

# Painting America: Teaching U.S.-American History and Fostering Visual Literacy through Art in EFL Classrooms

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*In our contemporary multimodal world, works of art serve as meaningful resources of cultural memory to understand a nation's identity. Accessing paintings from an art educational perspective, this article explores avenues through which art can teach students both historical and recent cultural aspects of the U.S.-American past. For this, two paintings, John Gast's American Progress (1872) and Frida Kahlo's Self-Portrait Along the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States (1932), and one mural depicting George Floyd at the memorial site in Minneapolis, drawn by the community artists Cadex Herrera, Greta McLain, and Xena Goldman in 2020, were chosen. By analyzing these paintings through an educational lens, different ways of implementing art in foreign language classrooms are shown. In doing so, we recognize the potential of art in EFL settings, which provides a meaningful channel to engage students with American history and present-day controversies, promotes students' cultural awareness, and ultimately fosters their visual literacy in foreign language education.*

*In unserer heutigen multimodalen Welt dienen Kunstwerke als aussagekräftige Quellen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, um die Identität einer Nation zu verstehen. Dieser Artikel untersucht Gemälde aus kunstpädagogischer Perspektive und erforscht Wege, wie Studierenden und Lernenden durch Kunst sowohl historische als auch aktuelle kulturelle Aspekte der US-amerikanischen Vergangenheit vermittelt werden können. Dazu werden zwei Gemälde, John Gasts American Progress (1872) und Frida Kahlos Self-Portrait Along the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States (1932), sowie ein Mural (Wandbild), das George Floyd darstellt und von den Community-Künstlern Cadex Herrera, Greta McLain und Xena Goldman im Jahr 2020 an der Gedenkstätte in Minneapolis gemalt wurde, ausgewählt. Durch eine Analyse dieser Bilder aus pädagogischer Perspektive werden verschiedene Möglichkeiten der Implementierung*

*von Kunst im Fremdsprachenunterricht aufgezeigt, die das Potenzial von Kunst in EFL-Kontexten verdeutlichen. Die Kunstwerke bieten den Studierenden und Lernenden einen wertvollen Zugang zu amerikanischer Geschichte und gegenwärtigen Kontroversen, fördern das kulturelle Bewusstsein der Lernenden und letztendlich ihre visuelle Kompetenz im Fremdsprachenunterricht.*

## Introduction

*"A people without knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture are like a tree without roots." - Marcus Mosiah Garvey*

The United States is a nation of diverse peoples that have been bound together by a constitution and a wish to live together in a shared place. Controversies over racial inequality, cultural diversity, and political decisions regulating this shared existence have dominated and continue to shape contemporary U.S.-American life and culture. This is best illustrated by current political and social upheavals: Derek Chauvin's conviction for murder following the killing of George Floyd, demonstrations against social inequality, structural racism,<sup>1</sup> and police brutality, the resurgence and expansion of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), and the migration crisis at the U.S.-Mexican border are just a few recent examples. All these events, experiences, and movements combine questions of race and belonging that have been at the core of a long history of divides and struggles over U.S. cultural and national identity.

Looking at U.S.-American history, it becomes evident that these issues have persisted ever since the mass appropriation, dispossession, and impoverishment of the lands, territories and resources of indigenous peoples through the practice of settler colonialism. The continuous and parallel existence of various cultures and ethnicities in one

place has opened room for discussions on migration and identity in past and present-day American society. However, a number of historical processes, i.e., conquests, colonialism, a slave trade, territorial acquisition, but also voluntary international migrations have sustainably influenced U.S.-American demographics (Gerber, 2011). “Who are we?” has become a question that is continuously revisited and reassessed by America’s people, who have migrated from every corner of the globe (Gerber, 2011).

One way of dealing with and negotiating individual reactions to this question is mediated through art. In our contemporary multimodal and increasingly diversified world, art serves as a meaningful resource of cultural memory to understand and embrace a nation’s identity. While works of art usually depict the individual perspective of the artist on cultural movements in a society, they nevertheless help to understand common characteristics that are shared by a society in a given place and time. Thus, the significance of art in a society cannot be overestimated. Furthermore, art depicts the social and political actions, needs, and expectations of a society at a specific point in time while simultaneously evoking a wide range of feelings in its audience. Because art is in constant interaction with society, paintings play a fundamental role in promoting cultural values and prevalent forms of identity while oftentimes breaking with societal norms and barriers (DeMarrais & Robb, 2013).

