

Museum Assignment 1 consists of a choice between two topics (portrait or landscape) based on works on view in the Boston MFA (Green 'E' line to Museum stop; free with your Suffolk ID). Be sure to get and save your museum admission ticket and attach it to your paper when you turn it in. It's a good idea to take a selfie with your work to show me if you lose your admission ticket.

either a portraiture paper ...

Choose an 18th or early 19th century American portrait currently on view in the MFA's American wing. Look at and think about all of the works before you choose one to write about; this will help in understanding what is significant about the work you do choose. Analyze the work in relation to the context and concepts of the readings, lectures, and discussions. Feel free to concentrate on one issue if you wish (e.g. gender issues, status), and feel free to compare other works, but the heart of the paper should be a thorough analysis of your chosen work in which you take account all of the visible signs depicted. On the back of this sheet are some questions and issues to consider.

... or a landscape paper.

Choose an 18th or early 19th century American landscape currently on view in the MFA's American wing. Look at and think about all of the works before you choose one to write about; this will help in understanding what is significant about the work you do choose. Analyze the work in relation to the context and concepts of the readings, lectures, and discussions. Feel free to concentrate on one issue if you wish (e.g. civilization vs. nature or God as nature), and feel free to compare other works, but the heart of the paper should be a thorough analysis of your chosen work in which you take into account all of the visible signs depicted. On the back of this sheet are some questions and issues to consider.

*** Don't choose works that we talked about in class. Email me (ccramer@suffolk.edu) with what work you are writing about by Monday 1 October so I can bring images for the class discussion on Tuesday the 2nd. ***

The requirements

The paper should be around 3-4 pages typed and 1½ or double-spaced with at least 1 inch margins. Use the concepts of the lectures and readings, but do your own analysis and use your own words. Do not copy or closely paraphrase any outside source such as books, museum labels, catalogs, the museum website, or the internet. Doing so will result in an automatic zero, and if particularly egregious will be reported to the Dean.

Your grade will be based on the following factors:

- ✓ Evidence that you have seen the works in person this semester. This involves (1) turning in the museum admission ticket with your papers, and (2) describing relevant details of the works that can only be seen in person, such as the size/scale of the work, fine details, the surface texture, etc.
- ✓ Your thesis statement. No need to get fancy; a simple "This work is a good example of a sublime landscape, or a mercantile status portrait, etc." will do fine. But do have one, and do concentrate your entire paper on supporting it.
- ✓ Your analysis of the work, which should be specific, thorough, and directly relevant to your thesis. What characteristics of the work exemplify that style or concept? How do the artist's choices of subject-matter and form/style contribute to the probable intended meaning of the work?
- ✓ Your incorporation of the ideas of the readings and lectures. As relevant to the work and your thesis, use the terms and concepts you have learned, discuss the context, and so forth. On the back of this sheet I have listed some questions and issues to consider, but please do not organize your paper as a series of answers to those questions; just use them to be sure you are considering the important points.
- ✓ Your writing. Without good organization, grammar, and spelling your reader will not understand your ideas. In general, write as though you were explaining the works and ideas to someone who has not taken this class: I will grade the papers based on how well I think such a person would understand the works and ideas from your paper.

Here are some questions to consider if you do a portrait:

This is a generic list, of course: let the work itself guide you to what issues need to be considered ...

- What is the size of the work relative to your body? Is the subject depicted full-length, half-length, three-quarter, etc? Life-size? smaller? larger? Is the horizon (our point-of-view) level with their eyes, lower, or higher? How do these issues affect the work?
- Who is the subject of the portrait? Do you know their profession and/or interests or can you figure them out from the work? How are their profession and/or interests indicated?
- Is this a private portrait or a public/civic portrait? Was the person a government or military leader? Did they do anything important that is referred to in the work? How does the work refer to it?
- Is the work an example of one of the types of portrait discussed in class or the text (colonial mercantile portrait, Grand Manner portrait, civic portrait, humble/democratic portrait)? How is the work an example of that type?
- Although we do not know what the person really looked like, do you get the sense that they were depicted realistically, idealized, generically, or something in between? What led you to that conclusion?
- How does the work convey the wealth and/or social status of the individual depicted? Compared to other works of the period and/or by the same artist, is your work subtle as regards this point or blatant?
- Is the gender of the sitter and their conformity to 'proper' gender roles an important feature of the work? If so, how is this issue featured?
- For the furniture and craft objects (if any) in the portrait, look through Craven and/or the MFA for similar objects and see if you can determine what they are and what styles they are in. Are they expensive or modest? Fashionable or out-of-date? What does this say about the sitter?
- Does the work say anything about the character of the person represented? If so, how so? Is it about their "personal" character or their "public" character?
- Is there anything in the work that is singled out (by gesture, composition, color, lighting, etc.) as particularly important? What? How is it singled out? What does it imply about the sitter?

Here are some questions to consider if you do a landscape:

This is a generic list, of course: let the work itself guide you to what issues need to be considered ...

- Is the view made-up or based on a real place? If it is based on a real place, where is it (American or somewhere else; East Coast, West Coast, Midwest), and what resonances did that place have with the American people at the time it was painted (settled or unsettled, distant or near, dangerous or safe, awe-inspiring, fertile, etc.)?
- What is the size of the work relative to your body? What is the format (ratio of height to width) of the work? Is the horizon (our viewpoint) high, level, or low; close or far? How do these issues affect the impact of the work? Is it intimate, overpowering, neutral, etc.?
- Describe the overall composition of the work: does it look carefully planned and organized or more casual? Is it balanced or unbalanced? Does the view into the distance go back to a wide horizon or is it channeled to a single focus? Is the 'path' back to that focus straight, diagonal, winding, etc.? Does it use devices such as coulisses and repoussoirs?
- Examine the foreground. Where would you be standing if you were actually in the depicted landscape? Are you given a place to stand or are you floating in mid-air or in water? Would the place where you are standing be safe and accessible or difficult of access and dangerous?
- Are there human figures in the work? If not, what does this imply? If so, who are they (or what type of people: Native Americans, trappers, wealthy landowners, rural workers, etc.) and what does this imply about the nature of the place depicted? What are the people doing and what does this imply about their attitude towards nature?
- Is the landscape in a 'savage,' 'pastoral' or 'civilized' state? Is it a good example of the sublime, picturesque, or historical/Classical landscape? How so and what does this imply about the attitude towards nature?
- Are there any explicit or implicit signs of God's presence? If so, what?
- What evidence does the work show of human effects on the landscape, if any? If the landscape shows evidence of human intervention, what type and degree of intervention? Can you determine if the painter approves or doesn't approve of this intervention? If so, how can you tell? (Be careful not to confuse your own opinion with the painter's.)
- Is anything in the work singled out (by gesture, composition, lighting, color, etc.) as particularly important? What? How is it singled out? What does it imply about the intended meaning?
- What, overall, does the work imply about American attitudes towards nature and their land at the time the work was painted? How does the painter convey these ideas?