



## *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*

Lesson Plan: Grades 6 – 12



## Introduction

Emigrants Crossing the Plains Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) Oil on canvas (67" x 102") National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City

Redefined by territorial expansion in the mid-1800s, the boundary of the American West shifted from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, fueled largely by exploration and emigration along the Oregon Trail, among others. Over the course of fifty years, almost 400,000 people traveled the 2,170-mile route, leaving their farms along the East Coast in hopes of securing fertile land in the Oregon Territory. American artist Albert Bierstadt documented his journey on the trail, capturing the dramatic panoramas and indomitable spirit of the emigrants on his oversized canvases. With their rich colors and pristine details, these romanticized images roused an already fascinated American public to begin their own westward adventure.

## About the Artist

Born in Solingen, Germany, on January 7, 1830, Albert Bierstadt immigrated with his family to New Bedford, Massachusetts, at the age of two. Throughout his youth, Bierstadt expressed an interest in art and by the age of 20 had established his artistic career, supporting himself through teaching. In 1851 he held his first exhibition, drawing the attention of art collectors in New Bedford.

Even though his family was poor and did not initially endorse his decision to be an artist, they supported his return to Germany in 1853 to study at the distinguished Düsseldorf Academy. There, Bierstadt worked intensively for four years, traveling throughout Europe and preparing sketches, drawings, and paintings of the Alpine mountain ranges, fueling his fascination with the majestic American topography.

Upon his return to the United States, Bierstadt arranged an exhibition in New Bedford that included works by major artists, as well as fifteen of his own paintings. In addition, the artist had his first showing at the National Academy of Design in New York City. This 1858 display validated Bierstadt's artistic career, bringing widespread acclaim for his work and strengthening his influence on 19th Century American landscape painting.

## About the Artwork

In 1859 Bierstadt made the first of many trips west, joining a survey expedition led by Colonel Frederick William Lander that followed the Oregon Trail to California. Along with the Lander party, Bierstadt traveled through Nebraska and into Wyoming Territory. Overcome by the beauty of his surroundings, Bierstadt left his place on the journey, deciding instead to explore and return home on his own.

While sketching the glorious peaks of the Rocky Mountains, Bierstadt was inspired to write a letter to the well-known artists' publication *The Crayon*, proclaiming the mountains to rival the Alps in Europe. In addition, he expressed his enchantment with American Indians and the wildlife that he discovered. Of these, he took numerous photographs and made several sketches and oil studies that would later be incorporated into the grand-sized paintings created in his New York studio. This fantastic excursion spurred the young artist's curiosity with North American landscape, a subject matter that would secure Bierstadt's position as one of the premiere artists of the American West.

Intent on defining the expanse east of the Mississippi River for the American public, Bierstadt planned a second trip west, this time traveling with writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow. The pair set off on their journey in May of 1863. Along the way they encountered a wagon train of German emigrants just outside Fort Kearney, Nebraska.

Ludlow recounted this moment in his 1870 book *The Heart of the Continent*, describing the “picturesque party of Germans...[with] a large herd of cattle and fifty wagons...such a delight in form, color, and spirit.” Bierstadt, in turn, captured the moment pictorially with two separate paintings, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, completed on November 27, 1867, and *The Oregon Trail*, dating to 1869.

While the works are similar in subject matter, they differ in scale. *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* carries out Bierstadt’s tradition of oversized painting, reflecting the grandiose size and spectacle of the American West. In addition, the artist’s style captivates the viewer with a romanticized scene of his adventure along the Oregon Trail.

## Questions for Discussion

- Describe what you see in Bierstadt’s painting.
- Where do you think this scene took place? What clues tell you this?
- What is the first thing you notice about this work? Do you think that the artist intended to make this the center of interest?
- Identify what you see in the foreground of this painting. What do you see in the middleground? And what can you find in the background?
- Do you feel like you could walk into this painting? Describe the space used by the artist – is the painting flat or does it have depth?
- Identify the warm colors used by the artist. Which one color do you see the most of in this painting? How does that color make you feel?
- Where do you see the most light in this work?
- Why do you think the artist created such a large image?

# Exercise: Social Studies/Visual Art

## Objectives and Overview

To complete this exercise, students will illustrate comprehension of 19th Century American landscape painting, creating original works of art using a variety of media, techniques, and sources for subject matter. \*To modify this exercise ask students to research the historical and cultural context of works created by Hudson River School artists and then create a landscape painting in their style.

