

European Exploration of the Americas, 1489–1596

By Connie Fink (created in 2022, revised in 2025)

Connie Fink has taught elementary and middle school students in Tennessee since 2009 and was named the 2018 Tennessee History Teacher of the Year.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Five 45-minute class periods

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original documents of historical significance.

Over the course of five lessons, students will engage in multiple critical-thinking activities and analyze maps, texts, and images. They will better understand multiple perspectives on an event and the impact early exploration had on Native Americans. They will use the knowledge gained through their analysis to reimagine a work of art representing an early explorer’s “landing.”

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary sources representing multiple accounts
- Identify and explain keywords and important phrases in a historical text
- Interpret primary source materials
- Collaborate with classmates to develop and express different viewpoints
- Recognize and understand the significance of historians’ and narrators’ decisions
- Highlight different historical figures (e.g., Columbus, De Soto, Indigenous peoples)

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Who made maps in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?
- How did European explorers use the information provided on maps?
- How did Columbus describe the Taíno people?
- What assumptions did Europeans make about Native Americans?
- What assumptions have visual artists made about Native Americans?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.1: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.6: Compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in focus and the information provided.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.6: Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.1: Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.7: Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

MATERIALS

- Source 1: *Map of the World of Christopher Columbus*, by Henricus Martellus, ca. 1489, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2007580
- Source 2: Map of the Americas, *America sive novus orbis respectu Europaeorum inferior globi terrestres pars*, by Theodor de Bry and John White, 1596, Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:3f462s48h. This map has figures representing Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Ferdinand Magellan, and Francisco Pizarro in each corner.
- Sources 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D: Quadrants of the Map of the Americas, 1596
- Activity Sheet 1: Critical Thinking: Map of the Americas, 1596
- Optional: Magnifying glasses
- Source 3: Taíno Territory Map from *Taíno: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean* created by Smithsonian Exhibits, 2017. Shown in Randal Woodaman, "Bringing Taíno Peoples Back into History," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 28, 2019, smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/bringing-taino-peoples-back-history-180967637/.

- Source 4: Map of the Americas, *Insulae Americanae in Oceano Septentrionali cum Terris adiacenibus*, by Montanus, 1671, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09789, gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc09789
- Source 5: Page 1 of a letter from Christopher Columbus reporting on his first voyage, [March 4,] 1493, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01427, gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc01427. The original letter, written in Spanish, has been lost. A copy was sent to Rome, where it was translated into Latin and printed for dissemination across Europe.
- Activity Sheets 2A–2F with excerpts from a translation of Christopher Columbus’s letter to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, 1493 from *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5
- Large drawing paper and color pencils or markers
- Source 6: Broadside of Pope Alexander VI’s Doctrine of Discovery [Inter caetera], May 4, 1493, printed in Valladolid, Spain, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GL04093, gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc04093
- Activity Sheet 3: Doctrine of Discovery: What Does It Mean? with excerpts from the Doctrine of Discovery. Translation of the Doctrine of Discovery from Papal Encyclicals Online, papalencyclicals.net/alex06/alex06inter.htm.
- Source 7: *Landing of Columbus*, based on a painting by John Vanderlyn, engraved by H. B. Hall, published by Martin, Johnson & Co., New York, 1856, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08878.001, gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/content-images/08878.0001.det_.jpg.
- Activity Sheet 4: Analyzing an Image
- Source 8: *Curate 757*: Titus Kaphar, PBS, 2019 (9 minutes), pbs.org/video/titus-kaphar-cyvmqu
- Source 9: John Vanderlyn, *Landing of Columbus*, 1847, US Capitol, Architect of the Capitol, aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/landing-columbus. Print on cardstock for each student.
- Source 10: Titus Kaphar, *Columbus Day*, 2014. Oil and mixed media on canvas. 67.75 x 90.75 x 4 inches. © Titus Kaphar. Image courtesy of the artist.
- Source 11: William Henry Powell, *The Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto*, 1855, US Capitol, Architect of the Capitol, aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/discovery-mississippi-de-soto. Print on cardstock for each student.
- Source 12: Titus Kaphar’s website, kapharstudio.com/work/

- Suggested art supplies: acrylic white paint markers, utility knives/cutting tools, watercolor paint, glue sticks, scissors, markers, cutting mats, paint brushes, water cups, metallic permanent markers, double-sided tape, colored craft tape, surgical tape, paper towels, pipe cleaners

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Age of Exploration

by Peter C. Mancall, University of Southern California

Humans, by their nature, are curious creatures, often looking for new adventures and opportunities. Many have gone in search of treasure, others to promote their religious views, and some for the honor they believed they would earn from being the first of their people to eye unknown territory. Travelers explored, as the saying goes, for gold, God, and glory.

Long-distance exploration has existed for centuries. Polynesians, navigating by the stars, guided their long canoes across the vast expanse of the South Pacific, arriving in Hawai'i around 400 C.E. and Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the thirteenth century. Norse (or Viking) sailors piloted their narrow *knerrir* through the frigid waters of the North Atlantic, traveling from modern Norway via Iceland and Greenland to Newfoundland sometime around the turn of the first Christian millennium. We do not know what drove these intrepid European and Asian adventurers, but in each case some of the travelers remained behind and established colonies.

