

Notes for Teachers

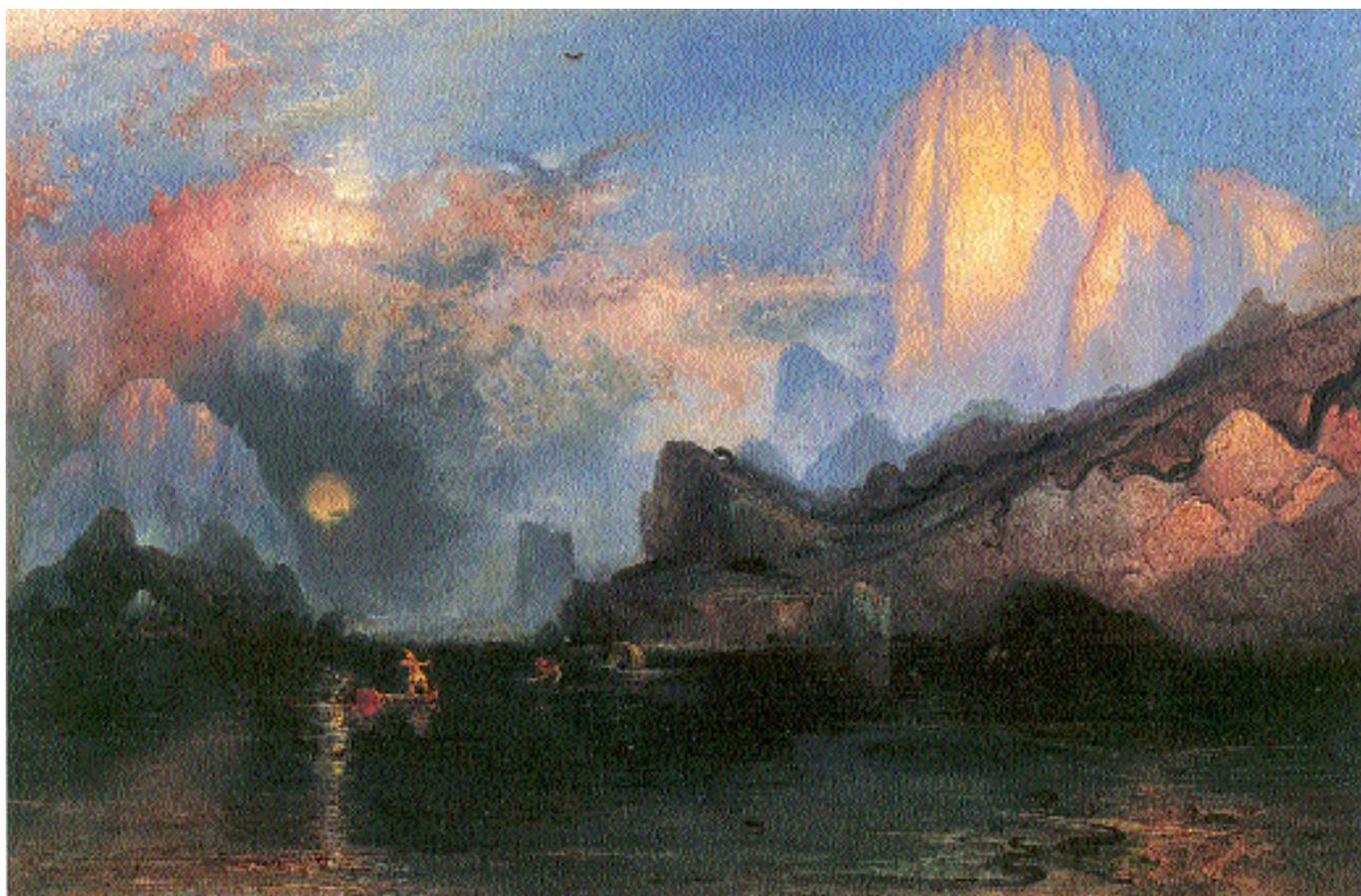
American Sublime

Landscape painting in the United States, 1820–1880

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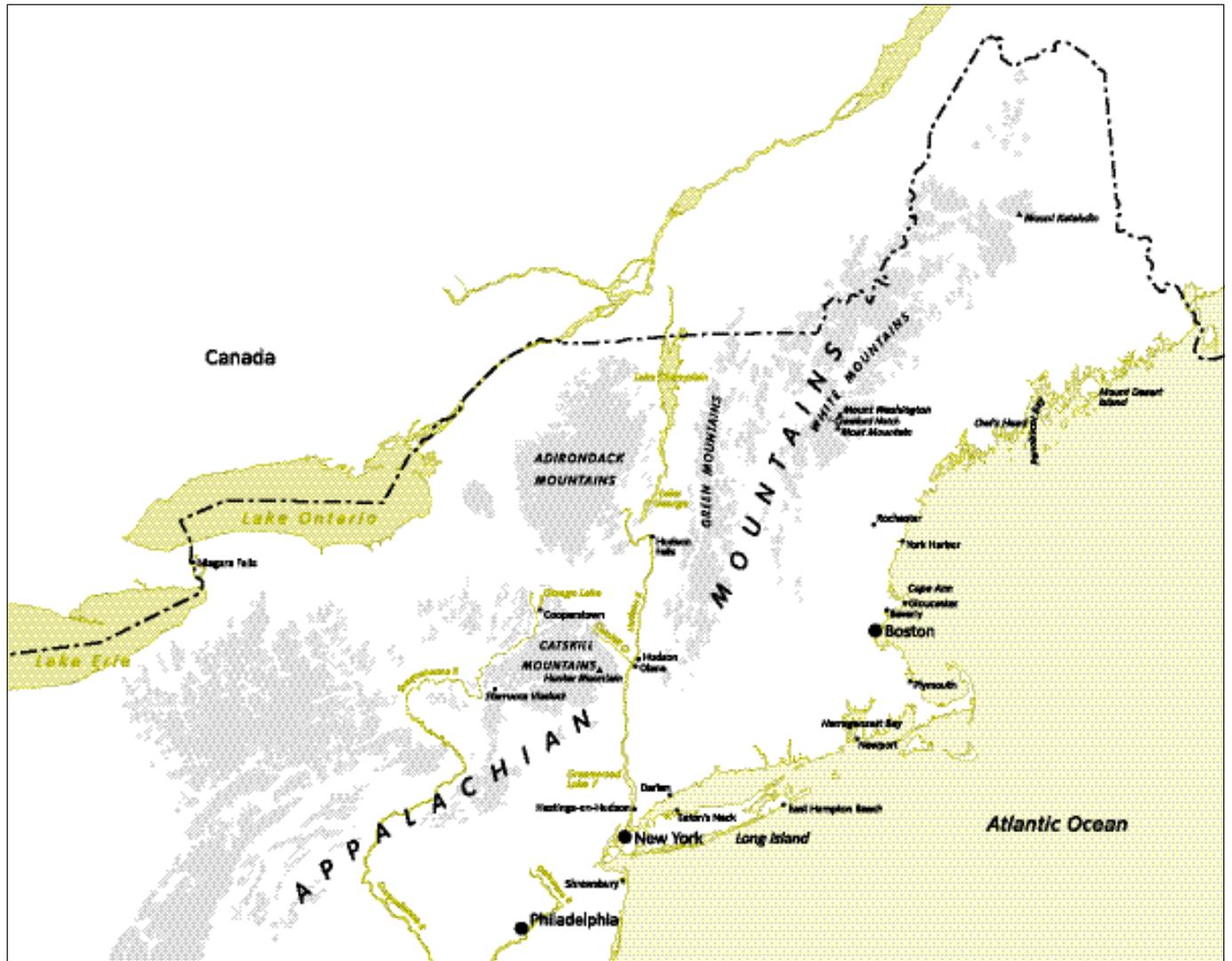
