

Teaching with *Frontier Trade – 1790-1830* 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

The abounding interest in the portraits of Robert S. Kerr, Sequoyah, Jim Thorpe, and Will Rogers painted by Charles Banks Wilson sparked the 1970 legislature to commission Wilson to create four murals depicting the history of Oklahoma from 1541 to 1906. Wilson spent four years researching his subject matter. Each person depicted was illustrated from life and Wilson utilized clay models before painting each scene. The 13 by 27 foot linen canvases were woven in Belgium. The murals were mounted on Fiberglas with hot wax resin adhesive and then placed thirty-six feet above the floor. On Statehood Day in 1976, Carl Clark and Betty Price co-chaired the dedication committee. During the ceremony, historian Dr. A.M. Gibson spoke about the historic murals.

The years 1790 to 1830 were marked by a rising interest in Oklahoma territory. In the mural *Frontier Trade*, Wilson depicts a bustling scene of rising commerce. Fur trading posts and salt exporting businesses flourished as boats were built along the Arkansas River. Native Americans considered the area their eternal home causing tension among the Native American and the new settlers resulting in numerous forts being built to protect the settlers as shown in the upper right side of the mural.

About the Artist

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.

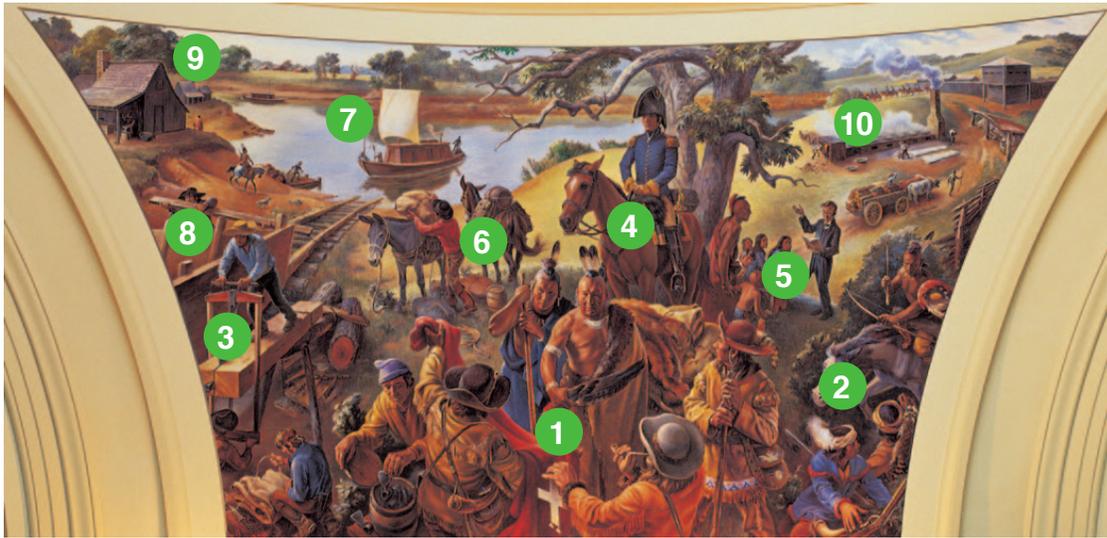
The Series

In 1970, Charles Banks Wilson was commissioned by the Oklahoma Legislature to complete four major murals in the three-dimensional triangles of the Rotunda piers. Wilson was given the challenge of depicting Oklahoma's history from the earliest recorded expedition in 1541 to the iconic scenes of settlement in 1906, the year before statehood.

Wilson spent years gathering research about Oklahoma before beginning the process of producing the murals. The research created the foundation for his preliminary sketches, of which he completed 75 for each mural. Each individual in the murals was illustrated from life. From the sketches, he created a 15-inch working drawing, which he used for reference. Wilson then built small three-dimensional clay models of each detail in the drawing, which he used for a reference of how the light would fall on each object. From there, he created several black-and-white paintings of the entire scene before finally making color choices and completing a 37-inch color painting. Then, he began work on the final product, a panel stretching 14-feet wide at the base, 25-feet wide at the top, and 13-feet high.

