

Teaching with *Jim Thorpe* 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

Jacobus Franciscus “Jim” Thorpe is considered one of the most versatile athletes in modern sports. This Sac and Fox Indian from Oklahoma won Olympic gold medals in the pentathlon and decathlon and was called “the greatest athlete in the world” by Sweden’s King Gustav V. Thorpe starred in college and professional football, played major league baseball and also had a career in basketball. He subsequently lost his Olympic titles when it was determined he had played two seasons of minor league baseball prior to competing in the games, thus violating the amateur status rules.

In 1950, the Associated Press named him the greatest football player and greatest all-round athlete for the first 50 years of that century. In 1983, thirty years after his death, Thorpe’s Olympic medals and records were restored by the Olympic Committee.

Commissioned by the Oklahoma State Legislature, Charles Banks Wilson completed this life-size portrait of Thorpe in 1966 for the state capitol rotunda. The portrait was unveiled one year later by Elmer Manatwa, Chief of the Sac and Fox Indians, and celebrated with a large Indian powwow on the Capitol grounds.

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 named an Oklahoma Cultural Treasure and is a member of the Oklahoma Hall of Fame.

Details



- Only a few photographs were in existence of Jim Thorpe, and no one model could duplicate Thorpe’s physique. So to depict Thorpe, Charles Banks Wilson used doctors’ measurements of the man who was called, “the most perfectly developed man...the nearest to a Greek god.”
- In addition to measurements, Wilson said he looked for several models to find “powerful enough legs, arms, and shoulders to put the shot and throw the discus,” and other models who were “built for speed to excel in the sprint, hurdles, high jump, and broad jump.” The artist used:
 1. The forearm of a bricklayer;
 2. The deltoid on a young farm worker;
 3. Other athletes were used for the ankles and neck.
- Wilson made use of symbols and paid meticulous attention to the details and time-period to depict Thorpe’s athletic success, including:
 1. The discus
 2. Track shoes
 3. Olympic emblems
 4. Hurdles
 5. Suites
 6. National flags of 1912

Details



- When Thorpe was in school at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, he participated in several sports including:
 1. Track and field
 2. Football
 3. Baseball
 4. Lacrosse
 5. Ballroom dancing
- Engraved on Thorpe's sarcophagus (stone coffin) are the words King Gustav V of Sweden spoke to him at the 1912 Olympics: "You sir, are the greatest athlete in the world."
- In 1999, Thorpe ranked fifth on *Sports Illustrated's* list of the best athletes of the 20th century.

Suggested Reading

Oklahoma Adventure, Centennial Edition 2006 by Oklahoma History Press
Oklahoma Stories: The Greatest Athlete, **pages 351-358**

Oklahoma: Land of Contrasts by Clairmont Press
Oklahoma Profiles, **page 355**

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

4. Identify significant historical and contemporary Native Americans (e.g., John Ross, Sequoyah, Quanah Parker, Jim Thorpe, Will Rogers, the Five Indian Ballerinas, the Kiowa Five, and Wilma Mankiller).

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.