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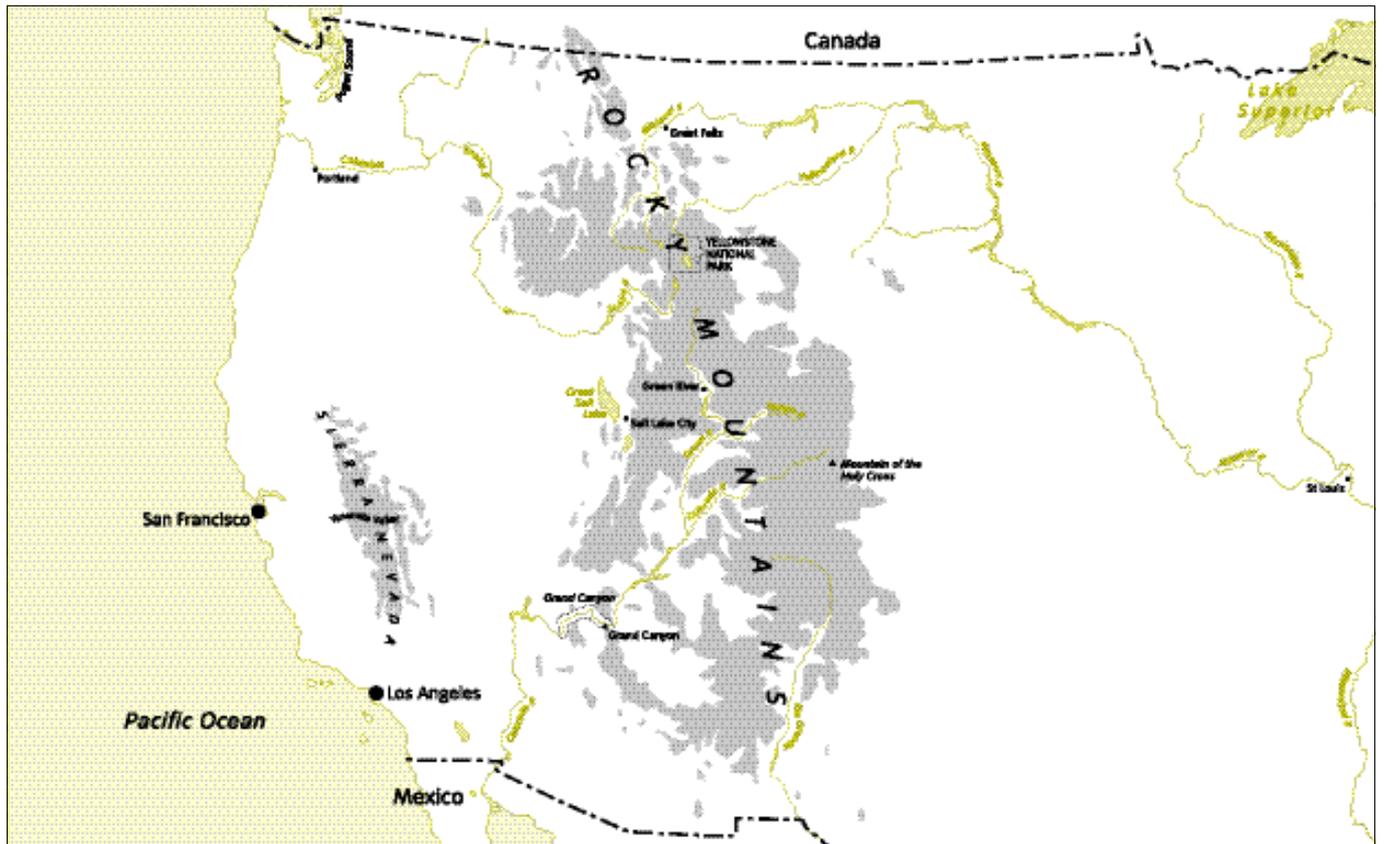
Thomas Moran, *Hiawatha and the Great Serpent, the Kenabeek*, 1867
By kind courtesy of The Baltimore Museum of Art: Friends of Art Fund

