

Educator Guide



Maynard Dixon. *Wide Lands of the Navajo*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 24 x 38 in. Denver Art Museum: Roath Collection, 2013.100

CREATING THE **AMERICAN WEST** IN ART

March 5–June 27, 2021

FristArt Museum

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Tennessee State Standards

Fine Arts Standards

By analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating artworks, students fulfill the Respond domain of the Tennessee Fine Arts Standards. Synthesizing information and contextualizing the works applies to the Connect domain. The Create domain includes the generation, conceptualization, development, and refinement of artistic work.

Fourth Grade Social Studies

4.16 Map the exploration of the Louisiana Territory, and describe the events, struggles, and successes of the purchase, including the significance of: Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and Sacagawea.

4.18 Analyze the impact of Andrew Jackson's presidency, including: the Indian Removal Act, Trail of Tears, and preservation of the union.

4.22 Describe the experiences of settlers on the overland trails to the West, including the purpose of the journeys and influence of geography.

4.23 Examine the impact of President James K. Polk's view of Manifest Destiny on westward expansion.

4.24 Explain the significance of the California Gold Rush in westward expansion.

Eighth Grade Social Studies

8.28 Identify how westward expansion led to the statehood of Tennessee and the importance of the first state constitution (1796).

8.40 Analyze the development of roads, canals, railroads, and steamboats throughout the U.S., including the Erie Canal and the National Road.

8.49 Analyze the concept of Manifest Destiny and its impact on the development of the nation, and describe the economic incentives for westward expansion.

United States History and Geography

US.01 Explain how the Homestead Act and the Transcontinental Railroad impacted the settlement of the West.

US.02 Examine federal policies toward American Indians, including: the movement to reservations, assimilation, boarding schools, and the Dawes Act.

Frist Resources

(details at FristArtMuseum.org/AmWest)

Availability varies; details subject to change

- Art Trunk video and activity
- FristKids videos and activities
- Gallery guides in English and Spanish
- Martin ArtQuest® Gallery stations (reservations required)
- Online interpretation
- Storytime video and activity

Introduction

The American West has long been a dynamic place of cultural exchange and artistic production, throughout thousands of years of precolonial Indigenous presence, the period of Spanish exploration and conquest in the mid-1600s, and modern times. When Euro-American artists first visited the region during the 1800s, they marveled at its ancient landscapes and myriad civilizations. Paintings and sculptures from the Petrie Institute of Western American Art at the Denver Art Museum reveal this creative interest in the region during the United States' westward expansion and its continued legacy into the mid-20th century. Most of the artists represented here spent years studying in Europe—predominantly Italy, Germany, and France. They returned to the United States, however, determined to distinguish themselves through uniquely American subjects. Their combination of closely observed detail and creative license in the resulting works reveals an array of aesthetic approaches. Regardless of style, some depictions helped foster a Euro-American identity rooted in a pioneering spirit of adventure and opportunity, which ultimately led to a doctrine of **manifest destiny** and the myth of American exceptionalism. This exhibition encourages viewers to explore the nuances of a complex American West, including both its challenging history—especially regarding the involuntary displacement of Native Americans—and its vibrant and diverse natural beauty.



Thomas Moran. *A Snowy Mountain Range (Path of Souls, Idaho)*, 1896. Oil on canvas, 14 x 27 in. Denver Art Museum: Roath Collection, 2013.109

Westward Curiosity

During the early to mid-1800s, intrepid artist-explorers, some of whom were hired by U.S. government-funded expeditions, journeyed into the American West. These Euro-American artists faced difficult journeys over rough terrain. They carried minimal supplies, such as notebooks and drawing or watercolor materials, and made **plein air** (outdoor) studies. They used these sketches as references to create larger and often dramatized paintings upon their return east. Tasked with recreating the factual details of the land, they were also challenged to capture the experience of the West—the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains, the vastness of the plains, and the unfamiliar forms of bison—within the limited space of a painted canvas. Such works, widely disseminated as prints and as illustrations in newspapers, proved popular to eastern and international audiences and established many symbols of the American West that remain current today.



