

Lesson 4 Teacher Handout

This handout provides additional context and an annotated image of the art to help you feel confident and enjoy leading the class discussion in Lesson 4: The Transcontinental Railroad and Kyle Kilty's *It Could Get the Railroad for These Workers*.

You can review this handout before you present the lesson to your class if you would like to have a deeper understanding before hosting the class discussion or read through it as you present. The conversation questions are the same as the lesson plan and the text with arrows on either side are answers you can anticipate from your students. The sequence of questions is designed to build ideas and comprehension, ultimately leading to a student-centered approach to thinking about the big concepts and learning together.

The themes can be addressed in the order of the lesson plan or according to the topic that the students point out first. After the artwork discussion, please refer back to the lesson plan to proceed with the activity and remainder of the lesson.

Engage

After the students look quietly for 30 seconds, begin an open-ended discussion. Prompt the students to thoroughly describe each part of the artwork they point out (i.e. describe where it is in the artwork, what color is it). Encourage discussion until all three sections of the discussion are addressed by the class.

THEME ONE: Train

For teacher context: The train at the top of the artwork is a direct reference to the Transcontinental Railroad, a 1,911-mile continuous railroad built from 1863-1869. The Central Pacific Railroad started in Sacramento, California and was routed through specific communities in Nevada to overlap with profitable mining locations. Building the railroad was dangerous and much of it was built by Chinese immigrants because they were seeking refuge from political strife and poverty. The dangerous, hard labor led to inconsistent settler workers, who could gain employment from more profitable, less risky professions. The labor in the west was difficult because of the mountainous terrain, harsh winter conditions, and racist work environment that the Chinese workers faced.

Lesson plan questions for class related to the train:

- What do you see?
- What kind of transportation do you see at the top of the artwork? <train, railroad>
- What is the name of the railroad that passed through early Nevada? <Transcontinental Railroad>
- How would you describe the railroad in this painting? <flat, straight>
- Looking below the train, what did the workers need to do to make the train lay flat and straight? <build bridges, fill in areas, dig or blast out others>
- What about Nevada's geography made it difficult to build smooth straight tracks for the train? < mountains, valleys, big rocks, difficult environment to work in with snow in the winter and high temperatures in the summer>

THEME TWO: Mood

The mood of the artwork can be interpreted through color, subject, and texture. The first thing you see in the painting is the wide orange gold bowl that occupies most of the painting. The molten orange, yellow, brown, and black mixing in the bowl creates the effect of melted metal. Gold is a symbol of prosperity, riches, opportunity, and for many of the immigrants migrating to Nevada it meant a new life free from poverty. Silver mining also represented an escape from poverty and gave us the name of our state. However, few of the thousands who came to our state struck gold. Instead, many toiled and perished in the name of progress. The context of the lava-looking pit within the jagged gray rock framing the sides creates a dark mood.

Lesson Plan questions related to mood:

- What colors do you see in the artwork? <white, gray, black, brown, orange yellow>
- What color do you see the most of? <orange, yellow, gold>
- Color is one way that artists can express mood. For example, what feeling goes with bright colors like orange, yellow and gold? <happy, hopeful>
- If we think about when people started mining in the west, what material did people come to mine? <gold, silver>
- When people moved to the Nevada territory to mine, how did they feel about gold/silver?
- What did gold/silver mean to them
- When you look at the artwork, how does it make you feel?
- What do you see that makes you feel this way?

Explore

THEME THREE: People

The emphasis of the artwork is the gold pit, however, upon closer inspection the bowl is filled with people. Stick figures with outstretched arms and hands represent the human labor and lives that made the endeavors of the Transcontinental Railroad and the Gold Rush possible. Many people whose names and lives have been lost to history, worked with hope, determination, and integrity, while relatively few people are recognized as profiting from their work and making the railroads. The arrangement of the people in the artwork mirror the scaffolding created to hold the earth in the mines and bridge canyons in the mountains.

- Looking closely at the orange-gold area of the artwork, what do you see? <stick-figure people>
- What do you notice about the people?
- What are the differences between them?
- Why might the artist have chosen to depict them without distinct facial features?
- What might this suggest about what we know about the many people who worked in early mines and on the railroad?

- What is the artist telling us about these people?
- Who migrated to early Nevada?
- Why did they come here?
- How important were people to the construction of railroads and mines in Nevada?

Please return to the lesson plan in the Teacher Toolkit to continue the lesson.