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NORTH EASTERN UNITED STATES



WESTERN UNITED STATES



1. Introduction

American Sublime is an exhibition of paintings by ten nineteenth-century artists, well known to American art audiences but mostly unseen in England since the reign of Queen Victoria. Some of the artists were born in England where landscape painting had reached its zenith in the first half of the nineteenth century with the Romantic generation led by JMW Turner and John Constable. Helped by their awareness of eighteenth-century British theories of the Picturesque and Sublime, they evolved an indigenous landscape idiom in response to the astonishing scale and features of nature in the New World as well as to the national needs and aspirations of Americans in the century following their independence from Britain.

This pack is mainly intended for secondary teachers to use with their students but year 5 and 6 children working on *A Sense of Place* would enjoy the drama of the paintings and teachers could adapt some of the ideas that follow for their use, for example by encouraging them to make an imaginary walk into the landscape. Some of the questions in the framed sections could be adapted for younger students. A trail is also available on request.

Chronologically, the exhibition ranges from the 1820s (the decade in which landscape painting first fully emerges as a genre in American art) to 1880, thus spanning several generations and several transformations of the Sublime. Most of the artists represented were part of the loosely defined "Hudson River School" of landscape painting, but their subject matter includes a much wider geographical sweep than the Hudson River Valley of New York state. Paintings in the exhibition range in subject matter from New England in the Northeast of the United States to the state of Washington in the Pacific Northwest; from Niagara Falls on the New York-Canadian border to Cotopaxi, the volcano in the Andes of Ecuador in South America. *American Sublime* is an exhibition that encompasses much of the New World.

There are eight sections, arranged in the following sequence: Wilderness, The Course of Empire, The Still Small Voice, 'Awful Grandeur', Painting from Nature, A Transcendental Vision, Explorations and The Great West. The ten artists are: Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Cole, Jasper Francis Cropsey, Asher B. Durand, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Martin Johnson Heade, John Kensett, Fitz Hugh Lane and Thomas Moran.

2. The Sublime and related Terms

In the twenty-first century, the meaning of terms such as "Sublime," "Beautiful," and "Picturesque" is no longer as precise as in earlier periods. Eighteenth-century British essayists defined the Sublime in terms of thundering waterfalls, erupting volcanoes, tempestuous seas, and violent storms. The Sublime evoked things astonishing, overwhelming, and frightening to human beings and yet "delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime." This quotation is from writer and politician Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), a major treatise on the Sublime. Burke is making the point that the Sublime is an aesthetic response to overwhelming phenomena experienced through art or literature, in the imagination-not first hand in circumstances of actual danger.

In his essay, Burke defined the Beautiful as the opposite of the Sublime. For Burke, the Beautiful was characterised by small scale, smooth surfaces and pervasive gentle luminousness. The

Sublime, in contrast, was overwhelmingly large, rough and irregular, even craggy, and either broodingly dark or marked by extreme contrasts of light and dark (as in lightning illuminating an enormous mountain peak during a stormy night, a thundering waterfall nearby and perhaps an erupting volcano in the distance). Although the paintings in this exhibition may contain passages of “the Beautiful” in Burke’s terms, the primary interests of these artists were the large, astonishing features of nature that stimulate sensations of the Sublime itself.

A third, related category is the Picturesque, defined in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a category midway between the Sublime and the Beautiful. Picturesque things are textured (not smooth, like the Beautiful), irregular in lighting and shadowing (but not in the harsh and extreme way of the Sublime), and moderate in scale. Picturesque phenomena are roughened rocks (rather than enormous boulders), the bark of trees, the overhead canopy of leaves in a forest copse, a burbling stream (not a torrential waterfall), etc. The point of view for experiencing the Picturesque is close range and intimate. The point of view for experiencing the Sublime is territorial and vast. The Picturesque world may well involve pathways, textured wooden fences, a lichen-covered cottage, or other evidence of human habitation. In contrast, the Sublime world subordinates or entirely avoids human habitation because the forces of the Sublime overwhelm human beings.

Look at John Constable’s full-scale sketch for *The Haywain* 1821 in room 13 of the Permanent Collection displays - an example of the Picturesque more than the Sublime. Other examples of the Picturesque include John Linnell’s *Study of Buildings* 1806 in room 11 and PJ de Louthembourg’s *Lake Scene, Evening* 1792 in room 7.

