



This talk is mostly about the leading artists of the uniquely American Hudson River School. I start with Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley to show how American art evolved following the American War of Independence (1775-1783). I have then selected three artists to represent the Hudson River School followed by Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins and William Merritt Chase. I have omitted American artists, such as Whistler, Cassatt and Sargent who worked mostly in Europe.

Notes

Nineteenth-Century American Art (Oxford Series). Works of art by familiar names such as Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer are discussed in detail. Omits Cassatt and Whistler and Sargent. Edward Hopper (1882-1967) is too late. Build on the story of American art from the beginnings of the century. The Hudson River School was mid-century.

Also see the exhibition ***Thomas Cole: Eden to Empire*** was 11 June – 7 October 2018, National Gallery

Thomas Cole (1801-1848) inspired the Hudson River School including Bierstadt and Church and Durand.

Artists covered

- Benjamin West (1738-1820), early American art was derivative of European art
 - *The Death of General Wolfe*
- John Singleton Copley (1738-1815)
 - *Watson and the Shark* (3 versions)
 - *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781*
- Thomas Cole (1801-1848), and the uniquely American **Hudson River School** (includes Bierstadt)
 - *The Last of the Mohicans*
 - *Distant View of the Niagara Falls*
- Frederic Church (1826-1900)
 - *New England Scenery*
 - *Twilight in the Wilderness*
- Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902)
 - *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*
 - *Among the Sierra Nevada*
- Winslow Homer (1836-1898)
 - *Long Branch, New Jersey*
 - *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*
 - *The Gulf Stream*, 1899
- Thomas Eakins (1844-1916)
 - *The Gross Clinic*, 1875
 - *The Swimming Hole*, 1884–85
- William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)
 - *Portrait of Miss Dora Wheeler*, 1883
 - *A Modern Magdalen*, 1888
 - *At the Seaside*, circa 1898, Metropolitan Museum of Art

I have excluded the great American painters James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1844–1926) and John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) as the majority of their work was produced in Europe.

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) is 20th century

References

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/about-us/press-and-media/press-releases/thomas-cole-eden-to-empire>



Benjamin West (1738-1820), *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

- Benjamin West was an American artist who was sponsored to go on a Grand Tour of Europe. He arrived in London in 1763 and never returned to America.
- Here he redefines the highest form of painting—the history painting. Conventionally it represents some heroic event from the classical period or an ennobling event from the Bible. Here he shockingly shows the combatants not in togas but dressed in contemporary clothes. History painting would never recover.
- General James Wolfe died during the 1759 Battle of Quebec of the Seven Years' War (1754-1763, a war involving most of the great powers). Britain gained a large part of North America from France (then called New France) and Florida from Spain. Many European states now saw Britain as a greater threat than France and so opposed Britain during the American War of Independence between 1778-83.
- West became known as the 'American Raphael' and became the **second president of the Royal Academy**.

Notes

- The first and by far the most important category of painting was the **history**

painting. This did not always represent a historical event as it could be a mythological, biblical or classical scene. The important, defining aspect of a history painting is that it represents a virtue that ennoble the viewer.

- This painting created a minor scandal as the figures are wearing **contemporary clothes**, George III refused to buy it
- Benjamin West was **pushing the limits** of history painting and changed what was acceptable
- General Wolfe is **Christ-like**, wearing ordinary clothes, in blue Dr. Thomas Hinde, Simon Fraser in green was not there, only 4 of 14 were actually present.
- A runner is approaching with news of the victory
- The Native American warrior is in a pose that signifies deep thought an idea that was inspired by the '**noble savage**' described not by Rousseau but by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. The idea was that people are essentially good as opposed to Thomas Locke's view of uncivilized people as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish' a description he applied to Native Americans. The fashion in polite society known as 18th century sentimentalism held that moral judgements are essentially emotional not rational and that feeling is a guide to truth. The term later became debased to mean shallow emotions held at the cost of reason. The modern usage is best put by Oscar Wilde "A sentimentalist is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it".

History Painting

- This is a history painting, the highest academic genre of painting. It tells a noble story and should show man in general not a particular man. This painting is therefore, arguably, not a history painting. The figures are not classical and many—including Sir Joshua Reynolds and West's patron, Archbishop Drummond—strongly urged West to avoid painting Wolfe and others in modern costume, which was thought to detract from the timeless heroism of the event. They urged him to paint the figures wearing togas. West refused, writing, 'the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should govern the pencil [paintbrush] of the artist.' After its completion, George III refused to purchase it because the clothing compromised the dignity of the event. The work, however, eventually overcame all objections and helped inaugurate more historically accurate practice in history painting. So this painting is important as it started the change in what was regarded as a history painting and ultimately it started to undermine the entire hierarchy of academic genres.

Notes on *The Death of General Wolfe*

- William Woollett's engraving was the best known copy of West's original and became popular around the world
- *The Death of General Wolfe* is currently in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum (Canadian art collection), as well as

the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan. The fourth copy produced resides at Ickworth House, Suffolk, England. There are five known portraits by the author. Wolfe's death and the portrayal of that event by Benjamin West make up half of Simon Schama's historical work *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations* (1991).

- Note that this type of painting was not open to women to paint as they were not allowed to attend life classes and learn to draw the nude male body.

Bio:West

- Benjamin West (1738-1820, aged 81) was an Anglo-American painter (born Springfield, Pennsylvania) of historical scenes around and after the time of the American War of Independence. Sponsored by the wealthiest man in Philadelphia he travelled to Italy in 1760 which enabled him to copy works by Titian and Raphael directly from the originals. He **travelled to London in 1763 and never returned to America**. He became known as the 'American Raphael' and was the **second president of the Royal Academy**, serving from 1792 to 1805 and 1806 to 1820 (James Wyatt, architect, the Destroyer of cathedrals was in between). He was offered a knighthood by the British Crown, but declined it, believing that he should instead be made a peer. A friend of Benjamin Franklin, painted *Death of Socrates* and met John Wollaston who had been a famous painter in London. Appointed historical painter to the court at £1,000 a year, encouraged George III to found the Royal Academy. *The Death of General Wolfe* is his most famous painting.



John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Watson and the Shark*, 1778, 182.1 x 229.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington

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John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Watson and the Shark*, 1778, 183.5 x 229.5 cm, replica, Boston Museum of Fine Arts

John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), *Watson and the Shark*, 1782, 91.4 x 77.5 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts

- The painting was commissioned by the 14-year old English cabin boy called Brook Watson. The shark attack took place 29 years before and Watson lost his leg but was eventually rescued by his companions. Watson became a government official and when he returned to England, became a successful merchant, then chairman of Lloyds and eventually **Lord Mayor of London**.
- Copley had become friends with Watson when Copley first arrived in London and Watson commissioned him to paint the event. It is thought Copley had been influenced by Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*, by the *Laocoön* which he may have seen in Rome and by a statue of a gladiator in the Louvre.
- It is thought Copley **had never seen a shark** as it is wrong anatomically with forward facing eyes, lips and air blowing out of its nostrils. He had also never visited Havana but he correctly includes Morro Castle on the right which he

probably saw in prints.

- It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1778 and he produced a copy now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts the same year. A third, smaller version is now in Detroit. At his death he bequeathed the painting to Christ's Hospital as a lesson to youth and in 1963 the school sold it to the National Gallery of Art, Washington.
- Copley changed various elements of the painting as he progressed, the old boatswain was originally a young man and the black sailor was originally a white man with long, flowing hair.

