

# **'We at least had our Ancient Trees': The Development of Myth and Identity in Nineteenth Century American Painting**

by Justin J. Morris

## **Abstract**

*Modern history has looked on the United States of America as a country with a very distinct and proud national heritage and identity, though this was not always so. When founded in 1776, America was a nation that had not yet developed the identity and customs that would soon come to define the country nationally and internationally. The articulation of this distinct identity fell to the artist class and, in particular, first and second generation American painters. Painters such as Thomas Eakins, Thomas Cole, and the Hudson River School of artists pulled from their natural surroundings to create art that would foster pride in the values of peace, liberty, and freedom. Without these early painters, the United States would not have the strong identity that is so well known today.*

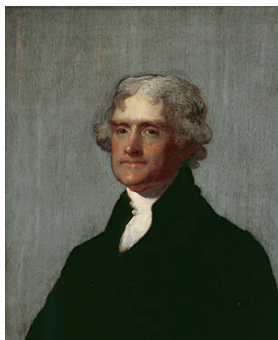
It is only on very rare occasions that new nations are founded without any sense of myth, lore, pride, or history. In short, they are nations without a distinct nationality. Though it would be easy for these nations to adopt the traditions of their former parent state, this route is rarely taken, especially when nationhood is achieved through revolution. The newly formed Communist state in Russia certainly did not adopt the culture of the Tsars. Instead it relied on the Russian Constructivist movement to establish the basis of what

we now consider a unique Soviet culture. So it was with America. After gaining independence from the British, America was a nation that only had the idea of liberty to define itself. There was no apple pie, no baseball, no Uncle Sam, and no big business--at least not in the America-defining context that these items are now applied to. Just as in the U.S.S.R., the development of American lore fell to the artist class. Though the first generation of American painters, including Benjamin West and his followers, worked in the realm of European styles and studied abroad, never to return, the artists of the nineteenth century during "the years of Jacksonian expansion" made a point of representing American themes and landscapes.<sup>1</sup> Artists of the nineteenth century "could even be quite critical of European art," and it is this need and desire to throw off the shackles of European tradition that "made American art and criticism particularly enticing territory in which to explore issues of 'Americanness.'" <sup>2</sup> The history of American painting is as turbulent as the history of the country itself, and the practice went through many different phases and directions before it reached the pinnacle of fame that it has now received. Although there were many different styles of painting in the America of the nineteenth century, nearly all the painting used a set of myths, beliefs, and landscapes,

which would mould the identity that we now associate with the United States and sow the seeds for the “American dream.”

The art produced by America began to take on a unique edge with the advent of portraiture and historical painting. Portraiture had always been a favourite tradition of the upper class and the official portraits of the early American Presidents, the majority of which now reside in the White House, are especially important. Painters such as Gilbert Stuart, the first “major portraitist of the postwar generation,” sought to capture men who were important to the founding of America, and who were idolized by early American citizens as the epitome of America's essence.<sup>3</sup> The subjects themselves may have been truly American, but the paintings reflected European ideals and styles. As a people with few artistic guidelines, early American painters “looked to Europe to set their standards [...] studying imported engravings after Old Masters and [...] observing the working methods of itinerant artists from abroad.”<sup>4</sup> Stuart's 1805 Edgehill portrait of Thomas Jefferson romantically depicts a man who believed America to be “the world's best hope” and is a painting that shows, even in the early days of the Republic, that artists wanted to depict a uniquely American image

which was associated with the American ideals of freedom, liberty, and happiness for all.<sup>5</sup> Jefferson's gaze shows the determined intellectualism and hope that most Americans would truly feel when looking upon the visage of one of their greatest presidents. Emanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" was completed in 1851, many years after the Revolutionary war and the work of Stuart. Upon its release the *New York Evening Mirror* called it "the most effective painting ever exhibited in America," proving that a great amount of what Americans considered their country to be resided in their great early leaders.<sup>6</sup> As a precursor, the American style of leader portraiture was the first organic way that American painters presented uniquely American ideals. This style of portraiture, though it was to remain popular well into the nineteenth century, was soon to take the back seat to more common styles of painting.



