

EXPERIENCING NATURE

LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS

CLASS EXPERIENCE

ART AND LANGUAGE ARTS

GRADE LEVEL: 3–12

BASED ON

William Louis Sonntag, *Landscape*, 1854, Gift of Alfred T. Goshorn, 1886.758

America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait for metres. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" Essays, 1844

OBJECTIVE

- Students will learn about the Hudson River School artists, including Cincinnati artist William Louis Sonntag.
- Students will examine the Art Museum's Landscape by Sonntag, identifying how the artist created aerial or atmospheric perspective.
- Students will observe and sketch regional topography and create their own landscape painting with aerial perspective.
- Students will learn that "nature" served as the primary inspiration for many writers of the mid-nineteenth century, as they read works by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and/or Emily Dickinson.
- Students will write a reflective paper about their own encounter with nature.

BACKGROUND

In the mid-nineteenth century, many Americans believed that the pristine wilderness of the West symbolized national pride, future prosperity, and the presence of God. Hudson River School landscapists—beginning with Thomas Cole and Asher B. Duran and later Albert Bierstadt, Frederick Church, and Thomas Moran—painted highly realistic scenes of America inspired by the nation's unspoiled land. Cincinnati earned the so-called title Western School of Landscape Painting, as the thriving commerce and proximity to nature encouraged exceptional local artists, including Thomas Worthington Whittredge, Robert Scott Duncanson, and William Sonntag. In 1839, John Cranch came to the city from New York, praising the Ohio scenery by writing the following:

This is beautiful country—the beautiful Ohio—winding among lovely hills—crowned with forests—The scenery round Cincinnati is rich in varied beauties of hill and valey [sic] and wood—you have only to take a few steps out of the city to find yourself rambling over green hills and through dense forests—and such trees—as we have out here... the famed Valombrosias of Tuscany is nothing to the thousand valombrosias here—a fig for your Italian scenery. (The Golden Age, pg.14.)

In the Hudson River School manner, the meditative landscapes of William Sonntag captured foliage, hills, and ponds of the Ohio River valley, and the mountains and streams of Kentucky, West Virginia, and the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Cincinnati artist's Landscape illustrates a poetic mood with its sweeping clouds, lavender hills, and lush foliage reflected in the calm stream. Sonntag's tight style of painting details a foreground containing two figures. The seated fisherman patiently waits for a tug on his fishing pole, while the standing figure seems to be looking beyond the water's edge, perhaps observing the beauty of the natural setting. Sonntag's sensitivity to light is especially evident in this work, which was donated in 1886, by Alfred T. Goshorn, the first director of the Cincinnati Art Museum.



VOCABULARY

Definitions from Merriam-Webster Online (www.m-w.com)

Hudson River School: A group of American landscape painters of the mid-nineteenth century, who took a Romantic approach to depicting the Hudson River Valley, and of the Catskill, Berkshire, and White Mountains, as well as lands further west

landscapist: a painter of a view of natural inland scenery

aerial perspective: the expression of space in painting by gradation of color and distinctness

mask: to cover for protection

wet-on-wet: a watercolor painting technique where wet paint is applied to wet paper

transcendentalism: a philosophy that asserts the primacy of the spiritual and transcendental over the material and empirical

CONCEPT

In this lesson, students will learn that Cincinnati artist, William Sonntag, used aerial perspective to create depth in this intimate painting. After sketching from nature, students will create their own landscapes based on the topography of their region. They will also experience the inspiration of nature through writers of Sonntag's era, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. Finally, students will write a reflective paper about their own encounter with nature.

MATERIALS | PROCEDURES

- watercolor paper
- watercolor paints
- ½ in. and #2 brushes
- tempera paint
- acrylic paint
- watercolor pencils
- Friskit

NATIONAL STANDARDS

VISUAL ARTS

Landscape artists use aerial or atmospheric perspective to create the illusion of depth in their work. Ask students to look closely at Sonntag's *Landscape* (1854). Help students recognize that as objects in the painting recede into space, color intensity, textural details, and object size all diminish.

