Columbus Who?

In the past few lessons, we have been leading up to a watershed moment: 1492. Why is this date so important? What happened?

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...

So, that's the third grade version, but what really happened? Who is this Christopher Columbus guy who is credited with altering the course of human history? What was his voyage westward really about? Was he a visionary or a fool? A hero or a villain?

Today, we are going to explore Christopher Columbus to try to solve this historical puzzle:

Who was Christopher Columbus and what is his place in history?
First let's start with what you know. Below, write down a description of Christopher Columbus and his famous journey based on what you already know.
Picture Analysis

A picture is worth a thousand words.

So to begin our investigation into Columbus, let's examine his portraits. Before photography, portraiture was the only way to preserve the image of an important person. While photographs have the advantage of accuracy, portraits can often give us more information about:

- How an individual saw themselves
- How an individual was perceived by others
- How an individual *wished* to be seen by others

Examine each portrait below and read the short description about its context. For each portrait, write down three words that describe Columbus *based on what you see*.

TEACHER'S NOTE

All of the portraits and descriptions were taken from *Looks Are Deceiving: the Portraits of Christopher Columbus*

Paulus Jovius (or Paolo Giovio in Italian) was a wealthy physician living in his villa on Lake Como. He had three loves in his life: his church, his writings, and his paintings. In 1527 he was named Bishop of Nocera de Pagoni, whereupon he gave up his career as a doctor to devote full time to his three loves. When Pope Paul III failed to award him the Bishopic of Como, he narrowed his passions to two. By 1521 he had a substantial collection of portraits of famous people in a museum he had built on his estate.

There is no record of a portrait of Columbus in the possession of Queen Isabella ever being sold to Jovius. Most likely, some unknown artist hired by Jovius produced a likeness out of sheer imagination for the collection. The painting (or a copy of the original) does not match the written descriptions of Columbus. It shows an older man with gray hair, a round face, downcast brown eyes, a protruding lower lip, and a dimple in his chin—a feature never discussed in any account of Columbus's appearance. He wears ecclesiastical dress, which for many confirmed that this portrait must be the true likeness of Columbus painted from life. The Jovian portrait, later owned by a descendant of Jovius, Count Alessandro Orchi, is famous because so many copies were made from the original.
The portrait attributed to the artist Sebastiano del Piombo (Sebastiano Luciani) is highly regarded as it has been used in descriptions and articles about the Admiral in such recent publications as the Encyclopedia Britannica, New York Times Magazine, and Newsweek magazine [however, it is surely not of Columbus].

Sebastiano Luciano was an artist of considerable fame. Michelangelo is reported to have said that he could make his student "the best painter in Rome." Born around 1485, he would have been 21 years old when Columbus died, but there was no indication he knew the Admiral.

Two questions remain: Is the portrait by Piombo and is it a portrait meant to be Columbus? In 1891, the Geographical Society of France concluded that it was probably painted by Piombo, but it is not Columbus.

As a portrait, it is a bit unusual. All other paintings of Columbus show him without a hat. In this one the figure wears a hat with a curled border. A deep-edged and ornate mantle hangs from his shoulders. His fingers are long and delicate. His face is round, his eyes blue, and a dimple is barely visible in his chin. Most striking about this painting is the legend that runs along the top. The inscription which identifies the sitter as Columbus was certainly included much later. There is also doubt about the signature. In those days it was an exceptional occurrence for an artist to sign a work (or to add a legend). It was probably added by the writer of the inscription to increase the value of the work [Thacher 1904:50].
The Lotto Portrait
The Lotto portrait is famous because it was the likeness minted by the millions for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago as a souvenir in 1893. Thus it had the stamp of approval by the United States government [Thacher 1904:64].

Lorenzo Lotto, born around 1480, was an Italian painter who studied under Raphael in Rome. There is no reason to doubt that the painting is meant to be a portrait of Columbus. Bernhard Berenson, Lotto's biographer, asserts that the artist was probably working from a description given to him by an artist for the Vatican who had seen the Admiral. In many ways, the portrait more closely matches the written descriptions of Columbus.

The Admiral is seen standing against a plain wall in a study. In one hand he holds a conically projected map of Brazil while the other touches an hour-glass and rests on a volume of Aristotle. He wears ceremonial furs, leaving his throat bare. Bare-headed, his face is smooth, with his long gray hair parted in the middle. His face is thin, his nose long, and his eyes are lightly colored. His chin contains a slight dimple. He appears to be between the ages of 38 and 45. His fingernails are well manicured and he wears a plain, silver ring on the little finger of his right hand.