Part of the interest of landscape paintings is their variety, and although the thesis of this exhibition is that these works primarily entail the Sublime in various ways, the Sublime is often set off and clarified by contrasting passages of the Picturesque and perhaps even the less easily identifiable Beautiful. Students could be asked to identify elements of the Picturesque in contrast to elements of the Sublime in particular works.

3. The Sublime in Art and Literature

The Sublime manifests itself in art and literature most completely in the Romantic period of the early nineteenth century. Romanticism is concerned with a human being’s individual response to nature, and the concept of the Sublime became a powerful vehicle for Romantic poets and painters interested in expressing an intensely personal response before the vastness of nature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” with its description of a vast and stormy sea all but capsizing a boat and its human inhabitants, is a key example of the Sublime in English poetry.

4. English paintings that epitomise the Sublime in the Permanent Collection displays

Many painted stormy seas can be found in the work of JMW Turner. Look, for instance, in the Clore Gallery at *The Shipwreck* exh1805 and *Snowstorm - Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* exh 1842. Other Sublime works on show in the permanent collection displays include Joseph Wright of Derby’s *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples* c1776–80 in room 6 and the entire contents of room 14 *John Martin and Visions of the Apocalypse*.

5. The Context of how the Sublime developed in America

By the 1840s, the Sublime had run its course as a mode in English painting, but American painters beginning in the 1820s, adapted the Sublime to their own personal and patriotic needs and made it a key mode of expression in American landscape painting for most of the nineteenth century. The Sublime took root in American painting of the nineteenth century for several reasons:

• North American Nature

The vast territories of undomesticated nature in the New World stood ready to be viewed and experienced as "Sublime". The forests, mountain ranges, rivers, and lakes, as well as such particular natural wonders as Niagara Falls or, discovered later in the West, Old Faithful Geyser, or the giant redwoods of California, were all staggering in their enormity. The term "Sublime" describes an imaginative response to immensity or boundlessness, a 'delightful horror' when faced by phenomena of great magnitude, by potential danger or the unknown.

• Romanticism

Although American nature stood ready to be understood and appreciated as Sublime, it required the rise of Romanticism for this sensibility about American nature to develop. In the eighteenth century, American nature was often perceived as a genuine threat to safety and well being and also as an impediment to progress: dense forests occupied land needed for agriculture; waterfalls interrupted natural transportation waterways, etc. Such nature was not at first experienced as Sublime because it was not, in general, possible to experience it as pleasurable because it was too threatening. Students should be reminded that the Sublime is a human construct, an aesthetic/experiential point of view that requires sufficient distance from the actual dangers of nature to find it pleasing in its overwhelming vastness. Romanticism, originating in England and developing in the United States, provided the impetus to experience American nature as Sublime.

• Nature endangered seen as Sublime

The Romantic period coincided in the New World with the taming of much of nature, especially in the eastern United States. Indeed, American landscape painting in any fully developed form did not thrive until nature began to be understood as potentially endangered (from over-logging and general population growth and land development), and until Romanticism provided a lens for looking at nature as Sublime, rather than simply dangerous, dirty, and in the way of human aspiration. Whereas landscape painting was popular in Europe as early as the seventeenth century, it did not flourish in the United States until the 1820s; the earliest work in this exhibition dates from that decade.

• Patriotism and the Sublime

As America developed as a nation in the course of the nineteenth century, nature in its sublimity came to be seen in nationalistic, patriotic terms. American nature was emblematic of America's size, strength, cultural and economic potential, and materialistic potential. American nature was unlike any other in the world, and certainly different (and by implication "better") than the old, used, domesticated nature of England and Europe. William Cullen Bryant urged his friend Thomas Cole, the American landscape painter who had been born in England, to soak up in his imagination "that wilder image" of American scenery before he took a trip to England and the continent. Bryant's advice was a warning to Cole to remember the virility of American nature and not be seduced by the gentler forms of nature he would encounter on his trip.

• Religion expressed through Nature

The West was seen as God's country, and some painters depicted the landscape as if its forms and effects were emanations of the divine. Some of the later paintings in this exhibition convey a mood of holiness and godly spirituality that reflects both genuine religious feeling and a tone of national pride and even superiority.

• Manifest Destiny

American nature was seen as Eden, God's handiwork, stretching uninterrupted from the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of the Pacific, an east-west distance of over 3000 miles. The United States at first occupied only the eastern portions of this land mass, but in the period covered by this exhibition settlement extended further and further west - buoyed by the rhetoric of "Manifest Destiny", the belief that it was the God-given right of Americans to extend the organized United States to the Pacific Ocean. American experience in this period was coloured and even formed by the knowledge that almost endless tracts of land waited to be developed to the west. This exhibition includes works by artists who toured the West and painted the scenery they encountered in terms of the Sublime.

6. Questions to ask your students in any Room

- What is the scale of the paintings? How does it make you feel? Do you feel yourself drawn into the landscape? Choose any painting and go for an imaginary walk through it. How do you feel: elated/intimidated/filled with awe?
- How is the picture painted? Is it detailed/sketchy/ brightly coloured/carefully composed/ apparently natural?
- From your knowledge of the English countryside, does nature as it is presented in these paintings seem "American" in any way? How would you define the difference?
- How does Tate Britain's presentation of these works affect the way we look at them? Be specific in asking yourself how such factors as the number of paintings presented in a room, the sequencing and their spacing around the walls, the colour of the walls (which have been specially painted to enhance these works), and the particular works selected for presentation in a section affect us as we enter each room.
- In what ways do the paintings carry on a "conversation" with each other, or do they converse at all? Each section has a theme title; what is the title, and how do the paintings presented in a given section seem to illustrate or illuminate that title?
- Of course, the most important question, whether asked generally or specifically, for this exhibition is: what are the elements of the Sublime in these paintings? Secondly, what are the elements of the Picturesque?

