

## Tales To Tell

**ARTIST:** Lee Udall Bennion (1956- ) Spring City, Utah

**TITLE:** *Snow Queen: Portrait of Adah* 1992

**MEDIA:** oil on canvas

**SIZE:** 48" x 36"

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born March 17, 1956, in Merced, California, Lee Udall Bennion moved to Utah in 1974 to study art at Brigham Young University. In 1976, she married ceramist Joseph Bennion and moved to the rural setting of Spring City, Sanpete County, Utah. She has three daughters and is active in the family-oriented life of Spring City. Energetically involved in both church and community activities, Lee's obvious commitment to family is reflected in the subject matter of many of her paintings.

In 1983, she returned to Brigham Young University to continue her education. There she earned a Master of Fine Arts in painting. She has received numerous honors and awards from the Art Community. She is a frequent participant in presentations and workshops for artists and educators and has been the featured subject of several articles in national art publications, including *Southwest Art*. Just recently, *BYU Studies*, a scholarly journal, published an interview with Bennion and color plates of eight of her paintings. Her work is sold through Gallery 56 in Salt Lake City, and Coda Gallery in Palm Springs, California and is owned by art museums and by many private collectors.

Lee enjoys an active outdoor life in the wilderness areas of the Southwest and wants to see its pristine grandeur preserved. The feelings generated by the places she visits and loves are communicated in her paintings by the rich, intense colors of her landscapes even more than by the pictorial elements. Her husband Joe believes the objects Lee sees with her eyes are "transferred as visual information through the conduit of her soul." Lee Bennion's distinctive style, with its pensive, elongated figures, is not so much portraiture as her own special harmony between subject, emotional atmosphere, and viewer. She says of her own work,

"Although I primarily paint the figure, portraiture is not my main concern. My painting deals with form, color, and feelings foremost. Often a likeness of my model is also found in my paintings, and I enjoy this when it happens. My figures are often slightly distorted,

never quite perfect, but hopefully still reflect the warmth and goodness that I feel exists within them. I am most pleased when these feelings reach the viewer, and some kind of dialogue occurs that goes beyond the recognition of the subject."

Lee Udall Bennion's paintings clearly reflect her own tranquility and her satisfaction with her life, and each is a gracefully crafted work that has emotional balance and stability as well as harmonious visual composition. She and her husband Joe have carefully sculpted a life that suits them, and out of that life comes art that communicates their values and priorities. Although Lee's work is often admired for its restrained expressive qualities, an examination of her paintings reveals her also to have a rich symbolic vision. Like many gifted artists, some of those symbols are deliberately included and others find their way into her paintings through an unconscious, intuitive gateway. She often uses herself as an "Everywoman" image who also may be "The Gardener," "Eve," or "The Madonna with Child" the givers of life. Although many of the symbols Lee uses are common Christian symbols, what distinguishes her work is her natural and homey incorporation of them. That comfort with the symbols is indicative of how successfully she and her family have woven their lives with the strands of their beliefs. Bennion's paintings are at once intensely personal and broadly universal.

Bennion says she thinks the only real change in her work over the years has been her increased ability to get the paint to do what she wants it to. That change is certainly evident in her recent work "abundant details, more complex symbolism, a natural elegance, and a greater delicacy and richness" but so is her maturation as a woman. Although her beliefs and concerns have changed little over the span of those years, the increasing depth a well-lived life endows is also part of the increasing richness of her paintings. They truly portray who Lee Udall Bennion is in the most intimate and basic sense.

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## SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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

What season did Lee Bennion depict in *Snow Queen*? What visual cues do you see? (Snowflakes, snow, cold outside, subject's dressed warmly) What symbols do you see? (Snowflakes, winter colors, bright clothes, subject's gesture, subject is framed within the window, complimentary colors, toys, other objects) What do they mean to you? What do the snowflakes symbolize? What is she holding in her hand (a troll doll) Why a troll doll? What might the subject's gesture or pose tell you about her personality? Why do you think the subject has chosen the combination of clothes she is wearing? (For warmth, for brightness, for convenience)

Is this painting Realistic, Representational, Non-representational, an abstraction, or in any way non objective? Describe the difference between a portrait and a self-portrait. What considerations does an artist make when creating a portrait? (Personality of the

subject, objects that portray the subject's interests or personality, purpose of the portrait)  
What is the artist trying to depict in her portrait of *Snow Queen*? (See information on the artwork, on the back of the Elementary Art Core Poster Set, *Snow Queen*.)

