



Smithsonian  
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for  
American Art and Portraiture*  
*Smithsonian American Art Museum*

# *American Landscapes*

19th-Century  
Selections



National Museum  
of American Art

## Introduction

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*"Go out to walk with a painter and you shall see for the first time groups, colors, clouds and keepings and shall have the pleasure of discovering resources in a hitherto barren ground. . . ."*

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1837*

In the early years of colonization, settlers in America fought a battle of survival with the wilderness, a struggle that overshadowed any romantic view of nature or interest in the flowering of the arts. Portraiture, however, was accepted as a practical art form by the upper levels of society, and it was as "face-painters" that artists first made their mark. Despite this culturally barren climate, American artists persevered in broadening their personal styles and thematic approaches, and in so doing displayed their "native" talent.

After winning independence, the inhabitants of the young republic searched for a distinctively American source of national pride and spiritual focus. They found it in the American landscape, in the country's vast scale, virgin forests, and awesome natural wonders.

With a new sense of national identity, artists set out to depict, with absolute veracity and in full detail, the country's beauty and bounty as evidence of divine blessing. Their efforts were rewarded with public acclaim and admiration. Paradoxically, the belief that

communion with nature was morally edifying did not stay the axe and prevent the subsequent plunder of the wilderness. Even as artists were painting epic-scale canvases to convey the solitude and majesty of the West, pioneers were pressing forward with domestication of the land in the name of progress. At the turn of the century, after more than a hundred years of expansion and conquest, the frontier was a thing of the past.

The natural environment continued to provide inspiration for artists in the early years of the 20th century, but their responses became more subjective and interpretive. Instead of idealizing the country's scenery and imbuing it with moral and religious significance, artists became absorbed in the technical aspects of painting: the manipulation of form, color, and composition to convey their imaginative and personal visions of the American land.

NORA PANZER  
*Office of Public Programs*

Alvan Fisher  
(1792–1863)

The Great Horseshoe  
Fall, Niagara  
1820



oil on canvas,  
34 1/2 × 48 1/2 in.  
Museum purchase

Alvan Fisher, one of America's first full-time landscape artists, was also one of the first to capture the majesty of Niagara Falls, the most often painted natural wonder in the United States. In the 1820s landscapes were beginning to win public acceptance, with interest in this new art form fueled by the romantic descriptions of travel writers and poets. Niagara Falls, more than any other site, provoked wonderment: "This magnificent current, after dashing upon a shelf, falls over a precipice . . . when it vanishes into the midnight beneath," wrote the president of Yale University in 1804.

Fisher visited the falls, made detailed drawings, and completed the work back in his studio, employing the traditional formula and conservative palette of 18th-century English view painting. From a high vantage point we observe the stagelike setting of the Great Horse-

shoe Fall, darkened on either side by swaying trees and a perilous cliff. Various spotlighted tree stumps and young men in the open clearing draw our attention to a family group gesturing enthusiastically as the phenomena are explained to them, while a young girl holds her ears to shut out the thundering sound. Small figures and a dog hover precariously at the edge of the gorge, silhouetted against the billowing spray. Retreating dark clouds, sunlight breaking through, and a clearly defined rainbow indicate that a storm has just passed.

The tiny figures dotting the landscape not only provide a sense of scale but no doubt helped promote the falls as a spectacular tourist attraction for the thousands who anticipated viewing it when the Erie Canal opened in 1825, making travel so much easier.

Thomas Cole  
(1801–1848)

The Subsiding of the  
Waters of the Deluge  
1829



oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 47 $\frac{7}{8}$  in.  
Gift of Mrs. Katie Dean in  
memory of Minnibel S. and  
James Wallace Dean, and  
museum purchase through the  
Major Acquisitions Fund,  
Smithsonian Institution

From inside the deep recesses of a cave, we see the first rays of dawn cross the forbidding landscape. Telltale evidence of the flood emerges: a skull washed up beside the large rock at the bottom center of the composition, the ark floating free in the path of light, and a dove suspended in flight between the ark and the rocky shore. Beyond the chaos and twisted tree trunks, a soft, purplish radiance has embraced the ark, signifying the return of God's favor to a world cleansed of its former sins. A sense of wonder and terror pervades the scene.

