

Canton
Museum
of Art



TEACHER RESOURCE PACKET

Grade Level: 4th Grade

A look at the real man behind the legend of John Henry and the role of symbolism in portraying both verbal and visual ideas.



The Museum To Go program and these educational materials are made possible by the generous funding of the Ohio Arts Council and Arts in Stark.



This document, companion artwork images, virtual tour of the exhibit: *"Frozen in Fire"*, and many other resources are available through the Canton Museum of Art website at:

www.cantonart.org/learn/museum-to-go.

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If I Had a Hammer!

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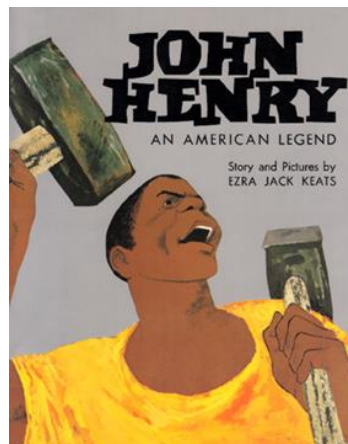
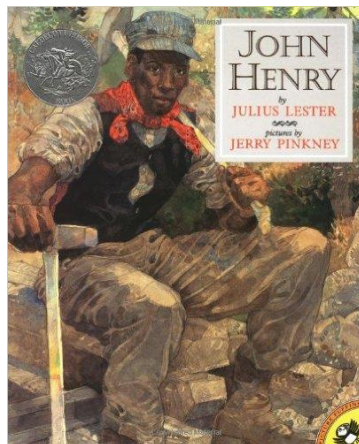
John Henry the Man

Although there is little documentation that proves his existence, it is believed that the real John Henry was born a slave in the 1840s or 1850s in North Carolina or Virginia and that he grew to be six feet tall and weigh over 200 lbs., which was very large for a man during those times. It is speculated that John Henry was arrested for vagrancy (as were many African American men after the end of the civil war) and forced to work for the C&O Railroad through convict leasing. Convict leasing is a system that arose in the south to fill the labor void after the abolishment of slavery. State governments began leasing out prisoners for a fee to private businesses who were then responsible for feeding and housing them. In reality the convicts were half starved, chained during the day, and slept in cages at night. Twenty five percent died from these inhumane conditions. Over ninety percent of these convicts were African American.

John Henry was said to be a steel driver who spent his days driving holes into rock by hitting steel spikes. Dynamite would then be placed in these holes. It is widely accepted that John Henry worked at Big Bend Mountain in West Virginia, digging through rock that blocked the path of the railroad. It took a thousand men three years to finish the tunnel. Hundreds of men, including John Henry, died in the process. After his death, the legend was born. For the railroad workers he was an inspiration and for the poor laborers he was symbolic of protest against terrible working conditions.

John Henry the Legend

There are many different versions of the tall tale "John Henry" including ballads and work songs that followed the railroad as it traveled from the east coast to the west coast. It is believed that the legend originated in Alabama or West Virginia, but it has been impossible to pin down facts that prove it. In summary the tale is about a steel driver with super human strength who is challenged to a race with a steam powered drill. Using two twenty pound hammers, he beats the machine, but at the end of the story dies from exhaustion or a stroke.



There are two well-known children's books about John Henry that are based on the tall tales. One is by Ezra Jack Keats and the other is by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney.

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“The Fall of John Henry,” 2014, Kyle and Kelly Phelps

(American, b. 1972). Mixed media / ceramic. 24 x 36 x 4 in.

This clay and mixed media sculpture was purchased by the Canton Museum of Art in 2016 from the exhibition *Blue Collar: Ceramics by Kyle and Kelly Phelps*. When the artists hear news of a factory or a mill closing they research and visit the site to collect found objects (wood, sheet metal, gears, tools) from the location to include in the artwork. These objects give the piece a sense of authenticity and sometimes even smell like the place where they were found. The wood used in this artwork was retrieved from an old rail road crate that contained fifty to a hundred stakes. Three of these stakes are placed in the upper left hand corner.

Kelly Phelps writes “The figure represents the John Henry from the past as well as all of the African American John Henry’s who have found work with the railroad industry. The title “The Fall of John Henry” talks about how technology has over taken a lot of labor based jobs like factory, manufacturing, agricultural, and rail industries.” Although John Henry beat the machine in the legend, it still killed him in the end.

