

## **Lesson Title: Art and the Environment**

**Grade Level: 5-12**

**Connections: Social Studies, Science, Visual Arts**

Students become more aware of their environment and the concerns that are associated with it. Activities involve researching a wide range of environmental problems, compiling information about environmental issues, and learning about a number of environmental concepts.

### **National Standards:**

#### **National Geography Standards -**

Learners will understand how human actions modify the physical environment

#### **National History Standards -**

Draw upon the visual data presented in photographs, paintings, cartoons, and architectural drawings

Obtain historical data

Identify issues and problems in the past

#### **National Science Standards -**

Make and act upon evidence-based decisions to ensure a sustainable environment.

#### **National Visual Arts Standards -**

Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes

Chooses and evaluates a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Reflects upon and assesses the characteristics and merits of their work and others

Makes connections between visual arts and other disciplines

### **Performance Objectives:**

Students will become more aware of their environment and the concerns that are associated with it.

Students will research a wide range of environmental problems, compile information about environmental issues, and learn about a number of environmental concepts.

### **Works of Art:**

**Mel Chin, American, b. 1951, *Spirit*, 1994. White oak, mixed Tall Grass Prairie plants, steel, industrial patina, sheetrock, paint; Room: 13 ft 9 in x 20 x 50 ft; Barrel: 12 ft long, 9 ft diameter**

Contemporary works of art like Mel Chin's are called installations. Installations are often very large and involve unusual combinations of objects reflecting the artists' ideas. They are created for a specific space and are often temporary. Viewers are often actively engaged in experiencing installations.

Pressed against the ceiling of a fifty-foot-long white corridor is a monumental oaken barrel, nine feet in diameter. This swollen form appears precariously balanced on a taut, scorched rope attached to the ceiling at both ends of the corridor. The

gargantuan barrel, encircled by giant steel hoops, its staves darkened by its mysterious contents, recalls the casks common to American frontier life. Everyday necessities essential to the survival of early settlers, such as grain, pork, and oil were transported and stored in these casks, as well as alcoholic spirits and gunpowder.

During this period, the increasing demands of agriculture, industry, and commerce set into motion the inexorable process of redefining the American landscape. An unhappy consequence of this transformation, which began with a vengeance during post-Civil War westward expansion, was the reduction of the indigenous ecosystem to, in Chin's words, "a thin green line." *Spirit* is his meditation on the Tall Grass Prairie, a lost American landscape that once extended from Minnesota southward to Texas and Oklahoma. The rope, composed of prairie grasses acquired by Chin from a national preserve,\* suggest not only the vestigial green line but the ragged horizon of a disquieting psychological landscape. Symbolic of people's aggressive interventions in the landscape, the giant barrel is a mesmerizing, potentially explosive presence.

\* Big Bluestem and other vanishing species of indigenous grasses used in Chin's rope were collected for *Spirit* with the permission of the Nature Conservancy, Kansas City Field Office, Topeka, Kansas.

#### **Bibliography:**

*Visions of America, Landscape as Metaphor in the Late Twentieth Century*, Denver Art Museum and the Columbus Museum of Art, 1994.

#### **Albert Bierstadt, American, 1830 – 1902. *Landscape*, n. d. Oil on canvas, Bequest of Rutherford H. Platt.**

As the American frontier expanded westward in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, exploration photography and painting documented many natural wonders that few had ever seen. Bierstadt accompanied a government survey party in 1858 to record the dramatic scenery encountered in the West and visited the West several times in the 1860s and 1870s, making numerous, detailed sketches of the land. Subsequently, various elements from the sketches were combined in his New York studio to create large, panoramic pictures which achieved great popularity and established his success.

In this vista, an ominous storm cloud sets the mood, shadowing the rocky slope. The dark edges frame a brilliantly lit central area, where the shining water and clouds and a lone bird attract the eye to this central focus. It is likely that the landscape is a composite of various scenes, whether in the Sierras or elsewhere, as Bierstadt made several trips to Europe during this period as well.

Human beings are absent. A soaring bird and a faint indication of a swimming deer represent the animal world. Nature is seen in Bierstadt's works as pure and poetic - a spiritual transcendence.

### **Discussion Questions:**

**Why do you think Bierstadt placed a small soaring bird in this otherwise motionless picture?** Perhaps he wanted to show the vastness of the landscape.

**What kind of painting or photograph might attract such attention today?** one of life from outer space or of a sunken treasure on the ocean floor

**What do you see in the installation by Mel Chin?** barrel on a rope

**What do you think the barrel and the rope symbolize?** The barrel represents people's presence and the rope represents nature. The size and weight of the barrel imply that technology and civilization are overwhelming nature and coming very close to destroying it. The barrel refers to those the early pioneers used to store and transport necessities of life as they settled the American frontier.

**Chin selected *Spirit* as the title for his installation.** What do you think this title implies? The word "spirit" has two connotations – one is the spiritual nature of the land and the other is spirit as an alcoholic beverage. In this sense, Chin wants the viewer to consider the fact that settlers introduced alcohol to its native inhabitants during the westward movement.