In the past, many historians have viewed the 1492 voyage of the Genoese pilot Christopher Columbus as initiating the “age of discovery.” But the European age of exploration began almost 200 years earlier when the Venetian Marco Polo traveled to China in the late thirteenth century, returning home with news about vast economic opportunities. His efforts led to the opening of the Silk Road. Others traveled far too. In 1325, the Muslim traveler Abu Abdallah ibn Battuta left Morocco bound for Mecca. He was on the road for thirty years, eventually traveling 73,000 miles. In the 1430s, the Ming admiral Zheng He, piloting a vessel that was five times larger than Columbus’s flagship, led expeditions that included perhaps 28,000 travelers. In 1433, they reached the east coast of Africa, but after their return the Chinese abandoned such long-distance adventures. In the 1440s, Portuguese travelers explored the west coast of Africa. They came home with news of enormous gold reserves and wealthy African kingdoms. Unlike the Chinese, the Portuguese made a substantial commitment to further voyages, which set the stage for Columbus’s desire to find the quickest route to the lucrative spice markets of the southwest Pacific.

News of Columbus’s first voyage raced across Europe after his return in early 1493, inspiring many others to try their luck with a transatlantic voyage. A Venetian explorer named Johan Gabota (John Cabot) received support from King Henry VII of England to explore the northern parts of the Atlantic in 1497. Like many unfortunate explorers, he disappeared into the waters, though his son Sebastian led subsequent voyages. Spaniards following Columbus’s lead traveled to Mexico in the 1510s and the Andes in the 1530s, claiming American territory for their patrons. In 1519, the Portuguese mariner Ferdinand Magalhães (Magellan) sailed west across the Atlantic, through the strait that now bears his name, and across the Pacific. He died in a battle in the Philippines in 1521, but his shipmates and their vessel returned home, marking the

first European circumnavigation of the Earth. From 1577 to 1580, the English explorer Francis Drake led the second circumnavigation. In the years that followed, other explorers tried to find the Northeast Passage, a water route north of Russia, and the Northwest Passage, a similar channel through modern Canada. Their efforts led to disappointment and proved fatal for the Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz and the English captain Henry Hudson. The passages existed, but they were frozen over in the era known as the Little Ice Age, which chilled much of the northern hemisphere from the fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

By the time the English decided to establish a permanent American colony in Jamestown in 1607, many peoples of the world had some understanding of what lay beyond the borders of their communities, with news available in printed books and in the stories that travelers always told. Exploration followed by conquest and colonization changed the world—for the better for Europeans, and for the worse for most Native Americans and residents of sub-Saharan Africa.

Peter Mancall is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities and professor of history, anthropology, and economics at the University of Southern California. He is the author of seven books, including Fatal Journey: The Final Expedition of Henry Hudson: A Tale of Mutiny and Murder in the Arctic (2009) and Hakluyt's Promise: An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America (2007).

LESSON 1: MAPPING THE “NEW WORLD,” 1489–1596

By Connie Fink (created in 2022, revised in 2025)

OVERVIEW

This lesson will serve as a hook for students while providing them some context for the lessons to follow. They will analyze three different maps created during the age of exploration. The theme of “power” driving this unit of inquiry will also be introduced and explored in the context of mapping territory and what is required by a colonizing power seeking to control a new space and its people. Student understanding will be demonstrated through discussion and student activity sheets.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Who made maps in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?
- How did European explorers use the information provided on maps?

MATERIALS

- Source 1: *Map of the World of Christopher Columbus*, by Henricus Martellus, ca. 1489, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2007580
- Source 2: *Map of the Americas, America sive novus orbis respectu Europaeorum inferior globi terrestris pars*, by Theodor de Bry and John White, 1596, Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:3f462s48h. This map has figures representing Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Ferdinand Magellan, and Francisco Pizarro in each corner.
- Sources 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D: Quadrants of the Map of the Americas, 1596
- Activity Sheet 1: Critical Thinking: Map of the Americas, 1596
- Optional: Magnifying glasses

PROCEDURE

1. The Historical Background is provided to supplement your knowledge of this period in history. Feel free to use it as you see fit and share information with your students as necessary.
2. As a hook, start the lesson by asking students if they can name a popular game that's played in the pool during the summer. When they reply "Marco Polo," ask them what the object of the game is. They should respond that the "it" player has their eyes closed and tries to find the other players by calling out "Marco," then the other players call out "Polo." Share with students that Marco Polo was an important Italian traveler who wrote about his travels in a book that later inspired Christopher Columbus and other European explorers. Polo's book sparked a "spice fever" among explorers. Columbus, with hopes of finding a faster and easier route to India and East Asia, ventured out to find a water route.
3. Ask the following discussion questions to spark curiosity and gauge how much students know about early exploration:
 - What comes to mind when you think about exploration?
 - What kind of risks do you believe were involved with early exploration?
 - Why do you think the Europeans' motivations outweighed the risks involved with exploration?
 - How could you learn whether your hunches about these questions are correct?
4. Display on a large screen the Henricus Martellus map from ca. 1489, hand out copies of the map, or if students have devices, provide them with the link to the map. Tell students that there is strong evidence that Columbus may have studied this very map in order to find a faster route to the Indies. Discuss with the students
 - What continents are shown on this map?
 - Where is India on this map?
 - Using this map as a guide, what possible water routes departing from Spain would Columbus take to reach the Indies?
 - In what ways could using this map be an obstacle for Columbus?