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Kyle and Kelly Phelps

Kyle and Kelly Phelps are identical twin brothers who create their works of art as a cohesive team. They consider their work to be that of a single artist, and they sign each piece with their shared initials, K.E.P, for Kyle Edward and Kelly Eugene. The brothers sculpt figures from clay which are fired, hand painted and placed into settings created from found objects and scraps they salvage from abandoned factories and yards. Born and raised in a working class family in New Castle, Indiana, the twins watched for years as their father set off to work everyday in his work boots to the Chrysler plant. After they graduated from college, the twins put on their own work boots and went to work in a factory cutting gears. They hated the work and the noise and the dirt, but they walked away with an experience to which they would give a voice. After years working in the factory they decided to go back to school and earn their graduate degrees in fine art they went on to become art professors at the University of Dayton and Xavier University. Together they make art that addresses the issues of the blue collar worker and the fallout from factory closings. Kyle and Kelly explain their unique relationship working together:

“We’ve had a shared story and experience forever,” they say. “Our relation is everywhere in our life, we studied, did chores at home, worked... always together. We support each other, contaminate each other’s ideas and work; it ceases to be a one person’s authorship.” “We consider ourselves activists. As educators we teach, inform, and shape minds.... We want people to know the everyday struggles of common men and women. We feel obliged to share what we know.”

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The History of the Bandana and its Connection to the Railroad

The word bandana comes from the Sanskrit word badhnati which means: to tie. Bandanas have been in existence for over 200 years. The first bandana in the US might have been a picture of George Washington commissioned by Martha Washington and created by a printmaker who defied the British ban on textile printing.

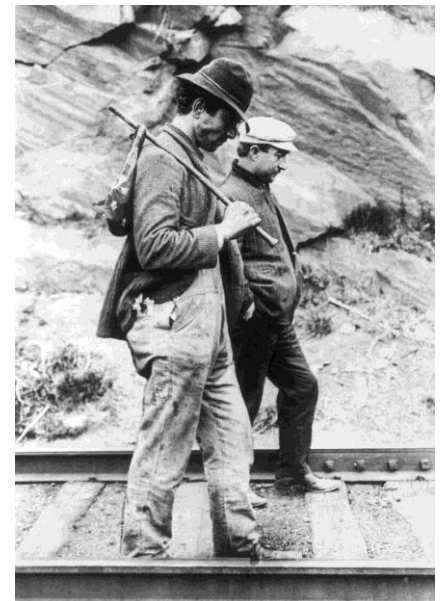


Charles Alston, *The Conductor*, 1941
Gouache with casein on paper, 21 X 14 3/4 in.
From the collection of Mr. & Mrs. Darrell Walker

The bandana was first created to inspire hero worship and eventually evolved to serve two other uses: the patriotic bundle valentine and the political campaign bandana. The bundle valentine was a bandana with a hand written verse from a soldier's sweetheart that he would use to bundle up his possessions upon going off to war. During World War I and World War II the valentine bundles were used to carry mail to the home front.

Bandanas paid homage to war heroes and sports figures, as well as showed support for political candidates.

The bandana was also associated with the working man as it was worn by cowboys, farmers, miners, railroad men, and construction and factory workers. Used to wipe sweat from the brow and to cover the nose and mouth from dirt and fumes, the red bandana, tied around the back of the neck, led to the term "red neck". For the railroad worker the bandana was a source of protection, keeping cinders from sliding down the collar of ones shirt.



During the 1930s homeless travelers who rode the box cars, tied the bandana to a stick and used it to carry their possessions. It was known as a bindle. Before long it became associated with any one running away.

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Overview: Students will learn about the tall tale of John Henry. Students will observe pieces of art from the CMA’s Permanent Collection through a virtual tour available at: <https://www.cantonart.org/learn/museum-to-go>. Focusing on “The Fall of John Henry,” by Kyle and Kelly Phelps, the students will examine the role of symbolism in the expression of ideas in the artwork. Students will then use symbolism to create their own work of art and accompanying story.

Materials: pencils with erasers, aluminum sheets, Amaco ArtEmboss Aluminum Sheets, glue dots, printed handouts of paper background for students to fill in their story, and (11" x 17") “Personal Story Bandana Frames” available at: <https://www.cantonart.org/learn/museum-to-go>

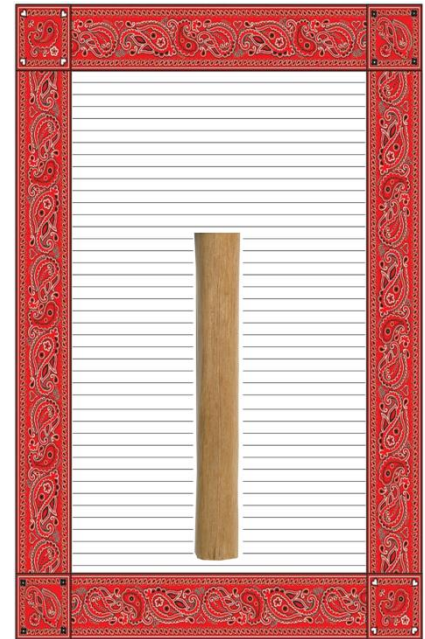
Content Standards:

