



The James Cowan Collection

Lesson Plans by DeeGee Lester



Cover Images:

Top left: *Autumn in the Catskills* by Sanford Gifford

Bottom: *Mount Tamalpais* by Albert Bierstadt

***“...to express...the love and reverence I entertain for Tennessee”
James Cowan***

In 1927, the city of Nashville received the first shipment in an anonymous donation of magnificent works of art to be housed as a permanent collection in the Parthenon, which was then halfway through reconstruction. The paintings (63 total) would not be seen by the public for another four years, but when the Nashville Parthenon opened in 1931, the anonymous benefactor had died and, according to his instructions, the collection could be introduced as the James M. Cowan Collection.

Born in 1858 in Hernandez, Mississippi, and raised in the Tennessee towns of Cowan and Tullahoma, James Cowan moved north as a young man and found success in the insurance business. In 1897, Cowan escorted a girls drill team, the Armour Drill Corps, from Chicago to attend and perform at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. While visiting the fair, Cowan visited the city’s first and temporary replica of the ancient Parthenon which housed 1,200 works of art from around the world. Upon hearing during the 1920s that Nashville would replace the earlier structure with a permanent full-scale replica of the ancient Parthenon, Cowan offered the donation of paintings from his enormous collection of approximately 800 works of art.

Cowan’s collection focused on works by American artists or those, such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, who had the bulk of their careers in the United States. Works from the Hudson River School, America’s first great artistic movement, form a significant portion of the collection. Among the famous artists included in the Cowan Collection are Albert Bierstadt, Sanford Gifford, Thomas Moran, Frederic Church, Winslow Homer, George Inness, William Merritt Chase, Benjamin West, Elihu Vedder, Carl Frederick Frieseke, and Elliott Daingerfield.

More than eighty years after that first generous donation, visitors to the Parthenon still marvel at the beauty, quality, and variety of works represented in the city’s oldest permanent collection. And we remain indebted to one man’s love for his home state.



Lesson 1:
Classical Influence on American Democracy, Art & Culture

Goal: To increase student awareness of the critical role of classical education/ideals in the development of American democracy.

Learning Objectives:

- To demonstrate the broader incorporation of classical ideals into 18th and early 19th century American culture.
- To underscore the strong influence of classical education, symbolism, and models on America's founding fathers.
- To initiate and encourage further student exploration of the classical foundations of American political thinking.

Background:

Imagine, a new land stretches out before you – lush virgin forests, clear rivers and streams, abundant wildlife, and unlimited fertile valleys. Envision this new country with unimaginable opportunities and challenges. The openness of this new and exciting place expands notions of liberty, natural law and individual freedom. Where do you begin in transforming that vision into reality? What models, what lessons, which

precedents do you reference for guidance? Weary of 18th century European models of nation and culture, leaders of the American colonies drew upon the examples, words, and cultures of classical Greece and Rome as their models for developing a new nation.

Spurred by the persistent recovery of artifacts and ruins in ancient lands, by a growing number of aristocratic connoisseurs of “anything Greek,” and the advancement of classical ideas and culture through travels and writings of James Stuart, Nicholas Revett, and others, leaders of the American colonies began with classical Greece and Rome as their base models for a free and democratic America.

Familiarity with ancient heroic tales, mythologies, epic poems, and dramas was part of the childhood memory for these aspiring leaders. Their later education centered on knowledge of democratic foundations, classical philosophy, mathematical roots, and the reading and translation of texts in Greek and Latin. Plato, Aristotle, Pericles, Cicero and Livy were more familiar to these men than Washington and Jefferson are to present generations. Veneration of classical words, ideas, and symbolism permeated the speeches, writings, and documents of our nation’s founders and appeared as benchmarks for human nature itself in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

American culture, too, reflected this fascination with classical ideals. Paintings such as **Benjamin West’s *Venus and Cupid*, shown above, reflect the popularity of classical subjects, including mythology, as subject matter for paintings and sculpture. Architecturally, the designs of Benjamin Latrobe and **William Strickland** (architect of the Tennessee State Capitol Building) imitated Greek temple design and brought classical lines and design elements (pediments, colonnades, symmetry, etc.) to public buildings and the private homes of wealthy citizens.**

Sources:

Fani –Maria Tsigakou, *The Rediscovery of Greece: Travellers and Painters of the Romantic Era* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).