It was originally thought, because of the condition of the lettering, that the date on the painting was 1502, thus making it possible for Columbus to have posed for it during his life. But four years before his death Columbus was a broken, depressed, and probably insane man who in no way would have resembled the self-confident image in the portrait. In addition, the Brazilian map shown in the painting was not known to exist until 1508. Consequently the date was changed to 1512 [Thacher 1904:67].
There were few unique portraits of the Admiral made until the nineteenth century. The portraits of Columbus painted during this era reflected the attitude of the day—that progress could only be accomplished through industrial and geographical expansion. Efforts were afoot by French Catholics and others to have Columbus elevated to sainthood. Nevertheless, Washington Irving, in his history of the seaman, created "a hero in the romantic mold . . ." whose "conduct was characterized by the grandeur of his views and the magnanimity of his spirit." The Irish Catholic group, the Knights of Columbus, newly formed in 1882, described the Admiral as "a prophet and a seer, an instrument of Divine Providence" [Wilford 1991:45]. Consequently, the Admiral was portrayed as a determined seaman on a divine mission. Columbus is seen as a man containing an inner, spiritual glow, guided by light from the heavens, lost in thought despite distractions, or steadfastly straight against the rigors of ocean travel. Typical of this genre is the 1850 portrait by Karl von Piloty of a bearded Columbus standing tall on board ship while illuminated by a heavenly light.

The Woolley Portrait (Mother Jones 1991: 25)
With people across the globe questioning the problems associated with unlimited expansion and growth, the 500th anniversary of the voyage was not set to be a festive affair by many. City leaders in the towns across America that were named for the Admiral wrestled with the best way to honor the Discoverer while at the same time recognizing the tragic mistakes made by him and others who followed. While Native American leaders speak of Columbus as a symbol for greed, slavery, rape, and genocide, historians now consider more closely their point of view. The present era of revisionism, therefore, provides a new collection of editorial illustrations meant to comment on his questionable legacy rather than to provide an accurate rendition of the Admiral's appearance. Typical of this genre is Janet Woolley's illustration, which shows a squinty-eyed and brooding Columbus standing on a book with pen in hand as if to rewrite his own history. Queen Isabella is shown trying to fit a jigsaw puzzle piece into the face of the Admiral--symbolic of the inconsistencies in the Admiral's character. [Woolley 1991:25].
Picture Analysis

Having looked at these five very different portraits, consider the questions below:

What are the similarities in each of the five portraits? Cite specific examples as evidence.

What are the differences in the portraits? Cite specific examples as evidence.

What do these similarities and differences tell you about the changing views of Columbus over time?
Which portrait do you think is the most physically accurate? Explain your choice.

Which do you think captures the “spirit” of Columbus the best, and why? Discuss with your classmates.
While a picture paints a thousand words, actual words still go a long way. Now we will take a closer look at two written descriptions of Columbus.

This first description is a basic biography taken from a popular website. This is a very traditional description of Columbus. As you read, take notes in the notes section. Take note of things you did not previously know about him and think about how the author is describing Columbus. What sense do you get of him as a person?

A Biography of the Explorer of the Americas
Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa (located in Italy today) in 1451 to Domenico Colombo, a middle class wool-weaver, and Susanna Fontanarossa. Though little is known about his childhood, it is apparent that he was well-educated because he was able to speak several languages as an adult and had considerable knowledge of classical literature. In addition, he studied the works of Ptolemy and Marinus to name a few.

Columbus first took to the sea when he was 14 years old and this continued throughout his younger life. During the 1470s, he went on numerous trading trips that took him to the Aegean Sea, Northern Europe, and possibly Iceland. In 1479, he met his brother Bartolomeo, a mapmaker, in Lisbon. He later married Filipa Moniz Perestrello and in 1480, his son Diego was born.

The family stayed in Lisbon until 1485, when Columbus' wife Filipa died. From there, Columbus and Diego moved to Spain where he began trying to obtain a grant to explore western trade routes. He believed that because the earth was sphere, a ship could reach the Far East and set up trading routes in Asia by sailing west.

For years, Columbus proposed his plans to the Portuguese and Spanish kings, but he was turned down each time. Finally, after the Moors were expelled from Spain in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella reconsidered his requests. Columbus promised to bring back gold, spices, and silk from Asia, spread Christianity, and explore China. He then asked to be admiral of the seas and governor of discovered lands.

