

Genres in Painting

Landscapes, portraits, and historical paintings are all categories, or genres, of painting which your students will see when exploring the Capitol Art Collection.

This lesson will help students understand and differentiate the various genres in the visual arts. Students will learn to identify major genres, and will learn to discriminate between a painting's subject and its genre.

Learning Objectives:

- Define genre in the visual arts
- Recognize and explain the differences between subject and genre
- Identify the genre of a variety of works of art in the Capitol Art Collection

Grade Level: 9 – 12

PASS Objectives Addressed

Grade 4- The Arts

Standard 1: Language of Visual Art - The student will identify visual art terms (e.g., architecture, contour, medium, mixed media, perspective, symbol).

1. Know how works of art are made with respect to the materials, media, techniques, and sources of ideas.
2. Describe and use the principles of design: rhythm, balance, contrast, movement, variety, center of interest (emphasis), and repetition in works of art.
3. Describe and use the elements of art: line, color, form, shape, texture, value (light and dark), and space in works of art.
4. Discuss observations of visual and expressive features seen in the environment (such as colors, textures, shapes).

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- 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.

Introduction

The word genre comes from the French word for “type” or “kind” and has been traditionally used in the arts to differentiate the type of work that is being produced. The word genre is often used in discussing literature (such as “westerns,” “romances,” or “mysteries”), as well as film (“drama,” “thriller,” or “action”). In the visual arts the term refers to the type of image, or what category of subjects is being depicted. Various genres of art in the Capitol Art Collection include:

- Landscape painting
Landscape painting covers the depiction of natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests. The composition of a landscape painting is usually a wide view. Sky is almost always included in the view, and weather is often an element of the image.
- History painting
History painting is a genre in painting defined by subject matter rather than an artistic style. Historical paintings depict a moment in history rather than a stationary subject such as a portrait. The events depicted in historical paintings are significant rather than scenes of everyday life.
- Portrait painting
A portrait is a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person. For this reason, in photography a portrait is generally not a snapshot, but a composed image of a person in a still position. A portrait often shows a person looking directly at the painter or photographer in order to most successfully engage the subject with the viewer.

These three are not the only genres to exist in visual arts. “Still life painting” and “genre painting” are also genres. However, for this lesson we will focus on the three genres above.

Beginning students often confuse a painting’s genre with its subject or with its style or movement. This lesson includes a brief activity to help students delineate a painting’s genre from its subject.

The following activities will provide suggestions for introducing students to some of the painting genres included in the Capitol Art Collection and provide guidance for a class discussion.

Part 1: Genres in art

Students have probably encountered the concept of genre – even if they don't realize they have – in movies, books, and television. This activity will introduce students who are not yet familiar with the term to the idea of genre in general, and in the visual arts in particular.

- Write a list of genres on the board: mystery, drama, comedy, romance, etc. Divide students into groups of four and ask each group to work together to compile a list of what is different about the items on the list and what all of these things have in common. Once they have compiled their list explain that each of the items written on the board is the name of a genre in the arts – such as literature or film. Students should then use their list of common qualities to work on writing a definition for the term genre. The definitions that students compile should include the idea that genre is a category of subject matter in creative works.
- Explain to students that works in the visual arts are often divided into different genres. Ask students if they can think of any painting genres and have them compile their list on the board. They can compare the list that the class has compiled with the examples they will be seeing, discovering which of the categories on their list appear and which do not.

Part 2: Subject or Genre?

- In their early encounters with studying the visual arts, many students find it difficult to differentiate between subject and genre.
 - Vocabulary:

Genre – a class or category of artistic endeavor having a particular form, content, or technique in common

Subject – in painting, the object on which the painting is focused
- If the subject is what the painting is about, then how is the painting's genre different? Show students Charles Banks Wilson's painting *Dr. Angie Debo*. Ask them to identify the genre of the painting. Students should identify the painting as a portrait. Next ask them to identify the subject of the painting: Angie Debo.
- Ask students to identify the subject and genre of the following three paintings:
 - *Carl Albert* by Charles Banks Wilson (subject: Carl Albert/genre: portrait)
 - *President Teddy Roosevelt Signing Statehood Proclamation* by Mike Wimmer (subject: signing the proclamation/genre: history)
 - *A Storm Passing Northwest of Anadarko* by Wilson Hurley (subject: the clouds and land/genre: landscape)

Once the students have completed this exercise ask them to write a brief explanation of the difference between subject and genre.

Part 3: Landscape painting

Landscape painting covers the depiction of natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests. The composition of a landscape painting is usually a wide view. Sky is almost always included in the view, and weather is often an element of the image.

The genre of landscape painting covers a large and diverse range of artwork including images of countryside, towns, farms, and cities.

- The painting *Showers of Sunshine* by Linda Tuma Robertson depicts what the Oklahoma landscape looked like in Grady County before the H.E. Bailey turnpike was built. The turnpike was authorized by the State Legislature in 1953. The original 86.4 miles opened in 1964, and the 8.2 mile extension connecting State Highway 9 to Norman was opened in 2001.

If Robertson were to paint what this spot of land looks like today – with the turnpike, billboards, and gas stations – would it still be a landscape painting? Why or why not?

- Next, have the students view the following paintings by Wilson Hurley. As they look at each painting ask students to contemplate whether or not the image is a landscape painting. They should explain their answers for each painting.
 - *Spring Morning Along the Muddy Boggy*
 - *Autumn Woods North of Tahlequah*
 - *Sunset at Roman Nose State Park*
- While the subject matter of these paintings is different, all four are landscape paintings. Divide the students into groups of three or four, and have each group work together to write a definition for landscape painting that will encompass the most important elements of the genre. Definitions should note that “landscape” is not restricted to images of the natural world, but also includes man-made landscapes, from the cultivated and managed land pictured in images of farms to the cityscapes that capture the light and movement of the world’s metropolises.

Part 4: History Painting

History painting is a genre in painting defined by subject matter rather than an artistic style. Historical paintings depict a moment in history rather than a stationary subject such as a portrait. The events depicted in historical paintings are significant rather than scenes of everyday life.

History paintings can include a range of subjects and topics. The paintings often illustrate a part of a story or a significant event.

Look again at Mike Wimmer’s rendering of *President Teddy Roosevelt Signing Statehood Proclamation*. “Oklahoma is now a state,” declared Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States, as he signed the statehood proclamation at 10:16 o’clock on the morning of November 16, 1907. The birth of the new state of Oklahoma was attended with little ceremony. Only a delegation of government clerks from Oklahoma and newspaper men were in the cabinet room as witnesses.

- This painting is not a rendering of an historical scene that was actually witnessed by Wimmer, but is the way in which the artist imagines the scene to have occurred. What does this tell us about the definition of “history” in the title of this genre?

- Have students view the following paintings. As they look at each painting ask students: Is this image a history painting? Why or why not?
 - [Creek Council Oak Tree](#) by Mike Larsen
 - [Fort Smith Conference – 1865](#) by Mike Wimmer
 - [Indian Immigration 1820-1885](#) by Charles Banks Wilson
 - [The Earth and I Are One](#) by Enoch Kelly Haney
- The subject matter of history painting encompasses an enormous range of topics and subjects, including: mythological scenes, historical events, religious subjects, and even allegories. An allegory is a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning. Haney’s *The Earth and I Are One* is a mystical painting of a meditating Native American. The painting is a depiction of an abstract or spiritual idea; therefore, this painting is a history painting.
- Have the students break into their small groups of three or four for further discussion of the genre of history painting. Ask the students to compile a list of qualities that are present in each of the five history paintings presented in this activity. What are the most essential elements which link these pieces together despite the very different subjects and topics covered by these images? Definitions should include the idea that history paintings are not strictly eyewitness accounts of historical events, but are artistic recreations of events that are thought to have taken place in the past. Even when the event is something that has occurred during the lifetime of the painter – and which he or she may even have witnessed – these paintings are not an attempt to report the event, but are designed to convey the lofty meaning of the event. Because history paintings are more concerned with themes and meaning than with reportage it is possible to place allegory paintings and mythology paintings into this category. It is also important for students to note that history paintings typically include idealized depictions of their characters – a quality which distinguishes history paintings of single figures from portraits.

Part 5: Portrait painting

A portrait is a painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person. The intent is to display the likeness, personality, and even the mood of the person. For this reason, in photography a portrait is generally not a snapshot, but a composed image of a person in a still position. A portrait often shows a person looking directly at the painter or photographer in order to most successfully engage the subject with the viewer.

This activity will guide the students through exploring various types of portraits.

- Have the students view the following paintings. As they look at each painting ask the students: is this image a portrait painting? Why or why not?
 - [Ada Lois Supuel Fisher](#) by Mitsuno Ishii Reedy
 - [Dr. Angie Debo](#) by Charles Banks Wilson
 - [Te Ata](#) by Nellie Ellen Shepherd

**One of these paintings is not a portrait.*

The painting of Ada Lois Supuel Fisher is not an actual portrait, but has been included in this group as a way to help students recognize the boundaries and necessary components of portrait painting. The painting of Ada Lois Supuel Fisher is not an actual portrait because the subject, Ms. Fisher, did not pose for the portrait.

One specific component of the portrait genre is that the artist paints from the actual subject. The painting of Ms. Fisher was painted after her death; therefore, the painting is of the history painting genre.

- Do all portraits depict famous people? All of the portraits in the Capitol Art Collection are of notable Oklahomans. But, do all portraits need to be of a famous person? Can the students name any portraits they've seen that are not of famous people? Ask the students to discuss whether or not it is necessary for the model for a portrait to be famous. Ask them to explain their answers.
- Are all portraits the same, or are there different kinds of portraits? Ask the students to try to identify a few different types of portraits they've seen before. Their list might include official portraits, such as those on [currency](#); self-portraits, like one of the many famous [van Gogh](#) images; and family portraits, which the students may have at home.
- Keeping the same small groups of three or four from the previous activities, have each group work together to write a definition for portrait painting that will encompass the most important elements of the genre. This should include the idea that a portrait is something that captures the likeness of a person who has been viewed by the artist. Can an image of a person never viewed by the painter be a portrait? Students should be able to identify Reedy's painting of Ada Lois Supuel Fisher as the image that is not a portrait. Ask the students to identify to which genre this image belongs. More will be discussed on images like these in Part 6."

Part 6: 'Historical portraits' are not actual portraits as they belong in the genre of history painting

The Capitol Art Collection is unique in that it contains several paintings which, by subject matter, appear to be portraits but are in fact history paintings. These paintings are referred to as 'historical portraits'; however, this is not an actual genre in art history. The paintings included in this category include renderings of notable Oklahomans who were painted after their death. An important factor in the portrait genre is that the subject poses for the artist and is present during the creation of the art. For the historical portraits in the Capitol Art Collection, the artist researched and studied the lives of the subjects through stories and photographs and rendered their interpretation of that person.

Charles Banks Wilson painted the four historical portraits housed in the Capitol's fourth-floor rotunda. For these paintings Wilson tirelessly researched and studied the subjects to depict what he saw as a true rendering of the historical figure.

To capture the "easy dignity" of [Will Rogers](#), Wilson studied all available published sources on Rogers including more than two dozen books which had been written about him and hundreds of photographs and motion pictures. The outcome was that of Rogers standing on a pastoral airstrip standing in front of the airplane he was in when he crashed with Wiley Post in 1935. The scene is an accurate historical setting for Rogers, who was the most air-traveled person of his time. For Rogers' face, Wilson used a series of photos rather than a single one. He wanted to depict the expressions and characteristics of Rogers as he matured from a young man into an older gentleman.

Wilson began his research of [Sequoyah](#), the inventor of the Cherokee syllabary, with an old crayon portrait redrawn from a painting that had burned in a fire at the Smithsonian Institute. He went to Tahlequah, OK and found descendents of the man to pose for his likeness. Wilson also spent time around Sequoyah's home in Sallisaw to sketch the surrounding timber and wild plants.

For Wilson's 'portrait' of Oklahoma's first native governor and senior United States senator [Robert S. Kerr](#), the artist researched much of the man's everyday life and used many symbols recognized by those who knew him to represent his personality. The Black Angus bookend on the desk next to Kerr represents the breed of cattle Kerr loved and raised on his ranch. The bookend supports a Bible, filled with scraps of paper marking scriptures that Kerr surely referred to in his speeches. Kerr stands in front of the actual maple desk from his Oklahoma office. The senator wears a blue chambray shirt, which Kerr's family lent to the artist for reference, and is accented by his typically uneven tie which was immediately recognized by Kerr's friends.

Wilson used doctors' measurements of [Jim Thorpe](#), a native of Oklahoma who had been referred to as the greatest athlete in the world, for his initial renderings. Only a few photographs of the athlete were in existence and the artist found it difficult to find a man with powerful enough legs, arms, and shoulders to model. To create the painting, Wilson pieced together the "perfectly developed man" by finding various models for individual body parts, such as a bricklayer's forearm and a farm-workers deltoid. Wilson also meticulously documented the details of the discus, track shoes, Olympic emblems, hurdles, suits, and the national flags of 1912, as Thorpe stands ready to woo the world with his athletic prowess.

Part 7: Explore

- Allow the students to have free time on the computer to explore the Capitol Art Collection online. Instruct them to click through to find paintings which interest them and have them note what genre these paintings belong.
- As a class, view [The People's Art: A Tour of the Capitol Collection](#) DVD. Pause the video when different paintings are shown and ask the students to discuss into what genre each painting would belong.
- Apply for [Capitol Art Travel Subsidy](#) to bring your class to the Capitol and explore the genres in the collection.