Activity: Observation and Interpretation

What can we learn about life on the Hudson River as industrialization began to change the way Americans traveled and traded upon its waters? How does the artist’s juxtaposition of manmade and natural elements reflect his view of the world around him? Would we share his perspective today? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.

Observation: What do you see?

Samuel Colman’s painting depicts what was a common sight on the Hudson River: a formation of boats and barges below Storm King Mountain in Cornwall, New York.

Steam Boats
The left half of the painting represents the industrialized future. Large commercial barges are linked together to form a tow for canal boats, their huge paddle wheels turned by coal-generated steam.

Paddle Boats
On the right side, we see an older way of life on the river. Men work a fishing net by hand from their row boat as another boater paddles past them.

Sail Boats
In the background, two sailboats, a sloop and schooner, sail from a harbor, likely transporting both cargo and passengers.

By carefully arranging his picture in two halves, Colman keeps the debate about industry and nature in balance. Are the barges symbols of promise and progress, or are they destroyers?
The American Experience in the Classroom
Using Art to Teach History and Language Arts, Grades 5-12

Contrasting Clouds

Coleman shows steam billowing from powerful engines on the tow boats. Huge puffs of smoke fill the upper left corner of the painting, contrasting with the heavy cloud cover hovering over the aptly named Storm King Mountain.

Storm King Mountain

The highest mountain in the Hudson Highlands dominates the background of the painting. The mountain was known to many as Butter Hill because of its soft, rounded shape. Today, we call it Storm King Mountain, a tribute to the frequent dark clouds that shroud its top. The area around it was known for radically changing sailing winds and highly charged thunderstorms. Colman gives nearly a third of the height of his canvas to these impressive clouds.

Interpretation: What does it mean?

What can we learn from this painting about life on the Hudson River in 1866? What clues does it give us to changes to come?

The Hudson River was/is appreciated for its natural beauty and served as an important waterway for the transportation of goods and passengers. In light of industrial and technological advances, older modes of transportation, like sloops and paddle boats, were replaced by more efficient ones, like schooners and steam engines. However, in 1866, all these vessels shared the river. Coleman divided the natural and man-made elements of his painting into two halves, but united the scene by balancing the two and showing little conflict between them.

In the years following this painting, industry along the river further increased. The river was both polluted and overfished. The scenic Storm King Highway was cut into the side of the great mountain. Railways replaced steamboats for most freight and passenger travel. Perhaps most significantly, plans for a hydroelectric power plant threatened the site of Storm King in the 1960s and the mountain became a symbol for citizens concerned about the environment. The efforts of these Americans, including folk singer Pete Seeger, led to such legislation as the Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Act, as well as environmental education programs that continue to this day.

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