

Hudson River School Masterworks



from the Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art

By

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Figure 1, Thomas Cole, Kaaterskill Falls, 1826. Oil on canvas; 25¼ x 36¾ in. Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.14



The rise of a school of landscape painters in New York in the mid-nineteenth century has proven to be one of the most important cultural developments in the United States. Native-born, immigrant, and visiting European artists focused their attention on the terrain of this new world, often combining literalism and lyricism to represent the transformation of the land over the course of the century from wilderness to an industrialized, urban-based society. Their art reveals the changing relationship between humans and their environment, from dominance by nature's forces early on, to a reversal of roles as the landscape was gradually integrated into human life by the century's end.

Figure 2, Thomas Cole, *Landscape Composition, St. John in the Wilderness*, 1827. Oil on canvas; 36 x 29 in. Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.16

Figure 3, Thomas Cole, *Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans": Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 25 7/8 x 35 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art Bequest of Alfred Smith, 1868.3



Figure 4, Thomas Cole, *View on Lake Winnipiseogee*, 1828. Oil on canvas; 19 3/4 x 26 1/2 in. Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.13



Figure 5, Thomas Cole, *View of Monte Video, the Seat of Daniel Wadsworth, Esq.*, 1828. Oil on canvas; 19 3/4 x 26 1/2 in. Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.14

Daniel Wadsworth and the Beginnings of American Landscape Painting

Niagara Falls, the Hudson River, Yosemite Valley, the vivid leaves of autumn – such natural wonders of the New World fascinated the Hudson River school, America's first school of landscape painters. The core of the Wadsworth Atheneum's Hudson River School collection was formed by

two major patrons of American artists who lived in Hartford – Daniel Wadsworth (1771-1848), a picturesque traveler, amateur artist and architect, and founder of the Wadsworth Atheneum, and Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt (1826-1905), widow of arms manufacturer Samuel Colt, and the creator of a major private picture gallery that was formed during the Civil War. Wadsworth determined the quality and direction



Figure 6, Thomas Cole, *Mount Etna from Taormina*, 1843. Oil on canvas, 78 7/8 x 120 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Museum Purchase, 1844.6



Figure 7, Frederic E. Church, *Hooker and Company Traveling through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636, 1846*. Oil on canvas, 40¼ x 60 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, 1850.9



Figure 8, Frederic E. Church, *Grand Manan Island, Bay of Fundy, 1852*. Oil on canvas, 21½ x 31 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Gallery Purchase Fund, 1898.6

of the collection. His distinguished Puritan lineage and his ties to the American Revolution endowed him with a profound reverence for his country's recent history. As a member of the first generation of citizens of the new republic, he saw this history and his country's vast wilderness landscape as conjoined, symbolic of the nation's potential greatness, and these two themes defined his vision for the Wadsworth Atheneum.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Wadsworth's active involvement in the picturesque description of the country's wilderness – as both amateur artist and collector – helped bring the aesthetic qualities and historic associations of the Northeastern landscape to the nation's attention. The American artist John

Trumbull, who Wadsworth was related to through marriage, and who instructed him in the emerging taste for landscape art, mentored him. As one of the most important early patrons of American artists, Wadsworth first met Thomas Cole in 1825, and maintained a life-long friendship with Cole that influenced his own collection. Wadsworth acquired works from Trumbull and Cole, and nurtured the careers of a number of younger artists including, Alvan Fisher, and Frederic Church, who he discovered in Hartford and introduced to Cole, resulting in Church's two-year apprenticeship in Cole's Hudson, New York, studio. His friendships with these artists helped to define Wadsworth's ambitions for the country's first permanent gallery of fine art. Months before the opening of the Wadsworth Atheneum, Cole, leader of the American landscape school, applauded Wadsworth's vision, writing, "I assure you that I shall feel proud of having a picture of mine in your Gallery & hope the example you are about to set, in forming a permanent Gallery, will be followed in other places & be the means of producing a more elevated taste & a warmer love for beautiful Art than at present exists in the Country." [Thomas Cole to Alfred Smith (Wadsworth's lawyer), February 6, 1844, Archives, Wadsworth Atheneum.]

Later acquisitions and gifts by donors such as Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt, widow of the Hartford arms manufacturer Samuel Colt, added significant works by the major Hudson River school artists, including Albert Bierstadt, William Bradford, John William Casilear, Jasper F. Cropsey, Asher B. Durand, and John F. Kensett. Elizabeth Colt worked with Frederic Church as her advisor to form one of the finest private picture galleries in the United States. The collection, which was housed in her Hartford mansion, "Armsmear,"



Figure 9, Frederic E. Church, *Coast Scene, Mount Desert, 1863*. Oil on canvas; 36½ x 48 in. Bequest of Clara Hinton Gould, 1948.178

was formed during the Civil War era. Because many of the works in the collection were commissioned by these collectors for their personal enjoyment or for the museum itself, the Wadsworth Atheneum collection has a purity that reflects the major concerns of the young nation and its artists, and the aesthetic sensibilities of the Hudson River School.