Upon completion in 1976, the murals were mounted on Fiberglas with hot wax resin adhesive and then placed approximately 36 feet above the 4th floor.

History Details



Frontier Trade illustrates the intense activity in the area, including boat manufacturing along the Arkansas River and fur trading at posts such as the one established by Major Jean Pierre Chouteau, a leading trader. The exporting of salt is represented by the evaporating oven shown near the fort.

1. Trade with Osage hunters, one clan of which was “imported” by Major Chouteau.
2. Indians from the southeastern states had long come into the region to hunt, but were considered intruders to the Missouri Valley and Plains Tribes.
3. A common tool for making boards was the whip-saw.
4. The U.S. Army, depicted by an officer of 1790, protected the busy fur trade.
5. Union Mission had the first school and printing press in the territory in 1821.
6. Experienced packers, important everywhere to the fur trade.
7. Keelboats carrying trappers and traders sailed up the Arkansas to the falls of the Verdigris known as the Three Forks area.
8. Flat boats carried beeswax, bear grease, nuts, lead, furs, and skins to New Orleans where the pecan, walnut, hickory, or oak used to build boats were also used.
9. Trading posts were established in the Three Forks area by Chouteau, Sam Houston, Colonel Hugh Love, and others in the early 1800s. Washington Irving visited there during the “Tour on the Prairies.”
10. Salt springs in eastern Oklahoma made evaporating salt for export possible.
11. Fort Gibson, established in 1824 to protect the Five Civilized Tribes from Plains Indians.
12. Pecan tree growing at the site of old Union Mission.

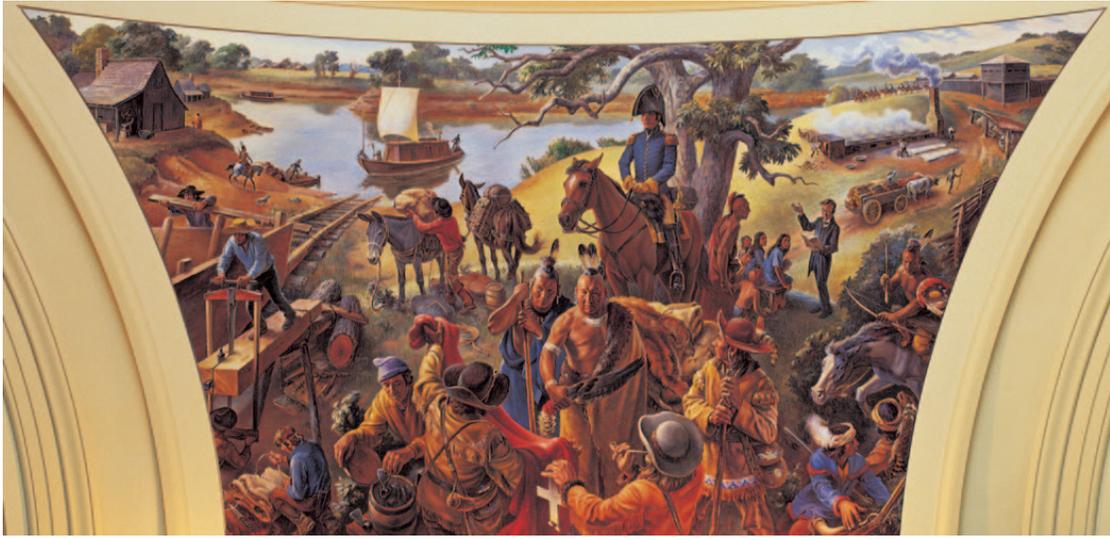
Visual Art Details



In creating these murals, one of artist Charles Banks Wilson's greatest goals was to remain faithful to the historical accuracy of details. In order to accomplish this goal, Wilson devoted two entire years to painstaking research in storerooms of museums, cubicles of libraries, and on the exposed windy plains and hills of Oklahoma. Wilson traveled Oklahoma to sketch the landscape, consulted with history professionals and history books, and studied the features of the American Indians of Oklahoma. Each person and object depicted in the murals had a model from which Wilson drew and painted. Upon completion, Wilson stated, "I can say that everything in these murals is accurate according to my ability to make it accurate."

