



# Illustrating a la Charlie Russell: Art Activity

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## Grade Level: 6–12

**Note:** This lesson is geared toward middle school and high school art students. It can be modified to upper elementary by shrinking the size of the paper and using ink pens for the contour lines.

**Essential Understandings:** Pictures can be used to tell stories. Although he struggled with spelling and had difficulty in school, Russell became an accomplished storyteller—both as a visual artist and as a “word painter.” Artists use a variety of learned techniques to create illustrations.

**Activity Description:** After discussing Charlie Russell’s illustrated notes and letters, students will explore how Russell used washes of watercolor and ink techniques to create shadow and depth in his illustrations. Students will then choose an animal to illustrate using these techniques. The illustrations can be paired with a poem, short story, or letter they have written.

**Time:** 2–3 class periods

**Objectives:** Students will

- Create a unified composition by incorporating elements of line, color, and value.
- Explore the use of color as a means of emphasis or shading.
- Explore the use and challenges of pen-and-ink techniques such as hatching, and crosshatching.
- Produce either an illustrated letter or an illustration for a story.

## Standards

### Art Content Standards

1—Students create, perform/exhibit, and respond in the Arts.

3—Students develop and refine arts skills and techniques to express ideas, pose and solve problems, and discover meaning.

4—Students analyze characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others.

### Common Core Standards

**CCRA.R.7** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

**CCRA.W.10** Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences. (If students participate in writing activity.)

**MMP. 6.** Attend to precision.

## Materials

Images from the *Montana’s Charlie Russell* packet or the [Russell Images PowerPoint](#):

- *Waiting for a Chinook*
- *I Have Just Returned from the Glasier Bill*
- *Untitled (Indian Talking to Beaver and Fox)*

Pencils

Illustration board or other heavier-weight paper

Watercolor paint and brushes

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Illustrating a la Charlie Russell: Art Activity (continued)

India ink and quill pens or extra fine, fine, and medium tipped Sharpie permanent ink pens

Animal image resources

*How Buffalo Lost His Crown* (a story with the Russell illustrations from the packet CD or online here: <https://mhs.mt.gov/Portals/11/education/docs/Russell/HowBuffaloLostCrown.pdf>)

Projector or photocopies for exploring images

**Note:** This art lesson can be used in conjunction with the lesson plan “The Rest of the Story.”

### Pre-Project Procedure

#### 1. Demonstration and Discussion of Art Techniques

Ask your students: What is an illustration? (Answer: To illustrate is to clarify one’s words with a picture.)

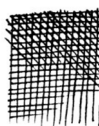
Demonstrate for students how to draw carefully from observation, using books or another resource.

Use *I Have Just Returned from the Glasier Bill*, *Waiting for Chinook*, and *Untitled: Indian Talking to Beaver and Fox* from the Russell packet to discuss how Russell used line and color in his illustrations. Look for shading lines, contour lines, and color: shading and background watercolor washes.

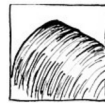
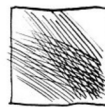
Demonstrate the following ways of creating value using pen-and-ink techniques.



**Hatching:** The most basic method of creating value is linear hatching. Fine parallel lines fill an area. The closer the lines are, the less white paper shows, and the darker the value appears. Heavier line-weight (pressing more firmly or using a bigger nib) also gives a darker appearance.



**Crosshatching:** Crosshatching uses layers of hatching placed at an angle. The first layer would be vertical, the next horizontal, the next at 45 degrees, and so on.



**Contour Hatching:** This technique is often used in figure drawing such as an animal, with the direction of line helping to suggest the cross-contours of the body. Hatching that follows a contour can also help to make objects appear more three-dimensional.



**Stippling:** Stippling uses tiny dots to create value. The closer together the dots, the darker the tone. Larger dots create a denser tonal value more quickly, but can look coarse.

Further explore the images from the packet. Which of these techniques did Russell use? Give students time to practice these techniques with the pens they will be using for their project.

Demonstrate a simple watercolor wash by loading a watercolor brush with color and painting an area of practice paper. The depth of the color will depend on how diluted the pigment is. This technique can be used to add shading to areas of a pen-and-ink drawing, as seen in *Waiting for a Chinook*.

