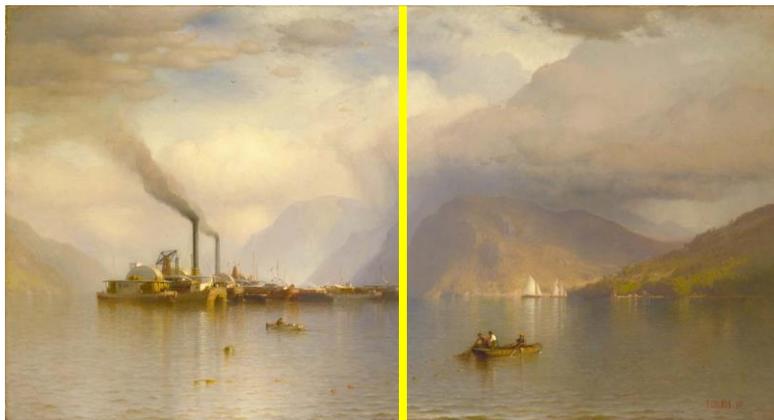


Activity: Observe and Interpret

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 near Cornwall, New York.



The left half of the painting represents the country's industrialized future, roaring back to life after the Civil War. It is the dawn of America's transportation revolution. Large commercial barges are linked together to form a tow for canal boats, their huge paddle wheels turned by coal-generated steam. On the right side, we see an older way of life on the river, with sail boats hugging the shore. Two small fishing boats in the foreground work in tandem, each having one end of a seine, or fishing net. The net connects the two halves of the composition underwater; a connection not visible from the surface, it figuratively stitches together the past and the future. All of the watercraft depicted in Colman's composition sailed between Albany and New York City on the Hudson River, transporting cargo such as coal southbound to New York City, and passengers northbound to Albany.

Huge puffs of steam and smoke fill the upper left corner of the painting, billowing from the powerful engines of the steamboats, contrasting with the heavy cloud cover hovering over the aptly named Storm King Mountain. Storm King, the highest mountain in the Hudson Highlands,

dominates the background of the painting. The area around it was known for quickly changing 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?

With the Civil War over, a building boom began and there was an expanded need for the transportation of goods and materials. The Hudson River served as an important waterway for the transportation of goods and passengers. In light of industrial and technological advances, older modes of

transportation, like sailing vessels, were replaced by more efficient ones, like steamboats. However, in 1866, all these vessels shared the river. Coleman divided the natural and man-made elements of his painting into two halves, alluding to the coming conflict when industry would steadily overtake the environment.

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 joined steamboats for transporting freight and passengers. A century after this painting, 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.



[Storm King on the Hudson](#), 1866, Samuel Colman, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum