

Romantic Painters in America

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"Fur Traders Descending the Missouri," oil on canvas by George Caleb Bingham, circa 1845; in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo from Wikimedia.

Romanticism was an artistic movement that began in Europe toward the end of the 1700s. At the time, America was still too young to have its own style of painting. Romantic artists, musicians and writers in Europe emphasized emotion, individualism and a reverence of nature. American Romantic artists learned from their European counterparts. Romanticism was also heavily influenced by the politics of the time. The late 1700s was a time of revolutions. Revolutions in America in 1776 and France in 1789 called for democracy and freedom. These ideas were portrayed in paintings, as were revolutionary heroes.



Benjamin West, born in America, moved to England and became famous for a new style of narrative painting showing events that had recently happened. Though he created his most important paintings in England, his work had a greater effect on American artists. John Trumbull created 12 scenes from the American Revolution. These paintings were detailed, colorful and filled with tension. Trumbull's 1786 painting "The Battle of Bunker Hill" shows a famous event in the Revolutionary War. His "Sortie from Gibraltar," painted in 1789, depicts a battle between England and Spain in 1781. The paintings try to show what had happened clearly. They are very dramatic and look as if the subjects are posing for the artist. One of the great portrait painters of the time was Charles Willson Peale. He completed a series of paintings of the generals of the Revolution in 1784. Between 1808 and 1814, Alexander Wilson painted 76 very precise and natural paintings of birds. Years later, between 1827 and 1838, John James Audubon created 435 life-size watercolor drawings of birds.

American painters find their own style

At the beginning of the Romantic period, the European influence on American artists was quite strong. In the 1800s, however, American painters started to have their own style. American painters began to show more intense emotion in their work. Thomas Sully, for example, brought more mood and feelings into the facial expressions in his portraits. He also played with different body positions in the poses. His most famous portrait is of Colonel Thomas Handasyd Perkins. The painting, finished in 1832, has fine brush strokes, contrast between

light and dark colors and an elegant pose showing the colonel's left arm resting on his couch. Some, like Samuel F.B. Morse, Samuel Waldo and William Page followed Sully's style, but most of the 19th century portraits were serious and showed little emotion.



The career of American landscape painter Washington Allston began in Europe. His love for German and English Romantic poetry inspired him to create a number of early landscapes in Rome between 1804 and 1808.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English Romantic poet, loved these paintings and they soon became friends. Allston's landscapes showed nature in the darker, more destructive moods similar to the landscapes of the English painter J.M.W. Turner. Allston's 1804 painting "The Deluge" includes bodies in a raging storm swept ashore where wolves and serpents wait. On

his return to the United States in 1818, however, Allston's work became less dark and more thoughtful, but still sad. His "The Flight of Florimell" from 1819 shows the escape of a fairy queen on a white horse, through a forest toward the sea. This painting illustrates his later style.

The Hudson River School



A simple love for natural scenery inspired many landscape painters. Thomas Cole painted scenes in the valley of the Hudson River showing the loneliness and mystery of the North American forests. Landscape painters like Cole were part of a movement known as the Hudson River School. Settlers were beginning to arrive in places like New York's Hudson River Valley. Artists like Cole worried that these scenes might disappear.

Hudson River School landscapes have several common themes. The scenes are about discovery and exploring America's wilderness, showing the artists' appreciation for nature. They inspired writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who shared this deep admiration for America's wilderness.

Asher B. Durand's 1849 painting "Kindred Spirits" is a landscape in the Catskill Mountains of New York that uses a feeling for space and finely diffused light. The painting honors the friendship of Thomas Cole and American Romantic poet William Cullen Bryant.

Country life inspires many artists

Other artists, including George Loring Brown, Fitz Hugh Lane, Frederic Edwin Church and George Harvey followed Durand and painted in the open. There were also the simple, quiet and peaceful Hudson River Valley landscapes of Thomas Doughty. The details of country life that fill the stories of Washington Irving are seen in William Sidney Mount's 1845 work "Eel Spearing at Setanket." This painting shows a black family servant teaching a young boy how to fish.

Artists painting in the style of the Hudson River School did not only paint scenes of the Hudson Valley. As artists began to focus more on the outdoors, the frontier became a common theme. "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri" by George Caleb Bingham captures the quiet beauty of frontier life. George Catlin, Seth Eastman, John M. Stanley, Alfred Jacob Miller and Karl Bodmer all discovered the drama and excitement in frontier life.

The Romantic period witnessed the emergence of a truly national style of painting in the United States, and the painters of the Hudson River School played an important role. Events and scenery from the world around them provided a constant source of stimulation for artists all the way through the 1800s.

Quiz

- 1 HOW do the image and information in the section "The Hudson River School" develop a coherent understanding of the school's landscape paintings?
- (A) Both emphasize the risk posed to nature by new settlers in the area.
 - (B) Both demonstrate the excitement of exploring America's wilderness.
 - (C) Both emphasize the focus on soft light and an appreciation for nature.
 - (D) Both demonstrate the development of deep friendships among members.

- 2 Look at the painting near the second paragraph of the article.
- HOW does this painting contribute to your understanding of early American Romanticism?
- (A) It demonstrates the dramatization of a real event.
 - (B) It illustrates the bright colors used by the artists.
 - (C) It demonstrates the reverence the artists had for nature.
 - (D) It illustrates the influence of European painters.

- 3 Read the selection from the section "American painters find their own style."

Thomas Sully, for example, brought more mood and feelings into the facial expressions in his portraits. He also played with different body positions in the poses. His most famous portrait is of Colonel Thomas Handasyd Perkins. The painting, finished in 1832, has fine brush strokes, contrast between light and dark colors and an elegant pose showing the colonel's left arm resting on his couch. Some, like Samuel F.B. Morse, Samuel Waldo and William Page, followed Sully's style, but most of the 19th century portraits were serious and showed little emotion.

Which conclusion is BEST supported by this selection?

- (A) Sully's more realistic style was not immediately embraced by most artists at that time.
- (B) Most artists immediately tried to copy the movement and emotion in Sully's paintings.
- (C) The people who posed for Sully were more emotional than most other people.
- (D) Some of the new positions and contrasts Sully used made his portraits less realistic.

4 Read the section "Country life inspires many artists."

Which sentence from the section BEST supports the idea that painters and writers were inspired in similar ways by their surroundings?

- (A) Other artists, including George Loring Brown, Fitz Hugh Lane, Frederic Edwin Church and George Harvey, followed Durand and painted in the open.
- (B) The details of country life that fill the stories of Washington Irving are seen in William Sidney Mount's 1845 work "Eel Spearing at Setanket."
- (C) "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri" by George Caleb Bingham captures the quiet beauty of frontier life.
- (D) Events and scenery from the world around them provided a constant source of stimulation for artists all the way through the 1800s.