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ART-215
VanScoy

The Changing Elements in American Art
Art Exhibition

This exhibition was created to show the shift and overall transformation of the portrayal of the natural elements through art in American History. In the past, we used art to capture the beauty of nature and the elements and glorify the landscape each element resided in. However, as time went on there began to be a shift in the portrayal of these fundamental aspects of nature. Instead of capturing the free living elements, industrialization left artists portraying the destruction and domestication of the natural elements of the world. It will explore the ideas of Romanticism as well as Industrialization and Modernity.

Most of the works of art are paintings done with oil on canvas as that was the popular way to capture the landscape in American art. Many of the works were also done by members of the famous Hudson River School, which was a NYC based group of landscape painters (Van Scoy, “Romanticism”). The ideas behind the school followed the movement of Romanticism when Americans wanted to show off the natural wild of the United States as well as showing the concept of Manifest Destiny, or their right to expand into the untouched land.

Each element has two groupings of paintings, one portraying the untouched freedom of the element, the other showing its domestication or ruin by humans. The first piece is taken from the mid to late 1800s when the ideas of Romanticism and the Hudson River School were popular whereas the second pieces are from the early to mid 1900s following the Machine Age and Industrialization.

This shift from glorifying the natural world and the elements of water, earth, fire and air, to portraying their demise is extremely important in understanding mankind's relationship to the world and how the human footprint can devastate the land in ways that translate into American Art.



Thomas Cole:
Distant View of Niagara Falls, 1830
Oil on panel, 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 23 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago,
Illinois

The *Distant View of Niagara Falls* is a landscape painting portraying the awe inspiring landscape surrounding Niagara Falls. This picture is painted from a high angled vantage point with the falls at the center at the focal point. The idea of the sublime, or awe inspiring yet terrifying, is translated in this picture due to the angle of the painting as well as the size in comparison with the tiny humans and the massive falls. The picture also shows stark contrast in colors between the trees; red, orange, and green, the water; white and blue, and the sky; dark on one half and light on the other. Having the only humans in the painting being two Native Americans helps to portray the idea of “untouched wilderness” (Polk 148) that was popular at the time.

Thomas Cole, despite being born in England, was a prominent artist in America who paved the way for landscape portraiture. After moving to the United States with his family, he settled in the Catskills where he then traveled around painting the landscape of the Northeast (“Thomas Cole”). Following the ideas of Romanticism, Thomas Cole founded the Hudson River School, a group of artists whose main goal was to paint the beauty of the American wilderness. His use of people in his landscape was meant to portray the “vastness and power of the natural world” (Polk 148). He was able to show the beauty and power of the free flowing water.

Charles Sheeler:
Water, 1945
Oil on Canvas, 24 x 29 ¼ in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Manhattan,
New York



Following the Machine Age during the 1920-30s Precisionism became a popular art movement in America (Van Scoy, "Precisionism"). Like the picture above, the ideas presented in Precisionism were smooth clean finishes of clear objects like machines. This painting portrays the industrialization of water in a huge water plant, and its crisp lines and limited color palette reflect the mechanical vibes of the scenario. The angle of the picture is from what would be eye level so it seems as if it could almost be a photograph. With the direction of the pipes creating sharp sterile lines it is in stark contrast with Cole's flowing portrayal of water in its natural state.

Charles Sheeler studied at "The School of Industrial Art in Philadelphia" ("Charles Sheeler") and was well known for his photography and paintings of machines and industrialization in America. He painted in the style of Precisionism which was extremely popular during his time, therefore his work reflected the lifeless and non-organic aspects of life at the time. His choice to paint water in these mechanical things as well as the movement of Precisionism following the Machine Age are a complete 180 from painting to appreciate the beauty of water in nature. This swap is extremely important when looking back on the history between the relationship of humans and the natural water around them. It went from appreciating its beauty to glorifying its domestication.