Carl J. Richard. *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

Carl J. Richard. *The Golden Age of the Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Dr. Joe Wolverton II. *The Founding Fathers and the Classics* The New American 20 September 2004. pp. 35-39. Available online at <http://21stcenturycicero.wordpress.com/tyranny/the-founding-fathers-the-classics/>

Activities:

- Googling™ classical mythology in American painting as a starting point, ask students to select and discuss several paintings in regard to the reflection of 18th-19th century values, and the meanings artists were attempting to impart to the viewing public. Why were classical myths and themes the best choice for imparting these views and values?
- In 1764, *History of Ancient Art*, by Johann Winckelmann noted ancient Greek art's "*noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.*" Using this description, ask students to select a familiar Greek Revival structure and demonstrate how design elements reflect Winckelmann's views. This activity can also be used as a follow-up to a visit to the Nashville Parthenon. During the visit, students are asked to take brief notes on their feelings and observations of the building; to move beyond sight only and to utilize all sensory perception (sound, texture, etc.); and to note their personal reaction to the structure. What *discoveries* did they make about the Parthenon and which of the senses was most important in making the discovery? Ask them to take time to look at the building from a different or unfamiliar vantage point. Upon return to the classroom, ask students to flesh out their notes to create a description of the Parthenon. As students share their written descriptions with the class, they may discover that the building can "speak" differently to individuals.
- Compare Pericles' *Funeral Oration* with Washington's *Farewell Address*. What commonalities/differences appear?
- Ask students to select from the following:
 - The U.S. Constitution*
 - The Federalist Papers*
 - The Bill of Rights*and then to demonstrate influences of classical Greece and Rome in these documents.

Excellent sources include:

Carl J. Richard. *Greeks and Romans Bearing Gifts: How the Ancients Inspired the Founding Fathers* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008).

Charles M. Sherover. *The Development of the Democratic Idea: Readings from Pericles to the Present* (NY: A Mentor Book: New American Library, 1974).

Susan Ford Wiltshire. *Greece, Rome, and the Bill of Rights* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

Dr. Joe Wolverton II. *The Founding Fathers and the Classics*. The New American, 20 September 2004, pp. 35-39. (Also available on line at [http:// 21stcenturycicero.wordpress.com/tyranny/the-founding-fathers-the-classics/](http://21stcenturycicero.wordpress.com/tyranny/the-founding-fathers-the-classics/))



The Wreck by Frederic Church (1852)

Lesson 2:

A Particular American Voice in Art

Goal: To use examples from the James M. Cowan Collection to demonstrate to students the foundations and growth of a distinctly American style and subject matter in art.

Objectives:

- To demonstrate how artists of the Hudson River School began to separate themselves from European art and find a distinctive American style.
- To explore ways in which American artists bought into political notions such as Manifest Destiny and influenced the American public on this and other ideas.

- To underscore the uniquely American perspective of artists such as Winslow Homer and Edwin Blashfield.

Background:

Art historian Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser describes eighteenth and nineteenth-century Americans as at once plagued by feelings of inferiority to the history and culture of the old world, while given to periodic feelings of superiority as citizens of a new world. The initial hesitancy of settlers to venture beyond the security of the colonies increasingly gave way to curiosity and a desire for the bold adventure of moving further and further into the American wilderness. Both the safety of clinging to the old and the thrill of new sights and experiences are reflected in the American art of the period.

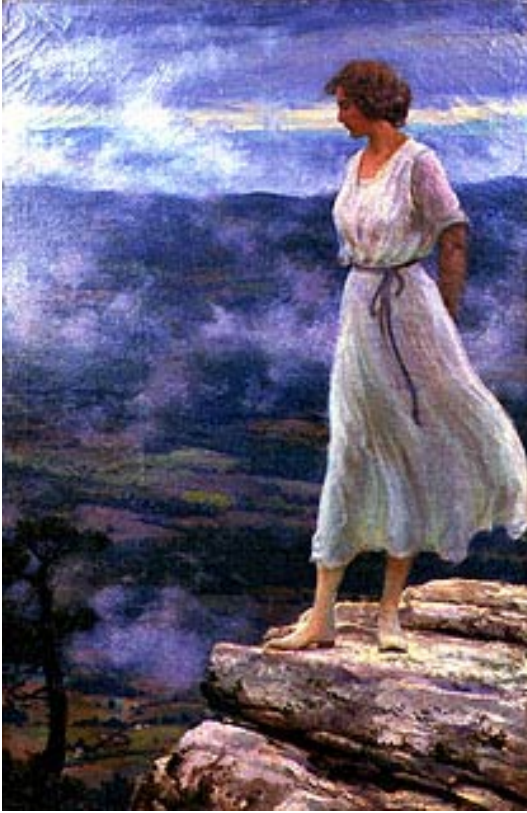
Like pioneering families, American artists led by the painters of the **Hudson River School** became trailblazers in a dramatic new art form, instinctively seizing upon America's most distinctive feature – the landscape – as an artistic theme. Led by Thomas Cole and Asher Durand, and spreading among a loosely-knit group of painters from New York State and throughout New England, the Hudson River School became the first American art movement.

