

Close read of “Sunday Morning in the Mines”

“Take a look at this famous painting called “Sunday Morning in the Mines” by Charles Nahl. It was painted in 1872. I want you to take a few moments and talk to your partner about the painting. What do you see in it? What’s the first thing that jumps out at you? Talk about it with your partner and jot down some ideas in your D.S.N.B.”

- After the students have taken notes, ask them, “Now I want you to look for something you haven’t seen before.” “What seems important here?”
- If they find something, have them jot it down on their list.
- Have some butcher paper and have students call out some things they noticed in the painting.
- If students are missing something important, guide them with questions like, “What do you think they guys in the background are doing?”
- Ask the kids to do an “I see... I wonder... I would argue...” Make sure that when they do an “I would argue...” that they give examples and show evidence from the painting. Here is an example to model:

“**I see** men in the background under a tent or some sort of covering.”

“**I wonder** what they are doing?”

“**I would argue** that they are fighting. I say that because one man is either throwing a punch, or has the other’s neck in his hand. They seem to be moving around in an excited manner.”

- After students have a chance to try, teacher says, “So as you know, like writers, painters often try to convey messages in their paintings. Sometimes the paintings have a theme or represent an idea. So what do you think the painter is trying to tell us? Discuss with your partner.”
- Ask for volunteers to share out loud.

After a lengthy discussion, have the kids write in their D.S.N.B. Have them respond to the following prompt, “What do you think the painter is trying to tell us? Is there a theme or message here? Make sure you support what you write with evidence!!”

For Teacher

If needed, point out that the tree is in the middle...it splits the painting into two rectangles. Ask kids what adjectives they could use to describe each side. Ask them what is in the middle of each rectangle.

About Sunday Morning in the Mines

Nahl's many drawings and paintings of the Gold Rush era were based on first-hand experiences as a miner in the early 1850s. He introduced this theme and complex composition of 20-plus figures in works from the early 1850s: for an illustrated poem-essay, *The Idle and Industrious Miner*, and in a newspaper illustration. Judge Edwin B. Crocker of Sacramento commissioned this painting, *Sunday Morning in the Mines*, in 1872, nearly 20 years later. Because of his earlier illustrations, the theme and imagery were well known to Edwin Crocker and a large portion of the public. When the painting was first displayed in San Francisco, the press referred to the "truthful" depiction of an earlier era. The chaotic, crowded conditions, with primarily male populations, are represented in this scene.

The redwood doorframe of the cabin, divides the composition into two parts. The left side of the painting is filled with raucous scenes, the other with quieter activities. Contemporary accounts of mining life, from letters and newspaper articles, reinforce the types of activities portrayed in this work. Although the doorframe dominates the center of the scene, it is the young man's outstretched hand clutching the bag of gold dust that draws the viewer's attention to the peak of activity. Men on horses thunder by, kicking a storm of dust underfoot. Further into the background on the left is a scene of men brawling and shooting, further reinforcing the lawlessness of mining towns. The large redwood branches cast shadows over a solitary man, smoking and leaning against the cabin. A man writing a letter – believed to be a self-portrait of Nahl – is also protected from the elements and chaos. Moving to the right, mining tools are scattered in the foreground, in keeping with Sunday as the day of rest. Two men listen attentively to a third reading, presumably from a bible. Further to right, two additional miners are engaged in washing and mending their clothes. Scattered across the foreground are a sardine box, oyster can, mustard bottle, claret bottle, sheet iron used in a hopper, etc. The containers are an insightful detail into some of the luxuries and cast-offs that made up mining life. Although this scene does not reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity associated with the Gold Rush, it may in fact reflect the type of community in which Nahl, as an immigrant from Germany, might have found himself. Many of his other works record the other groups of people who found their way to California by this time.

Although there are more figures on the left side of the painting, than on the right, Nahl achieved overall balance in this large-scale composition. He distributed the tools and litter throughout the carefully drawn foreground and balanced the ponderous figures and overhanging foliage on the right with the more brightly colored, and energetic figures on the left. Finally, he organized and unified the composition through line (along with two implied diagonal lines crossing through the center) and repeated color.

Although landscape scenes dominated the art market of the early 1870s, Nahl generally ignored this trend and found success with his scenes of figures. He emphasized -- sometimes, even exaggerated -- gestures and emotions in his dramatic images, whether in wood engravings or large-scale colorful paintings. In *Sunday Morning in the Mines*, Nahl demonstrated keen knowledge of nature by accurately recording the native flora of the Mother Lode region. Notice the small cluster of snow plants in the right foreground and the manzanita bushes used for drying clothing. A small lizard sits silent and alert on the large rock at the lower left of the scene, a nod to Nahl's attention to detail and humor.

(taken from
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