

## Sketching to Observe

### Model Lesson: Stamp Art

#### Overview

In this strategy, students investigate stamps (contemporary or from a time period of study) using resources at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum website. Students choose a stamp and sketch it in order to notice details, wonder, and infer ideas. By studying a primary source such as a stamp, students gain an understanding of values communicated, clues about the time period, and how visual art communicates a message.

#### Materials

- ▶ “Stamp Design and the Visual Arts” collection at Smithsonian National Postal Museum: ([postalmuseum.si.edu/topics/stamp-design-and-the-visual-arts](http://postalmuseum.si.edu/topics/stamp-design-and-the-visual-arts)), and [usps.com](http://usps.com)
- ▶ *Sample Stamp Art* (page 178)
- ▶ *Elements of Visual Art* (page 171)
- ▶ *Sketching a Stamp* (page 179)
- ▶ sketching materials (paper, pencils)
- ▶ stamped vintage postcards, physical stamps, stamped envelopes, or sheets of stamps (can be obtained at [usps.com](http://usps.com))

#### Standards

##### Grades K–2

- ▶ Describes ways in which artistic creations, such as pictographs, serve as expressions of communication and culture
- ▶ Describes what an image represents
- ▶ Uses observation and investigation in preparation for making a work of art

##### Grades 3–5

- ▶ Describes ways in which artistic creations, such as pictographs, serve as expressions of communication and culture
- ▶ Determines messages communicated by an image
- ▶ Identifies and demonstrates diverse methods of artistic investigation

##### Grades 6–8

- ▶ Explores and describes similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures express their beliefs
- ▶ Demonstrates openness to new ideas, materials, and approaches in making works of art
- ▶ Analyzes multiple ways that images influence specific audiences

##### Grades 9–12

- ▶ Explores and describes similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures express their beliefs
- ▶ Demonstrates openness to new ideas, materials, and approaches in making works of art
- ▶ Analyzes multiple ways that images influence specific audiences

## Sketching to Observe *(cont.)*

### Preparation

Gather sketching materials (pencils and paper) and scan the digital resources (“Stamp Design and The Visual Arts Collection” at Smithsonian National Postal Museum and [usps.com](http://usps.com)) to become familiar with the wide variety of stamps, and in particular, stamps related to your unit of study. View *Sample Stamp Art*. Additional suggestions are provided in the Specific Grade-Level Ideas.

### Procedure

1. Begin with an inquiry session. Provide small groups of students with a collection of stamp materials that you have gathered such as physical stamps, vintage postcards with stamps, stamped envelopes that have been mailed, or images of stamps printed from the internet) Invite students to discuss what they notice, wonder, and want to know.
2. Come together as a class and discuss students’ findings. Activate their prior knowledge by asking “What do you know about stamps?” Share the websites listed in the Materials section. (Smithsonian National Postal Museum and [usps.com](http://usps.com)). Share the “Stamp Subject Collection Criteria” at the U.S. Postal Service website ([about.usps.com/who/csac/#criteria](http://about.usps.com/who/csac/#criteria)) and discuss the process with students to inspire their curiosity.
3. Discuss with students how stamps are primary sources that reveal ideas about the American experience, significant events or figures, and more. Tell students that they will be using the strategy of “sketching to observe” as a way to mine the works of art for details and clues.
4. Invite students to consider stamps as artistic works. Introduce the *Elements of Visual Arts*. Ask students to discuss the stamps viewed earlier through the lens of the elements of visual art. Ask students “What artistic choices were used in the stamp? What impact is created as a result?”
5. Provide each student with a stamp and sketching materials. Relieve the pressure that can be associated with drawing (that the sketch has to be “good”) by explaining to students that the sketching process is all about finding and marking the details, not creating a beautiful sketch.
6. As students are working, complete this very important part of the lesson. Walk around and ask students questions about what they notice. Scan the students’ work thoroughly. You can ask a student about seemingly random marks. Listen to what they say, repeat it back to them, and invite them to expand their writing with the language they’ve used. Listening to students describe what they are doing reveals thinking that they might not have otherwise shared.
7. Gather the students together and debrief about what they noticed, inferred, and wondered. Consider as a class how the artist used the *Elements of Visual Arts* to communicate meaning.
8. Use the Discussion Questions to debrief at the end of the lesson.

### Planning Questions

- ▶ What stamp will you choose and why?
- ▶ What details are noteworthy?
- ▶ How will you “sketch to observe” (rather than create a picture)?
- ▶ What do you infer from details in the image?

“I’m not interested in a beautiful drawing, I’m interested in a document that shows what you’ve seen.”

—Tom Lee , Storyteller  
(personal communication, April 12, 2021)

## Sketching to Observe *(cont.)*

### Discussion Questions

- ▶ As you sketched your stamp, what details did you include and why?
- ▶ As you sketched your stamp, what did you wonder? What did you infer?
- ▶ What does your stamp reveal about the values, events, or significant ideas of the time period?
- ▶ How did your sketch inform or expand your writing?

