

Art/Western Cultural History essays

Essay #9: Compare and contrast another painting from this time period to Cole's

4 paragraphs: an introduction paragraph, a paragraph about the similarities between the two paintings, a paragraph about the differences between the two paintings, and a conclusion paragraph.

Use the handouts (in your art binder) about the art elements, art study with the 5 common topics, and the art terminology for analyzing art. These handouts will help guide your thoughts.

Thomas Cole, *The Oxbow*, 1835-1836, oil painting
American Romantic landscape painting – the Hudson River School



Compare this work to another similar landscape painting.

Talk about similarities and difference in:

- Medium/technique
- Composition (are both arranged similarly? Symmetrical? Asymmetrical? Same size figures? Same number of figures? Same arrangement of figures?)
- Use of colors
- Use of light and shadow
- Do they appeal to the emotions?
- Are objects in the painting the same? Are there different objects?
- How about symbolism?
- Their treatment of space?
- Are there things going on in the world that impacted both artists?
- How about their worldview?
- The meaning and story behind each painting?

Hint: Include the two images in your paper (two additional pages). And give the information for each painting under each image. When writing about art, visuals are helpful!

Here are some other American landscape artists to research for comparing to Cole:

- Albert Bierstadt
- Frederic Edwin Church
- Asher Brown Durand
- John Frederick Kensett
- Jasper Francis Cropsey

European Romantic landscape painters to look at for more contrast:

- John Constable
- J. M. W. Turner
- Caspar David Friedrich

American Romantic landscape painting & the Hudson River School

Thomas Cole was a leading artist in the Hudson River School. The Hudson River School was an American group of artists (don't think of a school building) who specialized in landscape painting. They primarily painted New York State's Hudson River Valley with panoramic views of the landscape. Their paintings explored the individual's and the country's relationship to the land; and even the moral question of America's direction as a civilization (including Manifest Destiny). These artists captured a history for America – the wonders of the wilderness as well as the pioneering spirit of westward expansion.

They often aimed to depicted the *sublime* in their paintings. The idea of the sublime is a sense of awe mixed with terror... a sense of greatness, grandeur, beauty, wonder, etc. Many of these artists painted *en plein air* (French for in the open air or outdoors). The new invention of oil paint in tubes allowed for this. Painting outside allowed for artists to observe how the sun and atmosphere affected their view.

Dramatic lighting and American idealism are characteristics of American Romanticism.

The Oxbow

This painting is a view from a mountain in Massachusetts looking over the Connecticut River. A dense, stormy wilderness to the left is contrasted with the pleasant valley on the right. The wilderness on the left is contrasted with the more developed civilization and cultivated farmland on the right. The fading storm could suggest that the wild will eventually give way to the civilized.

The artist himself is in the bottom center of the painting, tiny, wearing a top hat, dwarfed by the immense landscape. This seems to ask the viewer for input in deciding the country's future course. America was immersed in a debate about westward expansion at the time. Manifest Destiny was a thought that many Americans shared after the Louisiana Purchase. Manifest Destiny was the belief that it was God's will that America span from sea to sea. Americans cleared wilderness and settled the land as they expanded westward.

The idealized and peaceful farmland on the right on this painting (in contrast to the dark and chaotic wilderness on the left) could lead one to view this painting in favor of westward expansion. On the other hand, one could see the cleared land as boring in comparison to the lively and wild nature on the other side.

There is also an artist's sun umbrella perched on a rock on the bottom right of the composition. This subtle self-portrait allowed the artist to show himself in the process of painting this scene. Thomas Cole captured the beauty and even dangerous unpredictability of the wilderness, and the peaceful serenity of land subdued by man. The power of nature and a sense of the sublime can be felt in this painting.

The textures and details of the trees in the foreground are very realistic. The details and focus decreases as the landscape goes back in space. This shows his mastery of atmospheric perspective. The composition is dynamic. Cole divided the composition with a diagonal line that starts at the bottom right. This line follows up the mountain, along the trees, to the rain and storm clouds.

For your essay, also read Cole's essay in *Marvelous to Behold* (pg 104-112). Consider how he described the American wilderness and how nature benefits man. Consider Cole's arguments for the beauty of the American landscape.

Art comparison chart

These are just a few questions to get you thinking about how to compare the works of art. All of these questions may not apply, and there might be additional questions that are relevant; this is not a complete list. The information above, your own observations, and with additional research you can complete this chart to help with your essay. I have *started* the chart to help get you going. Spend some time truly observing each work and fill in the chart.

	Artwork #1 Artist: Thomas Cole Title: <i>The Oxbow</i>	Artwork #2 Artist: Title:
Describe the composition of each work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - dynamic - asymmetrical - has a strong diagonal 	
Describe the use of color in each piece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - greens, earth tones - light blue - subdued palette - natural colors 	
Describe the use of values, light, and shadow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - full range of values - natural light from the passing storm - dark and shadowy on the left side, light and airy on the right side 	
Describe the use of space. Is it flat or more three-dimensional and realistic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - deep sense of space - atmospheric perspective - three-dimensional, realistic sense of space 	
What is the story, meaning, mood, emotions, etc.?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NY landscape - westward expansion & settling the land vs. keeping wilderness - the sublime (awe, grandeur) 	
What/who is depicted? What is happening in the image?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - view from a mountain in Massachusetts looking over the Connecticut River - storm passing 	

<p>Under what conditions was this artwork created? (for example, was a war going on, persecution, were the arts thriving...?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Manifest Destiny - westward expansion - Louisiana Purchase - Lewis & Clark expedition - American Industrial Revolution - development of photography <p>(research these to discuss for giving context)</p>	
<p>What was the worldview or prevailing philosophy at the time?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Christianity - Manifest Destiny 	
<p>Is there any symbolism used?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wilderness vs. cultivated farmland (see description above) - Passing storm 	
<p>Is there anything about the artist that influenced their decisions making? For example, were they a Christian? Were they commissioned by someone and told what to create?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cole was a devout Christian (protestant) - Cole was not a fan of Manifest Destiny and had anxiety over the American progress and growth <p>(research these to add context)</p>	
<p>Is there a focal point in each?</p>	<p>The lighter colors and values of the river grab the viewer's eyes, and then the viewer's eye moves up along the mountain and trees</p>	
<p>Did a previous art style influence this artwork?</p>	<p>Romantic landscapes</p>	
<p>Do these two works of art have a direct relationship to each other?</p>		

Essay Outline

After completing the chart, you will have it to refer to for writing your essay.

Think of your thesis. Was one artist more of a master? Did one artist impact the world more? Or did one of the artworks have more of an impact on you? Why? Or are both artists great examples of a certain style or technique? Did an event in the world or certain politics play a major role in how the artwork was made?

Thesis:

Introduction paragraph:

Do some research. Introduce each artist. Where are they from? What time period?

Some ideas to consider including: How were they trained? Did both artists work in the same style? Did they have similar artistic goals, styles, patrons, etc.? Was there something going on in the world that affected both artists? Briefly introduce each painting. What is depicted in each? What is the technique in each? What is the style for each?

Similarities paragraph:

Use the questions on page 2 and the comparison chart to put the similarities together.

Differences paragraph:

Use the questions on page 2 and the comparison chart to put the differences together.

Conclusion paragraph:

Wrap it up. Restate thesis. Back it up. Give context/circumstances to each artist and artwork (what was going on in the world, what were the artists beliefs, etc.). How did this relate to the artwork and artist? Did it impact their artwork? Did it dictate what they painted and why? Did a previous art style or artist influence these artists? Or did either of these artists influence the art world?