

Art of the Western Identity

Using the Paintings of Marion Nicoll and A.C. Leighton to Compare Their Depiction of the West

Introduction

Students need to explore the unique and dynamic relationship humans have with the land and how places and environments affect our understanding of citizenship and identity. Students will examine the impact of physical geography and their own connections to the land as to how it impacts our view of Western Canada. How do we see the “land”? How does it affect how we see ourselves? How has the land changed since Leighton started painting in the 1930s? How would you represent the West as you see it? What would you want to show to the world?

Project Explanation

In this project, students will develop an appreciation of how different artists may view the same subject in extremely different ways. They will research and compare two different artists and their artistic styles, creating an interpretation of one of their artworks. Students will then try to emulate the style of one of the artists by creating their own artistic representation of Western Canada and Alberta.

Alberta Social Studies Curriculum Unit Connections

Grade Four - Alberta: The Land, Histories and Stories

- 4.1 Alberta: A Sense of the Land
- 4.2 The Stories, Histories and People of Alberta
- 4.3 Alberta: Celebrations and Challenges

Grade Five - Canada: The Land, Histories and Stories

- 5.1 Physical Geography of Canada

Materials and Resources Needed

- *Mavericks: An Incorrigible History of Alberta* - Character Biographies and Online Artifacts
<http://www.glenbow.org/mavericks>
- ImagesCanada.ca
<http://www.imagescanada.ca/>
- Marion Nicoll - Biography

- <http://www.artists-society.ab.ca/marion.html>
- Marion Nicoll - Artist's Biography
http://www.abheritage.ca/abarts/database/artist_bio.php?artist_id=59§ion_id=3
- Marion Nicoll – Annunciation
<http://www.artrentals.ca/detail.php?id=91>
- Marion Nicoll - February
<http://www.artrentals.ca/detail.php?id=92>
- Marion Nicoll - Foothills
<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Landscapes/popup.php3?language=1&image=img14maw>
- Marion Nicoll - Indian Girl
<http://www.artrentals.ca/detail.php?id=93>
- Marion Nicoll - Northern Nesting Grounds
http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/enjoying_alberta/exhibitions/giving/images/1973_011_039_Nicoll.asp
- Marion Nicoll - Pansies & Summer Rain
http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/enjoying_alberta/exhibitions/watermark/images/nicol.l.asp
- Marion Nicoll - Plants
<http://www.artrentals.ca/detail.php?id=94>
- Marion Nicoll - Prairie Farm
http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Perspectives/English/pop.php3?artid=31&language=English&imagenam=l_mnm.jpg
- Marion Nicoll - Prophet
<http://www.glenbow.org/collections/art/1969.cfm>
- Marion Nicoll - Runes B
http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/enjoying_alberta/exhibitions/giving/images/1973_004_011_Nicoll.asp
- Marion Nicoll - Spring
http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Perspectives/English/pop.php3?artid=116&language=English&imagenam=l_g13834.jpg
- Marion Nicoll - Sun Dogs
<http://www.artrentals.ca/detail.php?id=95>
- Marion Nicoll - The City Sunday
<http://www.trianglegallery.com/exhibits/civic/thecitysunday.html>
- Marion Nicoll - Thursday's Model
http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/search/artwork_zoom_e.jsp?mkey=21561
- Marion Nicoll - Untitled
http://www.cd.gov.ab.ca/enjoying_alberta/exhibitions/giving/images/1973_011_043_Nicoll.asp
- A. C. Leighton Biography
<http://www.artists-society.ab.ca/leighton.html>
- A.C. Leighton and the Canadian Rockies
<http://www.sharecom.ca/leighton/rockies.html>
- 22 Artworks by A. C. Leighton: The Rocky Mountains, B.C. and the Prairies
<http://www.sharecom.ca/leighton/works.html>

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WHERE THE WORLD MEETS THE WEST

Procedures

Students will examine and interpret two very different artists, artistic styles and the ways they represented life in the Canadian West. A. C. Leighton was one of the most influential artists in Alberta and Marion Nicoll learned under Leighton's tutelage. Leighton focused mainly on the Canadian Wilderness, while Nicoll began with landscape paintings and later turned to "classical abstractionism."

Using the *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* site and the other web resources presented above, students will research about the two artists and their artistic styles. They will then carefully examine and appraise the different artworks of each painter. Each student should choose one painting from each artist to study, and then use any of the following questions they feel are appropriate to write an interpretation of the artwork. Their work should use a "journal" style where they use questions from below that fit their painting. They should be as descriptive as possible in their writing, elaborating on the important questions.

Looking at Western Art

1. What do you see in the artwork?

- What lines, shapes, colours, and textures are used in the artwork?
- What objects are included? Describe them.
- Are people in the artwork? What do they look like? What are they doing?
- Is the artwork a natural scene? Describe what it looks like.
- What materials were used to create it? What is its actual size?

2. How is everything in the artwork arranged?

- What is the very first thing that catches your eye?
- How are the elements connected? Does anything repeat?
- What is the most important colour, shape or object? Why?
- Do some things appear to be close and others far away? How does the artist accomplish this?

3. What is the artwork all about?

- Imagine you are at the scene of this artwork. How do you feel being there?
- What sounds do you hear around you?
- What can you smell if you were there?
- What could you taste if you were there?
- What does this artwork remind you of?
- What is the "story" behind this artwork?
- What do you think the artist is trying to tell you through this artwork

4. How would you critique this artwork?

- Is this a good work of art? Why or why not?
- What do you like the most about this artwork?
- What would you change if you were the artist?
- How is it stereotypical?
- Does it show what is the “West” is really like to someone who has never been to Alberta?
- How does it portray our province? What would it tell tourists about Alberta?
- What kind of artwork would you choose to create in order to show the “Real West” to others?

Once the student interpretations are complete, they should share their own writing and discuss whether other people looked at the artwork in the same way. This may lead to some great discussions, especially using Nicoll’s paintings, about subjectivity in art.

Students will now attempt to create an artwork in the style of one or both painters. They could work from a photograph from the ImagesCanada website (searching “mountains” provides 2961 black & white photos), photos from calendars, other artworks, or even their own. Paintings in the style of Leighton may be done with watercolour or tempera paints. “Paintings” in the style of Nicoll could be created by cutting pieces of coloured paper and pasting them onto a coloured background.

Finally, the students will write a written description of their work, what they tried to represent, what the “subject” means to them, what they liked about these styles and what they found difficult. Their artworks may be exhibited along with their writing.

Assessment and Evaluation

- After the teacher and students collaboratively create a rubric, students should use it as a guide for their learning as they are working through the process, regularly checking that all the needed elements are included in their work and revising as needed. The rubric can then be used as a formal evaluative tool when they have completed their project.
- Students may use their rubric as a guide for writing a self-assessment of their project work. They will determine their level for each of the categories and use the criteria specified in their rubric to justify them.
- A project journal may be used for information gathering as well as for reflective writing as the process is taking place. Students can pose questions, vent frustrations, synthesize their work, examine their process, and even wonder about what they are missing or what is still needed for their project. This may be completed as a group or individually.

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WHERE THE WORLD MEETS THE WEST

Ideas to Enrich this Project

- Students may research and examine other Alberta artists, such as Margaret Shelton (<http://www.glenbow.org/collections/art/research/shelton.cfm>) and compare their work to Nicoll and Leighton
- Students could examine the work of the Group of Seven and describe how they tried to portray the Canadian West