



How the Hudson Valley's majestic wilderness spawned America's first art movement

RIVER VISION

by Steve Hoare

The story of how New York State's natural scenery inspired America's first significant art movement is still relatively underappreciated. Museum curators know about the painters of the Hudson River School, as do art gallery owners, art students, and a smattering of the general public—especially those living near the remaining shrines of the eighteenth century artists scattered throughout the Hudson Valley: Olana, Cedar Grove, even Locust Grove where Samuel F.B. Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, started out as a painter.

But ask any schoolchild studying New York State history, or even the average educated adult, and chances are they will have no idea that a handful of painters in the early 1800s captured New York's natural beauty on canvas and gave it as a gift to the world, helping create cultural pride and national identity in the new republic and paving the way for the wilderness conservation movement.

(opposite) *Kindred Spirits*, 1849 Asher B. Durand
Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant in the Catskills with
Kaaterskill Falls in the background. Oil on Canvas 44 x 36 in.



View of Schroon Mountain, After a Storm, 1838 Thomas Cole Oil on Canvas 99.8 x 160.6 cm.



Landscape, Scene from "The Last of the Mobicans," 1827 Thomas Cole Oil on Canvas 25 x 31 in.

It began in 1825 when a young English immigrant named Thomas Cole hiked into the northern Catskill Mountains and made sketches of wild unspoiled nature in the Kaaterskill Clove area, in what is now the Catskill Park and the domains of North-South Lake Campground. This campground is New York's busiest state campground, and for good reason: twin mountain lakes, sensational four-state views with an escarpment wall that looks down on and across the Hudson River to the Berkshires and Taconics, a legendary 230-foot waterfall, and a network of hiking trails on old carriageways that once carried the likes of Mark Twain, Ulysses Grant, and Oscar Wilde to the grandest resort hotels of the 19th century.

Cole returned with the sketches to his garret in New York where he worked them up into three finished paintings. They were displayed in a bookshop window and caught the eye of Colonel John Trumbull, a Revolutionary War veteran and president of the American Academy of the Fine Arts. It was a pivotal moment in American culture, as described by Barbara Babcock Millhouse in her new book *American Wilderness: The Story of the Hudson River School of Painting*:

When Trumbull saw Cole's wilderness scenes, he halted and peered intently through the glass. Here, he thought, was the answer to the call for a purely American subject and style. He did not need to read the titles to recognize the wild and lonely beauty of the Catskill Mountains. The American wilderness had inspired this young painter to compose landscapes unlike any Trumbull had ever seen and to imbue them with a majesty that awakened a new emotion in the old man.

Named for a fortress treasure-house in ancient Persia, *Olana* was the home of Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), one of America's most important artists, a student of Thomas Cole, and a major figure in the Hudson River School of landscape painting.

It was a new style of painting—no longer derivative of fashionable European styles—with an entirely new subject, celebrating quintessentially American scenes depicting the majesty, power, and promise of an unsullied and untamed wilderness.

The timing was perfect. Fifty years after Lexington and Concord, America was sated with paintings of heroic Revolutionary War episodes. And, in that era before photography, when travel was painfully slow and often dangerous, the landscape Cole depicted had only been seen by a very few. The small art community in 1825 New York City was mesmerized, and then galvanized. Soon, portrait painters (as Cole had been) and engravers (like Asher B. Durand) abandoned their former bread-and-butter professions, packed their bags and headed upriver through the Hudson Valley to the Catskills, Lake George, the Adirondacks, and soon beyond state borders to the Berkshires, White Mountains and, a few decades later, on to the American West and the Andes of Ecuador. Although they strayed ever further from New York State in pursuit of new landscapes to capture for an increasingly sophisticated and well-traveled public, the painters were dubbed collectively the "Hudson River School" as testament to the art movement's origins and first successes.

Jim Clayton



This celebration of nature, which had its roots in the English Romantic Movement, contained—as most concepts did in those pious days—religious underpinnings. The pristine American wilderness, as depicted by Cole and his followers, was nature untouched by man, straight from the hand of God. Thirty-eight years after Trumbull discovered Cole, a clergyman at the dedication ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone for a new building to house the National Academy of Design said “Nature is the art of God.” The political subtext of the Hudson River School paintings was that Americans were especially favored by God, blessed as they were with such a grand and bountiful land.

The Hudson River School style held sway for roughly fifty years, succumbing in the late nineteenth century to a variety of factors: the rise and spread of photography, making naturalistic landscapes by painters obsolete; the adoption of new styles of art from Europe, like the Barbizon School and French Impressionism; and the erosion of the underpinnings of the worship of nature and of God in nature by increasing religious skepticism. America had entered full-throttle into the

industrial age. Fields and forests were to be harvested and exploited, not worshipped. The Hudson River School was passé.

For almost 100 years, Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Asher Durand, and the many other Hudson River School painters languished as dusty footnotes to art history. Then, in the late twentieth century, a reawakening of interest occurred which continues to get stronger every year. Some of the homes and studios of the Hudson River School painters have been salvaged and restored and have become state or national historic sites with high visitation. Their paintings continue to increase in value, into the millions of dollars. Special museum exhibits tour nationally and internationally.

But the most important legacy of these pioneering nineteenth century painters is not our appreciation of their artworks, but of the landscape their art depicted. Their works helped instill a love of wilderness in the American soul, an appreciation of wilderness that gave rise to the conservation movement in the late nineteenth century and led to the National Park system



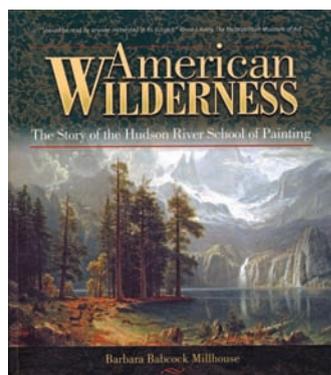
Lake George, 1869 John Frederick Kensett Oil on Canvas 48 x 66 in.



Niagara, 1857 Frederic Edwin Church Oil on Canvas 42.5 x 90.5 in.

and state forest preserves like those in the Catskill Park and Adirondack Park. New York's pioneering state park preserves set an example for other states to follow, just as Thomas Cole, the pioneering artist who first saw the sublime beauty of the New York State wilderness, inspired a generation of artists who, together, made New York's Hudson River Valley, "the landscape that defined America."

Steve Hoare is the editor of Black Dome Press.



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Connect to Nature

The 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's and Samuel de Champlain's voyages along the river and lake that bear their names, and the 200th anniversary of Robert Fulton's successful steamboat voyage and establishment of steam commerce on the Hudson River will be celebrated in 2009. From the Canadian border to New York harbor, exciting events and activities are being planned. We invite you to join this spectacular extravaganza that will draw people from all over the world.

The 1609 arrival of Champlain and Hudson was a fulcrum in world history. The subsequent actions of their explorations altered the lives of Native Americans, Europeans and peoples from all continents. Commerce grew with the construction of the Champlain Canal in 1823, linking the river with the lake. Trade bound these regions together and made these waterways a gateway to the rest of the country. The influx of new immigrants and ideas caused culture to flourish. Conservationists of this region inspired others to mirror their innovations, setting national precedents in conservation of the environment.

Today, the Hudson and Champlain valleys are places that sustain us. As they made the Hudson River School possible, these landscapes support us and contribute to who we are as a people.

In future issues of the *Conservationist*, we will delve into this rich history, celebrate our heritage, and dream about the future of this great region.

