

# DAR MUSEUM

*Lessons from the American Home*  
**Object Lesson: The Emery Children**  
*Suitable for 4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades*

Summary:

Students will “close read” an artwork and try to capture and describe as many of its physical properties as possible. Then they will determine its audience and argument and compare it to other works like it. After trying to reason out this work through observable data alone, they will be given a secondary source that reveals the history and context of the piece. They will then re-evaluate their observations and reflect on the relationship between secondary and primary sources, while evaluating the benefits of material/art history. Can be written or discussed.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will practice observation and descriptive language as applied to art
- Students will understand the pros and cons of observable data, and the necessity of relevant secondary sources
- Students will be familiar with issues around historical concepts of gender

Time: <15 minutes    Required Materials: All required materials are included in this packet.

Curriculum Timing Suggestion: This work was created in 1854, so it can be placed anytime between the Mexican-American War and the Civil War. However, it’s primary objective concerning sources could be beneficial during any discussion of sources or during Unit 0, or during any unit which discusses gender, as this provides an historical background and context.

Skills, Sources, and Concepts	Examples
Compelling and Supporting Questions	What can symbolism in art reveal about past culture? What assumptions do we have when viewing historic art? How have gender norms and representations changed since the 19 <sup>th</sup> century? How have they stayed the same? How do secondary sources help us understand art works?
Sources/Evidence	Historic art, secondary sources, museum databases
Key Concepts	Sex and gender, fashion, art history, art interpretation, childhood
Key Strategies and Skills	Critical reading and thinking, close reading art, evaluating primary and secondary sources, synthesizing information between primary materials and secondary sources
Evidence-Backed Interpretations	Using secondary sources to contextualize art history, using secondary sources to make claims and arguments about historical art, using primary materials to make arguments about secondary sources
Action and Communication	Students will become informed and critical consumers of historical content, students will hone strong descriptive language, students will practice analysis and exercise reasoned reflection, students will have a more nuanced construction of historical gender

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Art Lesson: The Emery Children (*Student Copy begins on page 10*)

Close Reading: Look at the art below. Write down words or phrases to describe it completely to someone who has not seen it. Do not label it – calling it a portrait or painting is not enough. What shape is it? What are the shapes contained within it? What colors does it have and where are they? Describe any images or words you see – what do they depict, what font and color does it use? What characters do you see? How are they dressed, what are they doing? Do you recognize them, and if so, who are they? What materials do you think it is made of? What size is it? What would it feel like if you touched it? What's in the background? How old do you think it is? Try not to stop writing until time timer is up.



Observe:

*[Particular note: the color of each child's clothing, the objects they are holding, the color and style of their hair. Try to guess their ages, the age of the portrait.]*

Reasoning – Audience and Argument: What is this art used for? Who was it created for, and what are they trying to communicate? Do you know or do you think it is used for that purpose? Make sure to distinguish between *assumed knowledge*, *reasoned conclusions*, and *evidenced knowledge*. What specific elements help you determine the audience or the message? Where would this piece have hung?

*[Why do people have portraits and photos of children? Does this reveal in anyway how historical parents felt about kids. What can we tell about their behavior from the objects they hold? They can read, the have access to toys which helps us make a reasonable assumption that they come from a wealthy family. Who would this hold value to outside of the parents? Other family members/the children themselves as adults, their offspring]*

Reasoning – Comparison: Compare this to other art pieces like it. How is it different? How is it the same? Are they making the same argument or using the same imagery? Were they made for the same audience? What elements would you add or subtract to better communicate its message? Are these original elements, or would you borrow from other examples? How are children depicted in art today? Why would a museum value a piece like this?

*[Where and how do people take photos of their children today? Are they staged and set like this one or are they candid? What sort of evidence does technology of today enable that can't be captured in a portrait? Which medium is more reliable: portraits or photographs (they can both be heavily fictitious, especially due to the widespread access of photo editing)? Have you seen other historic pictures of children? Who or what is usually featured in historic paintings? What value does this painting have when compared to a painting of George Washington, or a painting of the Battle of York Town, etc., etc.]*

Synthesis, Part 1 - Read: Read the secondary source(s) below.

**Source 1:** DAR Museum Catalogue Record #71.90, *The Emery Children* (oil on canvas), 1854. No artist attributed, possibly Frederick R. Spencer.

