

## LESSON PLAN

# Tricks of Naturalism: Hokusai's Landscape Paintings

**Subject:** Visual Arts

**Grade Level:** High School

**Duration:** One to three 45-minute sessions with extension activities

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## Objective

Students will understand that artists use techniques—"perspective tricks"—to create naturalism in landscape paintings.

## Essential Questions

- What are landscape paintings and what are the techniques artists use to create them?
- How do artists create naturalism in landscape paintings?
- What can landscape paintings tell us about the cultures by which they were created?



**Boy Viewing Mount Fuji**

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

Japan, Edo period, 1839

Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art

F1898.110



**The Edge of the Forest**

Asher Brown Durand (1796–1886)

1868–1871

Oil on canvas

Corcoran Gallery of Art

74.7



**Smithsonian**

*Freer Gallery of Art*

*Arthur M. Sackler Gallery*

## Background Information

### Katsushika Hokusai

The Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) began his training in his teens as an apprentice to a woodblock carver and printer. He also apprenticed in a workshop of an *ukiyo-e* artist before advancing to create designs for woodblock prints and inexpensively produced novels.

Although we know him as Hokusai, the artist called himself many names throughout his life as he developed his artistic styles. He left the printmaking workshop and began painting on his own at age thirty-five, using the pseudonym Sōri. In his early paintings, the artist used ink and light pigments on paper—materials that were inexpensive and suited his circumstances before he achieved fame.

Hokusai's fame and abilities were renowned by the time he reached his sixties. The artist was in his seventies when he created the designs for the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*) in the early 1830s. A single image from this series, *The Great Wave Off the Coast of Kanagawa*, has become a globally recognized icon. Mount Fuji, which holds symbolism for Japan and the Japanese people, was a lifelong obsession of the artist, who explored the sacred mountain. In another homage to Japan's sacred mountain, the set of books titled *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku hyakkei*), published in 1834, Hokusai ended the postscript of the first volume with this statement:

*From the age of 6, I had the habit of sketching the shapes of things, and from the age of 50, I painted a number of works. But before the age of 70, my paintings fail to convey reality. As I turned 73, I partially succeeded to capture the physique of all living things and the vitality of plants. For that reason, from age 86, I made great progress while at age 90 I did so even more. It is my greatest wish to reach 100, when my work would truly become marvelous. If I live to be 110, every dot and every line would be as if coming to life.*

—Katsushika Hokusai in his postscript from *Fugaku hyakkei*, published in 1834 at age 75 (Translated by Frank Feltens)

### Boy Viewing Mount Fuji

This scroll—one of the first Hokusai paintings that Charles Lang Freer (founder of the Freer Gallery of Art) acquired—is among the most iconic images of the artist's work in the Freer Gallery of Art collection. Hokusai expertly captures the atmosphere of the scene, with the sounds of the boy's flute mingling with the rushing water below him and the wind rustling through the tree's leaves.

This painting frames the mountain in the bend of a willow that extends over a rushing stream. A young boy nestles in the tree, playing a flute while gazing at the mountain. This tranquil and engaging view of Mount Fuji was one of hundreds produced by Hokusai during his lifetime. Here, at the age of nearly eighty, the artist gives visual form to his quest for long life by portraying a young boy in the thrall of the immortal mountain.

A prolific and technically proficient painter, Hokusai had a special sympathy for common people, whom he often depicted in his paintings, prints, and illustrations for printed books. Here he employs thin washes of color almost without outline to bring forth the familiar form of the great volcanic mountain.

## The Edge of the Forest

In 1894, John Durand wrote that his father's painting *The Edge of the Forest* was one that "sum[med] up the labor of his life." Rendered in Asher Brown Durand's signature vertical format, the painting depicts a peaceful, wooded landscape with a stream in the foreground. From the stream's bank, the space recedes quickly through the edge of a carefully realized forest in the middle ground to a distant lake bordered by mountains shrouded in delicate, pink-tinted clouds. In its marvelously detailed foreground, soft light, and meditative mood, the painting can be said to represent the culmination of Durand's career. Durand started the painting at the age of seventy-two, when he began to close his Manhattan studio of twenty-five years and moved back to his boyhood home in New Jersey; he put the finishing touches on the painting three years later in his Maplewood studio.

