AMERICAN ROMANTICISM

Romantic painting in America encompassed two subjects: nature and the natural man. The former included landscapes and the latter were genre paintings of common people in ordinary activities. In both, the subjects were seen through rose-colored glasses, like the seven dwarfs' "hi-ho, hi-ho" version of working in a mine. Forests were always picture-postcard perfect, and happy settlers without exception were cheerful at work or play.

THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE: AH, WILDERNESS. Before 1825, Americans considered nature menacing. The first thing colonial settlers did was burn or hack down vast tracts of virgin woods to make clearings for fields and villages. They admired nature only when it was tamed in plantations and gardens. After 1830 a shift occurred. America's natural wonders became a bragging point equal to Chartres or the Colosseum. As tides of settlers poured westward, pushing back frontiers, the wilderness became a symbol of America's unspoiled national character.

This shift in sentiment affected art. American writers like Emerson and Thoreau preached that God inhabited nature, which dignified landscapes as a portrait of the face of God. Suddenly the clichéd formula art of London, Paris, and Rome, which had before guided American painting, was obsolete. The grandeur of the American continent became the artist's inspiration.

The Hudson River School was America's first native school of painting. Its members, Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, John F. Kensett, and Thomas Doughty, delivered visual sermons on the glories of nature. They were the first to concentrate exclusively on landscapes, which replaced portraits as the focus of American art. Their patriotic scenes of the Hudson River area conveyed a mood of worshipful wonder. They combined realistic detail with idealized composition in a new form of romantic realism. Typically, the scenes were on a large scale with sweeping panoramic horizons that seemed to radiate beyond the painting's borders, suggesting America's unlimited future.

Cole, "The Oxbow (The Connecticut River Near Northampton)," 1836, MMA, NY. *Leader of the Hudson River School, Cole emphasized the grandeur and immensity of America's landscape.*

***COLE:* HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL LEADER.** Thomas Cole (1801–48) was the founder of the Hudson River School of Romantic landscapes. Cole, a self-taught artist, lived on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River. An outdoor enthusiast, he rambled on foot throughout the area in the spring, summer, and fall, scaling peaks to make pencil sketches of untouched natural scenes. During the winter, after his memory of particular locales had faded to a fuzzy afterglow, he portrayed the essential mood of a place in oil paintings. Cole's finished work — a combination of real and ideal— reflects this working method. He presents foreground in minute detail and blurs distant vistas to suggest the infinite American landscape.

In "The Oxbow," Cole faithfully reproduced rocks, juicy vegetation, a gnarled tree, and his folding chair and umbrella. The blond panorama of the Connecticut River Valley and receding hills seems to stretch forever. The painting depicts the moment just after a thunderstorm, when the foliage, freshened by a cloudburst, glistens in a theatrical light.

Cole's work expressed the proud belief that America was a primeval paradise, a fresh start for humanity. For the optimistic Hudson River School, communion with nature was a religious experience that cleansed the soul as surely as rainfall renewed the landscape. As Cole wrote in his diary before painting this picture, "I would not live where tempests never come, for they bring beauty in their train." America may have lacked picturesque ancient ruins, but its lush river valleys and awesome chasms and cascades were subject enough for the Hudson River School.

ARTIST-EXPLORERS: BIERSTADT AND CHURCH. The generation of painters after the Hudson River School tackled more far-flung landscapes. Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) and Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) were the Lewis and Clark of painting — "intrepid limners" they were called — as they sketched the savage beauty of nature from the lush vegetation of the tropics to the icebergs of the Arctic.

Bierstadt specialized in sweeping views of thrilling natural wonders. His career coincided with the westward movement begun by the forty-niners and their wagon trains. At the age of 29, Bierstadt joined a survey team mapping a westward route. Face to face with the Rocky Mountains, he found his personal mother lode: sketching the overwhelming vistas of the mountains. When he returned to his New York studio, he surrounded himself with photographs, sketches, Indian artifacts, and animal trophies and began to paint the views of the American West that made him world famous.

Bierstadt, "The Rocky Mountains," 1863, MMA, NY. *Bierdstadt captured the adventurous frontier spirit as well as the concept of the noble savage in harmony with nature.*

"The Rocky Mountains" is one of Bierstadt's typical images of the West as a Garden of Eden. He employed his usual compositional devices of a highly detailed foreground (the peaceful encampment of Shoshone Indians) and distant soaring mountains pierced by a shaft of sunlight. His paintings were like a commercial for westward expansion, as if that were America's Manifest Destiny.

THE P. T. BARNUM OF AMERICAN ART

Bierstadt's paintings were as vast in scale as the scenes he depicted — wall-sized canvases as big as a 9'x12' rug. A running joke was that his next subject would be "all outdoors" and that he had built a château near the widest part of the Hudson River so he would have room to turn his canvases. Bierstadt had a flair for showmanship. He not only sold paintings for $25,000 each (an enormous sum then), he charged 25 cents admission when he exhibited a work. Crowds lined up for the theatrical display of his paintings, which were flanked by potted plants and velvet draperies. The artist thoughtfully supplied magnifying glasses to scrutinize details of the polished scene, and although an entire painting might have a Paul Bunyan–like scale, on close inspection, one could see minute petals of individual wildflowers.

GENRE PAINTING: THE AMERICAN DREAM IN ACTION

Genre painting also gained respect in the first half of the nineteenth century. No longer placed on painting's lowest rung, these scenes of the common people engaged in everyday activity were enormously popular.

***BINGHAM:* SON OF THE PIONEERS.** The first important painter of the West was George Caleb Bingham (1811–79), known for his scenes of frontier life. Criticized in the East for uncouth subjects like riverboatmen playing cards, fishing, and chewing tobacco, he saw himself as a social historian immortalizing pioneer life.

Unlike many other artists who took the wilderness as a subject, Bingham was part of the life he portrayed. He spent his childhood on a hard-scrabble farm in Missouri and was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker before trying his hand at sign painting. He taught himself to paint with a how-to manual and homemade pigments, then took off down the Missouri and Mississippi rivers painting portraits. Bingham was soon acclaimed for celebrating the march west and the activities of the frontier. To Bingham, the commonplace was grand and bargemen at a hoedown were just as noble as ancient heroes in battle.

Bingham, "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri," 1845, MMA, NY. *In this classic "genre" painting, Bingham romanticizes the settling of the Wild West.*