

PIONEER IMAGES OF UTAH

ARTIST: Avard Tennyson Fairbanks (1897-1987) Payson/Salt Lake City,
TITLE: *Pioneer Family Group* 1941
MEDIA: Plaster
SIZE: 21" x 12-1/2"

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--13. 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 *Pioneer Family Group* and *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. *Pioneer Family Group* is a three-dimensional sketch: he often gave such sketches to friends and family members as gifts. 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

TITLE: *Pioneer Family Group* 1941

MEDIA: Plaster

SIZE: 21" x 12-1/2"

QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)

What clues tell you when the subjects of this work lived? What was the artist trying to tell you about the subjects? What is the purpose of this work of art?

Pretend you are the sculpture: what do you see around you? What do the houses look like? What kind of transportation is available? How do people cook their food? What is your favorite possession?

How does this art work make you feel? What mood does this work convey? How does the medium used affect the work? Would you say this is a successful work? Why? (Because of craftsmanship, design quality, expressiveness, personal response, originality, or comparison) What other titles can you think of for this work?

A full-size version of this sculpture was placed in front of the old Utah County Courthouse in 1980. The plaque reads "In honor of our pioneer heritage, of the solidarity and eternity of our families, who match our mountains."

ACTIVITIES

Art

Objective: Students will be able to create a work of art portraying an object or animal that is important to them using the clay modeling technique.

Avard T. Fairbanks gave presentations to many groups such as schools, garden clubs, service clubs, art guilds, church groups, and college faculty meetings. These were indeed presentations and not lectures. The presentation is described by his son, Eugene: "After a few remarks, he slips off his suit coat, rolls up his sleeves, opens a suit case, and dons a smock." The artist then proceeded to take the audience step by step through the process of creating a clay model.

Review with your students the various styles of sculpture done by Fairbanks using *Pioneer Family Group*, *Mother and Child*, and *Head of Abe Lincoln*, all located at the Springville Museum of Art. (A slide of *Mother and Child* is included in *Seeing Sculpture From All Sides*, Jan. 1993 pkt.) Discuss the importance of style in creating a mood or a feeling.

Demonstrate and review the process of clay modeling with your students.

Ask your students to identify an object, a person, or an animal that is important to them and that they would like to create in clay. First have the students do a thumbnail sketch. Students should employ all the art skills and concepts they have learned such as use of line, form, and perspective. Then have the students proceed to the actual art work.

For further information, [A Sculptors Testimony in Bronze and Stone](#), by Eugene Fairbanks contains a detailed description of the artist's lecture/demonstration technique. The book [Animals in Clay](#) by Shay Rieger is aimed at a young audience, and it gives step-by-step instructions on making animals with clay. For young students, salt dough clay, which is inexpensive to make and does not require firing, may be the best medium to use.

Art

Objective: After studying commercial art such as billboards, record jackets, signs, magazine covers, food packaging, television, or magazine advertisements, students will create their own commercial art symbols.

Avard Fairbanks did what we refer to today as "commercial art," in addition to his many sculptures. He designed hood ornaments for Chrysler--the flying lady for the 1931 Plymouth, the ram for the 1932 Dodge, and the griffin for the 1933 Essex. In addition, as part of a collaboration between the American Society of Engineers and the College of

Engineering at the University of Michigan extension division in Detroit, he taught automotive body design and styling.

Discuss with students the role of commercial art in our society, the influence of various symbols such as Joe Camel, Tony the Tiger, Body Glove, Nike swish, the Macintosh apple, and any other figures or symbols created to sell a product.

Select one product (or have each student select a product) and ask the students to create a symbol to represent that product. Instead of an actual product, students may want to create a new school mascot or a symbol to represent the upcoming Utah Olympics. Any other event of local importance can be used in lieu of an actual product. The image can be created in any medium.

The book, The Visual Experience, by Jack Hobbs and Richard Salome, contains a chapter entitled "Careers in Art" which describes what a designer or an artist tries to communicate via different kinds of commercial art and may be useful for background information or for additional information focusing on commercial art careers.

Social Studies

Objective: The students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the contribution made to Utah and US history by explorers.

In addition to his many sculptures of the Mormon pioneers, such as the image featured here, and *Tragedy at Winter Quarters*, showing a husband consoling his wife at the grave of a child just buried, Fairbanks also did a portrait of Ezra Meeker, founder of The Old Oregon Trail Association as well as designing bronze markers to mark the Oregon Trail. In addition, this packet contains a slide of Mahonri Young's *Frontier Scout*.

Using techniques learned, have the students research the Oregon Trail and the Mormon Trail, and then compare the two routes. Comparisons can be done on several aspects of the adventures such as purpose for specific expeditions, what types of people were involved and their particular roles, the route itself and the geographical impact of each trek, time of year and its impact on the expeditions, or any other aspect the students find of special interest to them. The comparison can be done as a written report, as a class discussion, or in any other appropriate format.

A component on interpreting maps can also be included.

Language Arts

Objective: The students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of brainstorming as a prewriting activity by participating in a brainstorming session.

Discuss with students the process and rules of brainstorming. Emphasize that in a brainstorming session there are no bad ideas. All thoughts are treated equally and students must respect each others' ideas. Discuss the role of the moderator in a

brainstorming session. Practice brainstorming with the students assuming different roles. Have students alternate as moderator.

Avard Tennyson Fairbanks was an artist. However, he also earned a Ph.D. in anatomy. Using Fairbanks as an example, brainstorm with students about how two seemingly different subjects such as art and anatomy might influence each other. In additional brainstorming sessions, have students pick other disparate topics and discuss how they might influence each other. Try to create an environment where even the shyest student feels comfortable contributing.

Many business-related books have sections on brainstorming and directions for how to conduct a brainstorming session. Other prewriting strategies such as listing and mapping can also be used. You may want to do this activity several times and when the students are comfortable with brainstorming, continue the activity by having the students write something as based on their brainstorming ideas.