Columbus' First Voyage
After receiving significant funding from the Spanish monarchs, Columbus set sail on August 3, 1492 with three ships, the Pinta, Nina, and Santa Maria, and 104 men. After a short stop at the Canary Islands to resupply and make minor repairs, the ships set out across the Atlantic. This voyage took five weeks - much longer than Columbus expected, as he thought the world was smaller than it is. During this time, many of the crew members contracted diseases and died, or died from hunger and thirst.

Finally, at 2 a.m. on October 12, 1492, Rodrigo de Triana sighted land in area of the present-day Bahamas. When Columbus reached the land, he believed it was an Asian island and named it San Salvador. Because he did not find riches, Columbus decided to continue sailing in search of China. Instead, he ended up visiting Cuba and Hispaniola.

On November 21, 1492, the Pinta and its crew left to explore on its own. Then on Christmas Day, Columbus' Santa Maria wrecked off the coast of Hispaniola. Because there was limited space on the lone Nina, Columbus had to leave about 40 men behind at a fort they named Navidad. Soon after, Columbus set sail for Spain, where he arrived on March 15, 1493, completing his first voyage west.
Write three words you would use to describe Columbus based on this biography.

word  word  word
Scholarly View of Columbus

This second description is not an official biography but an excerpt from a book entitled *American Colonies*, which looks at the whole process of contact and colonization. It is a much less traditional view of Columbus. As you read, take notes in the notes section. Take note of things you did not previously know about him, and think about how the author is describing Columbus. What sense do you get of him as a person?

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TEACHER'S NOTE

This is a much more difficult text geared toward a collegiate, academic audience. Have students identify and look up unknown words. They can record these in a class notebook or in the notes section of this page.

Alternatively, you can identify words you know will be challenging for your students in advance and provide definitions in a central location in the classroom.

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Excerpt from *American Colonies*

Spain pioneered transatlantic voyages, thanks to the aggressive ambition, religious mysticism, and navigational prowess of the Genoese mariner Christopher Columbus. In popular histories and films, Columbus appears anachronistically as a modernist, a secular man dedicated to humanism and scientific rationalism, a pioneer who overcame medieval superstition. In fact, he was a devout and militant Catholic who drew upon the Bible for his geographic theories. He also owned, cherished, and heavily annotated a copy of The Travels of Marco Polo, which inspired his dreams of reaching the trade riches and the unconverted souls of East Asia. Columbus hoped to convert the Asians to Christianity and to recruit their bodies and their wealth to assist Europeans in a final crusade to crush Islam and reclaim Jerusalem. Such a victory would then invite Christ’s return to earth to reign over a millennium of perfect justice and harmony.

A man of substance as well as vision, Columbus was a talented navigator and experienced mariner. He had sailed the Atlantic northward to England and Ireland (and perhaps even to Iceland), west to the Azores, and as far south as the Guinea Coast of West Africa. Everywhere he investigated stories and clues about mysterious islands presumed to lie farther west. If Columbus did indeed make it to Iceland, he probably heard something about the transatlantic voyages and discoveries of the Norse people of western Scandinavia.

As early as 1484, Columbus hatched his scheme to head west across the Atlantic to find East Asia and open a profitable trade. Because no private merchants possessed the capital or the inclination to finance such an expensive and risky voyage, Columbus sought royal patronage. He first approached the Portuguese crown, the promoters of long-distance exploration. After a careful hearing, the Portuguese authorities declined,
regarding the western route as too speculative and dangerous. Columbus then tried the royal courts of France and England, without success, before turning to Spain as a last resort. Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand approved, providing three small ships and most of the funding. They reasoned that even if Columbus failed to reach Asia, he might instead find valuable new islands like the Canaries [already controlled by the Portuguese].

Contrary to popular myth, fifteenth-century European intellectuals and rulers did not think that the world was flat. On the contrary, since the ancient Greeks, learned men had agreed that the world was round. They also accepted the theoretical possibility of sailing west to come up on the East Asian side of the known world. Although they expected to find some more Atlantic islands to the west, no Europeans anticipated that any large continents would obstruct a westward voyage to Asia. And given the high value of Asian commodities, there was a power commercial incentive for testing Columbus’s theory.

