

Art A Day CHALLENGE: Local History as Inspiration

Remembering the Burning of Chambersburg

Washington County Museum of Fine Arts

We challenge you to an art activity each day during school closures! If you decide to complete this challenge, share it with us in the comments and on Instagram @WCMFA and use the hashtag #ArtADayCHALLENGE. The order you complete the challenges is up to you!

Stuff you'll need: Materials are up to you! Read through the challenge and make your decision based on your idea! ALL ART MEDIUMS WELCOME: cellphone cameras, pencil, paper, clipboards, erasers, paint, etc!

Words you need to know:

Historical Painting is a genre in painting defined by its subject matter rather than artistic style. History paintings usually depict a moment in a narrative story, rather than a specific and static subject, as in a portrait (wikipedia).

Composition the arrangement of the visual elements in a painting or other artwork.

LOOK at this painting by Daniel Ridgway Knight that shows Union Soldiers and citizens of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, hiding in what seems to be a barn during the Civil War. They are hiding because of a very notorious event that happened. The confederate army stormed into the city and ordered the Chambersburg residents to turn over \$500,000 in cash or \$100,000 in gold in a matter of hours. They didn't have that money. The soldiers attacked and burned everything in their path. The community lost everything



Daniel Ridgway Knight
Union Refugees, 1867
Oil on panel

The artist isn't just using his imagination of what this must have been like...he was actually there! Knight was born and raised in Chambersburg and he was a Union soldier. During the burning of Chambersburg, the artist saved an infant and carried the baby, James A. Hamilton (a future local leader), to safety! He walked 10 MILES with a baby in his arms. Knight eventually settled in Philadelphia where he remembered the awful experience.

When the fires went out, many of the residence returned. A local newspaper, The Sentinel, remembers a reporter's account (1864) in a 2014 article (J.Cress) which highlighted the details of the event:

"Nearly every valuable building, both public and private, was reduced to ashes," the reporter wrote. "All the county buildings, the banks, hotels, printing offices, churches, the female seminary, law offices, fared the same common fate. Indeed, the very heart of Chambersburg is gone and the town, it may be said, is wiped out."

"Parties of soldiers, having sacked several drug and chemical stores, had manufactured turpentine balls which they threw in all directions, thus creating as many different flames in different localities of the town...." the reporter wrote. "Helped along by a stiff breeze, the many fires combined into one "terrible and devouring conflagration."



Photograph of the citizens of Chambersburg returning to the demolished city in 1864.

There are a lot of paintings that document historical events, but Knight's portrayal shows the viewer the fear that must have been felt throughout the community of families-moms, dads, babies, little kids, soldiers, etc. Knight creates a **composition** that uses the glow of the fire to make sure our eyes move around the canvas, from the doorway, to the faces of the young child and woman, to the older man, down to the arm of the man in the right corner. Then our eyes move directly to the woman on the other side of the painting. If you look closely, you can see a young child next to her in the shadows. It is important to note the two figures on the left hand side because they were most likely newly freed slaves that may have escaped the slave owners. As we know, the Union Soldiers were fighting the confederate army to free African Americans that were enslaved.



Colorized photograph of the citizens of Chambersburg returning to the demolished city in 1864.

MAKE: Research the history of your town or city. Select an event that has historical importance or has changed the lives of people in the community. Recreate this event. How will you create a **composition** that will make the viewers eyes move around the drawing/painting/photograph? How will the viewer understand the emotions and mood of the event?

Writing Prompt Extension: Write about the event from the perspective of someone who lived through the experience. This can be a diary entry, a letter written from this person, or a poem.

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