Inaccurate maps of the time made for a game of "Marco Polo" for explorers! You may want to display a modern world map to demonstrate the differences for the students.
5. Distribute one of the four sections of Source 2, the 1596 map, and the Critical Thinking activity sheet to each student. You may provide magnifying glasses to enable them to look

closely at the details on the map. Allow time for the students to examine their quadrant of the map and answer the critical thinking questions on the activity sheet.

6. Students are now ready to mix and mingle. Tell them to find three other students, each with a different section of the map so that their group of four has all four sections of the map. They will then take turns sharing the information about their section of the map with the rest of the group.
7. Once the students have finished sharing, have them put the pieces of the map together and explore what new observations they can make. They should note that the map represents the American lands Europeans had claimed. Display the map on a large screen and have each group share their observations with the class.
8. After completing the activity, have a whole-class discussion that addresses the two essential questions:
 - Who made maps in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?
 - How did European explorers use the information provided on maps?

LESSON 2: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF COLUMBUS'S LETTER, 1493

By Connie Fink (created in 2022, revised in 2025)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will work in small groups to analyze excerpts from a letter written by Christopher Columbus to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain. They will focus on how his assumptions and actions affected the people living in the region. Students will demonstrate their understanding by summarizing each excerpt, drawing the scene, and creating a headline. Students will explain each excerpt in a short oral presentation to the class.

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MATERIALS

- Source 3: Taíno Territory Map from *Taíno: Native Heritage and Identity in the Caribbean* created by Smithsonian Exhibits, 2017, in Randal Woodaman, "Bringing Taíno Peoples Back into History," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 28, 2019, smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/bringing-taino-peoples-back-history-180967637/
- Source 4: Map of the Americas, *Insulae Americanae in Oceano Septentrionali cum Terris adiacenibus*, by Montanus, 1671, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09789, gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc09789
- Source 5: Page 1 of a letter from Christopher Columbus reporting on his first voyage, [March 4,] 1493, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01427, gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc01427. The original letter, written in Spanish, has been lost. A copy was sent to Rome, where it was translated into Latin and printed for dissemination across Europe.
- Activity Sheets 2A–2F with excerpts from a translation of Christopher Columbus's letter to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, 1493 from *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5
- Large drawing paper and color pencils or markers

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did Columbus describe the Taíno people?
- What assumptions did Europeans make about Native Americans?

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to keep the same small groups from Lesson 1 or make new groups of 3–4 students.
2. Display Source 3, the map showing the Taíno territory. Share with students that these were the islands that Columbus wrote about in his letter to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.
3. In a guided class discussion, display Source 4, the 1671 map of the Americas, so students can develop some context about the land Columbus referred to in the letter. Columbus was sure that he had landed in India and referred to the Native people as Indians. However, in reality, he was in the Caribbean Sea, nowhere near India and the East Indies. The chain of islands he landed on became known as the West Indies (as opposed to the East Indies he was seeking).
4. Ask guiding questions to prompt students to think critically about the map:
 - What looks familiar/unfamiliar?
 - Are the islands shown on the map located in the Indies?
 - Who is represented at the top left and bottom right corners of the map?
 - How are the Indigenous people portrayed? What about the Europeans? What can you infer from some of their facial expressions and actions?
5. Display Source 5, Columbus’s letter on a large screen. Share that when Columbus returned to Spain he wrote a letter to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who had paid for the trip. In this letter, Columbus reported what he saw during his journey. Note that the letter was printed in Latin, a language that could be read by most educated Europeans at the time. Ask students what they think were the benefits of writing in Latin and not in another language. Explain to students that for hundreds of years Latin was considered the international language of trade and scholarship that allowed people to communicate beyond national borders and languages.
6. Write the following questions on the board:
 - How did Columbus describe the Taíno people?
 - What assumptions did Europeans make about Native Americans?

7. Explain to the students that they will be analyzing excerpts from Columbus’s letter. At the end of the lesson, students will share how their assigned excerpt reveals pieces of evidence that can be used to respond to these questions. You will do the first one together as a whole class.
8. Begin by explaining that primary sources can have tricky words. When there are limited context clues within the text, vocabulary definitions are provided on the activity sheet. Alert students that they might encounter other unfamiliar vocabulary in the text. Encourage students to work together using context clues to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words.
9. Distribute Excerpt 1 to all the students. Explain to the class that the goal is to select keywords that will help to create a summary sentence reflecting their understanding of the text.
10. “Share read” Excerpt 1 with the class. To share read the text, have students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to serve as the model.
11. Ask students to refer back to the text and independently identify keywords. Keywords are important to understanding the text. They are usually nouns or verbs. The students should not select “connector” words (*are, is, the, and, so, etc.*). As they identify the keywords, tell students to underline/circle them in the text.

The number of keywords depends on the length of the original selection. The number of keywords for each excerpt is provided on the activity sheets.

