

PERSHING MURAL PROJECT CURRICULUM

Learning From the Past, Understanding the Present, and Discovering the Future



THE PERSHING MURAL ~ A NEBRASKA CULTURAL LANDMARK

Bringing the Pershing Mural into the 21st Century

This lesson takes a close look at the 20th-Century Mural and the artists who designed it and asks students to reimagine it from a 21st-Century standpoint. Students will be invited to design their own modern-day Pershing Mural and a second activity asks them to create their own “Nebraska Mural”.

Note: It would be a good sequence of learning to complete the lesson “Writing an Artist Statement” prior to completing this lesson.

Included in this Lesson:

- Lesson Plan: Bringing the Pershing Mural into the 21st Century
- Power Point: How to Write an Artist Statement
- Power Point: Writing an Artist Statement Decades Later
- PDF: Line Images of the Pershing Mural
- Power Point: Mysteries of the Pershing Mural
- Pershing Mural Digital Image

Nebraska Standards Addressed:

Present: FA8.2.2.a Analyze and present reflections of personal growth in an artist statement.

Present: FA 8.2.1 Use the creative process to investigate and communicate personal voice in artwork.

Connect: FA8.2.1 Investigate ideas and materials to demonstrate planning and refining.

Connect: FA 8.2.1.a Investigate ideas and materials to demonstrate planning and refining.

Connect: FA 8.2.1.b Recognize personal voice and make stylistic choices to reflect personal identity.

Respond: FA8.2.1.c Engage in the sensory experience and relate it to making expressive artwork.

Connect: FA 8.2.1.e Investigate and demonstrate the relationship between technique, skill, and craftsmanship.

Respond: FA 8.2.1.f Demonstrate respect for accepted procedures regarding responsible care of equipment and materials.

Create: FA 8.2.2 Students will understand and apply their knowledge of a variety of presentation and communication techniques.

Connect: FA 8.2.3.c Compare and contrast various interpretations of themes, styles and mood

Respond: FA 8.2.3.d Explain why a work of art can evoke different interpretations and how artwork is interpreted and evaluated by the way it is displayed or presented.

Respond: FA 5/W.2 Use a recursive writing process to develop, strengthen, and produce writing appropriate to the audience

Create: FA 8.2.4.d Explain how images and objects are used to convey a story, familiar experience, or connection to the world.

Create: EP6. Use English structures to communicate context-specific messages.

Objectives:

- The students will be able to list at least five biographical facts about Leonard Thiessen and Bill Hammon (the artists who were commissioned to create the Pershing Mural's design).
- The students will be able to create their own mural design.
- The students will be able to draw a variety of sketches to formulate possible ideas for their overall design.
- Students will be able to transfer the images within the 7 sections of the Mural provided, adding color using markers or adhere/collage materials onto their design.
- Following the creative process, students will be able to write an Artist Statement.
- The students will be able to make an oral presentation of their work and answer questions about it.

Grade Level: Written at 6th Grade Level (educators are encouraged to adjust the lesson to meet needs of 7th to 12th Grade)

Materials Needed:

Pencils, scratch paper, colored pencils and markers, glue/glue sticks, folders for sketches and notes, creative materials (wallpaper, maps, paper scraps, etc.), one packet of the Pershing Mural's design, divided into 7 sections (*Note: Students may make additional copies and/or enlarge the sections as homework.*)

Time Requirement:

4-6 (50-minute) class sessions

Vocabulary:

Aesthetics: Creating a design that is well balanced creating visual harmony, beautiful, pleasing and interesting in appearance that take into consideration the visual relationship determined by light, shadow and contrast.

Artistic License: freedom of expression; allowing an artist to interpret subject matter which may differ from real life or accurate appearances resulting in creative, unique and engaging works of art.

