

Picturing America Landscapes Lesson Plan

By Mike Beerntsen

Objective: To utilize Van Allen's photographs of the Chrysler Building, Edward Hopper's "House by the Railroad", and Charles Sheeler's "American Landscape" to emphasize how the 1920s was an era characterized by contrasts.

Essential Question: How do these images capture how the 1920s both united and divided Americans?

Background: When I teach the 1920s to my 20th Century History students, the emphasis is on how it was an era that both divided and united Americans. We study how developments in mass media, entertainment, sports, advertisement, and a consumer economy helped to forge an American identity after World War One. We also discuss how the significant cultural, demographic, and economic changes that occurred at the time also created divisions within the United States. The urban-rural divide, racial tensions, developing generational differences are all emphasized. The purpose of this lesson would be to see if the students could identify the impact of these forces or concepts in an analysis of these three images.

Part 1- Van Allen's photographs of the Chrysler Building.

Students are asked to look closely at these photographs and to then share how the architectural and artistic choices made in designing the building capture the mood of the era. The goal is to facilitate and model a critical analysis of the images that ideally emphasizes how architecture and design can embody the ideals or priorities of a time period. For example, students would hopefully discuss how the building itself epitomized the outward optimism about industrializations and American strength that characterized the Roaring Twenties. They would be encouraged to identify how these characteristics are embedded in the design of the building itself. In the discussion, the symbolism of soaring eagles and elevators themselves could also be analyzed.

Part 2- Edward Hopper's "House by the Railroad" and Charles Sheeler's "American Landscape"

After an analysis has been modeled as a class, the students would be placed into two groups. One would be assigned "House by the Railroad" and the other would be assigned "American Landscape". Students in each group would then be asked to reflect in writing on two questions:

- 1) What tone or sentiments are expressed in these paintings and how are they conveyed?
- 2) What events or realities in the 1920s would have led an artist to experience these feelings?

After finishing their reflections, the students would share their conclusions in smaller groups. After doing so, and if time allowed, a few students might be asked to summarize the conclusions of their group to those students who were working with the other painting.