What Teachers Need to Know

Note: The descriptions and activities in the main text below are intended to help you become familiar with the artworks before presenting them to students; however, some of the activities might be adapted for classroom use. Activities intended specifically for students can be found in the Teaching Idea sidebars. The Looking Questions given below are also printed on the reverse side of the Art Resources, and have been written with students in mind, so that they might be used as a rough plan for class discussion. You should feel free to use these questions or develop questions of your own. Be sure students have time to look at the reproductions carefully before asking the Looking Questions.

Romantic Views of the American Scene

How old was the United States by the mid-19th century? With the new government just under 100 years of age, the country’s artists retained strong links to western European art traditions. Many professional artists in America were born, trained, and/or studied in Europe.

Nonetheless, 19th-century artists in America did not slavishly reproduce European art or represent the same subjects. Instead, they adapted established ways of painting and sculpting to suit a new need—depicting the ever-expanding United States in the best light possible.

Although the United States didn’t have a long-established history, it did have land—lots of it. The public hungered for images of the country’s glory, splendor, and bounty. Artists largely ignored the often-unpleasant realities of life on the frontier; they deliberately painted as if looking through rose-colored glasses. Painters like George Caleb Bingham, in his Fur Traders Descending the Missouri, portrayed the humble lifestyle of those who made their living off the land. (See the discussion on pp. 354–355.) Bingham chose not to show any of the actual hardships involved in the pioneering life; the figures look out serenely, as if they had not a care in the world.

Landscape painters initially thrived along the East Coast. The Hudson River School artists, such as Thomas Cole (whose work students in Core Knowledge schools should have discussed in Grade 2), painted unsullied, pastoral views of the New York and New England regions. The typically vast vistas of the painters of the Hudson River School captured the light in mists, sunsets, and other memorable idyllic moments.

However, American landscape art was not just an East Coast phenomenon. It followed the country’s explorers and pioneers as they moved across North America. Artists—like explorers, surveyors, and scientists—ventured into “new lands,” bringing their amazing visual expressions back to eastern audiences.

Albert Bierstadt’s paintings, including The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak, immortalized the West’s natural scenery. (See discussion on p. 354.) Through size, scale, and a wide range of color, Bierstadt painted pictures that evoked a religious sense of awe and admiration for the land.
Most artists, like society itself, paid little attention to the Native Americans who had inhabited the country for some 10,000 years before Europeans arrived. Native peoples are absent from Bingham's fur trading genre paintings, though Native American hunting talents were crucial to the fur trade. Even when Native Americans are included, as they are in Bierdstadt's composition, they are generally not the focus.

Looking at the Included Reproductions

**Thomas Cole, View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow (1836)**

Ironically, British-born artist Thomas Cole (1801–1848) is best known for his romantic views of the American landscape. For him, the young country's rustic, rugged beauty, interspersed with areas of pastoral charm, epitomized the United States. Cole celebrated the divine "New World" with bright, almost supernatural, color and light. One of the popular ideas of Romanticism was that there was an intimate connection between God and nature, that nature was permeated and infused with holiness and divinity. Looking at Cole's landscape paintings, one sometimes feels that they are artistic representations of this romantic idea about the intimate connection between God and nature.

Cole came to Philadelphia from England at age 17. He studied in both the United States and Europe, but was ultimately drawn to America. Here, he painted vistas of the wilderness that would soon vanish as the population and industry encroached upon the virgin land.

Look at the included reproduction of The Oxbow. What is the weather like in this view? Cole detailed the sunlight on the lingering mist after a thunderstorm. Although realist artists like Cole appear to work in a nearly photographic style, they often change certain elements in their scenes. They might move, eliminate, enlarge, decrease, and/or add items in their compositions. It is important not to confuse realism and reality.

Cole divided the painting into two. The left half represents the powerful, uncontrollable, yet sublime aspect of nature, symbolized by the broken tree trunk and dark clouds. On the right, Cole painted a quiet, pastoral, sunny view, “civilized” by humans, who have cultivated nature into bucolic, prosperous farms. Cole's painting reflects the debate among Americans during his day: Would civilization wipe out the wilderness or could the two coexist?

