Thomas Cole: The Voyage of Life
On view at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens January 17th-April 4th 2016
A Museum Guide for Kindergarten through Fifth Grade
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION
Thomas Cole (1801-48) was the leading landscape painter in the United States in the first half of the 19th century. Despite the public’s enthusiasm for his landscape views, Cole aspired to be more than a “mere leaf painter.” During the course of his career, he eagerly sought the support of patrons who would commission landscape compositions that were infused with the same kind of moralizing rhetoric that artists since the Renaissance typically achieved with figurative compositions. Cole’s four large allegorical pictures, The Voyage of Life (1839-40, Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute Museum of Art, Utica, N.Y.) are the finest and most celebrated examples of what Cole famously called a “higher style of landscape.” During Cole’s lifetime, the public considered The Voyage of Life his greatest achievement. Within a decade of his own death in 1848, however, a younger generation of artists and critics thought that the allegorical content of Cole’s series was hopelessly out-of-date. In spite of the emergence in the United States of a more cosmopolitan taste in the post-Civil War era, Cole’s paintings continued to have an impact on American imagination well into the waning decades of the 19th century. Few other 19th-century American paintings had a similar, sustained impact on popular culture. This phenomenon prompted one modern historian to describe the series as a landmark in American cultural history.

THE EXHIBITION
The three themes that he combined in the series—that life is a pilgrimage, that a person’s life evolves through four stages, and that our time on earth can metaphorically be compared to a journey on a river that winds its way through a changing landscape—appear in various forms and contexts in Western literature and art. Cole’s great achievement in The Voyage of Life was his synthesis of these potentially complex themes into a simple pictorial narrative. This solution enabled him to capitalize on his skill at landscape painting while simultaneously avoiding his shortcomings as a figure painter. After the death of his patron, Samuel Ward, put the safety and fate of the series in jeopardy, Cole painted a second set in Rome (1842, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), the largest and most ambitious set of copies he ever made.
OBJECTIVE
This Museum guide is designed to prepare your students for a Dixon visit while meeting state standards in certain subjects. Teachers may choose they type of Dixon Discovery tour they would like, or work with the Student program coordinator to tailor the tour to specific needs. Lessons inspired by Shelby County School’s Curriculum for 3rd and 4th quarter, and the current exhibition at the Dixon.

LESSONS

2. Kindergarten, first and second grades will focus on environments, landscapes, and collage. (Visual arts: Kindergarten, quarter 4 standard 1 and 2; first grade quarter 3 standard 1 and 2; second grade, quarter 3, standard 1 and 2).

Before the Museum: Thinking of Landscapes
Talk to your students about foregrounds, middle grounds, backgrounds, and horizon lines. (Help with these terms can be found on page 4). Use the template provided in the back of this packet to make view finders for the students. Let them walk around the classroom, looking through the viewfinder, to discover different points of view. Ask them to identify what lies in the foreground, middle ground and background each time they move.

At the Museum
Option A: Students will have an interactive tour of Thomas Cole’s paintings and drawings in the galleries, with a focus on space, landscapes, mood, and color. After the tour, the students will go to the classroom and work from colored construction paper to make a dreamlike landscape with a fore, middle, and background.

Option B: Students will have an interactive tour of Thomas Cole’s paintings and drawings in the galleries, with a focus on space, landscapes, mood, and color, followed by a brief tour of one of the Dixon’s 4 gardens. The students will the sketch the landscape en plain air. The instructor will give tips and guidance on how to complete a painting back in the classroom.

II. Third, fourth and fifth grades will focus on the passage of time, biology, color, texture, and composition. (Visual arts: 3rd grade, quarter3, standard 1 and 2; 4th grade, quarter 3, standard 1 and 2; 5th grade, quarter3, standard 1, 2, and 6. Cross curricular studies, Science: 3rd, 0307.9.1; 4th, 0407.9.3)

Before the Museum: Observing the Passage of Time
Discuss a life cycle with your students. It could be a frog, butterfly, human or plant. Have a group discussion of other ways to see the passage of time. Help lead the discussion to how light and shadow, (the sun as it moves across the sky) and color (grey hairs, faded paper, low light, etc.) After the discussion, have them create something that can visually communicate youth or old age.
At the Museum
Option A: Students will have an interactive tour of the Thomas Cole’s paintings and drawings that will focus on the theme of the exhibition, which is the passage of time, or the Voyage of Life. They will also discuss color, composition, and personal stories about getting older. The students will then go to the art room where they will be given a small plant and large sheet of paper to divide into 9 squares. During their time in the classroom, they will draw the plant as they see it in the first box. They will take their papers and the plants back to school where they can continue to draw observations as the plant wilts.