Client: An entity who employs the professional services of another individual. In the creation of the Pershing Mural, two Nebraska artists, *(Note: Leonard Thiesen and Bill Hammon were commissioned to create the design.)*

Commission: related to the design of the Pershing Mural, it was the act of Leonard Thiessen and Bill Hammon agreeing to be paid a specified amount by their client (*Hazen & Robinson Architectural Firm*), to create the design for the Pershing Mural with specific subject matter. All the elements of the commissioned work as well as the deadline for completion were dictated by the client. A commission often begins with a detailed drawing or cartoon which is shared with the client who may make changes.

Cartoon: refers to a full-scale, detailed drawing on paper.

Direct Instruction:

Learning About the Pershing Mural Artists

The collection of the Museum of Nebraska Art (MONA) consists of nearly 6,000 artworks created by more than 830 different Nebraska artists. An amazing 121 works of art are attributed to the two Nebraska artists who are also responsible for designing and overseeing the installation of the Pershing Mural. Through their prolific creativity and influence, they have left a significant and important legacy in Nebraska's history and within its art community.

(Charles) LEONARD THIESSEN (b. 1902, Omaha, NE – d. 1989, Omaha, NE)

Thiessen studied at the University of Nebraska; School of Royal Academy, Sweden; Heatherly School of Art, England; Academy Grande Chaumiere, France; and he received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from Creighton University. Thiessen's career includes a successful life as a painter, a writer and art critic for the *Omaha World Herald* for several years and as the first Executive Secretary for the Nebraska Arts Council

(*MONA records*). Thiessen's interest in mosaics began in Ravenna in 1929 and was renewed in Stockholm in 1932-38.

BILL J. HAMMON (b. October 3, 1922, Oklahoma City, OK - d. February 26, 1988, Miami, FL,

Bio summary in Hammon's obituary (Omaha World Herald, March 1, 1988) was a former president of the Associated Artists of Omaha and was the second individual to receive the organization's "Elmer" award for achievement. An Oklahoma native, Hammon studied at the *Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI)* and the *Art Students League* in New York City and the *Oklahoma Art Center*. While at the KCAI, Hammon studied under such famed artists as Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Lanning, and Horace Day. Jackson Pollack was a fellow student alongside Hammon at the KCAI. Hamon Studied with Diego Rivera while in Mexico City.

Thiessen and Hammon (two talented and prolific Omaha artists) would go on to team up to design what would be referenced as the largest Mural of its kind on the Western Hemisphere (*Jim McKee, Lincoln Journal Star, 1/30/2022*). Their creation, the Pershing Mural, would become the most significant artwork created in both of their careers.

Pershing Mural Commission

When Bruce Hazen (Lincoln Architect) contacted Thiessen on January 13, 1955, about 'filling out a panel over the main entrance of the new Lincoln City Auditorium with tile,' Thiessen was interested. He knew the personnel in the *Hazen & Robinson Architectural Firms* (one of the most prominent firms in Nebraska in the immediate times post war Nebraska) and was intrigued by the project.

Robinson's art project description to Thiessen:

- The area is approximately 120 feet long by 38 feet high.
- The tile and frame would project a distance of a foot or 18" beyond the stone face of the upper part of the auditorium.
- The area would be developed in color, using a tile which would withstand the weather.

Hazen told Thiessen, "I was wondering if you would be interested in developing a design for this area of this building...for an amount which you

consider satisfactory. If so, I suggest that you arrange to come down to Lincoln so you can see exactly what we have in mind (*"Prairie Symphony: The Story of Charles Leonard Thiessen"*).

Thiessen was indeed interested and as a result, he teamed up with Bill Hammon to undertake this monumental task. Together, Thiessen and Hammon were paid a total of one thousand dollars for their work on the project which is equivalent to about \$11,500 in today's dollars.

In designing the Mural, the primary concern of both Thiessen and Hammon was composition, and they gave only a small amount of study to the actual subject matter which was dictated. A scale model of the building was made, as were:

- 'Space Treatments' of the composition test
- Sketches of activities to be performed in the building which were fit into the composition model (ten were ultimately chosen to be developed)
- Sight lines of the viewer
- Colors of the mural which had to fit with the surrounding areas.