12. Explain that as a whole class they will agree on a final keyword selection to use when writing a sentence that summarizes the main ideas in Excerpt 1. Survey the class for the most popular keyword choices and write the words on the board.
13. Using the class keyword list, in a “shared writing” activity, the class will discuss, construct, and agree on a final summary sentence. Write the final summary sentence on the board and tell students to also write the summary sentence on their Excerpt 1 activity sheet.
14. Point to the essential questions on the board and lead a class discussion asking students to respond based on the evidence in Excerpt 1:
 - How did Columbus describe the Taíno people?
 - What assumptions did Europeans make about Native Americans?
15. Distribute one of the five remaining excerpts to each small group. Students will work in their small groups to complete the activity sheet. Tell the students that they will share their

analysis with the class along with their excerpt's relevance to the essential questions written on the board. As students work, circulate around the room.

16. Group members should silently and independently read their excerpt first, circling any unfamiliar vocabulary. As a group, they should work together to decode and decipher the meaning of any unfamiliar words.
17. Then, students should read the excerpt to themselves a second time to select keywords. Students will share their keyword choices with group members and explain why they made the selection. The group should reach a consensus on the final keyword selection.
18. In a "shared writing" effort, groups will draft a sentence using the keywords that best captures the main idea of their excerpt and write the summary sentence on their activity sheet.
19. The groups will discuss how their excerpt could be used to address the essential questions.
20. Students will brainstorm and take turns sharing their ideas with group members on how to collectively create a mural that visually interprets their assigned excerpt. Provide each small group with a large piece of drawing paper and colored pencils or markers. Students will draw pictures, drop in keywords, and include imagery that serve as symbolism and/or metaphors capturing the essence of the scene depicted in their excerpt. They will then write a headline that captures the essence of the scene.
21. Wrap Up: Students will write or discuss how they imagine their drawings would have been different if they had read a letter from an Indigenous perspective. This closing question starts to set the stage for the final unit of inquiry project.

LESSON 3: DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY, 1493

By Connie Fink (created in 2022, revised in 2025)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will be challenged to think critically as they read a primary source text. They will identify the main ideas and use evidence to make inferences while taking different perspectives into consideration. In closing the lesson, students will show their understanding by responding to essential questions.

MATERIALS

- Source 6: Broadside of Pope Alexander VI's Doctrine of Discovery [Inter caetera], May 4, 1493, printed in Valladolid, Spain, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GL04093, gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc04093
- Activity Sheet 3: Doctrine of Discovery: What Does It Mean? with excerpts from the Doctrine of Discovery. Translation of the Doctrine of Discovery from Papal Encyclicals Online, papalencyclicals.net/alex06/alex06inter.htm.

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GRADE LEVELS: 3–8

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Five 45-minute class periods

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PROCEDURE

1. Display Source 6, Pope Alexander VI's Doctrine of Discovery, the primary source for this lesson. It was issued by the pope soon after Columbus returned from his first voyage to America. Remind the students that most educated Europeans could read Latin. Students will be reading some excerpts from this document.
2. Distribute Activity Sheet 3: Doctrine of Discovery: What Does It Mean? with four excerpts from the Doctrine of Discovery. The students will work with a partner to analyze each excerpt to understand what it means.
3. Share read Excerpt 1 with the class as described in Lesson 2. Give the students time to "turn and talk" with their partners or discuss this excerpt as a whole-class activity.

4. Continue share reading Excerpts 2–4, allowing time between the readings so students can “turn and talk” with their partners. Let students discuss possible meanings of the unfamiliar words they encounter and only provide definitions or synonyms as a last resort. During this time, partners will process, discuss, and record their ideas on their activity sheet.
5. After all of the excerpts have been read and the students have had time to write their answers, discuss what the pope was saying about the discovery of new lands and Europeans’ view of the Indigenous people who lived there.

LESSON 4: VISUAL DEPICTIONS OF COLUMBUS'S LANDING

By Connie Fink (created in 2022, revised in 2025)

OVERVIEW

Students will make observations about how different artists have portrayed European explorers. They will be prompted to think critically about different cultural perspectives and engage in new points of view beyond what is visible on the surface.

MATERIALS

- Source 7: *Landing of Columbus*, based on a painting by John Vanderlyn, engraved by H. B. Hall, published by Martin, Johnson & Co., New York, 1856, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08878.001, gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/content-images/08878.0001.det_.jpg.
- Activity Sheet 4: Analyzing an Image

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ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- What assumptions did Europeans make about Native Americans?

PROCEDURE

1. Share with students that many other European explorers voyaged to the Americas following in Columbus's tracks. European countries competed with each other to find better routes to important trading destinations and to claim lands for themselves. Artists over time have captured what these "landings" might have looked like. Explain that art is often a reflection of one person's perspective about events or people and may not be a true representation of what happened.

Optional: This lesson provides an opportunity to define the difference between a primary and secondary source. For the purpose of this lesson, the paintings are primary sources for European attitudes at the time of their painting. They are also secondary sources because their creators provided a narrative interpretation of what happened in the past.

2. Display the “Landing of Columbus” image on a large screen. The first observation is done silently for a couple of minutes to simply notice as much as possible.
3. Engage students in a whole-class “Fact or Fiction” discussion activity. The purpose of this activity is to do a “close look” at the image to decipher the realities of the event from the thoughts and feelings portrayed by the artist. This activity will prompt students to consider other perspectives and to make deeper connections. Tell students that the “Fact or Fiction” comments should be reflective of the characters in the image, not their own thoughts and feelings. Share that we don’t always have all of the facts, sometimes we have to piece together clues to make informed inferences.
4. In a whole-class discussion, ask students the following questions:
 - What are the *facts* of this event based on what we know happened?
 - What is the *message* being delivered in this image?
 - What do you *believe* is true in this image? What makes you say this?
5. Distribute the Analyzing an Image activity sheet to help guide students to further examine the image. Allow partners/groups time to examine the image and complete the activity sheet.

