LESSON PLANS

VIEWS OF NATURE

Grade Levels: 7–9
Estimated Time: 3–4 hours

Introduction:
For centuries Niagara Falls has served as an enduring American icon. As one of the continent’s most famous natural spectacles, the falls inspired 19th-century artists and writers to celebrate the power of nature and the American landscape. Thomas Cole’s painting Distant View of Niagara Falls (see page 25) captures the grandeur of the falls through its depiction of unspoiled nature. In actuality, in 1830 when this work was painted, Niagara Falls was a popular tourist destination. However, Cole chose not to show the hotels, scenic overlooks, and factories that were present in the area. For him, depicting Niagara Falls was about more than its topography; Cole wanted to express feelings of awe and wonder elicited by the land's natural features. Like the Transcendentalists of this period, Cole believed that the spiritual was revealed in nature.

Lesson Objectives:
• Plan and execute a work of art.
• Create a piece of visual art that conveys an emotion or mood.

Key Terms:
• subjective
• representational
• Transcendentalists
• topography
• composition
• perspective
• idealized

Instructional Materials:
• notebook paper
• pen/pencil
• drawing paper
• markers, paint, crayons, and/or colored pencils

Procedures:
Discussion:
• Using image 4 or the enclosed CD, have students examine Distant View of Niagara Falls. Ask students the following questions to guide a discussion: What is the subject? From what perspective does Cole paint the falls? What colors did he use? Where are people in the painting? Are they the central focus of the painting? Why?
• Using the information in the introduction above and on page 25, explain to students that Cole wanted to depict the falls as a way to show an unspoiled, awe-inspiring view of nature and the American landscape. Tell them that Cole did not paint the falls with all the hotels and overlooks that had been built by 1830. Ask them why they think he chose to depict the falls without these things. Point out that Niagara Falls is a real place that is recognizable in the painting, but the Cole idealized the scene. Define idealized.
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Activity:
- Have students choose a place in their neighborhood or in the surrounding area that they like. Tell students to write down where this place is, what it looks like generally, and why they have positive feelings for it.
- Have students observe this space on two or three different occasions, paying special attention to details. Have them note how the colors and light change at different times of day. Have them observe the same space from different perspectives. Tell students to write down their observations.
- Have the students make a preliminary pencil sketch of their space.
- Using both their notes and their preliminary sketch, have students complete a finished artwork of their space. Tell students to use color, composition, and perspective to evoke the mood of the space rather than depicting it with exact, realistic details. Students may use colored pencils, crayons, markers, or paint to create their artwork.
- Have the students write an artist statement that explains the choices they made in interpreting their space. Did they include something or leave something out? Did they make certain choices about lighting and color? About perspective?
- Display completed artworks with artist statements when finished.

Evaluation:
Students should be evaluated on their participation in class discussion, their notes and observations on their space, and their ability to complete the project.

Illinois Learning Standards:
Fine Arts: 26, 27

For more detailed information on the Illinois Learning Standards, see http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/.