Indian limestone dominated considerations and every stage and aspect of the development was presented to the board or architects for acceptance.

While the design was Thiessen's and Hammon's, the subject matter of the commission was to some degree dictated by the Associate Auditorium Architects and their desire to illustrate the type of events that the new auditorium was to host. The complete cartoon was viewed by R.O. White of the *Cambridge Tile Manufacturing Company* of Cincinnati, Ohio and Thiessen flew to Cincinnati with the drawings to discuss tile colors with Harry J. Jacke, Art Director of Cambridge Tile.

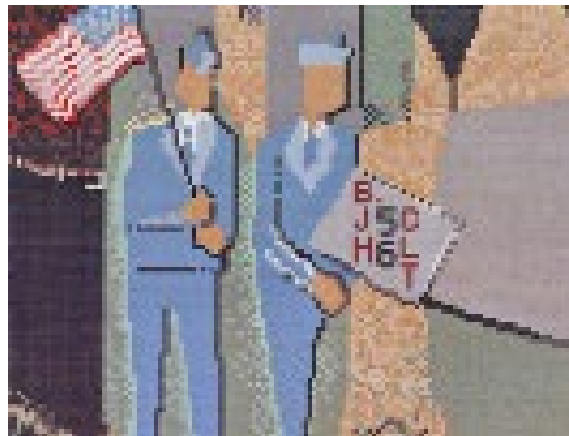
At the time, this was the largest mosaic ever designed and constructed, so it received special attention from everyone concerned. Each figure and its placement in the design were discussed with extreme care. The entire design ultimately took shape.

The largest tile used in the Pershing mosaic is about one inch square, with as much as five-eighths of an inch of space left between tiles. Of the tiles,

only ten percent were glazed, the rest unglazed. Glazed tiles were used, for instance, to make a circus performer's costume glisten.

The tiles were assembled in reverse and glued onto sheets of paper, in a manner similar to bathroom floor tile. Then these sheets, most of them 12' x 24" were applied to about-to-set cement and pressed in. After the tiles were set, the paper was moistened, the soluble glue loosened, the paper taken off, and the joints grouted. This was quick and easy compared to the Renaissance method, which involved a laborious, exacting process often taking years to complete a single work.

As a wink and a nod, Thiessen and Hammon "signed" their Mural with their initials (CLT and BJH) and the date they created the Mural's design (56) imbedded into the design. You can see their initials superimposed on the sign being held by a gentleman in uniform, next to another military person who is carrying the American flag.



We don't have an artist statement from Thiessen and Hammon to unlock some of the mysteries the Mural contains. It would have been fascinating to learn about the challenges they faced and how they collaborated on their creation. In the meantime, we are lucky to have the mosaic at our disposal to study and to enjoy as we celebrate "Nebraska's Mural"!

Discussion Questions:

- What did you learn from Thiessen and Hammon's studies that would show they were interested in Murals?

- If you were Thiessen and Hammon, would you have been hesitant to take on such a big job or would you have jumped at the chance to design the Pershing Mural?
- Where would you start if you had been asked to design the Mural?
- Why was it a good idea to build a model of the building when planning the Mosaic?
- What kind of research do you suppose the artists undertook to pick out the materials to be used in the creation of the Mural?
- There was a definite collaboration between Thiessen and Hammon. What other collaborations needed to take place to make this Mural a reality? (Think of the Cambridge Tile Company and the Associate Auditorium Architects.) What are the pros and cons of collaborating?

