

Coast View with the Abduction of Europa

Claude Lorrain
French, Rome, about 1645
Oil on canvas
38 x 48 1/4 in.
2007.32



Background Information

The maiden Europa rests atop a white bull, unaware it is the god Jupiter in disguise. According to the tale in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, soon the animal will abduct her across the waves. Until then, she and her attendants festoon the seemingly innocent beast with flowers, while her blue drapery flutters in the breeze. In the upper right corner, a hazy poetic light illuminates her home city of Tyre, further evoking an idyllic antique world.

Claude Lorrain is known for painting complicated images that achieve a tranquil balance. This scene appears pastoral, but his composition and details also hint of impending danger. Beyond the field of delicate flowers, for example, a craggy tower looms. The women fail to notice that the bull is poised in anticipation, already straightening one of his legs for flight. Whitecaps gather behind them on the darkening sea, the backdrop to Europa's fate.

Even in his day, Lorraine was known for developing a style called the Ideal Landscape, in which nature on the canvas surpasses the real thing in its beauty, harmony, and refinement. Here he balances formal elements, like the upright trees, ship, and towers, against the open expanse of sea and sky. Offshore, he juxtaposes the huge galleon and all its impeccable detail in the rigging and carved decoration, with Europa still on land. The maritime theme also had a deeper resonance for Claude's contemporaries, as in art criticism, the abduction of Europa was compared to a ship leaving shore.

French by birth, and working in Rome, Lorraine often went into the countryside to do studies of nature. One of his hallmarks is the use of a unifying light, which gives this work a kind of gentle glow. The romance is punctuated by long shadows coming in from the left, distinctive of his favorite afternoon light, which help frame the drama at center stage.

Coast View with the Abduction of Europa, Claude Lorrain

About the Artist

Claude Lorraine
b. 1604 Champagne, France, d. 1682 Rome
painter; draftsman
French

"Claude Lorrain knew the real world by heart, down to its minute details. He used it as a means of expressing the harmonious universe of his soul."
--Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A peasant's son, Claude Gellée became known as Claude Lorrain, named after the duchy in which he was born. He had difficulty writing French and Italian and could barely count, but he could explain light's effects like a physicist. Entirely devoted to his art, the kind, guileless Claude became wildly successful despite ruthless competition. Responding to forgers, notably Sébastien Bourdon, he began recording the pictures he sold in his *Liber veritatis* (Book of Truth), now in the British Museum, which contains some examples of his most beautiful draftsmanship.

The young Claude began his career in Rome by about 1617, where he largely remained until his death. He studied the art of Northern European landscapists working in Italy, trained under Rome's landscape painters, and briefly studied in Naples. By 1633 Claude had found his definitive landscape style and joined Rome's Academia di San Luca.

Regardless of subject, Claude's focus was always landscape and light, which unified his pictures. Thin, semi-transparent layers of oil paint created extraordinary luminosity, and every element was subordinated to the poetic feeling of the whole. To stimulate his imagination to devise images more beautiful and better ordered than nature itself, he drew outdoors daily. In life and long after his death, Claude influenced landscape painting and garden design, through his paintings and over 1,300 drawings.

Questions for Teaching

Describe the figures. What do you think they are doing?

Describe the setting where this is taking place.

What do you think is happening in this painting? What visual evidence leads you to your response?

Artists often juxtapose light and dark colors to highlight people or places in a painting. Which areas are highlighted in this work? Why do you think the artist chose to highlight these sections?

Which areas of the painting are in shadows? Why do you think the artist chose to place these sections in shadows?

What symbolic references allude to placing someone or something "in shadows" or "in darkness"?