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Art in D.C.: Using Rock Creek Park as Our Playground

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Overview

Children learn through play; they love being outdoors and are curious, creative, individuals. The unit “Art in D.C.: Using Rock Creek Park as Our Playground,” intended for first graders, will leverage children’s curiosity and love for play and the outdoors by exposing students to art through nature. We will learn about American landscape painters, such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran, and how they were inspired by nature.

Students will explore nature just like these artists did two centuries ago—with their eyes opened by art itself. Students will have the opportunity to see how nature influences their own art as they learn to draw the National Park System’s oldest natural urban park, Washington, D.C.’s Rock Creek Park, *en plein air*. Students will also learn how artists influenced the overall National Park System. To that end, this curriculum unit will review the history of Rock Creek Park and the larger National Park System. Students will answer questions such as “What is a national park?”, “When did Rock Creek Park become a park?” and “How did the work of artists play a role in the development of national parks?” In connection with the history of Rock Creek Park, we’ll discover that national parks in general, and Rock Creek Park in particular, were established because they benefited public health.

Additionally, we’ll visit another of Washington D.C.’s great public spaces, the National Gallery of Art, to view paintings by many of the most notable American landscape artists. At the National Gallery of Art, students will explore the parallels between their direct experience of nature in Rock Creek Park and the depiction of natural beauty in landscape art. We’ll partner with *Art Around the Corner*—an initiative that connects the District of Columbia Public Schools with the National Gallery of Art to help expose children to art—and create works of art inspired by nature with the help of the museum’s educators. Lastly, we will connect all the above to an English Language Arts unit on plants. Specifically, we’ll deepen student knowledge of nature’s flora by combining students’ encounters of American landscape art with their direct experience of plant life in Rock Creek Park. Ultimately, while students will be using art as a vehicle to learn about nature, they will also come full circle and experience nature to learn about and create art.

Demographics

I teach at Bancroft Elementary School — one of the top bilingual public schools in D.C.—located in the neighborhood of Mount Pleasant, which has a large population of Latin American immigrants. Many students are immigrants from Central America (i.e., El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala). These students enter school without knowing English, and about 50% of Bancroft students are English Language Learners.¹ Yet, while Bancroft has a large Latin American population, it is also in a gentrifying neighborhood with many students whose native language is English. Beginning in first grade, students spend half the day in Spanish instruction and half the day in English instruction. This unit will help students of all backgrounds and language needs leverage art as a learning tool. Whether students are instructed in English or Spanish, they will be able to “read” the text. In general, this unit will teach students that art is an international language. Many examples of art from American landscape artists feature natural landscapes in Latin America in addition to the United States, tying together the places of origin of Latin American students with their current learning environment and community. More importantly, students will immerse themselves in their communities by visiting Rock Creek Park and the National Gallery of Art.

Rationale

Children, especially visual learners, are drawn to colorful images. Yet, while students at Bancroft Elementary School take reading, writing and math classes daily, they only have art class once every six days. Though learning how to read, write and count are fundamental skills needed to function in society, they are not the only ones. Art benefits students. Not only is art important in and of itself, but it also allows for an inclusive approach to teaching and learning. Art is interdisciplinary and can be used for academic gains. Given that art is visual, it allows struggling readers to access information they would otherwise miss. At the beginning of every school year, a large percentage of students start the school year reading below grade level standards. In fact, for school year 2023-2024, about 55% of my students were reading below grade level in English, and 21% percent of my students were reading below grade level in Spanish.² While those numbers decrease as the year progresses, a good number of children are still unable to access texts. Incorporating art into this interdisciplinary unit fulfills two key purposes. First, art helps students academically by serving as a valuable instructional tool for language arts and self-expression more broadly. Second, art is a vehicle for students to express themselves and showcase their learning. This unit will teach students that art can be an engaging way to learn and can be used to complement more commonly used methods of instruction, such as reading and writing. While this unit addresses the Common Core Standard: W.1.8: “With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question,” it also aims to teach students how to appreciate art for the sake of art. Because this unit is interdisciplinary, I will be cross-collaborating with the art teacher at Bancroft Elementary School to deliver the content through the course of the spring semester. This collaborative approach will help students understand that art is everywhere—in art class, in English class, just outside Bancroft in Rock Creek Park—encouraging students to make connections between various subjects and environments. In short, this unit will use art to make learning fun and accessible, while being academically rigorous.

