

5-A The Oxbow

Thomas Cole (1801–1848)



5-A Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm — The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas; 51 ½ x 76 in. (130.8 x 193 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908 (08.228). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Art

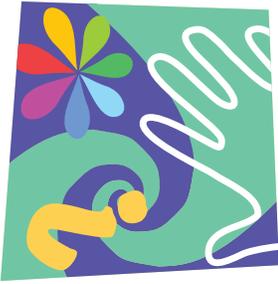
The full title of this oil painting is *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*. It was painted in 1836 and now belongs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The left side of the painting has a gloomy, wild, natural feeling, complete with very large tree trunks, rocky cliffs, and dark storm clouds. The right side of the painting is the very opposite. It shows calm fields of farmland with a few trees glowing with light. The painting was done by Thomas Cole, a painter of the Hudson River School. The Hudson River School refers to a group of artists whose works focused on lifelike natural scenes and landscapes of the Northeast. In this painting of the Connecticut River, Cole contrasts the wildness of nature and the order of cultivated land. If you look closely, you will see that the picture includes a small self-portrait of Cole, painting with an easel, on the cliff at the bottom edge of the painting.

The Artist

Cole was born in England in 1801. His family moved to New England when he was 17. Cole did most of his painting in the Catskill Mountains of New York. He is considered the founder of the Hudson River School. Although Cole realized that the United States had become a landscape touched by human hands, he also admired the unspoiled wilderness that was part of America's history.

The Historical Perspective

Landscape painting was popular and profitable at this time. The idealized view of the rural American countryside was already starting to lose ground when Cole painted this picture. The area he painted was one of the most visited places in the country. Cole was worried that all of the visitors would ruin the area's natural beauty. Painting it would help people remember it the way it was before too many people settled there. Cole's painting shows nature on a grand scale. It is hard to tell from this painting which he likes better—the wild stormy wilderness or the cheery, safe farmland.



Conversations and Teaching Activities

Head Start Children ages 3 to 5

Encourage children to look closely at this painting—its left and right halves, its foreground and background. Ask questions, introduce new vocabulary, and find books that relate to the painting.

Analyzing and Interpreting



Ask the following questions to stimulate thinking and discussion:

- Have you ever been to a farm? What kind of animals live there? What do they eat and drink? Would people be there? Are there many big trees on the farm?
- Have any of you gone on a walk in the woods? Who went with you? What did you see there? What kind of animals might live there?
- Have any of you ever played in a rain puddle or in the mud? In a pool? Or river? Or ocean? Which do you think this is in the picture—a puddle, a pond, a river, or the ocean?
- Why would someone living in a city want a picture like this in his or her home?
- Are there other things you would like to tell me about this painting?

Describing



- ✓ Look at this painting. What do you see?
- ✓ Ask the children to find an umbrella (lower center extending over the river); the artist sketching in a top hat (lower center between large rocks); lightning (far left, center); birds (left of center on the edge of the storm); smoke (several places on the right).
- ✓ Why is this picture called a landscape? (To compare, show other pictures, such as a portrait and city scene.) Why isn't the picture called a moonscape or an oceanscape?
- ✓ Which part of this picture do you think is the gloomy or grumpy part? It is okay if the children point at any part and say that it makes them feel that way. Tell the children that artists sometimes use dark colors to convey a gloomy or sad feeling.
- ✓ What kind of sounds would you hear if you were sitting there? Children might say wind blowing, leaves rustling, thunder and lightning, rain splashing. What would you feel if you sat there on that log? Children might say scared, excited, wet.
- ✓ What would you do if you were here to play? Children might say swim or play in the river, climb the mountains, go to the farm, fly a kite, collect rocks.
- ✓ What colors make it seem sunny and hot? What colors make it seem cold and dark? Go through the classroom crayons, sorting "light," "dark," and "in-between" crayons into containers.
- ✓ What kind of weather do you see in this picture?
- ✓ Which way do you think the storm is going?
- ✓ Who is the person sitting on a log right in the front of the picture? Listen to the children's ideas. What is going to happen to him next? Where do you think he lives? How will he get down and cross the river? Tell the children the man on the cliff is actually a painting of the artist, Thomas Cole. He included a little picture of himself painting with a small easel.



Connecting and Extending

Introducing Vocabulary

distant	panorama
elevated	peaceful
gloomy	river
incline	roots
landscape	scenery
lush	shrubs
mountains	valley
nature	

Related Family Literacy Experiences

Parents and children can:

- ✓ read the book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* and reenact the story.
- ✓ take a nature walk and talk about the sounds and sights they experience.
- ✓ come up with indoor activities to do during gloomy and rainy days.



Books

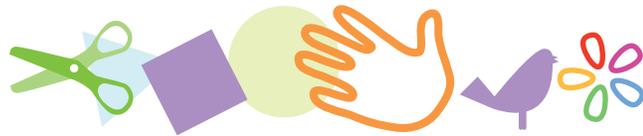
Rivers: Nature's Wondrous Waterways by David L. Harrison (Boyd's Mill Press, 2002) Readers take a journey down a river, from the river's source high in the mountains all the way down to where it meets the sea.

The River by Nik Pollard (Chrysalis, 2002)

Colorful collages illustrate the sights and sounds of a river, from its source in the mountains to the place where it pours into the ocean.

We're Going on a Bear Hunt by Michael Rosen (Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing, 1997)

The new board-book edition of the book follows a family as they travel through river, mud, forest, and snowstorm in search of a bear—and quickly retrace their steps when they find one.



Related Educational Experiences

- ✓ Make a collage using construction paper shapes. Do not glue the collage down. Place the collage in the sun and allow the sun to fade the background paper. The shape of the covering pieces will show darkly on the background when the shapes are removed. Discuss how the sun has rays of light with ultraviolet energy that heat and "cook" the paper it can reach, fading the color from it. That same energy causes sunburn when the sun heats and burns our skin. Have the children do this with a dark background piece of paper and a lighter (but still dark) background piece of paper. See which one fades more quickly.
- ✓ Have children choose either a black or white piece of construction paper. They can select glitter and cutout shapes (stars, moons, clouds, and sun) to paste

on their paper; paint with white or black paint; or use crayons they have sorted into light colors, dark colors, or in-between colors. Set up three stations: one with light paper and dark crayons, one with dark paper and light crayons, and one with other colored paper and the in-between crayons.

The ideas listed are just a few of the many activities that could be used to introduce or extend children's learning. Your knowledge of your children and families supports your ability to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. As an educator, you probably have ideas for books, songs, finger plays, and activities that you have thought of when introducing or extending children's learning related to the "A Head Start on Picturing America" artworks. We encourage you to confer with your colleagues, visit the local library or bookstore, and share your ideas with others.