"Them Damned Pictures":

The Legendary Cartoons of Thomas Nast

Brian Johnson, Sam Katz, Watson Moore
Senior Division
Group Exhibit
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While exploring possible NHD topics, one of our group members happened upon an internet article by *Nation* editor Victor Navasky on the fifteen most influential cartoons in history. One of these was Thomas Nast's "Who Stole the People's Money?" This clever cartoon graphically denouncing the Tammany gang as a ring of thieves captivated us. As we continued our research, we became even more fascinated with Nast's work and it became even clearer that Nast was a leader in history with a lasting impact on art, journalism, and American politics.

We began with online research to become acquainted with Nast's background and the historical context for his work. The internet archives of the Library of Congress, Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, and *New York Times* were especially helpful. We also made extensive use of our public library system. Equipped with essential information, we reached out to experts. We conducted audio-recorded telephone interviews with John Adler, electronic publisher of *HarpWeek* and Nast historian, and Jeffrey Eger, former editor of the *Journal of the Thomas Nast Society*. We conducted videotaped in-person interviews with editorial cartoonist Jeff Darcy, Gilded Age expert Thomas Culbertson, and Macculloch Hall Historical Museum curator Ryan Hyman. Additionally, we conducted archival research at the Rutherford Hayes Presidential Center, where we could access a large amount of Nast's correspondence and sketches along with original *Harper's Weekly* magazines. Later we explored the Nast cartoons and biographical material at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum and viewed the Nast collection at Macculloch Hall, the largest repository of Nast work in the world.

We created an exhibit because we felt it was ideally suited to our highly visual topic. We used black felt for a strong, professional-looking background in keeping with Nast's black-and-white woodblock engravings. To evoke the Gilded Age, we chose off-white paper, Old Newspaper Types font, and period-appropriate colors for backing text and images. We organized

our exhibit to highlight Nast's leadership on the side panels and his legacy in the center. We created a supplemental video using clips from our interviews. Thanks to Mr. Darcy and Mr. Eger, we acquired copies of "History…Repeats Itself" – which references Nast – and the final tribute edition of the *Journal of the Thomas Nast Society*. We also obtained an original 1876 Nast cartoon from *Harper's Weekly*. Over the months we made improvements based on feedback from our teacher and from judges.

Thomas Nast was a significant opinion leader in the late 19th century who left an undeniable legacy in American history. His influential cartoons swayed the public in favor of his Republican ideals, impacting the Union war effort, presidential elections, and public policy. He created or popularized such enduring iconic symbols as Santa Claus, the Republican elephant, the Democratic donkey, and Uncle Sam. As chief crusader against Tammany Hall corruption, he paved the way for the muckraking exposés of the Progressive Era and modern American editorial cartoonists, decisively demonstrating the enormous power of images to evoke emotion and inspire change.