Thomas Cole and Daniel Wadsworth: Artist and Patron

America's first native school of landscape painting emerged between 1825 and 1875, when artists created a distinctive style of landscape painting that all but replaced portraiture as the premier focus of painting in the United States. This group, now known as the Hudson River School, was active in New York City and frequented the Catskill Mountain region, where several built houses along the Hudson River. The scenery of upstate New York and New England—a part of the tourist circuit by this time, but often depicted as wilderness regions by the earliest of these artists—was their subject matter. South America and the West would later entice other Hudson River School

painters, such as Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt, who traveled widely in search of more exotic locations to paint.

The discovery, exploration and settlement of the land were central to the enterprise of the American landscape painters. Symbolic images of the American wilderness, depicted as untouched since Creation (and often identified with the figure of a Native American), evoked the Edenic purity of the New World and the hope for a fresh start. As the land was cultivated and the wilderness was settled, artists tried to come to terms with the pros and cons of progress. While industry grew and the country expanded westward, painters depicted the newly-settled landscape as a pastoral setting where human and nature could coexist in a balance of power.

Thomas Cole, the acknowledged founder of the Hudson River School, established a pictorial model reflecting the themes and ideas that he and his patrons, such as Wadsworth, espoused. Wadsworth commissioned his first landscape from Cole in 1826: a variation of Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls*, (fig. 1) which John Trumbull (Wadsworth's uncle-in-law) had purchased in 1825. Cole provided a romantic vision of the American wilderness in this view of the upper fall seen from beneath the rock semidome. The dark and dramatic scene includes a stormy sky and turbulent spray from the falls. Standing as though inside the



Figure 10, Frederic E. Church, *Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 48 7/8 x 84 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Bequest of Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt, 1905.21

cavern, the viewer is thrown into the scene without the benefit of a conventional foreground. He evoked the season with touches of bright autumnal color. An American Indian stands on a precipice in the center foreground, surveying the wild beauty before him. The anachronistic inclusion of a Native American symbolizes the nation's past. Pleased with the work, Wadsworth commissioned a series of additional landscapes between 1826 and 1828, becoming one of Cole's major patrons.

Among these commissions were two ambitious imaginary landscapes drawing on literary themes. *St. John in the Wilderness*, 1827, (fig. 2) was inspired from a passage from the Gospel of Matthew, and conveyed the message that the divine presence could be experienced in the wilderness. Cole's emblematic personifications of nature, seen here in the anthropomorphic rock formation and other dramatic natural and human forms, serve as symbols of God's presence in the unfolding historical drama of civilization. *Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans": Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund*, 1827 (fig. 3) was inspired by a passage from James Fenimore Cooper's popular novel of the same title, which became an instant best seller after its publication in 1826. Cole combined the real and the ideal in this work, including the idealized geological features that enhance the minute narrative scene in the foreground. The young white woman Cora pleads for her virtue and that of her sister's

before the Indian Chief Tamenund. Cole chose to surround the narrative scene with landscape features that reflect his interest in geology: the round boulder or "rocking stone," in particular was an object of great curiosity at the time. Here the boulder rests precariously atop a high pinnacle, marking the sacred spot for the tribal gathering of the Delaware Tribe. This rock formation, especially the phallic pinnacle, and, to its right, a large cave behind the group of figures, evokes the sexual tension in Cooper's novel.

When Cole delivered *St. John* to Monte Video (Wadsworth's country estate on Talcott Mountain in Avon, Connecticut), Wadsworth encouraged Cole to travel to the White Mountains in New Hampshire and provided him with an itinerary based on a trip he had taken in 1826. Cole followed Wadsworth's instructions and upon his return incorporated New Hampshire mountain scenery into a number of important landscapes, including *View in the White Mountains*, 1827. Of particular interest is a pair of pictures Cole painted for Wadsworth in 1828, *View on Lake Winnipiseogee* (fig. 4) and *View of Monte Video, the Seat of Daniel Wadsworth, Esq.* (fig. 5). These paintings, one of a lake in the White Mountains and one of Wadsworth's estate (with a figure, perhaps a muse, on a promontory overlooking the property), seem to be Cole's tribute to Wadsworth's role as a patron. At the time of Wadsworth's death the two works hung together in the library of Monte Video. *Lake Winnipiseogee* depicts American wilderness untouched by civilization and exemplified by the White Mountain scenery that both men revered, while Monte Video provides a pastoral view of Wadsworth's estate situated between

wilderness at the left and the ongoing cultivation of the landscape at the right. The paintings provided a testament to the friendship that existed between artist and patron.

