

study guide

Themes and Ideas Behind the Artwork at FCMOCA

Patriotism: The Last Refuge

"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel" is a quote made by Samuel Johnson, a British essayist, poet, lexicographer and critic of English literature. He wrote A Dictionary of the English Language in 1755, said to be one of the most influential dictionaries in the history of the English language.

Johnson wrote the following definitions of patriotism in two different dictionaries. From the first edition, in 1755, "One whose ruling passion is the love of his country," In the 4th edition in 1773 he then added, "It is sometimes used for a factious disturber of the government."

The "scoundrel" quote is reported to have been said on April 7, 1775, probably in reference to the British political theorist, Edmund Burke, who was a member of the Whig party and served in the British House of Commons. Burke was in support of the American colonies and their dispute with King George III that led to the American Revolution. As a patriot of Britain, Johnson must have viewed Burke's political leanings as less than patriotic for a British politician. Johnson was not denigrating the notion of patriotism, which he revered, however, he was referring to a scoundrel's tendency to use patriotism in order to manipulate public opinion and action.

The purpose of this exhibition is to provide a platform for discussion about patriotism in our community, through the lens of artists. Most of the artworks are by artists living in Colorado. They bring up many issues that lead to questions about our feelings about America, its politics and national concerns. Christopher Morris is a photographer for Time magazine. He was assigned to cover President George W. Bush and made the images in the exhibition between 2001 and 2005. His images serve as a national backdrop for the more local view of Colorado artists. Most of the artists provided a short statement about their artwork, why they made it, or what it means to them. These are posted alongside the artworks to assist the visitor in understanding the meaning behind the artwork.

There are several activities designed for visitors to express their own ideas about what it means to be patriotic, what it means to be an American, and what America means to them. It is our hope that viewing the artworks in the exhibit will help you explore your own ideas about what patriotism means to you.

Additional resources:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriotism>

the online, open source encyclopedia; this entry discusses the concept and history of patriotism

<http://www.42explore2.com/patriot.htm>

an educational website with historical information and activities for children to learn about patriotism

<http://www.usa-patriotism.com/>

a resource for patriotic songs, speeches, articles, etc.

From www.42explore2.com/patriot.htm:

The word patriotism comes from a Greek word meaning fatherland. For most of history, love of fatherland or homeland was an attachment to the physical features of the land. But that notion changed in the eighteenth century, when the ideals of democracy, socialism, and communism strongly emerged into political thought. Patriotism was still a love of one's country that included connections to the land and people, but then also included its customs and traditions, pride in its history, and devotion to its welfare.

Today most people agree that patriotism also involves service to their country, but many disagree on how to best perform such service. Some believe that the national government speaks for a country; therefore, all its citizens should actively support government policies and actions. Others argue that a true patriot speaks out when convinced that their country is following an unwise or unjust action.

This website is an excellent source of other web pages and resources to explore many aspects of American patriotism, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the history and protocol of the American Flag. It also addresses questions and suggests resources for activities to explore various forms of patriotism.