

AMERICAN STORIES

PAINTINGS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

SINCE THE FOUNDING DECADES OF THE COUNTRY, AMERICAN ARTISTS HAVE SOUGHT TO CREATE UNIQUELY American art—art that embodied the nation’s pioneering and independent spirit. Between the American Revolution and World War I, a group of British colonies became a nation, the frontier pushed westward to span the continent, a rural and agricultural society became urban and industrial, and the United States—reunited after the Civil War under an increasingly powerful federal government—emerged as a leading participant in world affairs. Throughout this complicated, transformative period, artists recorded American life as it changed around them in paintings of scenes from daily life, or genre paintings. Many of the nation’s most celebrated painters—including John Singleton Copley, George Caleb Bingham, Winslow Homer, John Sloan, and many others— captured the temperament of their respective eras, defining the character of Americans as individuals, citizens, and members of growing, diverse communities.

These curriculum materials present stories artists created about their times and illuminate the evolution of American artists’ approaches to narrative painting. Recurring themes in these artworks include childhood, marriage, family, and community; the notion of citizenship; attitudes toward race; the frontier as reality and myth; the problems and possibilities of urban and rural life; and the process and meaning of making art. Although times change, and the medium through which we tell stories has developed from paintings to movies to television and the web, the subjects are often the same.

The artworks highlighted in this resource reflect their times but they also actively produce and shape what we know about the past, as great works of art often do. As you explore these works, consider the ways the genre of narrative painting has been used to create many of America’s most enduring images and national myths.

- *How can works of art help to document personal and national stories?*
- *What is the role of personal and national narratives in contemporary society?*

Making a New Nation

Established during the Age of Reason (also referred to as the Enlightenment), the United States was founded on the values of ingenuity, creativity, and collaboration. Colonial life was practical, not luxurious, so artistic pursuits were initially focused largely on the making and embellishing of utilitarian objects. As colonial society grew in affluence, portraiture emerged as the nation's dominant artistic enterprise. England's portrait tradition provided the model for American artists into the post-Revolutionary era, and patrons gradually learned to appreciate paintings as more than mere likenesses of the sitter. Affected by shifts in society, artistic practices, and clientele, portraitists began to reveal their sitters' desired social positions and to delight them with more elaborate compositions.

During this formative time, native-born artist John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) emerged as the nation's foremost painter, establishing an early style of realism that would have an enduring influence on American art. As Boston's leading portrait painter, Copley navigated a society divided by patriots eager for American independence and loyalists who supported British rule. Copley's affinity for the patriots seems evident in *Paul Revere* (1768). He portrays Revere directly, looking straight at the viewer, and provides clues to his identity as a silver-smith: his smock, tools, and unfinished teapot. Revere would later become celebrated for his "midnight ride" on April 18, 1775 to warn colonial troops of approaching British forces.

A National Identity

In the first half of the nineteenth century, industrialization and immigration defined the national experience. Artists began to render scenes of everyday life, shaping an American identity and documenting the business of forging a new nation. Genre paintings flourished as a rising middle class gained the means to purchase paintings and developed an appetite for images reflecting their pastimes and values. Representations of people at work and rest, family gatherings, and narrative scenes detailing moments in American history—often fictionalized by the artist's imagination—became popular with these new art patrons and contemporary artists. These scenes self-consciously celebrate the distinctive characteristics of the new nation, such as hard work, community, and patriotism.

Western expansion, a term that describes the historic westward migration and its effects, dominated this period of American history. Whether explained as "Manifest Destiny"—the belief that it was the destiny of the United States to expand its territory over the whole of North America to extend its political, social, and economic influences—or more simply as the dream for a better life, Western expansion came to be synonymous for many Easterners with the promise of freedom and opportunity along the Western horizon. Despite the seeming progress that Western expansion implied, however, it was countered by the reality of the brutal devastation of native life and land.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–1879), one of the most popular American genre painters of the period, documented everyday scenes of frontier life on and around the Missouri River. He was fascinated by the rugged and unfettered life of the river boatmen like those seen in *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846). With the advent of steam technology and transportation, however, the boatmen were a dying breed by the 1840s and Bingham's paintings soon conveyed nostalgia for an aspect of American life that was fast becoming obsolete.