Thomas Cole chose the heroic and sublime allegorical theme of the Deluge to express his belief that America was a place where life could begin anew, untouched by the corrupting hand of civilization. "The subject [of art]," he declared, "should be pure and lofty, . . . an impressive lesson must be taught, an important scene illustrated—a

moral, religious or poetic effect be produced on the mind."

As a young artist Cole roamed the Hudson River valley and the region around the Catskill and Adirondack mountains, making sketches of the shrubs, trees, rocks, and waterfalls that he later incorporated into his own imaginative compositions to depict the look and feel of America's wilderness.

Because he was the first American artist to picture the wilderness with the passion of a poet and to capture its spaciousness and grandeur with technical skill, Cole exerted a strong influence on the new direction landscape painting was to take. Cole and his followers, who comprised a group that later became known as the Hudson River School, created a variety of styles to record, with pride and fidelity to nature, the unique, romantic qualities of the American scene.



George Catlin  
(1796–1872)

Big Bend on the Upper Missouri,  
1900 Miles Above St. Louis  
1832



oil on canvas, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 14 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.  
Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

George Catlin's hundreds of portraits of Indians, scenes of Indian life, and landscapes of the early wilderness are appreciated for both their historical and anthropological significance and their aesthetic value.

Carrying rolls of canvas, an easel, and a little case of fish bladders bulging with oil colors, Catlin, the pioneer artist-explorer, traveled across the Great Plains, feverishly documenting forty-eight different Indian tribes "to rescue from oblivion so much of their primitive looks and customs as the industry and ardent enthusiasm of one lifetime could accomplish."

In 1832 he made his first trip up the Missouri River, deep into Indian territory, to what is now the western boundary of North Dakota. *Big Bend on the Upper Missouri*, along with many other landscape scenes Catlin completed on this journey, became the first comprehensive pictorial record of the

country west of the Mississippi River. Catlin painted the landscapes directly, either from the deck of a steamboat or from high bluffs on the shore.

Of the scene depicted in the painting, Catlin noted in his extensive journals that "scarcely anything in nature can be found, I am sure, more exceedingly picturesque than the view from this place; exhibiting the wonderful manner in which the gorges of the river have cut out its deep channel through these walls of clay on either side, of two or three hundred feet in elevation; and the imposing features of the high table lands in the distance, standing as a perpetual anomaly in the country."

The lone Indian in this landscape dramatizes Catlin's prophetic view that heroic natural man and the undefiled wilderness would soon be doomed to extinction by encroaching civilization.

Asher Brown Durand  
(1796–1886)

Dover Plain, Dutchess  
County, New York  
1848



oil on canvas, 42½ × 60½ in.  
Gift of Thomas M. Evans and  
museum purchase

“Stop muddling the green of summer with brown,” Asher B. Durand urged his students; “go first to nature to learn to paint landscape.” On long trips in the forests, mountains, and fields of the Hudson River valley he made meticulous, scientifically accurate studies of his observations to capture “nature’s great truths.”

Like his friend Thomas Cole, Durand believed that his mission was to share with his countrymen the “lesson of high and holy meaning” found in the natural environment, but his visual interpretation was different. Instead of God directly revealed in nature, in Durand’s work God is implicitly revealed through nature; instead of the passionate and dramatic, he offers the lyrical and poetic.

In *Dover Plain* Durand celebrates the American landscape in its bucolic, pastoral state: rich and fertile, tranquil and ordered. In the

left foreground the two figures bent to gather berries suggest the harmony between man and nature and help establish a sense of scale. Standing on top of a rock, a young woman looks out into the distance, beckoning us to follow her gaze across the meadows and groves to the softly contoured, pale purple mountains on the horizon. No harsh contrasts of color or obvious brushstrokes are allowed to jar the quiet beauty of the scene, enveloped in a divinely charged light and warm atmospheric haze.

“That picture is ideal,” commented Durand, “whose component parts are representative of the utmost perfection of nature.” For Durand, art was “man’s lowly imitation of the creative powers of the Almighty.”

Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze  
(1816–1868)

Westward the Course  
of Empire Takes Its Way  
1861



oil on canvas, 33¼ × 43½ in.  
Bequest of Sara Carr Upton

By the mid 19th century, thousands of families in search of a new beginning left the settled East in caravans of wagon trains and began a mass migration to California and Oregon, the “New World Eden.” Emanuel Leutze believed strongly in this idealized view of the frontier and in the concept of Manifest Destiny, the notion that God had mandated an American empire from the Atlantic to the Pacific. *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* is his narrative celebration of the indomitable pioneers’ ultimate triumph.

After long weeks of struggle the weary travelers depicted in this painting emerge from the darkness and are in sight of their final destination. Their eagerness and hope are suggested by the brilliance of the rose-colored glow of the setting sun. Broken wagons, skeletons, and the death of an elderly person attest to the great hardships they

have endured. On the rock platform in the center foreground, a family group evokes depictions of the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, lending this westward journey a decidedly spiritual aura.

On the elaborate foliate border of the painting Leutze included vignettes to signify those historical figures with whom he believed these humble American adventurers deserved to be associated: Moses and the Israelites, the Magi, Hercules, the Vikings and Norsemen, and Columbus. On the bottom of the canvas, medallion portraits of Daniel Boone and Captain William Clark frame the inviting turquoise waters of San Francisco’s Golden Gate.

Congress commissioned Leutze to paint a mural for the nation’s Capitol. This painting is the study for that mural, now on display in the west stairwell of the House of Representatives.



Homer Dodge Martin  
(1836–1897)

The Iron Mine, Port  
Henry, New York  
ca. 1862



oil on canvas,  
30 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 50 in.  
Gift of William T. Evans

The steep bank rises abruptly: austere, forlorn, and brooding in its desolation above the placid blue-green lake.

No conventional pictorial framing devices soften the uncompromising frontality of the cliff as it stretches across the breadth of the canvas and reaches almost to the top of the painting under a narrow band of blue sky, veiled with soft cumulus clouds. Only the yellow-orange descending diagonals of the cascading slag from the mine, the deeply chiseled natural ravine, and the rusting iron ore spilling over the top of the cliff like a waterfall punctuate the strong horizontal composition, helping to create the picture's tension.

The warm ochers of the mineral deposits that complement the cool grays, greens, and browns of the meticulously detailed stratified rock, the crushed stone, the gathering mosses, and the scraggy veg-

etation are echoed again in the still water, unifying the simple arrangement of the large forms.

In the left foreground, a few dark boulders, whitened with scaly incrustations, remind us of nature's long geological history and direct our eyes to the uprooted tree, symbolic of nature's eternal cycles. The tree, in turn, points to the pristine white canal boat on the wharf and the small cabin directly below the rear exit to the mine shaft, both of which introduce man's intrusion into the scene and his exploitation of the nonregenerating iron ore.

In the late 1820s, seemingly inexhaustible resources of iron ore and timber attracted industrial pioneers to Port Henry in the Adirondacks. For over a century the area produced the pig iron for the railroads and bridges Americans required on their relentless march toward progress and civilization.



Albert Bierstadt  
(1830–1902)

Among the Sierra Nevada  
Mountains, California  
1868



oil on canvas,  
72 × 102 in.  
Bequest of Helen  
Huntington Hull

Albert Bierstadt, one of the first major artists to explore the West, was also one of the first to exploit the possibilities of photography. Photographs supplemented his extensive watercolor studies and pencil sketches, all of which he then used as a pictorial reference file when composing his formal works.

To depict his own responses to the monumental grandeur of the Sierra Nevada in California and to make spectators in the East feel that they were witnesses to the actual scene, Bierstadt discarded the smaller, contemplative canvas typical of the Hudson River School in favor of a more panoramic scale.

