

## **ART OF THE WEST**

**ARTIST:** Michael Coleman (1946- ) Provo

**TITLE:** Indian Burial, 1972

**MEDIA:** Oil on board

**SIZE:** 22"x18"

### **BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

Michael Coleman was born in Provo, Utah, in 1946. As a child, he spent every possible moment outdoors. When he wasn't fishing, hunting, or trapping, he wandered around, looking at everything he could see. When he got home, he'd draw what he'd seen, not only to recapture the images but also to recapture the feelings, the whole experience.

Coleman says he'd bring home birds he'd shot and set them up in his bedroom so he could look at them while he drew. He'd keep the birds there until his mother made him throw them out because they were stinking up the house. Coleman carried a sketchbook constantly and learned early to pay attention to detail and to see what the scene consisted of instead of what he thought was there (as most of us do).

Surprisingly, Coleman was not encouraged by his art teachers. In high school, pieces he'd submitted to an art contest were rejected by the judges, who refused to believe he had painted them. In addition, Coleman's chosen style was not then in favor

When Brigham Young University built a new Arts building in the mid 60s, Coleman decided to visit. On the walls of the Fine Arts Center were oil paintings looking the way Coleman knew he wanted to be able to paint. The scenes were almost larger than life, full of radiant light and lush shadows, evocative and daring; they projected "... an aching sense of the grandeur and majesty of wildlife and wilderness." Coleman didn't know the names of these marvelous artists--Thomas Moran, Alfred Bierstadt--but he assumed they were BYU faculty members and could teach him to paint like they did. So Coleman, changing his plans, enrolled at Brigham Young University.

Once in the art classes, Coleman learned that the artists whose work he had fallen in love with were of course, not on the faculty, but in fact, were 19th-century artists of the Rocky Mountain School of painting--the "Hudson River School of the West." What's more, he didn't like the way the faculty members painted, and they didn't like the way Coleman painted. After three years, Coleman left BYU, feeling as if he had wasted his time. He knew, and had known for a long time, exactly what and how he wanted to paint. He wasn't interested in what anyone else thought art should be. He knew what his art should be.

The one thing Coleman did take advantage of at BYU was the chance to study carefully the paintings he liked. He took them down and outside, where he examined them in the sunlight. Those paintings taught Coleman what was possible to do with paint. Portrayed in the paintings were the kinds of feelings he had experienced in the outdoors, the feelings he wanted to capture and to project in his own work. And the paintings told Coleman that in spite of his not knowing the techniques to use, the possibility of learning them was there waiting for him.

So Coleman went home and taught himself to paint. He credits his ability to see, honed by the years spent in the outdoors, for much of his success as a painter. He says that just looking has taught him. . ." more about painting than anything else." Trying to avoid preconceived notions about how things look has allowed him to see all kinds of details, like colors as they really are, a multitude of subtle shades making up generalizations like gray - the color of a deer hide.

At the age of 21, Coleman had his first one-man show. During the next few years he painted a series of sympathetic portrayals of Plains Indians and "Mountain Men." The painting *Indian Burial* is from this period and was painted when he was only 26. This painting exemplifies Coleman's attention to detail and to accuracy. Coleman has spent, and continues to spend, enormous amounts of time immersing himself in the subject matter he paints. When asked recently about whether his immense collection of wildlife and artifacts has been assembled in order to have them to look at to inspire him while he paints, or whether he paints those things because he has collected and likes them, he simply answered "yes." Michael Coleman paints what he knows and loves.

Some of Coleman's more recent paintings take a closer view of nature and picture small slices of life in the wild: two birds framed by old antlers and nestled against a rock, a martin standing over the grouse it has just killed. Coleman is increasing the amount of texture in his paintings and using a brighter, richer palette of colors. The time spent painting—ten hours a day when he is home and drawing, he sketches on his many hunting trips, shows in his draftsmanship.

Coleman uses his frequent hunting trips to gather material as well as to explore and indulge his love of the outdoors. Real-life sketches of scenes from his trips may be combined or modified or have bits and pieces of them used in his paintings. On the corners and margins of his sketchbook are notes to himself, information about the trip, ideas for a composition, details of color, clothing, or a way to render the subject.

While in the field, he may use pencil or gouache to flesh out one specific section of the drawing or to give him color ideas, then, back in the studio and using his artifacts and trophies, the ideas will be painstakingly painted, using his props for authenticity and color.

Coleman's paintings of Indians, trappers, hunters, and wildlife, all evoke a similar emotion. Although the details are accurate, the view is of nature and man at peace and unified. Michael Coleman is a romantic. His Indian paintings exemplify the idea of the noble savage at one with his environment. The people are proud and self-contained. So too, Coleman's hunters. They're returning from successful hunts, weary maybe, but replete and satisfied. And even in death, the slain animals of his paintings retain their beauty and dignity. They bring to mind the ancient myths of animals being honored to be killed by mighty hunters; they seem to have given themselves gracefully, even if not gratefully.

Throughout all his paintings, Coleman's love for the atmospheric effects of Bierstadt and his contemporaries can be seen; you can almost feel the delicate mistiness and the pre-dawn chill or the golden warmth of the sun on an autumn day. It is probably for his ability to rekindle our senses that Michael Coleman's work is so popular. His paintings are the distillation of all our memories of those perfect moments in the wilderness.

Although Coleman tends to shun group shows and contests, he has won awards such as the prestigious Gold Medal from the National American Wildlife Association, and he has paintings in galleries, innumerable private collections, museum exhibitions, and has been published in books and magazines. However, what is important to Michael Coleman is that he continues to improve his art each day and that his kindred spirits, guides, outfitters, and professional hunters, continue to "go nuts about his paintings" because they have been drawn into his paintings and shared something elemental with him.

