

Teaching with Images

James H. Madison

Never walk into a classroom without a picture. It is one of the few “rules” of teaching I have come to believe and usually to practice.

The simplest reason to use images is to break the drone of lecturing or the chaos of aimless discussion. There are other ways to do that, but nothing wakes up and focuses students more than putting an image on a screen. Once I have their attention, the next challenge is to make the picture more than just “interesting.” We



This World War II poster, “We Can Do It!” by J. Howard Miller, encourages discussion of women’s roles in wartime. (Image courtesy of Bettman Archive and Corbis.)



Reiko’s lunch box, partly burned by the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima. (Image courtesy of Peace Museum of Hiroshima.)

need to read it together, as a text, and to connect it to larger arguments relevant to that day’s class.

Some of the best images are those that are well-known but not always understood. One of my favorites is the “Rosie” poster from World War II. Students first see the strong woman, right arm flexed, hand formed in a fist, sleeve rolled up, and the caption “We Can Do It!” Usually, it takes a bit more time to encourage a second and closer look—at her eyebrows, lips, and the finely manicured fingernail on her left hand. That second look produces the important discussion. What does that fingernail mean? If she is a factory worker, why is it not dirty and broken? If we could smell the past, would this Rosie have body odor? Who made this poster, and why did he or she create Rosie in just this way? What does this poster with the manicured fingernail tell us about gender and about the era’s expectations of female beauty and thoughts about women doing men’s work?

A good image helps to move students outside of their own time and place. That is one of my major objectives in the large lecture course I teach on the homefronts of World War II. It is a world

history class, comparative and global, because I want students to understand more than the triumph of “the greatest generation ever.” Thus, we look at a lunch box carried by seventh-grader Watanabe Reiko in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Reiko’s body was never found, only her lunch box with the charred food. That lunch box was intended to be part of the exhibition about the end of the war at the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum in 1995. American critics wanted to focus instead on the B-29 bomber and forced the curators to withdraw a lunch box that suggested what happened after the bomb left the plane’s bay. Discussion of this little lunch box can move to the largest issues of history, memory, and commemoration.

Good teaching images can also be local. I like local monuments, for example, because they are “sermons in stone” set for later generations to read. One of my favorites is a monument on the square in Marion, Indiana. Why are these men who died in the World War called “boys”? And what is the significance of the wording on the small plaque later added, “WWI 1917-1918”? Most interestingly, why do two names have “(col.)” behind them? Students usually guess it means “colonel.” They almost never guess that it stands for “colored.” William Cromwell and Rollins Wade were African Americans. In a time when the color line divided black from white, local citizens chose to mark that line even in death and to make white the unmarked, default color. There is a line connecting that simple monument and the lynching of two African Americans on that same square in 1930, a lynching that produced one of the most powerful photographs in American history. Some might object to using this horrible lynching image as a teaching source. I would argue for responsible use with reading and discussion of the full contexts of America’s long struggles with race and violence.



One of the markers on the Courthouse Square in Marion, Indiana, that stand as “sermons in stone” for later generations to read. (Image courtesy of author.)

Students can learn to see the past for themselves as they go about their daily lives. I teach the United States history survey in a large lecture hall blessed with two panels painted by Thomas Hart Benton for the 1933 World’s Fair in Chicago. One panel causes considerable confusion and anger because a burning cross and hooded Klansmen are at its center. We talk about it the first day of class. Is it offensive? Should we have a curtain placed over it so we do not have to look at that ugly scene? Perhaps. But we notice that Benton placed the burning cross and white