Thomas Cole:
View on the Catskill-Early Autumn,
1836-37
Oil on Canvas 39 x 63 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Manhattan, New York

The *View on the Catskill* is a beautiful example of landscape portraiture that was used to exemplify the beauty of the Earth in its natural state. This painting demonstrates the landscape formula which was developed by the European as a guide to paint nature. It had a clear mid, fore, and background, as well as a centered body of water and trees framing the painting. Technically speaking it is a 'perfect' portrayal of nature which was one of the goals of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School at the time. The people in the picture are again small to show the grandness of the land and are portrayed as happy as a woman reaches with flowers in hand to her child.

The Hudson River School and Thomas Cole wanted to focus on what England could not, portraying real, natural, untouched landscapes. At the time landscape portraiture was uncommon as it was seen as a lesser form of painting in the English art world, but American artists like Thomas Cole wanted to show off the natural wilderness of America, something England didn't have because of its industrialization (Van Scoy, "Romanticism"). Doing this they were able to create a real name for landscape painting and gain popularity and respect for their work. Showing the sublime grandness of America's natural landscape during the popularity of Romanticism was Americans' way of preserving the natural wilderness as well as spreading their ideas of Manifest Destiny.

George Inness:
The Lackawanna Valley, c. 1855
Oil on Canvas, 33 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 50 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
National Gallery of Art, Washington,
D.C.



The Lackawanna Valley portrays the advancements of human civilization and their negative impact on the earth. In the painting there are winding train tracks that direct the viewer's eye down the hill to a small town. In the foreground is a field of tree stumps representing the “pushing back of nature to make way for the technology of civilization.” (Polk175) This idea is also represented as the train is moving from the village into what would have been wilderness had it not been for the touch of humans. There is even a factory spewing smoke right next to the town. Even with a limited color pallet George Inness was able to put a lot of meaning in his work. The careful placement of the town, train, and tree stumps show Inness’ disapproval of the advancement humans were making into the natural world.

George Inness was inspired by the Hudson River School as well as the art movement of Tonalism (“Geroge Inness”) to attempt to send a message about the destruction of the earth. Tonalists used landscapes to “evoke emotion and suggest deep, cosmic harmonies.” (“The Art Story”) Inness was actually commissioned to depict the growth of the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad, (“George Inness”) however, he disproved the expansion of man in nature so purposely filled his painting with ways of shunning that idea, like the tree stumps. This portrayal of the landscape with the intrusion of technology and civilization is in stark contrast to Coles portrayal of the wilderness as beauty without the hand of human expansion.



Winslow Homer: *Camp Fire*, 1880
Oil on Canvas 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 38 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Manhattan, New York

The painting, *Camp Fire*, portrays the element of fire in both a controlled and natural sense. The scene being at night immediately draws your eye to the only light source in the painting, the campfire. The triangle created by the slanted tree and the hut also point to the center of the image drawing your eye to the fire. The uprooted tree is a symbol for “ravaged nature” (“Metmuseum.org”) and is also possibly related to the amazing destructive powers of fire. Painted in the style of realism, the picture is able to portray the warmth and comfort fire can provide.

Winslow Homer had a complicated relationship with art and struggled to develop his style. His earlier works depicted bright happy scenes, but as he matured as an artist he began to focus on more solitary and solemn scenes. This painting was one of the last he did before moving to England (“Winslow Homer). Before then, he experimented with watercolor which gave him the ability to paint light and nature in ways he never could. This painting is a great example of his improved ability to capture the natural elements as well as his portrayal of more solitary scenery.



John Neagle:
Pat Lyon at the Forge, 1826-27
Oil on canvas 93 x 68 in.
Museum of Fine Art, Boston, Massachusetts

Pat Lyon at the Forge was commissioned by Pat Lyon with the request of depicting him at his job of being a successful blacksmith (Polk 254). The main focus is obviously on Pat as he is in the center and in the most light but you can also see a man in the back, possibly an apprentice wanting to work his way up like Pat did. The portrayal of fire in this portrait is small yet it still casts a strong light on the scene. In this picture the fire is used only as a tool to aid the blacksmith and is confined to the forge where it can be used and then put out when needed.