Bio:Copley

- **John Singleton Copley RA** (1738–1815) was an **Anglo-American painter**, active in both colonial America and England. He was probably born in **Boston**, Massachusetts, to Richard and Mary Singleton Copley, both Anglo-Irish. He is famous for his portrait paintings of important figures in colonial New England, depicting in particular middle-class subjects. According to art historian Paul Staiti, Copley was the **greatest and most influential painter in colonial America**, producing about 350 works of art. With his startling likenesses of persons and things, he came to define a realist art tradition in America. **He regarded himself as living in a colonial backwater and travelled to Britain in 1774 and stayed until his death in 1815. In Britain, while he continued to paint portraits for the élite**, his great achievement was the development of **contemporary history painting**, which was a combination of reportage, idealism, and theatre. He was also **one of the pioneers of the private exhibition**, orchestrating shows and marketing prints of his own work to mass audiences that might otherwise attend exhibitions only at the Royal Academy, or who previously had not gone to exhibitions at all. Copley lived beyond his means for the last 15 years of his life and had to borrow from his son who had become a barrister. His son later became Lord Lyndhurst and supported his mother until her death in 1836.



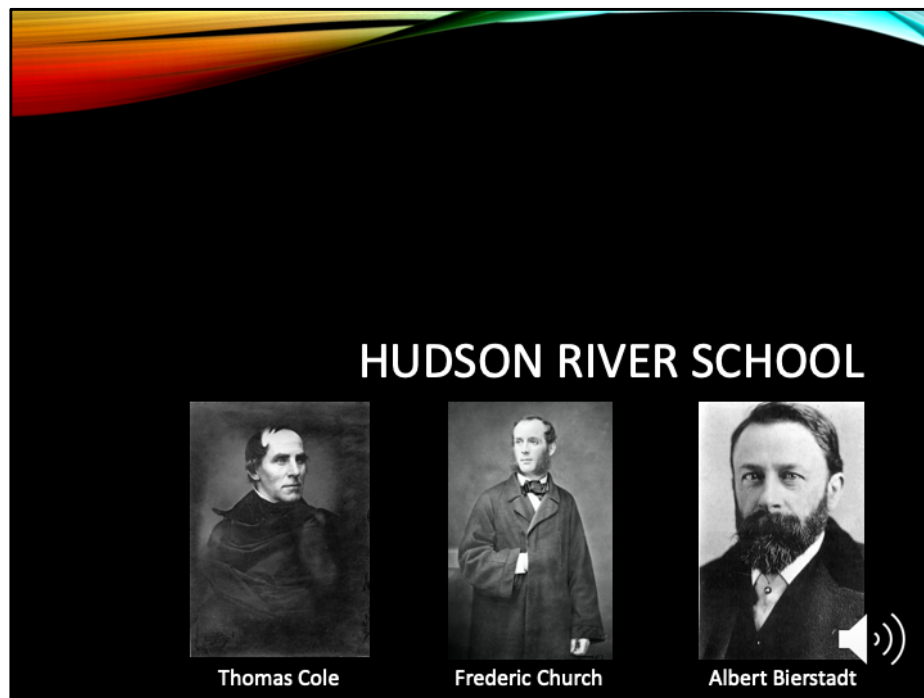
John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), *The Death of Major Peirson*, 6 January 1781, 1783, 251.5 x 365.8 cm

- **France invaded Jersey** on 5 January **1781** (known as the Battle of Jersey). The governor was **forced to surrender** the island after the fall of its capital, St Helier. A **twenty-four-year-old garrison commander, Major Peirson, rejected the surrender** and led a successful counter-attack. **Peirson was killed** shortly before the battle by a sniper, but Copley shows him dying at the **moment of British victory**, beneath the Union flag. The officers in the painting were said to be portraits, as was the image of Peirson's **black servant**, who is **avenging his master's death** by killing the sniper. Peirson became a **national hero** and the painting drew crowds when it was first exhibited. (based on the Tate display caption)
- As soon as news of the British victory was received an engraver and publisher immediately **commissioned this picture from Copley** who had already established his reputation. The painting was extremely popular and '**the chorus of praise reached all the way to Buckingham Palace**'.
- The American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), also known as the **American War of Independence**, was a global war that began as a conflict between Great Britain and her Thirteen Colonies which declared independence as the United States of

America in July 1776. It was clear by 1781 and the surrender at Yorktown that Britain would lose the war and so the victory against the French in Jersey was greeted with jubilation. The French under Louis XVI were allies of American and wanted to capture Jersey to stop its privateers disrupting their navy and to divert resources away from the siege of Gibraltar.

References

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/copley-the-death-of-major-peirson-6-january-1781-n00733>
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Thomas Cole (1801-1848), 1845

Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), 1855-65, photograph by Mathew Brady (1822-1896)

Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), photograph by Napoleon Sarony (1821-1896) , New York, at the height of Bierstadt's fame

- I will skip on to the most important art movement in America in the nineteenth century, the Hudson River School. One important artist of the early nineteenth century that I will not cover is John James Audubon (1785–1851), a famous painter of American birds and nature.
- The Hudson River School was a mid-19th century American art movement (1825-1875) embodied by a group of landscape painters whose aesthetic vision was influenced by Romanticism. The term was coined by the *New York Tribune* disparagingly as the style had gone out of favour when the *plein-air* Barbizon School in France came into fashion.
- The Hudson River School was founded by the **English-born American artist Thomas Cole** and it reflects three themes of American life, **discovery, exploration and settlement**. In their landscapes humans and nature co-exist peacefully and nature is seen as a reflection of God, although artists varied in their religious

convictions. They were inspired by European artists such as Claude Lorrain, John Constable and J. M. W. Turner.

- Cole's pupil was Frederic Church, perhaps the most famous artist of the Hudson River School.
- Bierstadt was a German artist who moved to America and who painted the grandest images of the American wilderness.
- A number of women were also associated with the school including Susie Barstow a well-known mountain climber.
- The School grew out of a **disenchantment with the crowded, dirty cities of the Northeast**. Artists travelled up the Hudson to find the fast disappearing pristine wilderness and document its grandeur and beauty for posterity.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *The Last of the Mohicans*, 1827

- The English-born American Thomas Cole founded the Hudson River School but most of its other exponents were American-born, the most important being his pupil Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900).
- The Hudson River School is steeped in irony as the popularity of their idealisation the sublime wilderness helped make those very sites tourist destination which destroyed the very thing they were representing. Cole was a deeply religious man who saw the wilderness as God's work and its destruction as transgressing God's will which would lead to a time of catastrophe of judgement.
- The wilderness Cole represented had, of course, been occupied for about ten thousand years but he saw the Native Americans as a natural part of the landscape. As more people moved West conflicts developed with the Native Americans who were largely wiped out by germs and guns. It is estimated that the genocide reduced the native population of the Americas, north and south, from about 145 million to about 15 million (a 90-95% reduction).
- *The Last of the Mohicans* was a novel by James Cooper published in 1826. At this time the settlers believed the Native Americans were simply 'disappearing' as the 'racially superior' Europeans moved in enabling them to see themselves as the

original people of the land. The novel ends with one tribe of Native Americans, the Delawares, killing the last of the Mohicans and with the prophecy “**The pale-faces are masters of the earth** ... I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans.”

