

Art of the West

ARTIST: Avard Tennyson Fairbanks (1897-1987) Payson/Salt Lake City, Utah

TITLE: Buffalo 1912

MEDIA: Sculpture-bronze cast

SIZE: 28-1/2" x 46-1/2"

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Avard T. Fairbanks was born in 1897, in Provo, Utah. His initial instruction in art came from his father, John B. Fairbanks, who was an art teacher at Brigham Young Academy and also from his brother, J. Leo, who was a painter. Avard's first sculpture, a rabbit in clay, was done when he was 12. The sculpture won first prize at the 1909 Utah State Fair, but the judge refused to give Fairbanks the medal because he said the contest was for professionals, not for boys.

His family decided Avard should go to New York to study, where his father was making private sale copies of the masterpieces at the Metropolitan Museum. The curator at the museum gave reluctant permission for Avard to make copies because he was so young. After seeing the quality of Fairbanks' work, the curator apologized. After an article about him appeared in the *New York Herald*, he was allowed to model animals at the Bronx Zoological Gardens. A scholarship to study at the Arts Students League with James Earl Fraser soon followed. During this time, Fairbanks came to know several notable sculptors who gave him advice and critiqued his work.

He returned to Utah after a year and a half in New York because he wanted to study abroad. The sculpture *Buffalo* was made when he was 15. Although he had planned to pay for his travels by sales of *Buffalo*, funds came from sales resulting from attention garnered by a lion sculpture he made of butter for a creamery exhibit at the Utah State Fair. While in France in 1914, he became the youngest artist to be admitted to the French Salon: he was 17. However, his studies in Paris were cut short by the start of World War I, so he returned to Utah where he finished high school and continued modeling in clay.

His first major commission was with his brother, J. Leo, to work on the statuary and friezes of the LDS Hawaii Temple. In 1918, he attended the University of Utah. Then, at the end of World War I, he was commissioned to do a war memorial called *Victorious American Doughboy* for the state of Idaho. This commission led to other commissions and to a teaching position at the University of Oregon. Among his other commissions

were the *Ninety-first Division Monument*, *Pioneer Family*, *Pony Express*, and four marble busts of *Abraham Lincoln*.

In 1925, he earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Yale and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study art in Rome and Florence the following year. His *Mother and Child* was sculpted during this period. He became a member of the faculty at the University of Michigan's Institute of Fine Arts in 1929 and while there, earned a Master of Fine Arts and also a Ph.D. in anatomical science.

Fairbanks always spent time researching his intended subjects to find background information that allowed him to include accurate details. For example, Fairbanks studied historical details of Lincoln's life as well as the president's life mask in order to portray him accurately. The anatomical studies he had done in college helped him make his figures very accurate.

In 1947, he returned to Salt Lake City with his family and was appointed Dean at the University of Utah where he was given the responsibility of organizing a college of Fine Arts. Considered an innovative and effective teacher, Fairbanks was, nevertheless, an "arch-conservative" artist. That conservatism resulted in departmental conflict as modernist teachers were hired but also resulted in a new generation of academically trained realist sculptors. Among Fairbanks' most successful students were Ed Fraughton, Justin Fairbanks (his son), Alice Morrey Bailey, Grant Speed, and Clark Bronson.

Retiring as Dean of the College of Fine Arts in 1955, Fairbanks taught for another ten years. He continued to produce sculpture and to criticize modern abstractionism until he died at age 90 in 1987.

Avard Fairbanks believed art should be simple and understandable, not only to the educated and technically trained, but also to children and the untutored. He believed art should be uplifting and represent the finer qualities of life to all men and women. He received numerous important commissions and honors throughout his career.

In addition to his religious sculptures, small and large bronzes, marble carvings, medals, and relief panels, Fairbanks created hood ornaments for Chrysler Motor Co. He had been asked to design a hood ornament for the Plymouth, and had designed a mermaid, which was approved. After approval of his mermaid design, Fairbanks was asked to design an ornament for the Dodge car. The design he came up with was a ram. When management from Chrysler came to see the design, they asked Fairbanks what a ram had to do with Dodge. Fairbanks replied that when people see a ram coming down the road they'll say "dodge!" He got the commission.

Fairbanks also has a serious and deeply religious side, and his sculpture *Mother and Child* exemplifies his belief in art as a portrayal of life's finer qualities. He lost his mother when he was fourteen-months old, and her loss consequently inspired him with great respect and honor for motherhood. Fairbanks said, "the arts are created for

contemplation and edification, the expression of the highest ambitions and the spiritual hope of a people" and he applied this theory to his own art.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

What is this? What is it made of? How was it made? (If students don't know, tell them the process. See General Sculpture Information at the end of this lesson) What other ways are sculpture made? (See Visual Arts Activity 2) How do you think the artist felt about buffalo? What about the sculpture makes you feel that way? How do you think the artist knew what buffalo look like?