Abandoned were the pastoral scenes of European artists. American painters grasped the opportunity of interpreting for the first time uniquely American scenes and elements. The scale of America's natural wonders, the dramatic transformation of the landscape under the interplay of light and shadow, the curiosity of Native Americans as representative of both savage and noble, the increasing interest in geology and the sacredness of nature, and the inclusion of artists in government-sponsored expeditions through the West, all came together to build an art form disassociated from European models.

The Parthenon's **James M. Cowan Collection** features several of the major artists from the second generation of the Hudson River School, including **Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, Sanford Gifford, Charles Courtney Curran, and George Inness.**

Source:

Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, "All Nature Here is New to Art: Painting the American Landscape in the Nineteenth Century" *Hudson River School: Masterworks From the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)



The Hilltop by Charles Courtney Curran (1918)

(See also the Gifford and Bierstadt paintings on the Front Page of these lesson plans)

Activities:

- **The sentiments expressed in an essay in the January 1870 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* by Thomas Wentworth Higginson entitled “Americanism in Literature,” could just as easily be applied to the art of 19th century America:**

The voyager from Europe who lands upon our shores perceives a difference in the sky above his head; the height seems loftier, the zenith more remote, the horizon-wall more steep; the moon appears to hang in the middle air, beneath a dome that arches far beyond it. The sense of natural symbolism is so strong in us, that the mind seeks a spiritual significance in this glory of the atmosphere. It is not enough to find the sky enlarged, and not the mind – cælum, non anumum. One wishes to be convinced that here the intellectual man

inhales a deeper breath, and walks with bolder tread; that philosopher and artist are here more buoyant, more fresh, more fertile; that the human race has here escaped at one bound from the despondency of ages, as from their wrongs.”

Using either the slides included in this website lesson plan, or the viewing of the actual paintings during a visit to the Parthenon, ask students to select and discuss one of the paintings with regard to the sentiments expressed above – for example, natural symbolism, spiritual significance, the relationship of man and landscape.

- As follow-up to the activity above, describe how the artist conveys these sentiments through the selection of the scene, the choice of color, and the painting technique. For example, the artists of the Hudson River School demonstrated a fascination with the effects of light upon water and sky, and the insignificance of man in comparison to the power and expanse of nature. Pay particular attention to the composition of the painting – the geometric organization, the treatment of atmosphere, the ratio of sky to land, the contrasts and symbolism of light and shadow, the role of depth and linear perspective, and the conveying of timelessness, mystery, and spiritualism.
- **Language Arts Connection:** Select a favorite from among the paintings in the lesson plans and find a 19th century American poem that reflects the mood of the painting.
- **Historical Connection:** Select a painting from the lesson plan and discuss how the artist’s work promoted the notion of *Manifest Destiny* among politicians and the citizenry.

Manifest Destiny – 1) the 19th century doctrine that the United States had the right and duty to expand throughout the North American continent; 2) a doctrine used to rationalize U.S. territorial expansion as justified and inevitable; 3) a phrase coined by journalist John L. Sullivan that the United States was “preordained” by God” to expand over North America and exercise hegemony over its neighbors.

- Throughout the 19th century a uniquely American perspective of art developed and artists used the canvas as a reflection of American values, needs, and lifestyle. The Western art of **Thomas Moran** was instrumental in the push for making Yellowstone the nation's first national park and for the later development of the National Park Service. (The Moran painting in the Cowan Collection, however, is a piece from the East Coast).



Town Pond – Easthampton by Thomas Moran, 1901

As Americans moved into the industrial age and great fortunes began to accumulate among the families of industrial elites, artists such as **Edwin Blashfield** and John Singer Sargent were commissioned by families to create works of art as monuments to their prestige and wealth.

The New Dress by Edwin Blashfield, 1874

Blashfield also created many of the beautiful murals that decorate the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.



However, the incredible beauty and drudgery of daily life was also portrayed through the etchings of publications such as *Harper's Weekly*, and through the delicate water colors and paintings by artists such as **Winslow Homer, whose popular work ran the gamut from Civil War drawings to artistic narratives of farm life and rugged seascapes in Gloucester, to the gentle brush strokes and melting hues and lines that bordered on *abstraction*. The**

Cowan Collection's painting, *Rab and the Girls* provides an artistic bridge in the ever-evolving Homer style.

Ask students to find and describe a work by an American artist developed over the past 25 years and discuss how that particular work expresses American values, lifestyle, or unique experience.



Rab and the Girls by Winslow Homer, 1875.