Charles Bird King. *Hayne Hudjihini (Eagle of Delight)*, ca. 1822. Oil on canvas, 17 x 13 in. Denver Art Museum: William Sr. and Dorothy Harmsen Collection, 2001.462

Euro-American settlers followed these early artist-explorers west in search of opportunity and land, resulting in both greater cultural exchange and significant tensions with the Indigenous peoples who had lived there for centuries.

After the American Revolution, U.S. government policy, growing industry, and economic opportunities drew migrating settlers westward. By 1845, the ideology (and terminology) of manifest destiny—that white Americans had divine justification to expand across and settle the continent—was established. Underlying the optimism of this doctrine was inexorable conflict with Indigenous people, whose tribal lands and **sovereignty** were increasingly under threat. Governmental responses ranged from negotiation to armed conflict and intentional disease transmission. Officials sometimes hosted delegations of Indigenous leaders in Washington, DC, hoping both to build relationships and to intimidate. Artists were commissioned to make portraits of these visitors, including this Great Plains woman, the wife of an **Otoe** leader.



William Jacob Hays. *Herd of Buffalo*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 48 1/2 in. Denver Art Museum: Funds from Fred E. Gates, 1960.39

A dozen bison mingle within a thick haze in this painting by William Jacob Hays, a noted naturalist. It is unclear whether this mysterious atmosphere is caused by a morning fog or the dusty soil of the prairie, kicked up by the herd. Hays records the physical characteristics of this uniquely American animal by painting it from twelve different angles. The silhouette of the immense bison in the foreground contrasts with the warmth of the light, dancing with the particles of dust or fog.

Questions

- What role did manifest destiny play in the westward migration?
- Look at William Jacob Hays's *Herd of Buffalo* and discuss how his artistic choices created a sense of mystery for people who had not traveled to the West.

The West as Future

During the Civil War years of the early 1860s, artistic depictions of magnificent western landscapes contrasted sharply with photographs of battlefield carnage. These paintings presented hope for healing in the nation's pristine wilderness and contributed to conservation movements that would lead to the formation of national parks. American artists, many returned from studies in Europe, went in search of uniquely American subjects by turning to western landscapes. In so doing, they presented a vision of the nation that could rival anything produced in Europe, and contributed to the idea that humanity's relationship to nature profoundly informed American identity.

Captivated by these visions of grandeur and encouraged by such U.S. government policies as the 1862 **Homestead Act**, many people moved westward for economic opportunity, religious freedom, and personal growth. This migration impacted intercultural relationships, sometimes worsening existing intertribal conflicts. It also created new tensions regarding property rights and cultural displacement as Indigenous people continued to be forced from their ancestral lands onto reservations, and Euro-Americans imposed their language, attire, and religion on them.



Albert Bierstadt. *Estes Park, Long's Peak*, 1877. Oil on canvas, 62 x 98 in. Lent by the Denver Public Library, Western History Department, 35.2008

When visiting the West, Albert Bierstadt would paint outdoor sketches. Then, back in his New York studio, he combined these sketches into a single dramatic landscape, like *Estes Park, Long's Peak*. Bierstadt paid close attention to minute details, but he also took artistic license in his large paintings, often doubling the size of a mountain to add spectacle to the work. By emphasizing the theatricality of a scene, he enabled viewers to vicariously participate in the adventures of an artist-explorer.

Questions

- How did Albert Bierstadt's painting *Estes Park, Long's Peak* and others like it inspire Americans' growing curiosity about the West?
- What was the Homestead Act? How did it promote western migration?

Activity: Landscape in Warm or Cool Colors

Instructions for the class or group:

Using the paintings in this section as inspiration, create a landscape using expressive warm or cool colors. Choose a warm or cool palette to communicate a specific mood or setting. Warm colors like orange, red, and yellow evoke a sense of warmth. Cool colors like blue, green, and purple are often associated with cool objects.

Visit FristArtMuseum.org/resource/color-temperature to watch our "Color Temperature" video.

A Wanderlust Memory

By the turn of the 20th century, railroads and barbed wire had put an end to the open-range cattle era of the American West. Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, arguably the most influential western artists of this period, witnessed these changes. In the words of Remington, “I knew the wild riders and the vacant land were about to vanish forever, and the more I considered the subject the bigger the Forever loomed.” While lamenting the passing of an era, they—as well as many other painters, illustrators, and sculptors—ensured that the memory of an idealized “Old West” lived on. Underscored by nostalgia for a seemingly simpler and nobler time, the often-stereotyped characters and plots proved to be common material for Wild West shows, popular fiction, and cinema.

