



RIVER SUMMER CURRICULUM: Art & Literature

Art History - Hudson River School

Seeing the Hudson Valley through the eyes of the ‘Hudson River School’

ABSTRACT: In the mid-nineteenth century, paintings of landscapes along the Hudson were widely celebrated as the first “American” school of art. These painters turned away from traditional academic subjects, which frequently referenced European culture and history, to focus on the beauty of their own environment. Painters and patrons alike turned their gaze toward the American landscape as an escape from increasingly industrialized and socially turbulent cities, as an outlet for their interest in natural history and as an inspiration for metaphysical contemplation.

Students in this unit will gain insight into these artists’ practices by creating their own representations of a natural environment according to the principles of Romanticism. In so doing, they will hone their own powers of observation and exercise judgment over the selection and depiction of what lies before them. This will not only help them understand what makes a picture “good,” but will also help them understand that every representation is an interpretation, as it takes the overwhelmingly complex and diverse material of physical world and translates it according to principles and rules.

PROJECT DEVELOPER:

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LEARNING GOALS:

Skills - Students will be able to-

- Use sketching as a means of focusing their process of observation.
- Analyze a visual representation such as a landscape painting, discussing elements such as composition and technique.
- Understand some of the reasons behind an artists’ choices, including historical notions of the value and significance of the natural world as resource, as microcosm and as divine creation.



Insights – Students will -

- Gain an appreciation of the diversity and richness of the natural environment of the Hudson Valley through observation of its geology, plant life, waterways and atmosphere
- Be introduced to the role of this landscape and its representation in American art history and the Hudson river School's relationship to global artistic and historical developments, including the rise of the aesthetic notions of the sublime and the picturesque in response to the industrialization of culture.
- Understand and interpret the presence of ideological meanings in visual representations

MATERIALS & PREPARATION NEEDED:

1. Special supplies or materials needed and source for any unusual supplies.

Sketchpads, charcoal, pencils and pastels

Digital camera

Optional; Digital equipment for classroom projection (color reproductions may also be used)

Optional: viewing and framing devices such as a rectangular frame cut from cardboard, a camera obscura, camera lucida or a Claude glass. While these are historically accurate tools students may also use the viewfinder of a camera to select and compose views.

2. Sites

It is recommend that the class take place at any site on the Hudson River Art Trail. The Trail brochure (<http://www.thomascole.org/trail/about.html>), which describes 8 locations within 15 miles of Catskill, New York) which are the subject of paintings by major Hudson River School artists. Some of these are close to the highway and others require a hike—teachers can make choices based on the mobility of the class. The Catskills region is a recommended area since the scenic vistas in this section of the Hudson Valley inspired a wide array of painters who depicted both the river and the surrounding peaks, forests and waterways, many doing so while guests at the Catskill Mountain House near North-South Lake.

However, for teachers who cannot make it to this region there are many locations along the river watershed with spectacular vistas that can be selected. Any of the following trips will work: Storm King – or across from Storm King in Cold Spring; West Point; Bear Mountain's Perkin's Tower; Hook Mountain or across in Sleepy Hollow, downriver in Nyack or in the Palisades or up in the Adirondacks.



SKILLS & UNDERSTANDINGS NEEDED:

1. Before completing this activity students should have an understanding of the following:

- **The aesthetic categories “picturesque” and “sublime”.** These two categories are central to the painting in the mid 19th century, and to the Hudson River School and were familiar to middle-class tourists and viewers of art. The Picturesque describes landscapes which offer a variety of natural features (such as mountains, forest, open or cultivated fields, and waterways), and often show a balanced relationship between man and nature by including farms or settlements alongside areas of wilderness. Compositional strategies emphasize the harmonious interaction between features and often invite the viewer to explore the scene figuratively and literally by gradually opening up a deep view. The concept of the sublime was developed to discuss the experience of the overwhelming power of nature—usually as a metaphor for understanding the overwhelming power of a divine Creator—through the contemplation of signs of natural creation and destruction, including vast and foreboding landscape features such as peaks, powerful waterfalls and cliffs as well as signs of dramatic geological and meteorological events such as storms. An introduction to these concepts is included in the readings below
- **The importance of the Hudson as a route and destination during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.** The opening of the Erie Canal made the Hudson a major throughway for the transportation of goods in and out of New York City, contributing to the rise of a wealthy elite who could also turn to the river for leisure travel. Students should have a basic sense of the industrial revolution and the changing conditions of city life in order to understand the value and appeal of landscape scenery. As more Americans turned away from agricultural work and engage in wage-based labor in urban centers, the landscape took on new meanings as a cultural resource instead of the source of a livelihood; and tourists began to study natural history and engage contemporary scientific developments that helped explain the structure, history, and significance of the natural world. Students may want to look at visual representations of the city or documents related to urban work in this era as well as perusing the Romantic literature set in the upper Hudson by authors of the time including James Fennimore Cooper and Washington Irving.
- **You may also want students to think about the social role of art.** In Europe, the traditional patrons of art prior to this were the Church and the nobility and it reinforced the power of church and state by depicting significant figures engaged in significant acts. As a secular democracy, the United States had no national institution dedicated to cultivating visual artists and many were skeptical about the importance of art to a democracy. The Hudson River School was the first artistic movement to gain widespread popular support, and it did so because middle class patrons purchased paintings and reproductions of the landscape. This subject matter was seen as different from the history paintings and portraiture of the past, in its accessibility to all, regardless of religion or level of education, and the inherent nationalism of the subject matter. For those who participated in the burgeoning Hudson River tourism, such pictures could offer a confirmation and lasting memento of the trip and the ideas that motivated it.



PRE-ACTIVITY READINGS: The following is a list of suggested pre-activity readings:

1. List of suggested readings & resources for the instructor:

Note: If the instructor has little background in Art History: Marcia Pointon, *History Of Art: a Student's Handbook* (Routledge, 2002)

Others:

Bermingham, Ann. *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860*. Berkeley: University of California, 1986: Chapter 2, the picturesque decade, for a description of the basic elements of a picturesque composition.

Wallach, Alan. "Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy." *Arts* 56, no. November (1981): 94-106. For an introduction to the historical context of the HRS.

Other useful resources:

Bedell, Rebecca. *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Voorsanger, Catherine Hoover, and John K. Howat, eds. *Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825-1861*. New York and New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2000.

Ferber, Linda. *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape* (2007)

2. List of suggested readings for the students

Novak, Barbara. *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (Oxford, 2007 (originally published 1980): 3-40 (Part I)

Gilpin, Sir William. "On Picturesque Travel," from *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty* (1794) [available at <http://www.ualberta.ca/~dmiall/Tintern07/gilpine2.htm>]

Cole, Thomas . "Essay on American Scenery," *The American Magazine*, n.s. 1 (Jan. 1836): 1-12 [available at <http://www.geocities.com/steletti/pages/scenery.html> or <http://www.writingstudies.umn.edu/courses/rhet8520/winter99/cole.html>]

B. PRE-ACTIVITY EXERCISES

The unit should begin with a discussion of what made a successful landscape composition in the time of the Hudson River painters. This could take place in a classroom or at the site of the activity, but it will require students having read or having access to the assigned texts.



The discussion should include Gilpin's writings of how landscapes engage the viewer by offering varieties of texture and tone and by inviting the eye to wander among different sites of interest and into the depths of a view. Students should think about how these things are enhanced by different compositional choices, including framing, orientation, and emphasis. It can be helpful for students to have a viewing device such as a small rectangular frame cut from cardboard or the viewfinder of a camera to experiment with looking at the landscape as a composition and seeing how small adjustments in point of view change the appearance of a scene.

The discussion should also address what is included in a landscape to give a sense of history, particularly American history if possible (in reference to Cole's essay) as well as the variety of nature (rocks, water, foliage, mountains), the passage of time (plants at different stages of growth, ruins or signs of geological change, other forms of decay, references to the season), and the presence or absence of man.

DEVELOPMENT OF ACTIVITY:

1. Time Allocation:

1.75-2.25 hours plus any travel time: 30 minutes discussion of the picturesque, etc. (as outlined above), 45 minutes of sketching, 30-60 minutes discussion afterwards. Adjust time appropriately if you have chosen a site that requires hiking in and out and if you are incorporating classroom or museum time.

2. Motivation – a starting focus for engaging the students:

As the title of the lesson suggests, the motivation for the project could be helping students move from looking to seeing—going from observing the huge variety of features of this landscape to thinking through how to focus their gaze and interpret what is seen. Thinking about this can lend a theme to a hike, allowing them to seek out examples of the interconnectedness of diverse landscape elements or of the life cycles of the natural world. A related motivation could be that such focus would result in taking better pictures. One could have each student make a photograph of the landscape before the discussion/activity and at the end before leaving. See if the through the discussion and the process of sketching according to the “rules” of landscape resulted in different kinds of photographs at the end.