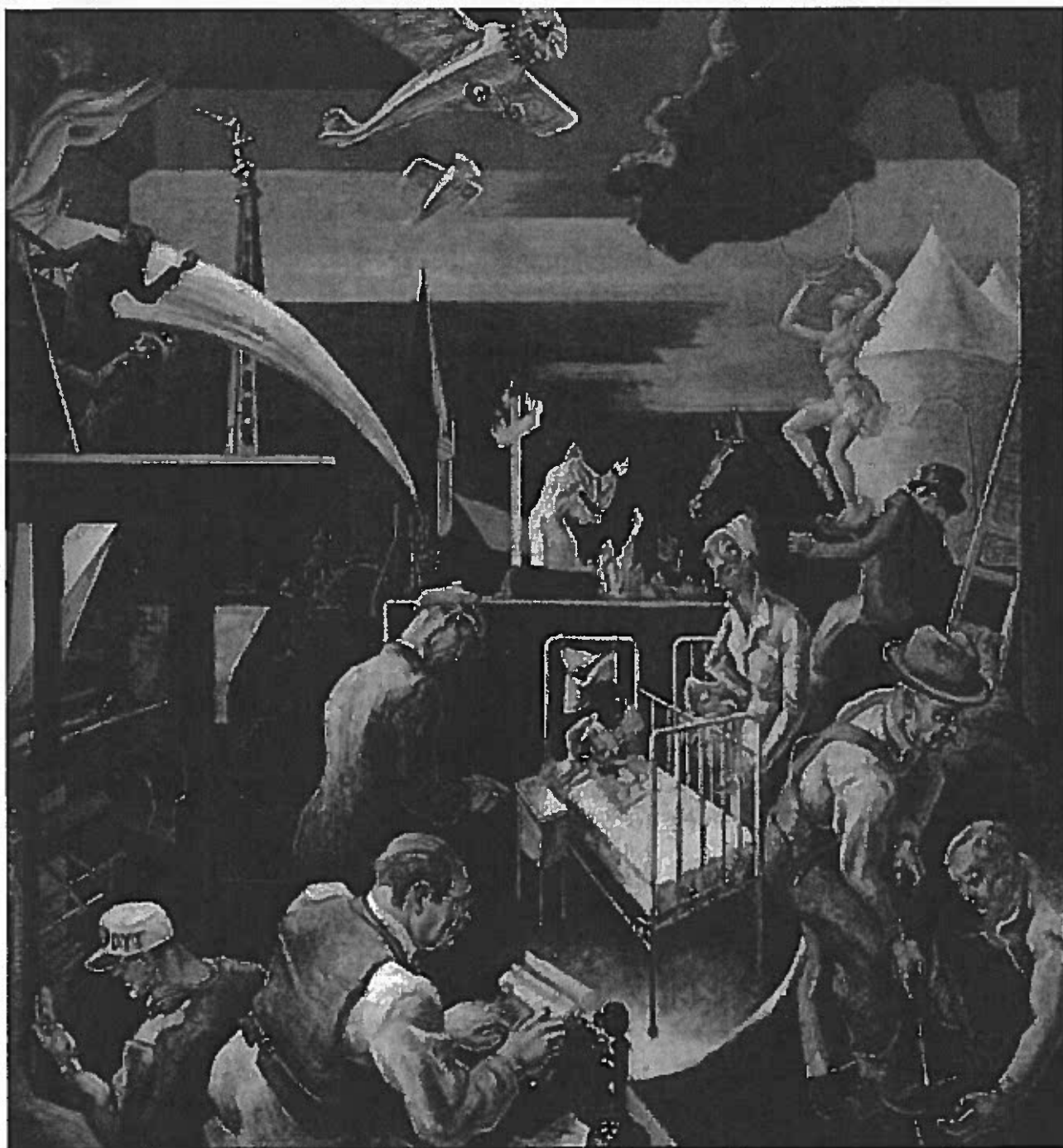
hoods in the background and in the foreground the free press and a nurse caring for a patient clearly not white. Perhaps the evil of the Klan is overshadowed by other possibilities. We also try to understand what it means for the Klan to claim the American flag. All these pieces of Benton’s mural rumble through the rest of the semester.

I also try to find the local past at a distance. At national cemeteries, for example, I look for the dead from Indiana. A favorite is a photo I took at Gettysburg. What could be more simple than a very small marker that reads “INDIANA. 80 BODIES”? The romance and glory of the Civil War fades when students begin to realize that those “bodies” were doubtless bits and pieces gathered from that 1863 battlefield, testimony to the brutality of its most glorious battle.

I often use images I have made myself. And while I try to avoid showing my vacation photographs, I am sometimes caught in the picture, as the one of me standing in front of the A-Bomb Dome in Hiroshima. Or, after looking at the little marker from the Gettysburg cemetery I show another photo I took at the same spot, looking



Local photographer Lawrence Beitler took this powerful lynching photograph in Marion, Indiana, in 1930. It shows the bodies of Abe Smith and Thomas Shipp and, as demanding of the eye, the spectators. (Image courtesy of Indiana Historical Society, the Bettman Archive, and Corbis.)



The artist Thomas Hart Benton depicted, and perhaps condemned, the Ku Klux Klan in this mural he painted for the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago. The mural now hangs in a lecture room on the campus of Indiana University, Bloomington. (Image courtesy of Indiana University.)

toward the building used as a hospital in 1863, which a hundred years later was the Gettysburg College dormitory where I lived my freshmen year. Just what part of a teacher's autobiography to reveal to students is always uncertain, but I find occasional personal photographs helpful.

