Variations of Place
Note to Teachers
UCI Jack and Shanaz Langson Institute and Museum of California Art (Langson IMCA) aims to be a resource to educators and students by offering school visits, programs, digital tools, and activities designed for grades 3–12 that contribute to the development of strong critical-thinking skills, empathy, and curiosity about art and culture. When students are encouraged to express themselves and take risks in discussing and creating art, they awaken their imaginations and nurture their creative potential. School visits, whether in-person or virtual, offer opportunities for students to develop observation and interpretation skills using visual and sensory information, build knowledge independently and with one another, and cultivate an interest in artistic production. This Teacher Resource Guide includes essays, artist biographies, strategies for interdisciplinary curriculum integration, discussion questions, methods for teaching with objects, a vocabulary list, and activities for three works in Langson IMCA's collection that are included in the exhibition Variations of Place: Southern California Impressionism in the Early 20th Century.

About the Exhibition
Variations of Place explores the development of Impressionism in Southern California. While arts organizations were established in Northern California before 1900, key Southern California institutions were not founded until the early 20th century. At this time, a number of artistic styles and techniques emerged from Santa Barbara to San Diego. The geographical influence was wide-ranging. Some artists migrated from Europe, others from the East Coast and Midwest. But Impressionism reigned, most especially the tradition of en plein air or outdoor painting that originated with 19th century French Impressionists.

These painters were also influenced by expanding industrial and cultural change, including railway access and international fairs, like the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition. This Exposition featured an art exhibition that increased awareness of French and American Impressionism across the United States. Of the 22 artists whose work is presented in Variations of Place, 12 of them exhibited at the Exposition. This group of artists shared a passion for Southern California with its Mediterranean climate and its geography—from ocean shores to valleys, and the High Sierra to the deserts. With highly individualized styles informed by their education and experiences, these artists created a multifaceted genre rich with variation.

Featured Works
Colin Campbell Cooper, The Rustic Gate, circa 1918–1921, Oil on canvas, 46 x 36 in. UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

Franz A. Bischoff, Alpenglow, High Sierra, ca. 1919, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in. UC Irvine Institute and Museum of California Art, Gift of The Irvine Museum

Charles Reiffel, Spring, c. 1925, Oil on canvas, 34 x 37 in. The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

Learn More
For questions about scheduling a school visit, please contact the Education Department by email at imca@uci.edu or register online at imca.uci.edu.
About the Artwork

Colin Campbell Cooper was best known for his urban landscape paintings and for focusing his keen eye on the built environment around the world. He made far fewer portraits. At nearly four feet tall by three feet wide, this oil painting has the monumental feel of his landscape work despite its focus on a human figure.

In this highly romanticized portrait, Cooper has depicted a young woman carrying a bouquet of red roses as she walks under a trellis constructed of rough-hewn branches intertwined with honeysuckle and hibiscus. On her left hand, a ring glistens. A critic at the time, Arthur Millier, described the subject as a “luminously painted figure of a young woman at her garden gate.” However, any contemporary reading of this portrait must consider the ways in which idealized pictures such as this one perpetuate unrealistic and inequitable
expectations around body image, gender, sexuality, race, and class. In painting her with these colors, brushstrokes, and proportions (as in the style of the day), Cooper presents this woman not as a unique individual but as a passive symbol of youth and beauty.

Cooper portrayed the figure in relation to the environment, at one with the nature around her and blending into the colors of the sky and blurred background flora. This stylistic approach is consistent with the romanticized ways in which Cooper also depicted landscapes and buildings. The “rustic gate” of the title frames the portrait and aligns with the mood and character of its subject.
About the Artist

Colin Campbell Cooper shows “a loving attention to all parts of the canvas and a close working out of the subtle gradations of color in the reflected lights and shadows that bring the picture finally to its pleasant harmony.”