Continuity and Change

The years following the Civil War (1860–65) were a time of rapid cultural and financial growth in America. The unique and overwhelming circumstances of the Civil War and the period of Reconstruction (1865–77) challenged American artists. Seeking to assuage the sorrow of the war and to heal the nation's fractured spirit, painters turned away from military and political content. Even Winslow Homer (1836–1910), who had visited the Union lines as a war correspondent, drawing illustrations for the press, preferred to recount the war's everyday aspects, not its bloody battles. A decade later, during the nation's centennial year, Homer painted *The Cotton Pickers* (1876), for which he chose to depict two African American women, former slaves, as monumental figures in a Virginia landscape.

As the agrarian basis of American life yielded to urbanization and industrialization, artists—many of whom lived, studied, worked, and exhibited their paintings in cities—looked to the countryside for subject matter. Instead of confronting the tumultuous political and economic events that defined this era of profound social change, many artists chose to examine only small, reassuring slices of the human experience in subtle, open-ended narratives.

Modern Urban America

The early twentieth century witnessed the transformation of the United States into a modern industrialized society and an international political power. By 1920 more than half of the country's population lived in urban areas. Between 1900 and 1920, 14.5 million immigrants from Europe, Russia, Mexico, and Asia settled in the United States, primarily in urban centers. Even West Coast cities were affected—the population of Los Angeles tripled between 1900 and 1910.

By 1900, modernization and city life had become a significant theme for artists. The city was represented as a place of pleasure, crowds, community, leisure, and sometimes as a place in need of social reform. The artists of the Ashcan School (so-called because of their dark, muted palettes and subjects of common city life) were known for celebrating the immigrant neighborhoods of the city and its accompanying entertainments. George Bellows (1882–1925) and John Sloan (1871–1951), in particular, delighted in capturing the raucous qualities of working-class culture.

Sloan's *Town Steps, Gloucester* (1916) illustrates a slice of life in Gloucester, Massachusetts and, more importantly, documents progress in the role of women in American city life. Proper middle-class women are pictured strolling about, unaccompanied by male escorts. This was a time when women were increasingly freed from the constraints of Victorian society.

Copley, Bingham, Homer, and Sloan represent just a small segment of the artists who played a role in shaping American identity through their works of art. These and other artists not only imagined the forming nation in their paintings, but reinforced that vision by representing personal and national stories.

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY (United States, 1738–1815)

Paul Revere, 1768

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY'S PORTRAIT OF HIS FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE PAUL REVERE IS A CLASSIC EXAMPLE of colonial portraiture. It is an accurate, intricate, and apparently truthful likeness, even as it presents an encoded story. Revere looks out at the viewer in a contemplative pose with his hand to his chin. He rests his elbow on a highly polished, unscratched table, possibly a work-bench. Wearing an open-collared shirt and no jacket, Revere appears as the workman he is, gripping a silver teapot in his left hand. Other than the engraving tools on the table, the setting is free from a craftsman's clutter or any other indication of an active workshop.

At the time this painting was made, Revere was known as a silversmith with a flourishing Boston trade, but not yet as an American hero. The embedded narrative is associated with the teapot: although it is the featured object in this portrait, Revere actually crafted only one in 1768. Many Bostonians were boycotting tea by 1767, when Britain imposed stiff taxes on the colony, so the teapot could have been seen as a confrontational element in the portrait. Copley's depiction of Revere sought to convey physical strength, moral certainty, and intelligence, qualities that would enable Revere to play an instrumental role in colonial history.

- *Consider the lighting, setting, body language, and facial expression of the sitter. What information does the sitter's clothing, posture, and accessories provide and what do these details tell us about his character?*

The fine mahogany table that distances Revere from the viewer and gives the workman in shirtsleeves an air of authority also serves a compositional purpose. It forms the base of a pyramid with the sitter's brightly illuminated head at the apex. This triangular composition emphasizes Revere's mind and references the ideals of creativity and ingenuity that defined the Age of Reason. Revere's hands are also emphasized, reinforcing the American value of hard work. This portrait, an idealized view of labor consistent with the democratic ideals of the forming nation, offers a record of Revere's powerful physical presence as well as the dignity and value of the work of an artisan.

- *Several of Revere's works in silver and other colonial decorative works are in LACMA's collection. Visit LACMA's Collections Online at lacma.org or view the enclosed CD to see an example. What do these objects tell us about the history of American craftsmanship? What types of objects were considered valuable in the developing nation?*

John Singleton Copley, son of working-class Irish immigrants and largely self-taught, was among the first artists to prosper financially on American soil. Copley lived and worked in Boston and witnessed the events leading up to the War of Independence. Copley's portraits endure because they transcend pure documentation to reveal deeper clues to a sitter's personality, profession, social position, and historical significance.