Oil on canvas of, from left to right, George, Horace, Josephine, and Charles Emery, of Albany, New York. Josephine wears a pleated yellow dress that hangs off of her shoulders and is tight around the waist ... Horace is seated on a step and wears an open brown coat with brass buttons over a white shirt with a black tie... George is seated on the ground to the viewer's left of Horace. He wears a child's gown that is pink with white lace around the collar... Charles stands to the viewer's right of Horace. He wears a blue, child's gown with white lace at the collar and cuffs. Assuming that the portrait was painted in 1854, Josephine is 8 years old, Horace is 6 years old, Charles is 4 years old, and George is 2 years old.

**Source 2:** *Folk Portraits Part II: Gender Identification*, Heritage Museum & Gardens blog, published 1 November 2018.

Dresses may also have been more practical in terms of accommodating rapid growth and for ease of toilet training. One wonders how casual acquaintances of two centuries ago knew whether they were looking at a baby boy or baby girl out for a stroll with the new mother; presumably, they asked and felt no embarrassment at doing so.

So, if the social indicators in these portraits are not the ones we're used to, how can we know what we're looking at? Researchers like Heritage's own Jennifer Madden have looked at countless child portraits for which the identity of the sitter is well established and have made some conclusions about visual markers in the paintings.

As we've noted, boys and girls dressed alike, at least until boys were "breeched" [permitted to wear pants] around the age of seven or so. Clothing color cannot be used as an indicator of gender in portraits, as societal notions of color meanings have shifted over time. The idea of pink being feminine and blue masculine is very recent, dating only to the early 1900s. Historically, blue was often identified with girls... while pink was considered to be a watered-down version of red, traditionally the war-like color of blood and therefore, masculinity.

What's being held by child in a portrait can be useful in telling their gender, but often it isn't the props you expect. Dogs, cats and other pets might be shown with children of either sex. Flowers, long thought to be feminine, are also held by both boys and girls, though they are more frequent among girls' portraits. Books, which were once thought to be "boys' props" because boys tended to get more education, appear frequently in paintings of girls. In fact, things like books, baskets and dolls that require very little active movement to play with are often associated with girls in portraits, probably because girls were expected to be quieter and more

demure than their more active brothers, who might be pictured playing with balls, hobby horses and pull toys. A definite indicator of boyhood is a switch or whip. If the child is holding one of these, you can be certain it's a boy.

The length and style of hair can't be used to indicate gender, since small boys went around with ringlets just as often as little girls did. But where the hair is parted—either on one side or in the center, is a good indicator. Boys, even ringletted ones, are generally shown with a side part or no part at all. Girls, on the other hand, wore their hair parted down the center regardless of how it was styled. This detail, which seems so arbitrary to us now, would have been recognized instantly by people of the time, perhaps in the same unconscious way that tells us that an infant wearing pink is a girl.

Synthesis, Part 2 – Reflect: How did the secondary source change how you viewed the art? Cite specific examples. Look back at your observations – what did you observe accurately, what did you miss or observe inaccurately? Look at your reasoned argument and audience. Has your concept of the audience or argument changed? What additional ways does this object differ from other examples of its type now that you've read additional sources? How do we determine gender in modern photography and art? What changed? What does this reveal about how gender is determined and expressed? What is the historical relationship between gender expression and practicality according to the sources? Compare and contrast how gender is constructed historically and today. How does the painting support Source 2? In what ways will this affect how you look at future art? What questions do you still have? Where would you go to find answers to those questions.

*[Are these sources authoritative? Do we find them reliable? What evidence do they site? (one of them is from a museum professional who references looking at a lot of other paintings). What further evidence would we need to corroborate the sources? Have them compare elements that the author of source 2 say \*may\* identify gender to the painting. Part of gender expression in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was due to practicality – dresses are very practical clothing across gender and class lines. But there are also arbitrary gender norms – like the hair parts and color of clothing. Why is it valuable to study this? How can that affect people in the present? How could we explore these concepts further?]*



Additional Reflection Space:

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Reasoning – Comparison: Compare this to other art pieces like it. How is it different? How is it the same? Are they making the same argument or using the same imagery? Were they made for the same audience? What elements would you add or subtract to better communicate its message? Are these original elements, or would you borrow from other examples? How are children depicted in art today? Why would a museum value a piece like this?



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