—Arthur Millier

Born in Philadelphia in 1856, Colin Campbell Cooper (1856 – 1937) was raised by a surgeon father and an amateur watercolorist mother. Both parents encouraged his artistic ambitions. Cooper studied under Thomas Eakins (1844 – 1916), an important American realist painter, at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and in 1886, traveled to Europe where he studied in Paris. In 1896, a fire destroyed many of the paintings he made during this time.

He moved back to Philadelphia in 1895 where he taught watercolor painting at the Drexel Institute and married Emma Lampert, a fellow painter. In 1902, they moved to New York City where Cooper’s creative output was focused on the city’s modern architecture, particularly the new American skyscraper. His paintings from this time often emphasize the contrasts between the towering modern skyscrapers and their neighboring older buildings, as well as the narrow streets of the city.

From their base in New York City, Cooper and his spouse traveled extensively outside the U.S., where he documented the architecture and street scenes, including the Taj Mahal in 1913. They were even aboard the S.S. Carpathia when it rescued passengers from the Titanic. In 1915, they spent the winter in California for the Panama Pacific and Panama California Expositions, world’s fairs that celebrated new inventions, such as the steam locomotive, the Panama Canal, and the telephone.

After his wife’s death in 1921, Cooper moved to Southern California, settling in Santa Barbara. He became dean of the Santa Barbara School for the Arts, though he continued to travel widely and frequently visited New York City. In 1927, he married Marie Henriette Frehsee. A decade later, Cooper died in Santa Barbara at the age of 81.
**View and Discuss**

Ask students to imagine describing this painting to someone who cannot see it. What would they say? Ask them to turn to a friend and describe the flowers, the setting, the woman’s clothing, accessories, hair, and facial expression. How do other students’ descriptions agree? How do they diverge?

Ask students to imagine what this woman’s day has been like. Where has she been? Where is she going? What might she be thinking as she gazes off into the distance? They should support their thoughts with evidence from the painting.

For older students, ask: Does this feel like a depiction of a real person or an idealized version of a woman? Ask students to use evidence from the painting to support their ideas. Then ask students where in their lives they see idealized images of the body and how they feel these images affect their lives.

The artist, Colin Campbell Cooper, was best known for his paintings of architecture. Ask students what the architecture of the “rustic gate” in the painting adds. What does it make them think about this woman and setting? Does it feel like a real place? Why or why not?

How do students think the artist feels about the woman in this painting based on how he depicted her?
Activities

Architectural Elements
Colin Campbell Cooper was renowned for his paintings of the built environment in New York City and abroad. He often emphasized the contrast between old and new buildings, towering skyscrapers and smaller-scale townhouses. For this activity, students will make a drawing of architectural elements in their community. They will think about contrasts they see in the architecture around them—such as modern versus traditional, shiny versus matte, ornate versus plain. From observation, if possible, they should sketch two contrasting examples. Then, in a final drawing or painting, they should place them in a setting together. Create a gallery wall of these architectural images. What can students learn about the place where they live from this selection of artworks? What kind of architecture would they like to see more of in the future and why?

Wildflowers
Wildflowers were a major subject for California artists of this era. Encourage students to find a flower they love in their environment and bring it into school—make sure students know to pick only wildflowers or a flower from their own garden. They can press their flower in a book in order to transport it. In class, start by observing the flowers. How many petals does your flower have? What colors can you find in it? How does it smell? Then, work together to identify the flower names. You can use a plant database or dictionary such as this one [https://www.bhg.com/gardening/plant-dictionary/] or apps such as PlantSnap or Pl@ntNet. What can students learn about the flowers they love?

Ask students to make a watercolor-and-marker painting of their flowers. They can start with a pencil drawing of the basic shapes of the flower on watercolor paper. Then they can trace over their pencil marks with a very thin black sharpie. Finally, they can moisten a thin paintbrush and use watercolor paint to add color to their sharpie drawing.

Talk about this process. What did students learn about their flowers? What do they love about the flowers they chose? How do the paintings reflect what they love and learned?

