Jeannie Reese
School:
California

19th Century American Landscapes/The Hudson River School

Grade Level

High School

Subject Area

Art, American Literature and U.S. History

Lesson Time

Lesson Description:
Provide a brief description of your lesson. State the topic/issue you wish to address. Explain the relevance of this lesson to your subject area and curriculum goals. Describe how the lesson will engage students in the design process

Students will look at three Hudson River Valley paintings, read and write about pertinent essays from the time and view part of the documentary *National Parks: America's Best Idea*. They will then brainstorm the qualities that characterize the work of those artists. Finally, students go to a local park and use some of these qualities to create their own landscape that expresses an environmental or social/political message.

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to answer the following essential questions:

- How does art reflect the values and concerns of the society that produced it?
- How can artists today convey contemporary values in their own works?

Objectives:
List what students will be able to do after this lesson. ex: Students will be able to understand and address how landscape paintings influenced the move to the west.

Students will develop the ability to

- Use art vocabulary to describe the formal qualities of a painting
- Recognize the outstanding characteristics of the Hudson River School
- Develop critical thinking skills to see connections between 19th century landscape painting and essays/correspondence of the day
- Draw connections between historical circumstances and art
- demonstrate their understanding for the ways in which landscape paintings can speak to environmental issues
- Apply the principles learned from the Hudson River School to paint landscapes that record their own landscape and convey ideas about their world today.

State Standards:
List all State Standards covered in your lesson.

1.1 Identify and use the principles of design to discuss, analyze, and write about visual aspects in the environment and in works of art, including their own.
1.2 Describe the principles of design as used in works of art, focusing on dominance and subordination.
2.1 Solve a visual arts problem that involves the effective use of the elements of art and the principles of design.
2.2 Prepare a portfolio of original two-and three-dimensional works of art that reflects refined craftsmanship and technical skills.
2.4 Review and refine observational drawing skills.
2.5 Create an expressive composition, focusing on dominance and subordination.
2.6 Create a two or three-dimensional work of art that addresses a social issue.
3.3 Identify and describe trends in the visual arts and discuss how the issues of time, place, and cultural influence are reflected in selected works of art.
4.2 Compare the ways in which the meaning of a specific work of art has been affected over time because of changes in interpretation and context.

Resources:
List additional resource materials, ex: technology equipment, reading materials (title and author), internet sites (URL).

Picturing America Image
Thomas Cole
View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow), 1836

Picturing America Image
Albert Bierstadt
Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California, 1865

Newark Museum Image
Frederic Edwin Church
Twilight, "Short Arbiter 'Twixt Day and Night," 1850
Newark Museum Collection 56.43

- Green Museum's Essay on Art and Ecology: http://www.greenmuseum.org/c/aen/Earth/signs.php

- Technology and the Hudson River School: http://www.nobts.edu/Faculty/ItoR/LemkeSW/Personal/hrsedentech.html

- **All that Is Glorious Around Us (Hudson River School Painters) (6/22/99)**
- **Art and Nature: The Hudson River School, Paintings from the Albany Institute of History & Art (7/27/99)**
- **Art & Nature: The Hudson River School Tours Nationally (8/4/99)**
- **Art and Nature: The Hudson River School (10/14/99)**
- **This Tranquil Land: Hudson River Paintings from the Hersen Collection (1/14/00)**
- **Art and Nature: The Hudson River School (1/20/00)**
- **All that is Glorious: Paintings from the Hudson River School (2/24/00)**
- **Art and Nature: The Hudson River School (3/7/00)**
- **Art & Nature: The Hudson River School (6/15/00)**
- **Hudson River School Visions: The Landscapes of Sanford R. Gifford (8/8/03)**
- **Hudson River School: Masterworks from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (8/26/03)**
- **A Wilder Image Bright: Hudson River School Paintings from the Manoogian Collection (1/29/04)**
- **Hudson River School: Masterworks from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (3/13/04)**

Materials:
List materials needed to complete this lesson, ex: handouts, supplies, etc.

