

PIONEER IMAGES OF UTAH

ARTIST: Mabel Pearl Frazer (1887-1981) Salt Lake City
TITLE: *Tye Rags* 1937
MEDIA: oil on canvas
SIZE: 34" x 40"

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Mabel Pearl Frazer is described by Robert S. Olpin as a "mainstay on the University of Utah's Department of Art faculty from 1921 until 1953." Extremely versatile, her teaching responsibilities included no less than nine different subject areas including art history, textile design, sculpture, ceramics, serigraphy, design, painting, landscape painting, and human anatomy.

Frazer was born in West Jordan, Utah, on August 28, 1887, but her family soon moved to the small town of Beaver, Utah. The eldest of four children, she valued her education and strongly resented having to put off starting school so she could help with the housework when her younger sister Leha was born.

Mabel graduated with honors from what was then the Beaver branch of the Brigham Young Academy (later known as the Murdock Academy). A very independent personality, she became devoted to art at a very early age. Her sister described her this way: "Her religion and her art took precedence over everything else in her life, she couldn't be bothered with anyone or anything else."

Frazer had some early childhood experiences that encouraged her later exploration of many forms of art. Her grandfather was a rock mason, and Mabel made a "nuisance" of herself at the family's rock quarry. Her family also owned a printing office, and it was her responsibility to be the type setter. In addition, her father had a blacksmith shop, a carpentry shop, and what she called a "stone sawmill." Working in and being exposed to a variety of art-related jobs were rich experiences for Mabel, the budding artist.

After her graduation from the Academy, she boarded the stage that went to Milford and caught the train to take her to Salt Lake City to attend college. Edwin Evans was her first art professor. She idolized him, and he and his wife became her life-long friends.

Mabel Frazer graduated from the University of Utah in 1914. She took a teaching position at Lewis Junior High School in Ogden, just long enough to finance her life-long dream of studying in New York. She studied in New York at the Art Students League under Frank Vincent Drumond. He was so impressed by her that he asked her to teach some of his classes. While in New York, Mabel also took classes at the School of Industrial Art.

After returning to Utah in 1918, Frazer began teaching at the College of Southern Utah in Cedar City. She then returned to New York to study at the Beaux Arts Institute of Design. One day, while she was making a copy of Rembrandt's *Daughter in Law* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the President of the University of Utah, President Widtsoe, saw her working and invited her to join the art faculty.

Mabel Pearl Frazer joined the University of Utah art staff in 1920 and remained there until her retirement 33 years later. She held strong views which she passed on to her students: "An artist must have something to say. Art is just another language and the would-be painter should at least learn

the rudiments of the language, color, composition, drawing, etc." She was personally instrumental in expanding the art department to include many new disciplines. She handled many managerial duties but was not appointed to the rank of associate professor until three years before her retirement. At one time, one of her former students, who was not even a college graduate, was appointed over her and was made head of the art department. Frazer believed she was passed over for promotion because she was a woman.

Mabel Frazer has been described by some as "not prolific." When her estate was appraised in 1981, it included over 386 works, but most of those were unfinished oil paintings. Her early style was reminiscent of Birger Sandzen, although less fauvist (her colors were not as bright) and more impressionistic (see *Sunrise, North Rim Grand Canyon*, 1928). However, in 1930 she went to Europe, spending 14 months in Italy where she was influenced by her studies of the old masters and by various artists. However, she clung tenaciously to her own purpose, not allowing herself to be confused by her exposure to a wide array of styles and art. She returned from Europe ready to

"resume the struggle with old problems from a new angle," and to be an "American artist."

Although she maintained that she did not belong to any school (A group of artists espousing a particular approach and philosophy), while in Europe, Frazer did change her style somewhat, her paintings becoming flatter, with more simplified, angular, and skewed shapes (see *Venice Canal*, 1930).

In an interview published in the November 1933 issue of the *Improvement Era* (an LDS magazine), she stated her ideology: "The vitality of art is life. All great art must have roots deep in a native soil. It can neither be borrowed nor lent. Things expressed without deep convictions can never be greatly convincing, rarely are they more than bits of superficial pettiness. That briefly, sums up my philosophy of art, and I try to live up to it."