## Materials

Transparency or color copy of *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*  
9×12" heavy-weight paper (120-160# watercolor paper or tag board) or canvas board  
Pencils  
Painting media (watercolor, tempera, or acrylics)  
Brushes  
Water and water cups or bowls  
Paper or Styrofoam plates or plastic palettes  
Paper towels

## Project Procedure

1. Using Bierstadt's painting, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, review the principles of art by asking students to identify and describe each of the following:  
  
Rhythm, balance, contrast, movement, variety, center of interest, and repetition
2. Next ask students to identify and describe the elements of design listed below:  
  
Lines (characteristics and qualities), colors (primary, secondary, complementary, intermediates, neutrals, tints, tones, shades, and values), shapes (geometric versus organic), textures (tactile versus visual), and space (background, middleground, foreground, and perspective)
3. Working with a piece of paper or canvas board and pencils, ask students to lay out the composition for their own original landscape painting, making sure to fill the entire picture plane and demonstrating their knowledge of the principles of art and elements of design. The subject for their composition be drawn from their observations, memories, or imaginations.
4. Next have students apply paint to their composition, showing safe and proper use, care, and storage of media, materials, and equipment, as well as thoughtfulness and care in the completion of their artwork.
5. \*Modification: Have students access and use a variety of appropriate to gather information about the Hudson River School. Using this information, each student will create an original landscape painting, composed in the style of Hudson River School artists.

# Exercise: Social Studies/Visual Art

## Objectives and Overview

The goal of this exercise is for the class to pretend that they are newspaper reporters in 1863. Using historical research, along with proper grammar usage, students will write a news article, inserting historically accurate quotes, as needed. \*To modify this exercise, have students present their reports orally to the class. Students may work in pairs or in small groups to prepare their research for the report.

## Materials

Paper  
Pencils or pens

## Project Procedure

1. Discuss early territorial exploration, expansion, and the settlement of the West, prior to the Civil War. Topics may include, but are not limited to, the pioneers who left from St. Louis to take the Santa Fe or Oregon Trail, the term "Manifest Destiny," and Western United States geography.
2. Have students access and use a variety of appropriate sources to gather information about Westward Expansion before the Civil War, including magazines, technology/Internet, encyclopedias, and atlases, among others.
3. Students should synthesize information from at least three different sources and summarize this information into short, written reports, presenting the information in their own words and identifying and crediting the sources used to gain information.
4. \*Modification: Ask students to present their reports orally to the class.

# Exercise: Social Studies/Visual Art

## Objectives and Overview

The objective of this exercise is for each student to imagine him or herself in the scene of this painting and to compose a letter written to a friend or family member describing his or her experience. Students will then illustrate their letters with original images; similar to what artist Albert Bierstadt may have done on his journey. \*To modify this exercise, ask students to journal their adventures during a course of study on Westward Expansion.

## Materials

Transparency or color copy of Emigrants Crossing the Plains  
Paper or notebooks  
Pencils  
Colored pencils, markers, crayons, and/or oil pastels

## Project Procedure

1. Begin this exercise by distributing paper and pencils to the students and showing the class a transparency or color copy of Emigrants Crossing the Plains. Ask the following questions. Students should think about their individual answers to these questions and write them down on their paper.

Imagine you can walk into this painting and become part of the scene. Are you the one riding in the wagon or herding the cattle? Or are you somewhere else? What are you doing?

Where did you come from? Where are you going?

Describe what you hear, see, smell, and feel.

What is the weather like? Are you hot or cold? Is it sunny or raining?

2. Using their answers to the questions listed above and/or their imaginations ask students to write a letter on a separate piece of paper to a friend or family member, describing their experience.
3. Distribute colored pencils, markers, crayons, and/or oil pastels to students.
4. Working from their observations, memories, or imaginations, have students create sketches illustrating the adventures and encounters described in their letters. Students can make pencil drawings that may be colored with other drawing media, or they can work directly with colored pencils, markers, crayons, or oil pastels.
5. \*Modification: During the course of study on territorial exploration, expansion, and the settlement of the United States, have students create a journal that combines their answers to the questions listed above with their interpretation and understanding of Westward Expansion.