#### 2. Pre-Project Discussion

Explain that Charlie Russell used illustrated letters to tell his friends about his life. Discuss Russell’s relationship with writing as you show pictures from the Russell resource packet. Although Russell seemingly effortlessly modeled clay animals, painted, and captivated audiences with his storytelling, he actually struggled to put words on paper. Today, many scholars believe that he suffered from dysgraphia—a disability that causes difficulty with written expression—but doctors didn’t know about such conditions 150 years ago. Because he found writing to be so difficult, Russell believed not only that writers were different from artists, but also that they were more gifted. Whether he recognized it or not, Russell was talented both as an artist and a “word painter,” and no one reading his letters or stories would know that writing was a skill he spent his lifetime learning. Russell struggled

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## Montana's Charlie Russell: Art in the Collection of the Montana Historical Society

### Illustrating a la Charlie Russell: Art Activity (continued)

with spelling, punctuation, and grammar, but when he decided that writing was just “paper talk,” he relaxed and began to express himself with his own style.

#### Communication Then and Now

Ask students about the current ways they communicate with their friends and family. When do they choose to e-mail, instant message, snap chat, text, or write a letter? How is the format and style of their communication different when they text from when they write a letter? What kinds of memorable letters have they received? Did they save them? What do they think makes a good letter?

Explore the content of *Waiting for a Chinook* and *I Have Just Returned from the Glasier Bill* from the Russell packet and/or read other examples of Charlie Russell's illustrated letters with students. Many can be found on Google images by searching “Charlie Russell illustrated letters.” Published sources of Russell letters include *Good Medicine: The Illustrated Letters of Charles M. Russell*, authored by Russell (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1929. Reprint 1966) and *Charles M. Russell, Word Painter: Letters, 1897–1926*, by Brian Dippie (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1993). These may be available from your local library or through interlibrary loan.

How did Russell's drawings complement his writing?

Explore *How the Buffalo Lost His Crown*. How do Russell's illustrations interact with the story?

Have students choose either to

1. Create an illustration for a story or poem (either one they wrote or one someone else wrote), or
2. Write and illustrate a letter.

#### Procedure for Creating an Illustrated Letter

Russell might first have written out the text, leaving a space for the illustration. This was possible because he roughed out his illustration

on a separate page and then traced it onto the letter. To transfer his sketch, Russell employed a trick we still use today. He rubbed soft pencil on the back of the sketch and then outlined it onto his letter. (Dippie, *Word Painter*, 8.) See additional resources for more information.

#### Procedure for Illustrating a Text

**Step 1:** Have students choose their subject. Possibilities include animals, birds, trees, things from nature, or imagery that pairs with writing (a poem, story, or letter) created by the student or writing by an author the student enjoys.

**Step 2:** Using a sketchbook or other paper, students should draw at least one sketch of their chosen subject. Have them use books and other resources to help them with their drawing. When done with their sketch, students should get approval from the teacher to move on to the next step. Once approved, students will transfer their sketch/drawing onto illustration board using Charlie Russell's technique described above.

**Step 3:** Ask students to paint the main subject of their picture with watercolor washes. Students may choose to do a simple watercolor wash for the background area.

**Step 4:** Allow to dry completely.

**Step 5:** Have students use India ink (or various permanent ink pens in black) to apply the contour lines and shading (using hatching, crosshatching, or other demonstrated techniques) on top of the watercolor portion.

**Step 6:** Students may choose to add some color washes for additional shading.

#### Critique/Discussion

Have students do an informal critique of their works considering the objectives of the lesson. This can follow the class's regular critique format or the empathic critique technique

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### Illustrating a la Charlie Russell: Art Activity (continued)

described here: <https://www.bartelart.com/arted/critique08.html>.

#### **Vocabulary**

**Prose:** The ordinary language people use when writing or speaking.

**Illustrate (verb):** To clarify words with a picture.

**Illustration:** Something that illustrates, like a picture in a book.

#### **Additional Resources**

Amon Carter Museum of American Art  
<https://www.cartermuseum.org/artists/charles-m-russell>

Brian W. Dippie, *Charles M. Russell, Word Painter*. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1993.

“6 ways to copy, trace, or transfer any image onto paper,” YouTube video (start at 1:30)  
<http://tinyurl.com/SketchTransfer>