



## *The End of the Trail*

Lesson Plan: Grades 6 – 12



# Introduction

Sculpted by American-born artist James Earle Fraser, *The End of the Trail* has endured to become one of the most recognizable images in the United States. Many people are familiar with this representation of an American Indian on horseback, but few actually know the history of the piece. Originally, it was more than just an image on a postcard, belt buckle or beaded bracelet. It was a major sculptural work. And for its creator, it was more than just a sculpture. It was a meaningful reminder of a childhood spent on the American frontier.

## About the Artist

James Earle Fraser grew up on the plains in Mitchell, South Dakota. There he had unique encounters with pioneers, hunters and fur trappers, and he befriended many of the Plains Natives. He often heard stories about the “doomed fate” of the Native people and sympathized with their suffering as westward expansion threatened to consume their lands. The experience of watching a young man in Mitchell carve chalkstone into different forms encouraged Fraser to begin sculpting. He later acknowledged that this significantly influenced his art career.

In the late 1880s, the Fraser family left their prairie life behind and moved to Minneapolis, a landscape that was much different from the flat, vast expanses of the West. The hills, lakes and trees provided the young Fraser with fresh subject matter for his artwork. His family then soon moved to Chicago, where at the age of 13, Fraser began his studies at the Art Institute. During this time, he was able to assist in the installation of sculpture at the World’s Fair of 1893. Combined with his boyhood experiences on the plains of South Dakota, the sculptures of the American Indians featured at the Fair further encouraged Fraser to produce the image he had envisioned for *The End of the Trail*. He began making the model for the piece shortly afterwards.

Though Fraser won many awards for his work at the Art Institute, his father did not support his plan to continue his studies as an artist. He contacted Sir William Van Horne, a major railroad tycoon who was also a close family friend and a collector of great works of art, for his advice in assessing his son’s artistic abilities. Van Horne encouraged Fraser’s studies in art, and his father agreed with the decision, allowing the young student to travel to Paris, France in 1897.

Fraser took a small, bronze version of *The End of the Trail* with him overseas, and in 1898 he won the John Wanamaker prize for the work at the American Artists Association exhibition in Paris. This prestigious award brought him the opportunity to study at the Beaux Arts school in Paris and the chance to assist Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the leading sculptor in the United States who had a strong influence on the development of Fraser’s style.

Above all, Fraser held the highest admiration for the work of Michelangelo, whose sculptures he had studied while at the Beaux-Arts school. But it was on a trip taken to Italy during his last year in Paris that Fraser encountered the classic works of this Renaissance master in person. The awe-inspiring journey encouraged Fraser to produce works on a monumental scale, and he kept this experience in mind as he returned to the United States in 1900. Working with Saint-Gaudens, Fraser found ways of rendering his forms in bronze and plaster with the same sense of emotion as Michelangelo.

In 1901 Fraser completed his first commission, the Saint-Gaudens Medal, for the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. This work helped to establish the artist and brought further commissions, including his most famous piece, a monumental version of *The End of the Trail* created exclusively for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, California.

## About the Artwork

After returning to the United States, Fraser made several changes to his small bronze of *The End of the Trail* for the 1915 sculpture. The artist struggled with which image of the Native American would be the most appropriate to depict—a vanishing race of savage warriors or the transformation of proud, spiritual people into the next century.

Choosing the latter option, Fraser replaced the buffalo shield that appeared in earlier versions of the piece with a medicine bag. Combined with the presence of a strong wind whisking behind the figure and his horse, these details represent the spiritual side of the Native people. Another prominent change made specifically for this piece was the removal of part of the buffalo hide robe, exposing the musculature of the figure and representing the strength of the Native American.

Placed in the Court of Palms at the entrance to the Expo, this compelling image greeted almost 19 million visitors. Fraser's piece was such a great success that he was awarded the gold medal for sculpture, and *The End of the Trail* quickly gained widespread recognition. Following the conclusion of the Exposition, many artists wished to have their sculptures cast in bronze, but this was not possible since the United States entered into World War I, and the materials for making bronze became very scarce. Thus, the plaster sculptures were tossed into a mud pit at Marina Park.

Residents of Tulare County, California, rescued *The End of Trail* in 1919 and relocated the piece to Mooney Grove Park, near Visalia, California. In 1968 the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum acquired the plaster piece, had the plaster piece cast in bronze, and returned the cast sculpture to Mooney Grove Park.

