

Painting the history of the Frontier: Eric Bransby



Artist Eric Bransby, Colorado Public Radio by Nathaniel Minor

Directions:

View all three of Eric Bransby's paintings. Select one, or more, to analyze. Spend a few minutes looking over the painting. Try to pay attention to the layout, details, and colors used.

Read the biography of Eric Bransby and the corresponding historical articles for the painting selected. Answer the corresponding questions.

Secondary resources are available to help familiarize yourself with the artist as well as how to analyze artwork. They are located on the Lesson Plan.

Select one painting to analyze



The First Dragoons: Fort Leavenworth

The Fork - The Oregon And Santa Fe Trail



Keelboats on the Missouri Founding of Fort Leavenworth

Biography of Eric Bransby

Eric James Bransby was born 25 October 1916 in Auburn, New York. He was raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and then in Council Bluffs, Iowa. During the Great Depression, Bransby studied under Thomas Hart Benton in Kansas City. He met his wife, Mary, while studying at the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI). On November 23, 1941 they were married. Two weeks later, the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred. Bransby was allowed to complete his senior year at KCAI before enlisting in the military.

In 1942, Bransby was sent to Fort Leavenworth. Although in the military, he continued to paint. The only place he could paint was the latrine, because the lights were always on. He became known as the latrine painter. The base Chaplain asked him to paint inspirational murals on the walls of the Reception Center where the new recruits stood when they took their oath. Bransby could only paint during the night when the building was not in use. The Chaplain let him sleep on one of the pews in the back of the chapel during the day while he did the murals. Bransby stated that he chose a biblical theme to please the Chaplain. (See image below)



Eric Bransby painted this mural for the Fort Leavenworth Reception Hall during WWII.

While at Fort Leavenworth Bransby also completed three murals in the library of the Command and General Staff School: "The First Dragoons: Fort Leavenworth"; "The Fork - The Oregon And Santa Fe Trail"; and "Keelboats on the Missouri Founding of Fort Leavenworth". Bransby used a medium called egg tempera. This method mixes colored pigments with egg as a binder. The murals were some of Bransby's earliest work. In an interview about the Fort Leavenworth murals Bransby said "If I do a history painting, it has to be so that grandpa and grandson can look at it and understand what's going on." The murals were eventually removed from the CGSC library and currently reside on display at the Frontier Army Museum on Fort Leavenworth.

After the war, Eric Bransby and his family moved to Colorado Springs. He continued to study art at Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center (CSFAC) under Boardman Robinson. In 1952 he studied at Yale under abstract colorist Josef Albers. For the remainder of his career Bransby continued creating murals, studying art, and eventually began teaching. Eric Bransby is alive and well, creating art.

The First Dragoons: Fort Leavenworth



1. What medium was used to complete the murals? What other artists have used this medium?
2. In what style are the paintings created? How does the style help tell the story?
3. Color is used by artists to influence and invoke feelings. What color scheme did Bransby use to portray the painting? What feelings do the colors evoke?
4. What is the focal point of the painting?
5. What movement/motion do you see in the mural? And what does it mean/point to?
6. Who were the Dragoons and what role did they play in Westward Expansion?
7. What feelings does Bransby evoke by centering the Dragoons in the middle of the painting?
8. What is happening in the right corner of the painting with the Native Americans?
9. What activity is occurring on the left side of the painting? What story does the tools, materials, and unfinished building on the left side tell the viewer?
10. If you were creating a mural to tell the story of the Dragoons, what would you include? What would you want the viewer to learn about this era of history?

The Fork - The Oregon And Santa Fe Trail



1. What medium was used to complete the murals? What other artists have used this medium?
2. In what style are the paintings created? How does the style help tell the story?
3. Color is used by artist's to influence and invoke feelings. What color scheme did Bransby use to portray the painting? What feelings do the colors evoke?
4. What animals do you see in the painting?
5. What is the focal point of the painting?
6. What movement/motion do you see in the mural? And what does it mean/point to?
7. Why were different animals used for different tasks?
8. What was the main difference between the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail?
9. What was significant about the Oregon Trail?
10. In the painting, there are military Dragoons pictured on horseback riding along civilian wagons. What was the significance of the Dragoons at the time?
11. If you were creating a mural to tell the story of Westward expansion what would you include? What would you want the viewer to learn about this era of history?

