

FIELDS OF GOLD

A Tribute to the California Poppy

BY JEANNINE MCHENRY





*“California poppies... are of a burning color—not orange, not gold,
but if pure gold were liquid and could raise a cream,
that golden cream might be like the color of the poppies.”*

– John Steinbeck

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

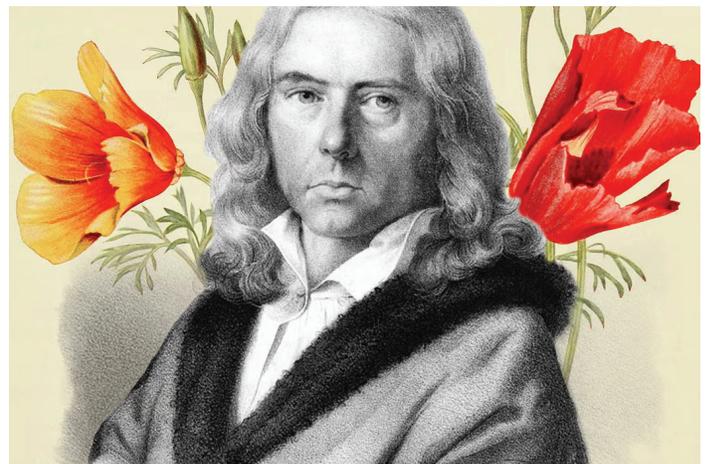
Students will learn the history and significance of the California poppy and its role in art. They will learn about the impressionist movement and the impasto painting technique. Using palette knives, students will create a field of California poppies, capturing their energy and movement.

BACKGROUND

OUR STATE FLOWER

The **California poppy** (*Eschscholzia californica*) holds a special place in both indigenous and modern Californian culture. Native American tribes, such as the Tongva and Chumash, valued the poppy for its medicinal and nutritional benefits, using its petals and leaves to relieve pain, promote relaxation, and as a mild sedative. In the 18th century, Spanish explorers were captivated by the golden fields of poppies that blanketed California’s hillsides, inspiring the state’s nickname, the “**Golden State**.” In 1903, the California poppy was officially designated as the state flower, symbolizing **resilience** and **natural beauty**.

Beyond its cultural significance, the California poppy has an important place in botanical history. Named after German botanist **Adelbert von Chamisso**, who documented it during an 1816 expedition along the Pacific coast, the flower gained recognition for its **hardiness** and **adaptability**. Thriving in diverse environments—from coastal cliffs to inland valleys—the poppy is known for its ability to reseed and flourish with minimal care. Over time, it has become a cherished emblem of California’s natural landscape. It is celebrated each year on **California Poppy Day** (April 6) and **Poppy Week** (May 13–18). Today, conservation efforts work to protect the species from habitat loss, ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy its golden blooms across the state.

