

## **Activity: Observe and Interpret**

*Artists make choices in communicating ideas. Both Thomas Sully's portrait, Daniel La Motte, and Frank Blackwell Mayer's Independence, Squire Jack Porter illustrate the sitter's relationship to the land. How do the artists convey this connection? The portraits recall a time in United States history when the idea of democracy was shifting. Growth, expansion, and social change pushed the American population westward, and a greater level of equality arose in the western states than there had been in the eastern colonies. The definition of democracy began to change, as western states led the way by not having property requirements for voting. Think about how the definition of democracy has changed over time. How do these paintings illustrate that? In the context of the era of the "Common Man" that the election of President Andrew Jackson represented – how might comparing and contrasting these two portraits illustrate this change?*

### **Observation: What do you see?**

**What does the landscape behind Daniel La Motte suggest about the man in the portrait?**



The casual elegance of the sitter reflects Sully's close study of eighteenth-century British portrait traditions in which aristocratic men and women were posed before landscape vistas, suggestive of their vast estates. The man in the portrait, Daniel La Motte, was a Baltimore merchant whose land holdings were extensive. Seen through the open window is his extensive property. A river is seen stretching far into the deeply shaded horizon.

**What does his attire tell us about his social class and economic status?**

Seated in a chair, Daniel La Motte is dressed in a fashionable sage green coat, white waistcoat, and ruffled shirt tied with an elaborate neckcloth. A rose-colored curtain flutters behind him. Portrayed as a gentleman, he benefits from land ownership but appears far removed from its day-to-day maintenance. LaMotte's introspective gaze and posture indicate a superior social position as well as education. Sully's careful choice of pose, backdrop, and costume create the impression of aristocratic wealth and birth.





### How does the portrayal of Squire Jack Porter differ from that of Daniel La Motte?

Whereas Daniel LaMotte is portrayed as a gentleman in the European manner and as lord of his estates, Squire Jack Porter in his very informal pose, is shown as a man integrally united with his land. Smoking a corncob pipe, he gazes intently into the distance, his feet propped up on a rough-hewn wooden railing. His broad-brimmed straw hat, worn to shield him from the sun, lies beneath the bench. His rugged features and casual pose

share an affinity with the mountain range seen through the railing. He wears the breeches of a working man, a farmer's tunic, and vest. A ball of yarn and knitting needles on the window sill suggest the presence of a woman—perhaps Squire Jack Porter's wife or daughter—who share his life on the estate.

Mayer's painting shows a self-made man. Porter relaxes while gazing out over the land that he has turned into a profitable farm. His tanned face and gnarled hands demonstrate hard labor in a way that La Motte's delicate complexion and calculated pose do not. Everything in the painting—house, bench, clothes, and pipe—has a quality that speaks of the squire's self-sufficient approach to life and the land. *Independence* is an affirmation both of Thomas Jefferson's ideal of an **agrarian democracy** and Jackson's policies that made it easier for the lower and middle classes to obtain land.

### Interpretation: What does it mean?

Having re-asserted the new nation's sense of independence after battling the British a second time in the War of 1812, the election in 1828 of President Andrew Jackson indicated a shift towards more democratic ideals. While the previous six presidents rose to political prominence through family background, landed wealth in the original thirteen colonies, and education, Jackson's humble background and Tennessee roots made his rise to the presidency a powerful metaphor for the self-reliance of the "common



man,” or self-made man. During the **Jacksonian Era**, white men who did not own land gained the right to vote, and therefore more political power. Economically, American reliance on international trade with Europe began wane, in favor of the growth of industry and agriculture at home. This duality between the aristocrat and the common man can be seen through the carefully composed portraits of Daniel La Motte and Squire Jack Porter.

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