. When Weeks was painting images of Delhi, audiences that lived elsewhere and had never experienced the real location or culture saw the artist's depictions as "authentic." These images informed many audiences' understanding of these distant locations and their peoples. Weeks also created images that were used to illustrate articles in Harper's Weekly, similar to how photography is used today to illustrate news articles. No image is neutral. All image makers make choices in terms of how they depict their subject and which narratives they tell.

## NOW IT IS YOUR TURN TO RESPOND TO AN ARTWORK.

You can choose to either respond to *The Great Mogul and His Court Returning from the Great Mosque at Delhi, India*, or the Bath Circus Parade Photograph, or you can find a contemporary image to respond to. Some ideas might be either a contemporary artwork, political cartoon or image that is in the media —on a website or a newspaper.

*The activity works best when the image reflects (intentionally or not) a specific opinion, point of view, or perspective.*



## HERE ARE THREE OPTIONS FOR MAKING YOUR ANNOTATION:

### 1. PRINT + WRITE

Print out the image and write on top

### 2. DIGITAL PROGRAM-PAINT OR PREVIEW

Use a program like MS Paint or Preview to type on top of the image

### 3. SKETCH + WRITE

If none of those options are available to you, you can sketch out the basic composition of the image and write on your drawing

**START WITH OBSERVATION** Start by looking at the image for 5 to 10 minutes. Observe the color palette, composition, the position of people and/or objects, etc. On a separate piece of paper, jot down your observations without making any value judgments or interpretations quite yet.



## PROMPTS FOR THE ANNOTATION:

**OBSERVE** and point out any special details that you notice when you look closely at this artwork.  
**WRITE** your statements next to the visual elements on the artwork that inspired your thoughts.

### WHAT? WHO? HOW? WHY?

- What stories or myths are being told?
- What do you think was true to reality and what was made up?
- What do you still have questions about?
- Who is the intended audience?
- Who is being represented?
- What mood do you feel from the image?
- Given the historical context and subject, what messages does the image communicate?
- Is there a political agenda behind this image?  
*Is this image propaganda (biased imagery or information meant to promote a political cause)?*
- Do you find any evidence of “Orientalism” in this work? Sexism? Racism? Ableism?
- What narratives are missing from the image?
- Do you see any stereotypes, if so, what are they?
- How were these works perceived in their own time vs. now?
- How do images shape our understanding of history? What impact do you think that images such as these had both historically and today?
- How does an image like this impact us in individual and/or collective ways?

## ACT: REFLECT AND SHARE

Let's reflect on what we just did and the experience we just had engaging with this artwork.

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**WHAT DID YOU NOTICE ABOUT YOUR THOUGHT PROCESS WHILE DOING THIS ACTIVITY?**

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**HOW DID THIS ACTIVITY EXPAND YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIFFERENT WAYS TO VIEW THESE TWO OBJECTS?**

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**HOW HAS THIS PROCESS INFLUENCED HOW YOU THINK ABOUT VISUAL MATERIAL WE SEE TODAY?**

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## RESOURCES

**B. Kolappan, *The Great Famine of Madras and the Men Who Made It*, August 22, 2013:**

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/the-great-famine-of-madras-and-the-men-who-made-it/article5045883.ece>

**Maine Memory Network, *Maine Circus Parades***

<https://www.mainememory.net/search/?keywords=circus+parade#sites>

**Wendy Red Star**

<https://www.wendyredstar.com/>

<https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/ywyb5k/wendy-red-star-art-celebrates-the-indigenous-roots-of-feminism>

**Edward Said, *Orientalism***

Said, Edward W.. *Orientalism*. United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1979.

**Amna Walayat, *Edwin Lord Weeks: An Artist and Traveller (mis) understanding an Indian sub\_continent*, (2015):**

[https://www.academia.edu/41820897/Edwin\\_Lord\\_Weeks\\_An\\_Artist\\_and\\_Traveller\\_mis\\_understanding\\_an\\_Indian\\_sub\\_continent](https://www.academia.edu/41820897/Edwin_Lord_Weeks_An_Artist_and_Traveller_mis_understanding_an_Indian_sub_continent)

**Edwin Lord Weeks, *Biography*:**

<https://www.edwinlordweeks.org/biography.html>

**Edwin Lord Weeks, *From the Black Sea Through Persia and India*:**

<https://books.google.com/books?id=Tf7JAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>