### Specific Grade-Level Ideas

#### Grades K–2

Visit the USPS online store to view stamps of Ellsworth Kelly’s art that celebrates vibrant colors and shapes ([store.usps.com/store/product/stamp-gifts/ellsworth-kelly-framed-stamps-S\\_478624](https://store.usps.com/store/product/stamp-gifts/ellsworth-kelly-framed-stamps-S_478624)). Have students explore the colors, lines, and shapes through sketching for observation. Invite them to choose one stamp that speaks to them and draft a poem to go along with the image.

Have students create a postcard and send it to a member of the school community using their schools’ address. Digital postcard making tools are available online.

#### Grades 3–5

In addition to the K-2 ideas, select historical photographs from the Library of Congress or the Smithsonian online. Using a small frame (which can be cut from cardboard), invite students to focus in on a particular area of the image and sketch to observe.

Students can also visit the National Portrait Gallery to find collections of portraits ([npg.si.edu/home/national-portrait-gallery](https://npg.si.edu/home/national-portrait-gallery)). Invite students to choose a portrait to sketch to observe, and design and create a museum label to inform and engage museum visitors.

Invite students to write a postcard to themselves and mail it to their school or home.

Arts Educator Tom Lee leads professional development workshops with a team from the Yale Center for British Art. A bedrock principle of their work is that drawing is prewriting.

Lee notes, “Students always show things in their sketches that they don’t initially include in their writing. There is nothing accidental. There is intentionality and meaning in every line of their drawings. Scan the students work thoroughly. Ask the student about any seemingly random marks to see what they reveal about the student’s thinking. Listen while they tell you about it, repeat it back to them, and invite them to expand their writing with the language they’ve used” (personal communication, April 12, 2021).

## Sketching to Observe *(cont.)*

### Grades 6–8

Visit the online archives of the Library of Congress for protest posters from different time periods. Have students focus in on a particular area of a poster and sketch to observe, documenting noticings, questions, and insights. Discuss artists' use of elements of visual art to convey, or amplify a message.

Hetland et. al. define *observe* as "learning to attend to visual contexts more closely than ordinary 'looking' requires, and thereby to see things that otherwise might not be seen" (2007).

"There's nothing like drawing a thing to make you really see it."

—Margaret Atwood (2009)

### Grades 9–12

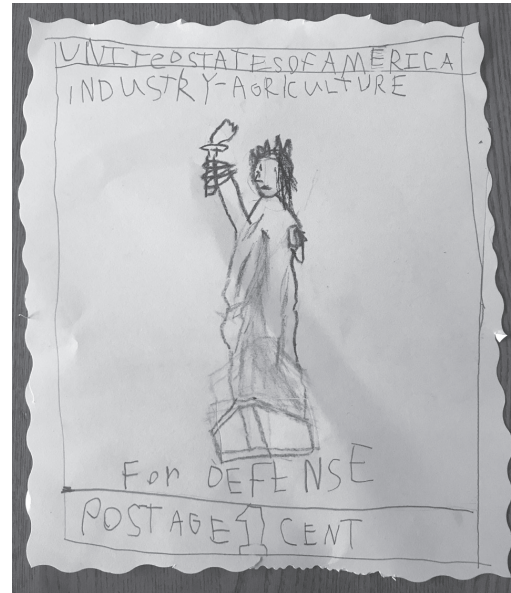
Locate images about present-day current events. Invite students to sketch to observe the details of the images and to ask questions, and make inferences and observations while they sketch.

## Sample Stamp Art

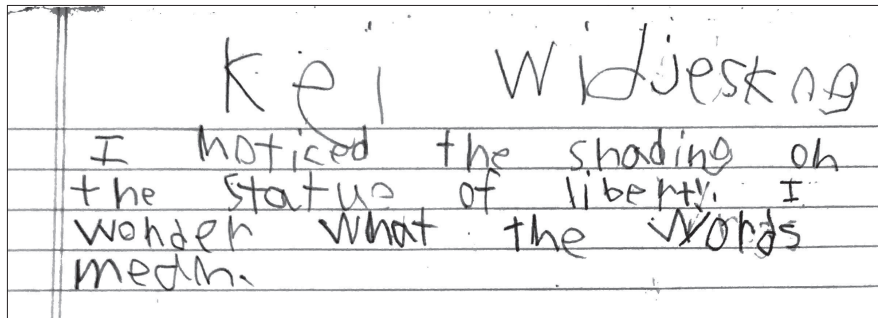
Stamp



Sketch



Writing Sample



**Credit:** Sketch and writing sample by Kei Widjeskog. Used by permission.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Sketching a Stamp

**Directions:** Choose a stamp to sketch. Use the space below to sketch the image on the stamp.

