SAMUEL COLMAN

Storm King on the Hudson, 1866

SAMUEL COLMAN (1832–1920)
Storm King on the Hudson, 1866

oil on canvas, 32 1/8 × 59 7/8 in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of John Gellatly

Background Information for Teachers

Samuel Colman's image of a steamboat gliding across the Hudson River near Storm King Mountain depicts the nation's transition into the industrial era. The unusually wide composition is divided into two halves. The left half of the painting represents the country's industrialized future, roaring 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 large paddle wheels powered by coal-generated steam. Huge puffs of steam and smoke fill the upper left 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.

On the right half of the painting, we see an older way of life on the river, with sailboats hugging the shore. Two small fishing boats in the foreground work in tandem, each holding one end of a fishing net. The net connects the two sides of the composition underwater, figuratively stitching together the past and the future. Colman 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.

After the Civil War the need for the transportation of goods and materials grew, which inspired a building boom, particularly in burgeoning New York City. The Hudson River served as an important waterway for the movement of passengers and goods such as coal and iron to the city. In the mid-nineteenth century, with industrial and technological advances, older modes of transportation, like sailing vessels, were gradually replaced by more efficient steamboats. New technology expanded American trade, fueling rapid settlement of the West. The economic development and stability of the western states depended on their capability to transport agricultural products in exchange for imports from the eastern states. With the development of the steam-powered locomotive in the 1870s, railways replaced waterways as America's main lines of transportation.

Guided Looking Questions for Students

➤ What do you see or notice in this artwork? Make a list of your observations.

➤ Use your list of observations to divide this painting into meaningful parts or categories. How does the artist convey past and present?

➤ What can we learn from this painting about commercial life on the Hudson River in the 1860s? What clues does it give us about changes to come?

Primary Source Connection

In 1803, Robert Fulton developed the first commercially viable steamboat and received a patent for his invention from the U.S. Patent Office in 1811. The inaugural run of his steamboat, the *Clermont,* left New York City for Albany on August 17, 1807, and took only 32 hours. By comparison, sailing vessels at that time took four days to make the same trip. Pair this artwork with an excerpt from Fulton's letter to the editor of the *American Citizen* newspaper, dated August 20, 1807:

> *As the success of my experiment gives me great hope that such boats may be rendered of much importance to my country, to prevent erroneous opinions, and give some satisfaction to the friends of useful improvements, you will have the goodness to publish the following statement of facts: I left New-York on Monday at 1 o'clock, and arrived at Clermont, the seat of Chancellor Livingston, at 1 o'clock on Tuesday, time 24 hours, distance 110 miles; on Wednesday I departed from the Chancellor's at 9 in the morning, and arrived at Albany at 5 in the afternoon, distance 40 miles, time 3 hours; the sum of this is 150 miles in 32 hours, equal near 5 miles an hour.*

Suggested Questions

➤ Until the *Clermont*'s successful arrival in Albany, many people did not believe that Fulton's invention would work, frequently calling it "Fulton's Folly." What do you think these "erroneous opinions" were that Fulton wanted to prevent?

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➤ Colman's painting was made 59 years after Fulton's inaugural run of his steamboat, and yet the artist made a point of including other, "old-fashioned" boats. How do you think Fulton would have responded to this painting?

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with the following excerpt from chapter 22 of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi,* written in 1883. The first part of Twain's memoir covers his early days as a steamboat pilot's apprentice, and the second part (relating to this excerpt) recounts a trip he made in 1882 to revisit his route on the river.

> *Mississippi steamboating was born about 1812; at the end of thirty years, it had grown to mighty proportions; and in less than thirty more, it was dead! A strangely short life for so majestic a creature. Of course it is not absolutely dead, neither is a crippled octogenarian who could once jump twenty-two feet on level ground; but as contrasted with what it was in its prime vigor, Mississippi steamboating may be called dead. It killed the old-fashioned keel-boating, by reducing the freight-trip to New Orleans to less than a week. The railroads have killed the steamboat passenger traffic by doing in two or three days what the steamboats consumed a week in doing.*

Suggested Questions

➤ Twain briefly lays out the progression of different modes of transportation taking over each other. According to Twain, what is the impact of this progression in economic and human terms? Are these good changes or bad ones?

➤ Compare Twain's view of technological changes with that of Colman's. What do they have in common, and where do they differ?

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