Studies in American Cultural Identity:
Beginnings to the Civil War

This course is designed for readers and students of American culture who wish to assemble a multidisciplinary “map” of American literary, visual, and musical art to help them locate authors, composers, and other artists in relation to key themes, decisive moments, and cultural developments which have shaped and defined our national character.

The emphasis will be on investigations of issues such as how the struggles for religious, racial, and gender rights, American violence, American polarities of innocence and experience, of individual and group welfare, individualism and conformity, and complex expressions of The American Dream and its dreamers influenced our first internationally recognized artists, as the formation of distinctly American art began.

Our basic text will be The Norton Anthology of American Literature (Eighth Edition, 2012), from which we will read representative works as exemplified key points on the “map,” including Bradford, Hutchinson, Bradstreet, Edwards, Wheatley, Franklin, Paine, the Adamses, Irving, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Douglass, Whitman, and others. We will examine the visual art of Copley, Peale, Stuart, Cole, Powers, Greenough, Catlin, Bierstadt, Moran, and of popular 19th Century magazines. We will listen to colonial, Federalist, Jacksonian era folk songs, ballads, and the later music of Bishop, Foster, and Gottschalk.

Throughout, we will consider how the social and political developments of the times helped form a foundation necessary for the multidisciplinary expression of nationalist American art.

A reading journal and individually defined final reading project will allow students to make comparisons and observations as their knowledge of American cultural traditions deepens.

If critic Van Wyck Brooks was right to suggest American artists and their audiences need to claim a usable past, how are they to do so?

Register online: ucollege.wustl.edu/registration
For more information, call: (314) 935-6700