Canvas
Paper
oil paint acrylic paint, oil pastels
cameras if necessary
pencils
sketchbooks

Vocabulary:
List and define new words or terms that you will be introducing in this lesson.

Hudson River School:
a group of American painters of the mid-19th century whose works are characterized by a highly romantic treatment of landscape, especially along the Hudson River.

Landscape
a section or expanse of rural scenery, usually extensive, hat can be seen from a single viewpoint.

Sublime
impressing the mind with a sense of grandeur or power; inspiring awe

Symbolism
the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character.

Procedures:
Give step-by-step directions for the implementation of this lesson. Things to remember: educators from across the country will have the opportunity to use your lesson. Remember to be detailed and precise. Procedures should be a minimum of 650 words.

Introduction

1. **Show students Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke* (The Oxbow), 1836**

2. **Using Visual Thinking Strategies, ask them:**

- "What's going on in this picture?" Let them observe the work silently and take notes.
- Elicit verbal responses and follow up with "What do you see that makes you say that?"

- Keep the discussion moving by asking, “What more can we find?”

3. Explain/Discuss the following points:

- The piece was painted by Thomas Cole, the accepted “founder” of the Hudson River School (HRS) in 1836. Discuss the Hudson River School and Thomas Cole using the Picturing America resources or other books and sites.
- Let students know that they will be seeing two more Hudson River School works, reading and responding to related essays, viewing a documentary, constructing a list of qualities of this movement/style and creating a landscape of their own.

4. Have the class compare and contrast the right and left side of the painting using a Venn diagram with the teacher modeling its use. Discuss.

Literacy Connection

While the painting and the Venn Diagram is still available to students, have them read Cole’s essay below and then respond to this prompt:

What are Cole’s feelings about the American wilderness? What are his hopes for the future of this land in 1836? How are his words reflected in his painting, A View from Mount Holyoke?

A very few generations have passed away since this vast tract of the American continent, now the United States, rested in the shadow of primeval forests . . . or lay in those wide grassy plains called prairies-- The Gardens of the Desert, these The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful. And, although an enlightened and increasing people have broken in upon the solitude, and with activity and power wrought changes that seem magical, yet the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.

It is the most distinctive, because in civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified--the extensive forests that once overshadowed a great part of it have been felled--rugged mountains have been smoothed, and impetuous rivers turned from their courses to accommodate the tastes and necessities of a dense population--the once tangled wood is now a grassy lawn; the turbulent brook a navigable stream--crags that could not be removed have been crowned with towers, and the rudest valleys tamed by the plough.
And to this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away: for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God the creator--they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.
Excerpt from: Cole, Thomas. "Essay on American Scenery". *American Monthly Magazine*

1, (January 1836) 1-12

As an alternative, this passage from Emerson's *Nature* might also work:

Possible prompt: *What are the connections between this essay by Emerson and the painting by Cole?*

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintences, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

Nature- Ralph Waldo Emerson

6. Have students discuss their responses in a think/pair/share format. Ask students about the historical significance of the piece (especially for Juniors studying U.S. History at this time) by asking: What was happening to the wilderness in the early/mid 1800's in America? What, then, might the clear sky and the stormy sky symbolize?

Art Connection

Have students view Frederic Edwin Church *Twilight, "Short Arbiter 'Twixt Day and Night*," 1850. (Newark Museum). Explain that this piece was produced by Church, who was Cole's student and part of the second generation of Hudson River painters.

1. Ask students to observe the work and take notes in their sketchbooks about the subject matter and formal qualities of the work (using art vocabulary such as movement, contrast, etc.) Ask students to share their observations.

2. Teachers can discuss or have students read a brief introduction to Church's life/work.

3. Ask students, "What was happening in the country in the 1850's?" How might Church's piece reflect the social turmoil of the time? (As stated in the Newark Museum publication of selected works, the "ominous sky indicates an impending storm, a

recognized symbol of social turmoil in the paintings and sermons of the period… At a time when many feared that the nation was heading irrevocably toward civil war, Church suggests that the American paradise is indeed threatened." Holly Connor, Curator, 19th Century American Art.