**Looking questions**

*Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.*

- What do you see? Answers will vary. Point out the lone figure.
- What is the lone figure doing? It is a self-portrait of the artist at work.
- Why did Cole make his self-portrait so small? (Hint: How does his size affect the way you see the rest of the scene?) The size of the self-portrait greatly enhances the grandeur and enormity of nature.

**Teaching Idea**

If possible, take students to visit a museum or gallery that contains contemporary landscape art. What do recent depictions of the country reveal about the way artists wish to portray the United States now, as compared to over 125 years ago? Do any of the modern artists seem to have a viewpoint or “message” they wish to convey?
II. American Art: Nineteenth-Century United States

Cross-Curricular Teaching Idea
You may want to study The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak while studying “Westward Expansion” in American History and Geography (see pp. 232–263).

Teaching Idea
Have students compile a list of adjectives and adverbs inspired by Bierstadt's painting, supporting their examples with specific references to the scene. Afterwards, have students use these words as the basis for poems that convey the feelings they might have walking straight into the landscape.

Teaching Idea
George Caleb Bingham was a master of genre scenes—images of everyday life. Have students make quick genre scene sketches of people who have jobs outdoors today. Remind them to use color and placement to create the mood they want to convey about the job. Is it a hard, tiring job? Is it seemingly easy and enjoyable?

- What two different aspects of nature did Cole present? Compare the left half to the right. On the left, Cole presented the rustic, wild side of nature. On the right side, he depicted the idyllic, pastoral side.
- What clues in the painting might lead you to believe that Cole saw the wilderness receding in the presence of civilization? What was Cole's message about civilization? Answers will vary, but he implies that civilization is good and orderly.
- This painting is called The Oxbow. Why do you think the artist chose this title? Students may identify the bow shape. Explain that the river makes the shape of an oxbow, a curved harness that is put over the necks of oxen.

Albert Bierstadt, The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak (1863)

Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) ventured to the Rocky Mountains with surveying expeditions, making sketches and photographs for his artwork. The dramatic grandeur of the mountains he depicts suggests the Alps, and indeed, Bierstadt was trained in Europe and born in Germany, but it was in America that he painted.

Bierstadt used his preparatory sketches and photographs to compose paintings back in his New York studio. He deliberately exaggerated reality, making mountains appear higher and scenes perfectly idyllic. He presented the great outdoors the way Americans in the second half of the 19th century wanted to see the West—through a romantic lens. His works were enormous; this one is over 6 feet long and 10 feet high. Bierstadt's art, in fact, did draw tourists from the East to the newly acquired western lands, much as Bingham's had done some twenty years earlier.

Looking questions
- What first catches your eye in this enormous painting? Answers will vary, though the waterfall in the middle ground is a central focus.
- How does Bierstadt draw your gaze to certain parts of the painting? He makes frequent use of contrasting lights and darks.
- How did Bierstadt suggest the huge scale of this scene? The scale of the scene is suggested in the actual size of the canvas, the towering peaks in the distance, and the way the landscape dwarfs the Native American camp.
- How did Bierstadt use atmospheric perspective to give the viewer a sense of deep space? The mountains in the background are painted with much lighter colors and much less detail so that they seem far away.
- How did Bierstadt include reference to his own role as an artist? He included the camera in the lower left center of the work.
- Why do you think Bierstadt included his camera in the painting? Answers will vary.

George Caleb Bingham, Fur Traders Descending the Missouri (1845)

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879) moved from Virginia to Missouri with his family when he was a boy. He worked as a cabinetmaker and later became a painter of portraits, traveling from place to place. Other than a few months at an art school in Pennsylvania, Bingham was self-taught until he was in his forties,
In this picture, Bingham presents a single moment of the vanishing frontier way of life. All the figures look straight at the artist, making us aware of Bingham’s role as visual recorder as well as pulling us directly into the scene. Bingham’s painting is not, however, an exact replica of reality. His alluring, harmonious colors and blanketing tranquility offer a highly romantic vision that appealed to northeastern audiences.

How did Bingham enhance the stillness of his scene? He evenly balanced the composition. The boy displays the duck he has shot, which hangs over the edge of the covered box on which the young man leans. The background trees sit nearly dead center and frame the canoe like a halo. The water is so still you can see reflections in it, almost undisturbed. This type of painting was the “tourist brochure” of the age.

**Looking questions**

Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- What is happening in this painting? Two traders with their goods and a fox are in a canoe. Explain that the painting was first called French Trapper/Half-Breed Son, which tells us more about these two figures. A “half-breed” was a crude term for someone who was half Native American.

- What mood does this painting suggest to you? Answers will vary.

- How did Bingham create the sense of a calm early morning? Answers will vary, but students should note the still water, the mist-covered background, the strong horizontal lines, and that there is little action in the work.

- Compare this work to The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak. What do the artists want us to think about the West? Answers will vary, but it should be noted that in both works, the solemn, still scenes immortalize the vanishing world of the American frontier.

**William Sidney Mount, Eel Spearing in Setauket (1845)**

Born in Setauket on New York’s Long Island, William Sidney Mount (1807–1868) is most well known for his images of everyday American life. He is particularly noteworthy for his (somewhat stereotypical) inclusion of African Americans in his work.

Mount drew inspiration from the local town and rural life on Long Island. *Eel Spearing in Setauket* draws its name from the activities surrounding the plentiful local sea life. It is an idyllic, romantic scene, but nonetheless it is a snapshot that captures the pastimes, garb, landscape, and social context of Long Island life in 1845. These scenes by Mount became wildly popular when they were made into engraved reproductions and thus became widely disbursed. They tapped into the same fascination with the simple life of American folk that Mark Twain would explore later in the century.

**Looking questions**

- What characteristics of Mount’s painting recall the work of Pieter Bruegel? The similarities include the attention to detail and the interest in the everyday life of common people.

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**Cross-curricular Teaching Idea**

Have students research which Native American peoples lived in these areas and would likely have been the ones with whom the fur traders interacted. Use this activity as a jumping-off point to study the fur trade and/or Native American/United States relations during this era.
II. American Art: Nineteenth-Century United States

- What effect do the broad horizontal bands made by the sky, land, water, and canoe have on the mood of the painting? *The bands establish a calm, tranquil mood.*

- How did Mount break the horizontal lines and keep the painting from seeming visually boring? *Mount placed some vertical trees on the left and right, the woman creates a vertical line that breaks into the sky areas, and the pole and paddle are very strong diagonals.*

- How did Mount use line and color to tie the two figures together despite the wide space between them? *If the line of the paddle were extended up it would intersect the pole. Also, bright red is used only on the woman's kerchief, and the boy's hat and cushion.*

- It has been said that a good writer could create a whole story based on one of Mount's paintings. Do you agree? Why or why not? *Answers will vary.*

- How might your thoughts about this painting be different from those of a fifth-grader seeing it in 1845? *Answers will vary.*

Art Related to the Civil War

The American Civil War tore the young nation apart. During the Civil War, many artists witnessed the war firsthand, and depicted in their artwork both the horrors and courage they observed. The American Civil War was the first American combat that was documented with photography.

**Mathew Brady Studio, Battery at Attention**

Mathew Brady was a famous portrait photographer who turned his interests to the Civil War. Although many pictures are attributed to him, Brady actually spent most of his time managing traveling photographers whom he had hired to work directly in the battlefield. These photographers captured every aspect of the war—soldiers in camps and preparing for battles, devastated ruins, officers, corpses on battlefields, ships, and railroads. These men chronicled the harsh images of war’s reality in stark black and white for the public back home. Brady exhibited some of the gruesome images in 1862. The *New York Times* wrote that the photographs of battlefield corpses from Antietam brought “home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war.” Brady’s team had made more than 7,000 images by the end of the war. However, Brady didn’t credit any of his cameramen nor allow them to retain the negatives they took on their own time.

Although Brady had many photographers working with him, he too risked his life on the battlefield. Brady said, “I had to go. A spirit in my feet said ‘Go,’ and I went.” Brady, along with many Union soldiers, had to flee after the Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run. After three days, he showed up in Washington, hungry and exhausted, where he bought more equipment, rounded up additional cameramen, and returned to the front. Later in the war he was present at Antietam and Gettysburg. He also made photographs of the rival generals, Grant and Lee. Interestingly enough, the war brought financial ruin for Brady. He had invested approximately $100,000, thinking that the government would want to buy his photographs when the war was over. However, the government showed no interest (until many years later) and Brady lost his investment, went bankrupt, and died in poverty and neglect.