Content

The History of the National Park System

According to Britannica, a national park is defined as “an area set aside by a national government for the preservation of the natural environment.”³ National parks are created by Congress and managed by the National Park Service.⁴ Yellowstone National Park, the world’s first national park, was established on March 1, 1872.⁵ At the time, Wyoming was only a territory of the United States, and, as a result, the U.S. federal government managed Yellowstone. Yet, the idea of setting aside land for public use can be traced back to Yosemite National Park. On May 17, 1864, John Conness, a U.S. Senator from California, proposed a bill “setting aside, not a landscaped garden or a city park, but a large tract of natural scenery for the future enjoyment of everyone.”⁶ This bill asked that more than sixty square miles, Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees, “be transferred to the care of the state of California, on the condition that the land never be opened for private ownership and instead be preserved for ‘public use, resort, and recreation.’”⁷ Conness stated that he was acting at the urging of his constituents—men of “taste” and “refinement.”⁸ One of these men was Captain Israel Ward Raymond, the California representative for the Central American Steamboat Transit Company, who wrote Conness a letter, including Carleton Watkins’s photographs (Fig. 1) of the sequoias in Yosemite Valley, suggesting legislation to preserve these lands.⁹



Fig. 1. Watkins, Carleton. *The Grizzly Giant, Mariposa Grove, Yosemite*, albumen silver print from glass negative, 1861, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, Gilman Collection, Purchase, (Gift of The Howard

Gilman Foundation, by exchange, 2005), 2005.100.618
<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/260317>

On June 30, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed a law preserving a “valley and a grove of trees” in California, making Yosemite the first state park established in the United States.¹⁰ While the law established that these lands were legally preserved and protected for public use, in practice, there was no way to protect the lands from encroachers or people attempting to profit from them. Fortunately, people such as Frederick Law Olmsted, John Muir, and Stephen Mather played an important role in preserving public spaces and the founding of the National Park System.

On August 8, 1865, Frederick Law Olmsted read a report regarding the future of the new park overseen by the state of California.¹¹ Olmsted stressed that, “Unless the government intervened to withhold such places ‘from the grasp of individuals,’ [...] ‘the great body of the people,’ would find itself shut out from the places it needed for ‘recreation of the mind and body.’”¹² Furthermore, to avoid becoming a “rich man’s park,” Olmsted recommended that the state of California improve roads providing access to Yosemite Valley and the sequoias.¹³ He also insisted that his fellow commissioners “enact and enforce regulations to protect the landscape from anything that would harm it, and prevent the construction of any buildings that would ‘obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the scenery.’”¹⁴ Unfortunately, a group of Yosemite commissioners thought Olmsted’s recommendations were too expensive and dismissed his report.¹⁵

In 1889, John Muir, one of the first conservationists, and Robert Underwood Johnson, associate editor of *Century Magazine*, went on a tour of Yosemite.¹⁶ Prompted by what they saw at Yosemite Valley—carved tunnels through some of the big trees, piles of tin cans and other garbage—Johnson suggested that the high country of Yosemite be set aside as a national park and convinced Muir to “become the public voice for the campaign by writing articles again describing not only the region’s beauty, but its vulnerability.”¹⁷ In 1890, President Benjamin Harris signed a bill that turned nearly 1,500 square miles, including the Hetch Hetchy Valley, into Yosemite National Park, but the original grant signed into law by President Lincoln in 1864 was left to the state.¹⁸ Muir wasn’t satisfied; he wanted the entire Yosemite valley ceded back to the federal government as part of the larger Yosemite National Park.¹⁹ Fortune would have it that, in the spring of 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt asked Muir to accompany him on a trip to Yosemite.²⁰ Upon returning from their trip, Roosevelt spoke at the state capital in Sacramento and stated:

Lying out at night under those Sequoias was lying in a temple built by no hand of man, a temple grander than any human architect could by any possibility build, and I hope for the preservation of the groves of giant trees simply because it would be a shame to our civilization to let them disappear.

