

# Picturing Women: Gender, Images, and Representation in Social Studies

Christine Woyshner

**More than two decades ago**, a well-known study pointed out that despite the marked increase in images of women in secondary history textbooks, the narrative emphasis on political, diplomatic, and military history had not changed.<sup>1</sup> While this study raised awareness of gender balance in the social studies curriculum, little attention has been paid to *how* women are represented, as opposed to *how many* are represented. Few, if any, articles on gender in the social studies curriculum have focused on teaching students to critically examine images of women and girls in textbooks, primary sources, and other resources. Young people are bombarded with media images at every turn; therefore, it is important to teach them to consider how women and girls are visually represented.

This article raises questions about gender identity, and how it has been culturally constructed in images, artifacts, and photographs. Social studies students should be literate in images as well as text-based resources.<sup>2</sup> I suggest ways that social studies teachers can help their students look closely at images of women and girls and think about who is represented, how they are represented, and who is left out. Once they learn some of the techniques of visual literacy, students may explore the following questions: What roles have images played in defining women's places in society? How is gender socially constructed, in part through visual representations of women and girls? How does race come into play through these images? What

impact and role do these images play in social and civic education? How do images shape students' understanding of women in history?

The activities outlined in this article emphasize three of the National Council for the Social Studies' Ten Thematic Strands: ❶ Culture; ❷ Time, Continuity, and Change; and ❹ Individual Development and Identity.

## Picturing Women

I use a series of images on women's mid-nineteenth century dress reform efforts to both illustrate the importance of questioning images of women in textbooks, primary source materials, museums, and public art, and to demonstrate three approaches that will help teachers in this

endeavor: (1) close-looking, (2) juxtapositions, and (3) switching places.

The mid-nineteenth century was a time of great change on the American political and social landscape, particularly for white, middle-class women. In the decades prior to the 1890s surge of women's activism, black and white women engaged in work that sought to aid the poor, support their ongoing education in literary circles, and engage in reform measures.<sup>3</sup> The many reform movements of this time included abolitionism, temperance, suffrage, health, and dress reforms, many of which were interrelated. For example, many women who were involved in the abolitionist movement later fought for women's suffrage. Also, health reforms for women were often related to dress reform, and the need for women to wear more comfortable clothing.

In the mid-nineteenth century, American women wore restrictive clothing, such as corsets and hoop skirts, while clothing for men had become more functional and comfortable. Women who adopted "male" clothing were perceived as challenging traditional gender roles, and none was more famous than Amelia

Bloomer. Bloomer advocated for women wearing trousers, or “bloomers,” under their skirts.<sup>4</sup> Bloomer was a journalist and temperance worker who attended the 1848 women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls. By 1850, Bloomer was defending the wearing of “pantelettes” in *The Lily*, a temperance journal she had founded. Her articles received widespread attention, as women wrote in asking for more information and patterns for this style of dress—a style that by then had become known as the “Bloomer Costume.”<sup>5</sup> Bloomer felt, however, that this fervor detracted from more important women’s rights issues. She eventually left the journal in the hands of others and later continued her activism as a member of the Ladies’ Temperance, Soldiers’ Aid, and Iowa Woman Suffrage Societies.<sup>6</sup> Women’s dress reform continued into the early years of the twentieth century and drew on scientific and anatomical rationales for changes in women’s dress by that time.

### Close-Looking

Students can certainly read textbook and primary source print materials to understand Bloomer and dress reform, but examining and questioning images extends their learning. A common museum education technique involves looking closely, which means having students study an image or artifact for an extended period of time. Very often we feel we do not have time to spend studying images for even a few minutes in a social studies curriculum that focuses on coverage, but doing so helps students develop important intellectual skills. Teaching students how to engage in close-looking cultivates “their capacity for careful, critical observation of their world,” an important building block to research and study.<sup>7</sup> This activity both helps students develop a keen eye for the rest of the activities and forces them to slow down and study a particular representation.

This approach can be done orally or in writing. The teacher will need to select an image that includes a woman or women related to the topic of study. For this example, I have selected a photograph



Figure 1: Women’s rights advocate Amelia Bloomer

of Amelia Bloomer (Figure 1). Either reproduce your image on an overhead or document camera, or circulate individual copies for students. Have them look at the picture silently for at least several minutes. This may be difficult, but it is important that they look for a sustained period of time. Students should then write down everything they notice about the image, keeping their notes descriptive. For teachers who use the dialectic notebook, they may want their students to write descriptive observations on one side, with more interpretive ones

on the other. When at least five minutes have passed, have students share what they notice, by stating what they observe (descriptive notes) before you allow them to move to interpretation.

