A Comparison of Paintings – Impressionism and Twentieth Century American

This unit is different from previous discussions in which we discussed a single artist and focused on his or her life and artistic style. We will now put aside “personalities” for a moment and focus on an example of a collective artistic theme or movement. (One could use examples of fashion styles or musical styles that the children are familiar with.) We will define compare – to find similarities between two things and contrast – to notice what is different between two things. Please focus on using the word “realistic” not Realism, which is a different art movement during your discussions.

We have selected 3 American artists whom we thought the students might be familiar with. Please review their biographies and discuss when and where they were born and what was happening in America during the time they were painting.

Impressionism – 1865 – 1880

Impressionism is perhaps the best known and best loved of all artistic styles, celebrated for its bright color and fresh, informal vision of the world. However, in its original contexts, in Paris in the 1870’s, this art was viewed as provocative and controversial; it was considered to threaten the values that fine art was meant to uphold. The artists aimed in their paintings to convey the immediate visual effect of the world around them.

The Impressionist artists painted to create a general impression of a scene or an object. They liked to paint pictures of landscapes and scenes from everyday life. Unlike the Renaissance artists, they did not paint every little detail. They wanted to capture a moment in time and the quick reflections of light. The Impressionists used unmixed primary colors and small strokes to add light to their paintings. They often used thick dabs of paint and they did not mind if the brush strokes could be seen.

"Nothing is seen without light,” and while the ancient masters were aware of the role of light in establishing the existence of objects and determining their forms and colors, it had never occurred to the Renaissance artist that light might also function in the opposite way to deform, denature and dissolve objects.
Homer, Winslow (1836–1910)

Winslow Homer, the son of a Boston hardware merchant, spent his childhood fishing rather than studying art. His only early training was apprenticeship to a lithographer for whom he drew pretty girls to adorn the covers of popular songs. By 1857, however, he was an illustrator for Harper's Weekly, drawing happy scenes of country life at first and then, during the Civil War, pictures of the loneliness and the pastimes of soldiers far from home. He painted his first oil during this period, again with almost no instruction, for Homer believed “that a man who wished to be an artist must not look at other artists’ work and he remained resolutely solitary, refusing to have anything to do with European art. After the war he returned to New York where he continued as an illustrator and painted a series of genre pictures of children and country life. These met with enthusiastic public approval and some critical disapproval, often repeated by later critics, disturbed by the simplicity and the force of Homer’s statements. Like all artists who work alone, Homer matured slowly. As he matured he lost interest in portrayals of the land and children. In 1883 he moved from New York to Maine where he set up a studio close to the wild and rocky coast and began his series of watercolors of the sea and its people, finally losing interest in people and confining himself almost entirely to “the lonely sea and the sky.” His watercolors are so powerful that it is difficult to believe that Homer was himself “a small, reserved gentleman, quiet ... and unostentatious.” His view of nature was severe and, even in the scenes of tropical waters, brilliant in color, indicative of his belief that man himself is nothing in comparison to the vastness of the ocean. Homer’s lofty point of view found fewer admirers than had his earlier, more easily fathomed works but he was not without recognition even before his death in 1910 and is today ranked as one of the finest of the world’s watercolorists.
Hopper, Edward (1882–1967)

Edward Hopper was born in Nyack, New York. From 1900 to 1905, he studied art at the Chase School in New York under Chase, Miller, and Henri, becoming a late follower of the Ashcan School and working in a fairly dark and somber palette. After a stay in Paris in 1906–1907, he returned to the United States with a considerably lighter and brighter palette. Hopper exhibited with the Independents in 1910 and at the Armory Show in 1913, where he sold his first oil painting. Between 1915 and 1923, he worked as an etcher and commercial artist, for he sold nothing more until a show of watercolors in 1923 established him well enough for him to devote himself to painting in oils in the completely finished and highly personal style from which he never deviated. Hopper belongs to the group of American realists that includes Charles Burchfield, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry. His subject is the American scene in its most everyday and ordinary aspects: to his specific motifs—old houses, city and village streets, diners, lighthouses, movie theatres—he adds a characteristic romanticism. His work has a dreamlike quality and hints of the wish for something extraordinary that is also found in the heroes and heroines of Sinclair Lewis's early novels: his paintings are as stark as Main Street. He achieves this dream quality by his use of lighting, sometimes fading, sometimes spotlighted, sometimes contrasting clarity and darkness of effect. Life may be drab, but it retains the memory of, or the hope for, excitement and poetry. Hopper's recognition came late, but it included honorary university degrees and the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Science and Letters, as well as acceptance by both the public and critics.
Wyeth, Andrew (1917– )