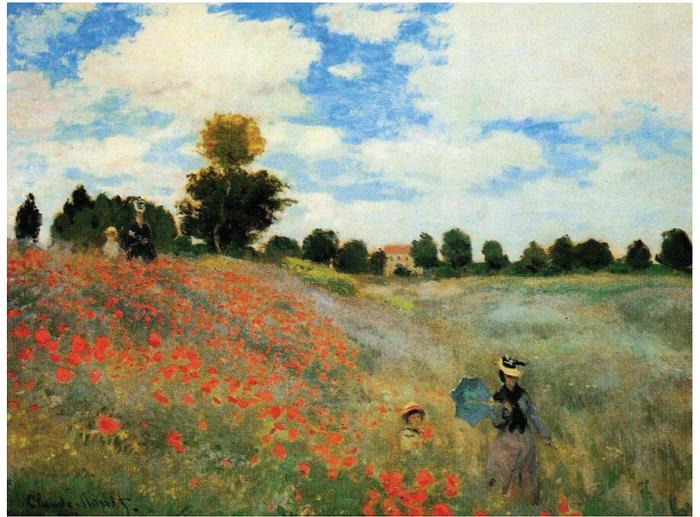


Adelbert von Chamisso

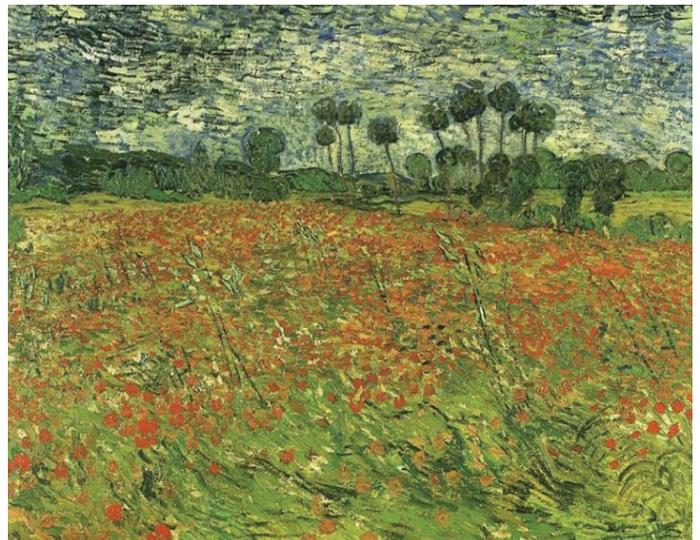
POPPIES IN ART

Poppies have long been a beloved subject in art, symbolizing beauty, tranquility, remembrance, and the fleeting nature of life. Their striking red, orange, and golden hues have captivated artists for centuries, appearing in works by **Claude Monet**, **Vincent van Gogh**, and **Georgia O'Keeffe**. Monet's "Poppy Field" (1873) beautifully captures the flower's natural elegance in an impressionistic landscape, using delicate, dappled light to evoke a serene atmosphere. In contrast, van Gogh's "Field with Poppies" (1890) conveys deep emotion through bold color and expressive brushstrokes, emphasizing the vibrancy and movement of the blooms. The intensity of his reds and the swirling motion in his composition reflect his emotional and psychological depth, making the flowers appear almost alive on the canvas.

Beyond painting, poppies have played a significant role in various artistic mediums, appearing in poetry, textiles, and modern graphic design. The flower's symbolic associations with peace and remembrance have made it a powerful image in war memorials and commemorative artwork, particularly in reference to World War I. Artists and designers often use poppies in prints and patterns, highlighting their aesthetic appeal and deeper meaning. Georgia O'Keeffe's close-up floral paintings, such as "Oriental Poppies" (1928), showcase the dramatic beauty of poppies by magnifying their form and color, transforming them into abstract yet deeply evocative compositions. Across different artistic disciplines, the poppy continues to serve as a timeless muse, embodying both delicate beauty and profound symbolism.



The Poppy Field near Argenteuil, 1873, Claude Monet



Field with Poppies, 1890, Van Gogh



Oriental Poppies, 1928, Georgia O'Keeffe

OUR STYLE INSPIRATION

The Impressionist Movement was a revolutionary art style that emerged in France in the late 19th century, characterized by **loose brushwork**, **vibrant colors**, and an emphasis on capturing **light and movement**. Unlike traditional academic painting, which focused on precise details and historical or mythological subjects, Impressionism sought to depict everyday life and fleeting moments with spontaneity. Artists like Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Edgar Degas used short, visible brushstrokes and often painted outdoors (plein air) to better capture natural lighting and atmospheric effects. Prioritizing color and **perception over strict realism**, Impressionism resulted in paintings that feel dynamic and alive. This movement paved the way for modern art styles, influencing Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Abstract Expressionism, leaving a lasting mark on the art world.

One technique often used in Impressionist works is painting **impasto with a palette knife**. Unlike traditional brush painting, which allows for fine detail, a palette knife is used to apply thick layers of paint, producing a three-dimensional effect. This technique is favored by artists seeking a raw, **spontaneous** quality in their work. The knife's flat edge and flexibility enable smooth blending, scraping, and layering of colors. Artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, and Rembrandt employed impasto to introduce dynamism and emotion to their work. Commonly used with oil and acrylic paints due to their thick consistency, this technique results in bold, tactile compositions that bring a painting to life. California artist **Lisa Elley** is a great contemporary example of this bold and expressive style. She specializes in impasto-style oil paintings, depicting California landscapes, flowers, and coastal scenes.



Lisa Elley, Golden Poppy Field, 2024



Lisa Elley, Delight on the Coast Print

ART VOCABULARY

Impressionism: A 19th-century art style characterized by loose brushwork, vibrant colors, and a focus on capturing light, movement, and everyday scenes with a sense of spontaneity.

Impasto: A painting technique where thick layers of paint are applied to the canvas, creating a textured, three-dimensional surface.

Complementary colors: Pairs of colors that sit opposite each other on the color wheel and create a strong visual contrast when placed together. Examples include red and green, blue and orange, and yellow and purple.

Composition: The strategic arrangement of visual elements such as color, shape, and line to create a balanced and engaging work of art.

Perspective: You can create the illusion of depth and space by making objects closer to you larger and those that are farther away smaller.

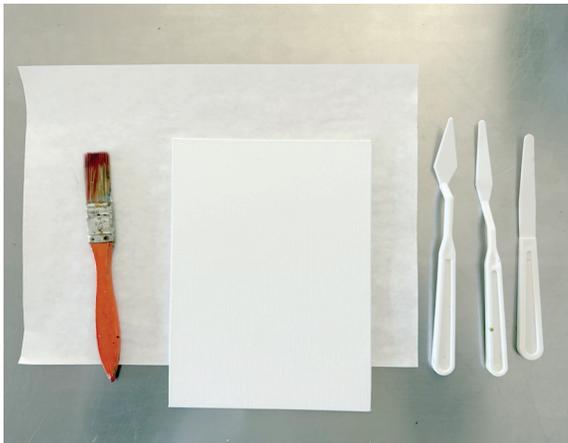
DOCENT SET UP

SUPPLIES PER STUDENT

- Canvas
- Paper Palette
 - Paints: White, Blue, Orange, Yellow, Green
 - Modeling Paste
- Paint brush
- Palette Knife (Or provide an assortment per table)

SHARED SUPPLIES

- Paper Towels
- Printed reference sheets



SET UP

- Get PowerPoint on screen. If this is not possible, be sure to have some resources printed for viewing.
- Tables should have shared supplies and reference sheets.
- Each student should have a canvas, a palette with paint and modeling paste, a palette knife, and a brush
 - Refer to the example to see how much paint they will need.