What deterred Europeans from sailing due west for Asia was not a fear of sailing off the edge of the world but, instead, their surprisingly accurate understanding that the globe was too large. Ancient Greek mathematicians and geographers had determined that the world had a circumference of about 24,000 miles, which suggested that Asia lay about 10,000 to 12,000 miles west from Europe. Fifteenth-century European ships were too small to carry enough water and food to sustain their crews on a 10,000-mile voyage beyond contact with land.

Breaking with geographic orthodoxy, Columbus dare the westward trip to Asia because he underestimated the world’s circumference as only 18,000 miles, which placed Japan a mere 3,500 miles west of Europe. In other words, a critical, and potentially fatal, mistake in calculations inspired his eccentric confidence that he could sail westward to Asia: the exact opposite of the popular myth that Columbus understood world geography better than his allegedly benighted contemporaries. Columbus was fortunate indeed that the unexpected Americas loomed at about the 3,000-mile mark to provide fresh water and provisions before his men mutinied. It is one of the ironies of world history that profound misunderstanding set in motion Columbus’s discoveries.

[Columbus] first landed at the Bahama Islands, just east of Florida. Turning south, Columbus encountered the West Indies, islands framing the Caribbean Sea. But Columbus supposed that all of the islands belonged to the East Indies and lay near the mainland of Asia. Although the native inhabitants (the Taino) were unlike any people he had ever seen or read about, Columbus insisted that they were “Indians,” a misnomer that has endured.

...Columbus unilaterally declared the natives subject to the Spanish crown. He reported, “I found very many islands filled with people innumerable, and of them all I have taken possession for their highnesses, by proclamation made and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me.” Of course, not understanding a word of Spanish, the Indians failed to recognize any cue to oppose Columbus’s ceremony...

...In [his] two remaining vessels Columbus sailed home, taking a roundabout route north and then east, to catch winds bound for Europe. He reached Spain in March 1493 to receive a hero’s welcome from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.
What happened next rendered Columbus’s voyage of enduring and global significance, far beyond the achievements of his Norse predecessors. The Norse discoveries proved a dead end because they remained largely unknown outside of the northwestern fringes of Scandinavia. Thanks to the newly invented printing press, word of Columbus’s voyage and discovery spread rapidly and widely through Europe...Publication in multiplying print helped to ensure that Columbus's voyages would lead to an accelerating spiral of further voyages meant to discern the bounds and exploit the peoples of the new lands.

...To his death in 1506, Columbus stubbornly insisted that all of his discoveries lay close to the coast of Asia.

TEACHER'S NOTE

Robert Taylor’s *American Colonies* is an excellent resource for teaching colonial history. It is an excellent summer reading choice to provide a deep foundation for the learning of American history.

Write three words describing Columbus based on your reading of this excerpt.
Biography Analysis

HISTORICAL QUESTION: Who was Christopher Columbus and what is his place in history?

Having done these two readings, answer the questions below.

What are the similarities in the descriptions of Christopher Columbus in the two readings? Provide specific examples from the texts to support your response.

What are the differences in the descriptions of Christopher Columbus in the two readings? Provide specific examples from the texts to support your response.

Which reading do you think is more accurate? Explain your answer.
What is the value of the each reading in terms of the historical question? Address each reading separately in your answer.

What are the limitations of each reading in terms of the historical question? Address each reading separately in your answer.
Now that you have examined various pieces of evidence, how do you answer the historical question?

In your own words: Who was Christopher Columbus and what is his place in history? Draw on information from the sources in this lesson.

What information or sources would you like that you did not have in this lesson to help you answer the question.
As you know, history is not just collecting facts: it is a debate. Columbus's place in history is one of the most controversial questions in American and world history. It even has become a very controversial political debate. As a class, this is what you will take on by debating the question:

Should Columbus Day be a national holiday?
TEACHER'S NOTE

Split students into two debate teams and randomly assign them either the pro or con side. Students should work independently to create lists of arguments for their side then join as a group to discuss and hone down to their best arguments.

For homework, they should further research the issue and each student should bring in their own *credibly sourced* article to support their side.

They should choose one student to give an opening statement for their team (that student can be given extra credit if you choose). This can be done ahead of time, or you could require all students to write opening statements, then have them read each other's and select the best one the day of the debate.

As this is the first debate of the year, the format should be kept relatively open and loose to encourage students to speak. As moderator, just work to ensure each side is given equal time to talk and as many students are included as possible.