Creating an Ode
In all likelihood, The Rustic Gate is a painting made in honor of someone the artist loved. For this activity, encourage students to write a form of poetry called an ode in honor of someone they love or respect. It could be a friend, teacher, family member, or someone they admire but don’t know, like a musician or writer. Encourage them to start by brainstorming words or descriptions that come to mind when they think of that person. They should write each of these words or phrases on a separate sticky note. Categories could include:

- How the person makes them feel
- Sensory elements related to that person (sights, sounds, smells, etc.)
- How or when they first met or learned of this person, and
- What life would be like without them.
Once they are done brainstorming words or phrases, they should arrange their sticky notes in an order they like. They don’t have to use all their sticky notes for this and they can experiment with different arrangements. The final order they decide on is their ode. Spend time asking students to read their odes aloud. What can students tell about what the writers love or appreciate about their subjects?

For older students, discuss whether each ode idealizes the person it is dedicated to or if it presents all aspects of them, even those attributes that may not be positive. Should an ode focus only on the positive? Why or why not?
About the Artwork

The Sierra Nevada mountain range, nicknamed “California’s backbone,” runs nearly 400 miles north to south, primarily through California. Also called the High Sierra, the range was formed less than five million years ago. It is comprised of a number of climates, includes granitic rocks from the Mesozoic, and features Mount Whitney, the highest point in the continental United States.

In this painting by Franz Bischoff, the spectacular peaks and valleys of the High Sierra are depicted in fiery orange, moody purple, and cobalt blue, while a glaringly white glacier spills down the mountain's face, catching the Sun’s light. The alpenglow, or the rosy light seen on mountains when the sun rises or sets, is the star of the painting. In the foreground, a grove of trees sits in shadow along a small body of water at the mountain’s base, contrasting with the mountains in size, color, and light.

*Alpenglow, High Sierra* is large, measuring 30 inches tall by 40 inches wide. While many of Bischoff’s early landscapes were impressionist in style, this one is more reminiscent of the post-impressionist style. The paint looks like it was applied with a palette knife, laid down in patches, like the technique Bischoff used to paint on porcelain.
like the technique Bischoff used to paint on porcelain. Bischoff completed two small studies in the process of making this painting. One version is muted and traditionally colored—brown instead of orange, gray instead of purple—with compressed space. The body of water and trees in the final painting’s foreground are absent. The second version adopts the colors of the final painting but with less definition and contrast; the grove of trees is still missing. Bischoff’s final painting is far bolder and more arresting than his earlier attempts.
About the Artist

“Picturesque color and surface design, both as to composition and technique, intrigue this artist whose work is of a lyrical quality.”
—Alma May Cook

Born in Austria in 1864, Franz A. Bischoff had a storied career, first as one of the world’s preeminent ceramic painters, and later as a renowned easel painter. As a child, he trained at a craft school in his small hometown, but by age 18, he had left for Vienna, Austria, to study watercolor and ceramic decoration. In 1885, he moved to the United States, first to New York City and then to the Midwest, eventually settling in Dearborn, MI. There he founded the Bischoff School of Ceramic Design and he also maintained studios in Detroit and New York. He became known for his extraordinary floral porcelain painting and earned the moniker, “King of the Rose Painters.”

After a trip to California in 1900, he was so taken with the state’s climate, landscape, and arts communities that he moved there with his family six years later. In South Pasadena, he built a home reminiscent of an Italian villa with a gallery, ceramic workshop, painting studio, and gardens. Here he developed an interest in capturing the natural environment. Bischoff had always made still life paintings in watercolor and oil as studies for his ceramic pieces, but these soon evolved into landscape paintings. After a tour of Europe in 1912 to study Old Masters and Impressionists, he focused even more on easel painting in the plein air tradition and eventually abandoned ceramic decoration altogether.

