

Manifesting Nature: The Hudson River School

By Sylvia Mencl

Americans defeated the British in the War of 1812 which brought about the end of British rule and the start of autonomy for Americans.¹ This period was marked by economic growth, booming industry, and a growing middle class that was becoming more interested in art. Around this time, the Hudson River School emerged. The Hudson River School does not refer to the name of an educational institution, but to a group of landscape painters working from around 1825 to 1870.² This group of artists became the first native school of painting established in the United States.³ The name, “Hudson River School”, was first coined by a critic in a *New York Tribune* article on the National Academy of Design’s exhibition of 1879. The term was meant as an insult to the painters, deeming them “old-fashioned, narrow, and hopelessly provincial” in comparison to the artists following the “European impressionistic styles of painting”.⁴ Artists of the Hudson River School were unified not by geographic location but by artistic style and thematic elements in their art. They believed in concepts such as “natural religion”, “the magnificence of nature”, and “the significance of the fresh, untamed American scenery reflecting our national character, as opposed to the civilized European landscape”.⁵

The movement began with founder Thomas Cole. He was the mentor of artist Frederic Edwin Church, another influential member of the school.⁶ Cole was an English-born artist who, in 1818, immigrated to the United States, and in 1826 began painting in the Catskill Mountains located in the state of New York.⁷ Cole was responsible for popularizing landscape painting, for which there was originally no demand and could not be used by artists to make a living.⁸ He was able to create a market for this genre of painting particularly among wealthy patrons in New York City. Cole was among many that were interested in America’s wilderness. This newfound

interest was evident in his artwork and that of the other members. The art produced by the Hudson River School reflected a new era of rapid expansion, a desire to fulfill Manifest Destiny, growing nationalism, and American Romanticism.

The paintings produced by the Hudson River School celebrated the new potential for Westward expansion and the conquering of land. Americans believed that they were ordained by God to settle North America and spread democracy, often through the removal of the Native populations.⁹ This was a belief known as Manifest Destiny. The Hudson River School paintings depict America as untouched by civilization. The emptiness of the land shown in the school's art was a "call to work" encouraging Americans to clear forests, establish new villages and farms, and to work the land.¹⁰ Paintings often emphasized progress towards a better future through the westward journey, which was communicated through the landscape. The west, which had previously been viewed as impoverished, wild, and uninhabitable seemed much more attainable and accessible, making Americans much more open to exploration.¹¹ Thomas Doughty's *View on the Hudson in Autumn* (1850) shows a river scene with a meadow in the foreground and a woman, dog, and child standing in front of their cottage. The river stands at the central focal point of the composition signifying "progress toward a brilliant and golden horizon" in a landscape with few human inhabitants.¹²



Thomas Doughty, *View on the Hudson in Autumn*, 1850, oil on canvas, 86.68 x 122.56 cm,
Source: National Gallery of Art

While Doughty's painting includes figures, Hudson River school artists usually painted landscapes with an absence of figural representations. If figures were present, they were small in comparison to the grandiose landscape.¹³ The large cascading waterfalls, mountains that seemed to reach the heavens, billowing rivers, and forests stretching for miles became a source of inspiration and pride. These national symbols also came to represent limitless resources to support the nation and fuel industrialization. Thomas Whittredge's *Trout Fishing in the Catskills* (1870s) shows a common scene depicted by the Hudson River School: a river. In the painting, a waterfall cascades near large boulders into a river. To the left, a fisherman casts his line. The figure is very small in comparison to the boulder and the multitude of coniferous trees lining the river. The fisherman is in nature's truest form, one that is untouched by humanity.



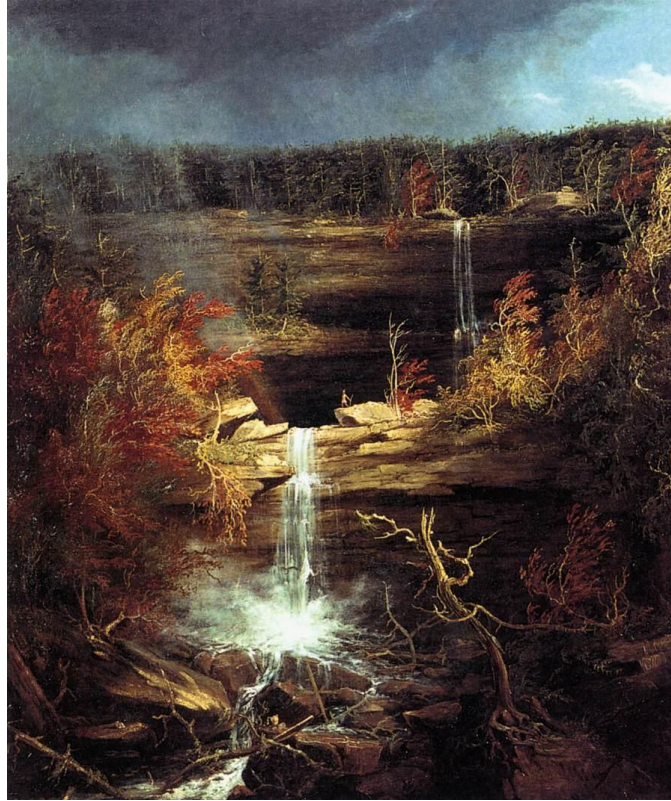
Thomas Whittredge, *Trout Fishing in the Catskills*, 1870s, oil on canvas, 53.34 x 43.18 cm,
Source: Reading Public Museum