7. Exploring the Exhibition, looking at key Paintings in Focus

Section I: Wilderness

This section emphasises the early work of Thomas Cole, one of the "founders" of American landscape painting. Beginning in the 1820s, Cole was the first to explore distinctly American landscape, the wilderness itself, in painting. Travelling on the Hudson River during the summers and visiting the mountains and waterfalls of eastern New York state and New England, he made drawings of natural features that he later incorporated into paintings. His paintings are composites rather than accurate views of actual places, but they were based on detailed on-site drawings and struck contemporary viewers as being startlingly immediate and genuine in their suggestion of North American landscape. They became known as Cole's "American views".

Questions to ask your students about

Thomas Cole's early work *Landscape with Tree Trunks*, 1828 (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design).

- Imagine yourself walking to the site of the painting. How would you as a viewer "get" to this viewpoint? How did Cole as artist get here? Encourage students to think about the arduous struggle of access that this painting implies. This is not a world of paths and trails. "No one has been here before", the painting claims, "this is Wilderness". How does it claim this?
- Does nature in this painting "invite us in"? Does it "block us out"? What are the elements of "blockage" in this painting? Encourage students to talk about the scary tree trunk standing directly in our way, the way the mountain spur crosses the middle ground and blocks our view, the frustration we may feel at not being able to see into the distance because of the jumble of Sublime components. Perhaps such factors as these add up to the overall effect of "wilderness" in this painting; the work is structured to be "inhospitable" to human engagement.
- What features suggest the Sublime? Students could list such things as the blasted tree, the turbulent sky, the contrasting lights and shadows, the craggy mountains and rocks, etc.
- Discuss the implications of the blasted tree as an emblem of the Sublime. What does it imply about the passage of time, the power of nature (tremendous storms over the centuries), etc.? Get students to think about the Sublime not only in terms of astonishing phenomena immediately before us but also of vastness of time and the forces of nature (such as storms) not presently occurring but always imminent (the unpredictability of nature can itself be Sublime).

• Compare and contrast Cole's *Landscape with Tree Trunks* with Asher B. Durand's *Kindred Spirits* (1849; Collection of the New York Public Library). Durand's painting was commissioned to honour the memory of Cole after he died and shows Cole and his older friend William Cullen Bryant (an eminent writer and poet) standing before the beauties of nature in New England. Although there are elements of the Sublime in this painting (the broken tree trunk in the foreground, symbolic of Cole's death, is one of these elements), Durand's view of nature is often more Picturesque than fully Sublime. Students might note the entirely different types of access to nature (Cole and Bryant have undertaken a comfortable stroll, not an arduous hike), Durand's presentation of nature as a chapel-like enclosure (note the leaves enclosing the scene at the top), and the closely inspected textures of bark, rocks, leaves, etc. - all elements of the Picturesque. Durand's vision of Wilderness is fundamentally different from Cole's.

Section II: The Course of Empire

The title of the Section is also the title of the set of five paintings by Thomas Cole presented in this room. These were painted in 1835–1836 following Cole's trip to England and Europe. In addition to the title of the set, each of the five paintings has its own individual title that suggest five developmental stages of a civilisation or empire: a primitive Savage State with a hunting scene is followed by a classical idyll in *The Pastoral or Arcadian State*. Wealth and military power have reached their zenith in *The Consummation of the Empire*. In *Destruction and Desolation*, the empire suffers the consequences of decadence and corruption. Cole clearly alluded to the rise and fall of ancient Rome in this series but there are suggested implications for modern London and even contemporary America. He was horrified by the rapid transformations caused by industrialisation, territorial expansion and the unrestrained growth of cities. In these paintings, Cole seeks to elaborate upon "mere" landscape painting and push it in the direction of History Painting - dealing with such elevated issues as history, civilisation, and the fate of nations. In the 1830s, American painters still wrestled with Sir Joshua Reynolds' assertion (delivered in his *Discourses*) that the most elevated category of painting was History Painting; landscape, portraiture, and still life were deemed secondary to this. Cole seeks to elevate landscape painting to History Painting with this series.

Section III: The Still Small Voice

This Section offers one of several different variants of what might be called the Sublime of Quietude that appears in American landscape painting of the third quarter of the nineteenth century. As originally defined by Burke, the Sublime was generally noisy and boisterous, involving storms, waterfalls, and other dynamic phenomena. But in 1835 in his *Essay on American Scenery*, Thomas Cole described a different sort of Sublime. Telling of his experience in a mountain gorge called Franconia Notch in New Hampshire, Cole wrote: "I was overwhelmed with an emotion of the sublime, such as I have rarely felt... Over all, rocks, wood, and water, brooded the spirit of repose, and the silent energy of nature stirred the soul to its inmost depths". This is the Sublime of repose and silent energy, capable of stirring the soul and arousing the kind of awe which makes the silent spectacle of the sunset in the wilderness seemed charged with religious significance. These paintings date mostly from the 1850s and early 1860s and thus represent the "second generation" of Hudson River School painting. Painted some thirty years after Cole's first works, the landscapes in this Section continue to explore the woods and mountains of New England and New York. But the mood of the scenes is more meditative, perhaps even brooding, than earlier. The sort of areas shown in these paintings was becoming rarer and more distant in location: the expressive emphasis of the works on twilight

