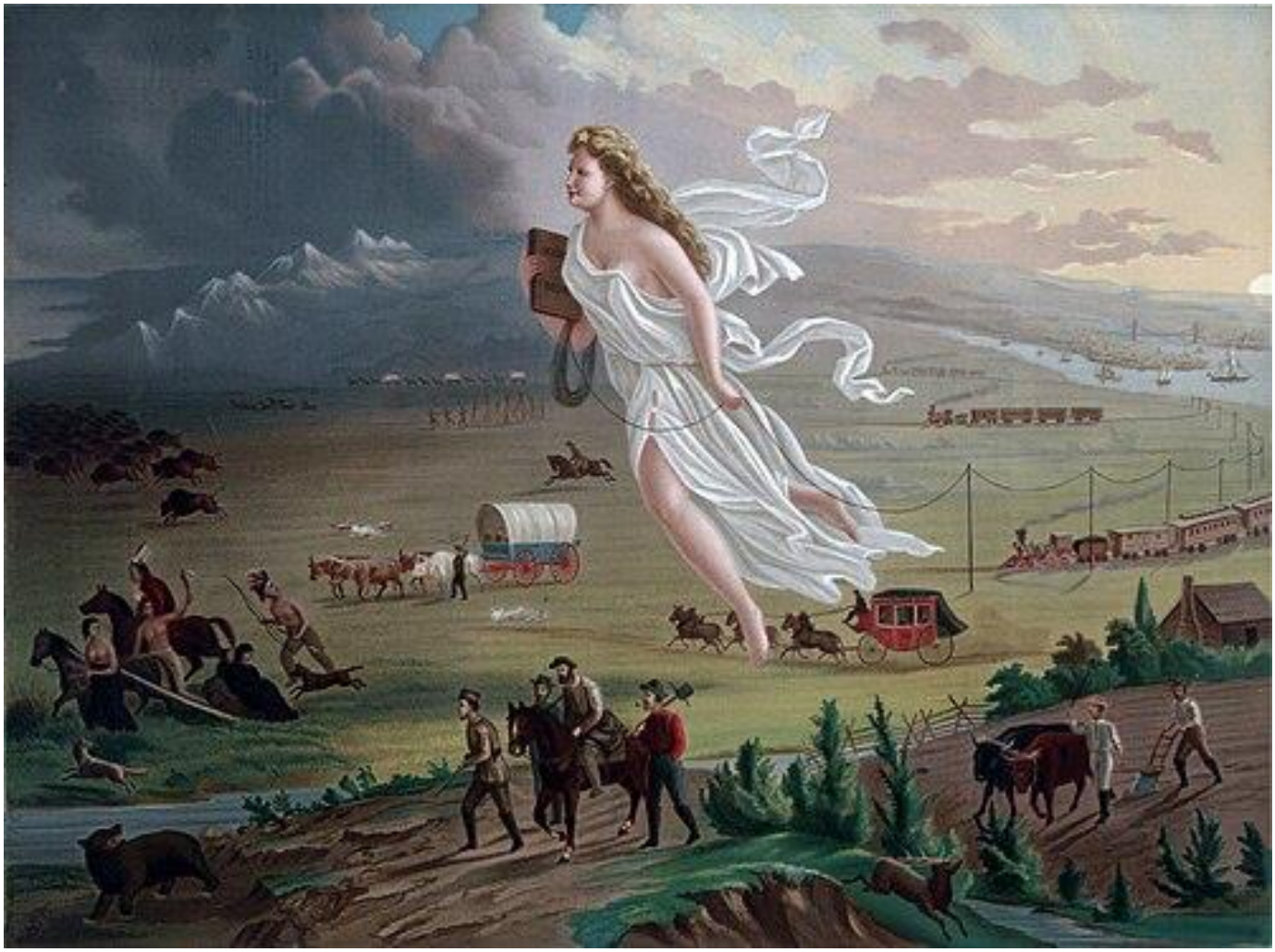
<u>American Progress-</u>1872 Painting by John Gast: What Do You See?

NAME: _____

American Progress is a painting of profound historical significance. It depicts the woman, Columbia, who personifies the United States and its westward expansion.

Take some time to observe this painting.



1. What did you notice? (Only what you can see.)
   Write or sketch details from the image.
   - I notice: _____.
   - I notice: _____.
   - I notice: _____.

2. What might it mean?
   Use your observations to begin thinking about what the image is showing.

- This might show: _____.
- This could suggest: _____.
- An important idea in the image might be: _____.

3. Think about perspective
    - I think this image shows the perspective of: _____.
    - I think this because: _____.
    - Someone or something centered in the image is: _____.
    - Someone or something less visible is: _____.

4. Notice what is not shown

    Think about what you know about the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians and their relationships to land.
    - Something I know about this place that is not shown is:

      _____
    - A relationship to land that is not visible is:

      _____
    - A perspective or knowledge that is missing or not centered is:

      _____

5. Write about your thinking
   Does this painting show a complete story of the land and people? Use evidence and include what may be missing.
   You might begin with:
    - I notice…
    - This shows…
    - Another perspective might include…

Teacher Background- American Progress: Art as Visual Text

About the Image

American Progress (1872), painted by John Gast, is often used as a historical example of how images were used to communicate ideas during the period of U.S. westward expansion. The painting presents a highly structured scene showing movement from east to west across the landscape. Progress for some people may not mean progress for others.