## ACTIVITIES

### Art

**Objective:** Students will demonstrate an understanding of abstraction (conceived apart from any concrete realities, specific objects, or actual instance) and symbolism by creating an abstract self-portrait.

Show the class the slide of *Snow Queen* and of *Self-Portrait* (REASONS FOR ART, Jan. 1992 pkt.), both by Lee Udall Bennion. Discuss the difference between portraits and self-portraits. Then show the class some famous self-portraits (Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Gauguin, Picasso) and some not-so-famous self-portraits from past Educator Evening packets, and point out that **you** are the only person you can never look at. A self-portrait is by nature an emotional and psychological vision of one's self. (Try to include some self-portraits that are abstracted or symbolic such as Sam Wilson's *Crow Crowded, Or I Myself* and A. D. Shaw's *Ego Trip: Self-Portrait* from A NATIONAL VIEW, Mar. 1995 pkt.)

Assign students to create a self-portrait and encourage students to be expressive. These self-portraits need not look like the student but should capture something essential to the nature of each self. This concept may need some explanation to be understood. If students don't want to explain the meaning in their self-portraits, don't force them. Symbols about themselves can be included to suggest elements of personality or personal generalities. (See A NATIONAL VIEW, Mar. 1995 Activities for Sam Wilson, for two additional ways to complete this activity)

Variation: Allow, or have the students use only symbols, or only shapes without specific symbolism attached, only non-representational shapes. (For example, the students can use squares, circles, organic shapes, but not shapes like hearts.)

### Art

**Objective:** Students will demonstrate an understanding of how CHARACTER can be portrayed through visual art by creating an artwork that conveys personal qualities.

Show the class the slides of *Snow Queen*, *Sitting on a Thornet Bentwood*, (this packet), and an assortment of other artworks such as *Amanda* (DRAMA: THE USE OF CONTRAST IN ART, Mar. 1993 pkt.), *Three Portraits* and *Afternoon with Florence Ware* (PORTRAITS IN PAINTING, April 1993, pkt.), *Clowns* (Mar. 1994 pkt.), *Mujeres Veracruzanas* (CULTURAL CANVAS, Nov. 1994 pkt.), *Entertaining: Favorite Ladies* (A NATIONAL VIEW, Mar. 1995 pkt.), any of the portraits from (WHO IS CYRUS E. DALLIN? Nov. 1996 pkt.), or any other interesting artwork that demonstrates

CHARACTER. (Several of the posters from the new Elementary Art Core Poster Set will work.)

Have the students identify some ways each artist has depicted character in their artwork. Then have the students identify one or more characteristics they want to portray and have them spend at least ten minutes identifying ways they can use the elements and principles of art to portray that characteristic. Then allow the students time to create their artwork.

Encourage students to explore a range of media or use this activity to introduce a specific technique or media. For example, people have lots of different characteristics and they act differently at different times. A collage that incorporates a wide variety of media or that uses some transparent or translucent media in layers are two possible ways to convey the variety and contrasts each person demonstrates. Another possibility is to use techniques like crayon resist, applique, and other combinations of media that can be used to portray the idea of parts within an inconstant whole. Share the finished artworks with the class.

You can choose to have the students make a collage-A technique in which the artist uses newspaper cuttings, photographs, and other objects (usually two-dimensional) and glues them to a flat backing. Collages generally have painted sections or passages-Encourage the students to use enough images to cover the whole page, overlapping where it is necessary. Show them how to create a visual path in the collage to emphasize a focal point or give movement or communicate meaning.

The discussion and assignment complexity will vary with the age and art experience of the class; however, young children can produce surprisingly complex artworks if provided a good combination of techniques and freedom to explore. For example, see the artwork in this year's Crayola DREAM-MAKERS packet, Tales To Tell. The packet also contains excellent suggested activities centered on CHARACTER.

### **Language Arts-writing**

**Objective:** Students will demonstrate an understanding of the establishment of CHARACTER in literature by writing a short and concise description that conveys character using appropriate literary nuance and structural soundness.

After completing the art activity described above, or after a brief discussion of how artists convey CHARACTER, read the class some short excerpts from age-appropriate literature

that create a sense of what kind of person one character is. Include selections that use different methods to establish character. Discuss the various ways CHARACTER can be established in literature: description by the author or another character, events that show the individual acting in ways that convey character, events or description of how other characters react to the individual, description of how the individual dresses and speaks, etc.

