



PLEIN AIR:

How Hudson River School art influenced the American spirit

Text adapted from: The Albany Institute of History & Art exhibit “The Making of the Hudson River School: More than the Eye Beholds” and *The Hudson River School: Nature and the American Vision* by Linda S. Ferber & the NYS Historical Society. Unless otherwise noted, all paintings represented here are from the collection of the Albany Institute of History & Art.



Asher B. Durand's *An Old Man's Reminiscences*, oil on canvas (1845).

Many of us are familiar with the muted colors, nearly invisible brushstrokes, and sprawling landscapes of the Catskills and Adirondacks by Hudson River School artists. Some of us might even know names like “Thomas Cole,” “Asher B. Durand,” and “Frederic Edwin Church.”

But what *was* this so-called Hudson River School?

Three statements offer only a beginning to understanding the term. One: The Hudson River School refers to landscape painting, specifically works created between 1825 and roughly 1875. Second: The School was not an actual school. Rather, it identifies a group of artists who mainly lived and painted in the

Hudson River Valley of New York. Third: The name “Hudson River School” was not used by the artists themselves, and it did not come into general use until the 1870s, at a time when the popularity of their style was waning.

Hudson River School (HRS) paintings are best recognized for their exaltations of wild and uncultivated nature, aspects of the American continent that differentiated it from Europe where wilderness had almost completely vanished. Emphasis on this wild, American landscape paved the way for a new sense of national pride and identity—one that the American people could call their own.



George Gerhard's *Major (Charles Temple) Dix*, oil on canvas (1865).



James Hope's *Watkins Glen*, oil on canvas (c. 1870).
From the collection of Nicholas V. Bulzacchelli.

In addition to their decorative appearance, landscapes impart a wealth of information about individuals portrayed, including their social standing and aspirations, as well as information about the economic and political climate in which a portrait was painted. In Gerhard's painting, the water in the distance most likely represents the Hudson River, and the rocky ledge on which Major Dix stands is likely the eastern extension of the Helderberg escarpment west of Albany.



James McDonald Hart's *Looking Toward Troy, on the River*, oil on canvas (c. 1850).



Thomas Cole's *View on Catskill Creek*, oil on composition board (c. 1833).

In the autumn of 1825, artists John Trumbull, William Dunlap and Asher B. Durand (a leading HRS painter) purchased several of British-born artist Thomas Cole's paintings. The three established artists promoted Cole's talents, setting him on his course to success and notoriety. What attracted viewers to Cole's landscapes were his depictions of wild American scenery—views of the Hudson River Highlands and Catskill Mountains.



Henry Ary's *View of Hudson, New York*, oil on canvas (1852).



John Vanderlyn's *A Distant View of the Falls of Niagara*, oil on canvas (1802-1803).

If European cities represented the grand museum that was western civilization, the natural scenery of North America symbolized moral worth and identity.

Spiritual truths and transcendence to a higher state of being could be witnessed and experienced through all that nature placed before the American people. Hudson River School paintings captured the emotional and contemplative forces found in the American landscape.

Landscape art of the period depicted both the enthusiasm for progress—the harmonious union between man's developments and nature—and a warning of nature's fragility. *View of Hudson, New York* (facing page) offers a look into this dichotomy by showing a city entering the industrial age. Note the several smokestacks that expel plumes of smoke into the air.

Cole and later HRS artists ventured to scenic areas throughout the nation, capturing sites that would become favored tourist destinations. Their paintings influenced the way Americans viewed the landscape as locations of wonder, beauty and historical association.



David Johnson's *Study of Nature, Dresden, Lake George*, oil on canvas (1870).



William Rickerby Miller's *View of Little Falls, New York*, watercolor on paper (1852).

