



MORSE MUSEUM

BIERSTADT'S BUTTERFLIES



Butterfly, 1887. Oil on paper, Albert Bierstadt, American, 1830–1902; 4 7/8 x 7 3/4 in.; gift of Theodore E. and Susan Cragg Stebbins (2020-004:3).

GRADES/LEVEL:

K–5th grade/Elementary

TIME REQUIRED:

30–40 minutes + drying time

LESSON PLAN:

Students will:

- learn about American painter Albert Bierstadt.
- learn about and apply the decalcomania technique to an original artwork.
- create a finished two-dimensional artwork inspired by Bierstadt.

MATERIALS:

- Printer
- Butterfly template (see end of lesson)
- White copy paper
- Water-based paint (acrylic, watercolor, tempera, etc.)
- Paintbrushes
- Cup for water
- Large popsicle sticks
- Sharpie® markers
- Tin foil (for activity extension)

VOCABULARY:

Asymmetry: the lack or absence of symmetry; an image that is not the same on both sides but still maintains artistic balance.

Decalcomania: a technique developed in the 18th century and adopted by the Surrealists where a wet medium (ink, paint, etc.) is spread onto a surface (paper, glass, etc.) and covered with another material (paper, glass, tin foil, canvas, etc.). When the covering material is removed, the medium stays on the new surface creating new, spontaneous art.

Symmetry: something that is even in design and proportion; a well-proportioned, well-balanced work of art that is the same on both sides.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

Decalcomania was a technique favored by Surrealist artists to create “impromptu” paintings. These artists would apply paint (or another medium) to a surface and then press another surface to the wet medium, transferring the image. The resulting print would often trigger the imagination as new shapes and images would appear. Artists could then embellish the new image to reinforce these new images. *The Lion-Bicycle* (1936) by Óscar M. Domínguez (1906–57) is an excellent example of decalcomania.

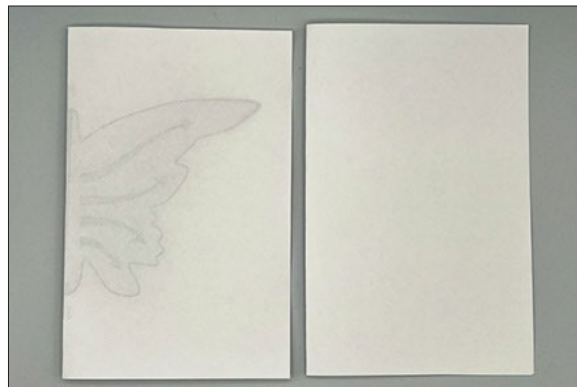
The Surrealist’s methods were not the only way to create spontaneous art. Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), best known for his large landscapes, employed a similar technique to create small keepsakes for his dinner guests. The process was described by a reporter as such:

“Two or three daubs of pigment on the paper, a quick fold, and holding it still folded against a pane of glass, he made two or three strokes of that wizard-like palette knife on the outside, and hey, presto! a wonderful Brazilian butterfly or moth, even the veining on the wings complete! A pencil touch added the antennae, that artist’s autograph was added to the corner, and now we each of us own a painting by Bierstadt.”

—as quoted in Gordon Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West*, 1974, p. 302-303.

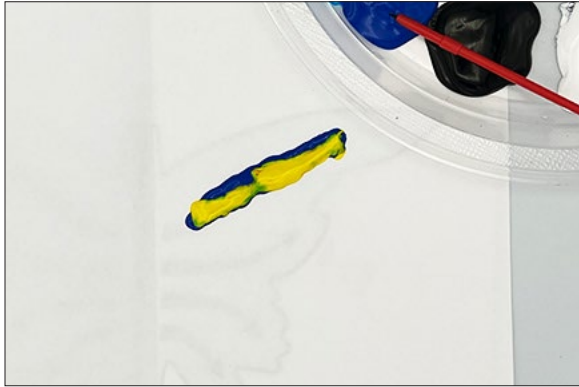
INSTRUCTIONS:

- 1) Ahead of project, cover tables with paper to protect from paint.
- 2) Give each student a piece of copy paper and the butterfly template. Have students fold both papers in half. For the butterfly template, fold inward so only the light outline of the butterfly can be seen. Place the plain copy paper inside the butterfly template aligning the creases.



- 3) As a class, examine Albert Bierstadt’s *Butterfly* at <https://www.morsemuseum.org/collection-highlights/paintings/albert-bierstadt-butterfly-painting>. Point out the different paint strokes on the wings and how the arrows on the butterfly template mimic these strokes.

- 4) Keeping the template in place, have students carefully open both pages to reveal the outline of the butterfly wing through the blank copy paper. Students will only paint on the right side of the paper. Pass out paintbrushes and various colors of paint to students. Have students select two paint colors. Instruct students to paint a generous, thick line of each color, one next to the other, following the line of any arrow on the wing. Repeat with the remaining four arrows using different paint pairings. NOTE: White paint makes a nice complement when paired with vibrant colors.



- 5) Next, have students carefully fold the left side of the blank copy paper and template over the right side; the sides should touch, but avoid spreading the paints.
- 6) Have students gently press the popsicle stick following the arrows of the butterfly template. Students should go over their lines multiple times, rotating the popsicle stick at different angles to create unique patterns and designs.



- 7) Once students are satisfied with the lines that have been created, have them carefully peel the paper apart to reveal the butterfly.

- 8) Have students use a Sharpie® marker to add antennae to their butterfly. Be sure to have students sign their names just like Albert Bierstadt!



- 9) **DECALCOMANIA ACTIVITY EXTENSION:** Give each student a piece of 8 1/2" × 11" in. tin foil. While paint from the butterfly artwork is still wet, have students align the foil and artwork and gently press the two together with their fingertips. Make sure students do not let the pages slide. Have students carefully peel the two apart to reveal a new impression. Ask students if their print looks like their butterfly or do they see something new? Students can use the Sharpie® marker to add details to the new image to reinforce what they see.



- 10) Allow artwork to dry and display.

ASSESSMENT:

Students should:

- be able to recognize symmetry and asymmetry in examples of artwork as well as in their original artwork.
- be able to describe the purpose of the decalcomania technique.
- identify where different elements of art (line, shape, color, texture, space, form, and value) appear in their original artwork.

BUTTERFLY TEMPLATE