Transmitting cultural values and manifesting social integration can be seen as two fundamental functions of education in general and of foreign language classrooms in particular (Barkan, 2011). By combining art education with EFL teaching, advantages from both fields are integrated into the foreign language classroom: authentic and historically relevant paintings are used to discuss present and past realities in the United States among learners which allow them to participate in the social lives and cultural memory (Assmann, 2006) of the English-speaking population. We will argue that using art in foreign language classrooms educates EFL learners about aspects of the U.S.-American society and helps them to develop

intercultural awareness; this contributes to fostering their visual literacy in foreign language education. In doing so, two paintings (John Gast’s *American Progress* (1872) and Frida Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait Along the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* from 1932), and one mural (George Floyd’s portrait at the memorial site in Minneapolis from 2020) will first be historically and socially contextualized to underline the common bond among the selected works of art. Using historical paintings to teach the present U.S. reality allows learners to further their understanding of the dynamic processes existing in a culture. We will also present our understanding of visual literacy (Wileman, 1993), an ability to read visuals (e.g., paintings) in educational settings. Against this background, it will be shown that methods from art education (i.e., percept, writing a museum label) serve as useful means of teaching EFL students about U.S.-American cultural diversity, migration, and historical events to foster both visual literacy and intercultural communicative competence in EFL settings as demanded by current core curricula in Germany (e.g., MSW NRW 2014; ISB Bayern 2009).

### **The State of the Art**

Ever since America’s independence was declared in 1776, the nation has been faced with enormous changes that have affected all levels of society, politics, and culture. These include technological and societal advances, political conflicts leading to war, and changes in immigration patterns affecting the ethnic and cultural composition of the U.S. population. Due to voluntary and involuntary international migrations from various parts of the world, the U.S., just like the migration patterns themselves, is in constant flux (Gerber, 2011) and continuously adapts to the political and social circumstances. So-called push and pull factors have prompted people being pushed away from their home countries and pulled towards the United States, oftentimes as a result of oppressive governments, wars, discrimination and a wish for material security, property ownership, and religious freedom (Bayor & Bayor, 2011), respectively.

Due to the large numbers of migrants who annually come to the U.S. from all parts of the world, the country has always been ethnically diverse and brings together White or European Americans, African and Asian Americans as well as Hispanics/Latinx people in different ratios. Based on the latest population estimates from 2019, White<sup>2</sup> Americans form 60.1%, Black or African Americans account for 13.4%, Native Americans for 1.3%, Asians for 5.9%, Native Hawaiians for 0.2%, and Hispanics for 18.5% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In addition, 2.8% self-identify as mixed race, a combination of two or more races and ethnicities, which again highlights the nation's diverse and dynamic ethnic composition. While this diversity has generated numerous innovations, a strong work force, and profound changes in U.S. society, discussions on the quotas of admission began to arise when immigration numbers peaked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gerber, 2011, p. 35). Currently, the laws governing immigration limit the numbers of migrants legally allowed into the country although contemporary immigrants bring to the United States needed skills, labor, and a desire to fit into the U.S.-American lifestyle (Bayor & Bayor, 2011, p. xxiv). Past and present regulations have elicited public discussions and nativist concerns over immigration among American citizens on the one hand and constant (re)negotiations of belonging to the mainstream society among immigrants on the other hand, the latter being tied to questions of identity, race, and ethnicity.

Respectively, these issues have been taken up by artists who deal not only with their experiences of migration and identity formation, but also with complex changes and movements in U.S. society. These key topics form a common bond between the artworks discussed: the two painters, John Gast and Frida Kahlo, both migrated to the United States and lived there for an extended period of time. While Gast never returned to his home country of Germany after his emigration in the 1870s, Kahlo went back to Mexico in 1934. In understanding the BLM movement as a direct consequence of sustained immigration, racial injustice and unequal treatment based on skin color, the

George Floyd mural completes our discussion by picking up current changes in U.S. society that are rooting in questions of migration, ethnic diversity, and identity formation. Both the interpretation and discussion of artworks ask for a consideration of the social conditions that define the meaning of the pictures to help understand the present through the past.