and autumn suggest a mood of elegiac reflection and a sense of loss. Admiring the heroic efforts of pioneers in clearing the forests and creating new farmland, artists such as Church and Sanford Robinson Gifford nonetheless lamented the resulting destruction of wilderness. The stumps of felled trees symbolised this cruel transformation. The period of the 1850s and early 60s was a time of unease in American culture, as the Civil War between the industrial North and the agricultural, slave-owning South approached (the American Civil War began in 1862). A particularly significant work in this Section is Church's *Twilight in the Wilderness*, probably based on a variety of north-eastern locations but primarily in the state of Maine, where Church often hiked and sketched.

Questions to ask about

Frederic Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860. (The Cleveland Museum of Art)

- Based on what we know about the Sublime so far, what are the Sublime elements in this painting? (Students might point out the gnarled tree trunks, leafless branches, rocky outcroppings, darkened hills, dramatic sky, etc.)
- At the same time, what is different (in contrast to works seen earlier) about the Sublime as we experience it in the paintings in this Section, and particularly in this work by Church? (It is possible to see the painting as an apocalyptic portent of the violence that would soon engulf America in the Civil War.)

Section IV: 'Awful Grandeur'

This Section is comprised of American landscape paintings created in the 1860s during and after the Civil War. Works of this period explored the Sublime in a number of its variations, ranging from the Sublime of quietude and silence (as in Kensett's *Lake George*, one of numerous paintings by a variety of artists of this remote lake in New York) to the more overtly dramatic and turbulent Sublime seen in Frederic Church's paintings of the Atlantic Ocean crashing against the rocky shore at Mt. Desert, Maine or of Niagara. The Niagara Falls unleashes power beyond human control: to be washed over the fall would mean certain death. The point of this Section's title is that American nature, whether silent and still or violent and tumbling, is "awful", in the sense of inspiring awe and filling us with it. Presumably the tiny human viewers who stand before the vast reaches of nature in many of the works in this Section are experiencing such awe.

Questions to ask about

Jasper Cropsey, *Starrucca Viaduct*, 1865. Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.

The painting's title refers to the railroad viaduct built in 1848 for the New York and Erie Railroad in the Starrucca Valley at Lanesboro, Pennsylvania. Over a thousand feet long and one hundred feet high, it was an engineering marvel of its day and a symbol of the rapidly expanding American railway system. Although a bridge of such a scale lends itself to presentation in terms of the Sublime, Cropsey instead subordinates the bridge to the panoramic sweep of nature itself. Indeed, a point embedded in this painting seems to be that industrialism need not undermine nature's sublimity, that the hand of man and the power of nature can coexist, that economic development need not diminish nature. Cropsey is not alone among American artists who sought to reassure viewers that industrialism and untrammelled nature could coexist.

- The title of the painting refers to the railway bridge that arcs through the middle ground of the painting. Built in 1848 and over a thousand feet long and one hundred feet high, it was one of the engineering marvels of its day. And yet, is the "subject" of this painting primarily the bridge? How does Cropsey present the bridge in relationship to the natural setting?
- Do the bridge and the train that crosses over it "interfere" with nature and "disrupt" it? Why or why not? (Ask the students to be specific in noting how the bridge curves in gentle rhythm with the hillside, how the tones of the bridge's sandstone piers blend with the autumn colours, how the steam of the engine echoes the strands of mist and the clouds above.)
- Do the bridge and the village compromise our (and the hikers') experience of the Sublime in nature? What are the elements of the Sublime in this painting, and how might the viaduct and train contribute to a sense of the Sublime?
- Can you imagine the possibility of an Industrial Sublime? What might a painting of the Industrial Sublime entail? Look at Turner's celebration of steam power in *Snow Storm - Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* ex 1842 in the Clore Gallery. Find an earlier, more domestic industrial scene in Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Iron Forge* 1772 in room 7 of the permanent collection displays. It demonstrates the benefits to all ages in society of a product of the Industrial Revolution, the water powered tilt hammer.
- In what ways may the term 'Awful Grandeur' apply to this painting by Cropsey? How does the placement of the hikers and their dog help suggest a sense of awe and grandeur?

Section V: Painting from Nature.

The sketches in this Section, many of them by Frederic Church, were generally created out of doors in front of the actual subject and thus are characterised by an informality, spontaneity, and lack of finish that differs from the more carefully worked studio paintings that largely make up the displays in other Sections. Because the oil sketches were done on site, they are small in scale, since the artists had to carry their supplies to sometimes distant sites. The sketches were apparently used for a variety of purposes: as exercises to keep one's technique fresh and vital, as studies of particular motifs or subjects that would find their way into finished studio paintings (often a composite of several sketches), as complete preliminary versions of studio paintings, or as finished works in their own right-appreciated for their freshness and spontaneity. The practice of making oil sketches on site was not original to American landscape painters but based on English and European tradition. You could compare these with others by Constable in rooms 11, 12 and 13 and Turner in room C1.

Section VI: A Transcendental Vision.