1. Wilson knew whipsaws were used to cut wood, but could find no photographic evidence of what one looked like. He researched to find out how the blade fit, how the teeth were pointed, how the men above and below the saw divided the job. He sketched a reconstructed whipsaw at the Smithsonian and incorporated it in this mural.
2. The pecan tree that Wilson painted is an actual tree growing at Three Forks. He found it when he drove out to get the rhythm of the area where goods were bartered.
3. Joe Benny Mason, an Osage of Fairfax, OK, golf champ and former football player, was the model for the figure of the Osage Chief.
4. Wilson remained true to the features unique to each Indian tribe. When he depicted a specific tribe, the models were, wherever possible, full-blood members of that tribe.
5. Color is one of many elements of art which play an important role in Wilson's murals. Wilson stayed true to the different colors important to each Indian tribe.

History Highlights



- In 1821, Mexico declared its independence from Spain. A profitable trade with Santa Fe and other Rio Grande settlements began.
- The quest for military, economic, and religious power motivated European countries to claim land in North America.
- The competition to control trade in America became a battle among three great European powers: Great Britain, France, and Spain.
- Europeans sought Native American tribes as allies because the tribes could provide protection and trade.
- Control of the Mississippi River for trade became a major issue for farmers in the western part of the United States.
- Trade developed in the Three Forks area and beyond.
- The natural resources of Oklahoma helped make the area a thriving trade site. The rivers helped to float goods to other regions.

Suggested Reading

Oklahoma Adventure, Centennial Edition 2006 by Oklahoma History Press

Unit 1: Chapter 3: American Explorers, **pages 28-34** and

Unit 1: Chapter 4: Early Government, **pages 35-39**

Oklahoma: Land of Contrasts by Clairmont Press

Chapter 5: Oklahoma in Early America, **pages 111-121, 131-133**

The Story of Oklahoma, Second Edition by Baird and Goble

Unit 2: The Discovery of Oklahoma; Chapter 6: American Explorers in Oklahoma, **pages 80-88**

Further Reading

Hunt, David C. *The Lithographs of Charles Banks Wilson* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

Wilson, Charles Banks. *Search for the Purebloods* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

Cagle, Charles. *An Oklahoma Portrait: Conversations with the artist Charles Banks Wilson* (Thomas Gilcrease Museum Association, 1989).

Oklahoma History Vocabulary

Commerce- the trade of goods or commodities

Commodities- agricultural products bought and sold in commerce

Consumer- a person or organization that uses a commodity or service

Economy- a system that includes all the activities involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services

Export- to ship commodities to other countries or places for sale or trade

Frontier- the area at the edge or just beyond a settled area

Keelboat- a shallow covered vessel that is rowed, towed, or poled on a river

Middleman- a trader who buys goods from producers and sells them to other traders or consumers

Saltworks- a manufacturing plant where salt is prepared for sale

Squatter- one who settles on unoccupied land in order to gain title to it

Topography- physical features of the land, such as mountains or plateaus

Visual Art Vocabulary

Center of Interest- a principle of design; the accent or important area used to attract the viewers' attention; i.e., emphasis

Color- an element of art; hue (name of the color), value (how light a color is), and intensity (amount of brightness) produced through the reflection of light to the eye

Depth- the illusion of space in a picture

Subject Matter- the categories for identifying the type of content in visual works of art, such as abstractions, animals, landscapes, genre (people in everyday activities), human figures, cityscapes, seascapes, etc.

Unity- a principle of design; sense of oneness, of things belonging together and making up a coherent whole

Review Questions

These questions may provide for verbal class discussion or for individual writing assignments.

**Note: Some topics may not be addressed in the text book for your class.*

1. What three countries competed for trade in North America?
2. Name three reasons the Europeans were motivated to claim land in North America.
3. Where was the Three Forks area?
4. Explain the reason that traders and trappers tended to concentrate in the Three Forks area in the early 1800s.
5. Discuss the importance of the following men in the Three Forks area: Pierre and Auguste Chouteau, Joseph Bogy, Nathaniel Pryor, and Colonel A.P. Chouteau.
6. List two reasons why William Becknell is called “the father of the Santa Fe trade.”
7. Discuss the establishment of forts in the area (name them) and explain the effects the forts had upon completing the exploration of Oklahoma.
8. Describe the typical Osage warrior.
9. Explain the difference in how the Spanish and the French viewed the use of land in North America.
10. How would you describe the subject matter of the painting?
11. What area is the center of interest in the painting?
12. Depth in a painting is the illusion of space. Does the artist create an illusion of depth in this artwork? How?
13. How did the artist create a sense of unity in the painting?
14. The artist used different colors and ways of dress to show various tribes in the painting. How many different tribes do you see in this painting?

Writing and Research Assignments

Choose one or more of the topics below about which to write two or three paragraphs.

**Note: Some topics may not be addressed in the text book for your class.*

- Research and describe the Osage Indians as a tribe (culture, reputation, general appearance, etc.)
- Research the Great Salt Plains region of Oklahoma today. Tell where it is located and how it's being used. Compare this to what it was in 1811.
- Using an internet search tool, research early American trading posts. Tell how they contributed to the economy, lifestyle, and settlement of the area where they were located.
- Mural painting is an effective way to remember historical happenings. Research other mural artists and write about some of the historical issues they have painted about. Include where these murals are located and who commissioned the artist to paint them.
- Charles Banks Wilson, the artist who created this mural, is a successful painter. Research and write about some of his other works of art.
- Refer to the elements of art and describe how each one is used within this mural.
- Choose a character within the mural. Do some research about the role this person or kind of person played in the development of trade in Oklahoma.

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.

2. Describe major events of Oklahoma's past, such as settlements by Native Americans, cattle drives, land runs, statehood, and the discovery of oil.
3. Analyze the use of Oklahoma's natural resources.

Grade 5- Social Studies

Standard 2: The student will describe the early exploration of America.

1. Examine the reasons for, the problems faced in, and the results of key expeditions by Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and England (e.g., Columbus, Ponce de León, Magellan, Coronado, Cortés, Hudson, Raleigh, and La Salle) and the competition for control of North America.
2. Identify the impact of the encounter between Native Americans and Europeans.

Standard 7: The student will review and strengthen geographic skills.

4. Interpret geographic information to explain how society changed as the population of the United States moved west, including where Native Americans lived and how they made their living.
5. Compare and contrast how different cultures adapt to, modify, and have an impact on their physical environment (e.g., the use of natural resources, farming techniques or other land use, recycling, housing, clothing, and physical environmental constraints and hazards).

Grade 8- U.S. History

Standard 9: The student will evaluate and explain the westward expansion of the United States from 1801 to 1877.

8. Describe the importance of trade on the frontiers and assess the impact of westward expansion on Native American peoples, including their displacement and removal, and the Indian Wars of 1850s-1870s.

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 2: The student will describe both European and American exploration and claims to the territory that would become Oklahoma.

1. Explain the significance of early Spanish and French expeditions (e.g., Coronado, Oñate, and LaHarpe).

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

3. Compare and contrast cultural perspectives (e.g., land ownership and use, agricultural methods, production and distribution of commodities, and trading practices) of Native Americans and European Americans.

Standard 4. The student will evaluate the major political and economic events prior to statehood.

1. Analyze tribal alliances, river transportation, and the fur trade, and their relationship to early mercantile settlements (e.g., Fort Towson, Fort Gibson, Fort Coffee, Fort Washita, and Chouteau's Trading Post).

Standard 6: The student will investigate the geography and economic assets of Oklahoma and trace their effects on the history of the state.

1. Locate the significant physical and human features of the state on a map (e.g., major waterways, cities, natural resources, military installations, major highways, and major landform regions).

PASS OBJECTIVES FOR VISUAL ARTS:

Standard 1: Language of Visual Art - The student will identify visual art terms and vocabulary.

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

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