### Introducing Visual Literacy in Learning Contexts

Today, "human experience is more visual and visualized than ever before" (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 1), but although visualization has become part of everyday life, it "does not mean that we necessarily know what it is we are seeing" (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 2). Especially in the context of the twenty-first century, where visualizations have become a vital part of our everyday lives and seem to be available and accessible everywhere, the necessity to learn with and about visuals is even more evident. Visual literacy addresses the issue of how to see visuals and is generally defined as "the ability to read, interpret, and understand information presented in pictorial or graphic images" (Wileman, 1993, p. 114).<sup>3</sup> The call for learning how to decode visual images in (foreign) language education has been increasing in recent years (cf. Gessner, 2005; Hebel & Moreth-Hebel, 2003), and can be observed in a current growth of the publication of teaching material. For instance, major German EFL journals have published special issues on *Visual Literacy* (2007), *Photography* (2019), *The State of the Arts* (2018) or *Mit Bildern lernen* [Learning with Pictures] (2012).<sup>4</sup> Further, the idea of learning how to read images has been discussed in many academic contributions in the field of (foreign) language education such as Kress and van Leeuwen's *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006), Lieber's *Lehren und Lernen mit Bildern: Ein Handbuch zur Bilddidaktik* (2013) or Hecke's and Surkamp's *Bilder im Fremdsprachenunterricht* (2015).

For the proponents of using pictures in class, reasons are as abundant as the works themselves. Pictures hold a high potential for accessibility and provide manifold learning and teaching materials

(Rymarczyk, 2003, p. 120). The use of pictures in the classroom not only fosters students' visual literacy but also stimulates their active learning processes and communicative competence (Rymarczyk, 2005, p. 15). Furthermore, visual input in class can provide scaffolds for learners as "the visual is a vastly [more] efficient mode for carrying and 'processing' great amounts of information [...]" (Kress, 1998, p. 55). As pictures can provide valuable learning and teaching resources for students (Romeik, 2017, p. 10), they are of great importance in the field of language education. However, the manifold functions and opportunities of learning with visual input is yet to be examined from an empirical point of view (cf. Hallet, 2015, p. 30). Visual input is often discussed and compared against textual input (e.g., picture books) in EFL contexts. In light of this article, we explicitly make works of art teaching and learning objectives, as "a visual decoding competence and critical viewing abilities are underdeveloped and not taught systematically" (Hallet, n.d.). Even though visuals are often considered to be very motivating for students (cf. Breidbach, 2015, p. 6; Freese, 2015, p. 239), they have not found their key roles in EFL classrooms yet.

This underrepresentation of pictures as key learning objectives can be observed when looking more closely at visualizations from the educator's point of view. Students' textbooks are full of visualizations; however, these are rarely taken up in the learning process and often have a predominantly illustrative function (Hallet, 2013, p. 215).

However, to foster students' visual literacy, visualizations must play an important role in the learning process and should not only serve a decorative purpose (see typical visualizations used in EFL settings in fig. 1).

As the term visual literacy aims at learning how to read visualizations, this graphic depiction (see fig. 1) is solely designed to give a first overview of the various forms of visualizations in the EFL classroom and should not be evaluated empirically. In the context of this article, we set a focus on the value of paintings in EFL education. Many paintings are a product of cultural, political, social and economic time and place and, therefore, serve as meaningful resources for learners in EFL education. Consequently, it is not surprising that visuals are suggested in the curriculum i.e., the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Here, "arts (painting, sculpture [...])" have been recommended input for students in foreign language education to foster the learner's sociocultural knowledge (CEFR, 2001, p. 104) and continue to be suggested resources – especially in mediation contexts – in the companion volume (cf. CEFR, 2020, p. 221-224). However, it is not enough to embellish students' textbooks with visualizations, but rather it is important to make these visualizations the learning objectives in the foreign language classroom.