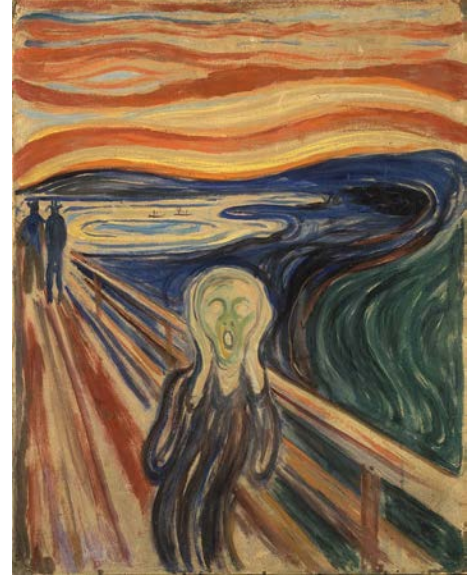
See the following pages for the annotated explanation of the artwork.

Please see the following page for an explanation of each area.



1. Here the artist depicts a train blazing across the Transcontinental Railroad. This was a 1,911-mile continuous railroad built from 1863-1869 by the Union Pacific Railroad starting in Omaha, Nebraska and by the Central Pacific Railroad starting in Sacramento, California and meeting at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869. The Central Pacific Railroad was formed by Leland Stanford, Collis Potter Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker (sometimes referred to as the Big Four). The artist chose to portray the locomotive in black and white in a style more akin to a sketch than a painting. Compared to the textured billows of coal fly ash above and the saturated valley below, the train is like a ghost. It is distinct because of its emptiness rather than detail or color. Additionally, the train barely exceeds the width of the colorful chasm below. What does this say about the challenge of building train tracks through the Sierra Nevada Mountains and through the topographically varied landscape of the intermountain west. What is the artist saying about the train? Who is the train important to? Who does the train benefit?
2. Thick black and gray smoke floods the air from the train's smokestack. Powered by coal, the fumes and ash surely lingered long after the clamorous engine and whistle were out of earshot. Through our modern lens, it is especially alarming to see the smoke fill the little bit of sky we can see. What is the artist telling us about the activity of the train based on the quantity and motion of the smoke? What is he saying about the environmental impact of the train compared to the common horse and buggy of the time?
3. This large orange, yellow, and black space dually represents a bridge through a canyon and an open-pit gold mine. The color here is a molten gold, almost like lava, which seems to shift and swirl as you look at it. Gold is an important symbol in the history of the west. For many immigrants and settlers, it conjured dreams of prosperity, wealth, stability, and skyrocketing away from struggles such as generational poverty and civil unrest. However, gold mining was a gamble, both in who struck rich and in the unsafe working conditions underground. What we now call Tahoe National Forest was all but felled to create the timber infrastructure for the Virginia City mining operations. Unregulated and unstable, miners risked their lives with high hopes of creating new lives for themselves and their families.

4. Upon closer inspection, the central gold area is scaffolded with yellow stick figures. Each one has outstretched arms and legs connecting to one another. Beside variation in poses, the only other differentiation is between the pale colors on their heads. Much like Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (right), the faceless figures could be anyone. What is the artist saying about how these workers were valued as individuals? The dangerous work conditions and poor pay created an unstable work force.



Concurrently, Chinese immigrants travelled to California and Nevada, many of which were propelled to leave the Guangdong (pronunciation: gwang·**daang**) province which was plagued by civil war and poverty. The prospect of discovering gold and creating a better life brought many to the United States. They were willing to take even the treacherous work on the cliffs of the mountains and in depths of the mines, desperate for work and looking to send their wages home to their families. Despite anti-Chinese racism that pervaded the West, Charles Crocker argued for hiring Chinese immigrants because the unreliable American workforce was hampering progress. Even after being hired, Chinese immigrants forced discrimination. They made lower wages than other workers and did not have food or board covered as their white counterparts did. Unwelcome in the towns they arrived in, they built their own communities, often called Chinatowns.

Though Chinese immigrants were instrumental to building the Transcontinental Railroad, they have been historically overlooked and omitted from history until more recently. What do you think the artist is saying about these workers by burying them under the train and filling the open pit mine with their bodies?

5. The gold pit is surrounded by textured gray and white, which flows vertically down the artwork. What do you think this could symbolize? Perhaps the unyielding rock of the Sierra Nevada range or the melting of snow after a long freezing winter of laying tracks. It could also reference the metal Nevada is known for, silver. Whether it is one, the other, or all three, the texture and irregularity of the pattern are not peaceful, but cold and maybe even ominous. Like the sharp ravine just inches from the rail ties' edge.