**Gilbert Stuart, *Thomas Jefferson*, 1805**





**Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851**

Other American ideals in American styles of painting were soon to be developed in the region surrounding the Catskill Mountains. The first school of American painting, the Hudson River School, was founded in the 1830s by painters such as Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand who found inspiration in the ideal landscape of the American country side, which they regarded as their Garden of Eden.<sup>7</sup> To these painters, the unspoiled American landscape was not just a subject for them to paint; it was the culmination of all that was America and American. An appreciation for undeveloped wilderness was growing in popularity in both America and Europe, though it was especially

important to American art. Coinciding with the Transcendentalist movement, the artists truly believed the lands that lay before them “could provide religious instruction and moral edification.”<sup>8</sup> Looking at Thomas Cole’s “The Oxbow” it is apparent that Cole believed that what he could see was truly worthy of great art, so much so that the Oxbow and countless other perfect outdoor sights like it could become “the American equivalent of Chartres or the Coliseum.”<sup>9</sup> Cole’s “Expulsion from the Garden of Eden” used the Hudson Valley as a landscape to paint the famous biblical scene. Portraying a real place within America as the Garden of Eden was certainly a bold claim, but it was also highly reflective of the artistic attitude of the time. Though the painting depicts Adam and Eve being expelled from the holy garden, the world that they travel to, while darker, is still painted with a sense of beauty that easily underpins the idea that in Hudson River School landscape “the sun rarely set.”<sup>10</sup>

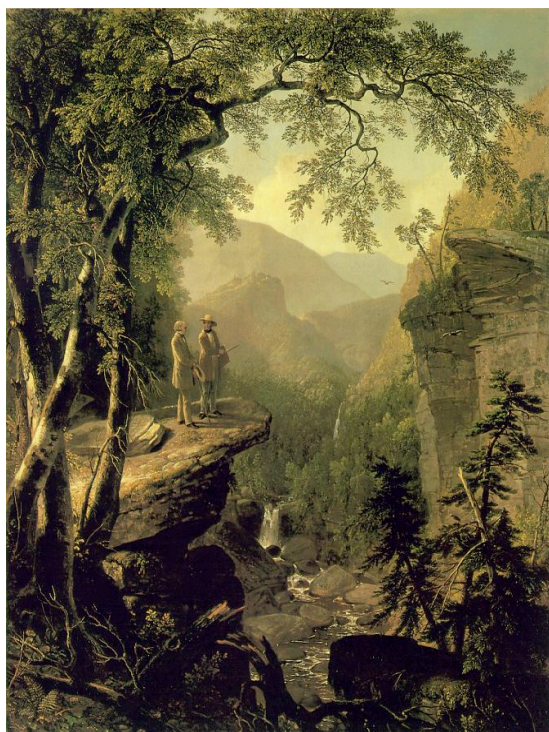


## Thomas Cole, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1827-28

Asher B. Durand, another great painter of the Hudson River School developed a style of “realistic landscape painting” than the thematic work of Cole.<sup>11</sup> His work on “Kindred Spirits” captured the entire idea of the Hudson River movement. “Kindred Spirits” depicts Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant standing with brush and easel in a lush, beautiful landscape. The painting not only suggests that the two men were “kindred spirits” but also that they were part of the same whole that is nature. As a movement that stressed nature as the perfect American subject matter, the Hudson River School created an entirely new set of ideas for artists to work with. While previously it had been important to American artists to travel abroad and “imitate the work of the latest European arrivals,” the new school made a purposeful stand against this kind of art, instead searching for something that could be created and distinctly ‘American.’<sup>12</sup> The painters of the Hudson River school certainly found this in nature, making it their built-in heritage. As art historian Barbara Novak laments: “If we had no cultural traditions, we had at least our ancient trees.”<sup>13</sup>



Thomas Cole, *The Oxbow*, 1836



### Asher B. Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, 1849

As the movement began to age and stagnate, the Hudson River School eventually began to fall out of prominence and by the 1860s had a “sagging reputation” among art critics and collectors. It was some time before another distinctly American tradition would replace it, and the market was instead flooded with the latest paintings from Europe. The popularity of European art in the United States reached its pinnacle with the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, which was “intended to celebrate the nation’s accomplishments,” a significant mission for a country still recovering from a civil war, but one that ultimately failed as the Exposition became a show of mostly European works.<sup>14</sup> The Exposition, though appearing to be one of the low points in American painting, acted as a catalyst giving a “movement [that was] already on foot [...] an immense impetus.”<sup>15</sup> Artists that were upset by the unfair advantage began to petition the American government for protections, leading “Congress [...] to create a tariff on the importation of European Art.”<sup>16</sup> Though the tariff was ineffectual due to the great amount of wealth that appeared after the Civil War, it was a hint of a new kind of attitude in painting that would soon take the forefront in the country. With painters such as John Quidor, Eastman Johnson, and George Caleb Bingham,