The stories of the West are, in truth, quite complicated. For many people, life there was marked by difficult changes in lifestyle and forced migration. While the Old West endures as an important part of American history, cowboy life and Indigenous culture remain vibrant into the present day.



Charles Marion Russell. *In the Enemy's Country*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in. Denver Art Museum: Gift of the Magness Family in memory of Betsy Magness, 1991.751

Because of his experience working with cattle, his friendship with Native Americans, and his talent with paintbrush and clay, the self-taught Charles Marion Russell became a preeminent artist of the Old West. While Russell's subjects were meticulously observed, they were also a product of a natural storyteller's lively imagination. Here, he captures the glowing jewel tones of Montana skies and confident yet careful **Kootenai** hunters striding alongside their horses, which are draped to appear like bison, through enemy **Blackfeet** country.



Frederic Remington. *The Broncho Buster*, modeled 1895, cast before May 1902 (Roman Bronze Works, cast number 12). Bronze, 23 1/4 x 22 x 13 in. overall. Denver Art Museum: Roath Collection, 2013.91

A well-established illustrator and painter of the American West, Frederic Remington also produced some of the most iconic bronze sculptures in American history. Here, he deftly captures the danger of riding an untamed horse. More broadly, the subject of bronc riding can be read as a metaphor for taming the West.

Vaqueros were actually the first cowboys in the American West. They were laborers on ranches in Mexico owned by Spanish settlers. Most vaqueros were **mestizo** (having both Native American and Spanish ancestry), Indigenous, African American, or **criollo** (a term for Spaniards born in the Americas). Vaqueros had been herding and driving cattle for hundreds of years by the time they became a part of the Texas ranching landscape.

Historians estimate that one in four cowboys during the 19th century was Black. As white Americans moved to Texas in the first half of the 19th century, they brought enslaved people with them. When Texas joined the Union in 1860, 30 percent of its population was enslaved. These formerly enslaved people were hired as paid cowhands after the Civil War.

Indigenous Loss

The sense of loss experienced by Euro-Americans as the era of American expansion seemed to be coming to a close pales in comparison with the loss of Indigenous lifeways caused by genocide, disease, forced migration, and forced assimilation. In the 1800s, American expansion displaced more than five hundred nations of people who had lived on the continent for thousands of years. During that time, they had developed sophisticated trading routes, land management processes, and cultural, social, and political systems. By the 1900s, however, most Native Americans had been forcibly removed to reservations and encouraged to farm land that was not **arable**. The buffalo—and the accompanying way of life that surrounded responsible hunting of the animal—had been nearly killed off. Often denied the rations promised by an inconsistent federal government, Indigenous people suffered from starvation and poverty. Their children were regularly sent to boarding schools where they were subjected to cultural oppression and abuse. While Indigenous people continue to grapple with historical trauma stemming from such experiences, they have maintained their cultural practices and languages against great odds.

Questions

- By the turn of the 20th century, artists found it especially important to remember the “Old West.” Why did artists feel this way?
- What ideas, images, or symbols do you think of when you imagine the American West?
- Frederic Remington’s *The Broncho Buster* is a metaphor for the “untamed” West as well as a depiction of the iconic cowboy. What does this sculpture tell us about life in the West and the lives of cowboys?
- How did western migration impact Indigenous inhabitants of western land?

Activity: Close Looking and Descriptive Writing

Give students one or two minutes to view Charles Marion Russell’s painting *In the Enemy’s Country*. Use the following guiding questions to encourage close looking:

- What do you immediately notice in the art? What appears to be happening?
- When you look closely, what else do you observe in the painting?

After the class discussion, ask students to write a description of the art based on their observations.

Activity: Thaumatrope—Animals in Motion

With Remington’s *The Broncho Buster* as a possible inspiration, students will make thaumatropes. A thaumatrope is an object used to trick the eye by creating the illusion of motion. Here are the instructions for the students:

- First, measure and cut out two squares (3 x 3 inches).
- Use a marker to draw an animal in the center of each square. The animals should be alike but doing something slightly different in each square.
- Tape a pencil or thin cylindrical stick to the back of one of the squares.
- Align the second square evenly with the first, and attach the two squares together.
- Holding the stick between the palms of your hands, roll the stick back and forth. The animal will look like it is moving.
- Investigate other early animation techniques and optical illusions.

Visit FristArtMuseum.org/resource/creating-a-thaumatrope to watch “Creating a Thaumatrope,” the instructional video for this activity.

Taos Society of Artists

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, many aspiring American artists studied abroad in prestigious French and German academies. There, they sketched the human figure and copied historic works of art, but they also learned about newer, more unconventional styles, such as the spontaneous brushstrokes and pure colors of impressionism.



Victor Higgins. *Taos, New Mexico*, ca. 1921. Oil on canvas, 52 x 56 in. Denver Art Museum: Gift from Dr. George C. Peck and Catherine M. Peck, 2013.462

The artists in this section of the exhibition studied in Munich and Paris but searched for subjects that they considered uniquely American when they returned. The remote northern New Mexico town of Taos proved particularly spellbinding. Attracted to the area's expanses of mountains, vivid sunlight, and Indigenous and Hispanic cultures, six painters formed the Taos Society of Artists in 1915. Global politics also informed this choice. When World War I closed European borders between 1914 and 1918, artists who might have sought training and inspiration abroad turned instead to the American West.

In the mid-1890s, Bert Geer Phillips, Ernest L. Blumenschein, and Joseph Henry Sharp met while studying in Paris. Sharp had earlier visited Taos and boasted of its beauty and rich subject matter. Phillips and Blumenschein would accidentally make their way there in 1898 when, en route to Mexico, their wagon wheel broke about twenty miles outside of Taos. As the now-legendary story goes, they flipped a coin to determine who would take the broken wheel into town, and Blumenschein lost the toss.



E. Martin Hennings. *The Rabbit Hunt*, ca. 1925. Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 39 1/2 in. Denver Art Museum: William Sr. and Dorothy Harmsen Collection, 2001.449. © E. Martin Hennings

Mabel Dodge Luhan, a patron of the arts who lived in Taos, wrote that Victor Higgins "can say more with his pearly tones than most painters do with the whole solid color scale." Here, Higgins evokes crisp winter air with his "pearly tones" and throws sloping hills into contrast with sharp blue shadows. A sturdy line of adobe architecture nestled beneath soaring mountains underscores what Luhan called the artist's "dramatic appreciation" of the region's sublime landscapes and its indomitable people.

Born in Chicago, E. Martin Hennings studied in Munich and traveled through Europe before visiting Taos in 1917. Rather than placing Indigenous peoples in an imagined past, Hennings observed their lifestyle in the present. In this painting, a dark storm fills the background and pushes the brightly lit foreground figures toward the viewer. We see not only a contrast in atmosphere but also of cultures: the male figures wear traditional moccasins and blankets as well as modern clothing like a tennis sweater and necktie.

Questions

- What attracted artists to Taos, New Mexico?
- Hennings did not place Indigenous people in an imagined past. Instead, he painted them in the present. Why was this an important artistic decision?

Activity: Postcards from the American West

Instructions for the class or group:

View the artwork featured in this guide, and research the early American West. Imagine whom or what you might see if you were to travel back in time. What kinds of experiences would you have had in the West during the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

On the front of a postcard-sized piece of cardstock, draw a picture inspired by one of those experiences. This could be a landscape, a portrait, a depiction of wildlife, or some other image representing your idea of the American West. On the back, write a short message to a friend or family member with descriptive adjectives to give them an idea of what the place is like. What did you see, hear, and smell? Whom did you meet? How did you feel when you were there?

A Modern West

At the beginning of the 20th century, the world seemed to be moving toward a future full of possibility, as novel methods of travel and communication transformed everyday life. Avant-garde (new and experimental) artworks from Europe challenged traditional artistic practice. Some of the unconventional techniques artists employed to express the world around them included using bold colors and patterns, radically simplifying or abstracting shapes, flattening three-dimensional forms, and tilting perspectives. The American West maintained its prominence as a source of inspiration for those seeking new forms of visual representation. Its dramatic landscapes and intense light lent themselves to modern styles, and a younger generation of artists saw new relevance in the centuries-old design motifs of Indigenous art. During a tumultuous era that witnessed technological innovation as well as the tragedies of World War I and the Great Depression, depictions of the West preserved key components of American myth and history.