- *If you were to create a portrait of yourself, what pose would you take? What attributes, or clues, would you include in order to reveal something about yourself, your interests, and society today?*



JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY
(United States, 1738–1815)
Paul Revere, 1768

Oil on canvas, 35 1/8 x 28 1/2 in.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Gift of Joseph W. Revere, William B. Revere and Edward H. R. Revere

Photo © 2010 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM (United States, 1811–1879)

The Jolly Flatboatmen, 1846

THIS CHEERFUL SCENE BY PAINTER GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM SHOWS BOATMEN PLAYING MUSIC, DANCING, and relaxing on the peaceful river: one man dances while another fiddles and a third sets the rhythm by beating on a cooking pan. The boat is empty of freight; only bedrolls and a raccoon skin are visible on the lower level of the boat. The men are imagined as spending their days drifting lazily, rather than toiling, waiting for the moments when they need to work. Bingham emphasizes the scene's tranquility by framing the musicians and dancer with two seated men; directly below the dancer, another man stretches on his back and clasps his hands behind his raised head so that he can watch the high-stepping footwork. The triangular composition with the dancer at the apex, combined with the flatness of the artist's brushwork and the calmness of the setting, produces a sense of balance and harmony, a triumph of the pleasures of American rural life.

- *Create a story for this artwork. What is happening in this work of art? Who are the characters? Where and when does this story take place? What happened before this scene? What happens next?*
- *Imagine yourself in this painting or as one of the characters in the painting. What might you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel? Record responses or share with a partner.*

Flatboats, used to haul freight in the sometimes shallow inland waterways, were becoming outdated when Bingham painted this one in 1846. By then, the Industrial Revolution was well underway and faster, larger, and more powerful modes of transportation were being developed. By the 1840s, manpowered flatboats had all but disappeared in favor of technologically advanced, steam-powered boats.

Bingham was a self-trained painter who lived most of his life in Missouri and found his subjects in the boatmen and trappers that populated his state's great rivers. From his easel in Missouri, Bingham sent this nostalgic painting to an exhibition in New York, knowing that it would invite his Eastern audience to fantasize about the seeming joys of frontier life. It was later reproduced as an engraving by the American Art-Union and distributed to its thousands of members, transforming the notion of the wild and dangerous frontier into a setting for an escapist narrative in the minds of Americans. The mythic West became identified as a paradise, a realm of natural leisure far removed from the hustle and bustle of the East, whose cities were troubled by the racially and politically divisive elements of urban industrialized life. Bingham's *The Jolly Flatboatmen* is consistent in theme and style with other genre paintings of the period: employing a realistic painting style to create a persuasive fantasy about American life.

- *In what ways does the artist tell us about the American landscape and our relationship to it?*
- *How could you document or idealize a region today? What story would you communicate about your geographic location or region? Consider the medium you might use to illustrate your narrative.*



GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM
(United States, 1811–1879)
The Jolly Flatboatmen, 1846
Oil on canvas, 38 1/8 x 48 1/2 in.
Manoogian Collection. Photo courtesy of the Manoogian Collection

WINSLOW HOMER (United States, 1836–1910)

The Cotton Pickers, 1876

WINSLOW HOMER'S *THE COTTON PICKERS* SHOWS TWO YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN returning home from a day's work in the fields. The women stand tall and proud despite their tiring labor. The woman on the right holds a sack filled with cotton over her shoulder. The woman on the left grips a large basket containing cotton to her hip and trails her fingers over the plants. Picking cotton was an exhausting and sometimes painful job. The cotton—especially as rendered in the right foreground—seems soft, but the fluffy boll hides the prickly seed pod underneath. Notice how the cotton plant catches at the woman's apron.

This kind of realism, based on accurate observation, is a hallmark of Homer's work. His realism, as is the case here, also serves a deeper, more symbolic function. Ten years after the Civil War's end, not much had changed in the lives of former slaves. Many still earned their living working the cotton fields of the South. By 1876, when this painting was made, most Americans hoped that the era of Reconstruction would have restored harmony to their war-torn country and improved the lives of its new black citizenry. Notice the expression on the face of the woman on the right. She looks off into the distance as if towards a better future, one that's still far away.