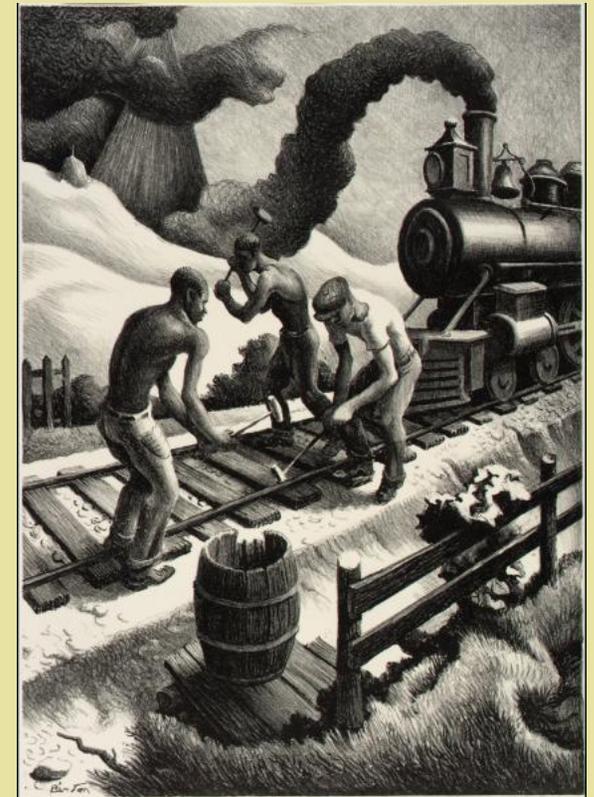
Keelboats on the Missouri Founding of Fort Leavenworth



1. What medium was used to complete the murals? What other artists have used this medium?
2. In what style are the paintings created? How does the style help tell the story?
3. Color is used by artist's to influence and invoke feelings. What color scheme did Bransby use to portray the painting? What feelings do the colors evoke?
4. What is the focal point in the painting?
5. What movement/motion do you see in the mural? And what does it mean/pointto?
6. What are the people in the picture doing?
7. Why were keelboats used to transport materials and goods?
8. What was the significance of the location in which Fort Leavenworth was established? (Think about its location near the Missouri River).
9. What details did the artist include to tell the story of the foundation and construction of Fort Leavenworth?
10. If you were creating a mural to tell the story of the foundation of Fort Leavenworth, what would you include? What would you want the viewer to learn about this era of history?

Follow-Up Questions

1. Compare all three murals. How do these murals tie together to tell a cohesive story?
2. In what ways does this painting fit your stereotype of the American frontier? How is it different?
3. How was Fort Leavenworth important to the development of the west? What significance does the fort play today?
4. Eric Bransby studied under Thomas Benton Hart. Examine the works of Thomas Benton Hart. How are their styles similar? Different?



Thomas Hart Benton, Ten Pound Hammer, 1967, lithograph on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum



The Thomas Hart Benton mural Independence and the Opening of the West (1961) at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum in Independence, Missouri. Photo by Arthur T. LaBar, via Flickr.



Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas - American Art Collection

Design your own mural

Select a historical topic below and sketch out the story. Consider what you will include in the mural. Think about what story you are trying to tell. What do you want the viewers to know or learn about your selected topic?

Select one of the historical topics below. Review the associated history to help you inform how you will visualize and express the story. Links to the readings are available on the lesson plan.

U.S. Army: Development of the West
The U.S. Army protecting the National Parks
Army Experiments: The Camel Corps (1856-1866)



Eric Bransby's murals "The First Dragoons: Fort Leavenworth" and "The Fork - The Oregon And Santa Fe Trail" hung in the CGSC library during WWII. Eventually they were removed and relocated to the Frontier Army Museum.

We would love to see your murals! Please share them on our Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/FrontierArmyMuseum>