These paintings, constructed in terms of geometry, measurement, precise intervals of space and implicit grid patterns, are often described as Luminist-in reference to the luminous glow that tends to emanate from the smooth or very gently rippling surfaces of water and the glowing, gently atmospheric skies. The paintings overall often become luminist panels of light. Luminist works are also characterised by a sense of heightened detail (especially in foreground subjects), overall clarity, and a sense of measured intervals between isolated objects - the spaces, for instance, between a foreground rock, a mid-ground buoy, a distant sailing boat. The worlds depicted seem based on measurement and an overall sense of order. Why, then, are these paintings Sublime rather than, say, Beautiful (in their smooth luminousness)? This question might be posed to students.

The word "Transcendental", used in the title of the Section, helps us understand these paintings as Sublime. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist and thinker, was a key exponent of New England Transcendentalism, the philosophy that individual human beings, by means of intense vision and meditation but without the intervention of organized religion, can perceive the enormity of the universe and the presence of God in ordinary and familiar reality. The gazing, meditating figures in some of these paintings, standing in the foregrounds with their backs to the viewer and looking into the world of the work, are surrogates for all human beings who take the time and have the patience to gaze at nature so intensely as to transcend its factual immediacy and experience a higher and more universal realm. As we ourselves look at these paintings, we may be lured - by the clarity of detail, the clearness of the lighting, and the measured order by which ordinary things are arranged - to experience that possibility of the divine or at least the universal within the immediate facts of particular places. To the extent that we stand on the threshold of the vast and universal in a moment of profound quietness and stillness, we are in realm of the Sublime. But this is a fundamentally different version of the Sublime than the one Edmund Burke envisioned in England a century earlier. That sublime was active and dynamic, potentially noisy (storms, waterfalls), tumultuous. The new Transcendental Sublime was based on quietness and stillness.

Questions to ask about

Fitz Hugh Lane, *Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine*. 1862. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

- Whereas many of the earlier paintings concerned the wilderness, natural history, or cultural history, what sort of reality does Owl's Head present?
- What is the relationship of the man, standing in the lower right foreground, to us as viewer of the painting and the scene of Penobscot Bay?
- What is the mood, tone, or "feeling" of this painting, in contrast to the scenes in earlier sections?
- Students could be asked to consider the idea that the Sublime can be quiet and still. In their own words, they might describe how this could be true and how Penobscot Bay may instil a sense of the Sublime in these terms. Even a phrase such as "God resides in the details" might be posited, with students asked to describe the painting in terms of its finely lighted details and the sense of "transcendence" that may result from the gently exaggerated realism of Lane's scene.

Section VII: Explorations

This Section and the following one make the point that, while the American Sublime in landscape painting originated in the Northeast, some painters travelled far from New England and New York to explore distant and exotic variants of the Sublime in nature - for example the icebergs that Church painted on a voyage to Newfoundland and Labrador in 1859.

Questions to ask about

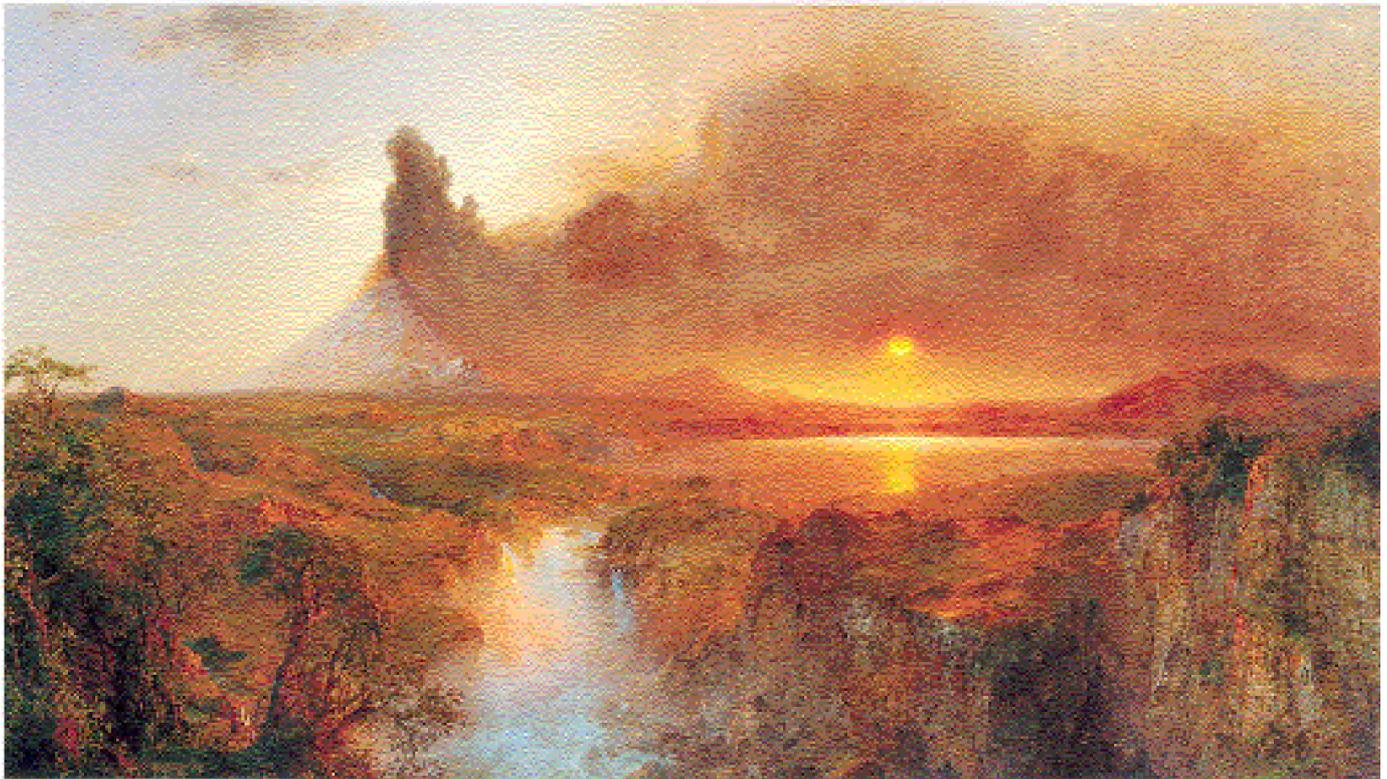
Frederic E. Church, *Cotopaxi*, 1862. (The Detroit Institute of Arts).