They are monuments in themselves.... I want them preserved.²¹

In 1906, Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove were transferred back to the federal government, becoming part of the larger Yosemite National Park.²²

By early 1914, the national park idea gained traction beyond Yellowstone and Yosemite, as parks such as Mount Rainier, Mesa Verde, and Crater Lake had been established.²³ While, since 1900, park supporters had

been encouraging the creation of a single federal agency to manage parks, there was no clear system in place or entity in charge of them.²⁴ Furthermore, the construction of a dam and reservoir in Hetch Hetchy Valley, a valley in Yosemite National Park with waterfalls and granite faces that John Muir had described as “Nature’s rarest and most precious mountain temples,” proved the parks were in peril.²⁵

Later in 1914, Stephen Mather, a prominent industrialist with mining concerns in California, visited Sequoia and Yosemite National Park.²⁶ Disgusted by what he saw—hiking trails in bad condition, cattle grazing where park rules forbade it—he wrote a letter and complained to Franklin Lane, the Secretary of Interior.²⁷ Lane replied, “if you don’t like the way national parks are being run, why don’t you come down to Washington and run them yourself.”²⁸ Mather accepted the offer and was soon assigned a legal assistant, Horace M. Albright, to help Mather with the task.²⁹

In 1916, Mather entered the debate for the creation of a national park system.³⁰ He encouraged newspapers and magazines to write articles favoring a new park service, school children earned cash prizes for producing essays about parks, and Mather ensured a copy of *National Geographic*—featuring the “scenic wonders of America,”—was delivered to every congressman. Mather even spent \$5,000 (more than his government budget) of his own money to publish *The National Parks Portfolio*; a book filled with photographs of every national park in the country.³¹ Soon, a group of men, including Horace M. Albright, Robert Sterling Yard, and J. Horace McFarland began drafting a bill—calling for the creation of an independent park bureau within the Interior Department—and plotting how to move it through Congress.³² As they drafted the bill, they asked Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., Olmsted’s son, to add a statement of purpose that would “stand the test of time and guide park policy” into the future.³³ Obliging, Olmsted wrote, that the purpose of this new park agency was to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life” and “provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner... as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generation.” The parks were meant to be enjoyed by current and future generations of Americans.³⁴

Finally, on August 25, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed the bill that created the National Park Service. Mather was named the bureau’s first director and Horace M. Albright was second in command.³⁵

What is Rock Creek Park?

Rock Creek Park, created by Congress in 1890, is the third national park established in the United States.³⁶ This park and “pleasure ground,” in northwest Washington, D.C, was “established for the scenic and recreational enjoyment of people of the United States.”³⁷ Rock Creek Park was purposefully designed to combat stress and “promoted as a remedy to urban ills.”³⁸ Unlike other American parks, which were designed and then built, such as Central Park or the Golden Gate Park, Rock Creek Park is 1,754.62 acres of mostly forested valley in an urban area, created by nature.³⁹ In fact, the land that now encompasses Rock Creek Park was set aside when the surrounding area was rural.⁴⁰ Planned by the landscape architecture firm of Frederick Olmsted Jr., and John. C. Olmsted (his half-brother), Rock Creek Park, has been described as “picturesque” with “gentle sloping hills and grassy meadows.”⁴¹

Who was Frederick Law Olmsted?

Frederick Law Olmsted is “recognized as the father of landscape architecture in America.”⁴² He is known for designing parks, most famously New York’s Central Park and others in urban America and advocating for the

preservation and conservation of scenic landscapes and natural beauty.⁴³ Olmsted was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1822 and died in Brookline, Massachusetts in 1903. In 1864, Olmsted was appointed as chairman to the board of commissioners for the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa land grants; he was asked to draft a charter and plan for Yosemite.⁴⁴ In this role, “Olmsted drafted recommendations to the state legislature [...] that read today almost as a blueprint for the federal national park system.”⁴⁵ These “recommendations” became a “manifesto” of his vision that set parameters for setting aside federal land as a ‘scenic reservation.’⁴⁶ In it, he “emphasized preserving the lands within the reserve in as natural a state as possible, managing it in consultation with artists and scientists, and ensuring that it was accessible to all stratum of society, not just the rich.”⁴⁷ Olmsted was decisively influenced by ideas of the Picturesque, which derived from English landscape aesthetics of the late eighteenth century. Many of the characteristics of his parks relate to this heritage. To date, Olmsted’s ideas continue to influence thinking about the responsibilities of people in nature, and “the power of design to preserve natural beauty and to create oases of nature within the cityscape.”⁴⁸ Olmsted was pivotal to the origin of the national park idea; thanks to him, the public—regardless of their means or background—has access to beautiful, scenic, landscapes that are preserved as national parks.⁴⁹

Who was Frederick Olmsted Jr.?