For example, with Figure 1, students will probably note Bloomer’s clothing, pose, and expression. Again, keep them close to description at first, such as “she is wearing a hat and leaning on a pillar.” Then as they move toward more interpretive notions, have them back up their assertions with evidence. For instance, if a student remarks that Bloomer is trying





Figure 2: A sketch of Amelia Bloomer



Figure 3: "The Bloomer's Complaint"

to change women's fashions, ask them to state what evidence they have of this. How do they know this from the photograph? Is it obvious that Bloomer is wearing pants? Why or why not? The teacher may prod students with questions that get them to look more closely and question their assumptions. For example, What time period is this from? How do you know? What does Bloomer's body language tell you? Getting your students to slow down, and think about what they see and assumptions that they hold, is a critical skill in developing image literacy.

### Juxtapositions

Next, it is critical to show students more than one image of the woman or women you are studying, even if some of the images are unflattering. Comparing dif-

ferent renderings of the same woman can illustrate how the public perceived women and what political point the artist was trying to convey. Sharing with students more than one image of a particular woman also helps them develop more complex and sophisticated understandings of women in the past. Too often, there is only one image of a particular woman in a textbook from which students are intended to understand that woman's impact, life, and contributions. With juxtapositions, the teacher displays several images of the same woman, or group of women, to provoke reflections on cultural constructions of gender and equality. The group of images I have selected helps students question how women reformers were represented in the mid-nineteenth century.

Begin by having students look at the first image again, the photograph of Amelia Bloomer, if they have not just done so. Then, display the two artists' drawings: one of Bloomer herself and the other of a woman in bloomers (Figures 2 and 3). Contrast the drawing of Bloomer in Figure 2 with her photograph in Figure 1. What differences and similarities do students notice? In which image is it easier to notice the pantaloons? Figure 3, "The Bloomer's Complaint," is from sheet music of the mid-nineteenth century. Have students look closely at that image to consider what they notice about this dress reformer. What do they make of the fact that she is slender, delicate, and very feminine looking? Have them describe her pose and her stance, comparing it to the other images. In addition to having



Figure 4: "Wearing the Breeches"



Figure 5: "Ain't You a Pretty Pair of Bloods"

the students study how the dress reformer is represented, you may wish to ask them what they consider to be the meaning of the title. What might have been "The Bloomer's Complaint?" Make sure to have students study the three images as a group to discuss their impressions. Have students reflect on the poses of the women and the ways the women and the Bloomer costume are depicted. Ask your students, "What purpose might these images have had in the wider public? Do you think they support or counter dress reform for women? Why or why not?"

Finally, introduce the last image in the juxtaposition, a comic valentine called "Wearing the Breeches" (Figure 4). This image represents another position on dress reform: how those in opposition viewed the Bloomer women and their

pantaloon. Have students study the image closely and then consider it juxtaposed with the others. What is different about this image in comparison to the others? What point is the artist trying to convey? What were people afraid of during this era in regard to changes in women's clothing? What other changes might follow dress reform? Ask them to again consider the group of images to think about which representations supported dress reform for women and to determine what evidence they have from these pictures.

### Trading Places

The third approach asks students to trade or switch places of the images. This "trading places" activity is useful in working with images that are all women,

all men, or both men and women. It can be applied to virtually any time period and any geographical location. The final image, a comic valentine from the late 1850s, is called "Ain't You a Pretty Pair of Bloods" (Figure 5). This illustration helps students consider, with the example of women's attire, how visual representations promoted cultural and social notions about women and how they were to be viewed and treated. It depicts a woman attempting to sit or stand comfortably in a train or streetcar. The poem says she is being crowded by two men, as it attempts to make the point that her crinoline (the hoop-shaped skirt) is to blame for the lack of space. The woman is clearly the focal point in this image, as her dress appears to overpower her and those around her.



As always, begin with close-looking, and have the students develop their impressions and ideas about the image. Have them describe the woman and the men surrounding her—what are their expressions, what are they wearing, and so on. Then, move toward interpretation. What sentiment was the illustrator attempting to convey? What does the image say about women's clothing at the time? Does it appear that the illustrator was in favor, or against, dress reform?