In the following, we suggest the use of visual art for EFL education and present activities for all three paintings during different phases of a lesson. These activities combine (classical and contemporary) works of art with meaningful communicative tasks. Two paintings, John Gast's *American Progress* (1872) and Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait Along the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* (1932), and the mural depicting George Floyd at the memorial site in Minneapolis (2020) serve as the basis for the following two steps: (a) an analysis of the graphic representations of the United States as a culturally diverse nation and (b) a provision of teaching ideas for EFL settings.

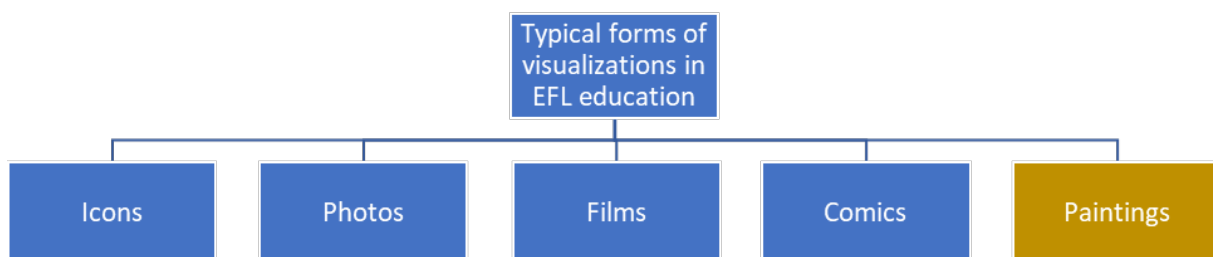


Figure 1: Typical forms of visualizations in EFL education (authors' illustration).

## Analyzing Paintings about U.S.-American History

### John Gast, *American Progress* (1872)

*American Progress* is a painting by John Gast and was created in 1872 (see fig. 2). Today, the painting, which is rather tiny in size and measures 12,75 x 16,75 inches, is held by the Autry Museum of the American West (cf. The Autry Museum online). *American Progress* can virtually be separated into two halves: it shows elements of the American industrial progress on the right side and the darkened landscape on the left, which depicts more traditional aspects of American history, such as Native Americans with hunting equipment, bison, horses, and a traditional covered wagon. Both parts are divided by a floating woman in the center of the painting who is hovering westward and above the crowds. With her long blond hair, the golden star on her forehead

and her light white dress, the female carries a book in her right arm and a black cable, an extension of the power lines, in her left hand. The book's title is partly shown and the letters "schoo" and "book" can be seen - "the emblem of education and the testimonial of our national enlightenment" (Crofutt qtd. in Sandweiss, n.d.). She is an allegorical female representing 'America' who is leading pioneers westward.

Gast's painting from 1872 emerged during a period which was marked by technological innovation and a continuous industrialization in the United States. Concomitant with these two aspects came a switch from being a predominantly agricultural nation to a focus on manufacturing and urbanization. These drastic changes brought along new modes of transportation, i.e., an elaborated and transcontinental railroad system,



Figure 2: *American Progress* (John Gast, 1872). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. Digital ID ppsca 09855 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.09855>.

and allowed Americans a westward expansion to settle on land previously inhabited by Native Americans. The so-called closing of the frontier, announced by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1890, meant that there were at least two White inhabitants per square mile (U.S. Census, 2012). Gast's painting reveals significant aspects of the U.S.-American past: The railroad, shown in the background of the picture, allowed people to travel long distances, and White settlers who proceed westward and at the same time "Indians flee from progress, unable to adjust to the shifting tides of history" (Sandweiss, n.d.). As can be gathered from this example, viewers of this painting receive historical information about the diverse heritage of U.S.-Americans. Sandweiss describes *American Progress* as a "historical encyclopedia of transportation technologies" with

the depictions of technological progress from simple Indian travois, to covered wagons, overland stage and railroad lines (Sandweiss, n.d.). She further states that this "painting hints at the past, lays out a fantastic version of an evolving present, and finally lays out a vision of the future" (Sandweiss, n.d.). *American Progress* therefore is well-suited for the foreign language classroom as it expresses the historical belief of manifest destiny and the cultural meaning of America's westward expansion.