Option B: Students will have an interactive tour of the exhibition with a focus on storytelling and symbolism. They will be encouraged to write their own fiction about each of the 4 paintings, and they will be encouraged to share them with the group. After the tour, the students will go to the art room and make their own landscapes and stories.

III. Middle School will focus on Landscape painting, placement of objects in a composition, and unity.
(visual arts: 6th grade 3rd and 4th quarter, standards 1 and 2; 7th grade, 4th quarter, standards 1 and 2; 8th grade, quarter 4, standards 1 and 2.)

Before the Museum
Using the template in the back of this packet, let the students make their own view finders. Have them practice using the view finder in the classroom, hallway, or outside. They should be able to identify a horizon line, foreground, middle ground, background, and perspective. They can make thumbnail sketches of their compositions.

At the Museum
Call the Dixon before your visit and request a docent for a gallery tour and request sketching materials. Your docent will focus on landscape painting and composition. After your tour, break your students into groups with chaperones and walk around the gardens with the viewfinders and sketching materials. Once the students have found their composition, teachers and chaperones can take pictures of their view to bring back to the classroom, in addition to the student’s sketch. Back in the classroom, the students can use their sketch and their pictures as reference for a landscape painting or landscape torn paper collage.

IV. High School will focus on figures in the landscape, and historical periods of American landscape painting.
(visual art: Art I Quarters 3 and 4, standards 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6.)

Before the Museum
Using the images and links provided in this packet, familiarize your students with Thomas Cole’s paintings. Have them research other American Landscape painters, specifically the Hudson River School painters.
At the Museum
Call the Dixon before your visit and request a docent for a gallery tour and request sketching materials. Your docent will focus on the Hudson River and American Landscape movement. After your tour, break your students into groups with chaperones and walk around the gardens with the sketching materials. Encourage your students to sketch each other sketching. Back in the classroom, the students can use their drawings to make a figure in the landscape painting with inspiration from the American Landscape Genre.

VOCABULARY
American Landscape Painting:
A mid-19th century painting style where American landscapes were romanticized

Atmospheric perspective:
a technique of rendering depth or distance inpainting by modifying the tone or hue and distinctness of objects perceived as receding from the picture plane, especially by reducing distinctive local colors and contrasts of light and dark to a uniform light bluish-gray color.

Background:
The part of an image represented as being the furthest distance from the frontal plane.

Foreground:
The ground or parts situated, or represented as situated, in the front; the portion of a scene nearest to the viewer (opposed to background).

Horizon Line:
The line in a painting that represents where the sky meets the ground.

Hudson River School:
A group of American painters of the mid-19th century whose works are characterized by a highly romantic treatment of landscape, especially along the Hudson River.

Middle Ground:
The part of a picture that appears to be halfway from the foreground and the background.

Perspective:
A technique of depicting volumes and spatial relationships on a flat surface.

Viewfinder:
A tool used to block out the surrounding area, allowing artists to focus on a smaller image.

Voyage:
A course of travel or passage, especially a long journey by water to a distant place.
THOMAS COLE
The Voyage of Life: Childhood 1839-1840
Oil on canvas
St. Louis Art Museum
THOMAS COLE
*The Voyage of Life: Youth* 1840
Oil on canvas
St. Louis Art Museum
THOMAS COLE
*The Voyage of Life: Manhood* 1840
Oil on canvas
St. Louis Art Museum
THOMAS COLE
*The Voyage of Life: Old Age* - 1840
Oil on canvas
St. Louis Art Museum
FURTHER STUDY

To schedule your group for a Dixon Discoveries tour:
Please call the Dixon at 761-5250 and ask for Erica McCarrens, or email Erica at emccarrens@dixon.org.

All other tours:
Please call the Dixon at 761-5250 and speak to Amanda Bjorklund, or email Amanda at abjorklund@dixon.org.

Check our website for upcoming exhibitions at www.dixon.org.

For more information on Thomas Cole, follow these links:

For more information on American Painting, follow these links:
1. http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/paintings/American_Painting.html

For more information about the Hudson River School, follow these links:

For more information on Romanticism, follow these links:

For kid-friendly videos about the Voyage of Life:
1. http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/artist-info.1155.html?artobj_artistId=1155&pageNumber=1

Thomas Cole’s Poetry: