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# Watercolor Trees



**Grade:** 5th

**Medium:** Watercolor paint

**Learning Objective:** Students will: create depth in a 2-d format; they will observe Albert Bierstadt's work; they will use watercolor techniques to create detail.

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## Elements of Art

**Space:** the element of visual art that describes the area above, below, around and within art. **Positive/Negative Space:** Positive space is the actual space taken up by a line, shape, or form. Negative Space is the empty space surrounding a shape, figure, or form in a 2- or 3-dimensional artwork. It also refers to an illusion of depth on a 2-dimensional (height and width) surface, so that the scene appears to go back into space.

**Texture:** how the surface feels or appears to feel.

**Value (Hue/Shade/Tint):** Color that's modified from its pure hue to darker (shade) by adding black or lighter (tint) by adding white. When using transparent watercolor paint, tints are achieved by adding water so that the white of the paper shows through.

## Principles of Design

**Proportion:** a principle of design; the relationship of parts to a whole or parts to one another in regard to size and placement.

## Additional Vocabulary

**Background:** in a landscape, the area "farthest away" from the viewer, higher on the paper, and contains few details and is often hazy like sky.

**Depth:** the apparent distance from front-to-back/ near-to-far (low-to-high on the paper) in an artwork; the 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension that gives objects form (besides height and width).

**Horizon line:** the horizontal line that delineates the sky from the land/water.

**Foreground:** the area "closest to" the viewer, lowest on the paper, containing the crispest details.

**Layering:** overlapping shapes to imply depth.

**Mid-Ground:** the space between the foreground and background.

**Perspective:** the art of drawing on a 2-dimensional surface so as to give the accurate impression of height, width, depth and position in relation to each other when viewed from a particular viewpoint.

**Wash:** the application of water to the paper, to which a small amount of paint is added that creates a light background or “atmosphere” to the work.

### **Materials & Supplies**

- 8 x 11” watercolor paper per student, with a few extra
- Wide blue painters’ tape
- Water cups, 1 per student
- Paint palettes for mixing color
- Watercolor brushes: 1 large, 1 small per student
- Hair dryer
- Watercolor paints
- Paper towels
- Salt
- Pencils
- Images of Bierstadt landscapes
- Wax paper

### **Context (History and/or Artists)**

Albert Bierstadt was born in Germany in 1830 and moved to America with his family at age 2. He knew from an early age that he wanted to be a painter, and when he was 23, he moved back to Germany to study art. In 1859, back in the United States, he traveled to Colorado and Wyoming with the U.S. Government survey expedition. This is when he discovered and began to paint the breathtaking western landscapes for which he is famous. Without cameras, it was important to document the newly discovered continent as accurately as possible for people back east, and using perspective techniques helped accurately recreate the landscapes he saw.

### **Advanced Preparation**

- Tear 8” strips of tape 5 per student. Tear these pieces along the long edge so they are rough, like tree bark and wider near the bottom. Vary the widths.
- Put these on wax paper for each student.
- Find Albert Bierstadt landscape artworks (about 5) to show the students that demonstrate depth, layering, foreground, mid-ground and background.

### **Tips & Tricks**

- The watercolor wash portion of this lesson needs to dry (not fully, just no longer shiny wet) before the tape is removed. It is great done in two smaller time periods of 30 and/or 15 minutes, perhaps one before a recess and one after.
- Tape the watercolor paper to the desk to keep it from moving around while they work.
- Caution against painting too long in one spot which tears the paper. If small beads of wet paper start appearing, the student must stop brushing in those areas.
- Paper towels are watercolor’s “eraser”: it must always be used as a blotter, to remove water and/or heavy wet color, but must never scrub the paper, which will tear it.
- When adding paint to a brush, roll the bristles rather than ‘drilling’ the tip into the paint.

## **Discussion Points**

- Talk about the way objects change appearance as they get farther away from us: they get smaller, higher on an imaginary horizon, and less detailed. Look around the room or out the window to observe this. Look for evidence of overlapping by objects nearer to the viewer.
- Show images of Bierstadt's landscapes.
- Find the foreground, mid-ground and background. (Lower, higher, highest placed areas)
- How can you tell which is which? (They appear to be receding in the distance)
- How did the artist show us? (Placement on the paper, proportional sizes in which things appear to get smaller as they recede, things "nearer" to the viewer overlap things "farther" away.)
- What time of year is it in the painting? Which details tell us this?
- Where is the light coming from? Do shadows help create depth? (yes, they suggest overlapping and form)
- What smells, or sounds would you experience here? Close your eyes and imagine walking through this forest.

## **Reflection Point (Assessment of Learning Objectives)**

Students will:

- create depth in a 2-d format
- observe Albert Bierstadt's work
- use watercolor techniques to create detail

## **Instructions for Lesson**

1. Every student should have: Watercolor paper, Wax paper with torn blue painters' tape, Water cup, 1 large, 1 small brush, Pencil with eraser, Watercolor paints with palette, a paper towel.
2. Have the students write their names on the back of the watercolor paper. Keep them near the corner in case they have to start over on the back.
3. Show the students the **pre-painting** steps using a document camera or at a large table.
  - Orient the paper vertically.
  - 1/3 up the paper from the bottom, demonstrate first and then have students lightly draw a horizon line with the pencils. The higher the horizon line, the less sky, more land in the picture plane. It's good to let students make that design choice, but no higher than 1/2 way up. The more sky, the more color!
  - Starting from the horizon line and moving to the bottom of the paper, demonstrate first by arranging the torn tape on the paper to create trees: small trees in back and larger trees in front. Trees must be placed from small to large; from nearest the horizon line to farthest; and the nearest trees may overlap. The ones in the very front can have branches that overlap the others. Vary the distance between trees.