Frazer showed her work in Utah, New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco, Portland, and Florence, Italy. While studying in Florence, two of her Utah paintings were exhibited in the Uffizi gallery. Among her last shows was a retrospective held in 1980; over 200 people attended to honor this Utah artist. She had a long and active artistic career until her death at age 94.

Information obtained from the following sources:

1. Biography written by the artist's sister; Madeline F. Waldis, collection of the Springville Museum of Art research library.
2. Utah Art, Swanson, Olpin, and Seifrit.
3. 100 Years of Utah Painting, James L. Haseltine.
4. Dictionary of Utah Art, Robert S. Olpin.
5. Improvement Era, Vol. 36, November 1933, p. 773, Salt Lake City, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

TITLE: *Tye Rags* 1937

MEDIA: oil on canvas

SIZE: 34" x 40"

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING
(History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

What is this painting about? When do you think it was painted? What clues exist? Describe the artist's use of color and other formal elements such as perspective or balance.

Why was this painting made? What aesthetic category does it best fit? Justify your answer. Is this painting beautiful? Why?

Is this a good painting? Why? Where would this painting look best? How many times would you like to look at this painting? (Once, several times, every day) Why?

ACTIVITIES

Art

Objectives: 1. The students will be introduced to the idea of aesthetic judgement by discussing what beauty means. 2. The students will create a piece of beautiful art.

Note: Aesthetics, at its most basic level, is what constitutes beauty, and therefore, what constitutes art. (see Richards' *Dreaming of Zion*, Activities pages 1-3 for other aesthetic approaches) Even very young children can discuss this idea, probably with less prejudice than most adults.

Begin by showing the students a series of slides, posters, or other reproductions of art that many people would consider beautiful from this or past packets or from the new posters, and ask the children whether they think the artworks are beautiful and if so, what makes them beautiful. (Subject matter is often used as one of the criteria for whether something is beautiful or not.) After the discussion, show the students the painting *Tye Rags* and let the children guess what the tye rags are. After a few minutes, if the children don't guess correctly, tell them the rags are for making braided rag rugs. If they look closely, they can see that some of the rags have been braided. The finished braids will then be sew together in a spiral shape to make a rug.

Students probably agreed that most of the other works were beautiful. Ask the students whether *Tye Rags* fits their definition of beautiful. Have students defend their position using whatever they know about the principles and elements of art. If the students don't bring up subject matter themselves, ask questions to make them consider the role of subject matter. Older students may be able to understand some of the complexities in making aesthetic judgements. Very young students likely will have a simple and short discussion.

After the discussion, assign the students to go home and find some everyday object they think is beautiful. If possible, students should bring their chosen objects to school and briefly explain why they think the object is beautiful.

This activity can be the beginning activity in a series about aesthetic judgement. Past packets have some lessons and other ideas to have the students explore this isn't a subject with one right answer. For example, explore what kinds of things affect our judgements about what is beautiful such as our culture, our training or education, our personality, our exposure to various art forms, etc. The most important lesson young children can learn about aesthetics is that it is not an absolute judgement. (See Richards' Activities, this packet)

2. If you want to include art production as part of this activity, have the students make a drawing or painting of the object they chose to bring to class or of someone else's object. Allow interested children to share their artworks and explain what they most like about the pieces.

Extension: Although the activity explained above was written for young children, it can easily become more complex simply because the more advanced students will have more complex ideas and their increased drawing and painting skills will allow them a greater choice in how they render the chosen object.

Art

Objective: The students will practice drawing using the art elements of line and color. In addition, the activity provides fine motor skills practice.

Some common problems with art activities in the lower elementary grade levels are that teachers have little or no training and many teachers are not confident in their art skills. The result is lots of art projects that involve all the students doing exactly the same work. One of the reasons for the teachers' lack of confidence is in addition to lack of training is that we all grew up doing "cookie cutter" art projects in which the goal was to stay in the lines and produce a finished piece that looked as much like the example as possible. We all got taught that our art projects should be done a certain way. Creativity was discouraged, we were taught how not to see (a necessary part of learning to draw), after all, how many flowers do you see with smiley faces in the center or perfectly round pumpkins with matching grins? Be brave and let the children explore more.

