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Gilbert's Travels: Approaching the Artist's Story

The 2003 Tweed retrospective exhibition, *Gilbert Munger: Quest for Distinction*, curated by Peter Spooner, was an interdisciplinary adventure that integrated 19th century American landscape painting with geology, geography, and American history. Buried in Duluth, Gilbert Munger was one of the first American artists to paint the West: he was commissioned to accompany Clarence King when King conducted the United States Geological Survey of the Fortieth Parallel in 1869–1870. Munger also painted with Albert Bierstadt at the Donner Pass. His painting was widely celebrated in both Europe and America, where he won numerous medals and awards before dying—and he died, surprisingly, forgotten by the world of art.

During the fall semester of 2003, all art education classes focused attention on the Munger exhibition. There were gallery talks by curators, art historians, and geologists. In addition to their own gallery drawings and landscape painting assignments, the students were required to create interdisciplinary lessons based on the exhibition. They studied maps, geological land formations, the Westward Expansion, and 19th Century landscape painting techniques. Students also assisted with the free Munger family day program at the museum. During this event, students assisted children with activities at the learning stations. Together, they built toothpaste volcanoes and a clay replica of a mountain range; they also took part in a Munger treasure hunt, explored State floor puzzles of America, created their own Western landscapes, and made Munger medals.

As featured guests, two art education students dressed up as Gilbert Munger (see Figure 12.5). One student dramatized the younger Munger as he looked in America and the other dramatized the older Munger in Europe. These two students gave theatrical living history tours in character, telling the story of Munger's travels around the world and discussing his painting technique in relation to specific paintings. In creating these theatrical tours, they imaginatively brought Munger back to life exactly 100 years after his death (Spooner 2003).



Figure: 12.5. Gilbert Munger (Chis Detert and Lucas Anderson)