

Activity: Beautiful and Sublime Landscapes

Introduction:

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were artistic traditions in European and American painting. One was based on the concept of the “beautiful.” Another was based on the concept of the “sublime.” When thinking about landscapes, the “beautiful” tradition followed the style and aesthetic of Claude Lorrain (1600-1682) and Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665). It was characterized by formal composition, rich, dark color, soft light, and classical features such as architecture, sculpture, and formal gardens. The “sublime” landscape followed the aesthetic of Salvador Rosa, who painted rugged landscapes with high contrasts in value, containing ruins and pensive figures.

Meriwether Lewis was acquainted with this tradition and wished he could write a poem or paint a picture to describe his strong feelings on seeing the great landscapes of the western parts of America:

“I now thought that if a skillful painter had been asked to make a beautiful cascade that he would most probably have presented the precise image of this one; nor could I for some time determine on which of those two great cataracts to bestow the palm, ... at length I determined between these two rivals for glory that this was *pleasingly beautiful*, while the other was *sublimely grand*.”

— p. 285-290, (Gary E. Moulton, ed. (1987). *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, vol. 4. Univ. of Nebraska Press)

Lewis And Clark Web Page: <http://www.lewisandclark/resources/lessons/landscapes/>

Directions:

- Look at images of painters of the “beautiful” and the “sublime.” Search Google™ for the painters listed above.
- Look at a photograph of a landscape and think about whether it would be considered “beautiful” or “sublime” by the eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetic.
- Create an artistic rendition (drawing or painting) of the landscape in the photograph following the chosen aesthetic.

Consider how it is possible to treat the same physical landscape in both ways by making two works of art, one using the elements of the beautiful and the second using elements of the sublime. Try it by making another version of your first landscape, perhaps either exaggerating aspects of your version of a beautiful landscape, or toning down your example of a sublime landscape.

Illinois State Board of Education Learning Standards for Art:

Creating and Performing, Early High School

26.B.4d Visual Arts: Demonstrate knowledge and skills that communicate clear and focused ideas based on planning, research and problem solving.

Arts and Civilization, Early and Late High School

27.B.4a: Analyze and classify the distinguishing characteristics of historical and contemporary art works by style, period and culture.

27.B.4b: Understand how the arts change in response to changes in society.

27.B.5: Analyze how the arts shape and reflect ideas, issues or themes in a particular culture or historical period.

Standards for History, Early High School

16.A.4b: Compare competing historical interpretations of an event.

(Euro-Americans brought preconceptions about the landscape to their exploration and interpretation of the environment of the American West. The artistic interpretations of painters of the “sublime” in the nineteenth century had a great influence toward establishing environmental conservation at the end of the century in order to preserve those same landscapes for future generations.)