Imagining Life in 1955 When the Mural Was Commissioned

In the mid 1950's when the Mural was designed,

- The Civil Rights Movement aimed at gaining equality rights for Black Americans under the law was just getting underway; segregation and discrimination were rampant.
- Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat.
- There were no women on the US Supreme Court.
- Fewer than 2% of residents had air conditioning.
- Almost 50% of adults smoked cigarettes or tobacco.
- TVs used antennas to receive a signal and the number of television stations available for viewing was three or four with programming ended at midnight and then TVs went to a blank screen.
- There had been no manned missions into outer space.
- Because of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and fear of nuclear war, school children practiced "Duck and Cover" air-raid drills in schools where they dove under their desks and covered their heads.
- About 35% of women participated in the labor force and worked outside of the home.
- The first McDonald's fast-food restaurant opened.
- Computers used by government and businesses filled an entire room and used more than 200 vacuum tubes.
- Telephones were landlines that used a handset with cord and dial.
- Cameras used film that needed to be developed to produce photos.
- The polio vaccine was declared safe and effective.
- Disneyland opened in California.

- The US began its involvement in the Viet Nam conflict.
- The average annual income for a family was about \$4,200.
- Seven out of ten families owned a car. The average car cost \$2,000 and seatbelts were an option, not a standard feature.
- Young children rode in car seats that were meant to contain them not to protect them.
- A two-bedroom home cost \$7,500 and gas was 20 cents a gallon.
- Professional baseball integrated as dozens of African American ballplayers joined the major league lineups for the first time.
- A postage stamp cost 3 cents.

Life was very different in the 1950's from what it is today. Technology, the political environment, and the evolution of our society in the way we think and live our lives has changed the landscape for our families and communities. What may have been acceptable in 1955 is not necessarily the norm today. As we continue to learn and grow and embrace our rich diversity, we are recognizing the importance of celebrating what we share as well as our differences.

Discussion Questions:

- Identify 5 technological advances we take for granted today that were not in existence in 1955. How has this technology changed our lives and our society?
- Identify forms of discrimination that took place in the 1950's. Has our society changed and evolved somewhat since then? How?
- How did the cold war and worry about global conflict affect children in the 1950's?
- How has television and communication changed from what it was 70 years ago?
- Without social media, how did people stay connected and get their news and information?
- Is life safer today than what it was in 1955? Please explain.
- Why were goods and services so much cheaper in 1955 than they are today?
- Do you think life was easier or harder in 1955 than it is today?

Guided and Independent Practice:

Activity One

For this assignment, students will be asked to put themselves into the shoes of Thiessen and Hammon and design a 21st Century version of the Pershing Mural, section by section (seven in all). The students will use the template of the Pershing Mural found in a PDF download. This template includes the Mural's various lines and shapes over which the various characters have been superimposed.

Now that the 38 figures from 1955 have been removed and the webbing and cross section of lines remain on the original Mural,

- 1) Students will be asked to design a Mural that would be suitable for a 21st Century Events Center in Nebraska, keeping in mind that people from all walks of life should be represented and celebrated.
- 2) They will need to brainstorm to determine the kinds of events, concerts, performances, and activities that would take place in their event center today.
- 3) They should put careful thought into what images they feel would be important for and representative of 21st-century Nebraska and its entertainment, demographics, and culture.
- 4) They will add their own images and objects to create their own mural design overlaid on the original background to reflect today's culture.

Guided and Independent Practice:

After students have brainstormed to arrive at concept for their Murals, students will:

- 1) Keep all notes and sketches used in the initial design process in a folder which will be handed in as part of their work on this project.
- 2) Begin the lesson by drawing a variety of images on scratch paper to convey the theme and scope for their overall design to cover the seven sections of the Mural.
- 3) Create and cut out the images they want to use for their Mural.
- 4) Lay out the seven sections of their Mural background and transfer the images they have created to each section.
- 5) Add color using markers or adhere/collage materials onto their design and use artistic license and methods to embellish and personalize their work.

- 6) Title their Murals at the conclusion of their work.
- 7) Write three-paragraph Artist Statements to accompany their new murals.
- 8) Present their original mural design to the class, talk about their design process, what they enjoyed and/or might have done differently and answer questions.
- 9) Hand in their developmental work, Artist Statement, and Mural design.

