

# Romantic Landscape Painting

by Sophia



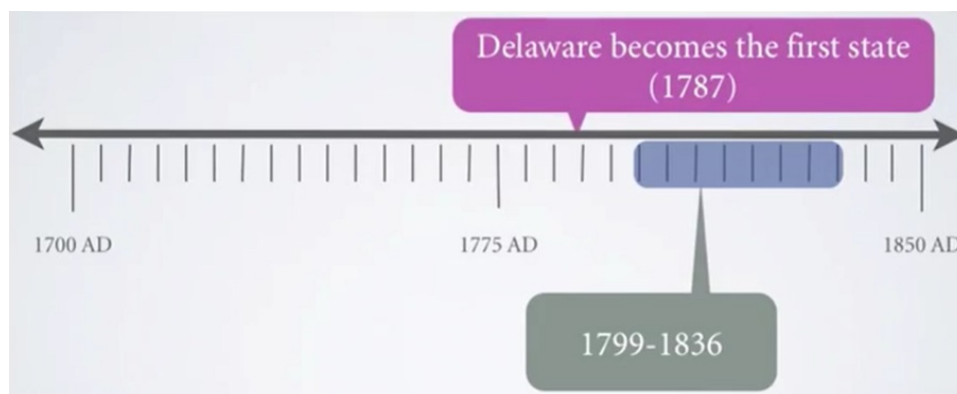
## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Romantic landscape painting. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe influences on romantic landscape painting, and identify examples of romantic landscape painting. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

## 1. Period and Location: Romantic Landscape Painting

Landscape painting became an important aspect of Romanticism in how the landscape was used as a metaphor for the unification of the soul with nature. This idea of nature being permeated by a universal spirit is a very **transcendentalist** idea.

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from between 1799 and 1836 and focuses geographically on three locations: Dresden, Germany; London, England; and New York State.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Transcendentalism

A 19th-century philosophical and spiritual movement that stresses the intuitive over the empirical.

## 2. Romantic Landscape Painting: Characteristics and Influences

All Romantic landscape painting takes the ideas of Romanticism and applies them to—you guessed it—landscape painting. Therefore, Romantic landscape painting is typically characterized by:

- Subject matter that incorporates:
  - The **picturesque**, meaning landscape that is worthy of being painted
  - Manifest destiny—the divine right to expand the country
  - The sublime, which is simultaneous awe and fear of nature
  - The incorporation of ruins, similar to French Baroque landscape painting
  - Images of the **pastoral**



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Picturesque**

In landscape painting, it refers to the charm of viewing nature in an undisturbed state.

##### **Pastoral**

A scene that shows man's dominion over nature.

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## 3. The Sublime in Romantic Landscape Painting: Examples

What makes a Romantic landscape painting different than other types of landscapes? Well, remember that Romanticism and Dark Romanticism are genres of art that embody the concept of the **sublime**—this was a very important idea in Romantic artwork. Also, in the case of Dark Romanticism, the notion of decay and death permeates throughout the artwork.

This first painting is a great example of the importance of the incorporation of ruins into a picturesque landscape painting. This entire landscape is evocative of death: humans, nature, and even the seemingly eternal construction of a church—Gothic, in this case. None of these things lasts forever. It's a sober reminder of the inevitability of death in all things, but it also shows the interconnectedness of all things. The setting is stark but beautiful, pitting the age of the ruins, the old gnarled trees, and the wilting gravestones with the freshness of the snow surrounding them. Ruins were thought to be especially picturesque, and Friedrich painted several similar scenes in his career.



Cloister Graveyard in the Snow (also known as Monastery Ruins in the Snow) by Caspar David Friedrich

1819

Oil on canvas

John Constable's painting "The Haywain" is a visual ode to the pastoral and idyllic English countryside. Constable believed that paintings that depicted landscapes were as important as history paintings, and this work was a carefully constructed nostalgic view of a small family farm.



The Haywain by John Constable

1821

Oil on canvas

It also proves a bit foreboding, depending on your interpretation. The cultural influence of the Industrial Revolution was apparent; Constable was uncomfortable with the way in which the English countryside was changing, as more and more small farms were disappearing from the English landscape.



