Genre painting, or scenes of everyday life, came into prominence during the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829 - 37) as an expression of popular taste. The artist most credited with giving genre painting its form and character is William Sidney Mount, a Long Island native who, in 1826, received formal training in drawing at the National Academy of Design in New York City. Despite offers, he declined travel and training in Europe, preferring his way of life in America. An illness necessitated Mount’s return to Long Island in 1830, and the artist turned from portraiture and religious paintings to genre scenes of the people and places around him.

Mount transformed the house of a local military general into a tavern interior for this 1835 painting Walking the Line. The six figures in this bar scene were probably friends and family that modelled for Mount. (The African American was identified in Mount’s written records as Paul Cuffee, a Black and Indian preacher living on Long Island.) The artist’s selection of the models was by no means random; two races are represented as well as a range of ages and social standing. And in keeping with the custom of the time, no women are present in the male environment of a public tavern. Five of the males fill the center of the picture, forming a triangle with the clapping gentleman’s hat, the dancing man’s drinking vessel, and the
arrangement on the floor of his ax, hat, and jug. This compositional device is more clearly defined for the viewer than the story taking place within it. Is the man in the tattered jacket, a "backwoodsman" judging by his attire and belongings, dancing to earn a beverage? Or has he already imbibed in the tavern's ale and is attempting to "walk the line" to prove his sobriety? As a visual storyteller, Mount often provides clues in his paintings; on the otherwise barren wall hangs a notice about temperance. Was the artist commenting satirically on this heated issue of the 1830s?

Regardless of the actual story, it is clear that the backwoodsman is the source of amusement for all, including the African American gentleman who is physically separated from the group. Mount is credited as being one of the first artists to give African Americans a place of "dignity" in American painting -- dignity according to standards in the 1830s. African Americans were a part of the artist's everyday life growing up in Long Island, and he fully recognized them as an integral part of the rustic American life he idealized. Yet, while he included African Americans in many of his paintings, he never painted them in their own social life, outside of the white context. He portrayed them as an American type, yet never put them in roles that challenged the accepted stereotype of the African American in pre-Civil War America. In Walking the Line then, the African American was considered by Mount to be "included" rather than "excluded"; in fact, it was the artist's intention that the backwoodsman be regarded as the outsider in this scene. MR
QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Genre paintings are scenes of everyday life. In *Walking the Line*, Mount depicted a slice of life in rural Long Island while also addressing temperence, a heated issue of the time. Have students create genre scenes that acknowledge and comment on important issues of the 1990s. As a research component, students can clip articles from newspapers and magazines that examine in depth the issue each selects.

2. Have students study African American history at the time of this painting (1835). Who were some important leaders and what were their contributions? What was the status of slavery in the states and, in particular, in New York in 1835? Did the legal abolishment of slavery necessarily mean the end of slavery?

3. Before providing students with the above information about the painting, have students examine *Walking the Line* and discuss its composition. How did Mount divide the space? How did he group the figures? What other “groupings” of objects exist in the painting? How did Mount use color to unify the scene?

4. See “Art Imitates Life: Jacksonian America” activity sheet in “Sample Lessons” section.
ART IMITATES LIFE:
JACKSONIAN AMERICA

Grade level: secondary
Work of art: Walking the Line (slide 7)

"Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds... The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body..."
Ralph Waldo Emerson

William Sidney Mount is credited with having established American genre painting, the painting of scenes of everyday life. He was a storyteller in paint, creating scenes within the frame that mirrored the larger "story" of everyday life in the villages and homes of rural America in the Jacksonian era.

Determine the "characters" in this story. What relationships do they have with one another, and what roles do they play within their community? What clues has Mount provided to indicate their social position and how they live?

How does this painting reflect American society in the Jacksonian period? How does the scene challenge the notion of a democratic America?

How might this scene be portrayed differently today?

Adapted from work by Museum Classroom participants from Evanston Township High School