LESSON 5: SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

By Connie Fink (created in 2022, revised in 2025)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will apply their learning from the previous lessons to include and understand a multi-perspective narrative. They will reframe a primary source image by shifting the focus from the explorer to uplift the perspectives in the background using creative techniques inspired by artist Titus Kaphar. Using art to foreground historical actors who were not initially centered will spotlight the kind of scholarly decisions that modern storytellers—historians and artists—have made and continue to make.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- What assumptions have visual artists made about Native Americans?

MATERIALS

- Source 8: *Curate 757*: Titus Kaphar, PBS, 2019 (9 minutes), pbs.org/video/titus-kaphar-cymqu
- Source 9: John Vanderlyn, *Landing of Columbus*, 1847, US Capitol, Architect of the Capitol, aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/landing-columbus. Print on cardstock for each student.
- Source 10: Titus Kaphar, *Columbus Day*, 2014. Oil and mixed media on canvas. 67.75 x 90.75 x 4 inches. © Titus Kaphar. Image courtesy of the artist.
- Source 11: William Henry Powell, *The Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto*, 1855, US Capitol, Architect of the Capitol, aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/discovery-mississippi-de-soto. Print on cardstock for each student.
- Source 12: Titus Kaphar's website, kapharstudio.com/work/
- Suggested art supplies: acrylic white paint markers, utility knives/cutting tools, watercolor paint, glue sticks, scissors, markers, cutting mats, paint brushes, water cups,

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RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Five 45-minute class periods

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary source materials. Over the course of five lessons, students will engage in multiple critical-thinking activities and analyze maps, texts, and images. They will better understand multiple perspectives on an event and the impact early exploration had on Native Americans.

metallic permanent markers, double-sided tape, colored craft tape, surgical tape, paper towels, pipe cleaners

PROCEDURE

1. Share how explorers such as Columbus and De Soto are displayed in the US Capitol. Share Sources 9 and 11 and point out the dates the images were created (1847 and 1855) and the scale of the paintings (12 ft. x 18 ft.) along with the importance of the US Capitol. Ask: How does knowing where the paintings are displayed influence your interpretation of the images?
2. Tell students that, for their final project, they will create new artwork that centers figures who are absent or un-centered in the paintings you just showed them. Remind students that people on the “side” are not the prominent/main figures portrayed in a story. The “hidden” is what is completely left out from the narrative. Students will rely on their learning from previous lessons to make these connections and inferences.
3. Titus Kaphar is an artist who does this kind of work. Introduce students to Titus Kaphar’s work by showing the PBS video from *Curator 757*. Kaphar mentions in the video that paintings are a type of “visual language.” Ask students what stood out to them from the video. In the video Kaphar says, “We can’t just simply demonize our Founding Fathers, but it’s important not to deify them. Let’s just find the truth in the middle.” What point is Kaphar making in this quote?
4. Focus in on Kaphar’s “Columbus Day Painting” without revealing the title. Ask students if they recognize the painting. In what ways did Kaphar uplift the voices that have been silenced in history?
5. Students will now use the paintings featured in the Capitol Rotunda, *Landing of Columbus* and *The Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto* to create their own Titus Kaphar–inspired art.
6. What kind of themes did they notice in both the Columbus and De Soto paintings? Explain that the project goals are to visually
 - focus on a lesser-known character(s)
 - deepen the story, not erase history
7. Challenge students to use their creativity and not to do the obvious as they modify one image. Students can pick one of the images; some might want to combine elements of both images. The creative reframing of the art piece should promote curiosity and challenge the viewer’s thinking so the image is reinterpreted from another perspective. As a source of

inspiration, use [Titus Kaphar's website](#) to show how he uses different art techniques and on the board write the different technique options Kaphar uses in this work:

- Cut out images from the painting then fill in space with a new image from behind or leave a void
- Invert images to the backside of painting
- Fold or crumple up the paper
- White out characters
- Create a diptych (two frames in one)
- Going outside of the frame
- Slice paper into strips and weave back together
- Use a clear overlay
- Frame characters
- Create new imagery not originally part of the painting
- 3-D effects, add strips/layers
- Bind figures

9. Distribute the images printed on cardstock and ask students to begin by asking themselves:

- What story am I trying to tell?
- In my story, who has become more important and who has become less important? What difference does it make?

10. Set up an art supply station. If you are using utility knives, demonstrate how to safely use the tool. If students don't feel comfortable using the utility knife, offer to cut the pieces out for them. As students work, circulate around the classroom to provide additional directions and monitor progress.

11. Once students have completed their image, they will create a label for their artwork. Explain that in museums and art galleries, each artifact or art piece has a label that provides background information or highlights certain aspects of the piece. Ask students to create a title that reflects the narrative they are revealing. Write the following questions on the board to help guide students in writing their label:

- What did you change in the image? What side characters are now the main people in the image?
- Why did you choose to emphasize a particular person or part of the image? In doing this, how does the narrative represented in the image change? (Students should use their historical thinking skills here. Ask them to back up their reasons with evidence from the previous lessons.)
- How did you accomplish your goal? What Titus Kaphar techniques did you use and why? (Here it's all about their artistic expression choices.)