Set up one to three objects as a still life that relates to a holiday, such as pumpkins for Halloween or various fruits and vegetables for Thanksgiving. Give students a black crayon or washable marker and have them make a drawing of the object(s). Then give the students colored markers or crayons and have them fill in the shapes with color. This will give students practice drawing and staying inside the lines, which can translate into improved handwriting and increased fine motor skills.

Social Studies/Art/Manual Dexterity

Objective: Students will learn a traditional craft skill, which can be tied to social studies curriculum or used as an art project, and which will help increase students' manual dexterity.

Show the students the painting *Tye Rags* and let the children guess what the tye rags are. (If you have not done one of the previous art activities) After a few minutes, if the children don't guess correctly, tell them the rags are for making braided rag rugs. If they look closely, they can see that some of the rags have been braided. The finished braids will then be sew together in a spiral shape to make a rug.

Get donations of material for rags or purchase inexpensive material at thrift stores, garage sales, or store sales. Have the students tear the material into long strips and make balls of the strips. Teach your students to braid the rags, overlapping pieces a couple inches when a new piece is joined. You may want to recruit a few parents to help with this activity. If the children aren't skilled enough, you or a parent(s) can help finish the rug by sewing the braided strips together using doubled carpet thread. Use the rug in the room, perhaps as a special place to sit and read.

You may want instead of or in addition to the rug project, to find other fun uses for rag braids such as for a jump rope or a tug of war rope that is less likely to burn hands than jute or nylon ropes.

Older students may wish to make individual projects from their rag braids—small rugs, head bands, belts, bracelets, etc. Suit the size of the strips used to the size of the finished product.

Art

Some other ideas for art activities based on this painting follow:

Under the Standard of Perceiving, (State Core) this painting can help the student:

- describe the three properties of color in a painting: hue, value, and intensity.
- observe and apply changes in hues, values, and intensities of color.
- create an illusion of space in a work of art.
- portray a familiar environment using linear perspective.
- discuss the structures or language of art by listing the elements (for example, color, line, shape, space, value, texture, and form) and the principles (unity,

balance, center of interest or focal point, rhythm, movement, and/or harmony)
found in this and various other artworks.

For more specific directions, see activities for other artworks and from other packets or look for directions in art textbooks.

Language Arts

Objective: The students will demonstrate an understanding of different points of view by discussing artworks, by reading and discussing written material, and/or by writing from a chosen point of view. (Fits Language Arts Fifth Grade Core, 4050-0203)

Show the class all or an assortment of the slides from this packet and lead a discussion in which the students identify and comment on the different points of view demonstrated by the artworks, even though the subject is one theme. For example, *Tye Rags* is a still life that uses a normal housewife's everyday objects, *Dreaming of Zion* is a romanticized view of a historic occasion, *Richards' Camp* is a simple, intimate view of a family outing, *Pioneer Home* is a realistic portrayal of an early home, and *Madonna of 1847* is a muralistic view of the difficult pioneer trek west. (See individual biographies and activities for more information)

You may want the students to read some excerpts from various sources about pioneer times such as personal journals, biographies of important people, biographies of typical people, historical information about Native Americans, encyclopedia entries, historical data, maps, etc. The students should be able to use what they learned and discovered in the art discussion to discuss point of view and how it affects written material. The activity can end here, or you can continue by having the students choose a point of view and write.

If you want the students to write, look at other Language Arts activities in this packet for ideas or design one of your own. The main focus should be on point of view, but students should also incorporate all the writing skills they have. You may choose to allow students to pick a point of view or you may want this activity to include other skills such as using encyclopedias or other reference materials. Point of view can be approached from many perspectives and can include other State Core objectives.

Variation: The basic outline for this activity can be used to structure a lesson on point of view that also reinforces Social Studies curriculum or another area of class study. Simply find artworks and written materials that better match your class' focus and discuss point of view using them.

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