

## Country Life

Hello, again, Docents! Here's to another year! (I think we are at 31 years now and with last year off, it is an even 30!)

When we look at maps of North America, we will see that even though the USA has many major cities, it still has a whole lot of country! We can use the vocabulary of social studies with this unit such as rural, city, suburban and the different lifestyles accompanied by each. Also, we can make relative comparisons. Do the children think they live a country life? Does a child who lives on a large wheat or dairy farm in the mid-west think Halifax is the country? Does the child growing up in New York City think Halifax is the country? In addition to finding out how the students define these lifestyles and environments, we can also ask, when viewing each picture, if that lifestyle still exists. Are there traders anymore? Do people still use river canoes? Are barns still used? Do people still store their sled (horse sled, not toy sled) up in the loft for the summer? We can also talk about advantages and disadvantages of each lifestyle and ask the children if they want to live somewhere else someday. In the end, ask the classes what stands out as common to all three paintings of life in the country. There are some!

### #1 Fur Traders Descending the Missouri by George Caleb Bingham, 1845

The description of Bingham's life is a very interesting one. His apprenticeship as a cabinet maker led to sign painting which led to attempts at portraits which, combined with his interest in watching life on the Missouri River, led to paintings of everyday life in that time and place. His paintings are very important, historically. Not many other people thought these subjects were interesting enough to paint. In the end, Bingham's style was ruined, some believe, by his attempts to "improve his art" with European training.

With this first painting, I think you will have to listen to the students' first response before you can begin questions of your own. I think they will want to talk about the black fox.

#### **Suggested questions:**

\* What did you notice first? Why do you think you noticed that first? What did the artist do to make it stand out? (If it is the fox (cat, they will probably say) talk about the silhouette and dark against light and the reflections in the water.)

\* Would you like a closer look to see if this is a cat? Have them look very carefully at the "cat's" face. In the blackness you can see a face that is too long for a cat.

\* Why do they have a fox with them and why is it tied? Is it a pet? Does it have some job to do for them? (I am wondering if it helps them as fur traders.)

\* If it is a wild fox, would it be sitting so quietly on a leash?

\* Is there such a thing as a black fox? I thought there was only grey and red and arctic.

\* What are these people doing? Is there still business in fur trading, nowadays? Fur farming?

\* What were the furs used for then?



\* Can you tell where these people are from? (Look at the clothing for clues. I think you can see a South Western (Indian, Mexican and Spanish) influence in the boy's pants and shirt. I read that the Native American Indians of the Southeast such as the Seminole and the Woodland East made sashes such as this. The man's hat and shirt and face show a French influence.)

- Let's look at a map and see why there are people from Spain and France there. You can talk about the importance of rivers for travel and commerce and the importance of the large rivers in the development of this country and in trade with other countries. You can also ask them at that time if they have learned about this in social studies. Did they learn about Lewis and Clark? Did they learn about the French and Indian Wars? Did they know that in 1673 the French Canadian explorer Louis Jolliet was the first known European to discover the Missouri River while travelling down the Mississippi?

- (More importantly than the facts of who and when, is that the children, while looking at a map, and seeing the countries and waterways, can figure out what areas would provide means of travel via waterways and, thus, become important areas that people might even fight over.)

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- \*\*George Caleb Bingham taught himself a lot about painting. One way he learned was to observe the paintings of others wherever he went. One of the techniques he saw in compositions was to make a triangle, or a pyramid, in the painting. This made his paintings look balanced and calm. Can you find a triangle? How about part of a triangle? (The canoe could be the bottom, the fox ears and man's back begin the side lines slanting upward and the trees and branches in the background continue the eye movement upward, suggesting a point above the trees.)

\* What is the mood of this painting?

\* What sounds come to your mind when you look at this painting?

\* How long do you think these people travel before they see other people? A long time?

\* Do they have much country space around them? Do we have this much space around us in Halifax, in the year 2021? Have they canoed or kayaked down the Winnetuxet River? Jones River? Burrage Pond?

\* What did the artist do to keep our eyes on the people and prevent our glance from floating away in all that space? Color and composition: The colors of red and blue are only on the people. Also, the people and their trading activities of canoe, bundles and fox are all in the triangle composition.)

