Representing the Land

What role do images play in shaping our relationship to the land and the environment?

How have artists’ views of the land changed in relation to evolving perspectives on nature?

From constructing a national identity for a new nation to contemporary perspectives on land use, depictions of the American landscape speak to the ever-changing ways in which humans relate to their environment. This Portfolio Guide, featuring works from the Addison’s collection, offers a sampling of representations of land over time and in various contexts, both personal and historic.

Educators are encouraged to use this Guide and the expanded Portfolio Image List as a starting point, a place from which to dig deeper, ask questions, and make new connections for class plans and projects.

For online use, click the images in this guide to access digital images in the Addison’s online database.

Selected Thematic Approaches

Picturing Natural Resources – How do images speak to the proprietorship of newly explored lands?
Comparing Perspectives – What can images of one place over time reveal about our relationship to the land?
Contemporary Perspectives – How do the values and intentions of nineteenth and twentieth century artists differ in their depictions of the land's natural resources?
Environmental Impact – How can images serve as analytical tools for assessing the impact of human presence on the environment?
Romanticism and Transcendentalism – How and why did nineteenth century artists and writers express the spiritual in nature?
Nature as Allegory – How can elements of a landscape be understood as symbols of a moralizing allegory?
Picturing Natural Resources

How do images speak to varying perspectives on the proprietorship of newly explored lands?

How do nineteenth-century images of the American landscape foster understanding of the expectations and values of the American public?

In the mid-nineteenth century American painters began focusing attentively on the landscapes of the developing United States, often depicting scenes with a sense of awe for their abundant and majestic natural resources. As Manifest Destiny ideals occupied the interests of both government and citizens, the sunset-drenched narratives of painters such as Alvan Fisher became the nationalistic vision that solidified Americans’s proprietorship and settlement of the ever-expanding American West.

In the 1840s the newly invented art of photography also focused on the American West, generally guided by political, commercial, or scientific objectives. Photographers including Carleton Watkins portrayed the seemingly unlimited richness of the American West through mammoth-plate photographs of prosperous strip mines, sumptuous sepia-toned prints of the Yosemite wilderness, and stereoscopic views of the hard labor of mineral mining.

A Alvan Fisher (1792–1863), Covered Wagons in the Rockies, 1837, 30 in. x 25 in., oil on canvas, museum purchase, 1953.11
B Carleton E. Watkins (1829–1916), Yosemite Valley from Inspiration Point, c. 1875, 4 3/4 in. x 8 in., albumen print, museum purchase, 1985.33
C anonymous, Mining Phosphate and Loading Cars Near Columbia, Tenn., n.d., two albumen prints mounted on studio card, gift of Suzanne Hellmuth and Jock Reynolds (PA 1965), 1997.16
Comparing Perspectives

**What can images of one place over time reveal about our evolving perspectives on nature?**

**How can images be used to inspire government and social action?**

Since the 1850s, images have been used to frame the Yosemite Valley as both the epitome of the sublime in nature and a must-see tourist destination. To produce his majestic photographs of this natural wonder, **Carleton Watkins** transported on horseback his glass-plate negatives and camera, all of the necessary processing chemicals, and a darkroom tent into Yosemite. The resulting documents, sent with letters to senators, were influential in persuading the United States Congress to pass legislation in 1864 preserving the Yosemite Valley for public use. Meanwhile, Watkins’s stereo views and images by other artists were marketed to would-be tourists.

In the twentieth century, **Ansel Adams** patiently waited for the perfect light and utilized special lenses and filters to photograph his beloved Yosemite. Like Watkins, Adams used his photographs to petition the government for further protection of Yosemite, prompting its national park designation in 1940. In stark and ironic contrast to these majestic views is contemporary photographer **Roger Minick**’s photograph, which captures the paradox of our simultaneous admiration for and co-opting of nature.
Contemporary Perspectives

How do images convey values and beliefs about nature’s resources?

How do the intentions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists differ?

The anonymous painting He That by the Plough Would Thrive—Himself Must Either Hold or Drive portrays settlers laborious taming and transforming the landscape by clearing and burning it into plowable fields and grazing areas despite nature’s ever-forceful regeneration revealed by the insistent vine creeping up the foreground tree. There is a moral reward to this family effort to train the land for survival, unequivocally conveyed by the boldly painted saying made popular in Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanack. The anonymous View of Barnstable implies the result of such efforts on a public scale, as earth is molded to accommodate the promising conveniences of modern civilization.