Assign the students to write a paragraph that uses one of the ways discussed to present the character of a chosen individual. Or, assign students to use a specific method of conveying CHARACTER. Students will need to work slowly and carefully, making a rough draft and refining it for a final presentation. Have interested students share their paragraphs.

**Variation for Older Students:** Have the students complete the above activity but make the assignment either 3-5 paragraphs long or ask students to use two different ways to convey the CHARACTER of the same individual.

**Variation for Young Children, Drama:** Read the students excerpts that establish CHARACTER, and then have the students make a list of other well-known characters from books you've read or from videos or TV shows. Have students take turns acting out the characters while the rest of the class guesses who the character is-just like Charades.

## **History**

**Objective:** Students will demonstrate an understanding of cultural history by documenting the development of personal style and fashion with the historical record of portraits.

Portraits are a record of personal views. Have students research the use of portrait as an artistic motif through various cultures and eras. Students should be encouraged to hypothesize what the various styles (both of the art and of the subjects) mean.

The product of this research should be a visual **time line**, which documents the evolution of style and fashion and cultural nuance by observing the evolution of portraiture. This time line can be produced with the help of original art work done by students, commercial prints, or borrowed photocopies of art work. Don't forget to include primitive portraiture, 3-D portraiture, and abstract portraiture.

## **History of American Portraiture**

Portraiture encompasses as many styles as art itself. As artistic styles and tendencies have changed so have the styles and tendencies of portraiture. One influence on early American portraiture was European portraiture. In the early 19th century, the trend in Europe was moving from the rational calm and balance of Academic Realism to the emphasis on emotion and imagination of Romanticism. Individuals became the focus. Along with Romanticism came an interest in primitive art forms.

Additionally, smooth painting surfaces became richly textured and, as art moved into the 20th century, abstraction also influenced portraiture.

Another influence on American portraiture was photography. As photography became more popular, accuracy became important. For a time, artists competed with the photograph, painting in sharp realism and paying great attention to detail.

Profile portraits were another type of portraiture in early America. It was widely believed that one's profile could reveal one's character. Thus, the demand for accuracy in silhouette portraits was also very high, and often artists would use instruments such as the camera obscura to ensure the greatest amount of accuracy. (A camera obscura works much in the same way overhead projectors do today. The image is passed by lenses onto a surface on which the image's outline can be traced.)

During the early 19th century portraiture was very popular in America. In order to understand why, social historians have given much study to these portraits, examining costumes, weapons, books of manners, gardening, interior design, and commerce within the sitter's society. Portraits can be considered from many views including the perspective of the sitter, the artist, the traditions of portraiture, patronage, and of broader social constructs.

Historians have found that portraiture tends to mirror both society and individual patrons. For example, by studying the differences between the portraits of men and the portraits of women in a particular society, one can understand more about that society's attitudes toward gender. Another example is the information portraits give about the economic status of their subjects. Often portraits of seemingly plain people would show expensive fabrics and furnishings that indicated the true lifestyle and economic status of the patrons.

Condensed from the Essay

19th Century American Portraiture

by Herman du Toit, 1997

MUSEUM OF ART, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT

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The complete essay is in the teacher packet Portraits and Painters, April, 1997

MOA, and copies are still available at the MOA museum store.

## **Science**

### **Objectives:**

1. Students will demonstrate an understanding of human physiology and anatomy by learning the basic skeletal structure and names of bones.
2. The students will use their knowledge to make a drawing of a skeleton.
3. The students will use transparent paper to make overlays (for their drawings of the skeleton) of the major muscle groups.
4. The students will use their knowledge of human physiology to build a sculpture of a human figure.

### **Activities**

1. The science of human anatomy and the art of figure sculptures are so intertwined there

is no logical place to separate these ideas. Have students learn the names of the 24 basic bones (abbreviated lists and illustrations of muscles are available).

If a teacher wishes to keep this project theoretical and focused on anatomy, the use of art prints of figure painting can still be used to enliven the lesson.

2. Use the above activity but have the students draw simplified skeletons, using a real skeleton if available, for reference. Have the students label and learn the major bones of the skeleton.

3. After completing the above activities, the students can then use tracing paper or clear plastic to make an overlay of the basic muscle masses. Assign the students to learn the names of and label the most important muscle groups.

4. After completing the first three activities, have the students create a sculpture of a person that is as anatomically correct as possible.