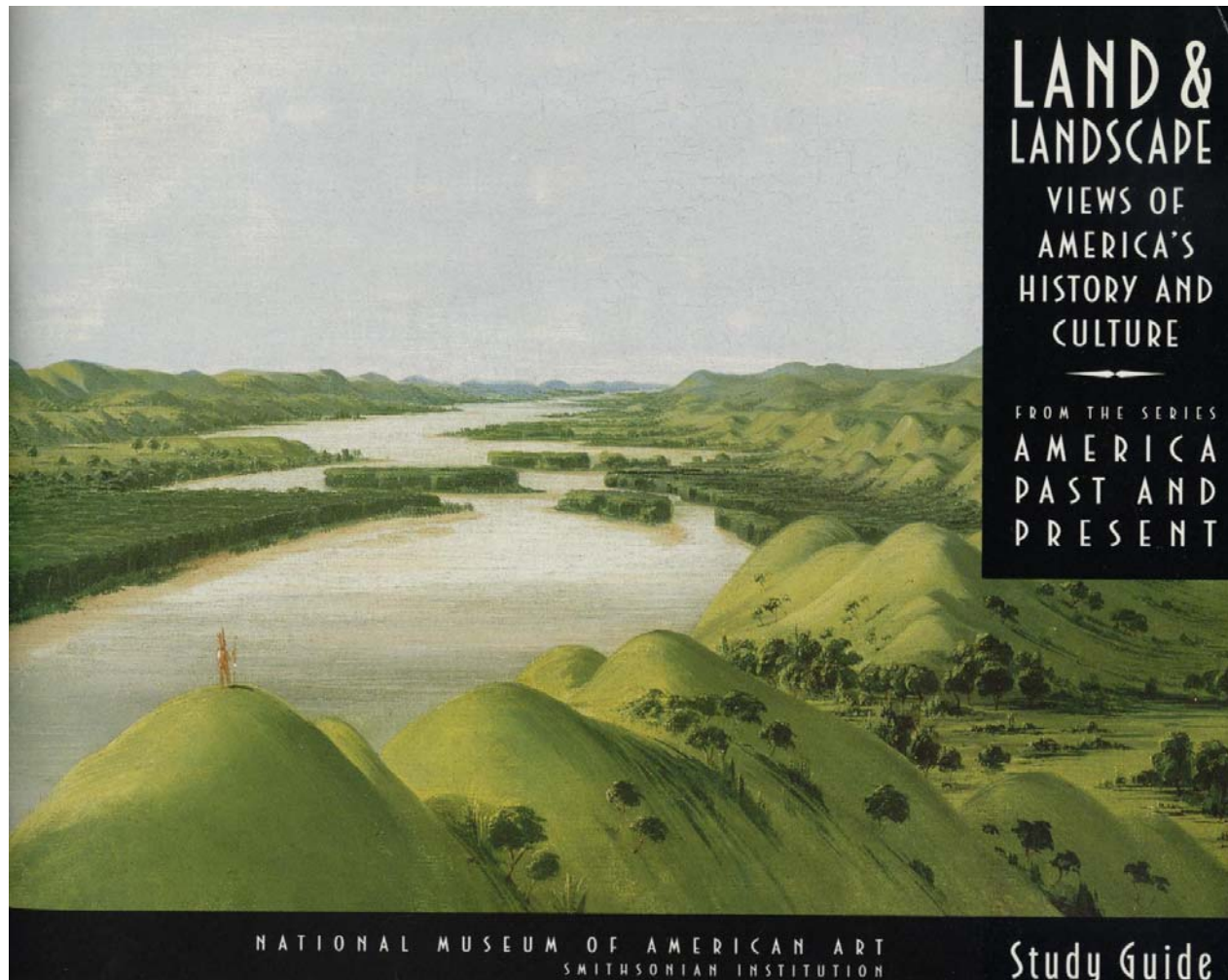




Smithsonian
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture*
Smithsonian American Art Museum



Unit II

OBJECTIVES

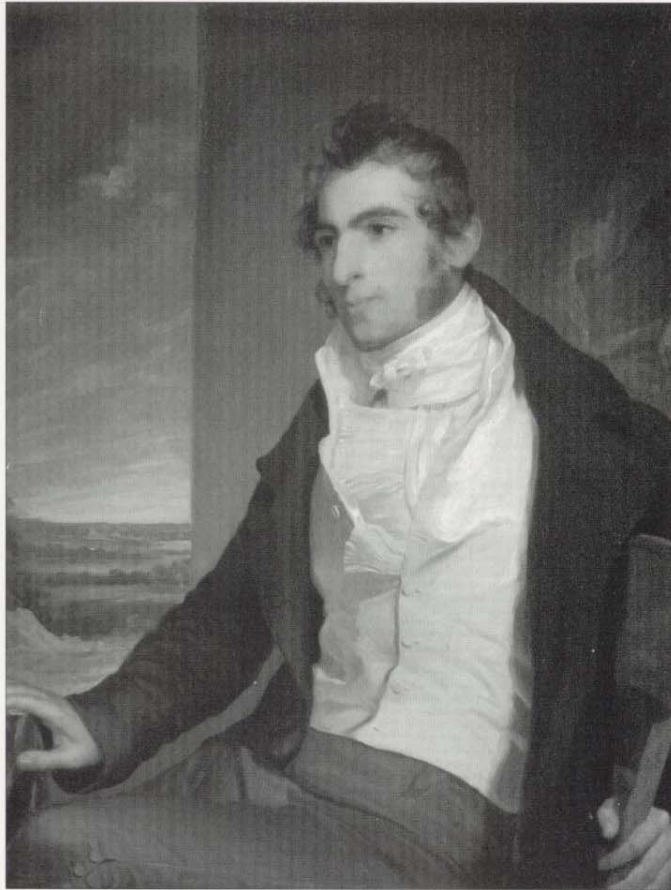
- 1
To demonstrate how the subject and the composition of paintings can reflect a shift in political philosophies.
- 2
To compare and contrast works from successive historical periods and identify the broader context in which they were created.

FEDERALISM TO JACKSONIAN DEMOCRACY

Thomas Sully, *Daniel LaMotte*

Historical Background

Independence from Britain caused leaders of the American Revolution to face the problem of establishing a national government while at the same time maintaining the rights of the states. A national government based on a loose union of states was formed under the Articles of Confederation, but debt and regional factionalism threatened to dissolve it. The "Great Compromise" of 1787 balanced the interests of the states with large populations and those with small ones by dividing a new national legislature into two bodies or houses. In this arrangement, the lower house was to represent the states according to population; in the upper house, the senate, all the states were represented equally, though senators were not to be directly elected by the people in the plan. A "federalist party" favored a strong central government drafted in a proposed new "constitution." The anti-federalists, fearing that a president or chief executive might become an oppressive dictator, or king, opposed the adoption of the constitution without guarantees that personal liberties would be protected. After a convention and careful drafting of the constitution, a questionable political



Thomas Sully, *Daniel La Motte*, 1812-1813, oil, 36½ x 29 in. (92.3 x 73.8 cm)

strategy on the part of the Federalists led to the ratification of the document by each of the original thirteen colonies by 1790.

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Federalists and non-Federalists, most of whom were among the nation's economic elite, believed that wealthy, well-educated men should govern. The nation's first two presidents, George Washington and John Adams, supported the ownership of land as a prerequisite to vote as did Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Property owners with formal education and experience in managing estates were thought to be the best qualified people to govern the new nation. Women, blacks, Native Americans, and most tenant farmers were unable to vote or participate in government. By the early 1800s farmland became scarce and expensive, preventing many settlers from acquiring land and the right to vote. The government of the new nation remained in the control of an elite of wealthy and well-educated men.

Looking at the Painting

VISUAL ELEMENTS Though this painting is a portrait, it also conveys an image of the landscape that is aristocratic in character. The casual elegance of the sitter reflects Sully's close study of the eighteenth-century English portrait traditions in which aristocratic men and women were posed before landscape vistas suggestive of their vast estates. The sitter, Daniel LaMotte, was a large landowner and Baltimore merchant. Seated in a chair, he is dressed in the fashionable clothes of a gentleman—a sage green coat, white waistcoat, and frilled shirt tied with an elaborate neckcloth. A rose-colored curtain flutters behind him. Seen through the open window is an extensive romantic landscape with a river stretching far into the deeply shaded horizon.

COMMENTARY Thomas Sully painted LaMotte to give the appearance of casual, natural ease. This portrait of aristocratic elegance is carefully composed. The sitter's right hand on the table in front of the window seems to signify his control over his estate, though LaMotte is physically removed from it.

Though his high status may come from land ownership, his portrait shows a remoteness from its day-to-day maintenance. LaMotte's introspective gaze and posture indicate his superior social position as well as education. Sully's careful choice of pose, backdrop, and costume create the impression of aristocratic wealth and birth. James Fenimore Cooper captured the spirit of LaMotte's portrait in this quotation from his 1838 essay, "An Aristocrat and a Democrat":

The very object of [democracy] is the utmost practicable personal liberty.... An aristocrat, therefore, is merely one who fortifies his exclusive privileges by positive institutions, and a democrat, one who is willing to admit of a free competition in all things.... He is the purest democrat who best maintains his rights, and no rights can be dearer to a man of cultivation than exemptions from unseasonable invasions of his time by the coarse-minded and ignorant.

