

FASHIONING CHARACTER

Costume drawings have long served important and multifaceted roles in American art. Some were created as technical exercises for working out the illusionistic fall of drapery over the human figure. In the academic curriculum, artists advanced from representing the nude body to portraying the clothed form.

In figural representation, costume also adds a layer of narrative content. In other words, artists used distinctive clothing and other accessories to construct or fashion a character's identity. Nostalgic images of peasants and rural folk became popular over the course of the 19th century as the United States became increasingly urbanized and industrialized. American artists and audiences were also fascinated with the "exotic" and the "picturesque," finding a range of interesting character types in far-off lands, as well as closer to home in a transformed modern society.

EXPLORING NATURE

The easy portability of drawing materials has historically made this art form well suited to documenting nature through on-the-spot observation. Ranging from panoramic vistas to close-up studies of particular species of flora or fauna, the drawings in this section exemplify various approaches to *plein air* (open air) sketching.

The rise of the Hudson River School in the second quarter of the 19th century established landscape as a significant genre in American art and placed a premium on the direct study of nature. Many artists spent the summer months working outdoors, recording their observations in drawings that were used as source material for paintings made later in the studio.

Plein air sketching remained a vital practice into the 20th century. Influenced by the French Barbizon School, Impressionism, and other modern movements, artists sought to portray the fleeting effects of light and atmosphere as well as their subjective responses to nature. In addition to providing a respite from the chaos of urban life, nature inspired experiments in new styles and aesthetic concerns.