



# BOULEVARD

## OVERVIEW

### Introduction to the American Art Galleries (at The M. H. de Young Museum)

Located in Northern California, within Golden Gate Park, the M. H. de Young Museum, a part of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, comprises a wide selection of objects from different time periods and areas of the world. The museum holds a premiere collection of American art from the Colonial Period to the present, much of which is presented on the 2nd floor of the museum in adjacent galleries.

Gallery 25 features a range of 19th-century still lifes that chart an evolution of American commerce, taste, and values. Several offer excellent examples of “trompe l’oeil” (or “fooling of the eye”) illusionism. The gallery also includes one contemporary painting made in 1994. These paintings are informed by several 19th-century historical currents in America from an intensifying sense of nationalism, and the advent of the railroad, to the charge of “Manifest Destiny,” and the impact of both the Civil War and steady urbanization and industrialization.

### Inspire Your Students Across Curriculum

The American Galleries of the de Young Museum support learning and teaching at any grade level, and offer huge opportunities to inspire people across subject areas.

### How to Use This Resource

This resource is designed for use by teachers, educators, or students to support and enrich the Boulevard viewing experience. Our Boulevard curriculum explores these paintings through a range of different themes inspired by the work, offering ideas for educational projects and activities.

This gallery provides particularly rich inspiration for learning in history, geography, literacy, technology, and art.

### Looking at the Work

The paintings in the American Galleries are rich in detail. When looking at the works within the Boulevard experience, you may find these suggestions helpful in engaging students to look closely, and for generating general discussion.

Ask students to respond to one or more artworks. Here are some examples of open-ended questions that can be helpful for starting a discussion with students.

- What is your first reaction to this artwork?
- What do you see?
- How does it make you feel?
- What interests or appeals to you?
- How do you think it was made?
- What does this object remind you of?
- What words would you use to describe the world depicted in the work of art?
- If you could step into this painting, what would it feel like?
- Would you like to have this artwork in your house? Why?

### Art/History in a Nutshell

The entire 19th century was a time of great political, social, and economic change in the United States: including massive westward expansion, the displacement of Native American populations, the Civil War, the abolition of slavery, urbanization, and industrialization.

During this time, landscape painting became as significant a genre as history painting was and continued to be in Europe. Beginning around 1825—and coalescing around the artist Thomas Cole and others close to him—American collectors and artists began to appreciate depictions of the vast and diverse American terrain. For them, it represented a symbol of the nation’s uniqueness and distance, literal and metaphorical, from its European antecedents. The American landscape was seen as wild and uncorrupted—an analogue for the American spirit.

Landscape painters, primarily associated with (or influenced by) what became known as the Hudson River School of painting, felt that painting should offer an exalted, symbolic, and often sublime—if not religious—experience of the American scenery. A marked shift in the taste for landscape painting occurred after the Civil War, when the American public began to respond to quieter, more poetic evocations of nature’s beauty and transcendent significance. In great part, this later period of American landscape painting resonated with slightly earlier 19th-century (philosophical) writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and the more contemporary poetry of Walt Whitman.

Still life painting became a popular genre during the 19th century, appealing to growing numbers of middle and upper-middle class collectors. Artist Raphaele Peale, a member of a prominent family of important Philadelphia-based artists, is attributed with raising its profile in the first decades of the century with his fruit pieces and other “deceptions.” At times, still lifes served a moralizing purpose—espousing the value of moderation or reminding the viewer of the fleetingness of life; at other times, still lifes were intended as decorative pieces,

celebrating the natural abundance of the land and the sportsman's life. Many also reflect a strand of matter-of-fact directness and attention to vernacular objects (and type of speech) that has persisted in American culture (painting and poetry) from the 19th century on. Ranging from small fruit pieces and trophies of the hunt to shelves or walls displaying compilations of personal, often hand-made or nostalgic objects, these works hint at larger narratives related to both a relation to and break from Europe and the rapidly changing culture of American society. In this way, some of these paintings might be seen as portraying a broader sense of the theme of an American landscape.

Time of Big Change: Artists born about the turn of the 19th century lived through a wildly expansionist phase of American history. Between 1820 and 1860, about 2000 miles of railroad track were laid, the population increased from 9.5 million to 31 million, and the number of states from 22 to 33.