Through skillful use of atmospheric perspective (the gradual diminishment of color and contour as forms recede within the painting's space), the softening effect in *The Edge of the Forest* gives a melting quality to the light, which seems to be coming not through a break in the trees but from the trees themselves. At first glance, there is no sign of human habitation, yet a close inspection of the near bank of the lake reveals three very tiny, cursorily detailed structures with thatched roofs.

The retrospective and restful quality of the painting is an essential component of what Durand thought a landscape painting should be. One visitor to the Corcoran Gallery described how, after an afternoon in the galleries, the ladies in his party liked to "make a farewell visit [to the painting] and drink in its tender, quiet beauty, until they are thoroughly rested in body and mind" (Cash, *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, 132–33).

## Vocabulary

**aerial perspective:** an effect of using variations in color, value, and detail to mimic the way distant objects look lighter in color and less distinct than closer objects do.

**composition:** the art of organizing the elements of an artwork into a harmoniously unified whole.

**high and low placement:** a technique used by artists to create the illusion of depth. Objects that are placed lower in the picture seem closer than objects that are placed higher.

**intensity:** the degree of purity, saturation, or strength of a color. High-intensity colors are bright; low-intensity colors are dull.

**landscape:** a major, relatively recent theme in art; the appreciation of nature for its own sake and choosing it as a specific subject for art. Until the seventeenth century, landscapes were confined to the backgrounds of portraits or paintings dealing principally with religious, mythological, or historical subjects.

**landscape elements:** the physical features included in a landscape painting, including trees, mountains, ponds, buildings, etc.

**leading diagonal:** a technique employed in landscape paintings to create an illusion of depth by using line, such as a winding path or stream.

**negative space:** the space around the objects or figures of a composition.

**overlapping:** a technique in which the artist creates the illusion of depth by placing one object in front of another.

**perspective:** the representation of three-dimensional objects on a flat surface to produce the same impression of distance and relative size as that received by the human eye.

**scale:** the size of an object in relation to the size of other objects around it or to its environment.

**ukiyo-e:** "pictures of the floating world." A tradition of Japanese woodblock printing dating from about 1600 in which images of kabuki theater, courtesans, daily life, and landscapes were popular.

**winding path:** a technique employed in landscape paintings to create an illusion of distance by using a meandering line.

## Materials

- **Worksheet: Matching Activity**—one set printed in color for each group of students.
- Scissors—one or two pairs per group of students.
- **Worksheet: Observation Activity**—one set per student.

## Procedure

1. Use the **Background Information** and the artworks in the **Resources** section to present an overview of Hokusai's oeuvre. State that during this activity, students will focus on Hokusai's landscape paintings. Share the Hokusai quote in the **Background Information**. Ask students, "Based on this quote, what impression do you have of Hokusai?"
2. Explain that landscape artists use certain tricks—"perspective techniques"—to make viewers feel they are seeing distance. Introduce the landscape vocabulary: scale, intensity, overlapping, aerial perspective, high and low placement, leading diagonal, and winding path.
3. Place students in small groups. Hand out the **Worksheet: Matching Activity** and a pair of scissors. Students will cut out the vocabulary cards. In small groups, students will identify perspective tricks in the sample landscape artworks provided in the **Resources** section. Students should attempt to match one vocabulary word per image.
4. Hand out the **Worksheet: Observation Activity**. Give students six minutes to silently examine Hokusai's *Boy Viewing Mount Fuji* before sharing any background information. Students should write down notes, phrases, or bullet points about this artwork that *describe, analyze, interpret, and inquire* based on the **Discussion Questions**.
5. Display *The Edge of the Forest* by Asher Brown Durand. Students will repeat the activity in Step 4 while looking at this artwork.
6. Ask the **Discussion Questions** and allow students to use their notes to support their answers.
7. Share background information about Hokusai's *Boy Viewing Mount Fuji*. Invite student comments and reactions. Ask, "Does this information align with what you saw when viewing the artwork? Does the background information supplied change your reaction to the painting?"
8. Share background information for Durand's *The Edge of the Forest*. Invite student comments and reactions. Ask, "Does this information align with what you saw when viewing the artwork? Does the background information supplied change your reaction to the painting?"
9. Select an extension activity to continue looking at Hokusai's artwork.