Bio:Cole

- **Thomas Cole** (1801-1848) was born in Lancashire and emigrated to America with his family in 1818. He initially settled in Ohio but moved to Philadelphia when he was 22 and then Catskill on the Hudson River, New York in 1825. He was a self-taught painter who relied on books and studying the work of other artists. He started as a portrait painter in 1822 and later moved to landscape painting. He was financed to take a summer trip to the Hudson Valley where he produced a number of landscapes that were purchased on his return to New York. His paintings celebrated the dreams of his fellow Americans celebrating their natural landscape which invoked the Garden of Eden. No one before him had applied the approach of the European Romantic painters such as Constable and Turner to the scenery of America.
- After 1827 Cole maintained a studio at the farm called Cedar Grove, in the town of Catskill, New York. He painted a significant portion of his work in this studio. In 1836, he married Maria Bartow of Catskill, a niece of the owner's, and became a year-round resident. Thomas and Maria had five children. Cole's sister, Sarah Cole, was also a landscape painter; the two were close. Thomas Cole died at Catskill on February 11, 1848. The fourth highest peak in the Catskills is named Thomas Cole Mountain in his honour. Cedar Grove, also known as the Thomas Cole House, was declared a National Historic Site in 1999 and is now open to the public.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1828, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- Normally Adam and Eve are the central figures in a scene of the expulsion from Paradise but here it is the landscape that predominates and Adam and Eve have become dwarfed by the grandeur of their surroundings. At the bottom left a wolf devours a deer as a vulture hovers just above. Paradise looks like a typical scene Cole painted of the American wilderness while outside Paradise is the world the Cole fears America will become with its unstoppable industrialization and exploitation of nature.
- The painting was exhibited in New York in 1828 and bought by a prominent doctor and collector. The painting was bought by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1947.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *Distant View of the Niagara Falls*, 1830, 47.9 × 60.6 cm

- The Niagara Falls was the most depicted natural phenomena in American art. Cole visited for the first time in May 1829. He wrote, **“I anticipated much—but the grandeur of the falls far exceeds anything I had been told of them—I am astonished that there have been no good pictures of them—I think the subject a sublime one.”**
- He did not complete it on the spot but in London the following year. The image is completely romanticized as the scene by then included factories and hotels. Cole has created as nostalgic look back to the American wilderness which he has emphasized by including Native Americans in the foreground. By 1830 it had already become a famous tourist attraction.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836, 130.8 x 193 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836, 130.8 x 193 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Cole first took a steamship up the Hudson in 1825 and then hiked west into the Catskill Mountains to paint the first landscapes of the area.
- In 1836 he was in the middle of painting *The Course of Empire*, his most famous work which we will see next. He first became interested in this scene during a visit to Europe in 1829–1832 during which he traced a view he found in some etchings. Cole has combined the picturesque with the sublime and the farmed landscape with the untamed wilderness. Cole has included himself in the picture painting the famous Oxbow. Many other artists copied or imitated this painting.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *The Savage State*, 1834, 100 × 161 cm, New York Historical Society

- *The Course of Empire* is a series of five paintings created by Thomas Cole in the years 1833–1836. It is notable in part for reflecting popular American sentiments of the times, when many saw pastoralism as the ideal phase of human civilization, fearing that empire would lead to gluttony and inevitable decay. The theme of cycles is one that Cole returned to frequently, such as in his *The Voyage of Life* series. *The Course of Empire* comprises the following works: *The Course of Empire – The Savage State*; *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*; *The Consummation of Empire*; *Destruction*; and *Desolation*. All the paintings are 100 cm by 161 cm except *The Consummation of Empire* which is 130 cm by 193 cm.
- The first painting, *The Savage State*, shows the valley from the shore opposite the crag, in the dim light of a dawning stormy day. Clouds and mist shroud much of the distant landscape, hinting at the uncertain future. A hunter clad in skins hastens through the wilderness, pursuing a fleeing deer; canoes paddle up the river; on the far shore can be seen a clearing with a cluster of teepees around a fire, the nucleus of the city that is to be. The visual references are those of aboriginal North American life. This painting depicts the ideal state of the natural world. It is a

healthy world, unchanged by humanity.

- Edward Gibbon's ***The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*** was published between 1776 and 1789 and it traces the rise and fall of civilizations. Both Britain and America were haunted by the possibility of the eventual fall of their own civilization.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *The Course of Empire: The Consummation*, 1836

- The series of paintings depicts the growth and fall of an imaginary city, situated on the lower end of a river valley, near its meeting with a bay of the sea. The valley is distinctly identifiable in each of the paintings, in part because of an unusual landmark: a large boulder is situated atop a crag overlooking the valley. Some critics believe this is meant to contrast the immutability of the earth with the transience of man.
- A direct source of literary inspiration for *The Course of Empire* paintings is Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18). Cole quoted lines from Canto IV in his newspaper advertisements for the series:
*First freedom and then Glory – when that fails,
Wealth, vice, corruption...*
- Cole designed these paintings to be displayed prominently in the picture gallery on the third floor of the mansion of his patron in New York.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *The Course of Empire: Desolation*, 1836

- The final painting shows the inevitable fall of all empires. A single column looms in the foreground and it has become a nesting place for birds.
- The cycle reflects Cole's pessimism and the inevitability of decay following the rise of an empire. However, many Americans saw not a cycle but the possibility of a continued upward trajectory and one Supreme Court justice responded to Cole by saying there would be no destruction of the United States.



Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *Home in the Woods*, 1847

Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *Home in the Woods*, 1847

- This was painted in 1847, the year before Cole died and it expresses the dilemma of the wilderness as unspoiled beauty and as an untapped resource..
- “Cole enjoyed the patronage of several prominent businessmen in New York City, and they would have been particularly interested in his depictions of the seemingly limitless resources of the country’s interior—the profusion of timber and the extensive network of rivers and lakes that would enable them to make their fortunes. They believed that settlement of the land would have nothing but beneficial effects.
- It is Cole’s skill as an artist that enables him both to create an image that would both appeal to his patrons in its depiction of abundant resources and express his own concern about the effects of settlement on the land. In Cole’s *Home in the Woods*, a father returns home to the family cabin in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, bringing with him a fresh catch that will serve as the family’s dinner. The family has cleared the land themselves—the chopped-down trees and sawn logs are prominent in the foreground of the painting. And it is through this detail that Cole reveals his stance on the settlement of unspoiled land in the country’s interior. In his 1836 “Essay on American Scenery,” Cole lamented the “ravages of

the axe” that were destroying the wilderness as early as the 1830s.

- In *Home in the Woods*, the ravages of the axe are prominently represented in the foreground. The artist clearly contrasts the area around the cabin, shorn of trees and littered with the family’s belongings, with the pristine mountains in the background. He seems to warn the viewer that, as more and more people arrive, these unspoiled places will disappear.
- *Home in the Woods* was commissioned by the American Art-Union, a subscription society founded by a group of New York businessmen in 1840. The goal of this organization was to educate and enlighten American citizens by exposing them to fine art. Members of the union joined by paying five dollars per year, for which they received minutes of annual meetings, a print based on a work of fine art, and a lottery ticket which put them in the running to win a work of original art. In 1847, the American Art-Union commissioned Thomas Cole to produce a work for addition to their catalogue. At the annual meeting that year, George Dwight of Springfield, Massachusetts, won *Home in the Woods* by lottery.” (Reynolda House Museum website)
- Cole died suddenly of pneumonia at home in the Catskills aged 47.



Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *New England Scenery*, 1851

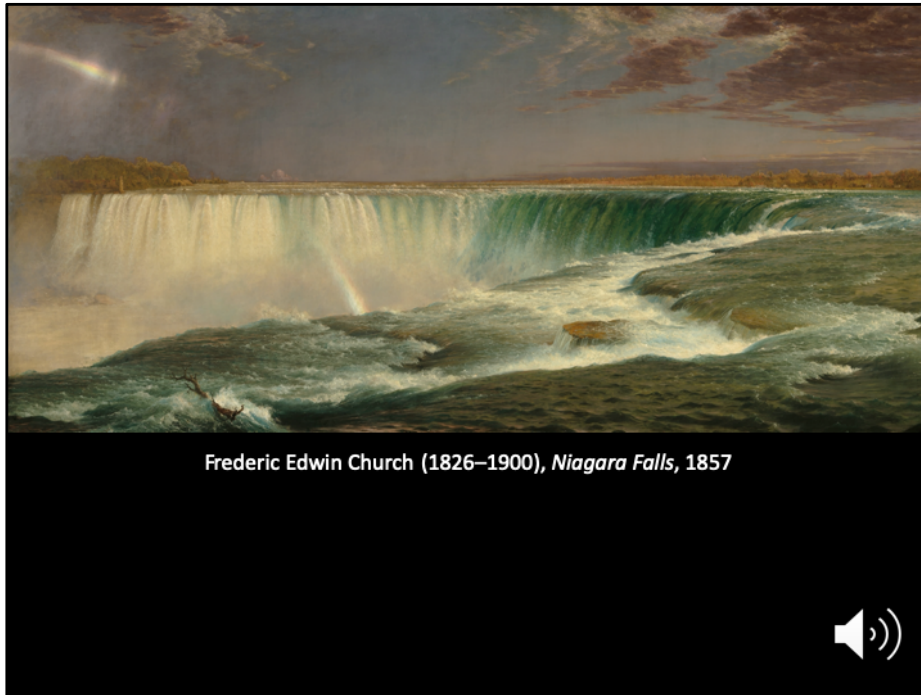
- Frederic Edwin Church (May 4, 1826 – April 7, 1900) was an American landscape painter born in Hartford, Connecticut. He was a central figure in the Hudson River School of American landscape painters, best known for painting large landscapes, often depicting mountains, waterfalls, and sunsets. Church's paintings put an emphasis on realistic detail, dramatic light, and panoramic views. He debuted some of his major works in single-painting exhibitions to a paying and often enthralled audience in New York City. In his prime, he **was one of the most famous painters in the United States**.
- *New England Scenery* is based on a number of sketches that he used to create a more complex landscape than is found in Cole's work. Church tended to prefer majestic scenes over Cole's increasingly allegorical work.

Bio:Church

- **Frederic Edwin Church** (1826–1900) was born in Hartford, Connecticut. His father was a successful businessman which enabled Church to pursue his chosen career in art from an early age. In 1844, aged 18, he became the pupil of Thomas Cole for two years. Cole wrote that Church had "the finest eye for drawing in the world". He

travelled with Cole around New England and New York painting and he sold his first painting in 1846 for \$130. In 1848 aged 22 he became the youngest member of the National Academy of Design and took his own pupils the same year.

- In 1860 Church bought a farm in Hudson, New York and married Isabel Carnes. They had six children although the first two died of diphtheria. In 1867, he began a long tour of Europe starting in London and Paris and moving on to Egypt, Jaffa, Beirut, Petra and Constantinople. He stayed in Rome over the winter and his wife gave birth to a son. He stayed two weeks in Athens before returning to America. Unlike most American artists he did not seem interested in the Western artistic tradition and it is said he disliked his time in Rome.

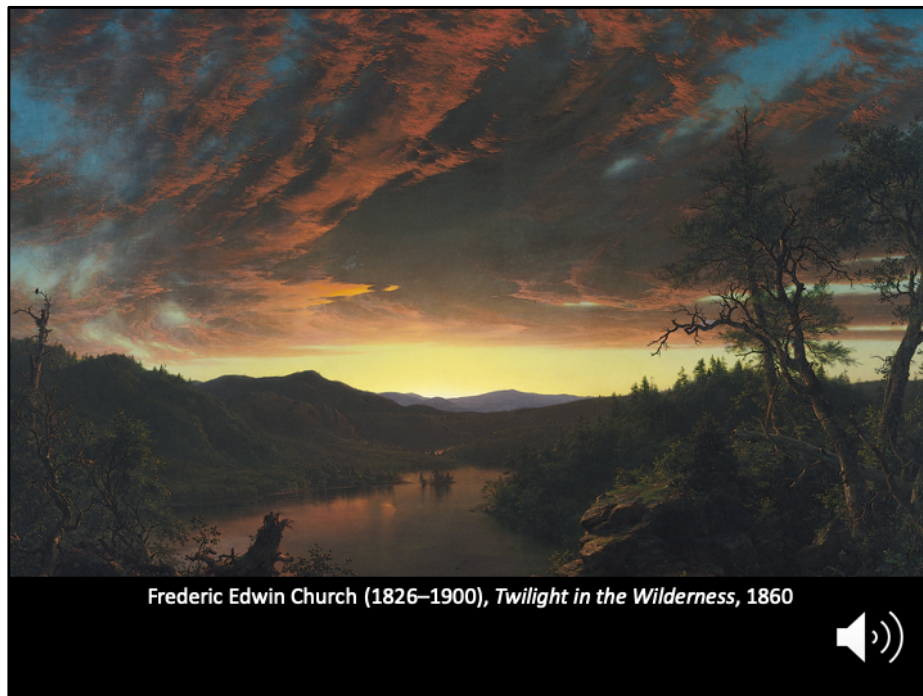


Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Niagara Falls*, 1857



Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Niagara Falls*, 1857, 101.6 × 229.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

- This is one of his best known works and it confirmed his reputation as the leading American landscape painter aged 31. In a history of the Niagara Falls Berton wrote, **“Of the hundreds of paintings made of Niagara, before Church and after him, this is by common consent the greatest.”**
- It was a major tourist attraction and “Honeymoon Capital of the World”. It was represented on souvenirs, wallpaper and lampshades and in 1853 a 1,600 foot moving panorama of the Falls was exhibited in New York.
- This is Horseshoe Falls the largest of the three falls. The viewer is suspended above the water and the painting lacks *repoussoir* which made it a revelation at the time, a new way of seeing the world which would become everyday with the advent of photography. The only foreground object is the tree trunk which gives a sense of scale.
- *Harper's* magazine called *Niagara* **“more widely known and admired in this country than any other picture ever painted in America”**.



Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860, 101.6 × 162.6 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art

- He shows the woodlands of the north-eastern United States against a setting sun. It has been described as one of his finest paintings.
- This was a time of increased interest in the unspoilt wilderness and Church shows no sign of human activity and the only living creature is a small bird in the tree. It is based on sketches he made visiting a remote area of Maine.
- This is an example of Luminism, a style of the 1850s to 1870s characterised by the effects of light on landscape, the use of aerial perspective and the concealment of visible brushstrokes. Luminist landscapes emphasize tranquility, and often depict calm, reflective water and a soft, hazy sky. Church was not a central proponent of the Luminist style and this painting was described as lacking an obvious style, **“He paints, not nature according to Mr. Church, but simply nature.”**
- It was generally well received although others saw it as ‘merely’ nature and so “unworthy of the artist, being a mere piece of scene painting”.
- It has more recently been analysed as a religious painting, with a naturally occurring cross on the tree stump, what looks like the outline of an angel, the tree stump points to a gap in the clouds that looks like the Dove of the Holy Spirit

descending and the three trees on the right remind us of the crosses at Calvary.

