

# Teaching with *Discovery and Exploration – 1541-1820* 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

The Oklahoma Legislature commissioned Charles Banks Wilson to create four murals depicting the history of Oklahoma from 1541 to 1906. The first of the four historic murals, *Discovery and Exploration*, depicts famed Spanish explorer Francisco Vasquez de Coronado atop his armored horse as he led a cavalry of soldiers into the panhandle of present-day Oklahoma in search of the city of Quivira and its mythic riches of gold.

Summing up Oklahoma's history from 1541 to 1820, the mural shows Coronado and French explorers discovering the land coveted by many as a key for control of the region. Wichita Indians represent some of the Native American tribes who already inhabited the area in the 16th century. Wilson shows the Antelope Hills, important to travelers who followed the many major trails across what would become Oklahoma. Large deposits of salt on the Cimarron River were written about in early accounts of the first travelers to Oklahoma. The painting is symbolic in that it does not only represent Coronado's exploration of Oklahoma, but it also depicts symbols of all the early explorers of region.

## About the Artist

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.

# The Series

In 1970, Charles Banks Wilson was commissioned by the Oklahoma Legislature to complete four major murals in the three-dimensional triangles of the Rotunda piers. Wilson was given the challenge of depicting Oklahoma's history from the earliest recorded expedition in 1541 to the iconic scenes of settlement in 1906, the year before statehood.

Wilson spent years gathering research about Oklahoma before beginning the process of producing the murals. The research created the foundation for his preliminary sketches, of which he completed 75 for each mural. Each individual in the murals was illustrated from life. From the sketches, he created a 15-inch working drawing, which he used for reference. Wilson then built small three-dimensional clay models of each detail in the drawing, which he used for a reference of how the light would fall on each object. From there, he created several black-and-white paintings of the entire scene before finally making color choices and completing a 37-inch color painting. Then, he began work on the final product, a panel stretching 14-feet wide at the base, 25-feet wide at the top, and 13-feet high.

Upon completion in 1976, the murals were mounted on Fiberglas with hot wax resin adhesive and then placed approximately 36 feet above the 4th floor.

# History Details



Discovery and exploration by non-Indians began with the arrival of Coronado. Located at the crossroads of the American West, the land which was to become Oklahoma was coveted by many as a key for control of the region. Also shown in the mural are French explorers and Franciscan lay friars. Wichita Indians represent some of the Native American tribes who already lived in the area in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Natural landmarks such as the Antelope Hills were important to travelers who followed the many major trails through the region. Of crucial importance to all were the large deposits of salt, depicted here on the Cimarron River.

1. Coronado, the first European in the region, 1541.
2. Franciscan lay friars with Spanish explorers.
3. French traders met as friends by the Wichita in 1710.
4. Bison were recorded by Coronado's expedition.
5. In 1819, Major S.H. Long described the region as part of the "Great American Desert," fit only for habitation by aborigines.
6. Wild game gathered at the salt deposits on the Cimarron River luring Indian hunters.
7. Scandinavian runes appear on a stone near Heavener.
8. The Antelope Hills, abundant in wild game and fruit, made a campsite for expeditions and landmarks for later wagon trails.
9. The Wichita Indians lived in grass lodges depicted here as Coronado described them.
10. "The Turk" who told Coronado about Quivira and the Cities of Gold.

# Visual Art Details



Charles Banks Wilson spent two years gathering research and authentic information about Oklahoma before beginning the process of producing the murals. The research created the foundation for his preliminary sketches, of which he completed 75 for the mural. From the sketches, he created a 15-inch working drawing, which he used for reference. Banks then built small three-dimensional models of each detail in the drawing, which he used for a reference of how the light would fall on each object. From there, he created several black-and-white paintings of the entire scene before finally making color choices and completing a 37-inch color painting. Then, he began work on the final product, a panel stretching 14-feet wide at the base, 25-feet wide at the top, and 13-feet high.

1. Acrylic paint was used for the mural because of its long-lasting durability.
2. The artist used himself as a model for Coronado.
3. Wilson spent time sketching buffalo from life.
4. The artist used Mexican prisoners for models of those holding the cross.
5. The horizon in the mural was said to symbolize the endless possibilities for Oklahoma.
6. The tents and other objects in the background are very small and placed in the upper portion of the composition to indicate they are far away.
7. The people and objects in the foreground are placed in the lower portion of the composition and painted with great detail to indicate they are closer to the viewer.
8. The people and objects between the foreground and background make up the middle ground of the painting.

# History Highlights



- Scandinavian Vikings were possibly the first explorers of North America as evidenced by the runestones found in Heavener, Oklahoma.
- The Spanish came to North America, including Oklahoma, hoping to find gold. Coronado's search for the Seven Cities of Cibola took him and his men into present-day New Mexico and Arizona where the Spaniards found the Pueblo Indians' towns – built of bricks, not gold. Coronado then led an expedition in 1541 to 1542 across Oklahoma into Kansas in search of another rumored city of gold, Quivira. Instead, he found a village of the Wichita Indians. Coronado claimed the land west of the Mississippi River for Spain.
- About 60 years later, Juan de Oñate, governor of the new colony of New Mexico, centered on the Rio Grande, led an expedition out of the capitol of Santa Fe toward the east, looking for Quivira. He also found the dome-shaped huts of the Wichitas.
- French traders and trappers explored the Mississippi River valley. One of them, La Harpe, explored much of eastern Oklahoma. The early French influence is evident today in the names of Oklahoma's rivers, geographical features, and communities in the eastern part of the state.
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- The European influence expanded the Indian's way of life through trade and bartering. The introduction of the horse to North America by the Spanish brought immediate changes to the Indian lifestyle.
- Europeans brought to the New World a variety of new plants, animals, foods, and diseases. In return, they carried plants, foods, and animals they found in the New World back to Europe.

# Suggested Reading

**Oklahoma Adventure**, Centennial Edition 2006 by Oklahoma History Press  
Unit 1: Chapter 2: First White Visitors, **pages 22-27**

**Oklahoma: Land of Contrasts** by Clairmont Press  
Chapter 4: European Quest for New Land, **pages 86-103**

**The Story of Oklahoma**, Second Edition by Baird and Goble  
Unit 2: The Discovery of Oklahoma; Chapter 5: The Europeans Encounter Oklahoma,  
**pages 61-71**

## Further Reading

Hunt, David C. *The Lithographs of Charles Banks Wilson* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

Wilson, Charles Banks. *Search for the Purebloods* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

Cagle, Charles. *An Oklahoma Portrait: Conversations with the artist Charles Banks Wilson* (Thomas Gilcrease Museum Association, 1989).



# Oklahoma History Vocabulary

**Alliance**- a close association to advance the common interests of the parties

**Cartographer**- a mapmaker

**Colony**- a group of people who settle in another land but who are still under the rule of their native land

**Conquistador**- a Spanish conqueror

**Expedition**- a journey for a specific purpose, such as exploration

**Missionary**- one who is sent on a religious mission

**New Spain**- the name the Spanish gave to Mexico

**Northwest Passage**- a hoped for all-water route to Asia through the North American continent

**Pueblos**- the name the Spanish explorers gave to the Indian settlements they found in New Mexico and Arizona

**Quivira**- a place believed by Spanish explorers to offer incredible wealth, where even common folk ate off silver plates and drank from golden bowls

**Runestone**- an object found near Heavener, Oklahoma, bearing markings that may have been made by early Scandinavian explorers

**Seven Cities of Cibola**- towns rumored among Spanish explorers to have houses whose walls were made of solid gold and doors made of turquoise

# Visual Art Vocabulary

**Acrylic Paint**- a nontoxic, water-based pigment available in tubes or jars and may be washed out of brushes

**Art Criticism**- the field of inquiry that describes, interprets and evaluates works of visual art, often by making comparative judgments

**Background**- part of the picture plane that seems furthest from the viewer; usually in the upper portion of the composition

**Foreground**- part of the picture plane that seems closest to the viewer; usually in the lower portion of the composition

**Middle Ground**- area of a picture between the foreground and background

**Mural**- a large picture painted or affixed directly on a wall or ceiling

**Symbol**- visual image that stands for or represents something else

**Three-Dimensional**- having three qualities including depth, height, and breadth, as in a sculpture, for example

# Review Questions

These questions may provide for verbal class discussion or for individual writing assignments.

*\*Note: Some topics may not be addressed in the text book for your class.*

1. Why do some experts believe that Scandinavian Vikings traveled in Oklahoma?
2. Explain the purpose of the Coronado expedition and describe the results of the expedition.
3. What advantages did the conquistadors have over the Indians and how did they use their advantages?
4. How did the attitude of the conquistadors, toward themselves and toward strangers, affect the outcome of the Spanish expedition?
5. Explain how the written reports left by Coronado and Oñate of their expeditions were important to Oklahoma.
6. How did the things left behind by the Spanish affect the lifestyles of the Indians?
7. How did the French hope to succeed in their explorations?
8. Describe the purpose of La Harpe's expedition.
9. How did the explorers and the Indians make cultural contributions to one another's lifestyles?
10. In what ways does the artist show the difference between the foreground and background of the painting?
11. List some of the objects in the painting that could be symbolic.
12. Charles Banks Wilson once said, "A painting is complete within itself. A mural is part of the architecture and must participate in the design of the building itself." What do you think he meant by that?
13. Charles Banks Wilson studied anatomy as part of his education for figure drawing. How do you think anatomy helped with drawing? What other subjects could be helpful in learning to make art?

# Writing and Research Assignments

Choose one or more of the topics below about which to write two or three paragraphs.

*\*Note: Some topics may not be addressed in the text book for your class.*

- Describe how the Spanish and French explorers differ in their purposes and actions as explorers.
- The French presence in Oklahoma 150 years ago is evidenced by French names for cities, rivers, and mountain ranges in Oklahoma. Write about some of the French-named places in Oklahoma and how those areas were affected by French exploration.
- The Wichita Indians came into contact with many of the European explorers. Do some research and write about the tribe. Where is their origin? What was life like for them before the Europeans came to Oklahoma? How did life change for them after the Europeans came?
- Choose one of the explorers' routes in Oklahoma. Trace the route through present-day Oklahoma and discuss how the land is different now then it was at the time of the exploration.
- Mural painting is an effective way to remember historical happenings. Research other mural artists and write about some of the historical issues they have painted about. Include where these murals are located and who commissioned the artist to paint them.
- Charles Banks Wilson, the artist who created this mural, is a successful painter. Research and write about some of his other works of art.

# 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 5- Social Studies

### **Standard 2: The student will describe the early exploration of America.**

1. Examine the reasons for, the problems faced in, and the results of key expeditions by Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and England (e.g., Columbus, Ponce de León, Magellan, Coronado, Cortés, Hudson, Raleigh, and La Salle) and the competition for control of North America.
2. Identify the impact of the encounters between Native Americans and Europeans.

## 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 2: The student will describe both European and American exploration and claims to the territory that would become Oklahoma.**

1. Explain the significance of early Spanish and French expeditions (e.g., Coronado, Oñate, and LaHarpe).

### **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 7: The student will examine major cultural and ethnic groups represented in Oklahoma.**

1. Identify cultural and ethnic groups in Oklahoma (e.g., African Americans, Eastern Europeans, Italians, Germans, and Vietnamese) and explore the causes and effects of their immigration and settlement patterns.

## **PASS OBJECTIVES FOR VISUAL ARTS:**

**Standard 1: Language of Visual Art - The student will identify visual art terms and vocabulary.**

**Standard 2: Visual Art History and Culture - The student will recognize the development of visual art from an historical and cultural perspective.**

**Standard 4: Visual Art Appreciation - The student will appreciate visual art as a vehicle of human expression.**