

Activity: Observe and Interpret

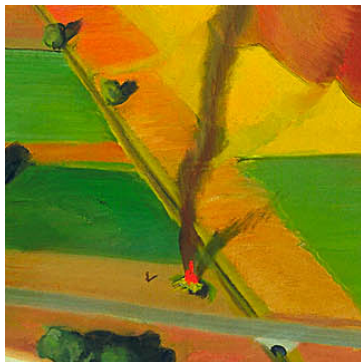
Artists make choice in communicating ideas. What information can we learn about California farm life and the American mindset in 1934 from this painting? What clues does the artist, Ross Dickinson, give us? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art. Ross Dickinson was employed by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) when he painted Valley Farms in 1934. The Project asked artists to capture “the American scene.” For Dickinson, this meant landscapes of his home state of California and scenes of Americans at work.



[Valley Farms](#), 1934, Ross Dickinson, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Observation: What do you see?

With our bird’s eye view, we see a vast swath of colorful land. Tall, domed mountains loom over a small valley, their massive curving shapes standing in contrast to a small patchwork of fields, farm houses, and trees. The rusty orange colors of the mountains nearly overwhelm the verdant green farmland below. A river, reflecting the pale sky, flows from the foothills towards the foreground. A milky curve against the verdant valley, it crosses under a roadway bridge. The irrigated farms are a luxuriant, bright green, while the hills are colored an arid reddish-brown – perhaps indicative that this scene takes place during California’s dry summer season.



At first glance, the landscape appears calm and unchanging, yet a closer look reveals danger on the horizon. Dickinson has included two fires. The first in the foreground of the painting is small, probably set by a farmer to clear away debris. The farmer stands, casting a thin shadow, near the bright red flames. A second fire in the background is visible as a large, thick plume of smoke rising in the distance. The smoke bends towards the hills, perhaps

indicating danger on the horizon. The scene sets up a confrontation between man and nature.

Interpretation: What does it mean?

Dickinson's valley, with its stream, green fields, and farmhouses nestled amongst the trees, seems sheltered, but also threatened by the surrounding hills and their encroaching shadows. The flowing river ensures the livelihood of these farms. The large column of smoke in the background adds to the sense of foreboding. The precarious relationship between the farm and its



surroundings in this work echoes the concerns of the nation in the 1930s. The fertile farming valleys of California became a destination for thousands of destitute mid-western farmers who poured westward in search of agricultural work, desperate to escape the despair of the **Dust Bowl**. However, they were met with a different set of hardships once they reached California. There were not enough agricultural jobs to go around, in part because of California's large, modernized corporate-run farms, as well as the existing migrant agricultural labor force – Mexican immigrants. As a result, many families continued to live in poverty, in tents or shantytowns. The artist hints at this lack of opportunity as the artwork is devoid of people and animals, save for one lone farmer burning debris in the foreground. As the nation endured this challenging time, Dickinson's *Valley Farms* captured the looming anxiety underlying America's hopes for better days during the Great Depression.