Frederick Olmsted Jr., akin to Frederick Law Olmsted (his father), was known for influencing and defining the national park idea.⁵⁰ He advocated for the preservation of natural areas and wrote the 1916 Organic Act, establishing the National Park Service.⁵¹ He was also recognized for his early work on the McMillan Commission—a plan to develop and improve the entire park system in the District of Columbia—as he was chosen by President Theodore Roosevelt to design and transform D.C. into a “model of civic parks.”⁵² More specifically, it is important to note that—for the purposes of this curriculum unit—he helped develop Rock Creek Park.⁵³

How did Artists Play a Role in the Development of National Parks?

While American landscape architects were fundamental to designing and highlighting the importance of parks, American landscape artists were influential in developing Americans’ appreciation and taste for the outdoors. In fact, “our love of natural landscape scenery is traceable to the area surrounding the Hudson River” and “much of our visual sensitivity toward nature derives from the images produced by the painters” of American landscapes.⁵⁴ The tradition of American landscape painting began in the Northeast with the immigrant artist Thomas Cole. Additionally, American landscape artists also influenced the establishment of national parks—they helped push the preservation of these picturesque places. By capturing and promoting the beauty of places like Yosemite, Niagara Falls, and Yellowstone, people were inspired to preserve them. If it weren’t for American landscape artists, such as Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Church, and Thomas Moran, perhaps places such as Rock Creek Park would not exist today. Beautiful images of scenic places circulated the country, influencing the development of the national park movement.

Who was Thomas Cole?

Thomas Cole was one of the earliest and most influential American landscape painters.⁵⁵ He influenced the works of Asher Brown Durand, Jasper Francis Cropsey, and Frederic Edwin Church (his student).⁵⁶ In fact, “his persistent practice of sketching from nature, of writing elaborate notes on the minute details of nature, as well as his mastery of the plein-air oil and sketch” was not only adopted by his students, but it also defined the

process for most of his paintings and laid “the foundation for the rise of plein-air naturalism that took hold in American painting by midcentury.”⁵⁷ Cole was born in Bolton Lancashire, England in 1801, emigrated to the United States with his family in 1818, and died in Catskill, New York in 1848.⁵⁸ In 1825, Cole moved to New York and set up a studio to paint landscapes.⁵⁹ The sale of these landscape paintings helped fund his sketching excursions up the Hudson River to the Catskill Mountains.⁶⁰ Using these sketches, Cole painted landscapes which he sold in New York. Cole was “discovered” by three New York artists—Colonel John Trumbull, Asher Brown Durand, and William Dunlap—when they purchased Cole’s paintings in New York, which made their way to the collection of Philip Hone, Mayor of New York City.⁶¹ These three New York artists also aided Cole’s success as an artist by securing patrons, such as Daniel Wadsworth, the “founder of the first public art museum” in the United States, the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford CT, for Cole’s work.⁶² Cole’s *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (Fig. 2), introduces a “bifurcated scene of wilderness on one side and settled land on the other” and is “regarded as one of the most iconic landscapes painted by an American artists.”⁶³



Fig. 2. Cole, Thomas. *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, oil on canvas, 1836, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908), 08.228. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10497>

Who was Frederic Edwin Church?

During the 1850s and 1860s, Frederic Edwin Church was the “best-known” American landscape artist in the

United States and abroad. ⁶⁴ As Thomas Cole's first student in Catskill, New York, Church completed many sketching trips throughout East Hampton, Long Island, the Catskills, and Berkshires.⁶⁵ Church was born to a distinguished Yankee family in Hartford, Connecticut in 1826 and died in New York City, New York in 1900.⁶⁶ By 1846, Church was an established landscape artist.⁶⁷ Inspired by Alexander von Humbolt, a German naturalist, Church traveled to South America, where he sketched Mount Cotopaxi, one of the highest active volcanoes in the world and the second-highest summit in Ecuador.⁶⁸ Church was "one of the most widely traveled artists of the nineteenth century," and his devotion to nature led him to experience firsthand the sites and environments he would paint on canvas.⁶⁹ Church is known for painting *Twilight in the Wilderness*, a view of a sunset over the wilderness near Mount Katahdin in Maine, and *The Heart of Andes*, a "romanticized image of the South American Andes." ⁷⁰ However, it was *Niagara* (Fig. 3), a painting of Horseshoe Falls (located on the Niagara River), that cemented Church's reputation "as the most important American artist of his day."⁷¹ Church worried that industry and commercialization would encroach upon Niagara Falls.⁷² When painting *Niagara*, Church intentionally omitted a foreground, "allowing the viewer to experience the scene as if precariously positioned on the brink of the falls."⁷³ In 1869, while a member of the Century Club, an elite art and literary club, Church warned his peers that Niagara Falls was "rapidly approaching ruin."⁷⁴ Church's plea caught the attention of Frederick Law Olmsted, Church's distant cousin and fellow Century Club member, and "together, they helped establish parks and protected areas that were cornerstones for American outdoor recreation and environmental preservation."⁷⁵ More specifically, Church and Olmsted worked together to restore and preserve Niagara Falls and helped form the Niagara Reservation, now one of the oldest state parks in the United States.⁷⁶