ACTIVITIES

Visual Arts-making

Objective: The students will demonstrate their understanding of sculpture by sculpting an animal in clay.

Show the students the image of *Buffalo* and discuss, using ideas from QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING. Assign the students to create a clay sculpture of an animal. You may want to have pictures of various animals for the students to look at. Students may need to make simple armatures to allow the legs to support the body. Use oil-base clay for the sculptures. There are several commercial products that work well for sculpting (i.e. Model Magic, Fimo, Sculpeez and WetSet). Another sculpting material can be salt dough.

Variation: Young children can make small, simple sculptures of animals using pottery clay or self-hardening clay. If using pottery clay, make sure the fattest part of the sculpture is not more than 1" to 1-1/2" in diameter. Dry the pieces very slowly so they don't crack. Fire and paint with acrylics. If desired, use a clear enamel spray finish over the paint.

Extension: Advanced students may want to make plaster or rubber molds and then casts from their molds. Get help from a local artist or text book.

Visual Arts-making

Objective: The students will demonstrate an understanding of sculptural processes by researching, writing reports, and making class presentations.

Show the class the image of *Buffalo* and pictures or slides of other sculpture. Ask the students how artists make sculpture. Divide the class in groups and assign each group to

research one method of creating sculpture. Each group should prepare a presentation for the class that contains the following information and activities:

1. A brief history of the method including who the principle artists are or were.
2. How the method differs from other methods.
3. Limitations and advantages of the method.
4. Pictures of specific sculptures.
5. A short activity or demonstration that allows the class to get a feel for the method. (For example, items that can be arranged by student groups to create an installation, or odds and ends to create an assemblage.)

Some sculpture methods that can be researched are as follows:

Clay models that have molds made and casts made from the mold
Clay that is then fired in a kiln
Wood carving
Stone carving
Assemblage
Installation
Metal--cut, welded, etc.
Fiber
Acrylics, polymers

Evaluation: Have a list that itemizes the areas and criteria for the presentations. Rate the groups in each area using a numerical scale or a check to indicate level of performance.

Dance/Music

Objective: The students will explore qualities of movement and sound through music and dance.

Show the students the image of *Buffalo*. Ask them to walk, gallop, and run like a buffalo might. Ask them to move in many other ways, like a cowboy, a bird, a fairy, a hippopotamus, etc. Having some kind of small items or pictures the students can pull out of a container is an effective way to introduce some of the possibilities. Also give the students a chance to suggest kinds of people or animals to dance.

Give some of the students rhythm instruments, use found instruments, or instruments you have already made in class. Have the group with instruments make sounds (music) that appropriately accompany the dancing. Have students take turns so that each child gets at least one chance to be a musician.

Let the students discuss the experience. How did it feel to try to move in different ways? Were some ways easier than others? Did they like some ways better than others? How is dance different from music? How the same? What else can they say about the relationship between dance and music?

Evaluation: Use a check mark on a class roll to indicate whether the students participate readily in the activity.

Science--Ecology, Preservation

Objective: The students will demonstrate an understanding of how animal and bird species are affected by man and how preservation programs work.

Show the class the image of *Buffalo*. Ask the students if they know how many buffalo once roamed the Americas, and where they lived. Allow the students to guess, putting answers on the board. Then tell them. How close were they? Use some local analogy to help the students understand how large a number that is. (Relate to local population, for example.)

Talk, or have information available for the students to research as individuals or as groups, about various threatened species and what has been done to attempt to save those species. (There's an excellent article on preservation and wildlife reserves in Oct. 96 National Geographic.) You may want to give the students a list to choose from that contains both successful ventures and unsuccessful ones, or that also contains species that disappeared before conservation efforts were being made. Another possibility is to have students research different areas of the topic such as The History Of The Conservation Movement, an important organization or personage involved in conservation (Audobaun, for example), The Endangered Species Act, etc.

Junior-High, High School, or gifted students may be able to analyze and to discuss the reasons for successes or failures of specific actions taken by governments or environmentalist groups.

Have students present oral reports with found and created illustrations or artworks relating to the information they discover. These reports will give the students writing, researching, presenting, and art experience.

Variation: Students can research specific local issues and hold debates about the various pros and cons of proposed actions that will affect their community or surrounding areas. You may want to have the students get involved in the decision-making process by having them make a presentation at local hearings or meetings.