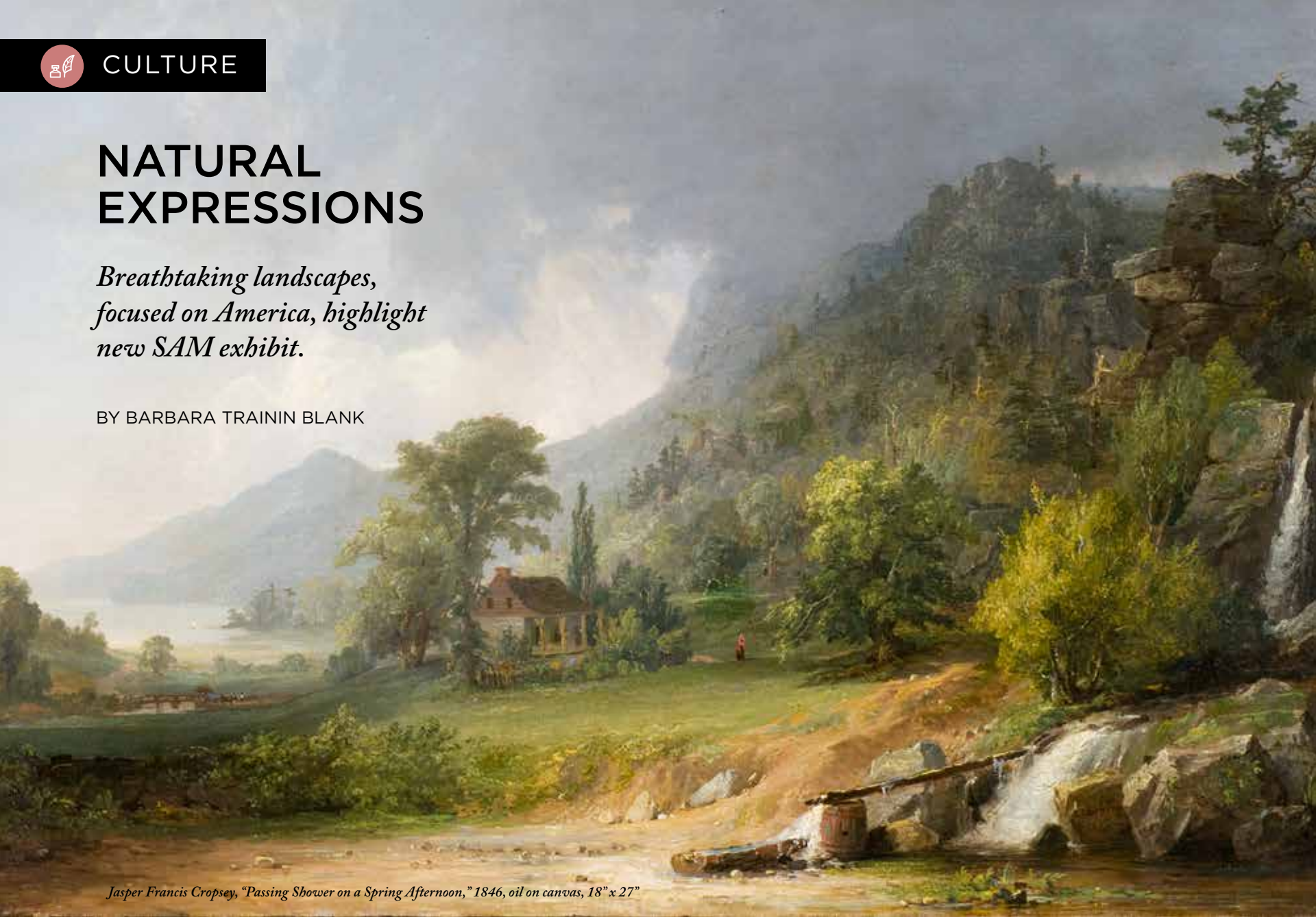




# NATURAL EXPRESSIONS

*Breathtaking landscapes, focused on America, highlight new SAM exhibit.*

BY BARBARA TRAININ BLANK



Jasper Francis Cropsey, "Passing Shower on a Spring Afternoon," 1846, oil on canvas, 18" x 27"

*"Oh, beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain."*

The current exhibit at Susquehanna Art Museum—"In Nature's Studio: Two Centuries of American Landscape"—is like the opening sentences of "America the Beautiful" come visually alive. The exhibit zeroes in on the rich bounty of American landscapes from the early-19th century through the late-20th century.