Andrew Wyeth, born in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, is the son of the talented illustrator N. C. Wyeth. Fragile as a child, young Wyeth received his art training from his father, who taught him the precision of line and accuracy of drawing that make his work technically excellent. His color is always subdued—often subtly monochromatic. His earliest work, done in 1929 when he was twelve, is pen and ink, precise and delicate in line, elegant in style in the best tradition of illustration. Wyeth then turned to the use of pencil and colored washes, then to watercolor drawings. At the age of sixteen, influenced by Winslow Homer, he was creating bold impressions of light, tone, and movement. Wyeth then disciplined his natural talent in order to present "the truth of the object." To achieve his aim, he experimented with various media, finally settling on "drybrush" watercolor and egg tempera painting, learning the latter technique from his brother-in-law Peter Hurd. These media require both time and patience, and Wyeth did not choose them lightly. A finished painting is often the result of many months of work. Final selection of a treatment is frequently accomplished only after many pen-and-ink drawings have been done of his subjects. Wyeth chooses his landscape subjects from two areas, Chadd's Ford and Cushing, Maine, the places he loves best and in which he personally is most deeply involved. He paints also the people he knows well. He does not, however, paint as if he were using a camera, but brings to his work the artist's extreme sensitivity, the painter's eye, and the poet's ability to transcend the moment, to synthesize an entire series of impressions into a crystallization of associated ideas that goes far beyond simple realism.
Scituate Schools – Docent Art for Children

Edward Hopper, "Ground Swell" and Pierre Bonnard, "Signac and Friends"

Grades K-2

Ground Swell (1939) Hopper’s fascination and love of boating was deep rooted from his childhood, along the Hudson River in Nyack, N.Y., a thriving ship yard. His enthusiasm for seafaring and nautical subjects continued from his youth to his adult life. Ground Swell was painted in oil on canvas and was painted in the studio. Hopper’s more successful nautical themes rendered in watercolor, on location are said to have captured the sea air and the joyful sunlight more accurately. However, we see that Hopper was able to evoke the seaward beauty and excitement just as accurately and successfully in the studio painting of Ground Swell.

Signac and Friends In this painting of the artist Paul Signac and several friends enjoying a day of sailing, we see an example of the experiments with color that dominate Bonnard’s painting. Although the short, choppy brushstrokes owe something still to Impressionism, Bonnard has left the soft coloration of the Impressionists behind him. In his work color often takes on somewhat dissonant tones and is forced into often arbitrary combinations. The color in this painting in intense even for Bonnard: a deep purple sea under a sky changing from rose to blue-green, with tones of rust and bright orange in the foreground. The composition is unusual as well: the boat thrusts up from the foreground in an extreme foreshortened perspective, while the entire upper-right-hand section of the painting is pierced by the sharp triangular shape of the sail, which is cropped off at the top as the hull of the boat is at the bottom. Bonnard’s bold experiments with color and composition were to prove an influence on the Fauvist artist who followed him, most importantly, Matisse and Derain.

Discussion Questions

Do you see any movement in the picture? Water, wind, people?

Which picture shows land on the horizon?

Describe the seas. Calm, rolling, choppy

In which picture do you feel as though you are inside or on the boat?

What time of day does it appear to be in these pictures? Morning, afternoon, sunset? What tells you this?

In which picture does there appear to be wind in the sails? How can you tell?

Which direction is the wind blowing? Left to right or right to left?

What shapes do you see in the pictures?

Who is steering the boat? What are the other people doing?

Tell me what you like about each picture?

How does each picture make you feel? Happy, thoughtful, imaginative.