Bischoff’s early landscapes were in the impressionist style. In later years, he developed a more post-impressionist style with flatter brushwork and more of an emphasis on form. His subjects included the coasts of Monterey and Laguna Beach, as well as the High Sierra. In 1928, he traveled to Utah to paint Zion National Park. He died soon after in 1929.
View and Discuss

Work together with another student to describe this painting. What is in the distance or background? What is in the middle ground? What is in the foreground? What changes—in terms of light, color, setting, and mood—as your eyes move from the background to the foreground?

Ask students to describe the light on the mountains in this painting. How did Franz A. Bischoff depict it? What colors did he use? The title of this painting is *Alpenglow, High Sierra*. The High Sierra is another term for the Sierra Nevada mountain range, or “California’s backbone.” Alpenglow means “a reddish glow seen near sunset or sunrise on the summits of mountains.” How did he depict the “alpenglow”?

Bischoff began his career as a renowned decorator of ceramics. He was so well known for his floral decorations that he was called the “King of the Rose Painters.” Look together at a ceramic decoration work by Bischoff such as this one [https://imca.uci.edu/california-poppies/]. What do you think he had to change about his technique when he began to paint landscapes? What do you think he might have carried over from that experience?
Activities

Painting in Three Dimensions
For this activity, explore the skill of ceramics decoration by painting in three dimensions on earthenware clay vases such as these [https://bit.ly/3JYeEcH]. Before students begin, show them an example of Bischoff’s porcelain work [https://imca.uci.edu/california-poppies/]. Ask students how they think he took the shape of the vase into account when he painted. Ask students to sketch out what they want to paint. They should consider how the sketch will translate onto their specific three-dimensional object. (Acrylic paints can be used though they will not be food safe.) Share the results as a class. Ask students which they prefer: painting in two dimensions or painting in three. Ask them to explain their answers.

Palette of a Place
Bischoff’s *Alpenglow, High Sierra* painting was based on two studies, but his final painting had a brighter, higher contrast palette. Ask students to describe the colors they see in the painting. What names would they give to the oranges, purples, and blues?

Next, ask students to visit a place they love that is outdoors and record the colors they see. What names can they assign to these colors? For example, they might name the colors of the flowers, the shadows, or the sky. They can be creative with their color names, such as peony pink, moody purple, or blueberry blue.

Back in the classroom, invite students to mix at least three of the colors they recorded. Ask students to share their palettes with the class and have their classmates guess where they found the colors in nature. As an extension, students can try to make a painting with the colors they mixed, whether it is of the place or something else entirely!

Encourage students to bring their palettes or paintings back to the original location. Do the colors match up just right with the place they first observed? Would they have rather painted outdoors in the location itself as Bischoff did? Why or why not?

Time of Day
Bischoff was interested in the way light fell on the High Sierra, creating an “alpenglow.” This alpenglow only occurs when the sun is setting or rising. For this activity, encourage students to think about a time of day they particularly love. Where do they like to be during this time of day and why? Then invite them to write a sense poem about what they see, feel, smell, hear, and taste during that time of day and in that place.
About the Artwork

Completed by Charles Reiffel in 1925, the year he moved to California, this painting seems to radiate warmth and peace with its sundrenched rolling hills and lush greenery. Yet, its depiction of a farmer toiling in the hot sun would certainly not convey tranquility to all viewers. Reiffel’s perspective of this California landscape is highly romanticized and likely quite different from that of the laborer he depicts.

In this painting, a farmer in overalls and straw hat works the field carrying a basket, perhaps sowing seeds, as a white horse, attached to farming equipment, waits patiently. Compared to the scale of the farmer and the horse in the foreground, the hills rise up dramatically behind them. The viewer’s eye can walk the winding path in the middle of this painting, traveling from the field below to the house nestled in the hills.

This artwork highlights an essential element of California life: farming. California has been and continues to be an agricultural center, not just for the United States but the world. After the Homestead Act of
1862, many white settlers claimed land in California and established farms. By utilizing irrigation, the Imperial Valley of California (to the east of San Diego) became a key area of commercial farming. As of 2015, the Imperial Valley produced roughly $800 million in farmed products, from lettuce to onions to watermelon. But while the arrival of white settlers was an economic boon to some, it was tragic for many others. The influx of newcomers displaced much of California's Indigenous population. Today, the state's farmland is often worked by migrant laborers who move depending on where they can find work.