Evaluation:

The students will be evaluated on:

- 1) Use of class time
- 2) Developmental work including deciding upon a clear theme that reflects our 21st century culture
- 3) Originality of artwork
- 4) Composition and placement of elements
- 5) Use of color
- 6) Use of emotion and movement
- 7) Craftsmanship in creating art work
- 8) Respectful listening and participation during their classmates' final presentation.

The Artist Statement should include:

- 1) A title
- 2) At least 3 paragraphs
- 3) Appropriate grammar, spelling, and punctuation
- 4) An overall explanation of the creative process - beginning to end
- 5) Includes personal reflection, such as what they enjoyed/biggest challenge/etc.
- 6) A description of anything they might have changed or done differently if asked to repeat the project
- 7) A reflection on what they would like to change (such as the theme or composition), why, and how

Discussion Questions:

- What process did you go through to select and design the images you would superimpose on your Mural? Are they different from the 1955 version? How?

- What story were you trying to tell with your design? Do you think it would be clear without an artist statement?
- How does your design showcase the diversity we have today in our communities and society? In our forms of entertainment?
- How did you use the “webbing” and lines from the original Mural background in your design? Did they enhance your design or make your process more challenging?
- How important was the use of color and blocking in your design?
- What did you incorporate into your design to help your mural show movement, action, and emotion?

Activity Two:

Native Nebraskan Joel Sartore is a photographer, speaker, author, teacher, and 20-year contributor to National Geographic magazine. When asked for a quote about the Pershing Mural, Sartore shared, *“As a conservation photographer, I’ve learned rare things don’t often get a second chance. It takes just one wrong move to erase things forever. At first glance and from afar, the Pershing Mural, ‘Nebraska’s Picasso,’ looks like an abstract painting. Get closer though, and you’ll see it’s detailed depiction of what we humans were up to in the late 1950’s. Clearly this is from another time and is no ordinary historic artifact. She is grand....She is irreplaceable... She’s valuable.”*

In Activity One, the students were asked to redesign a 21st Century version of the Pershing Mural. In Activity Two, students will be asked to broaden their scope and, in the words of Joel Sartore, create their own “Nebraska Picasso”.

For this assignment (depending on teacher discretion):

- 1) Students will work individually, in small groups, or as an entire class to create a mural with the theme “Nebraska’s Picasso”.
- 2) The size of the Murals will vary.
- 3) The Murals will reflect the students’ view of Nebraska and the images they want to use to help tell Nebraska’s story. Some theme examples (but not limited to) include:

- Landmarks and places to visit (e.g. Chimney Rock, Carhenge, Capitol Building, Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo, Ash Falls Fossil Bed, etc.)
- Native American Tribes in Nebraska (Pawnee, Ponca, Sioux, Omaha, etc.)
- Geography and formations (river valleys, sandhills, canyons, salt marshes, aquifer, etc.)
- Culture (music, theater, sports, art, etc.)
- People of interest (Willa Cather, Johnny Carson, Warren Buffett, Malcom X, etc.)
- Economy (agriculture, industry, tourism, etc.)

Using the format for Activity One for process and evaluation, the students will create their Murals, title them, and write artist statements. Finally, they will display their work and give a brief “artist talk” about their work and what they were trying to convey.

Closure:

Unlike the Commission accepted by Thiessen and Hammon, this lesson and activities offer students the creative freedom to decide on an overall theme for their Mural’s design, adding images and objects of their choice to convey a story, familiar experience, or connection to the world, either real or imaginary. The lesson also gives the students a hint into the process the artists of the Pershing Mural used to design their creation.

Resources:

Jim McKee, Lincoln Journal Star, January 30, 2022

Omaha World Herald, March 1,1988

Wallis, William. *Prairie Symphony: The Story of Charles Leonard Thiessen* (Los Angeles: Lone Wolf Editions, 2010).

“1955 Year in Review Major News Events in History”,
www.thepeoplehistory.com/1955

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Endless ARTS & HUMANITIES

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