

# **PERSHING MURAL PROJECT CURRICULUM**

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



THE PERSHING MURAL - A NEBRASKA CULTURAL LANDMARK

### **Writing an Artist Statement**

*In this lesson, students will learn details about the Pershing Mural and its artistic attributes and will be invited to write an artist statement on behalf of the Mural artists.*

#### **Included in this Lesson:**

- Lesson Plan: Writing an Artist Statement
- Power Point: How to Write an Artist Statement
- Power Point: Writing an Artist Statement for the Mural Decades Later
- Power Point: Mysteries of the Mural
- Pershing Mural Digital Image

#### **Nebraska Standards Addressed:**

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

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

Present: FA 8.2.2.a Analyze and present reflections of personal growth in an artist statement.

Connect: FA 8.2.2.b Analyze, individually and collaboratively, the selection of art collections, displays, and presentations.

Connect: FA 8.2.3.b Compare and contrast works of art using elements and principles (e.g., themes, styles, cultures).

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

**Objectives:**

- After analyzing the Pershing Mural, the students will be able to list the characters and activities that make up the design.
- The students will be able to explain how the Mural evokes feelings, movement and energy.
- The students will be able to describe the Mural's physical construction.
- After studying the Mural, the students will be able to write an artist statement for the mural.

**Grade Level:**

Written at 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Level (educators are encouraged to adjust the lesson to meet needs of Pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> Grade)

**Materials Needed:**

Paper, pens/pencils, an enlarged visual of the Pershing Mural

**Time Requirement:**

1-2 (50 minute) sessions

**Vocabulary:**

**Artist Statement:** A statement that briefly describes what an Artist creates, what inspires their creative process and offers the audience personal insight into the Arts and, at times, a better understanding of the work they create.

**Montage:** An assembly of images that relate to one another in some way to create a single work of art—it is usually based on a theme.

**Tableau:** Art in which characters are arranged for dramatic effect and appear to be absorbed and completely unaware of the existence of the viewer.

### **Direct Instruction:**

After years of deliberation and debate, construction of the Pershing Municipal Auditorium commenced in 1955. As an adornment to the building, Nebraska Artists Leonard Thiessen and William (Bill) Hammon were commissioned to create a one-of-a-kind facade mural to grace the west side of the Auditorium.

Leonard Thiessen was a prominent and highly-regarded Nebraska artist, educator, administrator, and art critic. Bill Hammon was well recognized by Omaha architects and designers for his works found in private homes and public buildings. The two were commissioned to “team up” to design, create, and supervise the installation of the Pershing Mural. At the time of its installation, the Mural was considered the largest mural of its kind in the Western Hemisphere.

Here are some facts about the mural:

- It measured 140’ 8” wide and 38’ 3” high.
- It was made up of more than 763,000 one-inch ceramic tile pieces in 40 different shades/colors.
- Ten percent of the tiles were glazed to giving a shimmering effect.
- It was a montage-type of work depicting the many activities that would be seen in the building.
- The panel was constructed by the Cambridge Tile Co. of Cincinnati, OH.
- It took three months for the Cambridge Company to construct the mural off site.

- The mural was assembled in one-foot by two-foot sections and was shipped to Lincoln.
- Each tile piece was numbered on its back to facilitate mounting the sections.
- The sections were affixed to metal cleats against a plaster base projecting out from the building.
- The mural was designed to last for the duration of the building.

No artist statements or quotes from Thiessen and Hammon at the time of its installation have been found concerning the mural. We do not know what part each artist played in the design and concept of the mural or how they arrived at the final creation. What we do know is that this is a complex piece that certainly deserves careful study.

Examine the mural closely and see what you find. When the Pershing Mural Historic Preservation Committee did just that, they came up with some of the following observations and theories:

- Look at the lines that crisscross the mural. Could the tableau be an abstract map of Nebraska denoting highways, rivers, lakes, trails or the aquifer?
- Can you identify the many images and characters portrayed in the montage?
  - a) Actors
  - b) Dancers
  - c) Musicians
  - d) Circus performers
  - e) Athletes
  - f) Military parade participants and debaters
- There appears to be three famous theatrical performances taking place. Could they be Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet", Puccini's Opera "Madame Butterfly", and Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci"?
- Can you feel the energy and playfulness expressed in the mural?
- Does the Mural feel like it was created almost 70 years ago or does it feel more modern and timeless?
- What emotions are evoked from the mural?
- How did the artists make the Mural come alive with motion?

- a) Can you feel the excitement of the basketball jump shot or the teetering of the clown balancing on the ball?
- a. Can you feel yourself gliding with the ice skater or tapping your feet to the rhythm of the jazz band?
- b. Is the strutting baton twirler playing with fire?
- c. Is the flying trapeze aerialist in fear of falling?
- d. Why are the debaters so worked up?
- e. Will the cowboy be bucked off? How soon will the buzzer sound to end his ride?

The Pershing Mural Preservation Committee summed up their study with this: “The artists “balanced a variety of abstract images across their huge ceramic canvas to tell a complex story about Nebraska—its spirit, topography, and culture. It is a ceramic YouTube video of the times and a remarkable physical depiction of life across the auditorium’s multi-decade timeline. Like all art, the Pershing Mural conjures a variety of ideas, feelings, and opinions.....it reflects who we are, what we were and where we came from, all at the same time.”