### Timeline of Key Cultural and Historical American Events 1800-1900

- 1803: Doubling of U.S. territory through the Louisiana Purchase
- 1805: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the first American art school and museum, was founded in Philadelphia by sculptor William Rush, and painter and scientist Charles Wilson Peale
- 1820s: Advent of the American Railroad, which continued to grow throughout the century
- 1820: Beginnings of Transcendentalism under Ralph Waldo Emerson
- 1825: National Academy in New York is founded as an honorary artists association, school, and museum “to promote the fine arts in America through instruction and exhibition”  
Artist Thomas Cole initiates the Hudson River School of painting in New York
- 1830: Native American Resettlement Act
- 1842: Founding of the American Art Union, with an annual painting lottery for members
- 1845: Concept of American “Manifest Destiny” is widely promoted
- 1846-47: Donner Party Tragedy in the Sierra Nevada
- 1848: Gold Rush in Northern California  
Michael Knoedler opens the first art gallery in New York
- 1850s-1880s: Numerous American painters travel to Germany, France, Italy, and England to visit cultural sites and to study art in schools, museums, and artists' colonies
- 1851: Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes Uncle Tom's Cabin  
First issue of The New York Times newspaper is published

- 1861-1865: The Civil War
- 1865: Slavery abolished  
Abraham Lincoln assassinated
- 1866: Civil Rights Act confers U.S. citizenship on people of all races
- 1869: The “Golden Spike” unites the Central and Union Pacific railroads
- 1869-1883: Construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in New York
- 1876: Centennial Exposition – World’s Fair in Philadelphia
- 1871: Great Chicago Fire
- 1872: The Metropolitan Museum of Art opens in New York
- 1874: Eadweard Muybridge takes serial (locomotive) photos of a galloping horse
- 1879-1886: Thomas Eakins is teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (and, for a time, is its Director)
- 1885: Mark Twain publishes The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
- 1886: The Statue of Liberty is erected in New York
- 1893: Columbian Exposition – World’s Fair in Chicago
- 1894: First public film screening in New York
- 1898: Spanish-American War occurs
- 1902: Alfred Stieglitz founds the Photo-Secession in New York
- 1903: Wright brothers responsible for first powered flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina
- 1906: Great San Francisco Earthquake
- 1908: First Model T rolls off the conveyor belt in Detroit

### Trompe l’Oeil Still Life

Trompe l’oeil (“fool the eye”) is a French term for paintings that attempt to fool the viewer into thinking that their subjects are real rather than imitations of reality. Trompe l’oeil paintings thus render apparent a truth regarding all art—that it is an illusion.

Trompe l’oeil still life paintings date back to ancient times, when images of game, poultry, fruit, and vegetables appeared on the walls of Greek and Roman villas to symbolize the hospitality of the owners. The ancient Greek historian Pliny the Elder described a trompe l’oeil painting competition in which the artist Zeuxis created a still life of grapes so realistic that it fooled birds into thinking the fruit was real. Yet, when he asked his rival, Parrhasios, to remove the curtain that seemed to cover his painting, Zeuxis found to his amazement that it was a trompe l’oeil as well.

The quality of still life painting was greatly enhanced by the invention of single-point perspective in 15th-century Italy, and by new discoveries in the sciences of optics and biology in 17th-century Netherlands. Many of these innovations entered the United States

through the 17th-century Dutch colony of Nieuw Amsterdam (New York City) and through 18th-century Philadelphia, the scientific capitol of the American colonies.

Tabletop still lifes of fruit, which celebrated the natural abundance of the landscape and evoked the sensory pleasures of food consumption, were especially popular in 19th-century America and provided appropriate decorative motifs for the living and dining rooms where their real-life counterparts appeared. Similarly, paintings of dead game, particularly, birds and hare, hanging on a wall or door had their origins in European hunting lodges, where such trophies would be displayed or consumed. In late 19th-century America, these hunt still lifes nostalgically brought to mind traditional male pursuits in an era when most men hunted and gathered at the local market.

### **Pennsylvania Academy of Art**

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (in Philadelphia) was the first American fine arts museum and art school. Founded in 1805 by painter and amateur natural scientist Charles Wilson Peale, the Academy played a significant role in shaping several generations of American artists. Alum Thomas Eakins taught at the Academy beginning in 1876 and became its director for a time in the 1880s. From the mid-19th century on, the school demonstrated a progressive stance in its inclusion and support of women artists.