#### Learning with *American Progress*

The painting allows visual approaches to U.S.-American history and can be included in EFL classrooms to teach U.S.-American culture and history. The following suggestions are inspired by an art educational teaching perspective and

Table 1: Teaching Suggestions for *American Progress*.

Phase	Method	Explanation	Instruction for students
Introduction	The painting's title <sup>5</sup> (I)	Students see the painting, but the title is not revealed yet. They are required to come up with a title that they find suitable for the painting and explain their choices.	Have a look at the painting. What could be the painting's title? Take notes and explain your ideas.
Analysis	Picture-profile <sup>6</sup>	Students write a profile of the painting. They research data about the painting and explain important aspects depicted in the painting.	Imagine you are the painter of this painting and write a profile of <i>American Progress</i> . Consider the following aspects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the facts about this painting: When was the painting created? What is the size of the painting? Where can it be seen?</li> <li>• What are the most important elements depicted in this painting? Describe and explain.</li> </ul>
Conclusion	Picture expansion	Students expand the painting. They a) add notes (e.g., pros and cons about the historical developments depicted in the painting). or b) draw further developments in the U.S. American history from today's point of view.	Expand the picture. You can either add textual or visual ideas. a) textual ideas: add notes regarding pros and cons about the historical developments depicted in the painting) or b) visual ideas: draw further developments in the U.S. American history from today's point of view.

imply the idea of learning with *American Progress* to foster students' visual literacy. Students not only learn about the country's cultural, social, and linguistic diversity but also about the near extinction of Native Americans, the colonial (dis)empowerment and the downsides of 'progress' such as the disadvantages of industrialization and unlimited growths. For each phase of a lesson, a method is introduced that picks up the painting's content in a meaningful and communicative way to foster the students' visual literacy.



Figure 3: Self-Portrait Along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States (Frida Kahlo, 1932).

#### **Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait Along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932)**

*Self-Portrait Along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* is a painting by the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. She created this self-portrait that is relatively small in size (12,5 x 13,75 inches) in 1932. The painting can be divided into two halves, the U.S.-American part on the right and the Mexican part on the left, separated by a pink-dressed Frida Kahlo, who is holding a Mexican flag in her hands. Following the economic prosperity during the 1920s, the painting encompasses the aftermaths of the 1929 stock market crash which led to the Great Depression during the 1930s.

While the economic downfall originated in the United States, it soon developed into a worldwide depression which was characterized by high unemployment rates, poverty, and a universal distrust in governments and banks (Crafts & Fearon, 2010). The United States put a halt to Mexican immigration, and Mexican Americans born in the United States were forced to return to their home country; between 1929 and 1935, almost 500,000 Mexicans were deported (García, 2011, p. 1505). Admission to the United States had already become significantly more difficult after the Immigration Act of 1924 (García, 2011, p. 1495); it nevertheless encouraged illegal crossings of the Mexican American border. The painting depicts drastic differences between the two cultures that become apparent in the borderlands between the two countries; Kahlo's painting reveals the historical – but still ongoing – conflicts along the U.S.-Mexican border.

#### **Learning with *Self-Portrait Along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States***

This painting provides a stimulating input for students in the foreign language classrooms it not only shows differences between two countries that share the same border, but it also depicts historical aspects of ongoing disparities between the United States and Mexico. Again, the following teaching suggestions are inspired by art education and aim at fostering student's visual literacy.

#### **Xena Goldman, Cadex Herrera, Greta McLain, *Photograph of People Grieving in front of Mural Dedicated to George Floyd* (2020)**

The last example is a photograph which shows people mourning at the George Floyd memorial site at the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis in front of a street art painting (George Floyd Memorial, Photo by Bebetto Matthews, AP, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/03/30/witnesses-say-they-saw-george-floyd-slowly-fade-away>). The mural in the background was created in 2020 to remember George Floyd's death caused by a police officer in Minneapolis which resulted in worldwide protests against racially motivated

Table 2: Teaching Suggestions for Self-Portrait Along the Borderline between Mexico and the United States.