Thomas Birch, *Southeast View of "Sedgeley Park," the Country Seat of James Cowles Fisher, Esq.*

Thomas Birch,
*Southeast View of
"Sedgeley Park," the
Country Seat of James
Cowles Fisher, Esq.,*
ca. 1819, oil,
34½ x 48 in.
(87.6 x 121.9 cm)

Historical Background

Thomas Jefferson, leader of the Democratic-Republican Party, was elected president in 1800. In his inaugural address, Jefferson vowed to promote the "equal and exact

treatment of all men." This view was markedly different from the Federalist Party ideal of a government dominated by a wealthy elite. Jefferson opposed the proliferation and growth of cities and instead promoted the ideal of a peaceful agrarian nation governed through local assemblies.

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All free male citizens, of full age, and sane mind, who for one year before shall have been resident in the county, or shall through the whole of that time have possessed therein real property of the value of _____; or shall for the same time have been enrolled in the militia, and no others, shall have a right to vote for delegates for the said county and for senatorial electors for the district.

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1783

The War of 1812 was caused by disputes between Great Britain and the United States over a commercial embargo and border disputes with Canada. Neither side gained or lost territory, though commerce and the nation's merchants were forced into serious financial crisis. Still, according to the American view, the war had been



fought to maintain the nation's political and economic independence.

The period was also marked by a number of bank failures and financial crises. The first Bank of the United States was not rechartered after the War of 1812. The second Bank of the United States announced in 1819 that it would no longer pay notes other than its own issued for western land. This created a *panic*; the economic future of the country had never appeared so bleak.

Looking at the Painting

VISUAL ELEMENTS In this *picturesque* scene a large manor house nestles comfortably among the trees. Similar estates appear in the distance across the river. A well-dressed family walks leisurely along a path leading to a house as a young girl picks flowers near an ornate outbuilding. "Sedgeley Park" illustrates a comfortable way of life and peaceful coexistence with nature. This *pastoral* view shows nature's bounty symbolized by flowers that are within easy reach.

COMMENTARY Sedgeley Park, a country estate built in 1799 on the banks of the Schuylkill River

near Philadelphia, was the first private American house designed in the *Neo-Gothic* style. The choice of the *Neo-Gothic* architectural style would have been considered evidence of the owner's cultivated taste and interest in history. It was designed by the English-born Benjamin Henry Latrobe, one of the first professional architects in America and a designer of the U.S. Capitol in Washington. The house was destroyed by fire after the Civil War, and the grounds of this "private preserve" became a public land known as Fairmont Park.

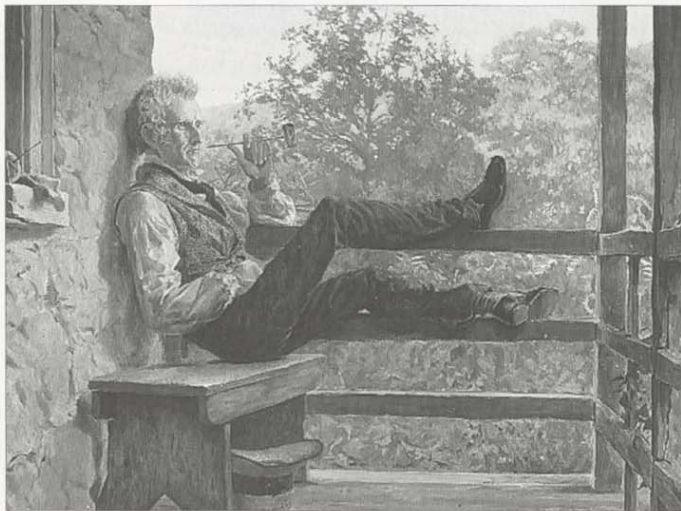
Thomas Birch painted *Sedgeley Park* for its owner, James Cowles Fisher. Fisher served as acting president of the second Bank of the United States. The painting was executed in 1819, the year of the economic panic. Fisher clearly wanted Birch to represent his family in a dignified natural setting oblivious to the economic distress. The image suggests that Fisher's genteel existence will survive the *panic*. In the wake of the *panic*, however, the general public became less interested in viewing landscape painting that chronicled a luxurious manner of living enjoyed by a privileged few.

**Frank Blackwell Mayer, *Independence*
(Squire Jack Porter)**

Historical Background

Frank Blackwell Mayer,
Independence (Squire
Jack Porter), 1858,
oil, 12 x 15½ in.
(30.4 x 40.3 cm)

After a long and arduous presidential campaign, Andrew Jackson defeated the incumbent John Quincy Adams in the election of 1828. Jackson ran as the



champion of the common man and as a war hero. He was the hero of the Battle of New Orleans of 1815, which was one of the few land victories of the War of 1812 and was actually fought after the peace treaty was signed. As a native of Kentucky, Jackson was also the first president to come from the frontier, outside the traditional centers of political power — Virginia and New England. Although Jackson represented the aspirations of the middle and lower classes, he was able to attract voters from all social sectors. Jackson felt that hardworking, motivated men should be allowed to achieve the same degree of financial and political success as those who inherited wealth.

