

E-course writing assignments

What is significant about Benjamin West's painting The death of general Wolfe?

This picture is very dramatic in its depiction of the death of general Wolfe. The lighting, arrangement of the people and their poses contribute to this.

According to Wikipedia, the painting shows Wolfe dying after winning the battle of Quebec. Because it shows him basically giving his life for victory, the suggestion of martyrdom is very clear. It is also significant that this shows people that were not present at the scene, breaking with standards of historical painting.

What aspect of American life does Benjamin West's painting Treaty of Penn with Indians present? How is this aspect presented?

The painting shows a group of settlers and natives meeting under a tree. In the background we can see colonial houses and ongoing construction, probably a settlement. The group is split, with the settlers on the left and the natives on the right side of the painting. In the middle men from both groups talk, while onlookers watch from the left and right sides of the painting. The group in the middle and thus their activity is the focus of the painting.

The painting depicts the two groups entering into a peace treaty (Wikipedia). This shows that the two groups could interact with each other in a peaceful manner (even though they were at war before).

The painting depicts this in a balanced manner, both sides are given a similar amount of space and neither is portrayed with an obvious bias (at least to me).

Compare the two paintings by John Trumbull The death of general Montgomery and The sortie made by the British garrison of Gibraltar. What paradox does the comparison reveal?

Both paintings are very similar in their composition. The background or sky is very dark and lacks detail. The light in the pictures comes from the left side and is focused on the object of the painting. These details combined make the object of the painting stand out from everything else (Montgomery and the British garrison/the dying soldier).

The paradox here is that, as an American artist, Trumbull painted a heroic American general (as one might expect), but also a victory of the British troops in the Independence War. This is not something that I would have expected because the British were enemies of the Americans. One explanation might be that the focus of the painting is on the Spanish officer and not the British (Wikipedia), thus depicting heroism and maybe martyrdom. This would be consistent with the first painting, which shows a general dying in the fight against British troops.

Compare the portraits of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart, John Trumbull, Charles Peale. Which is the most popular in the US? Why?

In all three pictures Washington stands in a similar pose, mostly upright and looking to the left. In Trumbull and Stuart's pictures he also has his right arm stretched out, holding a telescope. In Peale and Trumbull's pictures he is wearing a military uniform because those pictures show him at the sight of a battle, while Stuart paints him dressed formally and in a richly decorated room.

I would say that the portrait by Stuart is the most popular portrait of Washington because it shows the kind of statesman America wanted to see at the time of its creation. Maybe they did not want a general anymore, but a statesman that would lead the new country successfully. Because Stuart's painting shows that, it became the most popular one of the three.

What is the story behind John Vanderlyn's painting The death of Jane McCrea? How can his painting be interpreted?

The painting shows two native Americans killing a non-native woman with tomahawks. The woman is kneeling on the ground being held down by the two attackers. Just looking at the painting one would assume that the woman is being killed for no good reason because the picture does not show any and that the natives are unquestionably to blame.

According to Wikipedia though, this might not have been the case. While one version of the story fits the impression this picture gives, another version of the events describes McCrea being killed by bullets fired at the three of them by pursuing American soldiers. There is also uncertainty about why she was with the native warriors in the first place, either because they kidnapped her, or because her fiancé asked them to escort her. This painting only depicts one specific version of these events and sends a pretty clear message by doing so.

How can you interpret J. Vanderlyn's painting Landing of Columbus?

This painting focuses on Columbus and his men, shortly after they arrive on land. He is standing in a very noble pose, with his sword by his side and a flag raised towards the sky. He is also looking towards the sky. The clothes or armor of the men is shiny and clean, making them look noble and imposing. In the background the artist shows natives cowering and fleeing from Columbus and his men.

This painting glorifies the journey and arrival of Columbus and his men. The focus of the painting is completely on them and not the natives or the actual land they discovered. They are depicted as noble in shining armor and standing upright, while the natives (in the background) are naked, cowering and fleeing.

What are the story, art style, and reception of John Vanderlyn's painting Ariadne on the Island of Naxos?

The painting shows a naked Ariadne sleeping under a tree. The whole scene is pretty dark, maybe because it takes place at dusk or dawn. Ariadne is the daughter of King Minos of Crete from Greek mythology. She fell in love with Theseus from Athens and ran with him to the island of Naxos. There, he abandoned her while she slept. (<https://www.nyhistory.org/exhibit/ariadne-asleep-island-naxos>)

The painting has a classical reference and theme. This conformed to the taste of Napoleonic France and he hoped to make money with this painting. There was an exhibition of female nudes where he was successful in getting attention. While there was an outcry of disapproval, people would pay to see it anyways.

What are the differences between the Federal and the Colonial period?

The colonial period mostly had portraits of rich merchants as there was little else to do and there were no American subjects. Most of the artists were British and all foreign because there was no art schooling in America.