THINK ABOUT IT

How might you interpret this image's depiction of the sky and the dark clouds that seem to loom overhead? Perhaps it was Constable's way of foreshadowing what he felt was to come.

This next example also explores the concept of the sublime but in a slightly different way. Joseph Mallord William (J.M.W.) Turner's painting "The Slave Ship" explores the sublime through the subject matter. Insurance companies at the time would only compensate owners for slaves lost at sea, not slaves that died of natural causes. To avoid a financial loss, the captain of the slave ship ordered all the sick and dying to be tossed overboard.





The Slave Ship by J.M.W. Turner

1799

Oil on canvas

Notice how the sublime beauty of the boiling sea and the fiery sky, and the ship heading into the approaching typhoon, almost overshadow the drama happening in the foreground. If you look at the closeup below, you can see the arms and hands of slaves in shackles as they are being pulled underwater.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Sublime

An aesthetic quality in nature during the 18th century, distinct from beauty, expressing awe and fear simultaneously.

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## 4. The Hudson River School: Examples

The Hudson River School wasn't an official school or institution in the traditional sense but rather a group of artists who shared a similar vision and method of painting—with the emphasis still on the sublime, but in a different manner than the examples you've seen so far. This group of artists is known particularly for its dramatic scenes of the American wilderness, such as this painting, called "The Oxbow," by artist Thomas Cole.



#### DID YOU KNOW

An oxbow is created when a river bends into a U shape. The one in this painting is in the Connecticut River.





The Oxbow by Thomas Cole

1836

Oil on canvas

American landscapes lacked the ancient ruins of the landscapes of Europe, so Cole argued that the breathtaking features of the American wilderness should be considered its natural ruins. He further enhanced the sublime beauty of the scene by his composition, in the quick retreat of the foreground off a steep cliff, which forces your attention back into the landscape. The recession of a passing storm into the background also contributes to this feeling of awe.



**Hudson River School** artists such as Cole were consistent in their subject matter choices: distinctive landscapes of the Northeastern region of the United States, such as the Hudson Valley (the namesake of the school), the Catskill Mountains, and the Adirondack Mountains.

Nineteenth-century American Romanticism and its subject matter correlated with the westward movement into a new frontier and the growth of a young nation. The justification for the territorial expansion as a means of promoting and defending democracy can be summarized in the widely held belief or doctrine known as **Manifest Destiny**, which is essentially man's (specifically European man's) divine right to expand possession of land.

Albert Bierstadt's painting of the Sierra Nevada Mountains is an expression of Manifest Destiny. Bierstadt was part of the Hudson River School, and traveled west as part of several expansion journeys. His beautiful paintings exhibit the Hudson River School quality of luminism, in which the paintings almost glow in the way that they depict light. It's a rather amazing characteristic of these works of art, creating an almost divine presence within the painting that enhances the sheer awe of such an impressive landscape.



Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California by Albert Bierstadt

1868

Oil on canvas

Paintings such as this would have been the only visual examples for many people of what awaited them in the American West, and would have served as inspiration, as well as motivation, in the heavenly rewards that were awaiting those that took part in the divine expansion westward.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Hudson River School

American, 19th-century movement characterized by landscape painters, Romanticism, and themes illustrating the Hudson River Valley, Catskills, and Adirondack and the White Mountain area.

##### Manifest Destiny

A doctrine held by some Americans beginning in the 19th century that believes in a divinely granted right of expansion.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Romantic landscape painting**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms and describe **characteristics of and influences on Romantic landscape painting**. Through the exploration of artwork that incorporated the concept of **the sublime**, including works of art by **the Hudson River School**, you learned how to identify **examples of Romantic landscape painting**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.





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### **Manifest Destiny**

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### **Pastoral**

A scene that shows man's dominion over nature.

### **Picturesque**

In landscape painting, it refers to the charm of viewing nature in an undisturbed state.

### **Sublime**

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### **Transcendentalism**

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