

FICTIONAL LANDSCAPES

Exhibition Focus: *California Mexicana: Missions to Murals, 1820-1930*

Background

By the late 1800's, rail travel made access to the western region of North America more accessible to those living on the East Coast. Artists were among the first tourists to travel and record their observations of the western landscape. These quick sketches and drawings that artists created during their travels would later serve as reference material for larger, more detailed paintings created when they were back in the studio. Many artists took creative liberties and altered elements of the landscape in order to create a more dramatic or idealized scene. This alteration or fabrication of the landscape was common practice among artists of the Hudson River School, including Thomas Moran.

Lesson Overview

We can learn a lot about the past by looking at paintings from history. However, just because an image looks real does not mean that it accurately represents historical reality. Using Thomas Moran's *Cortez Tower, Mexico* as a starting point, students will learn how artists create landscape compositions from the quick sketches they created during their travels. Students will then compose and draw their own fictional landscapes by referencing a packet of "sketches" from the field.

Learning Objectives

- Students will learn how artists divide their landscapes into the *foreground, middle ground, and background* areas to create the illusion of perspective space in their images.
- Students will learn how to select and combine separate reference images to compose a landscape artwork.
- Students will critically look at historical paintings and discuss what the artist's intention was vs. what might have been the historical reality.

Materials

- Image of *Cortez Tower, Mexico*
- Reference packet of landscape elements
- Watercolor paper
- Pencil and eraser
- Watercolor pencils and cup of water
- Paintbrushes



Thomas Moran, *Cortez Tower, Mexico*
Oil on canvas, 1883