

### Visual Analysis: John Gast's *American Progress*

1. Divide the painting into four quadrants. Also view just the center figure.
  - a. In column 1, write ONLY what you see.
  - b. Then, in column 2, write descriptions of what you feel.
2. Discuss the painting and its quadrants. Share and fill in with additional information.
3. Now, list or map the **Themes**, **Symbols**, and **Ideas** presented in the painting. Build on your prior knowledge (this painting was created in 1872).

#### Questions:

How is the West depicted? How is the East? What about the South and North?  
What are the contradictions?

Based on the painting, what does “progress” mean to the “people?”

How does *American Progress* include and exclude themes of the Greater Reconstruction?

What assumptions does the painting make?

#### Activities:

Your mission: You have to put together an exhibit. You can only explore one idea/theme/symbol used in *American Progress*. What artifact or object would you use to link your idea/theme/symbol to the greater reconstruction?

**Excerpts from explanatory text that George A. Croffut provided to market John Gast's 1872 lithograph *American Progress*.**

This rich and wonderful country--the progress of which at the present time, is the wonder of the old world--was until recently, inhabited exclusively by the lurking savage and wild beasts of prey. If the rapid progress of the "Great West" has surprised our people, what will those of other countries think of the "**Far West**," which was destined at an early day, to be the vast granary [grain producing region], as it is now the treasure chamber of our country?...

In the foreground, the central and principal figure, a beautiful and charming Female, is floating westward through the air bearing on her forehead the "Star of Empire...." On the right of the picture is a city, steamships, manufactories, schools and churches over which beams of light are streaming and filling the air--indicative of civilization. The general tone of the picture on the left declares darkness, waste and confusion. From the city proceed the three great continental lines of railway.... Next to these are the transportation wagons, overland stage, hunters, gold seekers, pony express, pioneer emigrant and the warrior dance of the "noble red man." Fleeing from "Progress"...are Indians, buffaloes, wild horses, bears, and other game, moving Westward, ever Westward, the Indians with their squaws, papooses, and "pony lodges," turn their despairing faces towards, as they flee the wondrous vision. The "Star" is *too much for them*.

...What home, from the miner's humble cabin to the stately marble mansion of the capitalist, should be without this Great National Picture, which illustrates in the most artistic manner all the gigantic results of American Brains and Hands! Who would not have such a beautiful token to remind them of the country's grandeur and enterprise which have caused the mighty wilderness to blossom like the rose!!!