## Questions for Discussion

- Using “clues” made by the artist, can you tell what the subject matter of this sculpture is?
- Which sculptural medium has the artist used?
- What process did the artist use to make this sculpture? What tools did he use?
- What is the first thing you notice about this piece? Do you think that the artist intended to place emphasis on that?
- What materials or textures did the artist attempt to re-create?
- Do you sense movement in this sculpture?
- Is this figure romanticized, stylized or realistic?
- Imagine you are the one riding this horse. Describe what you hear, see, smell and feel. What is the weather like?
- How does the color of this sculpture make you feel?
- Why do you think the artist created such a large sculpture?
- How is this sculpture different from others that you have seen?
- Do you think that this is art? Why or why not?

# Exercise: Visual Art/Language Arts

## Objectives and Overview

The objective of this exercise is for each student to create an original contour drawing representing or inspired by the sculpture *The End of the Trail* by James Earle Fraser. Students should then fill the space inside the drawing with words and/or phrases that illustrate the moods and/or emotions present in the work of art, their interpretation of the artist's meaning for the sculpture, or what the piece means to them. \*To modify this exercise, have students fill the space inside their contour drawing with a collage of images and/or words cut out from magazines and/or newspapers.

## Materials

Transparency or color copy of *The End of the Trail*

8 1/2 x 11" white copy paper

Pencils

Markers and/or crayons

\*Magazines, newspapers, and glue

## Project Procedure

1. Begin this exercise by showing students a transparency or copy of *The End of the Trail* and ask students each of the following questions. Make a list of their responses on the board. Encourage all students to provide their input, and remind them that there are no right or wrong answers; this is simply a brainstorming exercise.
  - What do you think the artist was trying to tell us when he created this sculpture?
  - Which moods or emotions has the artist depicted in this piece?
  - What does this work of art mean to you?
2. Distribute paper, pencils, and markers or crayons to students while explaining the term "contour."
  - A contour is an outline or the outside edge of something. Contour lines define the objects, forms, or shapes in a drawing, painting, sculpture, or other work of art.
3. Demonstrate how to draw a contour by placing your hand on the board and tracing it. Then using the transparency or copy of *The End of the Trail* and a marker, trace the contour of the sculpture for students. Next demonstrate how to create a contour sketch of *The End of the Trail* using a pencil by drawing, not tracing, the image on a sheet of paper taped to the board.
4. Working from observation, memory, or imagination, have students create their own contour sketches of *The End of the Trail* using pencils. Encourage students to make their drawings large and fill their paper to the edges. Once they have finished their sketches, students may trace the contour line with a black marker or crayon.
5. Refer students back to their responses listed on the board. Using pencils, markers or crayons have students fill the space inside their contour drawings with words or phrases that describe the moods or emotions of the sculpture, the artist's meaning for the work, and/or what the sculpture means to the student.
6. \*Modification: Have students select and cut out words and/or images from magazines and/or newspapers that describe the moods or emotions of the sculpture, the artist's meaning for the work, and/or what the sculpture means to the student. Using glue, students should collage these words and/or images into the space inside their contour drawings.

# Exercise: Language Arts/Social Studies

## Objectives and Overview

At the age of four, Fraser moved with his family from his birthplace in Winona, Minnesota, to Mitchell, South Dakota, where his father began construction on the railroad line. The objective of this exercise is for students to research westward expansion in the United States after the Civil War and prepare a short, written report. \*To modify this exercise, ask students to present their reports orally to the class.

## Materials

Paper and pencils or pens

## Project Procedure

1. Discuss westward expansion following the Civil War, including the Homestead Act of 1862, the Transcontinental Railroad, cowboys and cattle drives, and the closing of the American frontier in 1890.
2. Have students access and use a variety of appropriate sources to gather information about westward expansion after 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 for this exercise is for students to work in groups of four or five to construct a timeline of significant events in United States history, using the birth and death dates of artist James Earle Fraser as a framework. Each event should be marked on the timeline with its date and title, and then students should take turns creating drawings that depict or interpret each event.

## Materials

Large sheets of white butcher paper  
Pencils  
Rulers  
Colored pencils, markers or crayons

## Project Procedure

1. On the board write the artist's name, James Earle Fraser, along with his birth date, 1876, and his death date, 1953.
2. Divide students into groups of four or five and have them locate and gather information about the significant events that took place in United States history between 1876 and 1953, using a variety of primary and secondary sources, including magazines, technology/Internet, encyclopedias, and atlases, among others.
3. Students should then apply this information by constructing timelines using pencils and rulers. Each significant event should be marked on the timeline with its date and title.
4. Next have students work individually or in pairs to illustrate each event using drawing media such as pencils, colored pencils, markers and/or crayons.