Fig. 3. Church, Frederic. *Niagara*, oil on canvas, 1857, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund), 2014.79.10.
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.166436.html>

Who was Albert Bierstadt?

Albert Bierstadt was considered "the premier painter of the American West."⁷⁷ He was born in 1830 in

Solingen, Germany, immigrated to the U.S. with his family when he was two years old, and died in New York City in 1902.⁷⁸ In 1858, Bierstadt completed numerous sketches of the West when he joined Colonel Frederick W. Lander's railway survey expedition of the Rocky Mountains.⁷⁹ Bierstadt portrayed the American West on an epic scale; he was widely recognized for painting *Rocky Mountain, 'Lander's Peak'*, a painting that measured over 6 feet by 10 feet in size, where he depicts a group of Shoshone Indians in the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains.⁸⁰ Bierstadt not only had an admiration for northern plain Indian and wildlife conservation, but he also had a preservationist bent.⁸¹ Bierstadt influenced the preservation of Yosemite by "making the case (artistically) for Yosemite's grandeur" and had many friends who advocated for Yosemite, such as Thomas Starr King and Jessie Fremont, "to be set aside for the benefit of the public."⁸² In 1863, while spending several weeks in Yosemite Valley, Bierstadt camped with Galen Clark, a protector and promoter of the Mariposa Grove and Yosemite; soon after, Bierstadt painted Clark into *The Great Trees, Mariposa Grove, California*.⁸³ Upon returning from his second trip out west, Bierstadt painted *Valley of the Yosemite*, probably his first painting of Yosemite. Nevertheless, it is likely that *Valley of the Yosemite* was merely a sketch of the much larger *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* (Fig. 4), painted in 1865.⁸⁴



Fig. 4. Bierstadt, Albert. *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, oil on canvas, 1865, Courtesy of Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, A.L., (Gift of the Birmingham Public Library), 1991.⁸⁷⁹ <https://www.artsbma.org/collection/looking-down-yosemite-valley-california/>

Who was Thomas Moran?

Thomas Moran has been described as America's "Turner," and his watercolors are considered some of "the

most beautiful paintings produced during the nineteenth century.”⁸⁵ He is known for being the first person to paint the Yellowstone region more than 125 years ago.⁸⁶ Moran was born in Lancashire, England, moved to the United States in 1844, and died in Santa Barbara, California in 1926. In the summer of 1871, after several years of studying J.M.W Turner’s work, Moran traveled to the American West as he accompanied Ferdinand V. Hayden’s expedition to Yellowstone.⁸⁷ Moran adopted a scientific outlook and made several drawings on the journey, which aimed to record specific geological and geographical facts and natural phenomena accurately.⁸⁸ These detailed drawings included rock formations, river gorges, hot springs, and geysers.⁸⁹ Moran worked with William Henry Jackson, a photographer on the Hayden expedition, to document Yellowstone.⁹⁰ In the fall of 1871, Hayden submitted reports of the expedition to Congress, including Jackson’s photographs of Yellowstone.⁹¹ When Congress started drafting legislation to protect Yellowstone, legislators shared both Jackson’s photographs and Moran’s paintings (such as Fig. 5) with other congressmen on Capitol Hill. Then, in the spring of 1872, inspired by the beauty (and perhaps the sublimity), of the landscape they saw in Jackson’s and Moran’s artwork, Congress approved the bill that turned the Yellowstone region into the world’s first National Park.⁹²