Cole traveled to Europe in 1828 to 1831 and again in 1841 to 1842. He spent a considerable amount of time in Italy, where he sketched the striking scenery and ruins that would figure in such pictures as *Roman Campagna*, 1843, and *Mount Etna from Taormina* 1843 (fig. 6). Cole's romantic depictions of the Italian countryside favored ruins as a symbol for the history of European culture and civilization, while the rocks and untamed forests of the New World suggested the great age and natural history of the American landscape.

Frederic Church

Hartford native Frederic Church, one of the second generation of Hudson River School artists to emerge in the 1850s, became the most popular artist of his day. Through Wadsworth's intercession, Church became Cole's first (and best-known) pupil. Cole's influence on the young artist is clearly seen in Church's first major landscape, *Hooker and*

Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636, 1846 (fig. 7). The romantic, idealized landscape relates to the history of the founding of Connecticut, when Thomas Hooker, a Puritan preacher, traveled to the Connecticut Valley with his congregation from Cambridge, Massachusetts. The famous Charter Oak Tree, where – according to legend – one of Wadsworth's ancestors hid the Connecticut Charter from the British, can be seen in the middle-ground to the left. Like Cole, Church used human and spiritual drama to define the landscape; the figures evoke the flight of the Holy Family. The brilliant light that illumines the party's passage through the wilderness completes the allegory of divine providence at work in the Connecticut River valley. The painting is one of the earliest representations of westward expansion.

Church traveled to the far reaches of North America, painting spectacular views of the coast of Maine and Canada, such as *Grand Manan Island, Bay of Fundy*, 1852 (fig. 8) and *Coast Scene, Mount Desert*, 1863 (fig. 9), which is distinguished for its compelling sense of drama and energy; the viewer directly confronts the sea and its sublime power. Influenced by German explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt, Church developed a fascination with South American and other remote wilderness regions. He produced a series of spectacular panoramic landscapes rich in detail and emotional effect that brought him interna-

Figure 11, Asher B. Durand, *View Toward the Hudson River Valley*, 1851. Oil on canvas, 33 1/8 x 48 1/8 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1948.119





Figure 12, Albert Bierstadt. *In the Mountains*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 36 3/16 x 50 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Gift of John Junius Morgan in memory of his mother Juliet Pierpont Morgan, 1923.253

tional acclaim. He completed *Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica* (fig. 10), one of his many theatrical views of the tropics, as the focal point for Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt's gallery, in 1867. Aware of the importance of this commission, Church took care in imbuing his tropical landscape with a deeply spiritual meaning. He chose to depict the moment just after a storm, when the landscape glows in a lush, steamy atmosphere. The brilliant light of the rising sun emerges from behind a passing rain cloud, creating a swirling vortex of light and atmosphere reminiscent of J. M. W. Turner. In this idealized landscape, a tiny monastery is placed high on the horizon, overlooking the river, symbolic of divine presence in the tropics. With Church's guidance, Mrs. Colt (one of the

first major American women patrons of American artists) created a picture gallery filled chiefly with works by Hudson River School painters.

Hudson River School

Asher B. Durand, one of the first generation of Hudson River painters, succeeded Cole as one of the leaders of the landscape school following Cole's untimely death in 1848. Durand developed a meticulous style for rendering the landscape that was based on his reading of *Modern Painters* by the English critic and moralist John Ruskin, and influenced by his training as an engraver. Durand's style embodied a reverence for nature and God's creation that later came to characterize the Hudson River school, as seen in *View Toward the Hudson Valley*, 1851 (fig. 11), where Durand carefully delineated trees and foreground rocks at the left representing a wilderness setting, while offering an admiring view of human creation beyond. The figures in this painting (perhaps the artist and his patron) look out over and toward a cultivated and pastoral stretch of land. Their symbolic position with regard to the valley can be seen as one of domination, implicitly celebrating the Manifest Destiny of the American empire to expand into, control, and civilize the wild in the name of progress.

Albert Bierstadt, another primary figure of the Hudson River School, made expeditions to the west, where he sketched and painted the breathtaking scenery of the Yosemite Valley and other well-known sites. *In the*

Figure 13, Albert Bierstadt, *Toward the Setting Sun*, 1862. Oil on canvas; 7 3/4 x 14 in. Gift of Mr. J. Harold Williams, in memory of Edith Russell Wooley, 1977.74



Mountains, 1867 (fig. 12), possibly a composite view of the Rockies or the Sierra Nevadas, typifies the large, dramatic panoramic vistas that Bierstadt painted to dazzle the eastern market.

