

Picturing Benjamin Franklin in the Classroom: Teaching Early American Literature with Digital Archives

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**Abstract:**

The addition of black and white and color images has radically changed the appearance of American literature textbooks. While these inclusions might improve student engagement, the frequent presentation of images as decorative illustrations can also obscure the need to teach students that all texts—verbal and visual—require careful analysis. "Picturing Benjamin Franklin in the Classroom: Teaching Early American Literature with Digital Archives" uses the example of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* to argue that students can learn vital critical reading and research skills from historically contemporary images. I show how an assignment I designed around the *Franklin Artifacts* database, a free digital image archive, taught students the important practices of close-reading and archival research.

**Keywords:** Benjamin Franklin, Digital Database, Pedagogy, Visual Culture, Material Culture.

The growing availability of images and the technologies used to disseminate them have radically altered the teaching of early American literature. University teachers have dramatically increased their investment with visual media, a shift that has led textbook publishers to begin including images as a central part of their texts. Even the current edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Volume A, 7th Edition, has taken the pictorial plunge, and now features eight pages of color plates at the center of the volume. Norton promises an even more visually developed eighth edition, complete with a "more modern display font and period-opener design that subtly refreshes the look of the page," more color plates, and considerably more digitized supplemental teaching material such as online courseware and lecture slides (*Norton*). Students can learn to become better readers, I believe, through their interactions with non-verbal material, and textbooks like the *Norton* can be an ideal starting place for research projects that teach them how to hone their close-reading skills and how to work with a range of cultural media.

Yet with the increased efforts to make the presentation of American literature more visual, textbooks like the *Norton* run the risk of marginalizing images as mere decoration. In developing my upper-level undergraduate course, "American Literature to 1830," around the *Norton*, I was struck by the color plate image of Franklin at the volume's center. Benjamin West's 1805 painting, *Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky*,<sup>1</sup> depicts its subject in old age surrounded by *putti* who help him in his observations of electricity. Staged as the Olympian operator of kite and key, Franklin embodies his role as the father of American science. Painted a full fifteen years after Franklin's death and almost fifteen years before the *Autobiography* was first published in English, the West portrait signals a problem plaguing many early American studies textbooks; images often depict an author in an historical context that corresponds neither to the writing nor to the publication history of the work it is meant to illustrate. Such a window-dressing approach to ancillary materials can prevent students from

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<sup>1</sup> Image may be viewed at USHistory.org. <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/info/kite.htm>

understanding images as significant cultural texts that require close attention in their own right.

In revealing some of the dangers of relying on visual teaching tools, the West portrait nevertheless evidences the expanding notions of what literary contexts are and the substantial benefits of developing new pedagogies for bringing visual materials into the classroom. In this essay I discuss an assignment that asked students to use a digital archive to assemble, contextualize, and analyze images of Franklin painted within his lifetime; I argue that this kind of research project can serve to build classroom discussion, develop research skills, and provide a useful supplement to textbooks illustrations. In teaching the *Autobiography* with this assignment, I followed a pedagogical approach that in Louis Masur's words, "connects illustration to narrative, situates images in history, and invites students to engage the picture on the page" (1410). Significant accompaniments to the *Autobiography*, portraits take students beyond expected readings of Franklin as author, printer, scientist, and statesman, and alert them to the immense image-making machine that ensured Franklin's place in an American mythology of the Founding period. Portraits also help students read the narrative more skeptically than they often do. Images of Franklin can teach students to see his creative self-representation as a form of self-promotion; more broadly, portraits can introduce students to the ambiguities of truth-telling, authorship, and self-representation in autobiographical writing, the notions of public persona and private self that emerged in the eighteenth century, and the ways these concepts of personal narration extended to cultural forms beyond literature.

Students bring a surprising amount of visual knowledge about Franklin to the classroom. Many of their notions of Franklin come from modern visual representations ranging anywhere from the \$100 bill to on-screen portrayals like that in the 2008 HBO *John Adams*<sup>2</sup> miniseries. Some students are also familiar with Franklin's emblem designs, even if they are not aware of Franklin's role in their production. For instance, his 1754 "Join, or Die"<sup>3</sup> cartoon, a grisly and serpentine reminder that the colonies' political power could be rendered entirely

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<sup>2</sup> Official home page for the series: <http://www.hbo.com/john-adams/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> View image at History.org  
<http://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume5/november06/primsource.cfm>

ineffectual by faction and disunion, has been appropriated by some modern conservative groups.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more than any other author that we teach in early American literature courses, Franklin is attached to a wide range of popular, and especially visual, cultural contexts that students have in mind long before picking up the class textbook. Because they are attuned to the competing interactions between pictures and personalities in their own time and because Franklin's face is already familiar to them, students are often remarkably keen readers of images of Franklin.