Can you describe where these people are going? What might they be going to do?
Winslow Homer, "Snap-the-Whip" and Georges Seurat, "Study for La Grande Jatte"

Grades 3-4

**Snap-the-Whip** (1872)  "When I select a thing carefully, I paint it exactly as it appears," said Homer. Late on an autumn afternoon, he apparently came across this group of farm children at play after school or on a holiday. In this completely happy, natural painting, we can hear the sound of their young voices, feel the warmth of the sun, and smell the mountain air. The variations in brushstrokes and tonality, the dark autumnal colors, the faded red on the walls of the barn, simple corduroys of the players' garments, and leading the eye to their more sedate female companions. The landscape in this painting is Impressionistic and generalized, as it would have seemed to the artist intent on his realistic portrayal of the boys at play.

**Study for "La Grande Jatte"** (1884)  Seurat's last version of this painting completed in 1886 and now hanging in the Chicago Art Institute, is nearly seven feet high by ten feet long. This version, one of many black-and-white or oil studies, each one different in technique and size, is about two feet by three feet in size. It does not differ from the final version in composition or in color but in the method of application of the color. Here color is overlaid in criss-crossings about one inch in length, so that outlines are very faintly hazy and the figures are less stiffly geometric than in the final work. The final version is composed entirely of the small, faintly ovoid dots applied here only in the narrow red and blue frame painted directly on the canvas, as if the artist were progressing, at this point, tentatively and experimentally, from Impressionism toward Divisionism.

**Discussion Questions**

Look at the two side by side - what season is it in Homer's? Seurat's? What is the weather like in each? How do you know - what is it about the colors or detail that makes you think it's a certain kind of weather?

From what direction is the sun shining?

What is the difference in the faces on the people in each one? How do their hands and feet look different in each one?

Can you see flowers and trees in both? How are they painted differently? (the flowers in the Homer have much detail but the trees do not - in the Seurat - the flowers are not distinct but the trees have distinct leaves...)

How would you describe the action of the people in each painting? Which children are having more fun?

Can you find 2 hats that are the same shape - one in each?

How is the grass in each different and how is it the same?

Can you tell a story about what is happening in each of these paintings?

- How do you think each artist makes his brush strokes? Pretend you were painting like Seurat and then like Homer.

Which painting would you rather have in your home and why?
Andrew Wyeth, "Christina’s World" and Claude Monet, "Tulips in Holland"

Grades 5-6

Christina’s World (1948)  Christina's World" was painted on a farm in Maine. Christiana Olson and her brother lived on a farm in Maine and provided Wyeth with subjects for many of his paintings. He paints the places he knows and people he knows. Christina is a paralytic who uses a chair to get around or even crawls. In this painting, Wyeth captures a moment when Christina is picking berries. Notice the weather beaten houses, the pale colors. He does not paint as if with a camera, but of a sensitive painter's eye. This painting reveals not only the loneliness of the subject, but also her powerful will and courage. This is the simple story of this painting, whose mood goes far beyond, for the empty, simple composition, the great sweep of grass, the lonely weather beaten houses and Christina’s body in a faded pink dress become symbols of refusal to meet defeat, of struggle for existence, of human loneliness and courage.

Tulips in Holland  Claude Monet was a leader in the Impressionist Movement. His works look real, but also have a hallucinatory effect. Colors are bright with no defined shadow, but rather a variety of colors and blends. In "Tulips in Holland", Monet uses a dark color range. The tulips are neat and orderly, and are the brightest colors in the painting. The landscape is primarily horizontal, except for the windmill, and stretches at an angle into infinity, also called perspective. This is an Impressionist’s vision of Holland: neat and orderly, with the brightest color coming from the tulips which are rigid flowers that bend only in a strong wind. The day is still, the shimmering light is barely evident. The Impressionist does not abandon reality in his techniques but paints what he sees.

Discussion Questions

What are the similarities of these two paintings? (both take place in filed, both have weather beaten houses, both have sunny, blue skies)

What are the differences in these two paintings? (colors, clouds, people)

Are the paintings in perspective? Does the landscape look like it goes on forever? (not in Wyeth’s, yes in Monet’s)

Does your eye go to any particular subject? (Wyeth’s Christina, Monet’s Windmill, or colors of the tulips)

Which painting looks more realistic? Why?

What emotions do you feel when you look at Wyeth’s painting? Why? Does it tell a story?

Does Monet’s painting give you any feeling or emotion?

Which painting shows more detail? Do you think they both show detail?

Does either painting show any movement?

In which place would you rather be? The field in Maine or the field in Holland?