



Watercolors of the Big Sky: Art Activity

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Grade Level: 3–5

Essential Understanding: Learning about composition and techniques can improve your artwork.

Activity Description: Students will explore compositional elements of foreground, middle ground, and background in Charlie Russell's paintings and create landscape paintings inspired by nature, using watercolor techniques. Older students can be introduced to the rule of thirds used in composition.

Time: 2–3 class periods (shorter if hair dryers are used to speed up drying time)

Objectives: Students will

- Learn about composition, especially the idea of foreground, middle ground, and background, and possibly other elements of art (such as color, shadow, and shape).
- Learn basic watercolor techniques of wet-on-wet painting and wet-on-dry painting.
- Create their own watercolor paintings composed with a foreground, middle ground, and background.

Standards

Art Content Standards

- 1—Students create, perform/exhibit, and respond in the Arts.
- 2—Students apply and describe the concepts, structures, and processes in the Arts.
- 4—Students analyze characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others.

Common Core Standards

MMP. 6. Attend to precision.

Materials

Images from the *Montana's Charlie Russell* packet or the [Russell Images PowerPoint](#):

- *Bronc to Breakfast*
- *Inside the Lodge*
- *Indian Hunters' Return*
- *Free Trapper*
- *Laugh Kills Lonesome*
- *When the Land Belonged to God*

Watercolor paper

Masking tape

Masonite, heavy mat board, or other firm material to attach stretched paper

Pencils

Watercolor brushes, various sizes if available

Small clean sponges for applying water to paper for wet-on-wet watercolor technique

Rubber cement

Watercolor paints in red, yellow, and blue or watercolor trays such as Prang

Projector (or copies of images for discussion)

Pre-Project Procedure

1. Pre-Project Discussion:

Explore and discuss all or a selection of the images listed above from the *Montana's Charlie Russell* education packet. Draw students' attention to how Russell divided his paintings into three parts: foreground, middle ground, and background. This is a technique that many classical painters use even today, called the rule of thirds. Ask students what kinds of things they see in the background? The middle of the painting? The front of the painting? Ask them if there are any sketch

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marks visible? List items they find in each part of the painting. From this list students can choose elements for their own paintings. Additional items can be added as students think of them.

2. Demonstration and Discussion of Art Techniques:

Demonstrate the wet-on-wet watercolor technique for students.

This technique is good for painting backgrounds. Apply water to a blank sheet of watercolor paper using a sponge or paintbrush. Create a wash by painting one color and then another color, allowing them to produce a soft, diffused look as the colors mix. The extent to which the two colors mix depends on how wet the paper and how diluted the paint is. You can get anything from a soft-edged shape to a widely spread pattern. The link below is an excellent video showing several watercolor methods, including all those listed in the lesson plan: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yl6V-gpkHOU.

Demonstrate the wet-on-dry watercolor technique.

If you want sharp edges to what you're painting, then any paint already put down on the paper must be dry before you paint another shape. Using a piece of watercolor paper that you have added color to and allowed to dry, apply paint creating a shape you desire, like a tree, grass, an animal, etc. If the first layer of paint is completely dry, then the shape will stay exactly as you painted it. If it isn't completely dry, the new layer will diffuse into the first one. Hair dryers can be used to speed up the drying process when time is a factor.

Demonstrate using rubber cement to mask areas of a painting the artist would like to remain white.

Rubber cement will resist wet paint, keeping the area its original color. Simply paint the rubber cement on using the application brush or another brush designated for this use. Allow to dry and then paint over it. Once a painting is complete, the rubber cement can be removed by gently rubbing it off the paper. This technique is good for creating aspen trees, clouds, snow, and other white things. Details can be added once

the rubber cement has been removed, such as black marks on an aspen tree and subtle washes of color around the edges to create depth in clouds and snow.

Project Procedure

Step 1: Have students stretch their watercolor paper by attaching it onto a firm surface using "linted" masking tape around the edges. It will look like the students have framed their paper in masking tape. To lint masking tape, have them press the sticky side to their clothing so it picks up lint. This will make the tape easy to remove.

Step 2: Have students sketch the middle ground, choosing from the list the class created. The middle ground often contains the main action or subject of the painting.

Step 3: Now is the time to apply rubber cement if needed. Use rubber cement for areas that students want to remain white (for example, an aspen tree might be painted in with rubber cement).

Step 4: Paint the background of the painting using the **wet-on-wet** painting technique, creating sunrise, sunset, midday sky, nighttime sky, or whatever the student has chosen. It is okay if students paint, as Russell did, the entire background with a watercolor wash.

Step 5: Once the background is dry, students can use the **wet-on-dry** technique to paint in their middle ground images. Allow the middle ground to dry.

Step 6: The next step will be to add the foreground images to the painting, again using the **wet-on-dry** technique. The foreground may include grasses, small animals, rocks, and other objects inspired by Charlie Russell's work and from the class's list.

Step 7: Finally, remove any rubber cement by gently rubbing it away and adding any details to the area that has been left white.

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Montana's Charlie Russell: Art in the Collection of the Montana Historical Society
Watercolors of the Big Sky (continued)

Critique/Discussion

Have students do an informal critique of their works considering the objectives of the lesson. This can follow the class's regular critique format or the empathic critique technique described here: www.bartelart.com/arted/critique08.html.

Vocabulary

Rule of thirds: The rule of thirds states that an image is most pleasing when its subjects or regions are composed along imaginary lines that divide the image into thirds, both vertically and horizontally.

Background: The parts of a painting or drawing found in the back.

Middle ground: The area in a painting or drawing that is in between the back and the front.

Foreground: The parts of a painting or drawing found in the front.

Watercolor wash: A watercolor term for a flat layer of very diluted color laid across the paper. It can either be an even layer of color or a graded layer that gets lighter.

Additional Resources

“Watercolor Basics” is a great YouTube video demonstrating watercolor techniques that can help you teach these techniques: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yl6V-gpkHOU