

Teaching with *Sequoyah* by Charles Banks Wilson



This document is designed to help teachers present, discuss, and teach about Oklahoma history and art literacy through the use of this work of art. The information and exercises here will aid in understanding and learning from this artwork.

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First Analysis and Criticism

The steps below may be used for group discussion or individual written work.

Before beginning the steps, take two minutes to study the artwork. Look at all the details and subject matter. After studying the artwork in silence, follow these steps:

Describe:

Be specific and descriptive. List only the facts about the objects in the painting or sculpture.

- What things are in the artwork?
- What is happening?
- List what you see (people, animals, clothing, environment, objects, etc.).

Analyze:

- How are the elements of art – line, shape, form, texture, space, and value used?
- How are the principles of design – unity, pattern, rhythm, variety, balance, emphasis, and proportion used?

Interpretation:

Make initial, reasonable inferences.

- What do you think is happening in the artwork?
- Who is doing what?
- What do you think the artist is trying to say to the viewer?

Evaluate:

Express your opinion.

- What do you think about the artwork?
- Is it important?
- How does it help you understand the past?
- Do you like it? Why or why not?

Overview of the Artwork

Sequoyah was a Cherokee Indian who was a skilled silver craftsman who never learned to speak, write or read English. He is credited with inventing the Cherokee syllabary, which had a profound influence on the tribe. Within several months of Sequoyah's unveiling of his invention, a substantial number of people in the Cherokee Nation reportedly were able to read and write in their own language. By 1825 much of the Bible and numerous hymns had been translated into Cherokee. By 1828 the first Indian newspaper was published along with religious pamphlets, educational materials and legal documents. He continued to serve the Cherokee people as a statesman and diplomat until his death.

Commissioned by the Oklahoma State Legislature, Charles Banks Wilson completed this life-size portrait of Sequoyah in 1963 for the state capitol rotunda. In preparation to paint the legendary Cherokee, Wilson roamed the hills near Sequoyah's home. Armed with a recreation done with crayon of a painting of Sequoyah that burned in a fire at the Smithsonian Institute, Wilson searched Tahlequah for anyone that may resemble Sequoyah. As a result, six men and one woman posed as models for the portrait. In honor of Sequoyah's creation of the Cherokee alphabet, Wilson depicts the legendary figure writing into the rich soil of Oklahoma with a stick, a common occurrence among teachers of the time.

About the Artist

Charles Banks Wilson Charles Banks Wilson was born in 1918 in Arkansas and grew up in Miami, Oklahoma. Educated at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1936-1940, he was given an award from the Chicago Society of Lithographers and Etchers, and his work was added to the Art Institute collection. While at the Art Institute, he also began a project whereupon he sketched portraits of numerous members of Oklahoma's American Indian tribes – a project that would soon become a lifelong artistic journey.

Wilson completed his education in Chicago and later returned to Oklahoma in 1943, where he established a permanent studio in Miami. Two years later, he began teaching night classes in drawing at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College. Eventually he became head of the art department, a position he held until 1960. During this period he continued to illustrate books and produce lithographs from his own press.

In 1957, he completed his first portrait commission for Tulsa oilman and collector Thomas Gilcrease. Perhaps one of Wilson's greatest achievements came when the U.S. Senate selected four of his paintings to be shown in 20 world capitals. In 2001, he was named an Oklahoma Cultural Treasure and is a member of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

Details



1. Sequoyah's English name was George Guess.
2. Sequoyah was born in Tennessee and moved to Indian Territory in 1829 where he built a log cabin near present-day Sallisaw.
3. Charles Banks Wilson had no images of Sequoyah to paint from except a crayon drawing of an original painting of Sequoyah which had burned in a fire.
4. Wilson traveled to Sallisaw and Tahlequah to research Sequoyah's home and found his descendents of the man to pose for the painting.
5. Sequoyah is seen using a stick to write symbols in the dirt. This was a common way teachers taught before the invention of chalkboards.
6. It took Sequoyah 12 years to develop the Cherokee syllabary.
7. To develop the syllabary, Sequoyah named each syllable in the Cherokee spoken language (a total of 86). To read the language, all you had to do was say the names of the characters. For instance, to read the word *expediency*, you would read, *x p d n c*.

