

LESSON FIVE: Landscape



IMAGE FOURTEEN: Georges-Pierre Seurat. French, 1859–1891. *Port-en-Bessin, Entrance to the Harbor*. 1888. Oil on canvas, 21 ³/₈ x 25 ⁵/₈" (54.9 x 65.1 cm). Lillie P. Bliss Collection



IMAGE FIFTEEN: Vincent van Gogh. Dutch, 1853–1890. *The Starry Night*. 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36 ¹/₄" (73.7 x 92.1 cm). Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest



IMAGE SIXTEEN: Edvard Munch. Norwegian, 1863–1944. *Melancholy III*. 1902. Woodcut with gouache additions, composition: 14 ¹/₄ x 18 ¹/₂" (37.5 x 47 cm); sheet: 20 ¹/₂ x 25 ⁵/₁₆" (52 x 65.8 cm). Publisher: the artist. Printer: M. W. Lassally, Berlin. Edition: approximately 100 in several color and compositional variations. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. J. Hall Collection. © 2005 The Munch Museum/The Munch-Ellingen Group/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

Landscape was a popular subject for many artists throughout the nineteenth century. While interested in painting modern city life, a number of artists in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century were averse to the intense pace of modern society. For artists who wished to paint landscapes, the country—made more easily accessible by the new railroads—offered a retreat from growing industrialization.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will become familiar with the term “landscape,” and will revisit the terms “foreground,” “middle ground” and “background.”
- Students will consider how an artist’s painting technique impacts a viewer’s interpretation of a painting.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Begin by showing your students *Port-en-Bessin, Entrance to the Harbor*. Ask them to take a moment to look at the image carefully. Ask the students to describe what is in the foreground, middle ground, and background.
- Inform your students that this is a landscape. Ask them to define “landscape,” or help them to define it based on what they see in this image. A landscape is an image that has natural scenery as its primary focus.
- Ask your students to write down five to ten words that describe this painting. (Emphasize to older students the use of adjectives as opposed to nouns.)
- Ask your students to choose their favorite words and share them with the class. Direct them to use visual evidence from the work to explain their word choices. Make a list of the words on the chalkboard or on chart paper.

Georges-Pierre Seurat, like Impressionist painters before him, was very interested in painting light, and studied optical theory to develop his painting technique, known as “pointillism,” or Neo-Impressionism (see Lesson Three, p. 14). Seurat created this image by carefully placing small dots of color side by side. When viewed up close, one is aware of the many small dots of varied color. When viewed from a distance, the dots fuse together to create the image. Neo-Impressionist artists believed that this painstaking method of painting was the most scientific and precise way to record color and light.

- Ask your students to look carefully at *The Starry Night*. How is it similar to *Port-en-Bessin, Entrance to the Harbor*? How is it different?
- Ask your students why—based on the definition they came up with earlier—this painting is considered a landscape.
- Ask them to write down five to ten words that describe this painting. (Emphasize to older students the use of adjectives as opposed to nouns.)
- Ask the students to choose their favorite words and share them with the class. Ask them to use visual evidence from the work to explain their selection.

- **Make a list of the favorite words on the chalkboard or on chart paper and compare this list with the list of words that the class came up with for *Port-en-Bessin, Entrance to the Harbor*. How many words do the two lists have in common? How many are different?**

“This morning I saw the country from my window a long time before sunrise, with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big,” wrote van Gogh to his brother, Theo, describing the inspiration for *The Starry Night*.³ But the painting is more about imagination than realism. While it is true that this landscape is of a real night sky van Gogh observed while living in the South of France, it also contains fictional elements, such the church spire, which did not exist in the small village that he saw from his window but which is reminiscent of a church in his native Holland. Van Gogh spoke passionately about painting a scene as he saw it, not as it was expected to be rendered: “[...] those mountains, were they blue? [...] They were blue, weren’t they? Good—make them blue and that’s all!”⁴

- **Ask your students to take a moment to look at *Melancholy III*. Ask them to compare and contrast this image to *The Starry Night*. How are they similar? How are they different?**

Edvard Munch believed that working in an expressive mode and capturing emotion was more important than making realistic images of the world. He wrote, “Nature is not something that can be seen by the eye alone—it lies also within the soul, in pictures seen by the inner eye.”⁵ This approach to creating images is called Symbolism. The Symbolists included artists and writers who sought to communicate their subjective reaction to the world around them rather than to create realistic depictions of it.

Melancholy III is a **woodcut**. A woodcut is a print that is made by carving an image onto a woodblock. The artist chisels away at the block leaving a raised image. When ink is rolled onto the woodblock, it lands on the raised image. Paper is placed on the block, which is then sent through a printing press to create the image. (For more information and to see a demonstration of this process, see: <http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2001/whatisaprint>.)

ACTIVITIES/PROJECTS

Show your students the three images again. Give them a moment to review them closely. Ask them to write “postcards” from each of the three landscape scenes. They should include both a description of the places shown in the images and a description of the mood that comes across in each image. Ask them to imagine what it would be like to spend a day there as they write.

Have your students create a landscape or a **cityscape**. First ask them to choose a location and take several photographs of it. Then they can begin by creating sketches before moving on to painting the scene.

3. *MoMA Highlights: 350 Works from The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 35.

4. John Rewald, in *Visions of Modern Art*, John Elderfield, ed. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 29.

5. Wendy Weitman, in “Landscape as Retreat,” *ModernStarts: People, Places, Things*, John Elderfield et al, eds. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 212.