- It has also been seen as a metaphor for the country falling into discord on the brink of the Civil War (1861-65).
- In 1860 Church bought a farm in Hudson, New York and married Isabel Carnes. They had six children although the first two died of diphtheria. In 1867, he began a long tour of Europe starting in London and Paris and moving on to Egypt, Jaffa, Beirut, Petra and Constantinople. He stayed in Rome over the winter and his wife gave birth to a son. He stayed two weeks in Athens before returning to America. Unlike most American artists he did not seem interested in the Western artistic tradition and it is said he disliked his time in Rome.



Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Parthenon*, 1871, 113 × 184.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

- “Church visited Greece in 1869 and spent several weeks in Athens. There, he painted numerous studies and oil sketches of the ruins of the Parthenon that later served as the basis for this work. Although he intended to paint a large canvas of the Parthenon while still in Greece, it was not until 1871 that a commission from the financier and philanthropist Morris K. Jesup permitted Church to begin this large canvas. By February of that year, he was already at work on "a big Parthenon". By May, he had apparently finished the painting and wrote of his concern for its proper lighting in Jesup's home. The picture was first exhibited in New York at Goupil's Gallery in 1872 where it was highly acclaimed. It appeared subsequently in many major exhibitions, including the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878.” (The Met)



Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Roman Fish Market. Arch of Octavius*, 1858, 70.2 × 94.9, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum

Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Roman Fish Market. Arch of Octavius*, 1858, 70.2 × 94.9, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum

- The last of the Hudson River School artists that I will be covering is **Albert Bierstadt** (1830-1902). He was born in Solingen, Germany, and emigrated to New Bedford, Massachusetts with his family in 1832. He studied art in Dusseldorf, Germany and returned to New Bedford in 1857, where he began selling his paintings of European scenes as we see here.
- This is one of the early paintings by Bierstadt of European scenes that he sold in America. It shows an American tourist with a red guide book accompanied by his nervous wife. The arch is the Portico of Octavia built by Emperor Augustus in 23 BC which fell into ruin and became a fish market in the 12th century. Rome was the most important destination for wealthy tourists making the Grand Tour. Bierstadt has humorously illustrated the decline and fall of the Roman Empire by showing two figures in the pose of the 'Sleeping Endymion' (the sleeping man leaning on the fish table) and the 'Barberini Faun' (the man under the stone table) .

References

- <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/winter03/245-anti-catholicism-in-albert->

[bierstadts-roman-fish-market-arch-of-octavius](#) gives a detailed analysis of this painting



Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863, 186.7 × 306.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

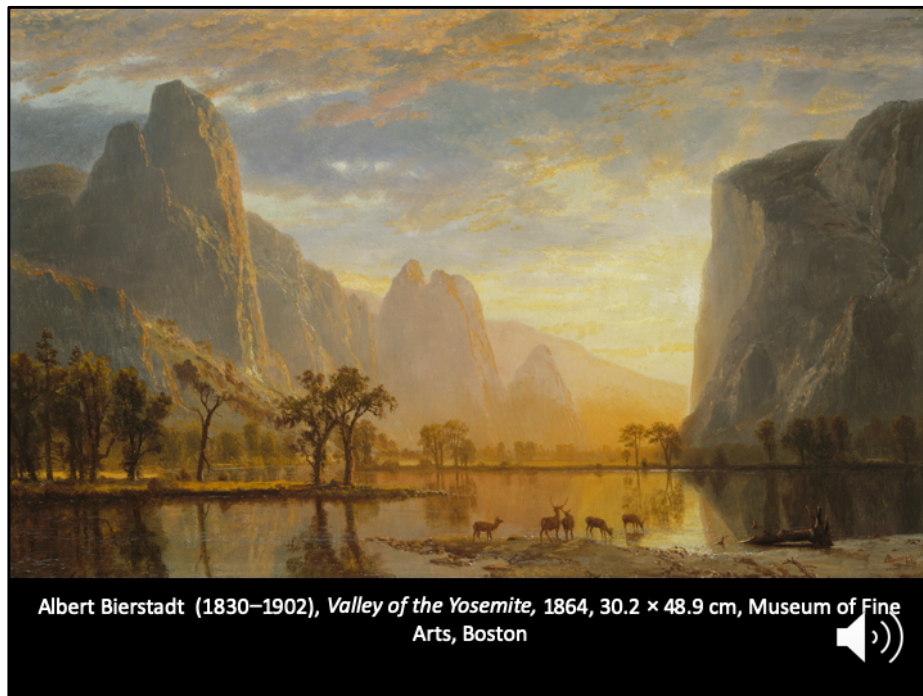
- In 1859 he joined a government survey expedition and became one of the first academically trained painters to travel to the West. By the summer the party reached the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains in what is now Wyoming. Bierstadt named the central peak Lander's peak after the leader of the expedition Colonel Frederick W. Lander died in the Civil War (1861-1865).
- This work was completed in 1863 (*The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*) and it was one of many works that were exhibited to great acclaim and which made his name. It was purchased in 1865 for the then astonishing sum of \$25,000 by an American living in London. Bierstadt later bought it back and gave or sold it to his brother.
- By 1871 when he returned to California he found the pristine wilderness had been discovered by tourists and was fast disappearing.

Bio:Bierstadt

- “**Albert Bierstadt** (1830-1902) was born in Solingen, Germany, and emigrated to New Bedford, Massachusetts with his family in 1832. He studied art in Dusseldorf,

Germany and returned to New Bedford in 1857, where he began selling his paintings of European scenes. In 1859 he travelled west with Lander's South Pass Wagon Road Expedition to the Rocky Mountain region, seeing for the first time sites in the American West that would become the scenes and subjects of some of his greatest paintings. Through his paintings of the Rocky Mountains, Bierstadt "gave the nation its initial vision of the majestic western landscape that awaited settlement" (ANB). Bierstadt created his large canvas paintings from field sketches and stereoscopic camera views that he made himself. Bierstadt travelled west again in 1863, going through Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Utah all the way to California, where he spent six weeks sketching in Yosemite. The period of the 1860s to the mid-1870s was a period of great success for Bierstadt, as his paintings sold for astronomical amounts, and he was acknowledged as a master of large landscape paintings." (William Reese Company website)

- Born in Solingen, Germany to a cooper, his brother became a well known photographer. When he was just one his family emigrated to New Bedford, Massachusetts.
- From 1853-57, Bierstadt studied painting with members of the Dusseldorf School of Painting.
- In 1859, he joined an overland survey expedition to the Rockies which allowed him to travel westward across the country sketching and photographing along the way.
- In 1860, he was elected a member of the National Academy.
- In 1861, Bierstadt and his friend Emanuel Leutze visited army camps around Washington to paint Civil War scenes.
- In 1863, he painted *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, and again travelled west, this time with author and friend Fitz Hugh Ludlow; it was his first time in the Yosemite Valley.
- From 1860-75, Bierstadt was at the top of his career, with some of his paintings commanding as much as \$25,000.
- By 1895, Bierstadt's popularity had faded. His extravagant lifestyle and increased debt forced him to sell 150 paintings to pay off creditors.



Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Valley of the Yosemite*, 1864, 30.2 × 48.9 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- In the summer of 1863 Bierstadt took his second trip west with the writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow. During the trip Bierstadt spent several weeks doing sketches in Yosemite Valley. These studies formed the passes of later paintings including this, his earliest painting of Yosemite Valley. He painted many other much larger versions of Yosemite valley later and so this is sometimes considered a sketch but it was painted in his New York studio.
- On reaching Yosemite he immediately wrote to a friend saying he had discovered the Garden of Eden and he tried to capture the beauty of a wilderness untouched by man. Within a few years the railroad started to bring tourists to the area.
- It was painted during the American Civil War and many Americans saw it as their untouched paradise and it spurred on many to protect America's natural landscape. With public support, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill protecting Yosemite in 1864.



Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Among the Sierra Nevada*, 1868, 182.9 × 305.1 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum

- The Sierra Nevada is a 400 mile mountain range that straddles California and Nevada and includes Yosemite Park. Bierstadt captures the beauty of the range using the highly detailed and naturalistic style of the Hudson River School. The suffused and glowing light is typical of the school and the idealised landscape was much in demand as a vision of part of America that was close to Paradise. The deer in the foreground act as innocent, surrogate viewers of a scene untouched by man. The soaring peaks touch and mingle with the clouds and our eye is drawn to the waterfall in the centre reflected in the placid lake. The mysterious peaks are separated from the calm waters of the lake by a bright line of reflected light broken by a remote line of trees that creates a sense of scale.
- By 1868 Bierstadt was a successful artist whose work was in demand. He was hard-working and had a talent for self-promotion. He would unveil his latest painting as theatrical events, selling tickets and planting news stories. One critic described his promotional work as a “**vast machinery of advertisement and puffery**”. He would install his elaborately framed work in a darkened room hidden by curtains and then reveal it to tumultuous applause.

Nineteenth-Century American Art

- He painted this work in London (or Rome) and toured Europe with it ending up in St. Petersburg.



Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Rocky Mountain Landscape*, 1870, 93 × 139.1 cm, White House

- By 1870 when he painted this he had not seen the Rocky Mountains for seven years and still worked from studies he had made in 1863. He had just returned from a triumphant two-year tour of Europe.
- Bierstadt perfected a theatrical device of the stage wings on either side encompassing the centre stage. Here the 'actors' are some deer that look across a lake to a sunlight mountain range. He directs our eye from the deer upwards to the left to the stand of trees, then up again to the right to the cathedral-like mountain and finally up again and left to the white peaks of the distant mountain range. It is as if the whole landscape is holding its breath and time is suspended as we come upon the scene.
- The following year he was to return to the west.



Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Mount Corcoran*, 1876-1877, 154.2 × 243.4 cm,
National Gallery of Art

- In 1877 Bierstadt displayed this large painting in a New York City exhibition with the generic title *Mountain Lake*. Unusually for Bierstadt it was panned by critics who described it as empty, meaningless and a mistake. This was partly because by the early 1870s public taste was switching to smaller more intimate works and partly that the critics were getting fed up with Bierstadt's self-promotion.
- What followed was an example of Bierstadt's commercialism. The Corcoran Gallery of Art bought a work by his rival Frederic Edwin Church called *Niagara*. Bierstadt tried to see William Wilson Corcoran but he refused to see him so Bierstadt retitled it *Mount Corcoran* and arranged through a friend of both Corcoran and Bierstadt to have it hung in Corcoran's house. Corcoran was unsure and arranged for the gallery to pay half but the board were against the purchase and it is said one member of the board resigned. Questions were then raised about whether there really was a *Mount Corcoran*. The curator of the gallery was deeply suspicious but Bierstadt showed him a Government map with the mountain marked. The curator then saw it was handwritten not engraved and claimed that Bierstadt had paid a government official to manually add the name to the map.

However, it was then revealed that Bierstadt had officially named the mountain after the banker Corcoran. The curator asked him to repaint a cloud which he did and it was acquired in 1878 for \$7,000. The story is described in detail in the reference below on page 140. As a final twist the mountain was known locally as Mount Langley and was officially named such in 1943.

Reference

<https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/research/publications/pdfs/corcoran-american-art.pdf>



Winslow Homer (1836-1898), *Long Branch, New Jersey*, 1869, 40.64 × 55.24 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Bio:Homer

- **Winslow Homer** (1836-1898). We now come to one of America's greatest landscape artists. He is not classified as a Hudson River School painter because, as you can see from this early work, he painted in a looser, freer way which reflected the exciting modern American society.
- Together with Thomas Eakins and James Abbott McNeill Whistler he is one of the leading American artists of the second half of the nineteenth century.
- He often deals with working people, such as fishermen and soldiers and he came from a hard working family of devout Christians in Massachusetts. He was the second of three sons and was born on 24 February 1836 in Boston. When he was six the family moved to Cambridge near Harvard College. He spent his childhood swimming and playing and although he was not academic he developed an interest in drawing. From the beginning he always loved to tell a story, 'art for art's sake' was a meaningless phrase for him. His father took him out of school and apprenticed him to a Boston lithographer. He designed and printed cards, title pages for music sheets and eventually the portraits of the entire Senate of

Massachusetts.

- On his **21st birthday** he left his apprenticeship and rented a studio in Boston where he drew the **street life of Boston** and caught the eye of *Harper's Week* which started to buy his sketches. They were so attracted to his art they suggested he **move to New York** and in 1859 he moved to Manhattan. They offered him a staff position but he refused as he wished to retain his freedom.
- He opened a studio and took art classes at the National Academy of Design. He also worked with an artists **who taught him oil painting** and within a year he was producing excellent oil paintings. His mother, who was an amateur watercolourist tried to raise money to send him to Europe **but civil war broke out** and he was **sent to the front** as art correspondent for *Harper's Week*. The pictures he produced were not about battles and heroism but about the **day-to-day life of the soldier**, playing games, singing around the camp fire and telling stories.
- On his **return to New York** he produced a series of painting based on his **war sketches**. He showed *Home, Sweet Home* (1863) at the National Academy and this led to his election as an Associate Academician, then a full Academician in 1865.
- **In 1866-67 he travelled to Europe** where *Prisoners from the Front* was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. This work **brought him to the public's attention** and was regarded as his finest work until *Breezing Up*. His work at this time showed more sympathy with French Barbizon School and Jean Francois Millet rather than Edouard Manet. **Unlike the Impressionists instead of blurring he sought clarity with clear outlines and large planes of light and dark.** He continued to sketch Parisian street life for *Harper's Week*.
- On his return to New York he briefly continued his war scenes and then started to paint rural life.
- From 1873 he started to use watercolours on a regular basis. He started to paint seascapes which proved extremely popular and increased his wealth.
- In 1875 he stopped working as a commercial illustrator to concentrate on painting.
- From 1881 to 82 he lived in Cullercoats, Northumberland painting the lives of ordinary men and women in a less sentimental manner and these works were well received by the critics on his return to New York.
- From 1884 until his death in 1910 he lived in a cottage he had built in Prout's Neck, Maine, where he painted seascapes and was inspired by the storm at sea, such as *Winter at Sea*. He painted the first great picture in his long series of seascapes in 1884. He called it *The Life Line*. It is the story of a shipwreck although, as he often did, he suggests the shipwreck by focusing on the rescue of a passenger.
- He still travelled - to the Adirondacks, Canada, Bermuda, Florida, and the Caribbean, and everywhere painted the watercolours upon which much of his later fame would be based. For example, *Gulf Stream* (1899, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City) a picture which he painted while on a visit to the South. In the mid-1880s he travelled to warmer places in the winter such as Florida, Cuba and the Bahamas where he painted watercolours for *Century Magazine*.

- Although well known as one of America's great painters he was never as popular in the late nineteenth century with wealthy buyers who favoured Salon art. His seascapes sometimes took years to sell and often a major work sold for less than \$500. Things didn't start to change until the early twentieth century when he became more wealthy during the last ten years of his life. He died at Prout's neck in 1910 aged 74.