The painting's overtly theatrical, idealized setting conveys the image of a Promised Land in the far West. A golden, spiritual light breaks through a clearing in the dramatic cloud formations to reveal spectacular snow-capped mountain peaks that soar to the

heavens. On the left a waterfall rushes down the steep cliffs. In the center a narrow, white stream of melted snow meanders slowly down the foothills, both replenishing the blue-gray crystalline lake below, where a single trout swims near the half-submerged rocks in the left foreground. From the dark, mysterious thicket of trees on the right a band of elk have emerged; they stand alert in the verdant meadow as a flock of waterfowl takes wing. A receding black cloud in the upper left signals the end of a thunderstorm and the beginning of another cycle of nature. Bierstadt synthesizes the symbolic truths of nature: All is in perfect harmony.

One of Bierstadt's contemporaries commented wryly on the painter's idealized vision: "It is a perfect type of idea of what our scenery ought to be, if it is not so in reality."

Thomas Moran  
(1837–1926)

The Grand Canyon  
of the Yellowstone  
1872



oil on canvas,  
84 × 144¼ in.  
Lent by the U.S.  
Department of  
the Interior,  
National Park Service

Like Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran made the hazardous journey to the West in the company of an expeditionary force seeking scientific clues to the age of the earth and the origin of Creation. *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, a visual lesson in natural history that resulted from Moran's journey, is a magnificently colored geological treatise of one of America's awe-inspiring wonders.

Set above the small party of explorers and their Indian guide, gathered in the foreground on the dark rock platforms, the viewer's perspective provides an unrivaled vantage point from which to bear witness to the majestic vista in the distance, bathed in dazzling, mystical sunlight. Strong diagonal planes of alternating patterns of light and dark direct the eye in measured progression across, back, and then down the deep chasm to the dwarfed blue river, with the

thundering falls and turbulent spray rising up and beyond the high horizon of the plateau. Giant evergreens cling precariously to the deep slopes of the canyon where fantastic spires and crenelated buttes, sculpted by the natural forces of erosion, suggest the slow passage of geological time.

"The motive and incentive of my 'Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone' was the gorgeous display of color that impressed itself upon me," Moran declared. Newly introduced coal-tar and synthetic pigments of yellows, magentas, and violets provided him with an almost unlimited range of brilliant colors with which to duplicate the luminosity of sunlight and the exquisite hues of the mineral deposits in the solidified sandstone and limestone.

In 1872, Yellowstone was declared the first national park, in large measure because of the impact of Moran's pictorial reports.

Ralph Albert Blakelock  
(1847–1919)

Moonlight, Indian  
Encampment  
1885–89



oil on canvas,  
27 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 34 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
Gift of John Gellatly

In *Moonlight, Indian Encampment*, Ralph Albert Blakelock combined his favorite themes of wilderness and Indian life to communicate his personal, romantic interpretation of primeval nature. He took landscape painting beyond the specifics of place to the visual expression of mood and imagination.

Blakelock, who loved the expressive quality of music and spent hours improvising at the piano, used the same approach in his painting. He manipulated color and form to stimulate emotional responses in his viewers, to awaken associations of thoughts and feelings and suggest elusive states of mind. His wife reported that he could see “pictures, compositions in everything; the markings on old boards, the broken or worn enamel in the bathtub; as fields of great suggestiveness.”

In this intimate nocturnal land-

scape, Blakelock uses the subtle interplay of light and dark to produce a poetic effect and applies his paint and glazes to achieve surface richness. The tall, graceful trees are shaped with layer upon layer of pigment so they appear to have weight and substance. The middle distance and sky are painted with pale colors, lightly rubbed and scraped to impart a delicate texture, while the Indians sitting around the soft, reddish glow of their campfire are modeled with minimal brushwork. These various surface densities reflect the light in different ways, creating the painting’s visually exciting effect.

With paintings that could be “felt” by the eye, Blakelock introduced a whole new way of seeing to American art. The real message of *Moonlight, Indian Encampment* is its mood: mystical, quietly suspenseful, and enigmatic.



## George Inness (1825–1894)

### Niagara 1889



oil on canvas, 30 × 45 in.  
Gift of William T. Evans

A comparison of George Inness's painting of Niagara Falls with Alvan Fisher's, executed sixty-nine years earlier, reveals the striking changes that had taken place in the philosophy, styles, and techniques used by artists to portray the American landscape during the 19th century.

Although Inness's earliest works were based loosely on the naturalism of the Hudson River painters, he struggled to find a newer, more expressive and poetic means of defining America's natural beauty.