3. Step by Step directions:

1. Each student takes a photograph or holds up a framing device to the landscape. Have them notice the challenge of having so much visual information in front of you—textures, colors, materials, planes of focus, etc. How much should you include? what should you focus on or emphasize?

(take home point: nature is overwhelmingly dense).



2. If you haven't done this in the classroom, discuss landscape aesthetics as outlined above in the pre-activity. If you *have* done this, review landscape aesthetics as a strategy to make choices about what to represent and how to represent it – ***(take home point: aesthetics is a means of making choices about what to represent, how, and why).***

3. Distribute sketching materials and ask each student to choose one medium (pencil for an emphasis on line, charcoal if selecting to focus on tone, or pastel for color representations and shades) and work on a single composition for 20 minutes, paying attention to composition and thinking about how their materials affect both the content and style of their composition. After 20 minutes, have them switch mediums and do the same thing again. It is important to do this twice, as many students will find with their first drawing that 20 minutes is not a lot of time and will make different choices about how to work on the second piece, perhaps moving from outline to detail or making a tighter composition.

4. **Optional:** Students take another photograph, this time using their insights to make a better composition.

The following steps can take place on site, in a classroom or at a museum:

5. Have each student select one of their pieces to share and place it in a “gallery” on the ground. Have them go around and describe their experience of the exercise: Why did they choose the composition they worked on? What aspects of the picturesque or sublime were they trying to attain? How successful were they in achieving their goals? Do they have any thoughts about why they were or were not successful in this? How did their choice of medium impact what they drew? How did the process of sketching change the way they looked at the landscape? Were there things that they noticed that they wouldn't have noticed otherwise? What aspects of the landscape were most difficult to capture? Did they draw just what they saw or did they embellish or adjust parts of their work (as Gilpin suggests)? When each student has said his or her piece, others may also want to comment on the work.

(take away points for steps 3-5: landscape art is a discipline and a challenging one; seeing and representating are two different acts; medium affects what an artist can capture)

6. Present students with examples of Hudson River landscape painting and ask them to analyze what they see, describing the artists' choices and interpreting their meanings. Depending on timing and class size, this work can be done in a large group or by breaking the group into smaller units. The analysis can be based on looking at color reproductions, using projected images, or by looking at works in a gallery. Dealing with physical paintings in person is the best option, for it not only allows students to think more concretely about medium, but it also allows them to see works in the context of one another, which will lead to greater insight about the artists' interactions with each other and their viewers (and perhaps give insight into the museum's ideas about how to display such works).



(take away point: looking at these paintings is changed when the viewers have a) studied how and why they were made and b) confronted the challenge of landscape representation themselves.)

Museum Visit:

If it is possible, it is good to follow this exercise up with a visit to a museum to view Hudson River paintings, so that students can appreciate the choices made by painters in their own work. They can reflect on what is observed, how a scene is composed, references to time, history and human presence and the influence of medium in the work. If this is not possible, viewing projected images in class will provide a lesser but still valuable experience. There are many sites that have collections of Hudson River School Images for viewing.

Some Museums to visit and other sources for Hudson River School imagery:

Museums (with relevant websites):

Thomas Cole National Historical Site
WWW.thomascole.org

Olana State Historical Site
<http://www.olana.org/>

Albany Institute of History and Art
<http://www.albanyinstitute.org/z-%20AIHA%20website/5-Collections/Hudson%20River%20School/Hudson%20River%20School.main.htm>

Newington-Cropsey Foundation
<http://www.newingtoncropsey.com/default.htm>

Metropolitan Museum of Art:
<http://www.metmuseum.org>

New York Public Library's Hudson River Portfolio (prints and photographs, not paintings):
<http://legacy.www.nypl.org/research/hudson/>

New-York Historical Society
https://www.nyhistory.org/web/default.php?section=exhibits_collections&page=exhibit_detail&id=4193233

Hudson River Museum:
<http://www.hrm.org/collections/landscapes.html>



Digital Collections:

Desmond Fish Library Hudson River School Collection:

http://dfl.highlands.com/DFL_Painters/Index.html

The Hudson River School Art Archive:

<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/hudsonriver.html>

AskArt Hudson River School Painters:

http://www.askart.com/askart/interest/hudson_river_school_painters_1.aspx?id=9

Art Experts: Hudson River School:

http://www.artexpertswebsite.com/pages/artists/hudson_school.php

SlideServe: The Hudson River School

<http://www.slideserve.com/presentation/2027/The-Hudson-River-School>

INTERDISCIPLINARY OPTIONS:

This topic easily lends itself to an interdisciplinary activity.