\* I love to hear the children's stories of people's thoughts and feelings. Give them the opportunity to talk about and to be aware of body language and facial expressions. (They can comment on these and you can watch theirs.)

\* What is the man thinking? Why do you think that? (Mouth and eyebrows point down.)

\* What is the man doing? Is canoeing hard work? Look at his hands.

\* What is the boy thinking? Why do you think that? (Mouth corners point up and the forehead is smooth.)

\* What is the boy doing? What is he feeling?

\* Would you like to be a fur trader? How about some other kind of trader who travels by canoe?

\* Do you ever trade?

\*\* Other possibilities:

Reflections in water, the colors of the sky, the tiny details such as the birds in the sky, the man's pipe, handmade clothes and woven belt and bag, the duck, the rifle.

\*\***Tip:** turn the print upside down for a better view of reflections.

Speaking of clothes, we had an interesting comment from a little boy at Dennett about clothing. When asked how the clothes on the children playing in *Snap The Whip* by Winslow Homer, were different from the clothes worn nowadays, the boy looked carefully, lit up and said, "Their clothes are plain! They don't have any pictures or words on them!" Everyone looked around and agreed that the children now, were, in fact, walking advertisements.

## George Caleb Bingham , 1811 to 1879

George Caleb Bingham was born in the Piedmont County of Virginia, where he remained until 1819, when a turn in fortune forced his family to move to Franklin, Missouri. In 1823 his father died and the Bingham family moved to a farm, outside the city, where the sons labored under the stern eye of Mrs. Bingham. Whenever he could, Caleb retreated to a bluff near the farm where he studied the fascinating life on the Missouri River. At the age of 16 he was apprenticed to a cabinet maker in Columbia, Missouri, an occupation that led to sign painting. By the time he was 22, Bingham was traveling up and down the river, painting portraits, in a vigorously drawn and linear style, with strong color applied in large areas, a manner that he probably acquired from the ancestral portraits he'd seen in settlers' homes. His art was appreciated locally as an indication of the progress towards refinement on the Mississippi, but he received less acclaim when he opened the studio in St. Louis in 1835. Bingham realized that he must move from Missouri in order to become a better artist, and after some study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he moved to Washington in 1840, began to paint portraits. Sitters were few, so Bingham, always interested in politics, returned to Missouri for the 1844 presidential election campaign of Henry Clay versus James Polk. Bingham favored Clay, but the banners he painted for him did not prevent his losing the election. The artist then began the series of genre pictures of river life that led to his being regarded as the historian of Jacksonian democracy. In his river paintings, we see only male figures. They are never at work, but dance, make music, play cards, fish, or hold conversations. Never disturbed by the presence of women, they relax against generalized river backgrounds that recede mistily and glow smokily in the distance. His paintings generally present a composition based on the pyramid, its base in the lower horizontal. His foreground figures stand quite free and are sharply delineated. He laid out his compositions carefully and drew his figures from life, realistically and often humorously, using friends from models and changing faces, to suit his needs. In crowded political canvases, his figures are grouped in horizontal planes and alternating bands of light and shade. His finest work, done between 1845 and 1855, when he painted the people and country he loved, is fresh and vigorous, truthful, and enthusiastic. He later went abroad to Düsseldorf, where he exchanged his former methods of composition and lighting, for a more sophisticated and European style that weakened his natural artistic strength.

### Fur Traders Descending the Missouri (circa 1845)

The foreground flatboat, inhabited by two traders and a fox, stand out in sharp silhouette against a background of hazy landscape detail. This arbitrary compositional arrangement emphasizes the lack of detail in the loneliness of the Midwestern landscape. The problem of endless distance fading away into the horizon is solved by the sharp horizontal broken by the human figures and the black fox chained to the bow of the boat. Bingham's interest in characterization is well illustrated in the contrasting faces of his two traders, one rosy and smiling, the other unaccountably unhappy. This painting has an unforgettable quality of peaceful space and hushed quiet.



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### #2 McVey's Barn by Andrew Wyeth , (circa 1950's)

The conversations you've had in past years will guide you in beginning the talk about this painting. If they enjoyed talking about the implements of a lifestyle they will enjoy talking about the sleigh and the basket and the wooden chest, all made by hand or even barn building. The children who were perceptive of colors and compositions will remember that they were complimented for their observations and will want to shine again with talk of the subtle colors and variety of angles in this painting.