Although the distinction between fire in the past and now in American Art might not be as obvious as the others, there is a general theme. Humans seek to contain and control fire and it is usually only seen as a destructive force. A campfire can be used for warmth and safety from the night but in the forge the fire is used only as a tool for humanities continued industrialization. John Neagle was known for portraiture and became well known for portraying people at work as well as actors and actresses in costume (“John Neagle”). His portrayal of Lyons was something never seen before as people typically wanted to show the more polished sides of life.



Willam Trost Richards: *Lake Squam from Red Hill*, 1874
Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on light gray-green wove paper
8 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{9}{16}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Manhattan, New York

Lake Squam From Red Hill portrays a multicolor topically accurate landscape portrait (“William Trost Richards”). This piece is the only one not done with oil on canvas and the use of watercolor and gouache allowed William Trost Richards to use an expansive color palette that gives an authentic sunset view. In this scene even the farthest of mountains are visible through the clear blue sky and every color of the sky at sunset can be seen. This clarity is rare to see nowadays unless you’re miles from civilization, and even then there can be intense light pollution that prohibits you from having a clear view.

Richards was affiliated with the Hudson River school, but because of his participation in the Pre-Raphaelite movement he focused more on a more accurate portrayal of the landscape rather than an idealistic one (“William Trost Richards”). He was a part of a Pre-Raphaelite group named Association of the Advancement of Truth in Art and focused on depicting the natural beauty of the land. His paintings are important markers of history as much of the landscapes’ he paints have been negatively impacted by humans.



Georgia O’Keeffe: *East River from the Shelton Hotel*, 1928
Oil on canvas 12 x 32 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Manhattan, New York

East River from the Shelton Hotel depicts a very industrial scene from a very unique perspective. The Shelton Hotel in 1924 was the tallest in the world, and artist Georgia O’Keeffe used that to paint from so as to have a higher vantage point over the East River (“Metmuseum.com”). This uncommon vantage point as well as the use of a limited color palette helps to portray the vast influence of the industrial world. Dozens of factories are spewing dirty smoke into the air making the whole painting look hazy, and because of this you can’t see very far into the distance, all you can see are the smokestacks. The only thing breaking up the dull sky and muted red and black of the factories is the river, and even that is a dull shade of blue.

Through the way O’Keeffe painted the scene to look almost uninhabitable, it is clear she had little taste for this modern industrial landscape out her window. Following the Modernist movement that believed artists should put their “personal ideas and feelings” into their art, O’Keeffe chose to portray her distaste of the increased industrialization around her. Unlike Richard who was able to depict accurate and real scenes of clear skies, O’Keeffe looked out her window into the haze of smoke that permanently sat on the horizon.

Conclusion

Looking at how the depictions of the natural elements over time is an important part of understanding humanities impact on the natural world. Artists that were a part of or were inspired by the Hudson River School like Thomas Cole, George Inness, and William Trost Richards were known for painting the beauty of the natural wilderness when America was a new country and there were still hundreds of miles of untouched land. This land symbolized the growth of America but unfortunately many times that meant the destruction of those beautiful landscapes. Artists like Georgia O'Keeffe and George Inness were able to use their art to express their distaste and disapproval of the new Industrial Age. By depicting the land as uninhabitable or dirty because of factories like O'Keeffe or showing the destruction of trees and land due to human expansion like Inness, the facing negative impact brought on by humans is unavoidable. Even the movements surrounding art have changed dramatically as past artists focused on the Romantic aspects of nature and the earth, while newer age artists portrayed the dirty work and industrialized America like was seen in John Neagle and Charles Sheeler's paintings. Even Winslow Homer in his darkest times was able to portray the beauty of fire in our lives.

These changes, from depicting the beauty of the natural land to the expression of disgust at our industrial world are so important in understanding why we have to make a change now for the betterment of our future. We can learn from our past mistakes through its depiction in art to push back against the tragedies that are befalling our land because of humankind. The fact that depicting the negative effects of human 'advancements' has been so popular in recent years says a lot about how humans are treating the planet. Hopefully we can learn and fix our mistakes so maybe one day it will be easier to paint the sunset then the smoke in the sky.

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