Phase	Method	Explanation	Instruction for students
Introduction	Interview with the painting <sup>7</sup>	Students see the painting and conduct an interview.	Have a look at this painting and imagine the painting is your interview partner: what would you want to know? Note down questions (first step) and find the answers by conducting an online search (second step). The following sample question might help you: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why does the woman separate the painting in two halves (USA &amp; Mexico)?</li> </ul>
Analysis	Imaginary journey <sup>8</sup>	Students identify with the depicted situation by imagining the time and place of the painting.	Imagine you live in the borderland between Mexico and the USA in the 1930s. Explain the depicted atmosphere, time, and place.
Conclusion	Comparing journeys and discussing ideas.	Students compare and discuss their imaginary journeys.	Compare your imaginary journeys with those of your fellow students.

police brutality and structural racism. The viewer can see people standing in front of the street art painting, where many flowers are laid. Some of them are embracing each other in their shared grieving. On the left, there is a poster with the sentences “If you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I ~~refuse to~~ believe.” Originating in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement, which condemns racially motivated brutality and inequality, gained worldwide attention under the social media hashtags #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter. It was initiated in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who fatally shot Trayvon Martin while patrolling his neighborhood in Florida. Supporters of the movement perceived Zimmerman’s acquittal as a failure of justice and started organizing nationwide demonstrations asking for social and racial justice for African Americans. After the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020, the movement gained new momentum; millions of people in the United States demonstrated against police brutality and made their voices heard against racist structures

deeply anchored in U.S. society. Using the George Floyd mural as a present-day work of art depicting current societal and cultural changes is thus of great significance to students dealing with American culture and politics in EFL classrooms and elsewhere. The photograph of people grieving in front of the street art painting illustrates problems of racism in the USA after ongoing police violence against people of color.

#### Learning with the Photograph of People Grieving in front of the Mural Dedicated to George Floyd

This photograph of the mural is another example of how to combine (historical) developments in the USA with contemporary visualizations in the foreign language classroom. The photo supports students’ comprehension as it not only shows a portrait of George Floyd, but also many people from different ethnic backgrounds standing in front of the street art painting grieving together. The people in front of the mural of whom we only see their backsides, are calmly facing the painting. This street art reveals George Floyd’s name and his portrait, which is embedded in a huge sunflower icon. Inside the lettering of George Floyd’s name, there are blue figures



Table 3: Teaching Suggestions for George Floyd's memorial.

Phase	Method	Explanation	Instruction for students
Introduction	Percept <sup>9</sup>	Students see the photograph and verbalize their first impressions.	Briefly answer the three key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can I see?</li> <li>• What do I think?</li> <li>• How do I feel?</li> </ul>
Analysis	Dialogues <sup>10</sup>	Students imagine that the people shown in the photograph (in front of the mural) talk to each other and/or to George Floyd. They write dialogues.	Imagine the people grieving in front of the street art painting are talking to each other and/or to George Floyd. What would they say? Write a dialogue.
Conclusion	Role plays	Students act out the dialogues in role plays.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act out your dialogues.</li> </ul>

raising their clenched fists. This graphic depiction of people raising their fists shows a strong reference to the iconic picture of athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos showing their gloved fists at the Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City 1968 – a gesture with a long history (cf. Spata, 2020).

### Discussion and Conclusion

The methods presented here, borrowed from art education and transferred to EFL contexts, offer various options to be used in class: identifying the painting's title, conducting an interview with the painting or verbalizing first impressions through percepts can be used as introductory activities to work with art in class. To thoroughly analyze the paintings during the body of a lesson, students stay on task by composing a profile, developing an imaginary journey, or writing dialogues among people in the picture. Finally, picking up the students' results by comparing initial and final thoughts in a last phase of the lesson allows for the integration of changing perspectives on art after an in-depth examination and rounds off the topic.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, paintings offer various learning opportunities for students to foster their visual literacy in the foreign language classroom. Methods of fine art education can help students to learn how to see those visualizations. Results from the essay illustrate that these paintings, along with

many other paintings which capture aspects of U.S.-American history, are suitable for EFL education: they not only depict elements from the nation's history but can also be adapted to recent developments in a given society. By teaching historical culture through art, students can connect past with present (cultural) movements and understand art as a key aspect of negotiating meaning in a society while being exposed to authentic material. This way, learners are enabled to develop intercultural communicative competences through meaningful tasks taken from the realities of the target language and culture (DeMarrais & Robb, 2013). While the students practice their English language skills and interact with their peers in the target language when analyzing and discussing the art works, they also foster their visual literacy to ultimately learn how to read visuals (cf. Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 2).

