

Bill Gollings: Cowboy Artist

Paintings from the Sherry Nicholas Collection

University of Wyoming Art Museum, 2007
Educational Packet developed for grades K-12

Introduction

In this museum visit, students will view the work of cowboy artist, Elling William “Bill” Gollings (1878-1932). Bill Gollings came to Wyoming at the age of 20. He worked as a ranch hand and cowboy, and began painting what he knew and saw in his life on the Wyoming range. Following his studies at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, Gollings settled in Sheridan, opening his studio in 1909 and pursued his artistic career the rest of his life.

The paintings in this exhibition are selections from the Sherry Nicholas Collection on extended loan to the University of Wyoming Art Museum. The 71 objects in this collection include paintings, prints, and drawings.

History

Elling William Gollings is one of Wyoming’s most celebrated cowboy artists. Born in Fort Pierce, Idaho, he spent his childhood in Michigan with his grandmother and completed his eighth grade education in Chicago. In 1896, longing to be in the West, he boarded a train to South Dakota and eventually arrived on his brother DeWitt’s ranch in Montana.

Borrowing a horse, he worked the “grub trail” for the next five years—branding cattle, driving a stagecoach, trapping for fur, and hunting for gold. These odd jobs not only paid his room and board; living the life of a cowboy on the open range would become the source of his artistic work.

As a young man, Gollings was fascinated by the drawings of Frederic Remington that he saw in *Harpers Weekly*. His admiration for Remington remained throughout his life. His older brother, Oliver, who could draw a horse from memory, was also an influence, and it was with his encouragement that Gollings started drawing.

DeWitt would continue to encourage Gollings in



Looking for the Wagon, 1930, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches, University of Wyoming Art Museum, Sherry Nicholas Collection, no. 37.

his artistic pursuits, showing his work to a furniture storeowner, Mr. W. E. Freeman, in Sheridan. Freeman began including Gollings’ paintings in his window displays of his store. DeWitt also sent some drawings to the editor of the *Chicago Fine Art Journal*, Mrs. Marion White. Recognizing that Gollings’ work showed great promise, she encouraged him to study, encouragement that would eventually result in a scholarship at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. Gollings would work roundup in the spring and summer and find his way back to school and painting in the winter. In 1909, he established his studio in Sheridan, Wyoming.

Artist statements

In the early spring 1903 I sent to Montgomery Ward & Company for some oil colors and other equipment to paint with. When the snow went off I made a few crude attempts at picture-making. The people on the ranch where I stayed and called home thought them wonderful. That summer I covered the mess tent with charcoal studies; horse heads and certain characters who interested and asked my brother to bring me over.

I built a shack and called it a studio. The skylight in the roof gave me the right to call it such. I had met and talked with a few of America's foremost painters: H.H. Sharp, Howard Russell Butler, William B. Henderson, C.M. Russell, Frederic Remington (now dead) and a few lesser lights. They have all had a good influence on my work. My work has had a good distribution throughout the United States and even in foreign countries. Four of my pictures are in the Wyoming capitol at Cheyenne: "The Smoke Signal . . . Indian Attack on the Overland Stage. . . Emigrants on the Platte," "The Wagon Box Fight." I have no pictures in permanent galleries. I do not consider the others worth mentioning. Work for the rest of my life is ahead of me with only one thing that would ever take me from it: to be younger and have the country open and unsettled as it was when I first made riding my profession.

—Bill Gollings,
February 1923



Indian Sunset, 1926, oil on canvas, 23-1/2 x 17-3/4 inches, University of Wyoming Art Museum, Sherry Nicholas Collection, no. 26

Lesson overview

Students will learn about the work of Elling William Gollings. They will explore the subjects of his paintings; animals, Indians, cowboys, ranches, and the western landscape and its seasonal changes. Students will look to see how Gollings translated his work and life in the West to canvas, prints, and drawings. Students will explore how to work with paints, brushes, pencils and pens for drawings, paintings, and prints. Students and teachers will consider the concepts behind the art work and how they fit with the idea of the American cowboy and Indian and the Western landscape and its seasonal changes.

In the Shelton Studio students will be given the opportunity to complete a drawing, a print, or a painting modeled after any one of Gollings' works; the idea being that each student will try, in his or her own way, to create something that represents their ideas and feelings about some region or place in the world they feel passionately about. The modeling will be done after some of the techniques Gollings used in producing a drawing, a painting, or a print.

Students and teachers may research and engage in conversations about the production of real subjects and landscapes with pencil, pen, or brush before arriving at the art museum, using study guides (available on-line) to explore ideas and techniques. While here they will spend time in the galleries closely observing the work, discussing it, writing about it, and even sketching it. They will begin conversations about the techniques and theories behind the work which will lay the groundwork for future opportunities to pursue these ideas in their home classrooms and schools.

Essential questions

Grades K-6

- How can a cultural region inspire and create its own art?
- What is Western art?
- How is it different than Eastern art or Southern art or Asian or Middle-Eastern or African art?
- How can we tell an artist feels strongly about a region and its people, animals and plants, landscapes and seasons?

Grades 6-12

- How can you describe the spirit of a place, like the West, through art?
- How does the cowboy experience in the West influence art making?
- How does the Indian experience in the West influence art making?
- How can art make you understand a landscape/ place or person better?
- Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of the cowboy at that time (early 1900s)?
- Have you heard the phrase “the cowboy myth?” What do you think it means?
- Do these paintings contribute to “the cowboy myth?” Why or why not?

