Art, Artists and Nature: The Hudson River School

The landscape paintings created by the 19th century artist known as the Hudson River School celebrate the majestic beauty of the American wilderness. Students will learn about the elements of art, early 19th century American culture, the creative process, environmental concerns and the connections to the birth of American literature.

New York State Standards:

Elementary, Intermediate, and Commencement
The Visual Arts – Standards 1, 2, 3, 4
Social Studies – Standards 1, 3
ELA – Standards 1, 3, 4

BRIEF HISTORY

By the mid-nineteenth century, the United States was no longer the vast, wild frontier it had been just one hundred years earlier. Cities and industries determined where the wilderness would remain, and a clear shift in feeling toward the American wilderness was increasingly ruled by a new found reverence and longing for the undisturbed land. At the same time, European influences - including the **European Romantic Movement** - continued to shape much of American thought, along with other influences that were distinctly and uniquely American. The traditions of American Indians and their relationship with nature became a recognizable part of this distinctly American Romanticism. American writers put words to this new romantic view of nature in their works, further influencing the evolution of American thought about the natural world. It found means of expression not only in literature, but in the visual arts as well. A focus on the beauty of the wilderness became the passion for many artists, the most notable came to be known as the Hudson River School Artists.

The Hudson River School was a group of painters, who between 1820s and the late nineteenth century, established the first true tradition of landscape painting in the United States. Their paintings included scenes of the Hudson River Valley and the adjoining mountains of New York and Vermont, as well as far flung sights around the world. Influenced by European romantic landscape painting, Hudson River School painters created artworks showing meticulously rendered details and an almost religious reverence for the magnificence of the American wilderness. Through their works, the Hudson River School artists set about the task of re-creating the unique beauty of the American landscape for the public.

top

Hudson River School painters, largely led by the work and writings of Thomas Cole, created the first distinctly "American" landscapes. Unlike the orderly landscapes of European artists, Cole and the artists that followed him created vast, awe-inspiring scenes which showed the unrestrained and even threatening characteristics of the American wilderness. Recognized not only as the founder of the Hudson River School, but also as one of its finest artists, Cole is credited with making landscapes acceptable subjects for serious painters. His writings and paintings imparted a new and majestic view of the American wilderness - a view wrought with intricate detail and romantic resplendence. Cole saw his work as a tool to inspire in his countrymen "the importance of cultivating a taste for scenery." He hoped to use his influence to encourage more people to love, enjoy, and protect nature as he did. In part as a result of Cole's influential work, people gradually came to enjoy traveling to the wilderness areas for recreation and relaxation.

Ironically, as more and more people visited the regions that Cole and other Hudson River School painters regularly depicted in their work, the increased visitation brought increased development. Aided by the availability of modern forms of transportation such as the railroad and the steamboat, tourism to the Hudson River Valley resort increased. This increase slowly began to change the pristine nature of the surrounding area. As a result, Hudson River School artists had to go further and further away from encroaching civilization in search of the unspoiled nature that

they sought as inspiration for their paintings. Many of the second generation of Hudson River School artists traveled to the American west in search of new expanses of wilderness.

top

With the growth of cities in the United States during the nineteenth century there was a dramatic increase in industry, and as industry grew, the natural environment was adversely impacted in immediately visible ways. For example, the machinery of many factories was fueled by coal that caused smokestacks to belch black smoke into the air, and industrial by-products flowed into the waterways leaving them polluted. Seeing the damage to the natural environment occur right before their eyes, some people became alarmed and began to search for ways to create a balance between industrial progress and the preservation of natural resources. One of the books that sparked this new movement, which became known as the conservation movement, was Man and Nature, written in 1860 by a man named George Marsh. Marsh argued that the growth of industry was upsetting the natural balance of nature.

As the struggle to find balance between nature and industry continued, artists had to move further and further away from the east coast in search of new and untouched scenery for their landscape works. Many artist set out to explore and paint the West, a trend that helped other Americans and even the international community become familiar with parts of the United States that many had not before seen.

Later in the century, avid outdoorsmen and naturalists, like John Muir, encouraged people to enjoy the beauty of the wilderness. Muir's efforts helped to involve the public and President Theodore Roosevelt in the establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890. Yosemite and other national parks were established to preserve the beauty of the wilderness in America. In 1905, eighty-six million acres of forest were placed under the care and management of the newly formed Forest Service. This landmark event marked the beginning of a century of debate over the proper management of land for the use of its natural resources versus the preservation of the unspoiled and untouched wilderness. Even today, the debate over the protection of endangered species versus the preservation of jobs in such industries as mining and lumbering continues.

As the debate over the preservation of the wilderness continues, so also do the landscape painting traditions established by the artists of the Hudson River School. "The painting tradition of the region," wrote twentieth century artist Alan Gussow, "was shaped more by nature than art." Many twentieth century artists in the United States continue to respond to the natural environment just as the Hudson River School painters did more than a century ago. Their paintings are an attempt to communicate the spiritual essence of their attitudes towards nature rather than necessarily recreating a particular scene. The new landscape paintings, although they look much different than their historical counterparts, continue to express the essence of artists' emotional responses to their natural environment.