### **Discussion Questions:**

- If you could go back in time, what questions would you ask Hammon and Thiessen about the Mural?
- Why do you suppose the Planning Commission decided to add the mural to the building?
- If you were designing the mural, would you have done anything differently?
- How hard would it be to assemble the mural by using numbers on the back of each tile? What would happen if you made a mistake?
- If the assemblers were off just a fraction of an inch when they were assembling up the mural, what would have happened to the entire layout?
- Why do you suppose Thiessen and Hammon used ceramic tiles to create the mural? Would paint have been easier? Would paint have lasted as long?
- Do you think it was important to save and preserve the mural when Pershing Auditorium was demolished? How hard was it to take the mural down and reassemble it at a different site?

### **Guided and Independent Practice:**

An Artist Statement summarizes what an individual creates and what motivates them to create. Each statement is unique and personal and varies greatly between Artists. This statement can provide meaning for a single work or an entire collection and helps the viewer better understand the Artist's work. It is meant to explain the style, approach, philosophy, and theme of the art. It talks about what the artist intended to convey through the art. The statement is meant to clarify and add understanding for those who are viewing the art.

Since Thiessen and Hammon did not leave behind an artist statement for the Pershing Mural, the students will be asked to do the job for them. There are known facts about the mural that can be used in the statement; however, the students are encouraged to try to put themselves into the hearts and minds of the artists when describing the creative process and the story they want the art to tell.

### **The Process and Criteria:**

- 1) You will pretend that you are Thiessen or Hammon and the Mural is being unveiled for the first time in public. It is your job to write an artist statement that will be read by the public to better understand the mural. Keep in mind what life would have been like in 1957 in Nebraska when writing your statement. To get your mind in the right place, brainstorm and take a few minutes to answer these questions as if you were one of the artists?
  - Why do I like to make art?
  - What processes or techniques do I use in my art?
  - What subjects do I like to use?
  - What are my goals and hopes in creating art?
  - What inspires me?
  - What was it like for me to undertake such a big project?
  - What steps did I take to design and create the mural?
  - What challenges did I face? How did I work through them?
  - Was it difficult to collaborate with another artist?
  - What did I like or dislike about the finished mural?

- What title will I give to the mural?
  - Would I change anything about the mural?
  - How did my unique artistic style show up in the mural?
  - What is my favorite part of the mural?
  - Did the Mural turn out how I had originally imagined it?
- 2) Imagining you are Thiessen or Hammon, you will write an artist statement for the Pershing Mural in first person.
  - 3) The Statement will be three paragraphs long. Each paragraph should be at least three sentences but can be longer.
    - a) Paragraph One: This opening paragraph will tell who you are, what your work is about, any why you created it.
    - b) Paragraph Two: The second paragraph will describe the materials you used to create your work. Also talk about what influenced and inspired you in creating this art.
    - c) Paragraph Three: Describe what feeling or emotion you wanted to invoke with the art piece. What was challenging? What was your personal experience from creating this art? Did you grow as an artist or learn something new?
  - 4) After brain storming and taking notes, you will write a draft of the artist statement, revise, rewrite, and edit. It is helpful to read the statement aloud or get advice from a peer.
  - 5) When the statements are completed, you will share your artist statements with the entire class or small group.

### **Class Discussion Questions:**

- Why do you think artist statements are helpful for those viewing art?
- How do you think writing artist statements can be beneficial for the artist?
- Does writing an artist statement make the artist feel more confident about their work?
- Is writing an artist statement difficult? If so, how?

## Evaluation:

- 1) Did the artist statement adhere to the criteria:
  - a) The statement was written in first person.
  - b) The statement consisted of three paragraphs outlined above
  - c) Each paragraph was at least three sentences long
  - d) The writing presented was correct in grammar, spelling, and punctuation
- 2) Did the artist statement present accurate facts about the mural?
- 3) Did the student use creativity in writing the statement from the point of view of Thiessen or Hammon?

## Closure:

Insights into the Pershing Mural's creation will always be a mystery—up for speculation and conjecture. But even without an artist statement, the Pershing Mural can be analyzed, explored, and enjoyed as a piece of art that speaks to each heart with a special message to convey.

## Resources:

Mona Museum of Nebraska Art <https://mona.unk.edu/mona/spotlight-on-bill-hammon/> *Special thanks to MONA for giving permission to use content from their website for this lesson (2-13-24).*

Jim McKee: The making of a monumental mural in Lincoln Jim McKee For the Lincoln Journal Star Jan 30, 2022 Updated Mar 6, 2022 (*Archival*)

MONA Museum of Nebraska Art <https://mona.unk.edu/mona/leonard-thiessen/> *Special thanks to MONA for giving permission to use content from their website for this lesson (2-13-24).*

Nebraska State Historical Foundation 725.83-P466m-Pershing-Municipal-Auditorium.pdf *Public Domain*

11 Artist Statement Examples (Plus Steps for Writing Yours), Indeed Editorial Team, Updated, June 29, 2023



Artist Statement Examples - A Look at Famous Artist Statements by  
Isabella Meyer, Posted May 13, 2022 and Updated August 1, 2023

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