

Teaching with *Flight of Spirit* by Mike Larsen



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

In 1991, artist Mike Larsen reached a milestone in his career when he was commissioned to paint a permanent mural for the Oklahoma State Capitol. Named *Flight of Spirit*, the painting is a tribute to five world-renowned Native American ballet dancers from the state of Oklahoma. Larsen states, “This painting is about our heritage. It is a symbolic representation not only of the accomplishments of these ladies, but also of the essence of our lives conveyed through the arts.” The dedication of the mural on November 17, 1991 brought together the five ballerinas for their first public appearance together.

Flight of Spirit merges the tragic history of Native Americans with the hope and renewal of modern accomplishments. Behind the illuminated ballerinas is Larson’s depiction of the Trail of Tears. Five geese soar over the displaced Native Americans. The geese symbolize the grace and spirit of the five ballerinas. Larson reserves his customary enlargement of hands and feet for the traditionally dressed Native Americans who stand tall behind the ballerinas. His depiction of the ballerinas is strictly representations in that the painted figures have analogous facial features and proportions. The commission was managed by the Oklahoma Arts Council.

About the Artist

Mike Larsen Born in Dallas, artist Mike Larsen divided his childhood between Texas and Oklahoma. His schooling was accomplished primarily in Texas where he attended both junior high and high school, and it was during high school that Larsen had his first pivotal art moment. He describes his art teacher as “[knowing] less about art than bingo”. The classroom atmosphere was thus extremely relaxed; an attitude that only increased Larsen’s love of art and strongly stimulated his sense of self-motivation. He further pursued art at Amarillo Junior College where his technique was practiced and polished. Forced to paint only in black and white for the duration of his freshman year, Larsen gained an invaluable experience that he describes as “great training in drawing and form.”

Larsen continued his art education at the University of Houston where he enrolled almost entirely in art classes to the exclusion of other required classes. He dropped out of college when he was notified that his senior year would consist entirely of mandatory academic requirements.

From this point on, Larsen attempted to make a career for himself but was initially unsuccessful. He took odd jobs mainly in restaurants so that he could afford to paint each day. During this time, Larsen showed his work at street venues and various galleries although he felt as though something was missing in his work. At the age of 36, Larsen decided to return to school and set his sights on the prestigious Art Students League of New York.

There he studied primarily under famed David Leffel who he described as a “really fine, old master-style painter.” While in New York, Larsen encountered three major influences on his career. First of all, was the talent of the instructors he was learned from as a student. Secondly, he was influenced by the retrospective exhibit of the work of Vincent Van Gogh at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Lastly, the experience of New York City alone influenced Larsen a great deal and propelled his career into a new realm of artistic exploration. Larsen’s new style integrated more of his Native American heritage into his work, as he began to experiment with Indian figures.

The Ballerinas

Flight of Spirit pays tribute to five world-renowned Native American ballet dancers from Oklahoma. To the world, these ladies were not just known as Native Americans or Oklahomans; they were recognized for their superior dance abilities. In *Flight of Spirit*, the artist depicts the dancers symbolically intermingled with the Oklahoma Native American ideology of their heritage. The ballerinas are:

Rosella Hightower

Born in Ardmore in 1920 and a member of the Choctaw tribe, Hightower became the first 20th century American ballerina to hold a leading place on the European stage. After winning praise in the United States during the 1940s for her performances with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Ballet Theater (now the American Ballet Theatre), and Col. W. de Basil's Ballets Russes, she went to Europe with the Grand Ballet de Monte Carlo. In 1962, Hightower opened the Centre de Danse Classique in Cannes, France, which was soon recognized as one of Europe's leading ballet schools. Hightower passed away in Cannes in 2008.

Yvonne Chouteau

Born in 1929 and a member of the Shawnee and Cherokee tribes, Chouteau grew up in Vinita, Oklahoma. Her ballet studies began at the age of two, and she performed nationally for the first time at age four. At the age of 14, Chouteau became the youngest American ever to sign a professional contract with the world-famous Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. She performed there for 14 years, the last eight as prima ballerina. In 1956, Chouteau married fellow dancer Miguel Terekhov. Together they organized the Oklahoma City Civic Ballet (now Oklahoma City Ballet). In 1962, they established the first fully accredited dance department in the United States at the University of Oklahoma in Norman.

Moscelyn Larkin

Born in Miami, Oklahoma, in 1925, Larkin is of Peoria-Shawnee and Russian heritage. Her mother personally trained her in ballet until she moved to New York to continue her studies. Larkin joined the Original Ballet Russe at age 15 and later danced for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. She moved to Tulsa with husband, fellow dancer Roman Jasinsky, where together they founded the Tulsa Ballet in 1956.

Maria Tallchief

Born in Fairfax, Oklahoma, in 1925, Maria Tallchief and her sister Marjorie were daughters of an Osage chief. Maria rose to fame as featured soloist for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and became the first prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet from 1947 to 1960. She also originated the role of the Sugarplum Fairy in choreographer (and husband to Tallchief) George Balanchine's version of *The Nutcracker*. In 1981, Maria and her sister founded the Chicago City Ballet for which Maria served as artistic director until 1987.

Marjorie Tallchief

Marjorie was born two years after Maria in 1927. She enjoyed her greatest successes in Europe with the Marquis de Cuevas company beginning in 1947. After a decade headlining that group, she left to become a star of the Paris Opera – a rare opportunity for an American at that time. As well as founding the Chicago City Ballet with her sister, Marjorie acted as dance director for the Dallas Ballet and the Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, Florida.

Details



1. The foreground of the mural shows the five ballerinas in signature ballet poses. The individual characteristics of each dancer are not shown, but symbolically they are represented dressed in white, classical ballet costumes.
2. Tribal ancestors and traditional Native American dancers and musicians are depicted in the middle ground. They represent each of the tribes to which the dancers belong and the importance of dance in their culture.
3. The figures in the background represent an even earlier generation and depict the Trail of Tears, which affected the ballerinas' ancestors. They face away as they head from their homelands to the setting sun of Oklahoma.
4. Five flying geese are depicted in the sky in the background. They are symbolic of each ballerina's grace and spirit.
5. Mike Larsen's paintings are often recognizable because he depicts Native American figures with strong faces full of character and exaggerated hands and feet. Here, he stayed true to his style while painting the ballerinas' ancestors in the middle ground, but he kept the ballerinas streamlined and whimsical, just as ballerinas are often known to be.
6. Light showers the ballerinas and their tutus in a style similar to French Impressionism. The style is representative of the fact that ballet is a dance that originated in Europe, and each of these ballerinas danced in European ballets during their successful careers.

Details



7. The imagery behind the ballerinas uses more traditional style and colors recognizing influence of culture and tradition on each of the ladies.
8. The mural dedication ceremony in 1991 was the first time all five ballerinas appeared in public together.
9. Young powwow dancers are depicted here. When they were young, all five of the ballerinas were taken to powwow dances that influenced their stage lives.
10. Young ballet dancers are portrayed on the left and right of the mural. They symbolize the early age at which the ladies began training to dance as well as the influence these supreme ballerinas have on young dancers today.

Suggested Reading

Oklahoma Adventure, Centennial Edition 2006 by Oklahoma History Press
Oklahoma Stories: Oklahoma Women with the Pioneer Spirit, **pages 385, 387-388**

Oklahoma: Land of Contrasts by Clairmont Press
Chapter 15: The Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, **page 397**

The Story of Oklahoma, Second Edition by Baird and Goble
No reference

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 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.