Finally, to show the students how gender is so central to our understanding of ourselves in history, have them switch the genders of the characters. That is, they should imagine the male figures to be female and the female figure in the center to be male. (And, yes, the man in the middle is wearing a crinoline!) What do they think about a man wearing a crinoline? How does that disrupt students' understandings of what it meant—and what it means—to be male or female? Would this ever have been possible? Why or why not? How do they feel about switching the genders? Discuss with students how this switching of genders seems unusual and even abnormal and what this means in regard to our expectations. This final exercise helps students see how our notions of what it means to be male and female are socially and culturally constructed.<sup>8</sup>

For the above three approaches and any selection of images you use in the classroom, it is most important to have students consider who is missing (i.e., who is left out from these portraits and images). Where are men in these images? Are they pictured as a standard? And how are we to read their reactions to the dress reformers? Students could research the history of men and dress reform. Were men involved? If so, to what extent? Did men have any dress reform issues of their own? Also, teachers should lead students to consider the absence of women of color. Why are they not included in these images? For example, were black women involved in the matter of dress reform? Why or why not? What about working-class women? Did they wear corsets and hoop skirts? Having students

locate representations of diverse women can teach students about how race and ethnicity complicated gender, and how diverse women were represented in images and photographs.

By engaging students in the activities discussed above over time, students should begin to develop a critical eye and ways of looking closely at images, as well as an ability to ask key questions, such as Who is represented? Who is the assumed viewer? What message is being conveyed about women and gender, and what does this tell us about the artist, U.S. society, or that era?

## Conclusion

In this article, I introduce the proverbial tip-of-the-iceberg of working with images to raise students' awareness of women in history through activities that focus on gender and representation. These are offered as a starting point for a much richer social studies curriculum, in which representations of women are considered, examined, and then critiqued. For those who believe that teaching toward gender equity in the social studies classroom is "old hat," I offer a caveat—current research on this matter has found that along with social studies, gender has been overlooked in recent years under the initiatives of No Child Left Behind.<sup>9</sup> Thus, raising awareness of gender and women in history remains as important today as ever. We cannot begin to achieve gender equity, nor can we adequately prepare citizens, until we teach our young people about how women and girls have been represented in the media, history, and artifacts. Gender identity is tied to the context in which we were raised. Once young people recognize this, they will be in a better position to think critically about gender as a cultural construct and the ways that literature, historical artifacts, and media shape various elements of identity. 

## Notes

1. Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault, "Integrating Women's History: The Case of United States History High School Textbooks," *The History Teacher* 19 no. 2 (1986): 211-262. Tetreault's study contributed to broader interest in changes in social studies teaching. See, for example, Margaret Smith Crocco, "Making

Time for Women's History When Your Survey Course Is Already Filled to Overflowing," *Social Education* 61, no. 1 (1997): 32-37; Bárbara C. Cruz and Jennifer L. Groendal-Cobb, "Incorporating Women's Voices Into the Middle and Senior High School History Curriculum," *The Social Studies* (November/December 1998): 271-275; Paula Sincero and Christine Woyshner, "Writing Women Into the Curriculum," *Social Education* 67, no. 4 (2003): 218-225.

2. In this article, I draw on theory and practice from critical literacy and museum education to argue that it is a natural evolution for social studies educators to consider gender and representation, especially as it has a tremendous impact on civic identity and the goals of the social studies. See, for example, Laraine Wallowitz, "Reading as Resistance: Gendered Messages in Literature and Media," *English Journal* 93, no. 3 (2004): 26-31; and John Hennigar Shuh, "Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects," in *The Educational Role of the Museum*, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, ed. (Leicester Readers in Museum Studies, 1999), 80-91.
3. A key work in this area is Anne Firor Scott's *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
4. Melissa Doak and Melissa Karetny, "How Did Diverse Activists Shape the Dress Reform Movement, 1838-1881?" (1999) in Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin, eds., *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000* at [www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmrestricted/dress/intro.htm](http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmrestricted/dress/intro.htm).
5. W. David Lewis, "Amelia Jenks Bloomer," in *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary*, Edward T. James and Janet Wilson James, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1971), 179-181.
6. For ideas on teaching about women's associations, see Christine Woyshner, "Teaching the Women's Club Movement in United States History," *The Social Studies* 93, no. 1 (2002): 11-17.
7. Shuh, "Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects," 85.
8. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1972), 64.
9. Carole Hahn, Jane Bernard-Powers, Margaret Smith Crocco, and Christine Woyshner, "Gender Equity in Social Studies," in *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity through Education*, Susan S. Klein, ed., (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, in press).

*The title and ideas in this article were inspired by the Picturing Women Project under the direction of curator Susan Shifrin. The author wishes to thank Susan Shifrin and Shirley Brown for their support and guidance in developing these ideas. More information on the project may be found at [www.picturingwomen.org](http://www.picturingwomen.org).*

**CHRISTINE WOYSHNER** is an associate professor of education at Temple University. She is currently working on two new books on women's voluntary organizations in the history of education.