



NASHVILLE PARTHENON EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

LESSON PLAN: THE STORY OF THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

WORKSHEET

Name: _____

Welcome to the Parthenon!

Read two versions of how the collection of paintings came to be at the Parthenon.

Version 1:



James M. Cowan donated the permanent collection of paintings to the Parthenon. He was from middle Tennessee, but grew up to work in insurance near Chicago, Illinois. He developed an interest in art and began collecting a new style of paintings: American landscapes painted by American artists. Cowan planned to donate some of his collection in 1927, but wanted his identity to remain a secret until his death. He died in 1930 after donating 63 paintings to the City of Nashville. The paintings became the main collection of art at the Parthenon, and have been on display ever since.

Version 2:

In 1927, people in Nashville heard rumors about a large collection of art donated to their city. Crates of paintings arrived, but their labels were hidden. Everyone had questions, but there were no answers. The art donor required full secrecy until the donor's death, or else they would cancel the donation of paintings.



After his death in 1930, James Cowan was named as the secret donor. He was inspired to make this donation to honor his boyhood home after growing up in middle Tennessee, and also as a thank-you to all the people of Nashville who made his visit to the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in 1897 so special. He visited the Exposition with a team of young Armour Drill Corps girls that he taught, which inspired him to donate a lasting legacy of art with all who visit the Parthenon.

"This naturally calls for some acknowledgement from me to the people of Nashville, who so generously and willingly gave these children the time of their lives." –James Cowan

The Parthenon was always meant to show art, even when it was a temporary building during the Tennessee Centennial Exposition. When the Parthenon was repaired and reopened in the 1930s, Cowan's collection went on display. As a new permanent museum, these paintings became the main collection of the Parthenon. To this day 2/3 of the 63 paintings are always on display. At the time, these paintings were a new and exciting type of art: American landscapes painted by American artists.

James Cowan hand-picked the art he wanted to donate to the people of Nashville. He chose artists that he enjoyed and artists that were important. He also chose art that he thought would inspire its viewers: nature scenes, sunshine, and forests. And lastly, he chose to share art that gave hope, such as a stormy scene that will soon pass, or a winter scene with a hint of spring.

Which version do you prefer, and why?

Collecting:

Some people collect baseball cards and keep them in a box in their bedroom. Some people collect giraffe figurines that decorate the "Giraffe Bathroom". What do you collect? What connects these objects?

Take a minute to think about who else would like your collection. Maybe this means you collect or trade with friends, or that someone else from around the world collects something similar. Pretend you meet someone who has never heard of your collection. What is the story of your collection? (How did it start? How would you describe it? Why is it important to you?)

The Collection at the Parthenon:




Cowan's entire collection had over 800 works of art, and not just paintings. He donated 63 paintings to the Parthenon because he thought they were important for people to see. He mostly picked landscapes, or nature scenes, but he also chose some portraits. What connects them all? Yes, they are all paintings. But they also tell the story of a major shift in the art world. At the time, American artists weren't as popular as European artists.

Landscapes weren't as popular as portraits and still life paintings. Together, the collection as a whole is showing what American artists were creating: a new style of art with innovative subject matter, colors, and textures that was purely American.



Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880)
AUTUMN IN THE CATSKILLS
1871, oil on canvas
29.1.07

Sanford Robinson Gifford was born and raised in the heart of the Hudson River Valley. Initially he studied to be a figure painter, but his journeys in the Catskill Mountains of New York moved him to concentrate on landscapes. He had a remarkable ability to capture light and atmosphere in his paintings, as seen in *Autumn in the Catskills*.

 **The Cowan Connection**
In 1857 Sanford Robinson Gifford spent time sketching and touring in Italy with Albert Bierstadt.

How to Read a Label at the Parthenon:

Artist Name (Born-Died)

TITLE

Date, type of painting and materials

Collection number

Information

Special Fun Fact

Connects the collector, the artists, and/or the paintings.



Key Questions:

What story is your collection telling?
What will you write on labels to help tell that story?