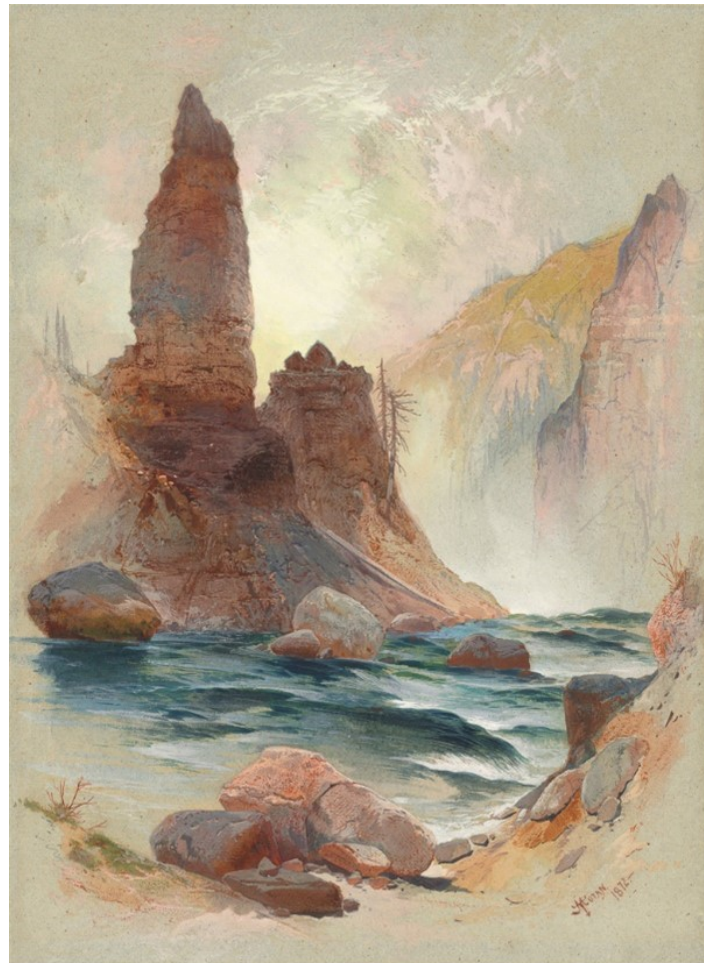


Fig. 5. Moran, Thomas. *Tower at Tower Falls, Yellowstone*, watercolor and gouache over graphite on blue laid paper, 1872, National Gallery of Art, Washington, (Florian Carr Fund), 2012.93.1. www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.156718.html

American Landscape Artists and the National Gallery of Art

American landscape art is superbly represented at the National Gallery. Artwork produced by American landscape artists Cole, Church, and Bierstadt is displayed in the American Painting and Sculptures galleries. Rock Creek Park is a beautiful national park that promotes public health and wellbeing; the National Gallery is, congruently, a beautiful cultural space that exposes the public to great works of art.

The National Gallery of Art is a museum in Washington, D.C., with a collection of more than 150,000 paintings, sculptures, photographs, prints and drawings depicting the history of Western art and showcasing human creativity.⁹³ It was a gift from Andrew W. Mellon, a financier and art collector, to the people of the United States.⁹⁴ Its mission is to serve “the nation by welcoming all people to explore and experience art, creativity, and our shared humanity,” and its vision is “Of the nation and for all the people.”⁹⁵ The National Gallery of Art buildings were designed by two prominent architects. The West Building is by American Architect John Russell Pope, also known for designing many of the buildings and monuments on the National Mall, the National Archives, and the campus plan for Yale University.⁹⁶ The East Building was designed by I.M. Pei, a world-renowned Chinese-born American architect, who is probably most known for the glass pyramid at the entrance of the Louvre in Paris. ⁹⁷ Like Rock Creek Park, not only is the National Gallery in and of itself a piece of art, but it is also one of Washington’s greatest public spaces.

How does the National Gallery Support the Arts in Classrooms?

