Niagara Falls
Nature Inspired Artwork

Materials:

1. A canvas, sheet of paper, or sketch book
2. Colored pencils, markers, or paint
3. Scissors
4. Tape or glue

Introduction:

During the early 1800s American artists looked to nature to inspire their artwork. Their creations represented the pride of a young country and natural landscapes symbolized what many felt was America’s manifest destiny. During this time, known as the Federal Period, artists such as Washington Alston, Samuel Morse and John Vanderlyn sought ways to celebrate the new republic. They all spent years abroad studying the masterworks and embracing the lofty artistic tradition of European high culture known as the Grand Manner. Using Grand Manner conventions, they put their efforts into depicting the land and sea to demonstrate what was American about America. The natural wonder of Niagara Falls was a popular subject for these, and a later generation of artists known as the Hudson River School.¹

When viewing John Vanderlyn’s Niagara Falls from American Side, completed in 1803, what elements do you think represent his pride in the new republic, the United States? Why so?

Art Analysis:

Vanderlyn’s painting is a metaphor for what he saw as the United States’ great potential as a new country. He depicts a sweeping vista and cascading waterfall which demonstrates Niagara Falls, and the United States great expanse and immense power. Countless artists throughout the years have turned to nature to inspire their art and share their beliefs about the world. Historical research has revealed the meanings embedded in Vanderlyn's work. Though, if you didn’t know this history, there are still methods to analyzing art to help understand the artist’s message.

Useful tips for analyzing and discussing landscape art:

1. When viewing landscape art, or any artwork, describing what you see is a great place to start.
   a. Color: what colors does the artist use? Are they warm colors or cool colors?
   b. Light: How dark or light do the colors appear? Does it seem like the sun the sun is shining or is it raining? Is it cloudy?
   c. Color intensity: Are they bright and in your face or subtle and dull?
   d. Mood: How does the choice of color affect the “mood” of the painting? Meaning, how do you feel when you look at this piece?

2. What’s in the fore, middle, and background?

3. What elements are included in each of these?
   a. Traditional elements of landscape paintings include trees, water, people, and animals.
   b. What are the people and animals doing in the painting? What role do you think they serve? Are they small compared to the landscape? Are they interacting with the landscape?

4. Is the landscape open or closed in?
   a. Are you viewing an overgrown forest or a wide-open field?

5. What are your impressions of this piece?
   a. Share your opinion! Does it make you happy or sad? Do you enjoy it or not? Consider why you don’t?

6. What do you think the artist’s intention was for this painting?

Want to see examples of traditional landscape paintings through the years? You can watch this video to learn more!
7. Landscape Paintings provide an opportunity to reflect on the environment that surrounds us. Consider: if you were going to create a landscape painting what story would you want to tell and what would you include to do so?

Does knowing about Vanderlyn change how you feel about the painting?

How does Vanderlyn portray his pride in his country through his artistic expression?

**Activity Time:**

Vanderlyn may have embraced the Grand Manner, but you don’t need to be a master painter to create artwork. Consider some landscapes that surround you in your everyday life and think about what they mean to you? Have you ever hiked a trail that made you feel peaceful or do you find comfort in the routes you take in your daily life? Use the prompts above to consider how you can share this message, and then create!

Below is an example of a waterfall painting that shows how creative you can get when creating landscape paintings!

---

**Check out the final product on the next page!**