## Discussion Questions

### Describe

- What landscape elements do you notice in each of the paintings?
- What landscape elements are included in both paintings?
- What landscape elements are only apparent in Hokusai's *Boy Viewing Mount Fuji*?

### Analyze

- What perspective techniques do you see in each painting?
- How does Hokusai compose *Boy Viewing Mount Fuji*? What decisions about placement do you notice?
- How do each of these artists use negative space in their paintings?

## Interpret

- What mood does each of these artworks establish? Are the moods the same or different?
- Do either of these artworks include narrative?
- What do these landscapes tell us about the environments they depict?

## Inquire

- Why do you think the artists created these artworks? Are their reasons the same or different?
- Do these artworks tell us anything about the cultures they come from?
- Which artwork would you like to know more about? Why?

# Extensions

## Visual Arts

- Compare and contrast Hokusai's *Country Scenes and Mount Fuji* with *View of the Delaware near Philadelphia* by Thomas Birch. What clues about social class are evident in these paintings?
- Create a landscape painting using one or more of the landscape techniques discussed.

## English Language Arts

- Write a story or poem about one of the two artworks. For example, take a first-person perspective of the boy in *Boy Viewing Mount Fuji* or of a tree in *The Edge of the Forest*.

# Resources

Cash, Sarah, ed. *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*. Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2012.  
<https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/research/publications/pdfs/corcoran-american-art.pdf>.

Christie's. "10 Things to Know about Hokusai." October 2019.  
<https://www.christies.com/features/10-things-to-know-about-Hokusai-9742-3.aspx>.

*Hokusai: Mad about Painting* exhibition website: <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/hokusai-mad-about-painting/>.



## Supplemental Artworks



### The Great Wave Off the Coast of Kanagawa

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

ca. 1830–32

Woodblock print

Metropolitan Museum of Art

JP1847





**Self Portrait**

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

ca. 1840–49

Ink and blood on paper

Musée Guimet

EO 1456



## Suggested Artworks for Extension Activities



### Country Scenes and Mount Fuji

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

Japan, Edo period, ca. 1830–1832

Pair of six-panel screens; ink, color, and gold on paper

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art

F1902.48–49





**View of the Delaware near Philadelphia**

Thomas Birch (1779–1851)

1831

Oil on canvas

Corcoran Collection

National Gallery of Art

2015.19.80

# Landscape Vocabulary Matching Activity Answers

Example of scale:



## The Temple of Diana

Giovanni Panini (1691–1765)

Italy, ca. 1740

Oil on canvas

Museum of New Zealand

1919-0001-1



Example of aerial perspective:



**Landscape with Figures, Ruins, and Bridge**

Jan van Huysum (1682–1749)

ca. 1709–1730

Oil on wood

Musée du Louvre

inv. 1383



Example of color intensity:



**The Trees**

André Derain (1880–1954)

ca. 1906

Oil on canvas

Albright-Knox Art Gallery

K1971:26

Example of leading diagonal:



### Classic Landscape

Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)

1931

Oil on canvas

Collection [of] Mrs. Edsel B. Ford, Dearborn, Michigan

The Carnegie Arts of the United States Collection



Example of winding path:



**Mont Sainte-Victoire with Viaduct**

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906)

ca. 1885–1887

Metropolitan Museum of Art

29.100.64



Example of overlapping:



### Winter Landscape

Pieter Brueghel II (1564/1565–1637/1638)

ca. 1601

Oil on canvas

Hermitage Museum

ART5785



Example of high and low placement:



**The Terrace**

Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947)

1918

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection

0177