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2019

## Art in the Museum

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### Recommended Citation

Janneck, Christopher, "Art in the Museum" (2019). *Writing Across the Curriculum*. 50.  
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Professor Pepe

American Art

10/3/2018

### Art in The Museum Paper 1

I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art (“the Met”) found at 1000 Fifth Avenue in New York City on Saturday, September 15, 2018, during a visit home. Although there was substantial traffic because of a German Heritage parade, it was a beautiful day to visit a magnificent museum. Everything about the Met is grand, including its entrance lobby and its artwork. I passed a few hours wandering the different halls with my family, while taking pictures and notes for this assignment. Some of my favorites during this visit was the Heavenly Bodies exhibit and the many halls filled by American artists. After much thought, I decided that the painting, “Moses Shown the Promised Land” would be the focus of this paper.

“Moses Shown the Promised Land” is a religious painting representing a scene from the Bible. It was painted by an American artist, Benjamin West, in 1801. The materials West utilized to create this painting is oil on wood. Its dimensions are 19  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 28  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches, so rather small compared to the other paintings adorning the room. When West completed this painting, he was already 63 years old. West was born in Springfield, PA in 1738, and later moved to Philadelphia, PA to further his art education. Later, his family sent him to Italy, where he worked on replicating European paintings and creating historical ones, which he then exhibited in London. After his exhibition of historical paintings was a success, he stayed in London, gradually gaining international recognition as a historical painter. West would also go on to become a founding member of the Royal Academy of Art, becoming its second president. In this position, he taught

several generations of artist, including American artists, who purposely traveled to London to learn from him. (<https://americanart.si.edu>).

“Moses Shown the Promised Land” was painted during his time at the Royal Academy of Arts. The painting depicts a biblical story about Moses being shown the “promised land”, the one which God had promised to the Israelites, but to which he did not permit Moses to enter. In the Bible story and the painting, Moses has an opportunity to view the promised land from above. He is not permitted by God to enter into the promised land. This painting is specifically representing something that happened in the life of Moses. The Bible tells us that the people were starting to turn against Moses because they needed water, and that God commanded Moses to hit a stone so water would flow out. Explicitly, in the Book of Numbers 20:10-11, “Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.” However, Moses did not openly tell the people that this was an act of God, and publically appeared to take the credit for God’s work. Thus, his action was against God. In Deuteronomy 32:51-52, we learn the consequence that Moses suffers “Because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel. For you shall see the land before you, but you shall not go there, into the land that I am giving to the people of Israel.” God seems to punish Moses by permitting him to see the promised land, but not allowing him to enter, before Moses dies. This is the exact scene from the Bible that West presents in his masterpiece, “Moses Shown the Promised Land”.

The painting itself seems to be in the Neoclassicism style of art. West studied abroad in Italy, and in the beginning of his career created copies of the works of several Neoclassical master artists while in Rome, and this work did influence his later paintings. Like Neoclassical style, there are geometric shapes, rectangular shapes, circular shapes, and horizontal lines in “Moses Shown the Promised Land”. There are also triangles in the painting as well, like the ones found in the corners. It has arch-like patterns, and each part of the painting plays a specific role in the placement that makes the painting complete. It is also made up of figures, clouds, and natural things, like a rock at the bottom of the composition.

More specifically, it is organized with angels and clouds to the left and right, and Moses is found on a rock directly in the middle of the painting. The composition in this painting is unified and appears complete. The painting is in the front-view perspective, starting from the upper left corner, there are two angels with wings. One angel is wearing red clothing, and motioning, while the other angel is wearing a white cloth, turning the head with the eyes closed. Below them is another angel with red clothing, black, dark wings, and has the finger pointing. Next, you have two angels in the background, one hidden behind a red cloth with gold hair in the center left, making a gesture. There is another angel directly looking at Moses in the center right with white wings, gold hair, white clothing, and the left arm out signaling. In the upper right, you have an angel that is larger than the other angels, with the white clothing of a dress, and black brownish wings, and the angel has both arms moving to the left showing Moses the promised land, which is not actually seen in the painting. Moses is in the center of a rock reclining back with his legs slightly elevated. His leg muscles are clearly defined, and his head is looking to the left, and down some, and his face surprisingly has little expression.

The perspective of the painting is very frontal, and each figure and background fits together perfectly in its closed space. There is repetitive shape and movement in the folds in the clothing, the expressions of the faces, the gestures of the hands, and the cloud shapes as well. The brushstroke is free brushwork, and the colors are controlled inside the canvas, and there are many colors represented in the painting. The colors that are present are gold, red, white, black, brownish black, some light blues, grey, and greenish blue. Mostly, the colors alternate between very bright and very dark. The bright and neutral colors dominate over the cool colors, and the moment captured is right before Moses dies, when he is being shown the promised land that God left to the Israelites. However, Moses will not be allowed to enter. There is a light source in the top center, who is perhaps God himself showing Moses the land. This holy light comes directly through the clouds in a line leading down to the bottom right of the painting.

Light in “Moses Shown the Promised Land” is likely a “holy” light that is extending down to where the promised land would be in the right corner. Light represents life and God, who is good, pure, and uncorrupt. God gives life to His creation. Behind Moses, there is also a bright light, which suggests that he is an important and holy figure too. The clouds seem to represent the pillars of clouds that led the Israelites out of Egypt. They are a symbol of God’s presence with and protection for the Israelites, God’s chosen people. (<http://www.alliancenet.org>) The rock I think represents the stone that Moses broke open with the staff to bring water to his people from the Bible story in Numbers (see above). The angels are beings of light. They are messengers of God, bringing God’s message to Moses. The angels also represent divinity.

In my opinion, this is a beautiful painting, representing a scene in biblical history in Judaic and Christian tradition. Moses was a prophet, who brought God’s message to the people (i.e. The Ten Commandments), and here God is bringing a message to Moses. If you offend God and sin,

you will not see the promised land. Perhaps, the promised land God shows him is heaven. We really do not know. However, Moses appears to be viewing an earthly place, since his face is nearly expressionless. If he was seeing heaven, his face might be filled with joy, or if he was seeing hell, it might reflect terror. I really enjoyed this painting. I am Roman Catholic, so I was really drawn to this painting because of the symbolism, but also because of the colors and movement. Biblical stories, turned into artwork, helps one form a visual portrayal of a written story. It fuels the imagination, and allows you to see it from a different perspective. Lastly, I like that the placement of each figure and object in the painting fits together like the pieces of a puzzle, and makes you want to look closer to see the even smaller details, and imagine the greater picture.

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Artist: Benjamin West

Title: Moses Shown the Promised Land

Year: 1801

Materials: Oil on Wood

Dimensions: 19 3/4 x 28 3/4 in

<http://www.metmuseum.org>