If possible, students will create thumbnail sketches of the local landscape, a park or other natural environment, concentrating on trees, rocks, hills, mountains, and a water source, such as a river, pond, or creek. Include a human element, such as the two fishermen in Sonntag's landscape. Ask students to observe and note how color, details, and object size diminish as distance increases.

When students return to the class, have them lightly sketch their favorite drawing on 12 x 18 inch heavy sulphite or watercolor paper. Students may wish to mask areas before they use the wet-on-wet watercolor technique to paint the sky and water reflections. Use tempera or acrylic paints to paint the middle and foreground. Details in the foreground could also be created using watercolor pencils.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Many American writers of the mid-nineteenth century linked nature and humankind. Discuss the meaning of the following quote with your students:

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,
to front only the facts of life,
and see if I could not learn what it had to teach.*
Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

Elementary students may read nature-inspired poems in Poetry for Young People: Emily Dickinson, such as the following:

*The bee is not afraid of me,
I know the butterfly,
The pretty people in the woods
Receive me cordially.*

*The brooks laugh louder when I come,
The breezes madder play.
Wherefore, mine eyes, thy silver mists?
Wherefore, O summer's day?*

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

Intermediate students will read and interpret poems by Walt Whitman (1819–1892), such as passages from his *Leaves of Grass*. Advanced students will read essays by Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), such as *Walden* (also known as *Life in the Woods*) from 1854, or Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803–1882) *Nature*, expressing the philosophy of transcendentalism. Much like the Hudson River School artists, Emerson believed that the divine could be experienced directly through nature. Thoreau's account of living two years in the second-growth forest around Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, encourages readers "to seek to know yourselves" through a simplified, natural life.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast William Sonntag's *Landscape* (1845) to one of the following Cincinnati Art Museum paintings: Robert S. Duncanson, *Blue Hole, Little Miami River*, 1851, 1926.18.; Thomas Worthington Whittredge, *Landscape in Westphalia*, 1853, 1949.82; Thomas Cole, *View Across Frenchman's Bay from Mt. Desert Island, After a Squall*, 1845, 1925.569; or Frederic Edwin Church, *The Falls of the Tequendama near Bogata, New Granada*, 1854, 1971.30.
2. In the 1830s, Cincinnati was considered a thriving western city, and its proximity to the wild beauty of nature provided inspiration for landscape painters. Explore the Art Museum's contemporary works to discover other artists influenced by nature.
3. In the 1840's and 1850's, Cincinnati became a burgeoning market. Research the city's history to discover how Nicholas Longworth and other patrons supported the landscapists of this period.

RESOURCES

- Alexander, Eliot. *Three Hundred Years of American Painting*. New York: Time Incorporated, 1957.
- Aronson, Julie, editor. *The Cincinnati Wing: The Story of Art in the Queen City*. Ohio Press: Athens, Ohio, 2003.
- Betz, Adrienne. *Treasury of Quotations for Children*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1998.
- Cincinnati Art Museum. *The Golden Age: Cincinnati Painters of the Nineteenth Century*. 1979.
- Kerley, Barbara. *Walt Whitman: Words for America*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2004.
- George, Kristin O'Connell. *Old Elm Speaks: Tree Poems*. New York: Clarion Books, 1998.
- Whitman, Walt. *I Hear America Singing*. New York: Philomel Books, 1991.

ASSESSMENT

Students will create a landscape painting based on the topography of their region and their own observations while sketching from nature. Like Sonntag, student paintings should demonstrate depth using aerial perspective techniques. Students will read and participate in discussions about works by mid-nineteenth century essayists or poets. Students will write a reflective paper about their own encounter with nature, which will be assessed using a standard 4-point writing rubric.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

VISUAL ART

Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.
Understanding the arts in relationship to history and cultures.
Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres.
Apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate text.
Write and use different process elements.