12. Wrap up: Class discussion

- In what way does Titus Kaphar tell new stories with his art?
- How does being inclusive of multiple perspectives preserve history?

SOURCE 1

Map of the World, ca. 1489



Map of the World of Christopher Columbus, by Henricus Martellus, ca. 1489 (Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

Name _____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 1

Critical Thinking: Map of the Americas, 1596

Closely examine your piece of the map. Be prepared to share your findings with the students holding the other three pieces of the map.

1. Describe what you see and what looks familiar or what was unexpected on the map.

2. What does your section of the map tell you about what people at this time knew or didn't know?

3. Record any questions you have about your piece of the map.

4. How does this map compare to a modern map you might see today?

SOURCE 2

Map of the Americas, 1596



America sive novus orbis respectu Europaeorum inferior globi terrestris pars, by Theodor de Bry and John White, 1596 (Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center)

SOURCE 2A

Map of the Americas, 1596



America sive novus orbis respectu Europaeorum inferior globi terrestris pars, by Theodor de Bry and John White, 1596 (Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center)

SOURCE 2B

Map of the Americas, 1596



America sive novus orbis respectu Europaeorum inferior globi terrestris pars, by Theodor de Bry and John White, 1596 (Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center)

SOURCE 2C

Map of the Americas, 1596



America sive novus orbis respectu Europaeorum inferior globi terrestris pars, by Theodor de Bry and John White, 1596 (Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center)

SOURCE 2D

Map of the Americas, 1596



America sive novus orbis respectu Europaeorum inferior globi terrestris pars, by Theodor de Bry and John White, 1596 (Boston Public Library, Norman B. Leventhal Map Center)

SOURCE 3

Taíno Territory Map



(Smithsonian Exhibits, 2017)

SOURCE 4

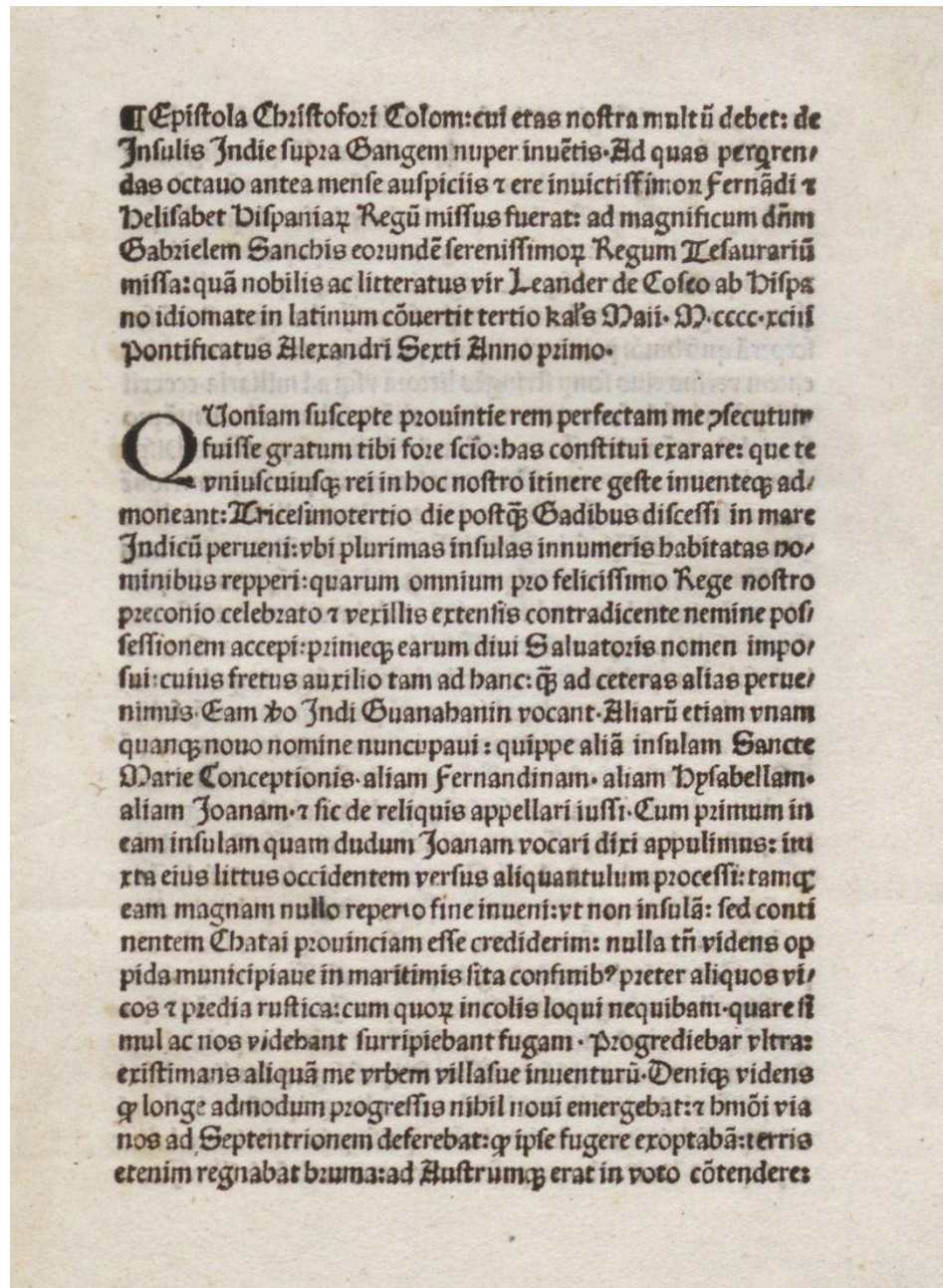
Map of the Americas, 1671



Insulae Americanae in Oceano Septentrionali cum Terris adiacentibus, by Montanus, 1671
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09789)

