LEsson Plan

Larger than Life: American Landscapes
Inspired by Albert Bierstadt, (American, born Germany, 1830–1902)
Created by Heath Draney
Grade Level Upper Elementary & above

Overview
Take a image of a mountain landscape. The picture should have some foreground (rolling hills, trees, maybe a river) and examine how much of the image is occupied by the sky, the mountains themselves, and the foreground. The student will try to push the boundaries of this midsection making the mountains seem distant yet enormous. This can be achieved by a variety of subtle changes in scale to the elements closest to the viewer, (ie. a massive cloud obscuring some of a mighty peak).

Anticipatory Set
Romantic paintings created a sensational fixation with the American West. Artists such as Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran paved the way for people's curiosity about the secrets America held on the frontier. The West is still a romantic subject of many major pieces of literature and film (i.e. Into the Wild).

Objectives
• Students will appreciate the grandeur of the American Landscape
• Students learn basic techniques and how to create opaque and translucent forms
• Students will inadvertently learn about more advanced art concepts such as usage of space, the golden mean, and atmospheric perspective.

Resources
• Albert Bierstadt Teaching Poster http://goo.gl/jr7ipF
• Rocky Mountain Plein Air Painters http://rmppap.org/
• The Basics of Art: The Romantic Period | The Art of Manliness http://goo.gl/sGXLFO
• Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise, Nancy K. Anderson*
• Albert Bierstadt, Matthew Baigell”

Supplies
• Assorted brushes
• watercolor paints & palattes
• cups for water
• watercolor paper or a heavier thicker paper to prevent buckling
• paper towels
• ruler
• images/photographs of mountain scenery

Vocabulary
• Atmospheric Perspective
• Luminism
• Opaque
• Transparent

Lesson Outline
1. First have the student examine the photograph or image of scenery
2. Have them make note of various landmarks, are there trees, clouds, people, a stream, etc.
3. Take a ruler and see how much space in the photo or image is being utilized by the elements in the foreground (areas closest).
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4. After careful observations of space have the student begin to draw out areas (may use pencil, paint directly tends to be more decisive).
5. Begin filling in areas with washes of different colors using light amounts of watercolor. (Make sure not to use very dark colors in heavy amounts because watercolor works best when you work from subtle to bold).
6. As the student layers underpainting into the spaces they have created, (mountains, trees, foreground, and sky), have them begin to bolden colors that have dried in other areas.
7. As a side note, it is very important to allow some areas to dry a bit before forcing new colors in to them, forcing colors into areas that are still wet causes colors to bleed and the paper to become overly saturated.
8. Once the student has recreated their mountain landscape, look for ways in which they have achieved luminosity, exaggeration, and wonder. The purpose is to create something that is not necessarily realistic, but has realistic traits, which inspire the imagination.

Extensions
• Learning all there is to know about watercolor could also be its own series of lessons, but learning about why the Romantic painters created the way they did is an excellent objective which spills over into many subjects.
• This lesson can be applied to Romantic Writing, Geology, Geography, History, Mathematics (Golden mean, Elevation), Plate Tectonics, Pioneer Life, Meteorology, and how temperature can affect how we see things in the distance. (Atmospheric perspective)
• Other Art Themes, which could be further explored via: Color Theory, Importance of the creation of Painting Schools (Hudson River), and Plein Air Painters.

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

About the Artist
When Bierstadt was two years old, his family moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, from their rural home near Düsseldorf, Germany. After teaching himself the rudiments of painting, he returned to Düsseldorf in 1853, where he studied in the studios of Andreas Achenbach and Karl Friedrich Lessing, both associated with the Düsseldorf Academy. These masters stressed precise, detailed drawing, high-keyed colors, and large, carefully balanced compositions, which reflected the romanticism of the German philosophers. Because of his training in Düsseldorf, Bierstadt's style differed from that of the first generation of American landscapists, such as Thomas Cole, who for the most part followed the looser, more atmospheric British style. In 1856 Bierstadt left Düsseldorf and traveled through the Alps and then south to Florence and Rome, where he painted for a year among the city's large contingent of Americans. Upon his return to Massachusetts in the autumn of 1857, he successfully established himself as an artist of romantic Alpine scenes.

If there is a single painter whose name is instantly associated with grand Western landscapes, it is Bierstadt. The artist made his first trip West in 1858, and traveled there again in subsequent decades; his last excursion was 1884. His dramatic mountain and marine views, often quite large, were enormously popular. Reflecting his training at the famed Düsseldorf academy, Bierstadt's carefully composed romantic paintings are full of details that are faithful to nature but do not necessarily document a particular place.

Valley of the Yosemite also demonstrates Bierstadt's interest in photography. He was particularly affected by the Yosemite pictures of Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge, whose works he may have used as compositional aids for his paintings. Photography's detailed rendering of forms and deep penetration into space (in the case of stereoscopic photographs) conformed perfectly to Bierstadt's meticulous style and, when combined with the mammoth scale of many of his paintings, produced spectacularly sublime visions that entranced audiences.

IMAGES: Albert Bierstadt. Photograph by Napoleon Sarony