With his expressive painting technique and sinewy lines, Reiffel was often compared to Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890). This large oil painting—nearly three by three feet—depicts the San Diego countryside using the simplified colors and definitive forms of the post-impressionist style and the brushstrokes of Expressionism. It also takes the farmer as its subject, just as Van Gogh often did. In his portrayals, however, Van Gogh was known for not idealizing the lives of laborers but rather showing their hard work and connection to the earth they tilled.

Reiffel was drawn to the Southern California landscape while on a detour from a planned trip to the Southwest. He stayed in the region and devoted much of the later part of his life, from 1933 to 1942, to painting its landscape for the Works Progress Administration. During this period, he also worked on a large-scale murals of the San Diego countryside that were installed in local public schools.
About the Artist

“Mountains, trees, houses, in a Reiffel landscape, share in a continuous flowing movement. Nothing is static. The eye is carried along graceful lines, traveling easily into the picture.”
—Arthur Millier

Charles Reiffel (1862 – 1942) was an influential post-impressionist painter and leader of the California plein air school of painting. Sometimes referred to as the “American Van Gogh,” his modern approach to painting was often rejected in favor of more traditional painters of the era. Though he won many prizes for his artwork during his lifetime, he was largely forgotten after his death in 1942.

Reiffel was born in Indianapolis in 1862 to an American mother from an established Virginia family and a father who had immigrated from Bavaria in the 1840s. He trained first in lithography, making posters and advertisements in the Midwest and New York. Later, he continued his lithography work in England, using the money he earned to travel across Europe and Northern Africa. Although Reiffel did not make painting his career until his early 50s, he soon became one of the most important American landscape painters of the 1910s and 20s.

In late 1925, Reiffel and his wife, Frankie, planned a trip to Nevada and New Mexico, but when the weather became treacherous, they ended up in San Diego. They spent the winter in Southern California and never left. According to Bram Dijkstra, curator of a Reiffel exhibition, Reiffel’s appreciation for San Diego’s landscapes was essential to his work.

“Reiffel’s work is post-impressionist. I would say it’s almost expressionist, in the sense that elements of passion that Reiffel had for the beauty and the fierceness and raw quality of nature spoke to the inner passions in him. He painted to express to others that there was this powerful, emotional, Godlike quality in the backcountry of San Diego.”

Dijkstra says this quality in Reiffel’s work “scared off a lot of people.” “It’s not all beautiful pretty colors and perfect composition. There was a sense of emotion in his work that’s missing from a lot of other California impressionists.”
Reiffel received more prizes than almost any other artist on the West Coast, but he did not sell many paintings. He lived in poverty and often made more traditional paintings to survive. When the Works Progress Administration (WPA) began to employ artists, Dijkstra says, “it essentially saved Reiffel's life.” 27 The WPA employed him from 1933 to 1942, during which time he produced several murals for local public schools in San Diego. These murals depicting the San Diego countryside have been removed from walls, preserved, and stored by the San Diego History Center.
View and Discuss

Take a moment to look at Charles Reiffel’s painting, *Spring*.

Imagine you could step into the painting. Think about your five senses. What would you hear? What would you smell? What would you feel on your skin and under your feet?

Now imagine you could walk around this painting. Where would you go? What would you discover? Describe what you see.

What if you could speak with the one person in this painting? What do you think they would say about this landscape? How do you think their description of it would compare to yours, or to the artist’s? What would you want to say to the farmer?

This painting was made the year the artist moved to San Diego. He hadn’t planned to move to California until a trip he was taking in the Southwest went awry and he ended up in Southern California. What do you think he thought of the area on arrival? Use evidence from the painting to support your ideas. How do you think his impressions of the place compared to those whose families had lived there for generations and were often displaced by newcomers?