At the center of the image is a floating female figure (often identified as "Columbia"), surrounded by people, animals, transportation, and changing land use. The composition draws attention to direction, movement, and contrast across the image.

Reading the Image as a Visual Text

- This painting can be approached as a visual text, one that communicates meaning through:
  - composition (placement and scale of figures and objects)
  - use of light and shadow
  - movement across the landscape
  - inclusion and omission of people and activities

- Students are not expected to arrive at a single interpretation. Instead, they are invited to:
  - observe carefully
  - describe what they see
  - consider how visual elements work together to communicate an idea

Perspectives and Point of View

Like any text, this image reflects a particular perspective.

- The artist made choices about:
  - what to include
  - what to emphasize
  - how to represent people, land, and movement

These choices shape how viewers might understand what is happening in the scene.

- This lesson supports students in recognizing that:
  - images do not simply show events
  - they present a way of seeing and understanding those events

Connection to Prior Learning of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw People

- Students bring knowledge from earlier lessons about:
  - the Tribes' relationships to land
  - long-standing presence in Southwestern Oregon
  - ways of living with and caring for natural resources, such as cedar
- This knowledge can support students in noticing:
  - how land is represented in the image
  - what relationships to land are visible or not visible
  - what perspectives may not be centered

- The goal is not to replace one interpretation with another, but to help students:
  - recognize that multiple understandings of place and history exist

- consider how those understandings are or are not reflected in the image

Role of the Educator:

- In this activity, the educator supports students to:
  - ground their ideas in visual evidence
  - distinguish between what they see and what they infer
  - explore how perspective shapes meaning

- Avoid introducing a fixed explanation of the image before students have had time to observe and interpret. Instead, use prompts to:
  - extend student thinking
  - connect ideas to evidence
  - invite consideration of perspective and absenc

- What to listen for in student thinking**:**
  - Students may notice:
    - Movement from one side of the image to another
    - Differences in light and shadow
    - Changes in land use or presence of tools
  - Students may begin to interpret:
    - Ideas about movement, change, or expansion
    - What is emphasized or valued in the image
  - Students may identify:
    - Missing perspectives or relationships to land
    - Differences between what is shown and what they know

Quick Guide: Reading Visual Text

1. Notice
   - Ask: What do you see?
   - Press for: specific details
2. Interpret
   - Ask: What might this suggest?
   - Press for: evidence from the image
3. Perspective
   - Ask: Whose point of view is shown?
   - Press for: what is centered or emphasized
4. What is Not Shown
   - Ask: What do you know about this place that is not shown?
   - Press for: relationships to land, continuity, presence
5. Reminder:
   - Avoid confirming a “correct” interpretation.
   - Keep returning students to what they can see and support with evidence.

American Progress - 1872 Painting by John Gast

Teacher Background

American Progress, a painting of profound historical significance, has become a seminal example of American Western Art. Serving as an allegory for manifest destiny and American westward expansion. The woman in the center is Columbia, the personification of the United States. On her head is "The Star of the Empire."

Columbia represents progress, which moves from the light-skied East to the dark and treacherous West. She leads settlers who follow her either on foot or by stagecoach, horseback, Conestoga wagon, wagon train, or steam engine trains. Columbia represents the figure of progress: She is carrying the telegraph wire in one hand and schoolbooks in the other.

On the right side of the painting to the East, New York City can be seen in the background. Farmers who have settled in the Midwest are featured in the foreground. The visual of this East to West movement is illuminated with light/goodness. As Columbia moves westward, Indigenous People and a herd of bison flee form her and the settlers. The West side of the painting is dark and ominous.

In the bottom right of the painting farmers are diligently (productively) tilling a field, a clear symbol of the Midwest as a developed and colonized region. This symbolizes the relentless push of settlers from the East to the West. This movement was facilitated by treaties with Native Tribes, often resulting in the forced relocation of these tribes to smaller reservations with little or no compensation for their land.

The painting provides a poignant visual representation of the complex and often brutal history of westward expansion in America, inviting us to reflect on the human cost of progress.

Portrayal of Lady Columbia:

- Ethereal-Showing the Shining Way
- Goodness & Light
- Clothing Conflict: White (Angelic) vs. Skimpy (not Angelic)
- Progress: The Telegraph Wire
- Education: The Schoolbooks

Portrayal of Animals and Transportation:

- Bison running away (fear/slaughter)
- Travel Progress: Steam Engine & Stagecoach
- Domesticated animals (able to master animals and environment)

Portrayal of People:

- Indians running in fear
- Farmers being productive with the land
- Changing land use to farming
- Farmers with advanced tools

Use of Color:

- East is light & has an illuminating glow
- West is dark & foreboding