As that began to change, American born artists began to emerge, but they were still trained in Europe. Now they had more American subjects to paint, so they started doing that. The War of Independence created new subjects and a need for art and I'd assume it made some artists want to distance themselves from the old colonial masters. Now we see portraits of politicians and battles that were American in artist and subject. As we said, art needs stimulus - the war was one for sure.

Why was the landscape genre popular in the United States around the middle of the 19th century?

The landscape genre of painting was popular in the US at that time because of multiple factors. Firstly, the landscape of the US was something that set it apart from Europe through its untouched beauty. The potential of this untouched land that settlers saw and its beauty may have made people want to paint it or own paintings of it. Especially for people that would probably never see it for themselves this seems desirable.

Another factor is that people in the eastern US started to reminisce about how the land there used to look before humans started changing it. Thus pictures that showed untouched land and provided contrast to the present were popular.

How can you interpret Thomas Cole's allegoric series of paintings by Cole Course of Empire and The Voyage of Life. Which of the two was more understandable to broad American public and why? What is the meaning and the tone of these two series?

The Course of Empire, a series of 5 paintings, shows the stages that an empire progresses through in Cole's opinion. This series was inspired by ruins of empires Cole saw when traveling Europe in 1829. The five stages are Savage, Pastoral, Consummation of the Empire, Destruction of the Empire, and Desolation. All 5 pictures show the same distinct mountain that allows the viewer to easily see that all pictures show the same place at different times.

The series describes the path an empire might take, starting at Savage. The progress starts at undeveloped, unwelcoming lands and continues to welcoming, peaceful settlements. The next step shows a sprawling empire with Greek or Roman architecture celebrating in abundance. Destruction shows the same city being burned and plundered resulting in Desolation, where nature starts to reclaim the land. These paintings could be seen as Cole's impression of the ruins of Europe that he saw during his travels and possibly a warning to the US not to go down the same path. It represents the life cycle as Cole perceived it.

The Voyage of Life, a series of 4 paintings, Childhood, Youth, Manhood, and Old Age, illustrate 4 stages of life. It starts out with Childhood, where an angel is seen steering a boat with a small child in it down a river. The landscape is green, the sun is rising and the whole scene looks almost like a dream. Progressing to Youth, the boy has now taken over the boat and left the angel at the side of the river, it is now day (maybe late morning) and he is gesturing towards a literal castle in the sky far off in the distance. Manhood shows the man approaching rapids, praying for help while his angel watches from up high. the scene is very gloomy and it's now dusk. Old Age shows the now old man arriving at a calm ocean while the angel is pointing towards the lit-up sky, as if to show him the way. Here we have another description of a life cycle, but this time it's the human life that is being described.

Both series of paintings are metaphors and contain many visual metaphors too. The symbolism of The Voyage of Life is a lot clearer and easier to understand because one human lifetime is something that a lot of people will experience themselves and they can see all stages of it around them. The life cycle of an empire takes hundreds of years and is not something that the average person can really emphasize with. This means that The Voyage of Life was more understandable for the average person because they could easily understand what it was describing and thus it became more popular.

What is similar to Cole, Church, and Bierstadt in painting nature? And what makes them different in terms what landscape they painted?

They all depict epic or memorable landscapes using dramatic lighting. Cole sometimes had some kind of moral message in his paintings, for example in his two big series. He showed people and stories to make the paintings more like history paintings, which he saw as superior art. Furthermore, he painted fictional landscapes.

Bierstadt was more focused on the landscape itself and making it as magnificent and large as he could, he placed animals and people in the pictures to give the viewer a sense of their scale. He painted real landscapes and often ones he saw himself.

Church (judging from the pictures on e-course) painted landscapes that had no visible living things in them and in the two pictures we have on e-course the lighting is even more dramatic than other paintings.

Kensett, Bingham and Gifford used the luminist approach in the paintings uploaded in this section. What is characteristic of this approach?

Luminism focuses on the effects that light has on a landscape. It was an American painting style from the 1850s to 1870s. Their paintings show calm landscapes and water with soft skies and the interactions of light with them. Their style is relatively realistic and doesn't really show who painted it (to me it seems like it would be hard to recognize specific artists).

What kind of America emerges in this painting by Bingham?

In this relatively gloomy painting Bingham shows two fur traders going down the river Missouri in a small canoe. They also have their cat on a leash with them. An old man is sitting at the back steering the boat while a young man, possibly a native tracker, lays on a stack of fur.

In this picture two normal, probably relatively poor people are painted going about their daily lives and nothing about it is magnificent. The focus is also not on the relatively uneventful landscape. This is new because earlier pictures focused on rich people, significant people and their deeds, and scenic landscapes. This picture doesn't have any of that, making it different. I would say that the kind of America emerging in this picture is that of the normal people that didn't do anything heroic or historically significant in order to be painted.