Many of Reiffel’s paintings express his feelings about nature in this place that was new to him. As one curator says, “He painted to express to others that there was this powerful, emotional, Godlike quality in the backcountry of San Diego.”²⁸ Respond to this quote. Do you think this landscape is powerful and emotional? Why or why not?

This area of the country is still an agricultural center, producing food not only for the United States but also the world. White settlers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were given free homesteads by the government. With these homesteads, settlers set up farms that displaced many Indigenous people. Today, these lands are often worked by migrant laborers. Ask students what this history makes them think about the painting and what it depicts.
Activities

School Mural
For this activity, ask students to plan a proposal for a new mural at their school. Tell them that Charles Reiffel was employed through the Works Progress Administration to create murals for San Diego public schools. See Reiffel’s “San Diego Backcountry” mural from 1936 here [https://bit.ly/3s1TfSn]. For their mural, they must first choose a site at their school. Then they can draw or photograph the site. In groups, they can decide on the subject of the mural. Do they want to highlight their local environment as Reiffel did? Do they want their mural to have a political or social message? Finally, have students present a sketch for their mural and a paragraph or two stating its importance and relevance.

Works Progress Administration
The Works Progress Administration, or WPA, played a critical role in supporting artists during the Depression. As a class, research the history of the WPA [https://to.pbs.org/3v1tvqM]. Do students think this was an important program? What do they think the government should do to support artists in the United States? Ask students to write a letter to a local government official articulating their views on the role artists play in a country’s history and culture and whether government should support artistic endeavors. What do students propose for future government funding of artist programs, if any, and why?

Seasons
The subject of Charles Reiffel’s Spring is, to a certain extent, captured by the title of the painting. Ask students to make another painting of the same setting, this one set in a different season. How would the colors change? The light? The figure? Line up the paintings and see if students can guess which seasons have been depicted.

Perspective Change
Create another version of this landscape, although this time depict it from the perspective of the farmer. How might the farmer have viewed this landscape differently than the artist? As a class, discuss if and how our perspectives on the environment are affected by our class, race, gender, and occupations, and why that matters.
Vocabulary

(adapted from Merriam-Webster.com, unless otherwise noted)

Alpenglow: a reddish glow seen near sunset or sunrise on the summits of mountains

Easel painter: an artist who makes paintings of a size and on a material suitable for framing—often distinguished from muralist

Homestead: a tract of land acquired from US public lands by filing a record and living on and cultivating the tract

Idealized: to give a perfect or imagined form or value to

Impressionism: a theory or practice in painting, especially among French painters in the 1870s, of depicting the natural appearances of objects by means of dabs or strokes of primary unmixed colors in order to simulate actual reflected light

Lithography: a printing process

Middle ground: the middle distance of a painting or photograph

Migrant laborers or workers: workers who move from one region to another offering their services on a temporary, usually seasonal, basis (adapted from Britannica.com)

Mural: a work of art integral with a wall or ceiling surface (such as a painting)

Palette knife: a knife usually with a flexible steel blade and no cutting edge used to mix or apply colors (as to a painting)

Plein air: of or relating to painting in outdoor daylight, or of or relating to a branch of Impressionism that attempts to represent outdoor light and air

Post-impressionism: a theory or practice of art originating in France in the last quarter of the 19th century that, in revolt against Impressionism, stresses variously volume, picture structure, or Expressionism

Rustic: of, relating to, or suitable for the country, or made of rough tree limbs

Ode: a lyric poem usually marked by exaltation of feeling and style, varying length of line, and complexity of stanza forms, or something that shows respect for or celebrates the worth or influence of another; homage
2 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Cook, Alma May. "Famous Painter Scores Big with Landscape and Marine Studies: Franz Bischoff Has Fine Selection on Display Here." Los Angeles Evening Express, 8 July 1926.
11 Ibid.
Notes


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.