

Tecumseh: Perceptions and Realities

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance.
- Analyze and explain the significance of Tecumseh’s role in the War of 1812.
- Analyze the similarities and differences between how Tecumseh was viewed during his lifetime and how he came to be viewed after his death.
- Analyze and debate the role of Native Americans in the War of 1812.

Portraits

Dying Tecumseh by Ferdinand Pettrich

Marble, 1856

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Additional Artworks

For more artworks and portraits, visit the “1812: A Nation Emerges” online exhibition at

<http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/1812/>

Background Information for Teachers

Information about Northern Battles and Indian Wars during the War of 1812

The land battles of the War of 1812—while small in comparison to the Napoleonic and later wars—ranged over a vast continent, from New Orleans in Louisiana and Horseshoe Bend in what is today central Alabama to Tippecanoe in the Indiana Territory, Detroit in the Michigan Territory, the Niagara frontier, and Lower Canada at the Battle of Châteauguay. Generalizations are difficult, but one may be offered: the American conquest of Canada would not, as Thomas Jefferson had claimed, be “a mere matter of marching.” Under the capable leadership of officers like Major General Isaac Brock, the British offered stout resistance. They were aided by some Canadians, such as Charles de Salaberry, who fought bravely in defense of their homeland. In addition, the Indian nations, fighting mainly on the side of the British under such gifted leaders as Tecumseh and John Norton, were essential to British victories and had a major impact on the course of the war. Under the leadership of new officers such as Brigadier General Winfield Scott and Major General Jacob Brown, American regular forces made rapid improvements, both in the quality of their officers and the discipline and courage of their soldiers. The abject surrender of the elderly Brigadier General William Hull at Detroit in August 1812 would be more than compensated for by the bravery of a new generation of officers at Chippawa and Lundy’s Lane in July 1814.

Information about Tecumseh (1768?–1813)

In the fall of 1810, Tecumseh, which means Shooting Star in Shawnee, paddled down the Wabash River with four hundred warriors to meet Indiana territorial governor William Henry Harrison. Tecumseh was there to represent his brother, Tenskwatawa (the Prophet), an important Indian religious leader of this era who preached a return to traditional ways. Tecumseh demanded Indian land ceded in the Treaty of Fort Wayne (1809). While Tecumseh traveled south to enlist the aid of more tribes for his brother, Harrison took advantage of his absence to destroy Tenskwatawa's encampment, Prophet's Town, near Tippecanoe in the Indiana Territory. Tecumseh then entered into an alliance with the British and was instrumental in forcing William Hull's humiliating surrender at Detroit and in other British victories of 1812. In 1813 Tecumseh opposed the British retreat after Oliver Hazard Perry's Lake Erie victory, which led to discord and Tecumseh's death at the Battle of the Thames. Tecumseh's image as a courageous warrior survived; only seven years later an Indiana newspaper proclaimed, "Every school boy . . . knows that Tecumseh was a great man."

For more information on Tecumseh, see this July 1995 article from *Smithsonian* magazine
http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/object_0795.html

For more information on Native Americans in the War of 1812, see "A Native Nations Perspective on the War of 1812" by Donald Fixico
<http://www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/native-perspective/>

Lesson Procedure

Portrait Analysis: *Dying Tecumseh*

Have students analyze *Dying Tecumseh* (available on the "1812: A Nation Emerges" online exhibition), using the following prompts:

- Describe what you see, paying close attention to elements such as pose, clothing, facial expression, objects, and other visual details.
- What adjectives would you use to describe the way that Tecumseh is portrayed here?
- This piece was sculpted in 1856, several decades after Tecumseh's death. In your opinion, which elements seem realistic in terms of how Tecumseh might have actually appeared while dying? Which elements seem like the artist imagined them? Why do you think the artist might have chosen to portray Tecumseh in this way?

Portrait Activity: *The Living Tecumseh*

1. Pose the following research questions to students as an introduction to this activity:
Tecumseh was killed during the Battle of the Thames in 1813. American soldiers apparently grabbed parts of his scalp and skin as souvenirs of victory. So why might the artist have chosen to portray him so nobly and heroically here? How was Tecumseh viewed during his lifetime, and how did perceptions of him change in the decades after his death?
2. Using all available print and online resources, have students research Tecumseh's life and the way that perceptions of him changed after his death. The following two websites will be useful:

- Tecumseh’s Address to the Osages, 1811
(available at <http://www.historytools.org/sources/tecumseh.pdf>)
 - “The Object at Hand,” *Smithsonian* magazine, July 1995
(available at http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/object_0795.html)
3. Have students work individually or in groups to create portraits (in a medium of their choice) of the living Tecumseh, reflecting how he might have appeared in 1811 or 1812 if he had agreed to sit for a portrait. In their portraits, students should use clothing, pose, facial expression, setting, and objects to reflect aspects of Tecumseh’s life and career learned from their research. Students should be able to explain the choices that they make in their portraits.

Follow-Up Discussion

Have students share and explain their portraits. As a class, discuss the similarities and differences among the various *Living Tecumseh* portraits, and also discuss how they are similar to and different from *Dying Tecumseh*. Use this discussion as a springboard into the topic of how the War of 1812 had tragic consequences for Native American life in the eastern and midwestern United States, and how perceptions of Tecumseh shifted after his death.

National Standards of Learning

Standards in History for Grades 5–12

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801–61)

- Understands United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861 and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans.
- Understands the extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800.