Like Thomas Cole, Inness believed in a divine order, but held that "a work of art does not appeal to the moral sense. Its aim is not to instruct and edify, but to awaken an emotion." For Inness, the vital and harmonious energy emitted by the spiritual force that flowed through the material world was most successfully expressed in painting by the evocation of nature's moods.

Rejecting Fisher's stage-set depiction of Niagara Falls, Inness offers a smaller, more intimate and serene view that can be taken in at a single glance. The simple structure of the composition, along with the minimal description of the basic elements of earth, water, and sky, forcefully communicates the power of the falls, wrapped in a dreamlike cloak of chilly mist. The enveloping atmosphere that unifies the elements is rendered by the application of delicate films of color that seem to float on the canvas: subtle harmonies of cool blue-greens and violet-browns, applied with broad, almost dry brushstrokes.

The soft glowing light that appears to emanate from within the forms themselves, rather than from any outside source, represents Inness's visual suggestion of God's presence in all natural forms: the expiration of the breath of the Divinity that dwarfs man and his civilization.



Winslow Homer  
(1836–1910)

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High Cliff,  
Coast of Maine  
1894



oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 38 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.  
Gift of William T. Evans

Winslow Homer was the master portrayer of outdoor life in America in the 19th century. He painted summer resorts and farms, the coasts, the forests, the mountains, and the hardy men who inhabited them—sailors, fishermen, and woodsmen—with such a fresh approach and boldness of vision that his work now ranks among the highest achievements in American art.

While man's relationship to nature always held a fascination for Homer, it was the awesome power of the sea that dominated his mature canvases. He spent the last twenty years of his life in remote Prout's Neck, Maine, where he came to know intimately the rocky coastline and its changing moods.

In *High Cliff*, Homer allows us neither distance nor escape. He provides us with no easy entry into the picture's space. We are thrust into the midst of the drama being

enacted before us: the relentless crash of the surf against the implacable rock. Our view is close-up, cropped, and devoid of any superficial details that might compete for attention. The strong diagonal composition and the use of contrasting colors—the muted blue-green water clashing with the dark brown of the rocks—are technical devices that heighten the work's tension. The wet cliff, glistening in the light, the threatening waves, and the bursting spray, modeled with broad, robust brushwork, convey the scene's intense energy.

At the top of the cliff small figures stand, dwarfed by the isolation and loneliness of the landscape. Throughout his work Homer pondered the insignificance and transience of man in relation to the eternal forces of nature.

Childe Hassam  
(1859–1935)

The South Ledges,  
Appledore  
1913



oil on canvas, 34¼ × 36½ in.  
Gift of John Gellatly

Bathed in color and light, air and sunshine, Childe Hassam's painting of his beloved New England seashore expresses his twofold aesthetic concern: to reveal what he saw and capture how he saw it.

Although *The South Ledges, Appledore* was painted early in the 20th century, it reflects the impressionistic style that Hassam had adapted in the 1880s, after advances in the study of perception and color theory and the discovery of more vibrant pigments challenged artists to paint out of doors and capture the immediate optical sensations of light and atmosphere.

Appledore, on the Isle of Shoals, off the coast of New Hampshire, was a popular summer resort and artists' colony at the turn of the century. Hassam often vacationed there to enjoy the charm of the broad ledges, the cool water, and the warmth of the sun.

We are immediately drawn to the woman comfortably posed in

quiet contemplation, refreshed by the afternoon breeze. Her white dress and broad-brimmed hat reflect and blend with the colors of the rocks. This conscious patterning device helps to negate any narrative association and encourages us to participate actively in the scene. The almost-square format and the very high horizon line emphasize great space and distance while the jewel-like colors create a shimmering light that fuses figure, sea, rocks, and sky into a unified whole. There is no conflict between man and nature or between nature's forces. All is in perfect harmony.

Hassam's evocative, sentimental portrayal of a genteel tradition in American life is a reflection of his aesthetic beliefs. Hassam explained his art this way: "A picture that does not carry its own message of loveliness, but which requires the service of an artistic guide, is not, to my mind, a work of art."



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