In order to get at these dynamics, I began the unit on Franklin by presenting students with a short background survey of eighteenth-century image production and consumption. In eighteenth-century Anglo-Atlantic culture, portraits, landscapes, military, and history paintings, as well as other aesthetic visual works, cemented social status, political allegiances, and familial ties. Renowned artists frequently depicted their wealthy patrons in poses and costumes similar to each other in an effort to highlight the connections between powerful individuals. Like other eighteenth-century elite men, Franklin often commissioned artists to paint him in particular ways, and directed them to include props and backgrounds that would highlight his achievements. Franklin worried considerably over the ways his image was produced, reproduced, and circulated, and frequently wrote to friends and family commenting on the qualities of his various portraits and how they should best be displayed. He also sent portraits as gifts, selecting original paintings to be copied or having copies modified to his specifications. By the end of his lifetime, Franklin had become the subject of a huge number of portraits. His likeness appeared in countless formats: in works by famed painters and sculptors, American and British political cartoons, private sketches, dinnerware, fabrics, and snuffboxes.<sup>5</sup>

Modern editions, especially anthologies, make invisible the graphic realities of early American experience. Nevertheless, a range of online resources can get students to think more productively about images and texts. Major

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<sup>4</sup> For studies on Franklin's iconographic creations, see Olson and Lemay. For a discussion of the importance of Franklin's image as iconography and the production of a nationalist imaginary, see Mulford.

<sup>5</sup> For information about Franklin in portraiture see Craven, Goodman, Fortune, Miles, and Sellers.

subscription databases like *American Periodicals Series*, *Early American Imprints*, and *Early American Newspapers* allow access to digitized texts and give students an opportunity to appreciate the formats, illustrations, and typographical choices that shaped early readers' experiences. Despite the many merits of subscription databases, they are generally only available at research universities. An increasing number of free online databases are far more accessible, however, and offer unique pedagogical advantages. While my course was awarded a grant for use of the university library's digital database subscriptions, it was the free digital archive that I incorporated that was most exciting to students and that produced some of the richest class discussions.<sup>6</sup> Hosted and administered by the Phillips Museum of Art at Franklin and Marshall College, the *Franklin Artifacts* database was the centerpiece archive for my *Franklin Autobiography* assignment. Established in conjunction with the *Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Project* ([www.benfranklin300.org](http://www.benfranklin300.org)), developed by Rosalind Remer and Paige Talbot and first exhibited in 2006, the *Franklin Artifacts* database assembles an archive of over 300 examples of Frankliniana and is searchable by object type, theme, or keyword. "Perhaps the most significant fact about the *Franklin Artifacts* database is its lifespan," explains database curator Constance V. Hershey: "the database will continue to grow as new information is gathered about existing artifacts, and new images and new artifacts are located" (Hershey). Using an evolving site that expands with others' findings modeled for students the necessarily changing and growing nature of academic research.

Students in my course began their research projects by selecting an eighteenth-century portrait of Franklin from the *Franklin Artifacts* online database. To aid students in their assignment, I linked the *Franklin Artifacts* site through our courseware webpage. First, I asked them to summarize information taken from the website about their selected image in a short paragraph. In particular, I asked them to make note of the following: When and where was the image made? Do we know if it was painted from life or if it was copied from an existing image? Do we know Franklin's relationship to the portrait? Did he own it? Did he

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<sup>6</sup> This course was awarded a university grant for innovative use of library materials. In addition to the assignment discussed in this essay, students also completed two assignments that required research using the digital databases *Early American Imprints* and *Early American Newspapers*.

commission it? Did he give or receive it as a gift? What do we know of the artist? What was the artist's relationship with Franklin? What was the artist's reputation in the art community? These questions helped students develop better skills, including how to find relevant background information on a website and how to present it in a coherent way to readers in their own words.

Second, I directed students to write two pages describing and analyzing the image that they selected. I encouraged them to pay as much attention as possible to a picture's organization and placement of faces, clothing, objects, and other visual components. In order to prompt them to consider details thoroughly, I asked them to investigate the following questions: What is Franklin wearing? Do his clothes seem expensive or inexpensive? Does anything stand out about his apparel or accessories? What else is going on in the portrait? Are there other subjects or objects in the image? If so, are they emphasized or deemphasized? What colors are used in the portrait? Is the image dark, light, or both? What might the use of color signify about the way Franklin is presented to the viewer? What is Franklin doing in the image? Is he facing the viewer? If not, what activity is he engaged in? What might his physical position say about the audience for the portrait? Is there anything you find especially unusual about the portrait? Does it seem to convey an idea of Franklin that accords with other images that you have seen or that we have looked at in class? Many students found this part of the assignment more difficult than they had expected. They thought it was particularly challenging to notice all of these elements and then organize them under one guiding idea in their writing. I used class time for students to share these difficulties and to explain the process of close-reading—that in noticing, describing, and explaining the details of an image, they were also making an argument about it.

Once they had completed this portion of their assignments, I then had students present their selected images in class. I invited them to share their observations about the details and composition, their frustrations with "reading" the image, and the arguments they were making through those readings. As a result of this part of the assignment, the class generated its own archive of Franklin images, a collection that was larger and more historically proximate to Franklin's *Autobiography* than the West portrait in the *Norton*, but also smaller,

more manageable, and more specific to the students' interests than the *Franklin Artifacts* collection. How is it possible, they generally asked, that Franklin is represented as both a bespectacled American rustic in fur cap while at the same time a bewigged doctor and statesman? What students concluded as a class is that Franklin was represented in countless ways, sometimes as a man of science, sometimes as a political thinker, sometimes as an American naïf, and sometimes as a wealthy statesman.

