

# Iconography for American Scenery

A language of universal symbols—iconography—dominated nineteenth-century American landscape painting. Please refer to this list as you walk through *American Scenery* to more fully appreciate the meanings and messages these works of art were originally meant to evoke.

## Leisure and Work



1.

**Bridges** frequently appear on the canvases of landscape painters. Natural bridges and rustic wooden bridges are seen as delicate and temporary, in contrast to stone bridges, which are sturdy and permanent. A stone bridge also symbolizes humans' long-term involvement in nature.

**Fishing**, in comparison to hunting, is seen as a relaxed and tranquil activity. Often, fishermen are as interested in the beauty of their surroundings as they are in the catch of the day.



2.



3.

**Haying** signifies the harmonious balance between humans and nature.

**Hunting** is equated with death and violence; when the delicate balance between humans and nature is disturbed, any suggestion of peace is destroyed.



4.



5.

**Machines** usher in progress and often signify human activity, but they also bring people into contact with nature in negative ways. The owners and operators of trains, mills, and the like wrestle for control of nature and seek to transform it.

**Water** that is calm often reflects serenity, while violent, tumultuous water represents the raw force of nature and serves as a warning of its wild, untamed capacity.



6.

## Animals and Vegetation



7.

**Cows** symbolize the presence of humans in the landscape. Because cows are domesticated, their presence suggests the existence of farmers, even when the humans do not appear on the canvas. Cows represent the steady, regular rhythm of farming life and the effort of man to work in harmony with nature.

**Deer** can represent a range of different ideas and concepts, depending on how they are used within the artwork's narrative. One example plays on the belief that deer are prudent animals whose keen hearing may alert them to nearby danger—usually humans.



8.



9.

A **dead deer** represents man's disruption of the natural balance of the wilderness.

A **lone deer** symbolizes the end of an era; a fragile yet majestic creature, he is witnessing the final days of an age untouched by humans.



10.



11.

**Mullein plants** are native to Europe and Asia and were brought to North America by immigrants. While they have often been thought to symbolize good luck and fortune, contemporary scholars believe they represent the presence of white Europeans and the mistreatment of the land that followed their arrival.

**Trees** take on many meanings in American landscape painting. Vibrant, fully foliated trees represent hope, youth, and novelty. A tree stump represents human contact with nature and serves as an omen of the destruction that can come if the delicate balance between nature and humans is disturbed.



12.

## Times of Day



13.

**Dawn** symbolizes rebirth and renewal, a new day with fresh possibilities.

**Sunrise** is full of expectation and a sense of promise of what the day might bring. Light symbolizes innocence and hope for the rest of the day.



14.



15.

A **sunset** commonly represents endings; often a sunset is depicted to suggest the end of a life.

**Spring** symbolizes new life and childhood. Everything seems possible in a spring landscape.



16.



17.

**Summer** stands for the vigor of adulthood and the drama and excitement that comes with an active life.

**Autumn** denotes contemplation as the end of the year draws near. While not as bleak as those of winter, autumn landscapes allude to the passing of the bright, vibrant foliage of summer and the coming dormancy of winter.



18.



19.

**Winter** often symbolizes death; the palette and scenery applied to winter landscapes reflect a nature devoid of life, with everything motionless, still, and literally frozen.

1. William Mason Brown, *The Bridge* (detail), circa 1850–60, oil on canvas, Private Collection 2. Henry Boese, *Autumn Landscape* (detail), n.d., oil on canvas, Private Collection 3. James Fairman, *Haying Scene* (detail), n.d., oil on canvas, Private Collection 4. Max Eglau, *Hunter in a Landscape* (detail), n.d., oil on canvas, Private Collection 5. Herman Herzog, *Mill with Raging Torrent* (*Sutter's Mill*) (detail), circa 1870, oil on canvas, Private Collection 6. James McDougal Hart, *Mountain Falls* (detail), n.d., oil on canvas, Private Collection

7. Gunther Hartwick, *Landscape with Farm* (detail), 1854, oil on canvas, Private Collection 8. Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, *Deer in Nature* (detail), 1869, oil on canvas, Private Collection 9. Sanford Robinson Gifford, *A Lake Twilight* (detail), 1861, oil on canvas, Private Collection 10. Charles H. Chapin, *Deer* (detail), 1870, oil on canvas, Private Collection 11. Gunther Hartwick, *Landscape with Farm* (detail), 1854, oil on canvas, Private Collection 12. Joseph Antonio Hekking, *Summer Landscape with Cows Watering* (detail), n.d., oil on canvas, Private Collection

13. Homer Dodge Martin, *Saranac Lake (Morning)* (detail), 1857, oil on canvas, Private Collection 14. John Frederick Kensett, *Mount Chocorua* (detail), 1857, oil on canvas, Private Collection 15. John Frederick Kensett, *Sunset over the Catskills* (detail), 1855, oil on canvas, Private Collection 16. Clinton Loveridge, *Spring Landscape* (detail), n.d., oil on artist's board, Private Collection 17. Joseph Antonio Hekking, *Summer Landscape with Cows Watering* (detail), n.d., oil on canvas, Private Collection 18. Clinton Loveridge, *Fall on a Lake in New England* (detail), circa 1870, oil on canvas, Private Collection 19. Thomas Birch, *Five Landscape Vignettes* (detail), n.d., oil on board, Private Collection



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