Unless otherwise noted, art description and artist bio is from Shorewood Fine Art Reproductions Reference Guide. The remainder of this guidance packet was written by Cathleen Drinan. 3 of 8

I recommend showing this painting in the middle because I think that the children will enjoy discussing American Gothic last. However, you know your class best and you can decide the order. Throughout the unit, remember to mention that these are **all American artists**. We have lots to be proud of in the field of art.

Andrew Wyeth gives us another opportunity to mention the importance of families. His father was a well-known illustrator and taught Andrew when he was young and at home frequently with illnesses.

The description of the painting from the catalogue mentions that it is the artist's use of perspective that gives the painting its ambiguity and leaves us uncertain of our viewpoint when looking at the scene. For me, it is the color green in the foreground that makes me unclear about where we are. Is that a pile of hay that is sprouting? (Around here we see this at construction sites where bales of hay and plastic strips are held in place with wooden stakes, forming a barrier preventing the wetlands from being affected by run-offs and soil changes. After a while, seeds sprout on top of the hay.)

This area of green could also be an old hillside onto which the barn is built. The hill would be a combination of the original slope, dirt, grass, and a little hay that blows into and settles in there. There is enough sunlight from the small windows to allow the grass to grow. On the left of the scene would be a crawl space that could be used for storage. To the right of the wooden wall would be the interior of the barn that would have a floor at a much lower level. This could explain why the sleigh is not very far away in height from the viewer of the painting but still looks like it is high up on the rafters.

In a way there is very little going on here. The colors are limited at first glance, but they are numerous in natural variations. There are few objects, and they are perhaps equal in meaning and importance in the painting. The things that are not there are very important. We can't see the window but the sunlight from that window is immensely important to the composition. We also don't see any people. We see the handiwork of people and the reminders of the work that country people do but the absence of people helps to make the painting a very quiet one. We are intruders peeking into someone's barn, someone's life.

The composition is full of geometrical shapes. There are lots of overlapping triangles crisscrossing the canvas. You could hold up a protractor to determine the angles. The students who like doing that could create a geometrical, abstract version of McVey's Barn.

**Use the above thoughts to guide you in getting started with this painting.**

**Suggestions:**

- \*What is going on in this painting? Name what you see.
- \* What is that used for?
- \* Who made that (basket, sleigh, chest barn, etc.)? How was it made? Was that thing important to country life?
  
- \* What did you notice first? (The sunlight?) Why?
- \* How did the artist make us see that first?
- \* If it is a sunny day outside, why is this place so dark? Have you ever been in a place like this?
- \* Do you have a barn and is it dark? Big? Have a loft? (Or how about a cellar? Does every house have a cellar?)
- \* Does it look like this barn has electricity?
- \* Is this a barn that is still being used? Why do you think this?
  
- Let's go back to the sunlight area again. See the areas of bright sunshine on the wooden chest and on the grass/hay? How did the artist make the sunlight look like it was shining on those different textures?
- (What is a texture?) (Talk about the hard edges, soft edges, the surfaces of things and how they feel.)

Now look very carefully and see where else there is sunlight. Is there only one rectangle of sunlight coming in, surrounded by darkness? Where else is there light and where is it coming from? Describe with words where the light is.

It sounds like you are describing a lot of straight lines to me that cross over in this painting. Let's make a drawing on the board of the design you have been discovering. Do you like the way this looks? Does it look like the painting? (If you feel really uncomfortable about any kind of "drawing", you can ask for a volunteer from the class. But I recommend that you allow the students to know that you are uncertain, just as they are at times, and have fun attempting something you have not done before.)

\* In the corners of the areas where the lines cross over, it makes a shape. What do you call this shape? (Triangle) In the corner of a triangle, we can measure something. Do you know what the corner is called and how we can measure it? (An angle and it is measured in degrees)

\* When you first saw this painting did you think it was full of triangles?

\* (Again, let the young ones find a letter where you might see a shape. L, V, W, etc)

\* The next time you look at a painting, look for these designs.

\* In fact, let's look for some patterns and designs in the next painting!

**Follow up reading:** We are never too old or too young for the **Laura Ingles Wilder** books such as *Little House on the Prairie*. For those interested in Gothic culture, we all have heard the rave reviews of the Harry Potter books. What is your favorite country book? (Mine is one of survival, dependent on creativity and problem solving: *The Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen.)

**Math/Art activity:** Take your protractors and have fun measuring! Trace some of the shapes onto paper and make designs with them. Or, using the shapes of paper again, place them down on wood and place nails or tacks at the corners of the shapes. Then connect the dots with string, making a design with the overlapping shapes.

### **McVey's Barn by Andrew Wyeth , circa 1950**

This interior of a farmer's barn is a fine example of Wyeth's realist technique. The various textures of wood and grass, the hanging basket and the sleigh stored near the roof are rendered with meticulous detail. The painting is a study of light and shadow, accented by the sunlight from a high window streaming down onto a wooden chest and a section of the pile of hay into which it is set. The painting economically and lovingly captures the homely simplicity of rural life that so appealed to the artist. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this painting is Wyeth's extraordinary skill in the use of perspective. Walls, ceilings and other architectural elements are typically cropped so that they form the frame of the composition. The point of view of the observer is obscured and made ambiguous: are we looking upward toward the ceiling, or standing on a mound looking down on the box and a pile of hay? We seem to be doing both at once. This is a technique which is frequently used in Wyeth paintings, which adds to the sense of mystery and timelessness that pervades his work.

### **Wyeth, Andrew (1917- 2009)**

Andrew Wyeth, born in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, is the son of the talented illustrator N. C. Wyeth. Fragile as a child, young Wyeth received his art training from his father, who taught him the precision of line and accuracy of drawing that make his work technically excellent. His color is always subdued—often subtly monochromatic. His earliest work, done in 1929 when he was twelve, is pen and ink, precise and delicate in line, elegant in style in the best tradition of illustration. Wyeth then turned to the use of pencil and colored

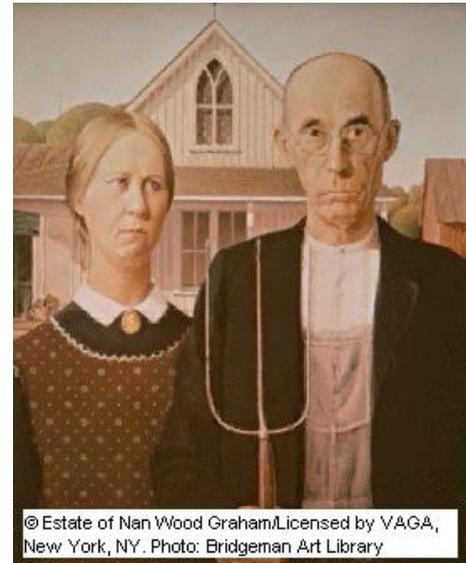
washes, then to watercolor drawings. At the age of sixteen, influenced by Winslow Homer, he was creating bold impressions of light, tone, and movement. Wyeth then disciplined his natural talent in order to present “the truth of the object.” To achieve his aim, he experimented with various media, finally settling on “dry brush” watercolor and egg tempera painting, learning the latter technique from his brother-in-law Peter Hurd. These media require both time and patience, and Wyeth did not choose them lightly. A finished painting is often the result of many months of work. Final selection of a treatment is frequently accomplished only after many pen-and-ink drawings have been done of his subjects. Wyeth chooses his landscape subjects from two areas, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Cushing, Maine, the places he loved best and in which he personally is most deeply involved. He paints also the people he knows well. He does not, however, paint as if he were using a camera, but brings to his work the artist’s extreme sensitivity, the painter’s eye, and the poet’s ability to transcend the moment, to synthesize an entire series of impressions into a crystallization of associated ideas that goes far beyond simple realism.

Here’s a link to a slideshow about Wyeth:

[https://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/01/16/arts/0117-WYETH\\_index.html](https://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/01/16/arts/0117-WYETH_index.html)

### #3 American Gothic by Grant Wood, 1930

**Wood, Grant** (1892-1942), American painter, born in Anamosa, Iowa, and trained at the Art Institute of Chicago and at the Académie Julian in Paris. He taught art in the public schools of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, from 1919 to 1924, and he served as artist in residence at the University of Iowa from 1935 to 1942. Wood is best known for his later paintings, which depict the scenes and people of his native Iowa. A leader in the regionalist school of 20th-century American art (see **American Art and Architecture: Regionalism**), he was strongly influenced by the subject matter and technique of various German and Flemish painters of the **Renaissance** (14th century to 17th century). In translating their stylized formality to the American scene, however, he added his own distinctive touches of irony and realism. This satirical treatment can be observed in Wood's most famous work, the double portrait *American Gothic* (1930, Art Institute of Chicago), and in *Daughters of the Revolution* (1932, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio.)<sup>1</sup>