"In Nature's Studio" encompasses early depictions of bucolic American vistas—intimate forest interiors, sweeping panoramic views of natural wonders and dramatic images of the untamed land and sea—with scenes of Europe, western Asia and South America, said Lauren Nye, director of exhibitions at SAM.

The exhibit, consisting of 43 works, begins by exploring how the Hudson River School of painting—a leading voice in American art until 1900 and the first uniquely American artistic movement—emerged. Founded in the mid-1800s by Thomas Cole, the movement grew out of the determination of American artists to become

independent from the traditional European schools of painting and set off on their own.

Another new style embraced by artists in the 19th century was "tonalism."

"It was inspired by the tone and rhythm of musical compositions and utilized a carefully chosen palette of colors," Nye added. "It adapted a theatrical form of expression while working within the subject of landscapes."

Another trend emerged at the turn of the century, when some artists delved into the popular European impressionist style. They used unique color combinations to capture the fleeting qualities of light by adapting French painting techniques to the American countryside.

One striking painting in the exhibit is Jasper Francis Cropsey's 1846 "Passing Shower on a Spring Afternoon." Perhaps due to his early career as an architect, Cropsey became a successful landscape painter known for sophisticated precision in rendering nature and capturing changeable, dramatic weather conditions.

George Wesley Bellows, represented in the exhibit by "The Launching," was known for action



Frederick Childe Hassam, "Beach at East Hampton," 1905, oil on canvas, 26" x 24"



paintings that depicted figures in motion. He was one of the organizers of the “Armory Show” of 1913, which introduced European modernist art to American artists and critics.

Although he remained a painter of realism, Bellows later demonstrated interest in modernist abstraction. He incorporated a greater range of color, experimented with composition and became increasingly taken by seascapes, Nye said.

Frederic Edwin Church sketched his first view of “Cotopaxi” in 1853 while on a tour of Colombia and Ecuador. He described the volcano as “one of the most majestic and awe-inspiring views I ever beheld in either hemisphere.”

Perhaps the best-known representative of the Hudson River School, Church studied with founder Cole. The two regularly toured the Catskill Mountains and the Berkshires of Massachusetts to create drawings and paintings.

According to SAM’s winter 2022 intern, Sylvia Menci, historic factors played a part in art. When the Americans defeated the British in the War of 1812, it brought about the end of British rule and the start of autonomy.

“This period was marked by economic growth, booming industry, and a growing middle class becoming more interested in art,” she said.

The exhibit underscored the belief that artists of the period had in such concepts 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,” she said.

Throw in the concept of Manifest Destiny, a phrase coined in 1845, the idea that the United States is destined—by God, its advocates believed—to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent.

Native Americans often occupied the land featured in the exhibit’s paintings, but they themselves were largely absent from the works of the Hudson River School. When they did appear, they seemed to represent “primitiveness, a group of people from a bygone era, and something as old and wild as the landscape itself,” Menci said.

“But artists generally preferred to portray the land as empty and ready for exploration,” she said. **B**

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*“In Nature’s Studio,” organized by the Reading Public Museum, runs through May 22 in the Beverlee and Bill Lehr Gallery of the Susquehanna Art Museum, 1401 N. 3rd St., Harrisburg. For more information, visit [www.susquehannaartmuseum.org](http://www.susquehannaartmuseum.org).*

*Paintings on loan courtesy of Reading Public Museum, Reading, Pennsylvania.*



*Frederic Edwin Church and DeWitt Clinton Boutelle, “Cotopaxi,” 1862, oil on canvas, 34.5” x 56”*



*Frederic Edwin Church, “Syria: Ruins by the Sea,” 1873 – 1874, oil on canvas, 10.5” x 16”*



*George Wesley Bellows, “The Launching,” 1913, oil on panel, 18” x 22”*