- Rub the edges of the tape down well to make sure water doesn't leak underneath.



4. As students complete these steps, remind them that the closer to the horizon line their tree is, the smaller it should appear (shorter & narrower). Also, trees and branches are always narrower near their tips.
5. **Painting:** Demonstrate how to add water to paint and fill their brush with color. The water/paint ratio changes with each dip, so be mindful of how much water (how light) you want your color to be. Demonstrate a wash vs. full color. Brushes should be rolled on their sides to soak up color, not 'drilled' down, which damages the bristles.

- Using a clean, large brush and clean water, dampen (no puddles, just shiny) the paper down to the horizon line. Move in even, quick brushstrokes from side to side. This is the sky so make sure this doesn't go below the horizon line.

- Make a puddle in the pallet and add a tiny bit of blue to create a lightly colored wash.

- Paint the color into the wash in long strokes. If the water has started to dry, quickly add more to the wash. Add yellow to make green areas, or watered down red (pink) to make violet areas. Caution against adding all 3 primary colors (red, blue & yellow) which turn a muddy brown. Keep a paper towel handy to blot puddles. If too much color is blotted accidentally, add more to the wash. Watercolor paper is forgiving and won't deteriorate unless the brush is heavy-handed in one area.



- This can also be done with "sunset" or warm colors. Lay the red near the horizon and add yellow to the brush as you paint upwards. Add water whenever paint doesn't move and blend freely. Or when color is too heavy.

- Don't clean the brush between the hue, as this helps the colors mix. Keep a paper towel near the water cup to catch random water drops or over-filled brushes. Students will develop a knack of maintaining the water/color ratio using the paper towel!

- Once done, rinse the brush and dab on the paper towel.

- Demonstrate for students how to add pinches of salt, gently sifted between the fingers, to their work to simulate snow falling. Explain that the salt absorbs wet color and will be removed from the paper when dry.



6. Have students complete the sky.
7. As they finish, help really wet work dry with a hair dryer.
8. Once the sky is dry (still damp but no longer shiny wet), gently peel off the blue tape, leaving “white birch” trees. Demonstrate peeling slowly so that the whole piece of tape is separating evenly. Work your way inward from any edge that peels easily. This is a critical step, since peeling too fast on too wet paper results in tears.



9. Demonstrate creating birch bark:
  - Load strong brown color onto the small paint brush. The tip should be pointed, like a pen or marker tip.
  - This is for detail so not too watery! Use mostly paint, just enough water to spread it.
  - Paint clusters of short horizontal, slightly curved lines (like wide smiles), with small brush strokes that don't go all the way across the tree. This simulates a curved tree trunk with bark.
  - Demonstrate how to add more detail to trees in the foreground than in the mid-ground.
10. Have students complete the bark.
11. Demonstrate creating shadows:
  - On the palette, add more water to the brown paint to make a lighter color.
  - Think about where the light is coming from and put a finger of the non-dominant hand wherever that is in the sky.

- Using the small brush create a tree shadow that comes from the base of the tree downward (diagonally) away from the finger.
- All the shadows should go the same direction as the light source is the same for all the trees. Caution against accidentally painting that shadow across other trees!



12. Have students complete the shadows.
13. With the small brush, students could add small vertical green lines the base of the trees or larger lines along the bottom edge/ foreground of their paper. They could paint dabs of green/blue/yellows (the brush is mashed gently in splotchy patterns) to suggest bushes. These details should remain in the foreground, near the corners or bottom edge to show it is closest to the viewer.
14. Remind students they will need to judge proportional sizes of things: i.e. how big is a bush, or blade of grass right next to you compared to those trees in the mid-ground?

## References and Attributions

Lesson written by Juliette Ripley-Dunkelberger & Naveen Khan; <https://www.albertbierstadt.org/>.

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## Notes for Educators

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Thinking Skills**

Thinking flexibly, persisting, creating, taking responsible risks, reflecting, observing, making connections, visualizing, sequencing, comparing/contrasting, determining main idea, finding evidence, problem solving, determining point of view, cause and effect, decision making, evaluating.

### **WA State Learning Standards**

(VA:Cr1.2.5) a. Identify and demonstrate diverse methods of artistic investigation to choose an approach for beginning a work of art. This happens if it's understood that watercolor effects work well to suggest color-filled skies.

(VA:Cr2.1.5) a. Experiment and develop skills in multiple art-making techniques and approaches through practice.

(VA:Cr2.2.5) a. Demonstrate quality craftsmanship through care for and use of materials, tools, and equipment.

(VA:Cr3.1.5) a. Create artist statements using art vocabulary to describe personal choices in art-making. This happens if students share during the lesson.

(VA:Pr5.1.5) a. Develop a logical argument for safe and effective use of materials and techniques for preparing and presenting artwork.

(VA:Re8.1.5) a. Interpret art by analyzing characteristics of form and structure, contextual information, subject matter, visual elements, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed. This happens when perspective drawing techniques are used to create 3-dimensional depth. How does Bierstadt's painting look so real?

(VA:Re9.1.5) a. Recognize differences in criteria used to evaluate works of art depending on styles, genres, and media as well as historical and cultural contexts. Realistic art was particularly useful in the pre-camera era.

(VA:Cn10.1.5) a. Apply formal and conceptual vocabularies of art and design to view surroundings in new ways through art-making.

### **Arts Integration Opportunities**

**Procedural writing:** students can write down the steps they used to make this painting, as if they were explaining the process to an absent student.

**Poetry or creative writing:** write a poem or tell a story that the painting illustrates.