

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing together your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about a work of art to try to understand what it means. There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this painting might be:

Images that celebrated different regions of America were quite popular during the 1930s. Why might that have been?

Why do you think Sample chose a style so like early American folk art for this New England scene?

What does Paul Sample seem to be saying about Beaver Meadow and the people who live there? Is this a positive, romanticized image of New England? In what ways? Does it also seem critical? How?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment deals with questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art. Critical assessment can also change over time.

Overall, do you think this painting is successful and well done? Why or why not?

Do you like it? Does it move you?

Does this image represent issues that are still relevant today? Why or why not?

We hope this approach has enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each work:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

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Paul Sample,
American, 1896–1974

Beaver Meadow

1939

Oil on canvas
Gift of the artist, Class of 1920, in memory of
his brother, Donald M. Sample, Class of 1921;
P.943.126.1

While Paul Sample was artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College from 1938 to 1962, he lived primarily across the Connecticut River in Norwich, Vermont. Depicting the small settlement known as Beaver Meadow within the rural township of Norwich, this painting features the hamlet's church and several of its known residents. *Beaver Meadow* eloquently expresses many of the aesthetics and ideals of the regionalist movement of the 1930s. Regionalist artists like Sample, Grant Wood, and Thomas Hart Benton celebrated the distinctive topography and manners associated with different regions of the country. They were especially drawn to rural communities whose traditional customs were perceived to be threatened by such homogenizing forces as big business and new forms of transportation and communication. Keenly aware of the widespread hardships that so many people experienced during the Great Depression, regionalist artists aimed to boost the spirits of the average American by depicting local subjects in an appealing, simplified, highly legible style. In *Beaver Meadow*, for instance, Sample created a lean, decorative composition that evokes popular illustration, caricature, and American folk art traditions.

In this painting, Sample hints at tensions between tradition and

change in rural Vermont and offers a mixed portrayal of his new home in New England. On the one hand, the painting celebrates qualities associated with a stereotypical Vermont village: the harmonious relationships between humans and nature, as reflected in the tidy fields and farm buildings nestled in the hills, and among the members of this apparently idyllic settlement, whose sense of community is strengthened through weekly worship. Yet the picture also includes such harbingers of “progress” as the automobiles parked next to the church's empty carriage stalls. Representing the customs of an older generation, a horse-drawn carriage conveys an elderly couple toward the church, their more formal garb contrasting with that of the more casually dressed men and boy situated near the cars. Sample also evokes an undercurrent of unease, and even suspicion, in the composition, suggested by the rigidity of the figures in the foreground and their disconnected gazes. A rather schoolmarmish figure, identified in a preliminary sketch as “Mrs. Roberts” (her pose taken directly from James McNeill Whistler's famous portrait of his mother), is absorbed in her reading. Her male counterpart, a rather gaunt New England Yankee type, stands looking absently downward. Further beyond, we see two rotund figures facing one another but set apart in space. At the far left, two plump pigs face in opposite directions, further drawing attention to the odd poses of their human counterparts. Presumably, Sample's view of his new Vermont surroundings and neighbors was more complex than the all-out boosterism generally associated with the regionalist aesthetic.

A Closer Look



HOOD MUSEUM OF ART
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

NUMBER NINE IN A SERIES

A Closer Look

The Hood Museum of Art is a teaching museum. Our mission is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. One way we do this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this painting.

What do you see?



What do you notice about the setting?

The land?

The various buildings?

The road?



What do you notice about the figures in the fore-ground?

Their clothing?

Their body language?

Their expressions?



What do you notice about the figures in the middleground?



In the background?



What types of transportation are pictured in the scene?

What animals has the artist chosen to include? What do they have in common?

Finally, look carefully at the way the artist composed the entire painting.

What do you notice about the colors? The shapes? The lines?

How has the artist organized the space?

Overall, what words would you use to describe this painting and the artist's style?

Step 2: Analysis

Now think about all of this visual information.

Where in the world do you think this scene might be taking place?

When?

During what season?

On what day of the week?

Where would you need to be standing in order to see the scene from this point of view? How does your eye move over the scene from this vantage point?

How would you describe the relationships between the people in this painting? Between the people and the land?

Does this style of painting remind you of other works of art or images you have seen?

Would you describe the artist's style as realistic? Abstract? Or both? Why?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the painting for clues to support your ideas.

Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the text printed on the back of this brochure. It provides background information you cannot get simply by looking at the painting.

When you have finished reading, consider the following:

Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did the text mention anything you did not see or think about previously? If so, what?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you read the background information first?