The National Gallery of Art supports and promotes art in classrooms through various programs and initiatives. One such initiative, *Art Around the Corner*, is a group of programs that partner the National Gallery of Art with the District of Columbia Public Schools.⁹⁸ According to Meghan Lally Keaton, the Manager of *Art Around the Corner*, the programs are “a whole-school approach to partnerships, creating programs for students, educators, and families” that “seek to build authentic relationships with the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) communities through collaboration and multiple engagements.”⁹⁹ These programs “are rooted in creative expression and using art as a platform to build connections with new ideas, ourselves, each other, and the world.”¹⁰⁰ She further explains that *Art Around the Corner*:

Offers a variety of programs based on the individual needs of a school community. Program offerings include school and gallery experiences, teacher workshops, family engagements, and opportunities to work with local artists. In addition to working with individual schools, *Art Around the Corner* supports DC Public Schools on a district level through professional development workshops, art supplies and resources, curriculum development, and local artist videos and lesson plans.¹⁰¹

The National Gallery of Art and *Art Around the Corner* see the importance of building relationships with various stakeholders such as students, educators, families, and school communities to expose students to art in classrooms, museums, and beyond. By identifying the needs of a school community, and providing art supplies and various other resources, *Art Around the Corner* facilitates the execution of art lessons. In the end, art lessons, field trips and partnerships such as that with DCPS through *Art Around the Corner* help students develop their appreciation and knowledge of art. Undoubtedly, this unit will come to fruition with the help of *Art Around the Corner* and art enthusiasts, such as Meghan Lally Keaton, as we will partner with *Art Around the Corner* staff to develop lessons for the students to visit the museum, explore the paintings and works of

art involved in these lessons, and create art in response.¹⁰²

Teaching Strategies

Line and Shape Drawing

Students will learn about basic lines and shapes, which are foundational skills artists use to illustrate and paint. After learning about basic lines and shapes, students will observe various plants and draw the corresponding lines and shapes to visually represent plants. Students will be able to answer questions such as: “What shape is the stem of a plant?” and “What shape are the flowers?”

Observations

By closely observing their surroundings and looking at objects, students will notice intricate details. We’ll practice how to observe, name, and document what we see.

Images and Other Texts

Through a read-aloud, students will learn about American landscape artists, such as Thomas Coles, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Church, and their paintings. In class, students will look at both photographs and illustrations of Rock Creek Park. At the National Gallery, students will observe and discuss landscape paintings of notable artists. Ultimately, students will be able to answer questions such as: “How have artists influenced national parks?” and “What do landscapes look like?”

Classroom Activities

Picturing America

Learning Objective: Students will identify and describe influential landscape artists.

First, while reading *Picturing America: Thomas Cole and the Birth of the American Art*, a biography on Thomas Cole with a focus on the environment by Hudson Talbott, students will volunteer or be cold called to answer questions such as “Who was Thomas Cole?” and “What was he known for?” Students will make self-to-text connections as they answer the question, “What does this book remind you of?” Next, students will be prompted to discuss the illustration of Thomas Cole’s *The Course of Empire* on pages 22-23 of the text. Here, students will answer text-dependent questions such as: “What happened when Thomas returned to the Catskills?” and “What did he fear would happen to America?” Last, students will write a short summary of the book describing how Thomas Cole influenced other artists that followed him as well as the preservation of wilderness.¹⁰³

Sketching in Rock Creek Park

Learning Objective: Students will practice *plein air* painting.

First, students will hike through Rock Creek Park and observe their surroundings. Next, after receiving guidance from the teacher (i.e. “choose a picturesque spot or place that you think is beautiful”), each student will stop and choose a spot from which the student will work. Using a pencil and a teacher-created sketchbook, students will sketch their observations of their subject(s) *en plein air*. Last, akin to notable American landscape artists, such as Cole, Church, Bierstadt, and Moran, students will use their sketches to create landscape artwork.

Leaf Rubbing

Learning Objective: Students will compare and contrast leaves from different indigenous tree species in Rock Creek Park to gain a deeper understanding of the various types of plants in the park.

First, students will collect two different types of leaves from Rock Creek Park. Next, each student will place a white sheet of paper on top of each leaf and color the paper while rubbing the leaf. Then, upon completing the leaf-rubbing activity, each student will jot observations on a Venn diagram to show the similarities and differences between the two leaves. Last, students will discuss and write about their findings.