My students this year see a picture I took in 2001 at the American Cemetery in Normandy. Wandering among the 9,386 markers, looking for Indiana "boys," I found instead the marker for Elizabeth Richardson, from Mishawaka, Indiana. I have since learned that Liz Richardson was one of only two women buried at that cemetery above Omaha Beach and that she joined the American Red Cross and served in England and France in 1944 and 1945. I now have copies of the

fascinating wartime letters she sent home and the diary she kept. They will be, I hope, the core of a book about an ordinary young woman in World War II. Students who have seen my photograph of her grave marker now ask about the project.

I am still amazed at how enduringly powerful images are for students. Effective teaching requires more than just putting images on a screen, however. There is, first, the challenge of selection, of locating images that are not only interesting but also connect to larger learning objectives of that day's class. The web has radically eased the practicalities of image gathering. Sites such as the American Memory collections at the Library of Congress <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ammemhome.html>>, the



One of the many markers at the Gettysburg National Cemetery, this one testifies to the brutality of the battle there on July 1-3, 1863. (Image courtesy of author.)



The grave site of Elizabeth Richardson, one of the 9,386 markers at the Normandy American Cemetery, Colleville-sur-Mer, France. (Image courtesy of author.)

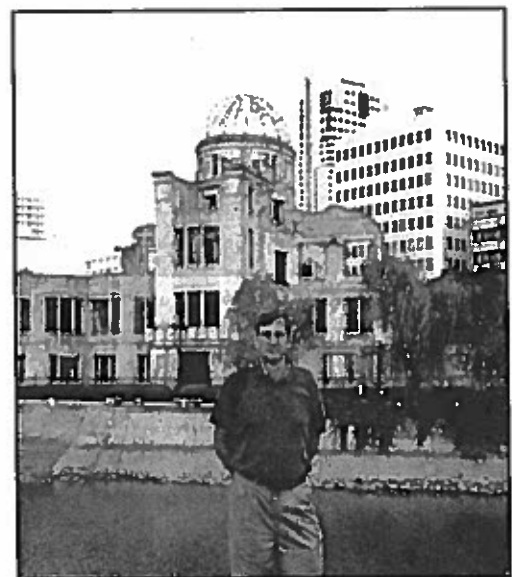
presidential libraries (the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, for example, at <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/>), and the National Archives <http://www.archives.gov/welcome/index.html> simplify finding good teaching images.

Showing the image has also become easier with new technology. Moving an image from the web to PowerPoint is a simple process that even I learned on my own and that is far more efficient than making and managing slides. Once in electronic format, images can be readily organized into subject folders and then selected and retrieved to use in class. And more and more classrooms have projection capability. Because it is far easier, I use images much more frequently now. I also assign students projects that require them to search and study images online, such as the World War II poster exhibit, "Powers of Persuasion," on the National Archives site.

The goal of selecting and showing an image is to spur student learning. A good image grabs their attention, but the teacher must be prepared to facilitate the discussion by allowing time for students to look and think. Despite assertions that young Americans are all so "visual," students often need help to move beyond the first look. And they need context, the kind of historical context that comes from reading relevant assignments and from a good teacher setting up the image. Images, of course, are primary sources. And students should learn how to read them just as they read other texts. Of course, students often differ in their reading of an image, thereby producing the kind of classroom discussion that every teacher covets.

I try to follow up good images by using them more than once. For example, comparing the Rosie poster to an image of a housewife in the 1950s enables students to think about change or continuity in gender roles. Once learned, it is not always necessary to repeat the image: a few words about Rosie's manicured fingernail weeks after we have discussed that poster become a shorthand comparison to a point about gender and beauty in, say, the 1960s counterculture. I reinforce the importance of images by including them on exams as the basis for an essay question.

It is simple. Never walk into a classroom without an image. But, as with most teaching, the "simple" takes preparation and thought. In the case of images, the investment pays off in student learning and with dividends of pleasure for the teacher. □



The author in front of the A-Bomb Dome, Hiroshima. This ruin remains standing as a symbol of the bomb the Americans dropped on August 6, 1945. (Image courtesy of author.)

James H. Madison is Thomas and Kathryn Miller Professor of History at Indiana University, Bloomington. His most recent book, A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America (2001), includes considerable discussion of the lynching photograph in this essay.