Geology: This activity has been successfully combined with fieldtrips that included geology. A group hike to examine and discuss the rocks and formations in the Catskills, or the Palisades Sill or the Hudson Highlands can lead into a rich discussion of the Hudson River School painters. This is particularly valuable because most Hudson River painters were naturalists who would have been able to identify geological and botanical specimens in the environment. Any natural science would be valuable in this regard. Students could then compare the processes of looking through the eyes of a natural scientist and an artist and might conclude that there are overlaps as well as divergences.

History: Another interdisciplinary approach could be to combine it with a historical focus. The Hudson River School painted at a time when America was young, yet being industrialized at a rapid rate. Examining the influences and resources that drove industrialization in the New World, and the ultimate impact on the people and the landscape would be an interesting accompanying discussion to the art piece. The Hudson River School painters could be considered some of the first New World environmentalists as well as being naturalists. Their juxtaposition of the contamination by industry set against the raw natural settings is evidenced in several paintings. A discussion of how industrialization made its way into some of the Hudson River School art could also be of interest.



English Literature: This activity can also be successfully combined with an early American English literature class. The Hudson River School blossomed at approximately the same period of time that the early American literature field was finding its voice and establishing itself. Authors like James Fennimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau wrote of an America that was deeply connected to its landscape and wilderness; an America in the process of discovering her own unique identity – one that was separate and distinct from that of Europe.

Environmental Science/Conservation: The Hudson River School and the early American authors significantly influenced the early conservationists and served to encourage their protection of large areas of land to be set aside for parks and wilderness areas. It can be argued that this early influence of the Hudson River School laid the groundwork for the Storm King lawsuit, which over a century later established a legal precedent for citizens/conservationists to sue in order to protect the public interest, and determined that protection of natural resources, the environment and aesthetics was a citizen's right.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

1. *Changing the Level – (a) Adding to the Activity -*

The sketches and photographs could be worked into a digital presentation about what was learned on the trip or an exhibition with labels relating the pieces to the main ideas of the unit. A higher level group could also result in students writing an analysis of a Hudson River painting using the insights they developed in their own work.

(b) *Simplifying the Activity-*

For a less rigorous activity, students could do a single sketch and have no follow-up at a museum. At the simplified level the important points for the students to take away are the importance of the landscape to the Hudson River School of art, and the role the Hudson River School of Art played in gaining 'standing' for New World artists on an international level.

2. *Extension or Supplementary Activities:*

I try to make my students aware of the degree to which the picturesque has influenced the design of public spaces throughout the Americas. It was a moving force behind Central Park, for example, but it also has a lot to do with the construction of spaces around public buildings. Students should look at the landscape aesthetics in spaces they frequent.



3. *Tough Questions – Some tough questions that might arise that the lesson plan provider might be aware of and can provide answers to in order to scaffold a first time instructor*

The tough question for art historians is “why does art from 150 years ago matter”? Students might be challenged to think about why American support begins with the Hudson River School and how the reverence for nature developed in this period continues to shape our culture—not only through lasting artifacts of Picturesque ideology such as Central Park or the National Park system, but also through more recent developments such as the environmental movement or the emphasis on sustain local ecosystems. With an understanding about the constructed nature of visual representations and an awareness of some of the principles that lie behind these works, students can gain a more sophisticated approach to reading the messages of a broad array of visual imagery. Finally, facing the challenge of making a “good” picture will give students an introduction to the idea that art making is as much about discipline as it is about expression.

4. *Common Misconceptions & Mistakes –*

Many people think making art is easy and/or that it is the product of an artist’s imagination. The sketching will be hard for some, and this may be discouraging.

A lot of people find landscapes “beautiful” without understanding that aesthetic standards are historic constructs. They may be reluctant to analyze this in themselves. Others may find nature boring or uninteresting and need encouragement to undertake the exercise for its educational value.

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