In many ways, this famous work epitomises the Sublime as originally defined by Edmund Burke while also using the Sublime as a metaphor for American exploration, religious epiphany, and expansionist dreams.

- What is Cotopaxi, and where is it? (The highest known volcano in the world, it is located in central Ecuador, in the Andes.)
- This painting implies tremendous effort by the artist, and by extension by us as viewers, to arrive at this scene. How does the composition of the painting imply that our "getting here" was difficult if not impossible?
- What is the expressive result of the arduous climb the painting insists that we have made?

The word “epiphanic” is sometimes used with regard to this painting—suggesting that we experience an epiphany, or a sudden illumination of ideas or understanding through our experience of the painting. How does Church use point of view, colour, light, detail and lack of it, etc., to suggest the experience of “epiphany”?

- We, like Church, have arrived at this viewpoint as a traveller. Is there another traveller in the painting? How does the placement and scale of the traveller figure affect our response to the painting?



Frederic Edwin Church, *Cotopaxi*, 1862. By kind courtesy of The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders' Society Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund, Gibbs-Williams Fund, Dexter M. Ferry, Jr., Merrill Fund, Beatrice W. Rogers Fund, and Richard A. Manoogian Fund

Section VIII: The Great West

The vast territories to the West of the Mississippi River represented the future to most Americans, even if individually they never planned to travel or settle there. The plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Pacific Slope, virtually unexplored at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were the focus of explorers' expeditions beginning with the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805. They were designated as American territories long before statehood was gradually established for particular regions, and by the later decades of the nineteenth century were made increasingly accessible by the laying of rail lines across the continent. The Great West was a marvel of the Sublime in its most gigantic and overwhelming forms, and this Section presents the work of two painters especially known for their dramatic documentation of the West - Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. Expansion and settlement of the West resulted in claiming of the lands and ending a way of life for the American Indians, traces of whose culture can be found in some of the paintings. Thomas Moran's first American journey of exploration, for instance, was to the shores of Lake Superior in 1861, when he collected material that was later to be used in three meditations on scenes from HW Longfellow's poem *Hiawatha* published in 1855. (Look for example at *Hiawatha and the Great Serpent*, *the Kenabeek* 1867 and at *'Fiercely the Red Sun descending Burned his Way across the Heavens.*) Nonetheless the overall emphasis in this Section is on the West as a land of promise and a gift from God.

Questions to ask about

Albert Bierstadt. *The Rocky Mountains (Lander's Peak)*, 1863. (The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums)

Students could be asked to discuss this painting as a summation of many themes of the entire exhibition. The enormous scale of the work and the staggering grandeur of the Rockies rising in the distance are indicators of the Sublime in its original, Burkean sense. The smooth, reflective lake in the middle ground suggests the later, profoundly quiet variations of the Sublime. The light and mist that suffuse the distant mountains evoke the aspects of divine revelation and "epiphany" associated with the Christianised Sublime that Frederic Church also explored.

- How does this painting provide a dramatic summary of many of the different variations of Sublime that have been presented in this exhibition?
- To what extent does the Picturesque persist here? In some ways the Indian encampment provides a Picturesque complement to the towering Sublime effects at the top of the painting.
- What are the implications of depicting the American Indians as Picturesque?

8. And finally, do traces of the Sublime remain in today's art?

Your students may feel that, since the eighteenth century and the social conditions that created the Sublime of the nineteenth century have long since passed, this exhibition is irrelevant to their lives in the twenty-first century. (Students should be encouraged to visit *Warhol* at Tate Modern to look at the work of a more recent American artist). But is the Sublime really dead or do some of its features remain alive in our culture? The impulse to view from a safe distance, and yet more surprising, even to enjoy horrific incidents caused by the overwhelming power of nature, remains constant as the box office success of films like *Titanic* demonstrates.

Further, Tim Barringer, co-curator of the show and Assistant Professor in the department of Art History at Yale University, claims that American Sublime paintings shaped the vision of Hollywood a century later. He says that movie directors and cinematographers, from John Ford with *Stagecoach* in 1939 to Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* in 1992, pay homage to the work of the painters in this exhibition. Barringer feels that the wide-screen proportions of nineteenth century landscape produced a tradition of painting that was still shaping the vision of the American West 150 years later. "By the time cinema was invented, there was already a vocabulary to describe that landscape, which adapted itself, supremely well as it turned out, to the wide screen format".