

# Teaching with *Robert S. Kerr* 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

Robert Samuel Kerr was Oklahoma's first native-born governor and in 1948 was the first Oklahoma governor to be elected to the U.S. Senate. His first bill in Congress created the Arkansas, White and Red River Study Commission, which was the planning stage for the land and water development in this region. This eventually led to the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation Project, a series of 17 locks and dams making the waterway navigable from the Port of Catoosa near Tulsa in Northeastern Oklahoma to the Gulf of Mexico. He also worked for the conservation of other natural resources in Oklahoma and the nation. The Saturday Evening Post published an article about him titled "The Uncrowned King of the Senate." With family in the oil business, Kerr and Dean McGee established the internationally known energy company, Kerr-McGee Corporation.

Commissioned by the Oklahoma State Legislature, Charles Banks Wilson completed this life-size portrait of Kerr in 1963 for the state capitol rotunda. Wilson utilizes 40 feet of canvas to immortalize the man whose is remembered as "The Modern Father of Oklahoma." Wilson yearned to paint the great politician for Wilson recall "fallen under the spell of his oratory." Wilson's painting exudes symbolism. One of the statues on his desk represents Kerr's love for his farm and cattle he raised there. Scraps of paper stick out of the Bible that rests on his desk marking the scriptures that Kerr includes in his eloquent speeches. The large map behind Kerr represents the senator's dream to develop the Arkansas River and her tributaries.

## 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

# Details



- Wilson made use of symbolism to depict Robert S. Kerr's character including:
  1. The Black Angus bookend represents the breed of cattle Kerr loved and raised on his ranch.
  2. The Bible next to the bookend is filled with scraps of paper marking scriptures for inclusion in Kerr's speeches.
  3. The pockets of Kerr's suit appear to be full as Kerr was known to keep note pads, pencils, hand lotion, and lip balm in his pockets.
  4. Kerr wears his signature chambray shirt monogrammed with his initials. Kerr's family lent the shirt to Wilson for the painting.
  5. Kerr's tie is just a bit uneven, something typical of him and recognizable by those who knew him.
  6. The map of which Kerr stands before symbolizes his dream for the development of the Arkansas River and its tributaries.
  7. A replica of Kerr's book, *Land, Wood, and Water*, adorns his tie. The book expounds on the abundant resources of our state.
- Upon Kerr's death, he was referred to as "The Modern Father of Oklahoma," and "The Uncrowned King of the Senate." He is often thought to have been one of the nation's most powerful senators because of his ability to make success happen.
- Kerr stood tall at six feet, four inches.

# Suggested Reading

**Oklahoma Adventure**, Centennial Edition 2006 by Oklahoma History Press  
Chapter 20: World War II, **pages 200-201**

**Oklahoma: Land of Contrasts** by Clairmont Press  
Chapter 16: Section 3: The Postwar Period, **page 421**  
Chapter 17: Section 2: State Affairs in the 1970s, **pages 446-447**

**The Story of Oklahoma**, Second Edition by Baird and Goble  
Chapter 21: The Great Depression and Global War, **page 338, 341**  
Chapter 22: The Politics of Maturity, **page 352**  
Chapter 23: A Mature Economy, **page 373**

# 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).
3. Analyze the use of Oklahoma's natural resources (e.g., salt, bison, oil, coal, timber and sod) by early visitors and settlers.
4. Identify state and local governing bodies (e.g., the state legislature and city councils) and officials (e.g., governor and mayors) that make laws and carry out laws, with an emphasis on civic participation (e.g., the importance of studying the issues and voting).

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

3. Assess the impact of the cattle industry (e.g., cattle trails, railheads and cow towns in Kansas, and the location of railroad lines).

**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).

**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.

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