Details



8. Sequoyah's syllabary was originally thought to be witchcraft until it was understood and widely used to communicate among the Cherokee people.
9. Sequoyah was awarded a silver medal from the National Council for his invention. He wore the medal every day as long as he lived.
10. Of Sequoyah's life's work, Sam Houston of Texas said, "Your invention of the alphabet is worth more to your people than two bags full of gold in the hands of every Cherokee."
11. A statue of Sequoyah stands in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Suggested Reading

Oklahoma Adventure, Centennial Edition 2006 by Oklahoma History Press
Oklahoma Stories: Sequoyah and Stand Watie, **pages 280-286**

Oklahoma: Land of Contrasts by Clairmont Press
Oklahoma Profiles, **page 151**

The Story of Oklahoma, Second Edition by Baird and Goble
Profiles, **pages 104-105**

Further Resources

Colonial Williamsburg offers teacher resources for history. Sequoyah is highlighted in [Sequoyah's Talking Leaves](#).

For K-2, there is [Traditions and Languages of Three Native Cultures: Tlingit, Lakota, & Cherokee](#) by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Final Analysis

After completing the readings and activities, go back and look at the artwork again. Now that the students are more familiar with the subject matter, ask them to write a few paragraphs about their interpretation of the artwork. In their own words, the writing should address the following:

- Description of the artwork and who/what is in it
- How the elements of art and principles of design are used within the artwork
- What feelings, emotions, or information the artwork depicts
- Their opinion of the artwork

Pass Objectives

Grade 4- Social Studies

Standard 5. The student will demonstrate an understanding of the unique features which contributed to the settlement of the state of Oklahoma.

1. Identify major historical individuals, entrepreneurs, and groups, and describe their major contributions (e.g., Sequoyah, the Boomers and the Sooners, and Frank Phillips).

Grade 4- The Arts

Standard 2: Visual Art History and Culture - The student will recognize the development of visual art from an historical and cultural perspective.

1. Describe and place a variety of specific significant art objects by artist, style and historical and cultural context.
2. Identify themes and purposes of works of art and artifacts in history and culture.
3. Demonstrate a basic knowledge of several fields of art such as painting, sculpture, drawing, computer graphics, printmaking, architecture, and fiber arts.
4. Identify how visual art is used in today's world including the popular media of advertising, television, and film.

High School- Oklahoma History

Standard 1. The student will demonstrate process skills in social studies.

1. Identify, analyze, and interpret primary and secondary sources (e.g., artifacts, diaries, letters, art, music, literature, photographs, documents, newspapers, and contemporary media).

Standard 3. The student will evaluate the social, economic, and political development and contributions of Native Americans from prehistoric settlement through modern times.

4. Identify significant historical and contemporary Native Americans (e.g., John Ross, Sequoyah, Quanah Parker, Jim Thorpe, Will Rogers, the Five Indian Ballerinas, the Kiowa Five, and Wilma Mankiller).

Standard 8. The student will examine factors that contributed to the political, economic, and social history of Oklahoma during the twentieth century.

1. Identify significant individuals and their contributions (e.g., Jerome Tiger, Frank Phillips, Kate Barnard, Angie Debo, Ada Lois Sipuel, Clara Luper, George Lynn Cross, Ralph Ellison, Robert S. Kerr, Henry Bellmon, and Reba McEntire).

High School- The Arts

Standard 1: Language of Visual Art - The student will identify visual art terms (e.g., content, engraving, foreshortening, mosaic, perspective)

3. Describe exhibitions of original works of art seen in the school or community.
4. Differentiate between art criticism and art reviews, recognizing that criticism is positive as well as negative in its evaluation of a work of art.

Standard 2: Visual Art History and Culture - The student will recognize the development of visual art from an historical and cultural perspective.

5. PROFICIENT: Identify major regional, national, and international collections of art.

Standard 4: Visual Art Appreciation - The student will appreciate visual art as a vehicle of human expression.

2. Demonstrate respect for their work and the work of others.