Winslow Homer (1836-1898), *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*, 1873 – 1876, 61.5 × 97 cm, National Gallery of Art

- “Upon his return to the United States, Homer turned his attention to lively scenes of sports and recreation, painting warm and appealing images that perfectly suited the prevalent postwar nostalgia for a simpler, more innocent America. *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*, painted during the country's centennial year, has become one of the best-known and most beloved artistic images of life in 19th-century America.” (NGA website)
- It was admired by critics and the public, one critic wrote, Homer “**has at last painted a picture . . . that will at once delight and surprise those who have feared we were never to have anything from his hand but sketches ... It is free from those abominable lazinesses and hurryings which formerly disfigured some of his best productions.**”
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Winslow Homer (1836–1910), *The Gulf Stream*, 1899, 71.4 × 124.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

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References

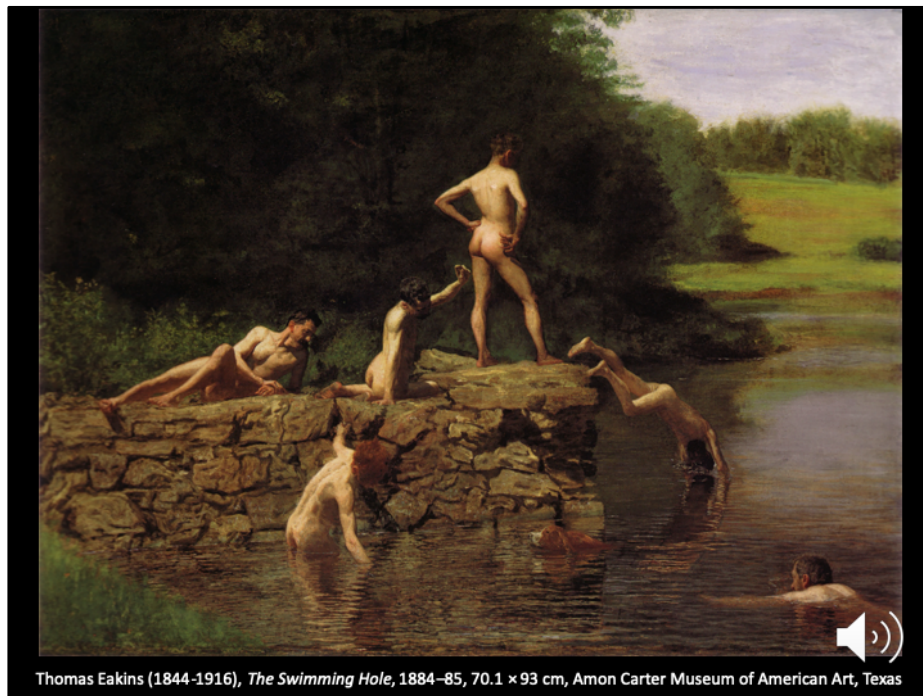
- Franklin Kelly, *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century*, National Gallery of Art, pp 312-318



Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic)*, 1875, 244 × 198.2 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- Many critics regard this as the best American painting ever made. Dr Samuel Gross is the 70 year old professor in the black frock coat lecturing his students. Eakins includes a portrait of himself on the far right with a white cuffed sleeve sketching or writing.
- At the top left is the clinic clerk taking notes of the operation. It shows the beginnings of surgery as a way of healing rather than previously when it had been associated with amputation. The patient has osteomyelitis of the femur which previously would have required amputation but here Gross is shown treating the bone disease. 1875 is after the introduction of general anaesthetic but before the introduction of hygienic surgical procedures. In 1889 he painted *The Agnew Clinic* where he shows a cleaner surgery with the participants in white coats and a nurse present.
- It is unusual for showing a woman on the left in distress, possibly the patient's mother.
- The blunt, honest depiction of surgery was shocking at the time.
- It was submitted to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia but rejected as

it was felt to be too shocking for those of a weak disposition. It was sold for \$200 to a medical college which voted to sell it to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, for \$68 million in 2006. However, Philadelphia raised the funds to keep it in the city although this meant selling two works by Eakins and two oil sketches.



- Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), *The Swimming Hole*, 1884–85, 70.1 × 93 cm, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas
- According to one art historian it is "**perhaps Eakins' most accomplished rendition of the nude figure**", and has been called "**the most finely designed of all his outdoor pictures**".
- **The nude was the centrepiece of Eakins' teaching program** at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. For Eakins, this picture was an opportunity to display his mastery of the human form. American society was very prudish regarding the naked body and in the early part of the century it had held back American art. However, it was regarded as acceptable and normal for males to swim naked in public. Eakins was the first American artist to use this 'loophole' in societal norms to display a painting of the nude figure in public. Eakins himself appears in the water at bottom right, like a signature.
- Eakins is **swimming with his art students** at Dove Lake, outside Philadelphia. **All the figures in the painting have been identified** including Eakin's Irish setter, Harry.
- Eakins has **removed all sign of civilization**, such as their clothes except for the artificial rocky promontory which was the foundation for Mill Creek mill, since

demolished.

- There is a **strong pyramid structure** with each figure leading the eye to the next and the contrast has been accentuated with the highlights unnaturally bright and the background dark to accentuate the figures.
- The painting carries on the **tradition of nude painting** in Western art although the **figure diving is very rare**. The figure on the **left is based on *Dying Gaul***, Capitoline Museum, Rome, Hellenistic, late 3rd century BC.
- **Eakins used photography as a reference for painting**. Four photographs of his students survive and bear a close resemblance to the painting.
- The painting was commissioned by a Philadelphia businessman for **\$800 but was never purchased**. The reason given was that it was not representative of his work but it may have been that it **was controversial** perhaps because Eakins had been **forbidden from using students as models as modelling was considered indecent**. In 1886 Eakins was **forced to resign** after he had **removed a lion cloth** from a male model in a class where female students were present.
- It was not sold in his lifetime but purchased by Fort Worth from his widow. In 1990 the museum announced it intended to sell the work and there was a public outcry which eventually resulted in a local museum, Amon Carter, buying the work for \$10 million.



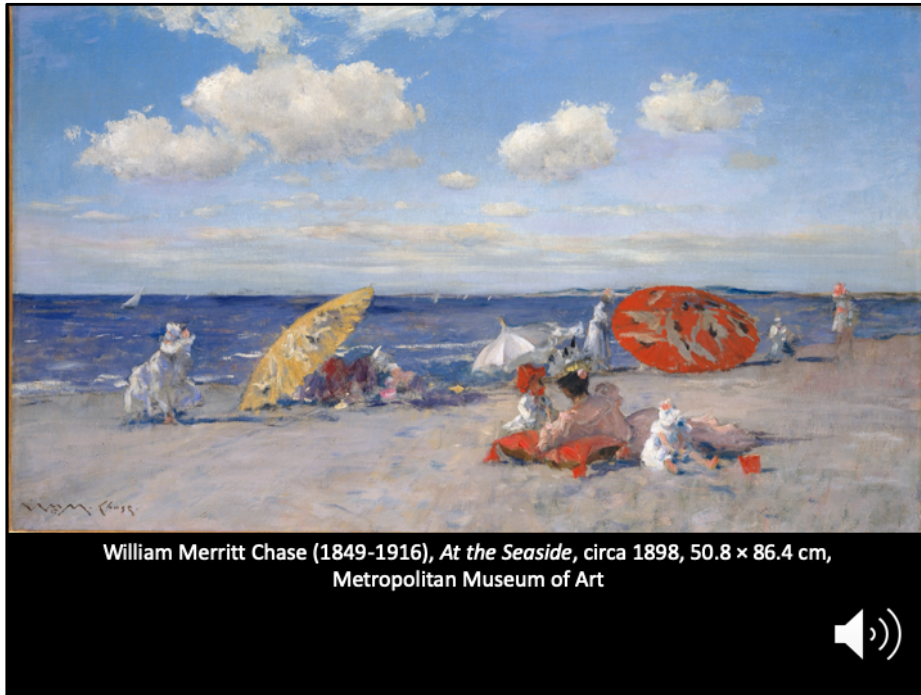
- William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), *Portrait of Miss Dora Wheeler*, 1883, 159.8 × 166.4 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art
- “**Dora Wheeler became Chase's first student** when he returned from overseas study in Munich and set up a teaching studio in New York. At the time, **few American artists accepted women as private pupils**. After her course of study, Wheeler joined her mother in launching a successful **decorating firm**, one of the **first businesses in the country to be operated entirely by women**. For the firm, she designed luxurious textiles, and the **embroidered silk tapestry** that fills the background in her portrait references her occupational interest. Chase's portrait was **awarded a gold medal** at an international survey of contemporary art in **Munich in 1883**, and later that year was also shown in Paris. At some later point, the painting was acquired by the sitter, who subsequently donated it to the museum.” (The Cleveland Museum web page)
- Bio:Chase
- **William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) was an American exponent of Impressionism and a teacher.** He established the Chase School, later the Parsons School of Design.