While the land was occupied by Native Americans, they were largely absent from the paintings produced by the Hudson River School. For the few paintings that did contain Native Americans, the figures symbolized primitiveness, a group of people from a bygone era, and something as old and wild as the landscape itself. Nonetheless, artists generally preferred to portray the land as empty and ready for exploration.¹⁴ This is evident in Thomas Cole's *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains* (1827). The painting depicts a large mountain top overlooking a river valley that seems to stretch for miles. In the foreground, there are remnants of an abandoned Native American altar representing the present emptiness of the land.¹⁵ Boats sail on the river in the distance. This indicates the pioneer's progress towards civilization in the future.



Thomas Cole, *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains*, 1827, oil on canvas, 47.31 x 64.45 cm, Source: Museum of Fine Arts Boston

Out of all the Hudson River School artists, Cole depicted Native Americans most frequently in his artwork. He was known for depicting historic and religious scenes. His painting *The Garden of Eden* (1828) notably shows Adam and Eve in the ancient biblical garden.¹⁶ One of his well-known paintings to include a Native American is *The Falls of the Kaaterskill* (1826). Cole placed an individual figure near the top of a waterfall. The portrayal is clumsy, and the figure appears awkward as he leans against his bow. He takes on almost a metaphorical meaning referencing the time before colonization. He stands alone representing someone that used to occupy the land.



Thomas Cole, *The Falls of the Kaaterskill*, 1826, oil on canvas, 109 x 92 cm, Source: Nell Shaw Cohen

The oeuvre of the Hudson River School reflected growing nationalism and the desire to be separated from European influence by creating a truly American style of painting. Thomas Cole was inspired by various ideas associated with Romanticism, the first literary and artistic movement which sought to emphasize American identity, venturing into the unknown, and the beauty of nature.¹⁷ Cole's work embodied Romantic ideals such as Burke's idea of the sublime and Gilpin's concept of the picturesque, which he applied to depictions of American landscapes.¹⁸ The "sublime" refers to a feeling of awe while simultaneously being overwhelmed and having one's breath taken away.¹⁹ It is likely that the sublime captured in these paintings reflected the sense of nationalism felt by the artists themselves. "Picturesque" refers to an "attractive or pleasing scene".²⁰ While Cole was considered the father of this first native

American movement, he still relied on some European artistic trends. He used “17th century pictorial conventions”, allegorical representations intertwined with landscapes, and fictional elements.²¹ Artists following Cole became increasingly affected by American Romanticism. They continued to capture sublimity and picturesque in their creations and moved further away from the European conventions that Cole had implemented. Members were also influenced by the written works of Transcendentalists who were involved in the movement, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Part of the movement also emphasized the power and beauty of nature. For the Hudson River School artists this meant turning to the natural world around them for inspiration as opposed to traveling abroad. It was common for artists at the time to travel to Europe as part of their study. While Cole and other early members of the Hudson River School traveled to Europe, the second generation sought inspiration in their own land.²² This is emphasized in Asher Brown Durand’s *Letters on Landscape Painting*. He wrote “Go not abroad then in search of material for the exercise of your pencil, while the virgin charms of our native land have claims on your deepest affections”. Durand further elaborates on the importance of direct observation by writing about the value of landscape sketching, observing nature in its “uncultivated state” and from up close and to rely on what is seen rather than the imagined or what is remembered.²³ This moves further away from the representations of foreign subjects and personification of nature depicted by Thomas Cole and towards the American style defined by the Hudson River School.

The Hudson River School was truly an impactful movement that reflected America’s move towards its own identity. While relatively small, its effects reached not only the artistic community but also caught the attention of the growing middle class. Like the painters, ordinary people sought to become part of the Romantic movement by which they were so inspired. These

individuals became “picturesque tourists”. Other artists from the school began to follow in Thomas Cole’s footsteps, traveling to the locations of the 22 landscape sketches found in his sketchbook.²⁴ These destinations became popular, drawing visitors from across the nation and encouraging further exploration and expansion. The paintings created by the Hudson River School both embodied and inspired Manifest Destiny, creating something that is new and destroying something that was once there.

Endnotes

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