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**Painting versus Photography—**

**Interpretations of the American Landscape**

**Writer:** Zoe Voigt, Humanities Teacher

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Related Big Picture Concepts:** Communication, Observation, Subjectivity

**Subject Areas:** American History, Social Studies, Visual Arts

**Essential Question:** What is subjectivity? What is objectivity?

**Abstract:** Students will critically consider the nature of objectivity and subjectivity in photography as an art form by taking a class poll, discussing the results, and writing a one-page paper. Through the aid of paintings, photographs, and readings, students will learn about the value of images for communicating unfamiliar information to a large audience.

**Duration:** 3–4 class periods

**Focus Work of Art:**

[](http://68.169.57.134/sites/default/files/Bierstadt,%20Bridal%20Veil%20Falls,%20Yosemite,%2087_9%20(HB).jpg)

Albert Bierstadt (American, born Germany (Prussia), 1830-1902)

***Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite*, circa 1871-73**

Oil on canvas

36 1/8 x 26 3/8 in. (91.8 x 67.0 cm)  
[www.artnc.org/node/334](http://www.artnc.org/node/334)

**North Carolina Standards Correlations:**

Visual Arts: I.V.1, I.CX.1, I.CX.2, I.CR.1, P.V.1, P.V.2, P.CX.1, P.CX.2, P.CR.1, A.CR.1

United States History: USH.H.1.2, USH.H.1.3, USH.H.1.4, USH.H.3.2

**Student Learning Objectives:**

* Students will assess the role American painters and photographers played in [idealizing](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22264%22)) the American West.
* Students will compare and contrast [realism](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22121%22)), [symbolism](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%2283%22)), and [composition](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%2235%22)) in painting and photography.

**Activities:**

1. Assign the class to examine *Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite.* Have students compare the image to a current photograph of the site. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridalveil_Fall>

Ask students to consider how accurately Bierstadt portrayed what he saw.

1. Hold a brief class discussion focused on the following question: *Why might some 19th-century New Yorkers, upon first seeing this painting, think it was just a figment of the artist's imagination?*
2. Assign each student to read the description of western photographers ["People and Events: Photographing the American Wilderness."](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/peopleevents/e_wilderness.html" \t "_blank)
3. Ask each student to respond YES or NO on a small sheet of paper to the following question: *Do you think a photograph tells the truth?*  
   Collect the responses and tabulate the results of the poll on the board. While looking at the class results, hold a brief whole-class discussion focused on the following question: *Why did you vote the way you did?* Some discussion should focus on [objectivity](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22273%22)) versus [subjectivity](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22293%22)). Photographs, like other art forms, are [subjective](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22292%22)), although they might appear to be purely objective.
4. Write the results of the Internet poll conducted in conjunction with the PBS presentation *Ansel Adams: A Documentary Film* on the board, or show results to the class by going to the [poll results Web site](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/sfeature/sf_poll.html" \t "_blank). Hold a brief class discussion focused on comparing the class results with the Internet poll results.
5. Continue the class discussion by asking students to consider the poll results when responding to the following question: *Were photographs necessary to convince easterners of the* [*grandeur*](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%2299%22)) *(and the reality) of the American West? Why or why not?*
6. Divide the class into pairs of students. Provide each pair of students with a copy of the attached [Image Analysis Chart](http://www.ncartmuseum.org/artnc/content/lesson/sampleRubric/24.doc" \t "_blank). Assign each pair of students to examine five additional images, two Bierstadt paintings of California:  
   *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California*, 1865  
   *Looking Up the Yosemite Valley*, about 1863–1875  
     
   and three Adams photographs of the West:  
   *Lakes and Cliffs, Sierra Nevada*, 1932  
   *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California*, 1944  
   *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, 1941  
     
   Ask each pair of students to record their observations on the Image Analysis Chart.
7. Hold a class discussion focused on the following question: *Which images seem more accurate in depicting the western landscape, the Bierstadt painting or the Adams photographs? Why?*
8. Assign each student to write a one-page essay assessing the validity of the following statement*: Photographs should be considered fine art and treated just like paintings.*

Have students draw on impressions of the Bierstadt paintings and Adams photographs to support their arguments. Students should be referred to the excerpt from Andy Grundberg's *Crisis of the Real, Writings on Photography since 1974* titled ["Art or Document?"](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/sfeature/sf_role.html" \t "_blank)

**Assessments:**

* Class discussion, the poll, Image Analysis Chart, and essay will be used to evaluate the students’ understanding of the role of American painters and photographers in the idealization of the American West and how these images helped to influence the western pattern of migration.
* The essay will be used to assess each student’s ability to formulate historical questions and evaluate competing narratives.
* The Image Analysis Chart, class discussion, and essay will be used to assess the students’ analysis of realism, symbolism, and composition in painting and photography.

**Resources:**

Vocabulary:

[composition](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%2235%22))

[grandeur](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%2299%22))

[idealization](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22263%22))

[idealizing](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22264%22))

[mood](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22224%22))

objective

[objectivity](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22273%22))

[realism](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22121%22))

setting

subject

[subjective](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22292%22))

[subjectivity](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%22293%22))

[symbolism](JavaScript:OpenGlossaryWindow(%2283%22))

Links:

Description of the western photographers of the late 19th and early 20th century ["People and Events: Photographing the American Wilderness"](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/peopleevents/e_wilderness.html" \t "_blank)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/peopleevents/e_wilderness.html>

Wikipedia Image of Bridal Veil Falls

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bridalveil_fall_2010.JPG>

Ansel Adams's photographs:  
*Lakes and Cliffs, Sierra Nevada*, 1932<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/gallery/gal_ansel_04.html>

*Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada, from Lone Pine, California*, 1944<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/gallery/gal_ansel_07.html>

*Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, 1941<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/gallery/gal_ansel_09.html>

Bierstadt Paintings:

*The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe*, California, 1865

<http://magart.rochester.edu/Media/images/92.78_A1.jpg>

*Looking Up the Yosemite Valley*, about 18630 1875

<http://www.hagginmuseum.org/collections/bierstadt_looking_up_the_yosemite_valley2.shtml>

Online poll results for the question, "Do you think a photograph tells the truth?"  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/sfeature/sf_poll.html>

Excerpt "Art or Document?" from Andy Grundberg's *Crisis of the Real, Writings on Photography since 1974*

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/sfeature/sf_role.html>

**Image Analysis Chart**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Painting**  **(*Title*, artist, date)** | **Composition** | **Setting** | **Description of Subject(s)** | **Action(s) Represented** | **Mood**  **(Happy, Sad, Other AND Why)** | **Predictions** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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