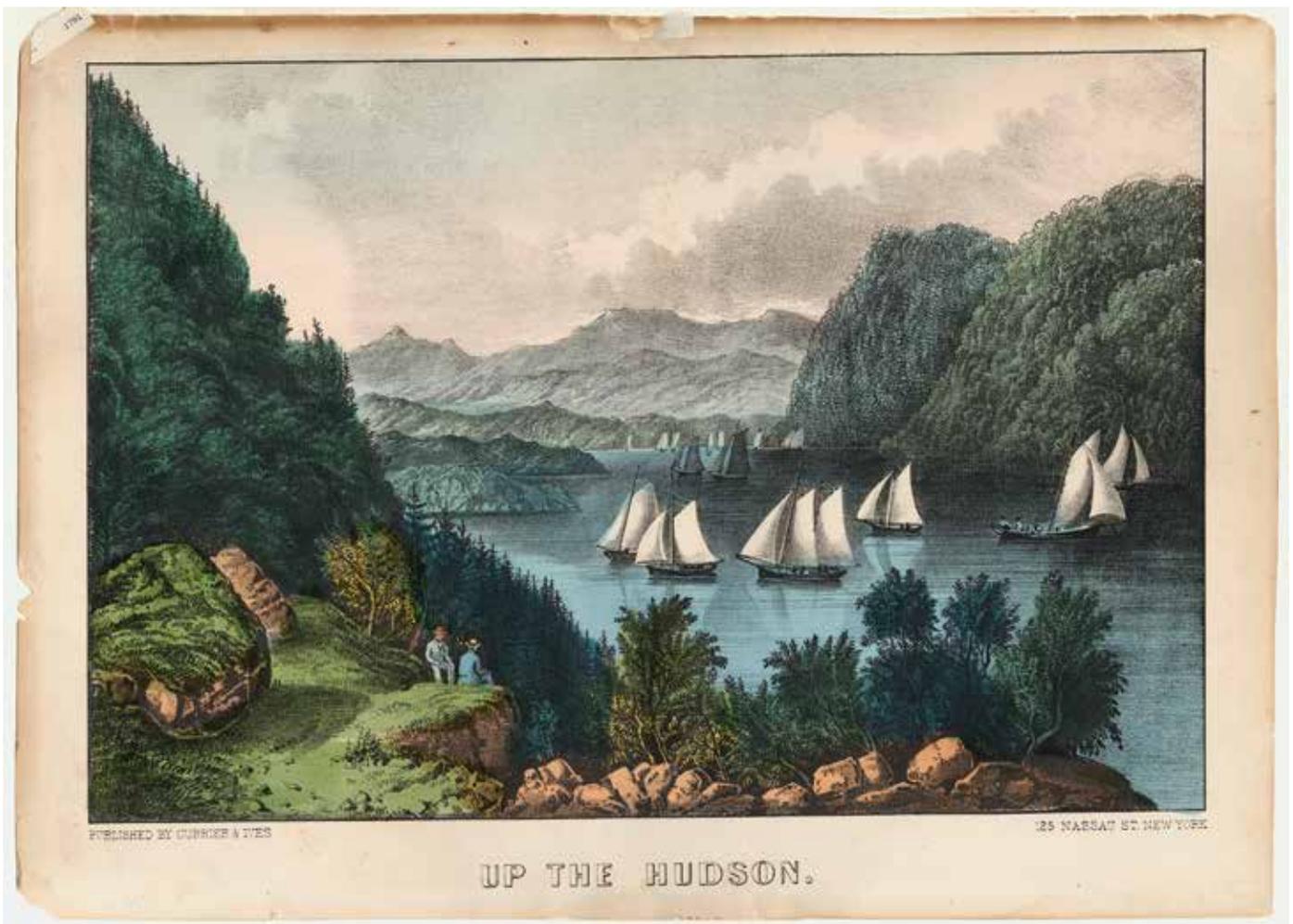


William Hart's *White Pine, Shokan, Ulster County, New York*, watercolor and pencil on paper (c. 1850-1860).

HRS artists were part of a generation of artists who made New York State's Hudson Valley the landscape that defined America.

Many artists preferred the “en plein-air” (French for “in open air”) technique of landscape painting, advocating a close observation of nature. “. . . I would urge on any young student in landscape painting, the importance of painting direct from Nature as soon as he shall have acquired the first rudiments of Art,” advised Durand. Preserving such truth in appearance was thought to lead to higher truths—moral, spiritual, and truth of ideas.

Even though few Americans could afford paintings by the HRS's most acclaimed artists, many could purchase landscapes from lesser-known painters, or they could purchase painted copies or prints. One such publisher that produced copies of Hudson River School paintings was Currier & Ives, as seen on page 11.



Up the Hudson, published by Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives, hand-colored lithograph (c. 1872).

Editor's Note: For more information about the Hudson River School and its artists, see “*River Visions*” in the February 2008 *Conservationist*.

ART ACROSS NEW YORK

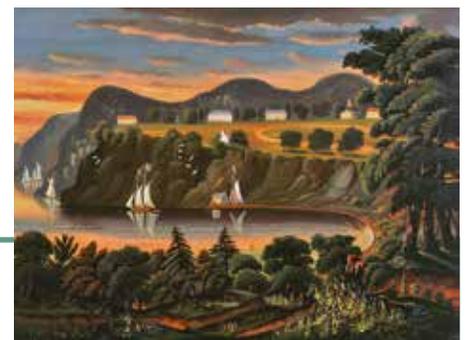
The Albany Institute of History & Art is displaying 140 works by artists of the Hudson River School in its exhibit, “The Hudson River School: More than the Eye Beholds,” which runs through August 18, 2013. The exhibit includes more than 80 pieces owned by the Institute, as well as paintings from several private collections. Additionally, the Institute is paying tribute to the popular nineteenth-century print-makers in the exhibit “Legacy of Currier & Ives; Shaping the American Spirit,” which showcases 64 hand-colored lithographs. That exhibit runs through June 15, 2013.

The Albany Institute of History & Art is open Wednesday through Sunday, and on Tuesdays for registered groups. Visit the

website at www.albanyinstitute.org for more information, including hours and directions.

You can find paintings by Hudson River School artists elsewhere around the state, too. The Hudson River School Art Trail, for instance, is a project that maps the painting sites of accomplished HRS artists. Visit the website at www.hudsonriverschool.org to find helpful brochures, maps, pictures and other resources to guide you on your virtual or literal journey following the trail of the artists. One of the sites included on the HRS Art Trail’s website is Cedar Grove, Thomas Cole’s home and studio, which is a national historic site.

The Albany Institute of History & Art and Cedar Grove are destinations in New



Thomas Chambers’ *View of Hudson River at West Point*, oil on canvas (c. 1855).

York’s new Path Through History project, a statewide roadmap highlighting more than 200 of the state’s significant historic sites and milestones. Highlighting places like the Albany Institute and Cedar Grove will help draw attention to New York’s rich cultural history so that residents and tourists may appreciate and experience all that our state has to offer. For more Path Through History places to go, visit the I Love NY website at <http://iloveny.com> and click on “Path Through History.”