- He was born in **Williamsburg, Indiana**. His father was a **businessman who moved the family to Indianapolis in 1861** and employed Chase as a salesman. He showed an early interest in art and studied under local artists.
- **In 1869 he travelled to New York** to learn more about art and enrolled in the National Academy of Design.
- In 1870 his family's declining fortune forced him to travel to St. Louis, Missouri where they lived. He won prizes for his art in St. Louis and a wealthy local collector arranged for him to **study in Europe for two years** in exchange for paintings and working to acquire art for his collection.
- He **settled in Munich** and enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts as it had fewer distractions than Paris. His first major success was winning a medal for "*Keying Up*" – *The Court Jester* (now in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition 1876.
- **In 1877 Chase travelled to Venice** and returned the following year, by then an **accomplished artist**. He **opened a studio** in the Tenth Street Studio Building in New York, home to many well known artists.
- In **1881 he travelled round Europe** with a fellow artist visiting Venice, Capri and Germany.
- **In 1887 he married and he and his wife raised eight children**. He developed an interest in teaching and initially took on **private students, among his first was Dora Wheeler** a student from 1879 to 1881. She became a professional artist and a lifelong friend. Her mother wrote in her memoirs of Chase's "the most generous of teachers, not only giving exhaustively of his stored knowledge of how to do things, but fostering as well the will to do it. Later, somewhat against his will, he was persuaded to take charge of an art-school at Shinnecock Hills, Long Island . . .".
- He also opened the Chase School of Art in 1896, which became the New York School of Art two years later with Chase staying on as instructor until 1907. Chase taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1896 to 1909; the Art Students League from 1878 to 1896 and again from 1907 to 1911; and the Brooklyn Art Association in 1887 and from 1891 to 1896. He became the most important teacher of American artists round the turn of the century.
- He is perhaps best known for his portraits and his sitters include some of the best known people of the period. He painted full length figurative works and from the late 1880s landscapes. He continued to paint still life which he had painted since his student days and a particular favourite subject was dead fish against a dark background.
- He won many honours and was a member of the National Academy of Design, New York, and from 1885 to 1895 was president of the Society of American Artists. He died at home in New York in 1916 aged 65.



William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), *A Modern Magdalen*, 1888, 48.2 × 39.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

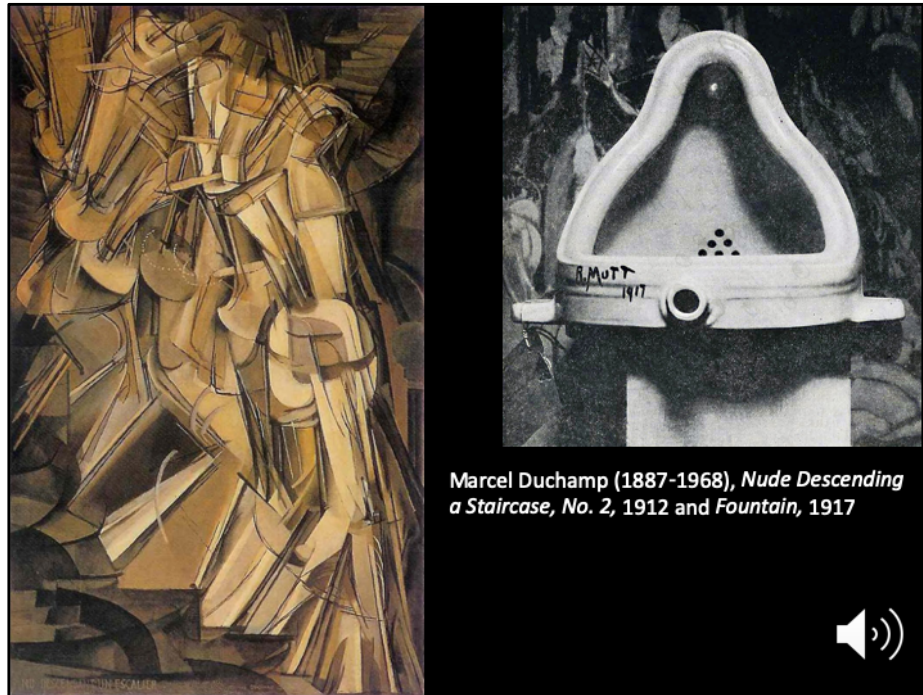
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William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), *At the Seaside*, circa 1898, 50.8 × 86.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

- “Beginning in 1891 Chase taught at a summer art school in Shinnecock, Long Island. The following year, he and his family moved into their new summer home, Shinnecock Hall, which had been designed and built by the well-known firm of McKim, Mead and White. Chase taught at the beach resort until 1902, conducting open-air classes for as many as a hundred students each summer. This work is characteristic of the outdoor scenes that Chase painted during the 1890s on Long Island beaches.” (Met website)
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- A footnote on **American Impressionism**. From 1880 to 1913 a number of American artists painted in an Impressionistic style characterised by loose brushstrokes and vivid colours. Many American Impressionist artists lived and worked in colonies with like minded painters. In New York on Long Island the colony at Shinnecock came under the influence of William Merritt Chase.



Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912 and *Fountain*, 1917

- American Impressionism started to die out in 1913 when an exhibition of contemporary European art known as the '**Armory Show**' took place. Many critics made fun of the work on display particularly **Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*** which was described by the art critic of *The New York Times* as "an explosion in a shingles factory". However, the show became an important event in the history of American art, introducing astonished Americans, who were **accustomed to realistic art**, to the experimental styles of the European *avant garde*, including **Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism**. Duchamp dismissed what he called 'retinal art', intended only to please the eye in favour of art to serve the mind. The show served as a **catalyst for American artists**, who were freed to think about what they were trying to achieve as artists.
- **The nineteenth century had ended** and with it the **innocence of American art**. The nation was on the brink of **World War I** (6 April 1917 following the sinking of American merchant ships to 11 November 1918), the **Great Depression** (October 2919 to 1933), **World War II** (8 December 1941 following the attack on Pearl Harbour the day before to 2 September 1945 when the surrender document was

signed by Japan) and the **Cold War** from 1947 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.