4. Display both Cole's *The Oxbow* and Church's *Twilight, Short Arbiter* Ask students to make a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the two pieces. Think/Pair/Share. Create a class list of qualities that the two works share, and post on board; this will be the beginning of the list of HRS characteristics that the class constructs.

5. Based on students' compilation of characteristics, segue into a discussion of the "sublime" in Romantic landscape painting. What makes these two works sublime?

Artistic Connection

1. Show students Albert Bierstadt's, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 1865. (Picturing America collection)

2. Using Visual Thinking Strategies, ask them:

- "What's going on in this picture?" Let them observe the work silently and take notes.
- Elicit verbal responses and follow up with "What do you see that makes you say that?"
- Keep the discussion moving by asking, "What more can we find?"

3. Have students read about Bierstadt and his travels. (Picturing America resources)

4. Ask students:
What national event was the country recovering from in 1865 when this was painted?
Americans were recovering from the Civil War.
What message might Bierstadt have been trying to convey with this piece and what elements in this work convey this?
The shining glow in the background may have been a symbol of hope for a better future.

5. Ask about student's experiences in Yosemite or other parks. How did that make them feel? What feelings does it seem Bierstadt wanted viewers to feel? *Perhaps a sense of awe at the beautiful sight.*

6. Have students choose one of the quotes from John Muir below and have them respond to these prompts:

What feelings towards nature is John Muir expressing in the quote that you have

chosen? What references (use specific words/phrases) do you find that demonstrates that Muir's expressions were above the ordinary? Sublime?

"No temple made with hands can compare with Yosemite... the grandest of all special temples of Nature."

"I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in contact with the new-made fields and plants of Eden; but I do so no more, because I have discovered that I also live in "creation's dawn." The morning stars still sing together, and the world, not yet half made, becomes more beautiful every day. "

"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves. "

"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and give strength to body and soul."

7. Have students share their responses. Ask: How might people who had never traveled east of the Mississippi in 1865 - responded to Bierstadt's painting and Muir's words?

8. Show students excerpts from Ken Burns' *National Parks:* *America's Best Idea* as they relate to Muir, Yosemite and early tourism. *The documentary chronicles Muir's exploration of Yosemite; features many quotes from his correspondence; and tells of his influence on the U.S. government to ultimately preserve Yosemite as a national park. Unfortunately and ironically, before it was protected by the government, it was overrun by tourists in the 1870's who came out to see what Muir and Bierstadt saw; commercial enterprises did much damage to Yosemite at that time.*

9. Ask students to respond in a reflection: What lessons might we take from the Hudson River School paintings that we could apply to our understanding of the landscape today? How might contemporary artists be influential in conveying these ideas?

10. Display all three Hudson River School paintings for students.

11. Have students modify their list of qualities now that they have examined all three works and finalize a list of characteristics that exemplify Hudson River School paintings.

Characteristics may include

- Landscape

- Atmospheric elements such as clouds, fog, sunset - Sublime
- Real features sometimes integrated with ideal characteristics
- Parts of composition were sometimes made up or exaggerated
- Reflected national/social concerns
- Huge canvasses
- Expressed the artist's feelings
- Satisfied public's curiosity for distant lands

Student landscape painting

Students take a field trip to a local park where they sketch in their notebooks and/or take photographs that record their impressions. Upon their return, they synthesize their sketches or photographs into one composition that they transfer to a painting.

Students are to use devices that Hudson River School painters used – and they need to include a symbolic message – either environmental or social/political

- the addition of atmospheric effects the composition can be a composite from different features of the landscape they viewed
- features of the landscape might be exaggerated

Students complete the assignment by writing a mock letter to a friend, explaining the intention of their work.

Assessment:
Provide an assessment to measure student learning.

1. Teachers can grade student sketchbooks that contain notes, reflections, sketches.

2. Students' paintings can be evaluated on the basis of their thoughtful response to the criteria, t execution of the landscape and their letter that explains their work.