Some twentieth and twenty-first century photographs highlight the ironies of a simultaneous desire for yet destruction of nature, and the consequences of this contradictory relationship. Oscar Palacio’s perplexing image of lawn care and Bill Owens’s Suburbia series speak to the ways in which suburban migration had altered both landscape and society.
Environmental Impact

How can photography be used to assess the impact of humans on the environment?

What can we learn from images about mediating our relationship with nature?

Photography provides both a tool and data for exploring the effects of the demographic, cultural, and economic patterns that interact with the cycles of nature. Jack Delano’s photograph of eroded land in Georgia and Arthur Rothstein’s depiction of the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma illuminate ways in which overplanting and poorly managed crop rotations combined with severe drought conditions to wreak havoc on the land and economy during the Great Depression. Images documenting so-called natural disasters such as Joel Sternfeld’s sink hole after a California flash flood and Katherine Wolkoff’s devastated neighborhood after Hurricane Katrina poignantly illustrate the long-term repercussions of attempting to domesticate nature.

Study of these relationships have led to the development of green technologies in architecture, such as the Addison’s Green Roof. Designed for the museum’s recent expansion, the flat roof planted with self-sustaining plants mitigates the impact of the building’s increased footprint by absorbing runoff from precipitation and lessening the energy needed to heat and cool the museum’s interior.
Romanticism and Transcendentalism

How and why did nineteenth-century artists and writers express the spiritual in nature?

How did depictions of majestic wilderness reflect American nationalism?

Nineteenth-century American painters championed nature as the holder of truth, beauty, and democracy, as echoed by such literary figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry David Thoreau. Reflecting these romantic beliefs as well as the United States’s Manifest Destiny ideals, Thomas Doughty’s *In the Catskills* integrates the celebration and civilization of nature through its depiction of people delighting in exquisite yet already settled surroundings, as evidenced by the winding road which runs along the river’s edge.

Idealizing the coexistence of civilization and nature was characteristic of the Hudson River School, a group of artists that included Asher Brown Durand, as well as Doughty and others in the Addison collection. Durand’s *Study of a Wood Interior*, with its attention to naturalistic detail, is a characteristic expression of nature as a manifestation of the divine. This correspondence is also expressed in the painting and writing of Christopher Pearse Cranch, whose *Sunset Landscape* invites the viewer to join the boating figures in transcending the physical world through a direct experience with a sublime moment in nature.
Nature as Allegory

*How does a series of images create a powerful national narrative?*

*How can elements of a landscape be understood as symbols of a moralizing allegory?*

While Asher Brown Durand expressed the divine in nature (see previous page), fellow Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole transformed sketches begun in nature into moralizing narratives. Cole’s series, *The Voyage of Life*, presents the awesomeness of nature as an allegory for religious faith and human fate, with a guardian angel taking a different place and role in each painting as the human voyager journeys in a boat down the river of life.

The sequence of images brings the viewer through Childhood, emerging from the darkness of a cave into a flowered landscape bathed in the pink glow of sunrise; Youth, where looming trees have replaced the flowers of infancy and material possessions provide irresistible temptations; Manhood, in which foliage has been replaced by rugged rocks against a dark and moody sky; and finally into Old Age, in which the earthly landscape recedes to make way for a heavenly light beaming its hope from above.
Curriculum Connections and Resources

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

History/Social Studies
- Manifest Destiny
- The American West
- The Dust Bowl
- exploration
- land use and agriculture
- land conservation
- national parks
- environment and economy
- social action through images

English
- Romanticism
- Transcendentalism
- allegory
- juxtaposition and context
- poetry
- Thoreau, Emerson, Bryant
- The Grapes of Wrath
- White Noise
- Dances with Wolves
- Out of the Dust

Art
- landscape
- romanticism and realism
- representation
- symbolism
- narrative
- series
- weather and atmosphere
- painting and photography

Science
- environmental geography
- agriculture
- mining
- drought/soil erosion
- environmental ethics
- land conservation

CONNECTIONS TO ADDITIONAL THEMATIC PORTFOLIOS

The Environment
The American West
Manifest Destiny
Romanticism/Transcendentalism
The Great Depression
Representation and Reality

TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES


Klett, Mark, Rebecca Solnit, & Byron Wolfe. Yosemite in Time: Ice Ages, Tree Clocks, Ghost Rivers. San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2005. Through essays and the re-photographing of some of the most enduring images of Yosemite, scholars reconsider the iconic status of Yosemite and show how both the land and our conceptions of landscape have changed over time. Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe’s work can also be explored at http://www.thirdview.org/. Third View revisits the sites of historic western American landscape photographs, makes new photographs, keeps a field diary of its travels, and collects materials useful in interpreting the scenes, change and the passage of time.