SOURCE 5

Page 1 of Christopher Columbus's Letter to
Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain, 1493



Christopher Columbus on his first voyage, printed in Rome in 1493
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01427)

ACTIVITY SHEET 2A**Columbus's Letter: Excerpt 1****Vocabulary**

proclamation – official announcement

unfurling his standard – putting up the Spanish flag

. . . I have determined to write you this letter to inform you of everything that has been done and discovered in this voyage of mine. On the thirty-third day after leaving Cadiz I came into the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands inhabited by numerous people. I took possession of all of them for our most fortunate King by making public **proclamation** and **unfurling his standard**, no one making any resistance. To the first of them I have given the name of our blessed Saviour, trusting in whose aid I had reached this and all the rest; but the Indians call it Guanahani. To each of the others also I gave a new name, ordering one to be called Sancta Maria de Concepcion, another Fernandina, another Hysabella, another Johana; and so with all the rest. . . .

Keywords (select up to 6 words)

Summary

Source: *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5.

ACTIVITY SHEET 2B

Columbus's Letter: Excerpt 2

Vocabulary

cultivation – planting or farming

pasturage – land covered with grass, good for grazing animals

salubrity – good quality, clear, clean

. . . In the island, which I have said before was called Hispana, there are very lofty and beautiful mountains, great farms, groves and fields, most fertile both for **cultivation** and for **pasturage**, and well adapted for constructing buildings. The convenience of the harbors in this island, and the excellence of the rivers, in volume and **salubrity**, surpass human belief, unless one should see them. In it the trees, pasture-lands and fruits differ much from those of Johana. Besides, this Hispana abounds in various kinds of species, gold, and metals. . . .

Keywords (select 4–5 words)

Summary

Source: *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5.

ACTIVITY SHEET 2C

Columbus's Letter: Excerpt 3

Vocabulary

destitute of arms – not having weapons, guns

guileless – innocent

. . . They are all, as I said before, unprovided with any sort of iron, and they are **destitute of arms**, which are entirely unknown to them, and for which they are not adapted; not on account of any bodily deformity, for they are well made, but because they are timid and full of terror . . . when they saw our men approaching, they speedily took to flight, parents abandoning children, and children their parents. This happened not because any loss or injury had been inflicted upon any of them. On the contrary, I gave whatever I had, cloth and many other things, to whomsoever I approached, or with whom I could get speech, without any return being made to me; but they are by nature fearful and timid. But when they see that they are safe, and all fear is banished, they are very **guileless** and honest . . .

Keywords (select up to 10 words)

Summary

Source: *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5.

Name _____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 2D

Columbus's Letter: Excerpt 4

Vocabulary

Abound in – to have in large numbers

. . . I gave them many beautiful and pleasing things, which I had brought with me, for no return whatever, in order to win their affection, and that they might become Christians and inclined to love our King and Queen and Princes and all the people of Spain; and that they might be eager to search for and gather and give to us what they **abound in** and we greatly need. . . .

Keywords (select 4–5 words)

Summary

Source: *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5.

Name _____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 2E

Columbus's Letter: Excerpt 5

Vocabulary

notwithstanding – in spite of

. . . As soon as I had come into this sea, I took by force some Indians from the first island, in order that they might learn from us, and at the same time tell us what they knew about affairs in these regions. This succeeded admirably; for in a short time we understood them and they us both by gesture and signs and words; and they were of great service to us. They are coming now with me, and have always believed that I have come from heaven, notwithstanding the long time they have been, and still remain, with us. . . .

Keywords (select up to 6 words)

Summary

Source: *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5.

Name _____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 2F

Columbus's Letter: Excerpt 6

Vocabulary

serene – used as a term of respect for members of some European royal families

prone – likely to do

. . . In all these islands there is no difference in the appearance of the inhabitants, and none in their customs and language, so that all understand one another. This is a circumstance most favorable for what I believe our most **serene** King especially desires, that is, their conversion to the holy faith of Christ; for which, indeed, so far as I could understand, they are very ready and **prone**. . . .

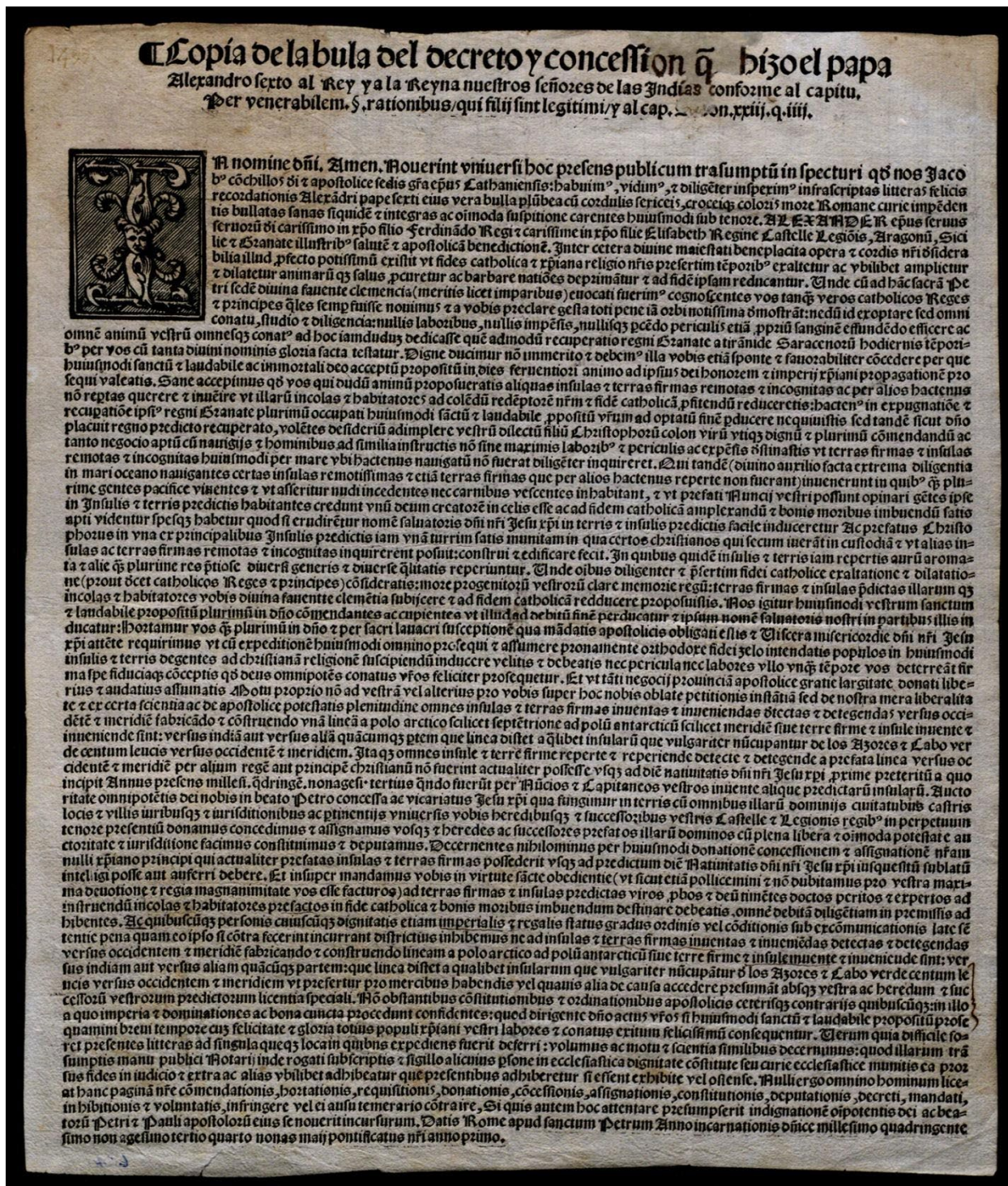
Keywords (select 4–5 words)

Summary

Source: *The Old South Leaflets*, 10th series (Boston, 1892), pp. 1–5.

SOURCE 6

Page 1 of Pope Alexander VI's Doctrine of Discovery, May 4, 1493



Alexander VI, *Inter caetera*, May 4, 1493 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04093)

Name _____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 3

Doctrine of Discovery: What Does It Mean?

Excerpt 1

. . . the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to faith itself. . . .

Excerpt 2

. . . Christopher Columbus, a man assuredly worthy and of the highest recommendations and fitted for so great an undertaking, discovered certain very remote islands and even mainlands that hitherto had not been discovered by others; wherein dwell very many peoples living in peace. . . .

Excerpt 3

. . . In the islands and countries already discovered are found gold, spices, and very many other precious things of divers kinds and qualities. . . .

Excerpt 4

. . . should any of said islands have been found by your envoys and captains... And we make... you and your said heirs and successors lords of them with full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind; . . .

Excerpts from a translation of the Doctrine of Discovery at Papal Encyclicals Online, papalencyclicals.net.

SOURCE 7

Landing of Columbus (published in 1856)



Landing of Columbus, engraved by H. B. Hall, published by Martin, Johnson & Co., New York, 1856. Based on a painting by John Vanderlyn, 1847. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08878.001)

Name _____ Date _____

ACTIVITY SHEET 4

Analyzing an Image

PEOPLE Describe the people in the image. Pay attention to their facial expressions, pose, clothing, etc.	OBJECTS Describe the objects in the image. Objects may also be symbolic.
ACTIONS/ACTIVITIES Describe what is occurring in this image.	OVERALL ASSESSMENT I have learned the following from this image:

SOURCE 9

Landing of Columbus by John Vanderlyn, 1847



(Architect of the Capitol)

SOURCE 10

Columbus Day by Titus Kaphar, 2014



Titus Kaphar, *Columbus Day*, 2014. Oil and mixed media on canvas. 67.75 x 90.75 x 4 inches. © Titus Kaphar. Image courtesy of the artist.

SOURCE 11

The Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto
by William Henry Powell, 1855



(Architect of the Capitol)



