

19th Century American Landscape Painting

GUIDING QUESTION

How and why do American Landscape Painters and writers take, reject and reinterpret traditions from European Baroque, Romantic and Neoclassical Landscape painting in order to create a new American story?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

To identify how American landscape painters and writers use nature itself to represent American themes.

To understand how American artists dismiss references to Classical Art in their paintings.

To recognize how these choices might be personal but might also be propagandistic.

To recognize the influence of Neoclassical and Romantic painting, especially the Romantic idea of preserving the unspoiled in nature.

Thomas Cole, View From Mount Holyoke, Northampton Massachusetts, 1836

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/08.228>

Claude Lorrain, Landscape with Jacob Wrestling with the Angel 1672 (French, 1604–

1682)[http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/cgi-](http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/cgi-bin/db2www/quickSearch.mac/gallery?selLang=English&tmCond=Claude+Lorrain)

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Claude Lorraine depicts a centrally planned Greek Temple in his painting. How did American artists of the Hudson River School (and Thomas Cole especially) react to these symbols? How does Walt Whitman's poem express this same impulse to "leave out the Temple"?

16 Dead poets, philosophs, priests,
Martyrs, artists, inventors, governments long since,
Language-shapers, on other shores,
Nations once powerful, now reduced, withdrawn, or
desolate,
I dare not proceed till I respectfully credit what you
have left, wafted hither:
I have perused it—own it is admirable, (moving awhile
among it;)
Think nothing can ever be greater—nothing can ever
deserve more than it deserves;
Regarding it all intently a long while—then dismiss-
ing it,
I stand in my place, with my own day, here

Full Poem, Starting from Paumanok 1871-72, Walt Whitman

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1871/poems/11>

2. How does Cole create a feeling of sacredness in *The Oxbow*? How does *Lorraine in Landscape with Jacob Wrestling with the Angel 1672*? Read the full poem, *Starting from Paumanok* and point out ways that Whitman makes his American story spiritual?

3. The visual arts can be used as propaganda for the goals and ideals of a government. How might American landscape images have been used as propaganda for US government or industry?

TIME LINE

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/?period=10®ion=na>

1821 Homesteading Movement begins

1825 Erie Canal opened to barge traffic

1825 Work begins on the Pennsylvania Canal System-canal link Cleveland to the Ohio River and to the Mississippi

1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) publishes his essay *Nature*; he becomes the central figure in a circle of radical thinkers and writers known as the Transcendentalists, who share a belief in a higher reality than that found in the experiences of the senses or achieved by human reason. Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) publishes *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (1854), his effort to put these philosophical ideals into practice in the real world.

1839 First covered wagons set out on Oregon Trail

1842 The American Art-Union is founded as an annual lottery open to anyone who purchases a membership; the prizes are the paintings purchased each year by the Union. All members receive an engraving each year of a popular painting. The Art-Union is enormously successful in supporting American artists and helps to develop a taste and market for American subject matter among the middle class. It is forced to cease after a court decision outlaws it as a lottery.

ASSESSMENT

Find an American landscape from the early 19th century and describe how American Landscape recreates European traditions to tell its own story. Describe these stories by explaining the personal, political, social or religious function of each image. Pick one or two events from the time line on the Metropolitan Museum's website to support your connections. You must also quote from Whitman or Emerson.

Possible Additional resource-*The Poet*, 1844, By Ralph Waldo Emerson can be quoted.

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/poet.htm>

“But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact: Orpheus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Plutarch, Dante, Swedenborg, and the masters of sculpture, picture, and poetry. For we are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes, when we know least about it. And this hidden truth, that the fountains whence all this river of Time, and its creatures, floweth, are intrinsically ideal and beautiful, draws us to the consideration of the nature and functions of the Poet, or the man of Beauty, to the means and materials he uses, and to the general aspect of the art in the present time.”