Joslyn Art Museum
Comprehensive Study Lesson Plan

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THE COWBOY ARTIST

Focus: Charles Marion Russell, *Range Mother (A Serious Predicament)*

Objectives – Students will:

- Create pastel landscapes and print critters that may live on the land depicted in Russell’s artworks of the West.
- Respond to the challenge of considering how (or if) Russell’s compositions would change if his upbringing was different.
- Present thoughts on why Russell’s artworks seem to glow.
- Connect to the life of a cowboy and determine if they would enjoy as Russell did.

Suggested Materials: Charles Marion Russell teaching poster; Pinterest Resource Board, Russell images, see detailed lesson plans for additional materials.

Vocabulary: cowboy, gear, herd, landscape, open range, palette, predicament, ranch, the West

Procedure:

- Engage: Who is a cowboy? Show students images of Charles Marion Russell’s depictions of cowboys next to an image of a familiar cowboy such as Woodie (from Disney/Pixar’s Toy Story). Have students discuss similarities and differences.

- Art Talk: Cowboy Gear. Have students look at the cowboys in Russell’s *Range Mother (A Serious Predicament)* and identify all the gear cowboys use from saddles to ropes. Refer to the workshop presented by Scott Wehrmann at Thursdays for Teachers.

- History: Who was Charles Marion Russell? Refer to resources in the Teacher Support Materials for additional information. [http://goo.gl/BTkzcF](http://goo.gl/BTkzcF)

- Aesthetics: Have students study the colors of *Range Mother (A Serious Predicament)* and ask them to identify Russell’s palette. What strikes them about this artwork? Discuss how it seems to glow.

- Production 1: Pastels on the Range. Students will use pastels to create a landscape similar to what Russell experienced. Refer to the lesson plan presented by Carey Hernandez at Thursdays for Teachers.

- Production 2: Creatures for Teachers. Have students research animals living on the range and print them. Refer to the lesson plan presented by Therese Straseski at Thursdays for Teachers.

- Other: Russell daydreamed about the West, finally traveled there in 1880, and eventually worked as a cowboy. Challenge students to think about how his artworks would be different if he grew up on a ranch rather than adapting to it as a young man.
• Close: Ask students if they would like to be a cowboy or cowgirl. Why or why not?

Extensions:

• Cultural Connections 1: Hollywood Spin. Have students research how old Hollywood incorrectly depicted cowboys in their films. Russell’s student eventually became a film consultant.

• Cultural Connections 2: Study what open range ranching is and how ranchers kept track of their herd.

• Fine Arts: Take the story from Language Arts and create a performance piece. Discuss what how to make it a great one.

• Language Arts: Fireside Story. Craft a story featuring a “predicament” like in Russell’s painting that would be shared around the campfire. Have students write it from the perspective of a cowboy. Ask them to consider how much embellishment may have happened with each telling of the story.

• Math: Applied multiplication. Think back to the harsh winter of 1886–1887 that Russell experienced. Have students determine how much money ranchers lost as a result. Create other story problems related to ranch life.

• Science: Study the geography of the open range land.

Academic Standards & additional resources:
Available on online version at www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/thursdays-for-teachers
[select Lesson Plans, then Art of the American West]

About the Artwork:
Charles Marion Russell’s art was in high demand due to growing popular interest in the West, which drove magazines to seek illustrations by “Western artists.” In 1908 Russell signed a five-year contract with Brown & Bigelow, a prominent calendar company. Russell would send in a selection of paintings and Brown & Bigelow picked their favorites. They paid $500 for the exclusive rights to reproduce the images, but Russell could keep the originals and sell them as he saw fit. The publications were widely circulated and increased the artist’s exposure.

The company typically gave Russell complete freedom to choose his own subject matter, but requested a “cattle’ piece and possibly a ‘gun fight.” He obliged and created a few scenes including Range Mother (A Serious Predicament).

Open ranges provided sufficient space to sustain massive herds of cattle, but the absence of fences made it difficult to locate and claim ownership of individual animals. In order to avoid this, ranchers branded their property with unique designs that were recorded in books published by livestock associations. Russell understood this well as he was a “rep” or an employee who rode from camp to camp rounding up calves and stray cattle for branding. He found the job enjoyable because it was more social than the lonely life of a cowboy, but in Range Mother (A Serious Predicament) he documents some of the perils of the work. The exciting and dangerous action scene is one that helped establish Russell’s reputation as the “cowboy artist” who accurately recorded the vanishing spirit of the West on canvas.