works were developed that helped create and perpetuate a new American myth: a myth that included everything from good old country times to depictions of scenes by new American writers such as Washington Irving. Their works were new, honest, and 'American,' creating a "new spirit of nationalism that breathed in their canvases [with] no overtones of chauvinism, or [...] blind faith in and support of the government and all American institutions." <sup>17</sup> John Quidor's work with images from books by Washington Irving offered "the young nation -tongue in cheek— ready-made myths about its past."<sup>18</sup> Most of Quidor's paintings included some element of humour or satire, and served as a commentary on the sometimes-ridiculous stories that surfaced in America, such as the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle." Humour itself was soon to become woven into the national conscience in the United States, and the particular brand of humour that became so popular in the country was just another way to "compensate for the lack of a set of traditions that all European countries possessed." <sup>19</sup> If the very land was good enough to be subject matter for American painters, then so too would be the follies and humours of the American people.



**John Quidor, *The Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane*, 1858**

Art was made primarily for the art scene of the United States, which at this time already existed in the area surrounding New York. Many of the paintings however reflected bucolic country life, something that seemed to be have been slightly satirized for the art buying class. Eastman Johnson's work, particularly on "Old Kentucky Home," helped define a stereotype of country life that is identifiable today. Known for his "theatrical staging" Johnson created a painting that is not only a myth of the laid back country life style, but also shows hints of Sambo stereotype.<sup>20</sup> The black family in the portrait is shown sitting around an old house that appears to have fallen into shambles, but



the family appears happy and relaxed. Children dance and sing, a man plays the banjo, and a dog prepares to playfully pounce--a situation that may not have been entirely true to form given the intense work schedules that these farmers (who were likely involved in share-cropping) would have had. Whether or not the scene is true to life is not particularly important, as the importance lies in the fact that purchasers of this art would receive a good feeling of what it was like to be an American, and would certainly buy into the portrayed themes. As an extension of Transcendentalism and Jacksonianism, Americans believed that it was a good thing to be rural, and to live a simple rural life free from the burdens of the hustle and bustle of the modern city, which is something Johnson certainly understood and played into.





## Eastman Johnson, *Old Kentucky Home*, 1876

Another myth that was developed and spread during the nineteenth century was the idea of the West and open frontiers. As transport became increasingly important within the U.S., so did the idea of the rough and tough renegades who patrolled the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and train lines west. George Caleb Bingham who took “Western rivers, [...] boats and boatmen, and the banks of the streams for his subjects” was one of the many painters who believed that “agrarianism [was] the ideal basis of Western life.”<sup>21</sup> In “Fur Traders Descending the Missouri” Bingham created a portrait of the America that had its past in the east, and its future just beginning in the West. For the average city dwelling art buyer, this portrait of two simple but interestingly sullen characters could appear quite whimsical, creating a wonder of what it must have been like to belong to a trade of this kind. Bingham “shared the nineteenth-century concern with narrative meaning,” a concern that had become very important to the painters of the era as it was realized that “pictorial form to the burgeoning American myths of settlement and democracy” was being given.<sup>22</sup> Bingham and the artists that succeeded him began to find America in

the people that inhabited it, trading the subject of unspoiled landscape for unspoiled people.



**George Caleb Bingham, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, 1845**

Though America would eventually take a turn towards introspection and individualism, the mid nineteenth Century was a time of common ground and community. As Matthew Baigell states: “American painters of this generation sought themes within the context of the nation as a whole, and celebrated shared rather than private pleasures.”<sup>23</sup> The subjects

of these “American life” paintings took part in events and practices that would become uniquely American, with the idea to create scenes that all liberty-minded people could understand. Though the ideal of the American subject was not universally accepted within the country, painters like Thomas Eakins still strived to paint subjects that were true to them in an effort to gain “autonomy from European art.”<sup>24</sup> In “The Gross Clinic,” Eakins portrayed the new American intellectualism that would place a defining shape on the country. In this painting, Eakins developed “surgeons as modern heroes and [highlighted] new scientific techniques such as anaesthesia and antiseptic surgery,” a theme that had begun to develop during the Civil War.<sup>25</sup> While the bulk of the country was not comprised of modern surgeons, the idea of the United States excelling in some kind of academic field would certainly create pride and help to contribute to the idea of “Americanness.” Eakins was celebrated for his “matter-of-fact elements of [American] surroundings to artistic use” and for his scientific approach to portraying his images.<sup>26</sup> His most famous painting, “Max Schmitt in a Single Scull” exhibited a sense of realism that had yet to be achieved in American painting up to this point. Schmitt is shown as “a hero of modern life,” the kind that would soon possess Americans as the country

