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## **Introduction to Romanticism through *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)***

Objective: Students will begin to identify values of Romanticism as illustrated through Hudson River School paintings, particularly *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)* by Thomas Cole.

### Guiding Questions:

- How does the painting *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)* differ in topic and mood from Neoclassical portraiture?
- What events and trends in the early 1800s may have contributed to this shift in artistic and literary thinking?
- Given the features and mood of Romantic painting as illustrated through *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)*, how do you anticipate that literature will change during the early 1800s?

### Brief Background:

Students' prior experience with painting has been through Neoclassical portraiture as related to the events and thinking of the late 1700s. Paintings such as *Paul Revere* by John Singleton Copley (1768) and *George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait)* by Gilbert Stuart (1796) visually represent values represented rhetorically in writing of the same period. Logic, intellect, order, balance and references to classical cultures are just a few of the ideas represented through these paintings as well as works such as *Letters from an American Farmer* by Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur, "Speech in the Virginia Convention" by Patrick Henry, *The Crisis #1* by Thomas Paine, *The Autobiography* by Benjamin Franklin and *The Declaration of Independence*.

After the Revolution, some Americans turned west to explore the vast continent beyond the settled colonies. Human intellect and achievement which stood central in Neoclassical thinking, writing and art, now seems dwarfed by the vast landscapes of the American West. For instance, the tiny figure in Cole's painting stands in direct contrast to the human figures dominating Neoclassical portraiture. No longer is human accomplishment central but the overwhelming expanse and beauty of the landscape. As the Jacksonian common man emerges on the frontier, American painting changes from order, balance and logic to the seeming chaos and moodiness of nature. These shifts in painting parallel shifts in writing from the logical rhetoric of Crevecoeur, Henry, Paine, Franklin and Jefferson to the imaginative, spiritual perspectives of writers such as William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. While these latter writers explore topics of nature and the imagination, they do so with the hope of reforming American society. This dichotomy of nature and human works is also present in *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)*.

### Procedure:

1. Review ideals of Neoclassical writing and art through examination/review of one or more Neoclassical portraits such as *Paul Revere* and/or *George Washington (Lansdowne Portrait)*.
2. Anticipation: Ask students what aspects of Neoclassicism are present in their lives. (They are likely to discuss the structure and rules of school, the focus on intellectual achievement within the school day, etc.). Then ask students what aspects of Neoclassicism trouble them personally. (They

are likely to also make comments about desire to express themselves and their individuality rather than always conforming to the needs of school society and structure.)

Have students imagine life in the cities of the Northeast in the early 1800s. Have them recall details from writers they have studied, particularly Crèvecoeur's description of the stages of American development in *Letters from an American Farmer*.

Now have them imagine they are turning toward the West. What would the frontier have been like? What features are "to be discovered" in the early 1800s? How might travel and exploration affect individuals? How would Neoclassical ideals hold up under these new circumstances?

3. Examine the artifact: Provide a copy of Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)*. Projecting it is preferable to looking at a small copy because there are tiny details that students will miss if they can't see a large copy. Before discussion, have students make notes about what they see in the painting, particularly the ways in which it compares to or contrasts with Neoclassical portraiture. Have them write down any questions they have.

Begin discussion with students' personal responses to the painting. Guide them to qualify their responses beyond just "I like it" or "I don't like it." What details of the work cause them to feel a certain way? How do these feelings compare to their responses to Neoclassical painting? Why?

What questions do they have about the painting? At this point it may be necessary to point out specific details such as Cole sketching behind rocks in the foreground and Cole's umbrella, stool and sketchbook. Students might also miss the raft in the river and the tiny details of settled society (houses, cultivated fields) on the right side of the painting.

After initial discussion, have students write down a "statement of argument." What do they think Cole is saying through the painting? What details support this statement?

Engage students engage in full-class discussion of their interpretation of Cole's message. As a result of this conversation, have students make a list of values they believe are significant to Romanticism as illustrated through this painting and their previous discussion of shifts in American thought/experience.

4. Because this is an introductory lesson, students will continue to examine art and literature to more fully understand major concepts of Romanticism. Paintings to compare to *View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow)* may include other paintings by Thomas Cole (especially *Kaaterskill Fall*), Ashur Brown Durand (especially *Kindred Spirits*), and Albert Bierstadt.

Through the unit on Romanticism, students will also develop their understanding of major ideas through literature such as "To a Waterfowl" and "Thanatopsis" by William Cullen Bryant, "Rip Van Winkle" by Washington Irving, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Nature" by Ralph Waldo Emerson and excerpts from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau.

5. Assessment: As part of the assessment for the Romanticism unit, provide students with a Hudson River School painting which they have not previously discussed. Ask them to write an analysis of how the painting reveals major concepts of Romanticism. Students must provide specific details from the painting to support their observations. If appropriate, ask students to connect the major ideas in the painting to specific pieces of literature they have studied throughout the unit.