



W. A. R. 1866

William Bliss Baker, *Fallen Monarchs* (1886)

ARTIST BIO

Although he is not well-known today, American painter William Bliss Baker was a celebrated landscape painter during his relatively short life. Baker was born in New York City to a wealthy family in 1859. He exhibited artistic skill early on, and at age seventeen he enrolled in the National Academy of Design where he received multiple prestigious awards and regularly exhibited his paintings. When the painter was still young, a critic remarked that Baker enjoyed “a flood tide of success, such as rarely comes to an artist not of mature years.” Sadly, William Bliss Baker passed shortly before his twenty-seventh birthday. During his short-lived career, Baker painted more than 130 landscapes and critics hailed him as one of the leading landscape artists in America.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

At the time, professionals in the art world required that all serious artists must be trained in Europe. Baker rejected that idea, studying exclusively in New York. Baker’s American landscape paintings reflect his close connection to the land he loved. One art collector noted that Baker was “a graduate of the great school of nature.” Although he had a studio in the heart of New York City, Baker spent much of his time in a studio he built near the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. Here, the artist could see sweeping views of the surrounding mountains, forests, and lakes. Baker’s countryside studio allowed him to observe the constant shift of light and shadow across the lush, natural environment. Through his great attention to detail, textured brush strokes, and masterful use of light, Baker invites the viewer to be transported right into his paintings.

ARTWORK

Fallen Monarchs has been called William Bliss Baker’s masterpiece. Set in the forests around his New York home, grand trees reach past the top edge of the canvas, while a handful of fallen trees litter the damp forest floor. The painting’s title, *Fallen Monarchs*, gives a royal dignity to these fallen trees and reflects Baker’s deep respect and admiration for nature. A quiet hush seems to be over the forest, almost as if the trees are mourning the loss of their fallen brothers. Baker used nature as an escape from life. Almost all of his paintings are of majestic landscapes, usually forests painted in a calm and serene atmosphere free from any signs of modern life and people.

CONTINUE THE STORY

In the late nineteenth century, America experienced an Industrial Revolution. Steam engines, telephones, lightbulbs, and electricity transformed everyday life for Americans. In 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, connecting the East coast with the West. The population of major cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago grew to over one million. America was transforming rapidly, but Baker did not focus on this progress.

- 1 Why do you think he chose to paint landscapes instead?
- 2 Why might he have excluded people and progress from his paintings?

ACTIVITY #1: ENVIRONMENTAL EXPLORATION

Materials: Paper, pencils, paint, brushes, cup with water
Subject Areas: Visual Arts, Geography
Duration: 60-120 minutes

Take a trip to an outdoor site with your class. Observe the people, environment, and their relationship to one another. Sketch key details to help you remember what you see. Back in class, team up with a partner and compare your observations. Create a collaborative drawing or painting of the scene, synthesizing the information each team member gathered. Share the artwork with your class. Compare your representation of this place with other groups, taking special note of viewpoint, scale, and details.

UTAH STATE VISUAL ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS

Lesson plans may easily be adapted for each grade level. Please use the plans as a guide and source for ideas, but feel free to adjust the activity based on the needs of your class.

Strand: Create (V.CR)
Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment of students during this lesson may include participation in group discussion, written interpretative answers, and quality and participation of art projects. An incorporation of interdisciplinary environmental science discussions can be included to assess student knowledge, and critical thinking skills.

INTRODUCTION

Fallen Monarchs provides a realistic depiction of a lush environment in upstate New York with academic precision. William Bliss Baker dedicated himself exclusively to painting American landscapes. At his untimely death in 1886, Baker was only 26. While his career as a landscape painter was just beginning to take shape, he had already produced an impressive body of work, including this fan-favorite from the BYU MOA permanent collection. This interior forest scene highlights the natural cycle of decay and renewal in the American wilderness. The painting invites an interpretive approach that reinforces scientific concepts, allowing students to make cross-disciplinary connections.

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- 1 Engage different senses to observe details within the scene and analyze the natural world
- 2 Identify ways artists use viewpoint, scale, and details to communicate ideas
- 3 Create a work of art highlighting the relationship between humans and the natural world

LOOK AND DISCUSS

Five senses: Baker’s painting looks like a real place that can be experienced with all five senses. Imagine yourself in the middle of this forest:

What do you see? What would you not see? What else might you discover?

What do you hear? What would you not hear?

What textures can you touch and feel? Describe them!

How does it smell?

What might you taste?

How would you feel in this place?

What month of the year and time of day do you think is depicted? How can you tell?

What is the temperature like?

Is this painting more about life or death? Where do you see life and death?

ACTIVITY #2: TRAVEL POSTCARD

Materials: White construction paper or cardstock, colored pencils or markers, pen
Subject Areas: Visual Arts, English Language Arts
Duration: 30 minutes

Create a postcard of a trip to a forest. Decide what season and time of day you will depict. Draw your experience and impressions on the front side of the postcard. Then write a short message on the back describing your adventures for a friend or family member.

Optional: Have students actually mail their postcards to a friend or family member.

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Lesson plans may easily be adapted for each grade level. Please use the plans as a guide and source for ideas, but feel free to adjust the activity based on the needs of your class.

Strand: Create (V.CR)
Students will generate artistic work by conceptualizing, organizing, and completing their artistic ideas. They will refine original work through persistence, reflection, and evaluation.

Strand: Respond (V.R)
Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