Along with the most exceptional features of the wilderness landscape, Native Americans served as an important symbol of the New World. In landscape art, they are so fully integrated into the wilderness scenery that they seem one in the same. In an effort to justify their claim to this vast landscape, artists and the American public romanticized the indigenous presence while eliminating all signs of the Native Americans' actual relationship with the land. They appear in northeastern scenery as symbols of the original purity of God's wilderness (see figs. 1 and 5); and later, as they are encountered in the western territories, they are documented with a sense of urgency that forecasts their threatened extinction – for example, Albert Bierstadt's *Toward the Setting Sun*, 1862 (fig. 13). In a suffusion of golden red light, the Native Americans and their dogs are placed in dark shadow in a flat plains landscape. With their backs to the viewer, the Indians gaze at the setting sun in the distance.

Landscape painters who established their careers after mid-century continued to explore familiar scenery in the Northeast, but their landscapes demonstrated new aesthetic concerns. In the 1860s and 1870s Americans, who traveled in great numbers to Europe, became more cosmopolitan in their tastes. Artists sought training and inspiration in Europe as American patrons supported the large-scale importation

Figure 14, John F. Kensett, *Coast Scene With Figures (Beverly Shore)*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 36 x 60 3/8 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1942.345

of European art. Several new trends rooted on European styles began to have an impact on art in America, including French Barbizon landscape painting, the Munich School, and the British-inspired Aesthetic movement. The term *Hudson River School* was first introduced in the 1870s – pejoratively, in fact – to describe the panoramic vision and precise detail of such artists as Durand, Church, and Bierstadt, among many others whose works began to appear conservative in the face of new stylistic concerns. Additionally, advancements in photography threatened the landscape painter's hegemony over this newer, more "truthful" medium. These changes signaled in landscape art a transitional phase that was resolved by the end of the century, when the figure replaced nature as the prominent subject of the landscape.

Another mode of Hudson River School landscape painting, differing from Church's and Bierstadt's grandiose views, developed during this period. Such artists as John F. Kensett, Sanford Gifford, Martin Johnson Heade, and John William Casilear painted landscapes characterized by strong horizontal compositions, a profound stillness, diffuse light, and a nearly imperceptible brush stroke. This mode is best represented in the collection by Kensett's *Coast Scene*



with *Figures (Beverly Shore)* of 1869 (fig. 14) and Casilear's *Lake George*, 1860 (fig. 15). Large bodies of water dominate these two compositions, and each artist employs light in a distinct manner: Kensett uses a soft light to define atmosphere, while Casilear's lake is almost crystalline. The Hudson River School's interest in light can be traced back through the work of Church and Cole, both of whom imbued light with spiritual and intellectual significance.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the style that was pioneered by Thomas Cole had virtually disappeared. The American frontier was declared "closed" by the young historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In 1893, four years after the Oklahoma Territory – the last tract of western American Indian land – was opened to non-Indian settlement, Turner delivered his lecture, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." He declared that the "frontier is gone and with it's going has closed the first period of American history." American artists returning home from European sojourns in the 1870s and 1880s found that earlier agrarian society had rapidly shifted by the final decades of the century to an industrialized and increasingly urban culture. They began to explore urban subjects and scenes of modern life.

Nevertheless, the Hudson River School painters left a notable legacy to American art, capturing the reverence for nature and the idealism of the nation that prevailed at the middle of the nineteenth century. After the devastating blow dealt by the Civil War, these attitudes toward nature and

Figure 15, John William Casilear, *Lake George*, 1860. Oil on canvas, 26¼ x 42½ in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Bequest of Clara Hinton Gould, 1948.183

nation would be re-examined, and artists, who sought inspiration from new artistic styles in Europe, would turn to depictions of the figure, and everyday life as a more suitable means of exploring our evolving national identity.

The exhibition *The Hudson River School: Masterworks from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art* will celebrate the return of this renowned collection from its major national tour and can be seen at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, from June 2 – December 31, 2006. The catalogue for the show is: Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser with Amy Ellis and Maureen Miesmer, *Hudson River School Master works from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). The exhibition is sponsored by Met Life.

Following its showing in Hartford, the exhibition is planned to tour to three European venues, opening at the Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg, Germany, February – May, 2007. The tour will be preceded by a symposium held at the Warburg Haus, Hamburg, Germany, on October 10, 2006, and will engage German and U.S. scholars in an international dialog on the Hudson River School. The symposium, exhibition, and catalogue are sponsored by the Zeit Foundation and the Terra Foundation for American Art.