ARTISTS

In the 19th century, the arts were a great force in changing Americans' opinions about the natural world. In the Hudson River Valley, writers first expressed this change of opinion. Previously, nature had been considered the home of the devil. Several 19th century Hudson Valley writers showed nature as the home of beauty, power, and god. They did not represent nature as chaos but as a place of tranquility, grandeur, wonder and even rustic humor.

A number of artists working in the Hudson River Valley pursued the changing interest in the natural environment by creating landscape paintings. Rather than nature serving as a backdrop for history paintings or portraits, their scenes illustrated the changing power and beauty of the American wilderness. These artists, later called the Hudson River School by a hostile critic, were

very popular in the mid-19th century and like writers, helped change Americans' views toward nature.

Frederic E. Church

(1826-1900)

A Connecticut native, Church began studying painting at 16 and when he moved to the Catskills, studied with Thomas Cole for 2 years. Within a year he exhibited at the National Gallery of Design. He traveled extensively and was a master of panoramic landscapes such as *Niagara* and *Heart of the Andes*. With his fame and fortune, he built a "Persian" villa in Hudson, New York, called Olana, which commands an impressive view of the Hudson River and the Catskills- the perfect landscape.

Thomas Cole

(1801-1848)

The work and thought of Cole sparked the growth of the 19th century school of American landscape painting - now referred to as the Hudson River School. Cole began his career by exploring nature and making detailed drawings that became the foundations of his painting style. He was "discovered" in 1825, when an artist, Asher B. Durand, and a patron saw three of his Hudson Valley paintings in New York City. His meticulous landscapes were admired, but his allegorical painting, his personal favorites, were not. Cole, unfortunately, died a poor man.

Jasper F. Cropsey

(1823-1900)

Cropsey began his artistic career as an architect, but eventually devoted his time exclusively to painting landscapes. He sketched during the summer and painted in his studio during the winters. His early works are influenced by Durand and Cole. The later works focus on idealized autumn scenes with vivid colors. At one time, he had to produce leaf samples to convince a British audience that his vivid leaf colors were not fanciful but very realistic.

Asher B. Durand

(1796-1886)

Durand started out as an engraver, but became more interested in oil painting than engraving He and Cole were close friends and when Cole dies, Durand became the leader of the Hudson River School. He encouraged a more realistic representation of nature based on observation rather than Cole's idealized formulas. Durand published his approach, "Letter on Landscape Painting" which influenced younger Hudson River School artists.

Alvan Fisher

(1793-1837)

Fisher was born in Massachusetts and studied painting with a Boston artist, in the traditional manner of copying paintings. He had a successful and varied career, which included painting landscapes, portraits, genre scenes, marine, animal, and Western subjects.

James MacDonald Hart

(1828-1891)

Hart was leading member of the second generation of Hudson River School artists. He began his career working for a sign and banner painter, but, in three years, exhibited his landscapes at the Albany Gallery of Fine Arts. He had a studio in downtown Albany and taught numerous students, including Homer Dodge Martin. He is best known for his finely detailed and gently colored pastoral compositions.

William M. Hart

(1823-1894)

Like his brother, William Hart belonged to the second generation of the Hudson River School. He began as a coach and ornamental painter and after trying portraiture, began to focus on landscape painting. He painted his early works in a detailed and meticulous manner (influenced by Asher B. Durand) while later painted more broadly and loosely.

David Johnson

(1827-1908)

Johnson primarily taught himself to paint, but was elected to the National Academy of Design. His early “luminist” style paintings with their detail, bright palette, and smooth texture were very popular. Critics and the public did not like his later works which were darker, less detailed and with heavily applied paint.

John F. Kensett

(1816-1872)

Kensett began his career as an engraver but became a prolific landscape painter, sketching in the Catskills, Berkshires, White and Green Mountains during the summer and painting in his New York studio during the winter. Despite his success with painting, he continued to support himself with engraving.

Homer Dodge Martin

(1836-1897)

Martin was encouraged to become an artist and his work links the Hudson River School painters to the American followers of the French Barbizon art and later Impressionism. His early works emulated Thomas Cole's and other Hudson River School artist's styles. Influenced by two European trips, he began to paint more spontaneously using a palette knife, more subtle colors, and a looser touch, like the French Barbizon artists.

GLOSSARY

Allegory - A tale with one or many metaphors standing for other ideas and images.

Atmospheric perspective - A technique of showing distance in a painting by gradually changing the color and tone of objects.

Background - The area of a painting that appears furthest away.

Binder - The liquid mixed with pigment to form paint. In many cases linseed oil is used as a binder for oil paints.

Brushes - A device composed of bristles and set into a suitable back or handle and used for applying paint to a canvas.

Canvas - A surface prepared to receive painting, usually oil painting, made of course closely woven cloth.

