**Unit 1 Understanding American Society and Culture**

**Text A**

**American Culture**

1. American culture is o Western culture in general. Having been developing since long before the United States became a country, it gradually obtains its own unique characteristics as is reflected in its dialect, music, arts, cuisine, etc. Today the United States of America is a diverse and multi-cultural country as a result of mass scale immigration from many countries.
2. The Culture out of Many

In general, Americans come in all different colors and nationalities. Americans practice different religions, and live many different lifestyles. Important differences exist between geographical regions, between rural and urban areas, and between social classes. In addition, the presence of millions of immigrants who came to the United States from all corners of the world with their own culture and values adds even more variety and flavor to American life.

1. Because of its colonial ties with the British, early American culture was chiefly influenced by British culture. Other European cultures influenced American culture as well, prominently those of Ireland, Germany and countries from which large numbers of immigrants came. Influences also came from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, especially the western part of African from which the ancestors of most African Americans came. American culture also shares some features with the cultures of its neighbors in the New World.
2. The United States has been traditionally known as a melting pot, but recent developments reveal the characteristics of cultural diversity and pluralism, presenting the image of a salad bowl rather than a melting pot. In American culture, there are many integrated but unique subcultures which are connected with social classes, political orientations and multitude of demographic characteristics such as ancestral traditions, sex and sexual orientation, making American culture heterogeneous.
3. The Culture of Its Own

Although Americans do not always agree with each other, they are united by a very special thing: the values and ideals that were originally described in the U.S. Constitution over 200 years ago. Probably above everything else, Americans consider themselves individuals. There are strong family ties and strong loyalties to groups, but individuality and individual rights are most important. If this seems like a selfish attitude, it also leads Americans to an honest respect for other individuals and an insistence on human equality.

1. Related to this respect for individuality are American traits of independence and self-reliance. From an early age, children are taught to “stand on their own two fee,” an idiom meaning to be independent. Honesty and frankness are two more aspects of American individuality, and they are more important to Americans than personal honor or “saving face”.
2. Americans place a high value on achievement and this leads them to constantly compete against each other. You will find friendly, and not-so-friendly, competition everywhere. Americans can also be obsessed with records of achievement in sports, in business, or even in more mundane things. On the other hand, even if Americans are often competitive, they also have a good sense of teamwork and of cooperating with others to achieve a specific goal.
3. Americans are ofen accused of being materialistic and driven to succeed. How much money a person has, how much profit a business deal makes, or how many material goods an individual accumulates is often their definition of success. This goes back to American competitiveness. Many Americans, however, do not agree with this definition of success; they enjoy life’s simple pleasures and are neither overly ambitious nor aggressive. Many Americans are materially successful and still have time to appreciate the cultural, spiritual and human aspects of life.

**Text B**

**Five Famous Symbols of American Culture**

1. The Statue of Liberty

In the mid-1870s, French artist Frederic Auguste Bartholdi was working on an enormous project called Liberty Enlightening the World, a monument celebrating US independence and the France-American alliance. At the same time, he was in love with a woman that he had met in Canada. His mother wouldn’t approve of her son’s affection for a woman she had never met, but Bartholdi went ahead and married his love in 1876.

That same year, Bartholdi had assembled the statue’s right arm and torch, and displayed them in Philadelphia. It is said that he had used his wife’s arm as the model, but felt her face was too beautiful for the statue. He needed someone whose face represented suffering yet strength, someone more severe than beautiful. He chose his mother.

The statue was dedicated on an island in Upper New York Bay in 1886. It had his mother’s face and his wife’s body, but Bartholdi called it “ my daughter, Liberty”.

1. Barbie

Before all the different types of Barbie dolls for sale now, there was just a single Barbie. Actually, her name was Barbara. Barbara Handler was the daughter of Eliot and Ruth Handler, co-founders of the Mettel Toy Company. Ruth came up with the idea of Barbie after watching her daughter playing with paper dolls.

The three-dimensional model for Barbie was a German doll --- a joke gift for adults described as having the appearance of “a woman who sold sex.” Mattel refashioned the doll into a decent, all - American version --- although with an exaggerated breast size --- and named it after Barbara, who was then a teenager.

Since her introduction in 1959, Barbie has became the universally recognized Queen of the Dolls. Mattel says that an average American girls owns ten Barbie dolls, and two are sold somewhere in the world every second.

Now more than sixty years old, Barbara, who declines interviews but is said to love the doll, may be the most unknown figure on the planet. Barbie’s boyfriend, Ken, was introduced in 1961 and named after Barbara’s brother. The real Ken, who died in 1994, was disgusted by the doll that made his family famous. “I don’t want my children to play with it”, he said in 1993.