Yet, the large figures of the woman in this painting fill the canvas, underscoring their importance to the artist. The figures are seen from below, a perspective that raises them heroically above a sea of cotton. The almost infinite expanse of the field alludes to the enormity of their labor. Silhouetted against the sky, the shape of the figures as stable triangles makes them seem even more heroic.

- *Imagine if the women were not so prominently depicted, but rather set further back into the middle or background of the painting. How would changing the women's size and scale alter your interpretation of the painting? Or imagine if the horizon line were placed higher in the composition.*

Homer was interested in the subject of people at work. Many artists, both American and European, were documenting their changing worlds at this time. Heroic images of working class people were a common subject.

- *The Cotton Pickers and other genre paintings can inform us about how people lived and worked long ago. How would you document American workers today? Think about the different kinds of people you encounter daily such as mail carriers, construction workers, bus drivers, bank tellers, and grocery store clerks. What kinds of stories would you like to communicate about these workers? How would you depict them?*

Winslow Homer was a subtle chronicler of African American life in the years immediately following the Civil War. During the 1870s he visited Virginia for a firsthand look at the work of Reconstruction, returning to scenes he had known as a war correspondent. The pictures that resulted from these trips analyzed the various successes, failures, and tragedies of the war and its aftermath.



WINSLOW HOMER
(United States, 1836–1910)
The Cotton Pickers, 1876
Oil on canvas, 24 1/16 x 38 1/8 in.

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JOHN SLOAN (United States, 1871–1951)

Town Steps, Gloucester, 1916

JOHN SLOAN CAPTURES A GROUP OF ANONYMOUS PEDESTRIANS IN *TOWN STEPS, GLOUCESTER*. IN THE compressed picture plane, two women, seemingly in conversation, walk along the sidewalk of a residential neighborhood. The woman in the pink coat glances back at the woman in the blue coat walking in the opposite direction. A wide staircase and sections of several architectural structures fill the remainder of the composition. People and dogs walk up and down the wooden steps, a pedestrian thoroughfare that connected streets on two levels. The two women in the center foreground are bathed in bright light and cast shadows on the ground in front of them. Even the pigeon on the ground (to the right of the walking figures) casts a shadow.

Rendered in thickly applied oil paint in bright, colorful hues, Sloan's painting illustrates a slice of life in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Sloan lived in New York, but spent five summers in Gloucester, a popular spot among artists. There, he painted hundreds of pictures outdoors on a portable easel. Painted quickly and directly, the Gloucester paintings represent a departure from the darker palette and grittier urban scenes that Sloan was known for as an Ashcan artist.

- *What are some of the clues in the painting that tell us about life in Gloucester around the time this painting was made? Notice the details of the figures' dress, architectural features, and landscape.*

Sloan's *Town Steps, Gloucester* documents progress in the role of women in American city life. As the women's suffrage movement gained momentum in the late nineteenth century, the depiction of women shifted to reflect their increasing political and civic status. Unlike earlier, Victorian era paintings of women in interior scenes at work or engaged in leisure activities, the proper middle-class women seen strolling about in Sloan's streets are free from their previous constraints; they walk unaccompanied by male escorts.

Through his association with Robert Henri (1865–1929) and the group of young Philadelphia artists around him, Sloan began to paint in oil around 1897 and became interested in recording city life. In 1904, he followed Henri to New York where in 1908, he participated with seven other artists in an exhibition at the Macbeth Gallery to protest the conservative taste of the National Academy of Design. The group of realist painters was dubbed "the Eight" and depicted the hustle and bustle of city streets, the common pleasures of restaurants and various forms of entertainment. Several of the Eight, including Sloan, were part of what came to be known as the Ashcan school, so called because of their dark, muted palettes and fondness for realistic representations of urban working-class scenes and settings, such as streets, alleys, and bars. They tended to focus on the inhabitants of cities rather than the cities themselves. During the 1910s and 1920s, the realists' celebration of America spread throughout the country, as artists recorded the neighborhoods and people that made their own cities distinct.

- *Record a realist view of your neighborhood. Select a subject—architectural or figurative or both—and vantage point and capture the scene using drawing tools or a camera. Consider the type of narrative your composition will tell and adjust the point of view and other compositional details appropriately.*



JOHN SLOAN
(United States, 1871–1951)
Town Steps, Gloucester, 1916
Oil on canvas, 32 1/16 x 26 1/8 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection
Photo © 2010 Museum Associates/LACMA

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