moved into the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> The work of Thomas Eakins and similar painters during this era set the stage for another transition in American art and life in general, and would be a suitable closing to the nineteenth century.



**Thomas Eakins, *The Gross Clinic*, 1875**



**Thomas Eakins, *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*,  
1871**

The concept of “American life” paintings extended to painters such as Winslow Homer, who sought to capture the importance of youth in America. Youth had been such an important part of the national psyche as the Revolution had created generations of citizens who believed in rebirth and trust in the future. For example, “Snap the Whip” portrays a childhood game in a familiar country setting. The children in this painting are everything that the U.S.A. imagined itself to be: youthful, vibrant, and free. While capturing a

silly moment of childhood folly, Homer sought to express the feeling of joy and happiness that was inherent in all citizens of his great nation. As a painter working in the final quarter of a century filled with art that had desperately tried to create a country entirely independent of the mastery of Europe, Homer developed myths and ideas that were completely original and distinctly American.



**Winslow Homer, *Snap the Whip*, 1872**

Despite often being founded on bloodshed, the birth of a new nation can be a time of creation and opportunity. If the nation is dedicated enough to create something that is completely different and new from what is destroyed, then a breeding ground for fresh ideas and insight is created. After the American

Revolution of 1775, the 13 colonies that would become the United States of America had a unique opportunity. Though the first generation of American born artists had a difficult time striking away from the annals of European art history and leader portraiture, the second generation that took prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century made it their goal to create a new American set of myths. Beginning with the Hudson River School, a long tradition of American painters exploring American subjects began, and a unique subject matter was soon uncovered. The Hudson River School developed the countryside as their muse, marvelling in the perfect, Eden-like qualities of American nature. After a brief lull in painting, new inspiration came hard and fast in the mid nineteenth century with artists painting from native literary works and perpetuating myths and stereotypes that would endure long lives in America. As the century began to wind down, painters looked to the American people for their subjects, and artists such as Thomas Eakins used modern medicine and sport to portray a unique American intellectualism and creativeness. Finally, near the turn of the century, painters looked to the youth of the country to lead them into what would certainly be one of the most turbulent yet fantastic centuries of all time, underlining the American trust in youth and rebirth. The United States of America is a

country that was born without myth, lore, or history indeed without a distinct nationality. In an effort to distance the new country from their European counterparts, American artists turned to the untouched landscape and the unique way of life surrounding them to create something new and identifiable. Their project was largely successful, and their work can now be observed as the antecedents to what is now considered an easily recognizable American culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Baigell, *A History of American Painting* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971) 106.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; Randall C. Griffin, *Homer, Eakins, and Anshutz: The Search for American Identity in the Gilded Age* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004) xix.

<sup>3</sup> Baigell, *History of American Painting*, 76.

<sup>4</sup> William James Williams, *A Heritage of American Paintings* (New York: Rutledge press, 1981) 12.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006) 261.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia M. Burnham and Lucretia Hoover Giese, eds. *Redefining American History Painting* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 7, 333.

<sup>7</sup> Baigell, *History of American Painting*, 107.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 41; Baigell, *History of American Painting*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Baigell, *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 114

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Griffin, *Homer, Eakins, and Anshutz*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-4

<sup>17</sup> Baigell, *History of American Painting*, 106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Heritage of American Paintings*, 148.

<sup>21</sup> Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 126-127.;  
Baigell, *History of American Painting*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Baigell, *History of American Painting*, 127.

<sup>24</sup> Griffin, *Homer, Eakins, and Anshutz*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Penelope Davies, Walter Denny, Frima Hofrichter, Joseph Jacobs,  
Ann Roberts, David Simon, *Janson's History of Art* (Upper Saddle River:  
Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 888-889.

<sup>26</sup> Griffin, *Homer, Eakins, and Anshutz*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Davies, et al., *History of Art*, 888