**Discuss the artist's message.** Mel Chin, the artist who created this work is deeply concerned about the ecology of the planet. He is worried about chemical pollutants and how they affect the earth. He is optimistic however, that art can play an important part in getting people's attention and bringing them together to do something about this kind of problem.

### **Vocabulary:**

**Contemporary artist** – an artist who lives and works today.

**Installation** – A work of art, often temporary, created for a specific space. They are often large and involve unusual combinations of objects reflecting the artists' ideas.

**Ecology** – The relationship between organisms and their environment.

**Conservation** – The planned management of natural resources, involving the protection of some wilderness areas and the development of others for the common good.

**Environmentalist** – A person who works to protect the environment from destruction and pollution.

### **Activities:**

1. Some of the earliest conservation efforts began during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. Research President Roosevelt's Square Deal reforms for conservation and the nation's natural resources. How did these policies affect Bierstadt and other artists at the time? Examine the problems of exploitation of the environment during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in America. How were some of these problems solved during Roosevelt's presidency? Write headlines announcing the solutions.
2. Analyzing Primary Sources. Naturalist John Muir was a friend of President Roosevelt and influenced him to take action. Read the following excerpt from John Muir's book *Our National Parks*, published in 1901. Then answer the questions below.

“So far our government has done nothing effective with its forests, though the best in the world, but is like a rich and foolish spendthrift who has inherited a magnificent estate in perfect order, and then has left his fields and meadows, forests and parks, to be sold and plundered and wasted at will, depending on their inexhaustible abundance. Now it is plain that the forests are not inexhaustible, and that quick measures must be taken if ruin is to be avoided...

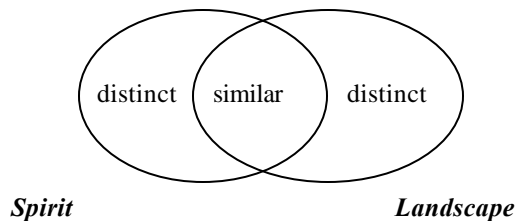
Just now, while protective measures are being deliberated languidly, destruction and use are speeding on faster and faster every day. The axe and the saw are insanely busy, chips are flying thick as snowflakes and every summer thousands of acres of priceless forests... are vanishing away in clouds of smoke...”

John Muir, “The American Forest,” from *Our National Parks*

**Whose actions do you think Muir criticized in this excerpt? Why might his concern about the forests be justified?**

In an 1859 editorial letter to a popular 19<sup>th</sup> century publication, *Crayon*, Bierstadt wrote, “If you can form any idea of the scenery of the Rocky Mountains...I shall be very glad... The mountains are very fine; as seen from the plains, they resemble very much the Bernese Alps, one of the finest ranges of mountains in Europe, if not in the world.” The letter was widely reprinted, demonstrating America’s new fascination with wild scenery as a subject. **Why do you think he compared the Rocky Mountains to European mountain ranges?**

3. In the form of a slide, it is difficult to capture the feeling of being in the space of an installation such as *Spirit*. Without the complete sensory experience, much of Mel Chin’s message can get lost. As a class or group project, try and reproduce the installation in your school. Be creative with materials! You’ll need to measure out a space that is 12 ft x 20 ft x 50 ft. The barrel is 9 ft. in diameter. The walls of the space lean in slightly, narrowing toward the ceiling. How does the experience of being actively in the installation change the overall feeling of the installation?
4. Create a Venn Diagram analyzing the similarities and differences between Mel Chin’s environmental installation *Spirit* and Albert Bierstadt’s landscape painting. Think about the subject matter, media, the resulting expression of the idea, and the motivation or feeling behind the idea.



5. Art and Issue. Discuss America's continued efforts to address its environmental problems today. What are our environmental problems? Research one of the problems and portray your views on the issue. Using the media of your choice, create a design that, without words, signifies your point of view and presents a potent image.
6. The United States held its first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, set aside as a day of serious discussion of environmental problems. Organize an annual Earth Day celebration at your school on April 22. Today thousands of schools and communities around the world participate in Earth Day activities. Research the internet or the library for ideas on planning your celebration. Some good Earth Day sites are: [www.earthday.net](http://www.earthday.net) and [www.earthsite.org](http://www.earthsite.org). A good site for young students is [www.kidsdomain.com/holiday/earthday/index.html](http://www.kidsdomain.com/holiday/earthday/index.html).
7. Divide the class into 2 groups. Defend and debate the following issues regarding Mel Chin's work *Spirit*:
  - a) His art can never fully convey the scope of the calamities he describes in his work. They are inadequate metaphors for tragic situations.
  - b) The work has successfully conveyed a message if it moves the audience to some form of sympathetic action, no matter how small.

After note: The two viewpoints expressed above are excerpts from statements by Mel Chin about his work. They are taken from an article by Peter Boswell, "Viewpoint: Mel Chin", Walker Art Center, 9/23 – 12/2/90.

**Follow-up:**

For additional activities on conservation using the internet and original sources such as paintings, photography and writings, visit the Library of Congress "American Memory" website, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem>.

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**Albert Bierstadt, American, 1830 – 1902. *Landscape*, n. d. Oil on canvas, Bequest of Rutherford H. Platt.**