Kenneth Miller Adams. *Reapers (Harvest)*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 in. Denver Art Museum: Gift from Dr. George C. Peck and Catherine M. Peck, 2013.466

Kenneth Miller Adams studied in France and Italy before moving to Taos in 1924, where he became interested in the local Spanish American population. Here, he surrounds the strong bodies of two female workers with golden harvest tones. The viewer's eye travels around the composition—from the upright woman in the green dress, through her sheaf of wheat, and down the stooping woman's back and arm. This movement imitates the endless motion of these women's exhausting labor.

Question

- Compare Kenneth Miller Adams's *Reapers (Harvest)* to other artworks in this guide. How did Adams's style of painting challenge what had been traditional artistic practice?

Activity: Narrative Writing

Give students one or two minutes to view Kenneth Miller Adams's *Reapers*. Use the following questions to guide students through a discussion about the art:

- What do you notice in the art?
- What do your observations tell you about the story, idea, mood, or feeling of the work of art?
- Why do you think about that? Expand on your ideas.

Ask students to write a narrative from the perspective of a person depicted in the painting, using ideas generated during the discussion.

Glossary

arable: land fit or used for the growing of crops

Blackfeet: Indigenous people of Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan

criollo: a person of pure Spanish descent born in Spanish America

Kootenai: American Indian people of the Rocky Mountains in both the U.S. and Canada

Homestead Act: starting in 1862, provided 160 acres of public land free of charge (except for a small filing fee) to anyone who was either 21 years of age or head of a family, who was a citizen or person who had filed for citizenship, and who had lived on and cultivated the land for at least five years. By the turn of the century, more than 80 million acres had been claimed by homesteaders. The act was repealed in 1976.

manifest destiny: a future event accepted as inevitable; in the mid-19th century expansion to the Pacific was regarded as the Manifest Destiny of the United States; an ostensibly benevolent or necessary policy of imperialistic expansion

mestizo: a person of mixed blood; specifically a person of mixed European and American Indian ancestry

Otoe: North American Indian people of the Chiwere branch of the Siouan linguistic family, which also includes the languages of the closely related Missouri and Iowa tribes. (Britannica.com)

plein air: of or relating to painting in outdoor daylight

sovereignty: freedom from external control

vaquero: used in reference to cowboys in areas (such as Mexico and the southwestern U.S.) where Spanish is spoken

Definitions are from Merriam-Webster.com unless otherwise noted.

Resources

Elementary School

Book

Real Cowboys, written by Kate Hoefler and illustrated by Jonathan Bean

FristKids Videos and Activities

Color Temperature

[FristArtMuseum.org/resource/color-temperature/](https://www.fristartmuseum.org/resource/color-temperature/)

Creating a Thaumatrope

[FristArtMuseum.org/resource/creating-a-thaumatrope/](https://www.fristartmuseum.org/resource/creating-a-thaumatrope/)

Denver Art Museum Activities

What's that Bear doing There? Making Inferences

[DenverArtMuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/whats-bear-doing-there-making-inferences](https://denverartmuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/whats-bear-doing-there-making-inferences)

Middle and High School

Books

An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

The True West: Real Stories About Black Cowboys, Women Sharpshooters, Native American Rodeo Stars, Pioneering Vaqueros, and the Unsung Explorers, Builders, and Heroes Who Shaped the American West, written by Mifflin Lowe and illustrated by Wiliam Luong

Denver Art Museum Activities

Functional Fashion

[DenverArtMuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/functional-fashion](https://denverartmuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/functional-fashion)

Taking a Stand on Coexistence

[DenverArtMuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/taking-stand-coexistence](https://denverartmuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/taking-stand-coexistence)

The Power of Plein Air

[DenverArtMuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/power-plein-air](https://denverartmuseum.org/en/edu/lesson/power-plein-air)

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Organized by the Petrie Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum

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