

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON

American Art

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



Watson and the Shark

1778

by John Singleton Copley
(American, 1738–1815)

■ In 1749, fourteen-year-old Brook Watson, cabin boy on a boat docked in Havana Harbor, Cuba, was attacked by a shark while swimming. In two passes at the boy the shark took off his right leg below the knee. On the third pass the shark was killed by crew members who came to Watson's aid. He survived the attack and went on to become a successful British merchant and politician.

The artist John Singleton Copley portrays the shark attack at its most dramatic moment. Watson struggles to reach his comrades in the boat while the shark bears down on him from the right of the canvas. We witness the action at close range as we see Watson's arched body in the foreground of the painting, an expression of terror on his face. Above him nine seamen work furiously trying to rescue him. The immediacy of this image contributed to its great public success.

Copley was born in the American colonies, but he went to Europe on the eve of the American Revolution and spent the remainder of his career in Great Britain. There, Copley was commissioned by the adult Watson to memorialize his brush with death. The artist's rendition of Watson's ordeal helped to redefine the representation of contemporary historical events. While using traditional compositional techniques, such as grouping his figures in a pyramid, Copley dressed them in contemporary garb. He also demonstrated the influence of the burgeoning romantic movement, emphasizing the emotional power and dramatic tension of Watson's narrow escape from death.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What event would you consider to be most formative in your own life?
- 2 How convincing is Copley's rendition of this shark attack? Does the shark look real to you? What about the grouping of the seamen? What do you think Copley tried to achieve with his composition?
- 3 What lessons do you take away from Watson's experience? Do you think this was an important event to commemorate?

Rubens Peale with a Geranium

1801

by Rembrandt Peale
(American, 1778–1860)

(detail, cover)

■ Rubens Peale (1784–1865), age seventeen, appears seated beside a large geranium in this portrait, painted by his brother Rembrandt. Why is the plant so prominent? Rubens Peale was a botanist, and the geranium was an exotic rarity in nineteenth-century America. Thus, the pairing of the plant and the sitter seems a natural choice.

Rembrandt Peale lavishes as much attention on the depiction of the geranium as he does on his brother. The artist allots nearly the same amount of space for the potted plant in his composition as he does for the human sitter, suggesting Rembrandt's pride in Rubens' accomplishment in raising the floral specimen. We can discern the knobby quality of the stalks as well as the leaf veins. It is even possible to make out characteristics of the flowers, including their five-petal bloom. This detailed study of the plant complements Rembrandt Peale's careful rendition of his brother's appearance. A pair of spectacles rests on the bridge of his nose, throwing a delicate shadow and concentrated disks of light onto his cheeks. A second pair of glasses rests in his hand. This emphasis on sight is paralleled by a depiction of touch, as Rubens' hand rests gently against the base of the plant.

Artist Rembrandt Peale and his younger brother Rubens were the sons of the American artist and naturalist Charles Willson Peale. Charles Willson Peale named several of his children after famous painters.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How do our senses of touch and sight interact? Is touch as important for artists and botanists as sight? Why or why not?
- 2 Have you ever tried to raise a flowering plant? Did you find it easy or difficult?
- 3 Imagine that you were commissioning a portrait of yourself. With what object would you want to be shown?

El Rio de Luz (The River of Light)

1877

by Frederic Edwin Church
(American, 1826–1900)

■ Frederic Edwin Church was one of the leading painters of the Hudson River School, a group of American landscape painters who came to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century. While the group tended to be focused geographically in New York State, its subjects ranged beyond the confines of that area. Church in particular traveled widely and produced many remarkable paintings of the exotic landscapes that he visited. Inspired by the writings of the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, Church made two trips to South America during the 1850s.

The painting evokes the lush, luminous South American landscape that Church had encountered. Golden sunlight, suffused by clouds, glistens on the surface of a river that stretches from the foreground of the painting into its background. A mossy plant-covered log seems to invite us to enter this tranquil setting. Church's extraordinarily detailed landscape was not painted from life but instead from memory, twenty years after he had last visited the South American tropics. The artist's recall was aided by copious drawings and oil sketches he had made while in the region. Church's attention to the vegetation and birds—red-breasted hummingbirds and waterfowl—reflects his devotion to scientific study. Yet despite Church's meticulous rendition of this scene, the painting does not depict a specific place, but instead a general evocation of daybreak in the tropics. Interpreting the scene metaphorically, we might equate dawn in this lush setting with the dawn of creation itself.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What is your favorite time of day? Why?
- 2 If you were standing in this setting would you be able to see all the details depicted by Church in a single glance? Does this make the painting more or less “realistic”?
- 3 If you were to paint a landscape, what place would you choose to paint? How would you paint it?

Both Members of This Club

1909

by George Bellows
(American, 1882–1925)

■ George Bellows was one of a group of American realists at the turn of the century who came to be dubbed the “Ashcan School.” These artists did not paint the social elite, but instead presented unflinching views of urban existence for the masses. Bellows' paintings were strongly influenced by his belief in the need for social justice.

Both Members of This Club presents a glimpse of one of the unsavory aspects of urban life that Bellows wished to address. Public boxing matches were illegal in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. To get around the law and to hold such bouts, certain athletic clubs made prospective boxers temporary club members on the night of the match. Here, the fighters push against one another head-to-head. The black fighter on the right creates a strong diagonal, his leg stretched out toward the lower right corner. His opponent's leg, torso, and head form a strong vertical line of resistance. These forces underscore the powerful meeting of the boxers' punches in mid-air; indeed, their gloves almost touch the top edge of the canvas. Bellows chose to depict the violent climax of the match: the victorious fighter on the right lunges forward, while the nearly vanquished boxer on the left, his face contorted with pain, weakly resists the blow, momentarily postponing his imminent defeat.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What issues do you think are worth fighting for?
- 2 If you were called upon to create a painting or a sculpture that represented an important social issue of our era, what issue would you choose and how would you depict it?
- 3 Look carefully at the faces in Bellows' painting. Do they look “realistic”? How did Bellows manipulate faces to describe what is going on in this painting?

Information

TRANSPORTATION

Metro stops are Judiciary Square (red line), Navy Memorial/Archives (yellow/green line), and Smithsonian (orange/blue line).

Metered street parking is available along the Mall for cars and vans. Buses may let students off at the entrance noted on your confirmation sheet. Parking for buses is allowed on Independence Avenue next to the Washington Monument.

Please check your school tour confirmation letter for the location where your tour will begin. If you are unable to keep this appointment, notify the Tour Scheduler at 202.842.6249 as soon as possible.

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There are no special lunch facilities for school groups. Groups may purchase their lunches from the full-service cafeteria. Group meal plans can be arranged by calling 202.216.2480.

Restrooms are located by the cafeteria and near main entrances of the Gallery.

WHAT TO BRING

Hand-held cameras, pencils, and pads are allowed in the permanent collection areas, but not in special exhibitions. The use of a tripod, easel, or ink and chalk

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MUSEUM PUBLICATIONS AND REPRODUCTIONS

Postcards are available in the museum shops for 50 cents each; 11 x 14-inch reproductions are \$5.00 each. Museum shops are located in the East Building Concourse (next to the cafeteria), and on the ground floor of the West Building between the 4th and 6th Street entrances.

ACCESSIBILITY

The 6th Street entrance to the West Building at Constitution Avenue and the 4th Street entrance to the East Building each have ramps to accommodate visitors in wheelchairs. The 6th Street entrance may be used as a drop-off and pick-up location. Please inform your docents prior to your tour of any special needs for your students.

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