Charcoal - A piece of wood that has been charred in a hot oven with no oxygen. Used in painting to sketch in nature or to outline a drawing before putting paint on the canvas.

Composition - Arrangement of subject matter.

Foreground - The area of the painting that appears closest to the viewer.

Genre - A group of paintings placed into a distinctive group with respect to style, form, or purpose.

Gesso - A prepared paste applied to wood or canvas, often made out of plaster of Paris or gypsum. The gesso tightens the canvas and prevents the oil paints from seeping through.

Glaze - A semitransparent coat of color applied to a painting to modify the effect of the colors.

Gouache - A method of painting with pigments which have been ground in water and mingled with a preparation of gum. top

Landscape - A representation of outdoor scenery.

Linear perspective - A mathematical system for representing three-dimensional objects from a single viewpoint.

Metaphor - Use of an image to suggest a likeness or similarity with something else.

Middle ground - The middle area in a painting.

Oil paint - Paint made by using ground pigments combined with a binder such as linseed oil.

Paint bladder - Used by artists for storing their mixed oil paints, made from a pig's bladder. Collapsible metal tubes replaced the paint bladder in the mid-19th century.

Palette - A small board on which a painter mixes his colors.

Palette knife - A small knife used for removing and adding paint to either the palette or a canvas.

Patron - A person who supports of an artist, both financially and socially.

Picturesque - Representing the charm in scenes or ideas, without attaining beauty or sublimity.

Pigment - A powdered substance made of ground stones, such as malachite or azurite in the nineteenth century.

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Realism - An accurate representation without idealization.

Romanticism - A trend in thought that prevailed during the mid-eighteenth century affecting styles of art, literature, and philosophy. It emphasized emotion, instinct and imagination as the most valuable human qualities.

Sketch - An outline of a painting. Artists often sketch their works on paper in advance, before putting them on canvas.

Stretcher bars - Wooden bars used to give tension to a piece of canvas for painting. The canvas is pulled across the bars and fastened tightly, providing a good work surface for the artist.

Studio - The working room of an artist.

Sublime - A sense of elevated beauty or grandeur.

Symbol - Something that represents or stands for something else.

Symmetry - Having balance of size, shape and relative position on either side of a center axis.

Varnish - A liquid preparation which, when spread upon a surface, dries forming a hard, lustrous coating.

ACTIVITIES

Think about the paintings you saw when you were at the museum. Try to imagine yourself in one, walking along a road or in the mountains. What do you see/hear/smell/feel/touch?

Discuss the concepts of foreground, middle ground, and background. Have students determine which types of scenery would be placed in each. (Ex. Would a volcano be placed in the foreground? How about a person? What is most important to see, and how do you show that in the landscape painting?)

Take students on a walk near the school, perhaps to a nearby park. Have them make sketches, which will be brought back to class and used to make a finished drawing. Discuss choices made by the students. Did they sketch things that were left out of the final drawing? Did they add anything that wasn't originally there?

Have students write a poem about a place that they like, perhaps as a haiku. Have them include their feelings about the place, as well as what they see when they are there. Use examples from Romantic poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Wadsworth Longfellow, and William Cullen Bryant for comparison and discussion of the literary aspect of the Romantic Movement.

Discuss the role of the Hudson River School in the environmental movement. The Hudson River artists were themselves disturbed by the changes they saw in nature in the 19th century, and wanted to capture the beauty of pristine nature. In the 1970s, the paintings were used once again by modern environmentalists to make people conserve the environment. Have students use Hudson River School images in their own ads and slogans regarding conservation of the environment, and have them present their ads to the rest of the class.

Use the Asher Durand painting "An Old Man's Reminiscences" to inspire a story from the point of view of the old man. Have the students write about what he sees, what he is thinking, and why he is there.

The Romantic Movement was about literature, art, and music. Play Romantic Era music, and have the students draw images inspired by the music they hear.

Read portions or all of James Fenimore Cooper's Last of the Mohicans. Compare and contrast his portrayal of nature with that of the artists.

WEB RESOURCES

Basic Information

Historic Hudson River
Explore the Hudson River School Painters through pictures and text and take a virtual trip of William Wade's "Panorama of the Hudson River" 1846.
The Hudson River Museum
View many Hudson River School paintings by Asher B. Durand, Jasper Francis Cropsey and many others.
Nature and the American Identity
An overview of the natural world and the American culture in the 1800s and its influence on the Hudson River School artists.
Thomas Cole
Learn about Thomas Cole, view his artwork and follow the Hudson River School Art Trail.
Frederic Church
Discover one of the Hudson River School artists.

Asher Durand
Descriptive explanation of inspiration and visual aspects of "The Trysting Tree" 1868.
The Hudson River
Explore the Hudson Valley's rich history.
Thomas Locker
A contemporary artist working in the style of the Hudson River School.

Teacher Resources

Hudson River School Activities
Hudson River School artists lessons focusing on the Arts, English, Social Studies, Science and Language Arts.
Teacher Guide
Examine one of Thomas Cole's landscape paintings, "Landscape with Figures: A Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans" 1826.

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