

PAINTING THE PRAIRIE

GRADE: 4-8

TIME: Two 40-minute sessions

Frank Lloyd Wright had a strong connection to nature and the local environment, designing homes that were suited to their natural surroundings. While living and working in Oak Park, Illinois, Wright pioneered a new style of architecture--the Prairie style-- inspired by the flat, vast landscapes of the Midwest. In this lesson, participants will explore the landscape that inspired Wright as they learn about and illustrate the elements of a prairie, as well as the plants and animals that live there.

INTEGRATED SUBJECTS: Visual Arts, Science

OBJECTIVES

MATERIALS | RESOURCES

Images, videos, and articles about the prairie (Suggested resources can be found in Appendix A)

Sketchbooks or paper

Pencils, fine point black Sharpies and/or artist pens

Examples of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie style architecture

Examples of historic house styles such as Queen Anne, Italianate, and Federal

Colored pencils or watercolor paints (optional)

1. Explore the elements of a prairie and the plants and animals that live there.
2. Understand the various types of prairies, how they differ, and where they are located.
3. Sketch and record native prairie plants.
4. Compare and contrast images of prairies with Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture.
5. Design an original Prairie style facade.
6. Create a collaborative work of art.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How is Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture influenced by the prairie?
2. What are elements that make up a prairie and what are the different types of prairies?
3. What are elements that make up a Prairie style building?
4. What are the benefits of designing in harmony with nature?

LESSON PROCEDURE

EXPLORE

Session One

- **Ask students:** What is a biome? **Challenge students to identify and describe types of biomes such as tundra, grasslands, deserts, and rainforests.**
- **Introduce prairies as a type of grassland and describe elements that make up a prairie.** (Additional resources can be found in Appendix A).
- **With students, explore similarities and differences between tallgrass, midgrass, and shortgrass prairies. If applicable, locate the prairies of your area and give examples of prairie plants, animals and insects.**
 - Optional Extension: If it is possible to visit a prairie, students may draw and write notes to create their own field guide.
- **Demonstrate use of pen and ink, Sharpies, or pencils to draw and record prairie plants.** (Tip: It can also be helpful to review clean-up procedures and care of materials.)

ENGAGE

Session One

- **Discuss the plants and animals that live in prairies.**
 - Differentiation: Have students independently research plants and animals that live in prairies.
- **Introduce Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School of architecture.**
- **Display examples of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie style homes such as the Frederick C. Robie House, Taliesin, the Averly Coonley House and the Arthur B. Heurtley House. Ask students:** What do you notice? (Tip: Students may notice a horizontal profile, natural materials, natural colors, strong geometry, central chimneys, and/or ribbon windows). **Challenge students to compare and contrast Wright's Prairie style designs to other historic house styles such as Queen Anne, Italianate and Federal.**
- **Ask:** How are Prairie style homes designed in harmony with nature? What similarities do you see between prairies and Prairie style homes?
- **Challenge students to identify various prairie plants to determine what type of prairie they came from.**

DESIGN

Session Two

- **In a sketchbook or on drawing paper, have participants sketch prairie plants and grasses. Pen and ink may be used initially or on top of a light pencil sketch. Color may be added using colored pencils and/or water-color paint.** (Tip: Encourage students to use smocks, newspaper, and other measures to avoid permanent stains on clothing and furniture!)
 - Optional Extension: Drawings and notes may be created in a small notebook to create a field guide.
- **Have students design and draw a Prairie style facade inspired by their sketches.**

LESSON PROCEDURE (continued)

CRITIQUE & INTERPRET

Session Two

- **Display drawings and challenge students to identify plants drawn by their peers.**
- **As a class, hang drawings on a wall or hallway to create a classroom prairie.**
 - Optional Extension: Discuss plant root systems and have students add a root system to the classroom prairie display.
- **Add students' Prairie style facade designs to the display. Have students consider the following quote by Frank Lloyd Wright:** "What was the matter with the kind of house I found on the prairie?It had no sense of Unity."
- **Ask students:** How does the surrounding prairie environment impact how designs are perceived? Is there a sense of unity between the prairie and the house designs? If so, how?

APPENDIX A

Resources about the prairie:

- **Video and written information available at:**
 - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/midewin/home>
 - <https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/education/Pages/EduWildflowers.aspx>
- **[Prairies of the Midwest](#)** by the Army Corp of Engineers is a useful manual with wildflower images for drawing.