CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

EXPLORE THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE DELAWARE VALLEY REGION WITH THE MICHENER ART MUSEUM

RIVER ICE
John F. Folinsbee, 1936.
Oil on canvas.
40x32.25 inches.
James A. Michener Art Museum.
Gift of the John Folinsbee Trust.

LET’S LOOK
What is your first reaction to this artwork? Why do you think you feel this way?

What juxtapositions - or disimilar elements placed near each other - can you find in this piece?

Describe the water in this painting using three well considered adjectives.

Describe the kinds of brushstrokes the artist used in the painting. Are they short/long, wide/narrow, tentative/confident, one or multidirectional? How do they contribute to the mood, or feeling, of this piece?

If you were to place yourself somewhere in this painting, where would you be? Why did you choose to be there?

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

The painting depicts a collection of small icebergs floating atop the Delaware River, as seen from one of its banks on a winter day. A few chunks of ice appear in the foreground, each drifting along with the current. The dark blues and grays of the water contrast with the white snow and brown tones in the earth. On the distant riverbank are the shapes of several buildings: rectangular windows and pitched rooftops alongside the tall chimney stack of a factory. A steel truss bridge made up of black angular lines spans across the river. In the foreground, a single leafless tree stretches its few bare branches into the air.

Folinsbee often made sketches of the factories, quarries, and canals along the Delaware River, and later used his drawings as guides when painting in his studio. Early on in his artistic career, Folinsbee used bright colors and short brush strokes to help create a feeling of warmth and natural light. Later, he began to use different darker, more intense colors that he applied with long, forceful movements of his brush. He also loved to create a high level of contrast between the light and dark areas in his paintings. These choices, as visible in River Ice, would eventually characterize Folinsbee’s signature artistic style.
ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Fulton Folinsbee was born in Buffalo, New York, and showed a talent for drawing early on. He received his first formal arts instruction when he was fifteen, and by the age of twenty, had committed himself to a painting career that would span over sixty years. Folinsbee came to New Hope in 1916, where he joined the group of artists known as the New Hope School, or the Pennsylvania Impressionists. He quickly became established in the community there, and together with his wife, Ruth, helped to create the Phillips Mill Community Association in 1929.

Folinsbee approached his art with great commitment and liked to finish a painting in “one go,” sometimes working overnight to complete it. Notably, his life path was significantly shaped by two tragic events. As a young man, he was stricken by the polio virus while swimming and a week later, his older brother was killed in a diving accident. These experiences prompted Folinsbee’s decision to devote himself to the study and practice of art as a profession. They also deeply influenced his attitude towards water, which often has a mysterious, powerful and even forbidding quality in his paintings.

Creating a Soundscape

A soundscape is a group of sounds put together to make one collective experience. After looking at River Ice, brainstorm different sounds that might be in that setting – perhaps crunching leaves, wind blowing, a hawk’s shrill call. Assign the list of sounds to different students and perform the soundscape together, using various instruments and objects or simply voices. What other images would you like to “hear”?

One River, Two Styles

Folinsbee’s manner of painting changed as he included new and more modern ideas and techniques into his work. Compare River Ice with Frozen River, a painting Folinsbee created of a similar subject 20 years earlier. Note the different choices he makes with color, brushstroke, composition and overall mood. Challenge yourself to create two small paintings of the same scene that demonstrate one subject rendered in two different styles.

Surviving the Ice

The Delaware River is home to many fish, reptiles, birds, and mammals. However, the water temperature averages between 31 and 48 degrees Fahrenheit during the winter months. How do they survive the cold season? Choose one of the following native species and find out the answer to this question: Shortnose Sturgeon, Great Blue Heron, North American River Otter, Northern Watersnake. Create a postcard-sized fact sheet that includes this and other notable information about your chosen creature.