Another American Scene painter, or Regionalist, Thomas Benton, said, “A windmill, a junk heap, and a Rotarian have more meaning to me than Notre Dame or the Parthenon.” These artists were very proud of the American way of life, of the courage and determination that it took to settle this vast, wild country. With their paintings, they added to the cowboy myth of America, a chauvinistic myth that predominantly portrayed men as the conquerors of this new land. In this painting it is the implement of farming, the pitchfork, that the man firmly holds like a king's staff.

#### **Suggestions:**

\* In the background you can see the curved window of the house. That shape window is known as Gothic, a style from the Middle Ages in Europe (5<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> C.). It was originally a derogatory term referring to the barbarian Goths. Currently, the term refers to a style of fashion and a way of life that includes frequent use of the color black and a belief in or fascination in anything occult.

\* Where has the artist repeated the image of the Gothic window? (If you squint your eyes and look at the window, you can simplify it to, what? An elongated shape with symmetrical sides and a line down the middle. Where else do you see that?)

\* Some places to look: the pitchfork, the other windows, the front of the man's overalls, the front of the man's shirt, the long faces, the triangular or pyramidal shaped arrangement of the two people on each side of the peaked roof of the house.

\* Hey! A pyramid! Where else did we see a pyramid? Why do artists draw in these designs and patterns? (It helps the painting to look balanced, calm, finished.)

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<sup>1</sup>"Wood, Grant," *Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

\* If you get around to talking about shapes with the children, the ones in kindergarten and first grade have a blast with letter recognition. They see and find letters hidden in the picture. They truly are amazed at their own new ability to do this and are happy to demonstrate the ability.

\* What is the man thinking?

\* What is the man looking at?

\* What is the man feeling? Why do you think this?

\* What is the woman looking at? Why?

\* What is the woman thinking? Feeling? Why? How do you know? (Look very carefully at their faces. Give the children a close-up look. Talk about the details of their eyebrows, their chins, their mouths and how they pose.)

\* Is the woman looking at the artist or picture taker?

\* Did they get dressed up for the picture?

\* Are they hard working people?

\* What do they do each day?

\* Are they happy?

A Cathy story: Every time I see this picture, I think of a quick magic marker drawing I made on poster board for the day my parents were moving from the family place in Weymouth to their new retirement place in Maine. My father had become a bored, neurotic cleaner, constantly picking up and dusting. So, I placed a bottle of Windex in his left hand. (His weapon against the world.) His right arm, however, was lovingly wrapped around my mother, who looked little by comparison. Her hands were in front of her, and she held a bowl of cookies (to feed the new world). My parents put this humorous picture in a frame and hung it up in their condo. After they passed away, I inherited it and hung it up in my kitchen. One day a little boy came into my house, looked at this picture and announced, "I've seen that picture before!" I tried to tell him that I didn't think so. He insisted that he had and then looked a little puzzled, telling me that he thought the man was supposed to hold a pitchfork. That is when I realized what picture he had in mind, and I laughed because I had never made the comparison. It is a case of a highly publicized image being part of the consciousness of even children and also a case of the real-life situation (a man and wife posing stoically) forming an image that becomes symbolic.

Your visit to the classroom gives the children the opportunity to discuss a famous image and have a meaningful discussion about it. The painting will never be the same again. It will have more meaning for them. They also will know when the image has been incorrectly reproduced. I once saw a copy of the painting that appeared in AAA's magazine. The picture was backward and the image distorted from stretching in a computer program. The faces in the original are quite long enough. It is an instance of how easily we can be fooled by the technology that makes reproduction and distortions so easy. Just think! If we don't know what the originals look like and people distort and incorrectly reproduce them, we could, in time, think the distortions are the real thing!

\*\*\* Vote for their favorite (not the best) for any reason at all

What is their favorite painting about country life?

If they could visit and live in one painting for a day, which would they choose?