English Language Arts: Writing: Grade 4

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3.A Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3.B Use dialogue and description to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3.C Use a variety of transitional words and phrases to manage the sequence of events.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3.D Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3.E Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

Visual Art:

- 1PE Use sensory details and descriptive language to identify and describe universal themes, subject matter and ideas expressed across arts disciplines.
- 1PR Identify, select and vary art materials, tools and processes to achieve desired results in their artwork.
- 2PR Experiment with art materials by using them in unexpected and creative ways to express ideas and convey meaning.
- 3RE Recognize and describe the relationship of artworks to their social and cultural contexts.
- 6RE Give and use constructive feedback to produce artworks that achieve learning goals.
- 5PR Combine the elements and principles of art and design to create visually effective compositions in original works of art.



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Vocabulary:

Tall Tale: A story about a main character who is extraordinary compared to people in real life. These stories are highly exaggerated and are often funny as well. Tall tales became popular in the 18th century as a source of entertainment and relaxation.

Adversity: A difficult or unpleasant situation, a hardship or misfortune.

Symbolism: The use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities: The expression or representation of an idea or quality.

Legend: A story from the past that is believed by many people but cannot be proved to be true.

Convict leasing system: During the period of Reconstruction (1865-1877) the convict leasing system arose to fill the labor void. In most of the South, state governments began leasing out prisoners to various private businesses, such as coal-mining companies and railroad companies.

Background/Key Ideas: Students will learn about the tall tale of John Henry. Students will take a virtual tour available at: <https://www.cantonart.org/learn/museum-to-go> and will carefully observe the sculpture "The Fall of John Henry" by Kyle and Kelly Phelps. Students will talk about the visual elements in the art work that are symbolic of hard work. After discussing ideas about overcoming adversity, meeting life's challenges, and positive outlooks on life, students will write a brief story of a time they met a challenge or overcame a setback in their own life. Students will then write their stories and create a visual symbol using the technique of embossing.

Procedures:

Introduction:

- Play the video: "John Henry and The Railroad" at <https://youtu.be/j3LVFdWBHVM> (about 20 minutes in length) or read the legend of John Henry.
- Learn about the history of the real man behind the story.
- Students take a virtual tour of the Canton Museum of Art's Permanent Collection Exhibit *Frozen in Fire* and focus on the sculpture *The Fall of John Henry* by Kelly and Kyle Phelps.
- Show picture of Kyle and Kelly Phelps and tell a little about their background.



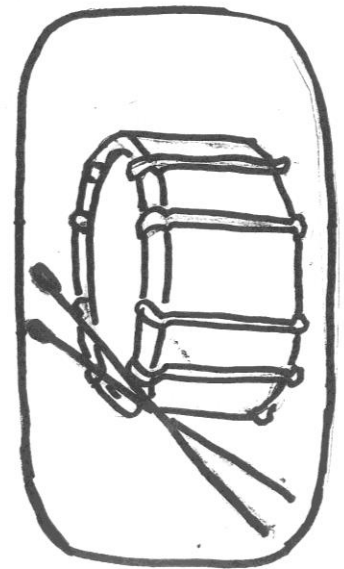
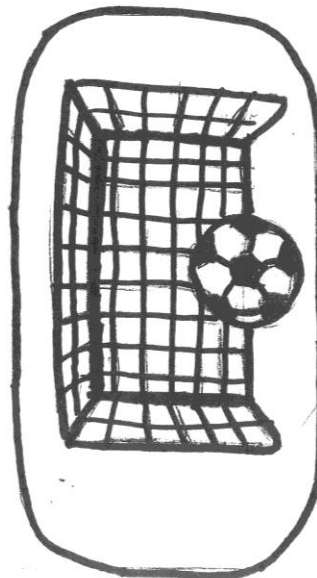
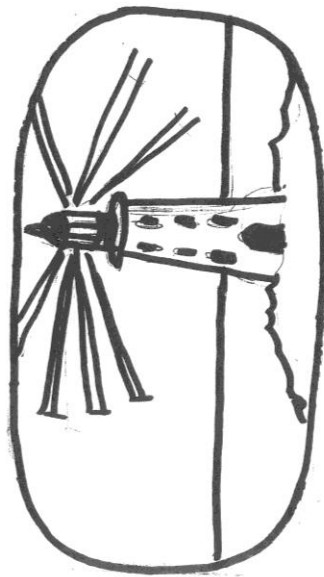
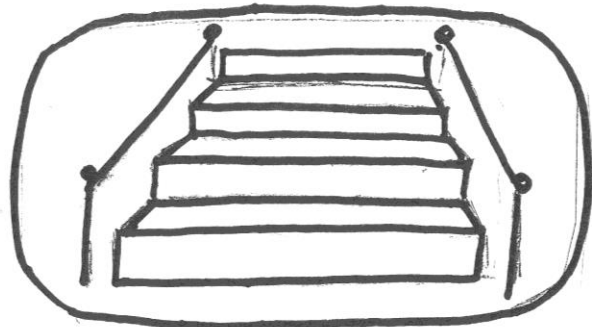
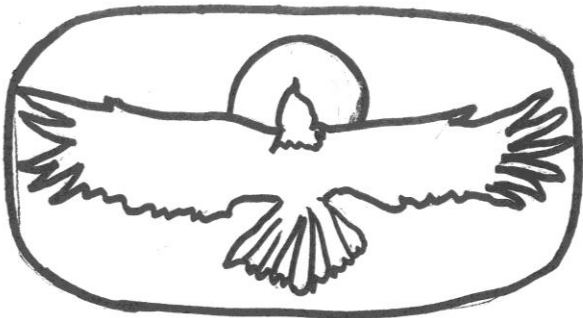
Discussion Points:

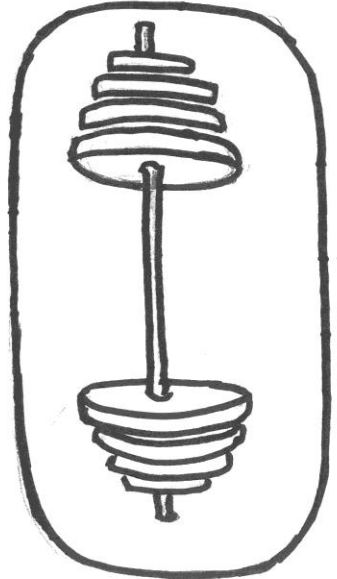
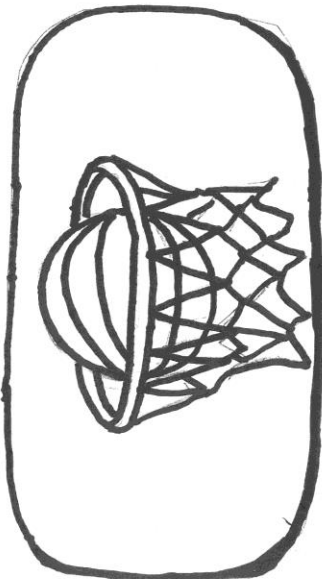
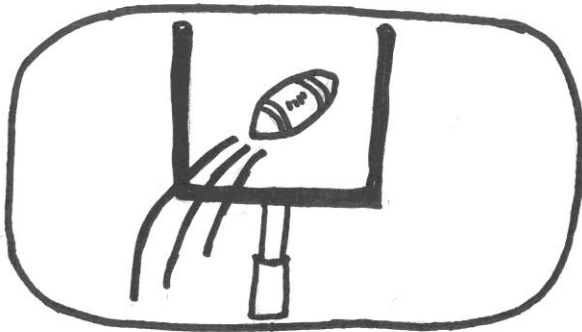
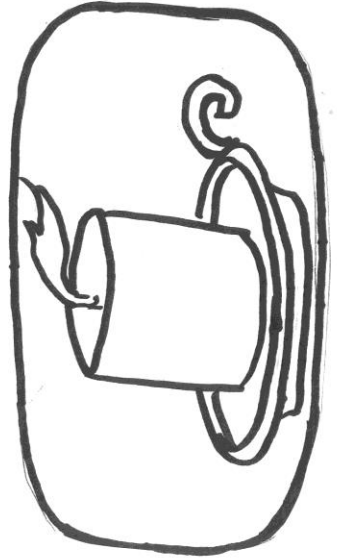
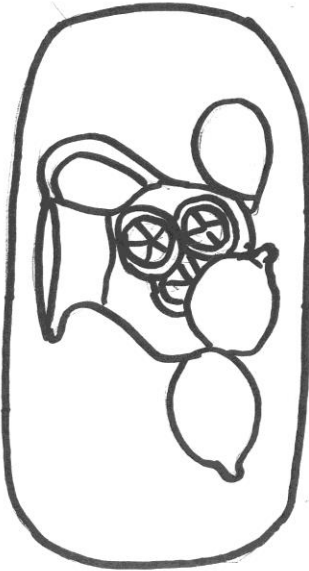
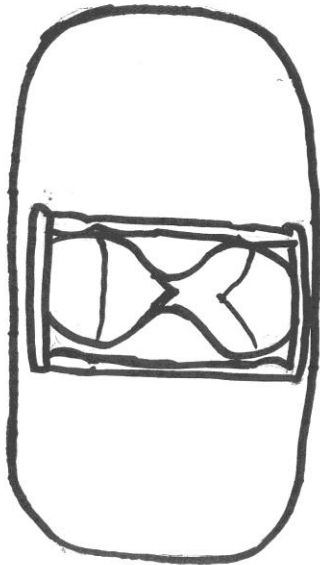
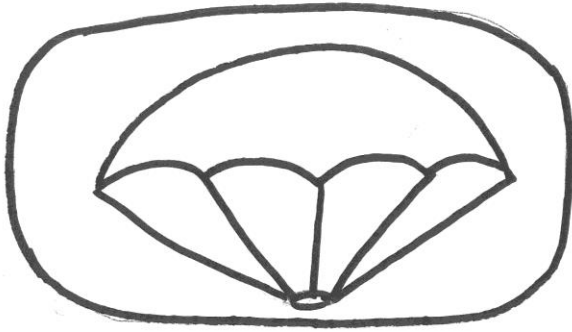
- There are symbolic elements in the piece “The Fall of John Henry.”
- The red bandana that is tied around the figure’s head is a symbol of the working man. See history of the bandana.
- The hammer in the figure’s hand is an allusion to the tall tale of John Henry.
- Although the figure is made of clay, the railroad stakes and the wood background are real.
- Ask the students what the red, white, and blue colors in the piece might symbolize.
- Ask the students what they think the posture of the figure tells us about how he feels.
- Explain how the story of John Henry relates to modern day workers losing their job to a machine.



“The Fall of John Henry,” 2014, Kyle and Kelly Phelps

Activity: Students will be presented with several visual symbols which might be used as ideas for illustrations for their personal stories (See examples below). Printouts available at: <https://www.cantonart.org/learn/museum-to-go>. Students will emboss a visual symbol into a piece of aluminum. These pieces of aluminum will become the head of a hammer and be affixed onto the printed handout. Students will carefully hand print their stories onto the handout.





John Henry Faced Adversity

John Henry had a difficult path ahead of him. Did he turn around and go back?

No! He kept on going down the road!

John Henry ran into a mountain. Did he say "I can't go any further?"

No! He smashed his way through that mountain!

John Henry grew tired and hungry. Did he become discouraged? Yes. Did he quit?

No! He swept away those negative thoughts and continued to work toward his goal!

A lot of people did not believe that John could win his bet. Did he worry about what other people had to say?

No! He believed in himself and knew he would prove them wrong!

John Henry had a lot of hard times in his life. Did he complain and give up hope? Did he use those hard times as an excuse to quit trying?

No! He said "I am never going to let anything keep me down again!"

John Henry was a real man who became a legend because of his determination and strength. All of us do not have the heroic strength and grit that the tall tale character has, but we can all share a story of a time when we worked very hard and hammered our way through a tough time or face adversity.

Tell your story in five or more sentences where you face adversity:

- This is the hard thing I had to do.
- This is why I kept going down the road and did not turn back.
- These are the things and people who got in my way and made it hard to keep going.
- This is what I did when I faced obstacles in the road.
- This is how I felt when I finished the hard thing I had to do.

When writing your story:

- Establish a situation
- Organize events in the situation so they unfold naturally.
- Use concrete words and phrases (I heard, I saw, I touched, etc.).
- Use a variety of transitional words and phrases (Finally, meanwhile, however, even so, etc.).
- Provide a conclusion.

Resources:

"John Henry and The Railroad." *Whitestone Motion Pictures*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2017.

Degman Moje, S. (2013, March 12). John Henry: Steel Driving Man - Using a Railroad Legend to Teach Westward Expansion. Retrieved April 04, 2017, from <http://www.brighthubeducation.com/middle-school-history-lessons/127845-john-henry-steel-driving-man>

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(n.d.). American Folklore: Famous American folktales, tall tales, myths and legends, ghost stories, and more. Retrieved from <http://www.americanfolklore.net/folktales/wv2.html>

"John Henry: The Steel Drivin' Man." *West-virginia-encyclopedia-text*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2017.

"History Of The Bandana - The Go-To Destination For Bandanas." *Bandanashop.com*. N.p., 2017. Web. 4 Apr. 2017.

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