Art questions to consider

Grades K-6

- What do you see? Describe all of what you observe.
- What colors are mostly used in the paintings and drawings?
- What kinds of brush strokes do you notice? Thick, thin, dark, faint, etc.
- Do the people in the paintings seem happy, sad, angry, serious?
- Do the cowboys and Indians look the same or different?
- How do you feel when you look at the seasonal changes in the paintings?

Grades 6-12

- How can we represent an animal, person or place in two-dimensional art making? with pen and pencil, and with a brush and paints?
- Does the way Gollings represents the cowboy and his life artistically seem real and accurate? Why or why not?
- What are the different techniques used in painting with a brush and with various widths and kinds of brushes?
- What are the differences between water-based paints, acrylic paints and oil paints?
- How can you show the emotions of the cowboys and Indians with paints and brushes on different surfaces?
- How does Gollings use color to indicate time and place?
- How does his use of color affect the way you feel?
- Do different paintings evoke different emotional responses? Why?

Pre-visit activities

In order to prepare students for their museum visit and extend learning possibilities, we suggest that teachers and students consider the following activities.

- Students will research the settling of the American West.
- Students will research the artist, Bill Gollings
- Students will research on the American cowboy, the American Indian, bison, and the cattle drives and cattle industry.
- Students will explore Gollings’ drawing and painting influences and techniques.
- Students will explore relationships between an artist and his or her work.
- Students will read literature on the cowboy and the West and discuss the idea of “the cowboy myth.”

Prerequisite skills/knowledge

Museum staff will work with teachers to ensure that all projects are age and skills appropriate. At the very minimum:

- Students should have some familiarity with sketching and drawing objects.
- Students should be able to identify shapes and colors.
- Students should be familiar with drawing concrete objects versus abstract.

Museum activities

Part 1

Time frame: 45 minutes

- Students will closely observe the work of the cowboy artist, Bill Gollings.
- They will identify lines, brush strokes, shapes, forms, patterns, repetition, color, light and shadow, techniques and style in the existing work.
- Students will discuss what they see with museum educators.
- They will explore the artist’s drawings, prints, and paintings in relationship to the work the artist studied in depth; cattle, cowboys, Indians, ranches, landscapes and seasons.
- They will explore the concepts/ideas and emotions/tones, and spirit behind the art work in the exhibit.
- Using worksheets, students will respond in writing or drawing to the work they see by recording their observations and their own thoughts about the work.

- Students will answer questions on a museum worksheet.
- Students will engage in discussions about their observations and their answers and sketches with one another and with the teachers.

Part 2

Time frame: 45 minutes (minimum)

The following projects may be considered individually, or combined, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects which support ongoing classroom work.

- Students will explore the ways to draw and paint subjects they have a passion for and an understanding of, including a geographical region.
- Students will create drawings, prints or paintings which depict a subject or subjects in a specific geographical region that they have a deep understanding of and about.
- Students will explore techniques in the making of drawings, prints and paintings.

Post-visit activities

We have found that students achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit when time is scheduled for post-visit activities. Here are some suggestions:

- Students discuss or write about their museum experiences, reviewing what they learned, what has special meaning for them, how they will use new information and skills.
- Students continue to research the cowboy artist, Bill Gollings, plus other cowboy artists, like; Frederic Remington and C.M. Russell. (an essay, art work, research paper)
- Students create their own regional /natural drawings and paintings to explore their own expressions of their passion about a particular regional and cultural subject or subjects.
- Students write stories based upon a western painting of their choice.

Suggested use in the curriculum

The study of Bill Gollings' work, plus the historical, geographical, social, political, and cultural knowledge gained from studying the work and time frame of these works from the early twentieth century ties to multiple curricular areas, including; art, history, social studies, literature, writing and reading, speech, geography, and science. Museum staff will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Teaching Standards and to align museum projects and studies with ongoing classroom curricular units.

Some recommended resources

From Amazon.com:

Bill Gollings, the Man and his Art by James T. Forrest.
Unknown binding, 1979
Northland Press, 1st edition.

The Cowboy's Alphabet
Wyoming State Press, Wyoming State Archives, Museum and History Department, 1987.

Ten Years with the Cowboy Artists of America; A Complete History and Exhibition Record by James K. Howard.
Phoenix Art Museum , 1993.

Frederick Remington Art Museum Collection by Brian W. Dippie. Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Materials to be supplied to each student

Materials for selected Shelton Studio projects are provided by the art museum.

Assessments and documentation of museum tour and studio experiences

In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we ask that participants complete evaluation surveys. Surveys will be distributed to teachers and students, but they are also available on-line as a *pdf* file to be downloaded, or they may be requested via email from Wendy Bredehoft, Curator of Education, at wbredeho@uwyo.edu.

1. Students will self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and research, and their studio experience.
2. Teachers will assess the overall visit by completing a quick survey that asks for their observation and assessment of students' experiences, as well as assessment of the overall process of the museum visit.
3. Museum staff and artists/teachers will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art work completed in the Shelton Studio visit.
5. Museum staff may take photographs of students and teachers to document the learning taking place and the work produced during a museum visit. These are available upon written request to teachers who would like to use them to document the art of teaching and for student portfolios.