In asking students to analyze images of Franklin, this activity built a strong foundation for discussions about the role visual representation plays in Franklin's narrative, but it also helped them develop an understanding of Franklin's autobiographical self as flexible, based on audience perception, and a creation of his imagination. In completing their assignments on portraits of Franklin as well as discussing the way personal appearance operates in the *Autobiography*, students gained a more careful critical appreciation of Franklin's narrative voice and the literary qualities of the *Autobiography*. As a means to get students to enter such discussions, we discussed one of Franklin's brief statements on the art of writing in class. Only a few pages into the *Autobiography*, Franklin writes:

By my rambling Digressions I perceive myself to be gown old. I us'd to write more methodically. But one does not dress for private Company as for a public Ball. 'Tis perhaps only Negligence. (8)

This short aside is a reminder that Franklin's ideas about writing are similar to his views on appearance. While it is true that he is writing in old age and that styles of writing might change over the course of one's life, Franklin's statement about readership ("private Company," "public ball") and his intimation that his disorganization might be attributed to "Negligence" work together to create a sense of intimacy with his imagined reader. Students approached Franklin's statement with an unusually critical eye. Franklin's appearances as well as his writings, they concluded, are studied and manipulated. Like clothing, authorial and narrative personas might be tried on, but are always just as easily taken off.

In order to further develop students' understanding of the connections between visual appearance, self-representation, and Franklin's narrative strategies, I directed students to identify and examine a moment in the *Autobiography* in which Franklin provides a description of himself. Students selected a passage and analyzed it while keeping in mind the following questions: How does Franklin describe himself? Does he mention if he is handsome or homely, wealthy or poor, stylish or plain? What do you notice about the grammar and sentence structure? Is the wording short and choppy or long and flowing, easy to follow or complex? On what particular details is the passage focused? Is there an aspect of Franklin's appearance that is especially emphasized? Does he contrast his appearance with that of any other characters? To whom is Franklin presenting himself? Who, if any, are the other characters involved in the passage? Where does this incident fall in the timeline of the narrative and why is that significant? Is he saying something about his station in life at that moment? Is he indicating a particular character trait about himself? How does this moment help further the narrative? What are the results or lessons of this incident?

Once students had the opportunity to think critically about appearance in the *Autobiography* on their own, we discussed how the concept of Franklin's visual self-representation develops over the course of the narrative. In class, I asked students to share their selections and explain what their passage said about Franklin's self-representation. The results were not unexpected. For example, one student offered Franklin's description of his arrival in Philadelphia on "Sunday morning...at the Market Street Wharf" (19-20). After purchasing "three great Puffy Rolls," Franklin proceeds up "Market Street as far as Fourth Street, passing by the Door of Mr. Read, my future Wife's Father, when she standing at the Door saw me, and thought I made as I certainly did a most awkward ridiculous Appearance" (20). Casting himself as unique in Deborah's eyes, Franklin could hardly have been the only impoverished, awkward, or ridiculous, young man to make his way down the crowded commercial street. Poised on the verge of success, Franklin dresses the part and carries the props that make his future achievements all the more incredible and unexpected. Other students offered similarly familiar passages, including Franklin's visit to the

tavern where he is suspected of being "some Runaway" indentured servant (21) and his visit to his brother James' print shop in Boston where he displays signs of his wealth.

For the final part of the unit on Franklin, I asked students to draw conclusions based on a comparison of their images and the text. Reminding them that the *Autobiography* was written in four parts over almost twenty years, I encouraged students to match portrait dates to the years of Franklin's writing. In particular, I directed them to consider the following: How do the dates of composition of your selected image compare with those of your selected passage? Is the section of the *Autobiography* you selected contemporary with the image or not? Students rightly concluded that Franklin's extreme emphasis on a humble appearance in the *Autobiography* is chronologically parallel to portraits in which he generally appears at his wealthiest. This comparative pedagogical approach demonstrated Franklin's theory of appearance as flexible, studied, and self-consciously deployed. Students interrogated the *Autobiography* in light of their research on Franklin portraits in order to develop readings of the text in which outward markers of success must be manipulated depending on particular circumstances. They were able to generate nuanced and well-argued analyses of the distinctions between the specific narrative persona that Franklin cultivates for the reader and the various visual identities he embodied at the same historical moment.

Supplementing the *Autobiography* with a short research assignment on Franklin portraiture provided students with a way of getting at the central issues at the heart of the period's literary culture without needing to know too much about specific historical details. The assignment also encouraged them to hone the skills they already have and to investigate the questions of identity production, authenticity and duplicity, and disclosure and revelation that lie at the heart of Franklin's narrative. Pairing eighteenth-century images of Franklin with the *Autobiography* allowed students to investigate important concepts of one important literary work, but this pedagogical method also equipped them with the critical tools needed to understand, contextualize, and interrogate any cultural production—visual or textual—that they might encounter.

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