1. American Gothic

Grant Wood instantly rose to fame in 1930 with his painting “American Gothic”, an often-coped interpretation of the Solemn pride of American farmers. The painting shows a serious-looking man and woman standing in front of a farmhouse. He was strongly influenced by medieval artists and inspired by the Gothic window of an old farmhouse, but the faces in his composition were what captured the world’s attention.

Wood like to paint the faces he knew well. For the grave farmer, he used his dentist, a sour-looking man. For the woman standing alongside him, the artist chose his sister, Nan. He stretched models’ necks a bit, but there was no doubt they posed for the portrait. Nan later remarked that the fame she gained from “American Gothic” saved her from a very boring life.

1. The Buffalo Nickel

Today, American coins honor prominent figures of the US government --- mostly famous former presidents. But the Buffalo Nickel, produced from 1913 to 1938, honored a pair of connected tragedies from the settlement of American frontier --- the destruction of the Buffalo herds and the American Indians.

While white people had previously been used as models for most American coins, famed artist James Earle Fraser went against tradition by using three actual American Indians as models for his creation. For the buffalo on the other side, Fraser was forced to sketch an aging buffalo from a New York City’s Central Zoo since buffalo no long wandered about the great grasslands. Two years later, in 1915, this animal was sold for $100 and killed for meat, a hide and a wall decoration made from its horns.

1. Uncle Sam

Fourteen-year-old Sam Wilson ran away from home to join his father and older brothers in the fight to liberate the American colonies from the British during the American Revolution. At age 23, he started a meat business and earned a reputation for being honest and hard-working.

During the later war in 1812, Wilson gained a position inspecting meat for US army forces, working with a man who signed a contract with the American government to provide meat to the army. Barrels of meat supplied to the army were stamped “EA-US” identifying the company and the country of origin (US). According to one story, when a government official visited the plant and asked about the letters, a creative employee told him that US was short for “Uncle Sam” Wilson. Soon soldiers were saying all Army supplies were from “Uncle Sam”.

After the war, a character called Uncle Sam began appearing in political cartoons, his form evolving from an earlier cartoon character called Brother Jonathan that was popular during the American Revolution. Uncle Sam soon replaced Brother Jonathan as American’s most popular symbol. The most enduring portrait of Uncle Sam was created by artist James Montgonmery Flagg in his famous army recruiting posters of World Wars I and II. That version --- a tall man with white hair and a small white beard on his chin, a dark blue coat and a tall hat with stars on it --- was a self-portrait of Flagg.

**Text C**

**Moral Values in American**

Do Americans have any morals? That’s a good question. Many people insist that ideas about right and wrong are merely personal opinions. Some voices are calling Americans back to traditional moral values. William J. Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education, edited *The book of Virtues* in 1993 to do just that. Bennett suggest that great moral stories can build character. The success of Bennett’s book shows that many Americans still believe in moral values. But what are they?

To begin with, moral values in America are like those in any culture. In fact, many aspects of moral values are universal. But the stories and traditions that teach them are unique in each culture. Not only that, culture influences how people show these virtues.

One of the most basic moral values for Americans is honesty. The well-known legend about George Washington and the cherry tree teaches this value clearly. Little George cut his father’s favorite cherry tree while trying out his new hatchet. When his father asked him about that, George said, “I cannot tell a lie. I did it with my hatchet.” Instead of punishment, George received praise for telling the truth. Sometimes American honesty --- being open and direct --- can offend people. But Americans still believe that “honesty is the best policy.”

Another virtue Americans respect is perseverance. Remember Aesop’s fable about the turtle and the rabbit that had a race? The rabbit thought he could win easily, so he took a nap.But the turtle finally won because he didn’t give up. Another story tells of a little train that had to climb a steep hill. The hill was so steep that the little train had a hard time trying to get over it. But the train just kept pulling all the while saying, “I think I can, I think I can.” At last, the train was over the top of the hill. “I thought I could, I thought I could,” chugged happily the train.

Compassion may be the queen of American virtues. The story of “The Good Samaritan” from the Bible describes a man who showed compassion. On his way to a certain city, a Samaritan man found a poor traveler lying on the road. The traveler had been beaten and robbed. The kind Samaritan, instead of passing by, stopped to help this person in need. Compassion can even turn into a positive cycle. In the fall of 1992, the people in Iowa sent truckloads of water to help Floridians hit by a hurricane. The next summer, during a mid-west flooding, Florida returned the favor. In less dramatic ways, millions of Americans are quietly passing along the kindness shown to them.

In no ways can this brief description cover all the moral values honored by Americans. Courage, responsibility, loyalty, gratitude and many others could be discussed. In fact, Bennett’s best seller --- over 800 pages ---highlights just 10 virtues. Even Bennett admits that he had only scratched the surface. But no matter how long or short this list, moral values are invaluable. They are the foundations of American culture --- and any culture.