PROCEDURE

PAINT THE SKY

1. Start by adding white paint to you canvas
2. Pick up a tiny bit of blue and add it to the white on the canvas. Here you can decide how much to add. A little goes a long way! You can make it solid color, gradient, swirls, clouds, dark, or light. Just be sure to cover the whole canvas and avoid blobs of paint.



Put away brushes. They are no longer needed.

MIX IN THE MODELING PASTE

3. Pick up some modeling paste and add it into the orange. You need about half the amount of paste as there is paint. Use the knife to scrape it back and forth until its mixed in thoroughly.



NOTE: I'd suggest premixing the modeling paste for Kinder and First. To simplify things you can just use the modeling paste in the orange.

4. Take a few minutes to play on the palette paper and see what sort of shapes and textures you can make with the knife. Try not to take over the palette as we will need space for mixing the other colors.

PAINT THE ORANGE PORTIONS

5. Decide where to place your first large flower and what style you want to make. Pick up some orange and press and drag to create a petal. Repeat to create four petals. Go big! Especially for the younger ones as it will be easier to fill the space. **NOTE:** Remember, impressionist painting is about **perception over realism**. Don't get hung up on it being a perfect flower! You can also mention that we are using **complementary colors** (blue and orange) which help create striking contrast.



6. To create depth in our field we will add different size poppies. Add some medium size poppies into your field now. Keep adding poppies until the **composition** feels balanced to you. You can also add another large if you wish.



7. Next add the smallest poppies. These could be as simple as dots.
8. Clean off your knife

MIX IN THE MODELING PASTE

9. Pick up some modeling paste and add it into the yellow. You need about half the amount of paste as there is paint. Use the knife to scrape it back and forth until its mixed in thoroughly.

PAINT THE YELLOW PORTIONS

10. Decide where to add yellow highlights on to your poppies. Try to just press and drag on the yellow. **NOTE:** The paint is wet so the colors will start combining if you start swirling around too much. We are aiming for bold yellow strokes.



11. You can now go in and scratch off sections of the paint with the edge of your knife to reshape the colors and edges as well as add unique texture.

12. Clean off your knife

MIX IN THE MODELING PASTE

13. Pick up some modeling paste and add it into the green. You need about half the amount of paste as there is paint. Use the knife to scrape it back and forth until its mixed in thoroughly.

PAINT THE GREEN PORTIONS

14. Decide how many stems and leaves you want. Add paint to the edge of the knife and tap on the canvas to create stems. Work carefully as to not smear the orange and yellow.

15. Add in leaves if you wish.



NOTE: Let dry overnight for the paint to fully harden.



PALETTE KNIFE TECHNIQUES



Press and swipe to get a petal like shape



Use the edge to drag through the paint and create texture



Press and pull to make smaller petals or leaves



Tap the edges of the knife to create stems

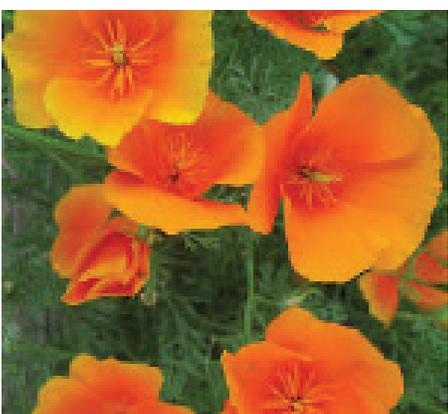


Load quite a bit of paint on the knife in order to create thick texture



Use the edge to scratch away or swirl paint and create texture

POPPY REFERENCE



STUDENT SAMPLES



FURTHER LEARNING

California Department of Fish and Wildlife: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Plants/California-Poppy#:~:text=The%20California%20poppy%20is%20commonly,designated%20as%20California%20Poppy%20Day>.

Poppy Cam: https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=31189

California State Parks: https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=627&fbclid=IwY2xjawIvCg1leHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHTPkZeyLHOQUssP3i-x_T6zKHVEsneMHb7IDThcDw0f0ksDjA2-Er3e52w_aem_3ahx89UWV82vz5OTFO3Nlw

California Poppy Day Celebration: <https://www.calnatureartmuseum.org/news/california-poppy-day-2025>

Where to see impressionist paintings:

- The Getty
- LACMA
- Hunting Library

Where to see California poppies:

- Along country roads and freeways throughout much of California
- At the Poppy Reserve in Antelope Valley
- In almost all of Los Angeles County's Significant Ecological Areas