Davis, Tom. The Art of Looking Closely: Michael Coleman. Wildlife Art News IX No. 6: 36-45 Minneapolis

A Hunter's Sketchbook. Sports Afield Vol. 191 No. 7: 64-69 New York

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## **SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

### **QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)**

What style is this painting? (Realism.) Has realism always been considered "good" art? Who decides what is good art? How is the value of a painting determined? How much would you pay for this painting? Why? Why does the definition of what is considered art change? As an artist, is it more important to please art critics or the public?

What does this painting depict? What does this painting tell viewers about life and customs among the Plains Indians? Coleman researches his paintings so the details and depiction are accurate. How would his paintings be different if they did not contain accurate details? Would they be as valuable? Why?

How does this painting make you feel? How do the various art elements (line, color, shape, texture, space, form and value) contribute to the creation of mood in this painting? (If the students are not familiar with the art elements, ask them individual questions such as "How do the colors make you feel?")

## ACTIVITIES

### Visual Arts-expressing

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of how art elements can be used to create mood.

Show the class the image of *Indian Burial* and discuss using some of the QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING. Assign the students to choose a specific custom of their culture or of another culture. They may be interested to know that Michael Coleman has many Indian artifacts in his home. The students should write a list or several paragraphs about the custom. Then the students should plan a drawing or painting that accurately depicts the facts about the custom but also conveys mood and feeling. The students should list ways each of the art elements can be used to create mood. (For example, somber or bright colors, sharp, definite lines or soft, implied line.)

Or, have the students analyze how Coleman has used each of the art elements to create mood. The analyzation can be written or can be part of a class discussion.

### Visual Arts-making

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of the process in creating a detailed drawing.

Show the class the image of *Indian Burial* and discuss Coleman's use of detail. If possible, show the class some slides or photographs or prints of other art works that contain detail. Give each student one piece of paper and a pencil or pen. Assign the students to make a very detailed drawing of plant life. You can designate a specific sized rectangle or tell the students to draw a view about the size of their hand.

Go outside, bring plants to school, or assign the drawing as homework. Display the finished pieces and discuss. The students may be interested in some artists who do small detailed drawings or prints such as Dürer or Audubon, or they may want to talk about how detail is used in larger art works such as Coleman's.

### Social Studies or Language Arts

**Objective:** Students will demonstrate their understanding of their own culture by writing a cultural portrait.

Show the class the image of *Indian Burial* and discuss Coleman's use of accurate detail. What does his painting tell us about Native American life and culture? Why do we study other cultures, especially ones from a long time ago? What kinds of information can we gain, and why is it useful today?

Have each student pick one facet of current culture and make a list of items that could be included in a painting to tell viewers about our culture.

Have the students write a description that includes all or some of the items on their lists. Have the students share their cultural portraits with the class. Ask the class why and what a future civilization may want to know about our culture.

### **Art History/Social Studies/ Healthy Lifestyles**

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of how cultural values shape and impact our tastes and lives by researching and reporting on trends in a particular area.

Show the class the image of *Indian Burial* and tell the class that when Coleman was an art student, most of the teachers did not like his art because realistic art was not "in"--he painted in a style many considered old fashioned. However, Coleman now sells his paintings for thousands of dollars apiece. Discuss who decides what our society considers "in fashion" or worthwhile. Ask the students about fashion, social behavior, morality, art, literature, music, dance, etc. Ask the students to think about and to discuss whether the people making the public judgements reflect most people's values and whether they reflect the individual student's values.

Assign, or let the students choose, one of the following activities:

1. Have students research the history of a particular art movement, style, or an artist. The students should learn about the time period and about what kinds of art were considered "good" art or were in vogue. Have the students trace reactions of the public, of art critics, and of other artists to the movement or to the artist's works. Then the students should find out the current popularity and accepted critical evaluation of the movement or artworks.

Have the students write a report of their findings, including illustrations, if possible. At the end of their reports, the students should include a personal prediction of the future reaction to and evaluation of the artworks. They also need to include justification for their prediction.

Have students present their reports or a shortened version of their reports to the class. If you have time and interest, after all the reports are finished, have the students discuss the information presented and how it affects their perceptions and feelings about the artworks or about art criticism in general.

2. Have the students do activity 1 above, researching and writing about a musician or period of music instead of about art. If possible, have students bring samples of the music to play for the class when they give their reports.

Or, have students do the activity focusing on literature or dance.

3. Students can trace western fashion trends through the last century. After tracing the major changes and movements, students should analyze the fashion industry: major patterns of change, motivations, impact on society, how fashion relates to the values of various segments of society. Students can include an analysis of current local fashion--how fashion at their school and among their friends reflects or contradicts national fashion trends. Have the students write up and present their reports to the class.

4. Have the students research and analyze a current specific social custom, problem, or activity, such as gangs. Students should research the history, the prevalence, the reasons for involvement, the impact on society, and the impact on participants. In their reports, students should include their personal reasons for inclusion or exclusion or ways they could promote or discourage the activity.

5. Use any of the above ideas as the basis of a class discussion, instead of for individual research and report writing.

**Variations For Young Students:** The activities can all be scaled down to be appropriate for younger students by keeping the research to a minimum and by having the reports give the most important facts and only a sentence or two of analysis. After the reports are presented, use some of the questions designed for analysis in a class discussion.

Another way to reduce the difficulty of the activities is to focus on one topic such as an art movement, and have student groups research a small segment of the topic, putting the information together in a series of brief reports. The outcome of the activity may make an interesting bulletin board or may be appropriate for presentation to another class. Encourage students to take a creative approach to their reports. The topic may lend itself to short dramatic scenes, fashion shows, art reviews, art, music, or dance demonstrations, class participation activities, or many other possibilities.