Visiting The National Gallery of Art and Partnering with Art Around the Corner

Learning Objective: In partnership with *Art Around the Corner*, students will create art after exploring paintings and works of art from the National Gallery of Art.¹⁰⁴

Prior to visiting the National Gallery, a museum educator will come to our classroom (at Bancroft Elementary) and introduce students to the museum, collection, and its spaces.¹⁰⁵ Students will look carefully at reproductions of works of art and create art in connection to what they are seeing. ¹⁰⁶ Next, on a different day, students will visit the museum to explore these paintings in person, and practice Harvard’s Project Zero—a research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education whose “mission is to understand and nurture human potentials –such as learning, thinking, ethics, intelligence and creativity”—thinking routines to engage with original works of art, think critically, and develop language and thinking dispositions. ¹⁰⁷ While at the museum, students will also meet with the horticulture department, as the National Gallery of Art employs several experts in horticulture who care for the plants both inside and outside the museum.¹⁰⁸ Students will observe plants up close, explore the work of horticulturists, and pose questions related to horticulture and their museum visit.¹⁰⁹ Lastly, upon returning to school, as a post-museum-visit activity, students will create works of art inspired by what they saw and experienced at the museum.¹¹⁰

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Materials for Classroom Use

- *Picturing America Thomas Cole and the Birth of American Art* by Hudson Talbott
- Leaves
- Colored pencils
- Paper

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

W.1.8: “With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.”

In first grade, students are developing their research and presentation skills. They are expected to meet the Common Core Standard W.1.8. In the past students have gathered information by reading texts. By approaching this standard in an interdisciplinary unit, where students use art and Rock Creek Park (as their research lab and playground) students can conduct research in an exploratory fashion. Students will gain first-hand experience with plants and their environments not only by observing plants in their natural habitat but also by surrounding themselves in the environment plants thrive in. This will lead students to have a more concrete understanding of plants.

VA:Cr1.21.a: “Use observation and investigation in preparation for making a work of art.”

Prior to making art, students need to develop their observation and investigation skills.

Observing and investigating objects and environments allows students to notice details they can incorporate into their art.

VA:Cr2.1.1.a: “Explore uses of materials and tools to create works of art or design.”

This standard will be used to introduce to students the concept of *en plein aire*, outdoor painting (or creation on the spot), at Rock Creek Park.¹¹¹ Akin to notable artists, students will create art outdoors; the materials and tools students will use to create works of art will be their immediate surroundings (in this case, Rock Creek Park).

Notes

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46 Howard, *Architects of an American Landscape*, 87.

47 Tweed, 37-38.

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⁵¹ National Park Service, "Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. (U.S. National Park Service)."

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⁵⁴ Mann, "The Hudson River and America's Love of Natural Landscape Scenery," 83.

⁵⁵ Barringer, "Thomas Cole's Atlantic Crossings," 20.

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⁵⁷ Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser et al., *Thomas Cole's Journey Atlantic Crossings*, 10.

⁵⁸ Boettcher, "Biographies of the Artists," 253.

⁵⁹ Boettcher, 253.

⁶⁰ Boettcher, 253.

⁶¹ Howat, "The Hudson River School," 274.

⁶² Boettcher, 253.

⁶³ Kornhauser and Braddock, "Reexamining the Wilderness Aesthetic."

⁶⁴ Howat, 277.

⁶⁵ Boettcher, 258; Driscoll, John. *All That is Glorious Around Us*, page 46.

⁶⁶ Boettcher, 258.

⁶⁷ Boettcher, 258.

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⁶⁹ John Driscoll, *All That Is Glorious around Us: Paintings from the Hudson River School*, 46.

⁷⁰ Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*; Gurney, "The Heart of the Andes by Frederic Edwin Church."

⁷¹ National Gallery of Art, "The 19th-Century Blockbuster: Frederic Edwin Church's 'Niagara.'"

⁷² Howard, 144.

⁷³ Church, *Niagara*.

⁷⁴ Howard, 138.

⁷⁵ Howard, 144; Coleman, "How Frederic Church & Frederick Olmsted Joined Forces to Create the Modern American Park."

⁷⁶ Coleman, "How Frederic Church & Frederick Olmsted Joined Forces to Create the Modern American Park."

⁷⁷ Boettcher, 259.

⁷⁸ Boettcher, 259.

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⁸⁰ Boettcher, 259; Hassrick. H. Peter, *Art, Agency, and Conservation a Fresh Look at Alber Bierstadt's Vision of the West*, page 7.

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⁸² Hassrick, 12.

⁸³ Hassrick, 12.

⁸⁴ Bierstadt, *Valley of the Yosemite*.

⁸⁵ National Gallery of Art, "Thomas Moran"; Moran, *Tower at Tower Falls, Yellowstone*.

⁸⁶ National Park Service, "Museum Management Program, Thomas Moran Virtual Museum Exhibit."

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