Although the art selection presented here is just a small sample of the various choices of paintings available and by no means representative, it nevertheless offers a culturally diverse and critical view on U.S.-American historical and contemporary societal movements. By choosing artists from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (John Gast, Frida Kahlo, and the artist group Cadex Herrera, Greta McLain, Xena Goldman), we aim at providing a diverse cast of people representing a cross section of U.S.-American society. Questions of cultural diversity, structural racism, ethnic identity and migration

among the U.S.-American population illustrated by the BLM movement, the policies that have led to Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States causing a migration crisis along the U.S.-Mexican border, and the subjugation and discrimination of Native Americans in U.S. society, again underline the topicality and importance of connecting history with contemporary experiences. By fostering cultural and racial awareness through historical paintings, we recognize cultural movements of contemporary U.S. society, for which a solid knowledge of the past is the basis. In modern societies, art allows people to “remake themselves and their worlds, while commenting on their values and beliefs” (DeMarrais & Robb, 2013, p. 7). Thus, art establishes a reciprocal relationship to culture: it forms culture and has an impact on its individuals, but it is also influenced by and cannot exist without the larger society. As paintings are one way of fostering visual literacy and teaching historical aspects of a country which are still relevant today, they allow individuals to participate in society and become sensitized towards material culture.

Nevertheless, the examples presented here can only serve as a starting point to broaden students’ visual literacies and should be regarded as initial ideas to inspire teachers to deal with paintings in foreign language education. As long as students, as much as other individuals, are confronted with omnipresent pictures and images in their daily life, they need to be able to understand what they perceive. Future (empirical) studies could set out, for instance, to investigate questions such as the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of art in EFL settings, the (measurable) benefits and potentials visual literacy provides, and/or a multimodal experience of authentic material, in which paintings are one way of providing visual input.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of task-based online lessons on U.S. structural racism see Sandra Stadler-Heer’s article in

this issue.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Census defines a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa as White.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of this article, we would like to draw a line between visual literacy and multiliteracies. While visual literacy focuses solely on the ability to decode visual modes, the concept of multiliteracies refers to the idea that students negotiate multiple meaning-making modes (such as text, image, sound, gesture, object and space) in social, cultural, and domain-specific contexts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 3).

<sup>4</sup> *Der Fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch: Visual Literacy* (2007) and *Photography* (2019), *Praxis Englisch: The State of the Arts* (2018) and *Englisch 5-10: Learning with Pictures* (2012).

<sup>5</sup> This method refers to Schoppe’s teaching suggestion originally entitled “Titelsuche” (2014, p. 49).

<sup>6</sup> This method refers to Schoppe’s teaching suggestion originally entitled “Bild-Steckbrief” (2014, p. 107).

<sup>7</sup> This method refers to Schoppe’s teaching suggestion originally entitled “Interview mit dem Bild” (2014, p. 59).

<sup>8</sup> This method refers to Schoppe’s teaching suggestion originally entitled “Fantasierese” (2014, p. 93).

<sup>9</sup> This method refers to Schoppe’s teaching suggestion originally entitled “Percept” (2014, p. 60).

<sup>10</sup> This method refers to Schoppe’s teaching suggestion originally entitled “Bilddialoge” (2014, p. 100).

<sup>11</sup> While these methods can be used interchangeably and according to the teaching context, they can also be stretched over more than one lesson.

## Literature

Gast, J. (1872). *American Progress*. [Oil on canvas]. The Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles,

United States.

Herrera, C., McLain, G., Goldman, X. et. al. (2020). George Floyd Memorial [Photograph of blue and yellow mural by Bebetto Matthews, AP] Minneapolis, United States.

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