

LESSON PLAN

Step 1

VIEWS OF THE AMERICAN WEST: TRUE OR FALSE?

Objectives

- To understand that a landscape painting may or may not accurately represent a specific place.
- To identify techniques that create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface.

Materials

- Copies of Activity Pages 1A–D.
- Pens or pencils.
- Map of the western United States.

Subjects

Art, geography, U.S. history

Procedure

1. Give each student a photocopy of Activity Pages 1A–C, which show three views of the American West. After they have studied the images for a few minutes, ask students the following questions: Which painting was painted outdoors? Which painting was painted in an indoor studio from sketches made outdoors? Which painting was painted outside of the United States?

2. Introduce students to *River Bluffs, 1,320 Miles above St. Louis* by George Catlin on Activity Page 1A.

A. Ask them to describe the painting, making sure that they notice the winding river with occasional islands; the conical hills, or “bluffs”; the Native American man; the scarcity of trees; the lack of buildings and roads; and the wide-open sky.

B. Use a map of the western United States to locate the two-thousand-mile stretch of the Missouri River between Fort Union, North Dakota, and Saint Louis, Missouri. Estimate where 1,320 miles above Saint Louis would be. Explain that during the years before trains and cars were invented, traveling by boat along the Missouri River was one of the only ways to reach the

West. Indian villages, fur-trading posts, and forts were built along its banks.

C. Refer to the “About the artists” section on page 4 to introduce students to George Catlin. Have them read Catlin’s description on Activity Page 1A of how he painted *River Bluffs, 1,320 Miles above St. Louis*. Ask them what they can learn from his words that they might not be able to see from the black-and-white reproduction of his painting.

D. Read space trick 1 to students:

SPACE TRICK 1

Catlin uses a winding river to lead into space.

Ask students to put a finger on the river at the lower left corner of the picture. This part of the river, closest to the front, is in the *foreground*. Ask them to move their fingers along the river until they reach the islands. This is the *middleground*. When they have moved their fingers as far back as they can go along the river, they are in the *background*. Ask students to run their fingers along the bumpy line where the top of the bluffs meets the sky. This line, called the *horizon line*, is the farthest point that the eye can see.

E. Read space trick 2 to students:

SPACE TRICK 2

Catlin makes foreground forms larger than background forms.

Tell students to compare the height of the bluffs in the foreground with the height of the bluffs in the background. Explain that Catlin had to make them different sizes to create the illusion of deep space. Ask students to measure the height of the man and then draw a second person exactly the same size on one of the islands in the middle ground and on one of the bluffs on the horizon line. Discuss why the results are so comical.

3. Introduce *The Chasm of the Colorado* by Thomas Moran on Activity Page 1B.

A. Ask students to describe this place, making sure that they notice the massive rock cliffs, the small patch of grass (the only vegetation), the mighty storm breaking over part of the canyon, and the steam rising between the rocks.

B. Use a map of the western United States to locate the Colorado River, which cuts through the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona.

C. Use the “About the artists” section on page 4 to introduce Thomas Moran. Explain that, although he had

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never before spent much time in the outdoors, during his first few expeditions he quickly became used to traveling by horse through unknown territory. Ask students if they have ever succeeded in doing something for which they felt ill-equipped at first.

D. Have students look at Moran's painting and read his description of the Grand Canyon on Activity Page 1B. Have them list words that would describe his view of the Grand Canyon.

E. Read space trick 3 to students:

SPACE TRICK 3

Moran overlaps the rocks.

Ask students to put one of their hands in front of the other to see how the closer hand overlaps and partially hides the hand behind it. Explain that Moran arranged rocks and cliffs in the same way. The rocks that you see in full appear closest. Those that are partially obscured appear farther back.

4. Introduce *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* by Albert Bierstadt on Activity Page 1C.

A. Ask students to locate the alpine peak, waterfall, herd of deer, and flock of ducks among the grasses in Bierstadt's painting.

B. Use a map of the western United States to locate the Sierra Nevada Mountains in eastern California. These are the highest and steepest mountains in the United States. They include Yosemite National Park.

C. Refer to the "About the artists" section on page 4 to introduce Albert Bierstadt. Tell students two facts about *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*:

Although the scene looks extraordinarily realistic, nobody has ever found a place in the Sierra Nevadas that looks exactly like it.

Bierstadt painted *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* while he was in Europe, nine years after leaving California.

Ask students if they can explain the first fact by the second. If they cannot, ask them to make a small sketch of an outdoor place they visited a long time ago. When they are finished, ask them to describe what they remembered about the place. Press them for details, such as the exact shape of the tree or the precise position of the sun. If they are unable to remember all the details, ask them how they were able to draw their picture. When they admit that they made up many of the details, tell them that Bierstadt did the same thing.

D. Tell students that Bierstadt also changed the shape of the Sierra Nevada Mountains because he knew that Americans wanted to think that their native mountains were more majestic than those of Europe. Give each student a photocopy of Activity Page 1D. Have them compare these photographs of actual mountains—Mount Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps and the Sierra Nevadas in California—with the mountains in Bierstadt's painting (Activity Page 1C). Have students guess which mountains Bierstadt used as a model for the highest snow-covered peak in his painting. Ask them if they

approve of Bierstadt's method of combining and manipulating sketches from many locations to compose a scene that looks realistic.

E. Read space trick 4 to students:

SPACE TRICK 4

Bierstadt makes the distant mountains hazy and indistinct.

Ask students to use their fingers to trace the outline of the cliff on the left side of the painting. Then ask them to use their fingers to trace the outline of the most distant mountain they can find in the picture. Ask them why Bierstadt made the outline of the closer cliff so much clearer than the outline of the distant mountain. Explain that when we are outdoors, the atmosphere between our eye and a distant mountain (not to mention the imperfections of human vision) makes its outline appear less distinct.

ACTIVITY PAGE 1A



George Catlin, *River Bluffs*,
1,320 Miles above St. Louis

In the artist's words: "I took my easel and canvas and brushes to the top of the bluff, and painted two views from the same spot. These hills [were] five or six hundred feet high and every foot of them, as far as they can be discovered in distance, covered with a vivid green turf. From this enchanting spot there was nothing to arrest the eye from ranging over [the Missouri's] waters for the distance of twenty or thirty miles."

William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), p. 247.

ACTIVITY PAGE 1B



Thomas Moran
The Chasm of the Colorado

In the artist's words: "I was completely carried away by its [the Grand Canyon's] magnificence. I will not attempt to say anything about it as no words can express the faintest notion of it."

Ron Tyler, *Visions of America: Pioneer Artists in a New Land* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1983), p. 58.

ACTIVITY PAGE 1C



Albert Bierstadt
*Among the Sierra Nevada
Mountains, California*

ACTIVITY PAGE 1D



Mount Matterhorn,
southern Switzerland

Ansel Adams
Yosemite Valley, winter,
from Inspiration Point