By the late 1820s, almost all states had ended the property requirements for voting. Increased literacy and effective political advertising were also important factors in the election's outcome. As a result, the number of voters participating in 1828 doubled from the election of 1824.

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Looking at the Painting

VISUAL ELEMENTS Like Sully's portrait of Daniel LaMotte, Mayer's *Independence* illustrates the sitter's relationship to the land. An aged man in work clothes rests on a bench against an exposed stone wall of a country house with his feet propped up on a rough-hewn wooden railing. Smoking a corncob pipe, he gazes intently into the distance. His broad-brimmed straw hat, worn to shield him from the sun, lies beneath the bench. He appears to be one with the loosely painted wooded landscape and mountain range seen through the railing. Near the corner post sunflowers are in full bloom. The sitter, Squire Jack Porter, is relaxed and at ease as he contemplates his estate. He wears the breeches of a working man, a farmer's tunic, and vest. A ball of yarn and knitting needles on the window sill suggest the presence of a woman—Squire Jack Porter's wife or daughter—who shares responsibilities around the estate.

COMMENTARY Mayer's painting shows the self-made man as an equal member of society.

Porter relaxes while gazing out over the land that he has turned into a profitable farm. Porter, seventy-five years old when the picture was painted, had been a captain in the army during the War of 1812. He is shown at his farm, Rose Meadows, in Eckhart, Maryland, after a career as a successful entrepreneur. Porter became rich by owning and operating the first coal mine for domestic use in the Allegheny Mountains.

Everything in the painting—house, bench, clothes, and pipe—has a quality that speaks of the squire's self-sufficient approach to life and the land. *Independence* is an affirmation both of Jefferson's ideal of an agrarian nation and Jackson's policies that made it easier for the lower and middle classes to obtain land.

Whereas Daniel LaMotte is portrayed as a gentleman in the European manner and as lord of his estates, Squire Jack Porter in his very informal pose, is shown as a man integrally united with his land. His tanned face and gnarled hands demonstrate actual labor in a way that LaMotte's delicate complexion and calculated pose do not.

Andrew W. Warren,
Long Island Homestead,
Study from Nature,
1859, oil, 12½ x 23¾ in.,
(31.6 x 60.1 cm)



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**Andrew W. Warren, *Long Island Homestead,*
*Study from Nature***

Historical Background

Before the War of 1812, commercial revenues of the United States had come chiefly from the exportation of foodstuffs, timber, tobacco and other raw materials.

Most manufactured materials were imported from England. However, the war isolated the United States commercially and quickly forced it to develop its own factories to produce the goods it needed.

After the war, when commerce and shipping were restored, American industries continued to expand. Many people moved from rural farming areas into towns to work in mills and forges that were springing up near major trade routes in New York. Farms still existed, however, in places like Long Island, New York, well into the twentieth century.

The demand for landscape paintings rose sharply in the 1830s and 1840s at exactly the same time that towns and cities were attracting people from the country. A nostalgia for the idyllic rural way of life motivated artists and the public alike to focus upon scenes of family farms and unspoiled wilderness.

Looking at the Painting

VISUAL ELEMENTS A large farm house is partially obscured by trees and surrounded by rolling fields while sheep and cattle graze on the hill to the right. Several figures appear on the porch. At left stands a chicken coop. In the *middle ground*, two women cut and bind sheaves of wheat in front of a small pond. A sunflower and other cultivated flowers appear in the *foreground*. The land is divided into vegetable garden, flower garden, farmland, and pasture. Beyond the barns at the viewer's left in the distance is a graveyard with a white cross.

COMMENTARY Andrew Warren's small study, executed at the scene, shows this fairly large farm as a self-sufficient, harmonious *microcosm*; a model of America's agrarian wealth. The wheat field is not very extensive, suggesting that it is for the family's own consumption. Trees and shrubbery help create a sense of the farm's isolation from the rest of the world. The painting depicts a way of life rapidly becoming obsolete in the face of rapid advances in manufacturing and transportation. The homestead's self-sufficiency directly contrasts with the emerging urban world of specialization and interdependence. While the painting's scale is intimate (12½ x 23⅞ inches), it shows a complete view of the homestead where all the needs of the inhabitants are depicted from "cradle to grave." Around the time of the Civil War, scenes of such serenity, optimism, and "contentedness" were seldom seen.

