

## Nature and the American Vision: The Hudson River School

“The painter of American scenery has indeed privileges superior to any other;  
all nature here is new to Art.”

—Thomas Cole

Nature and the American Vision: The Hudson River School is designed as a grand tour of the nineteenth-century American landscape, and the paintings on view reveal much about issues of national identity, westward expansion, mistreatment of the native population, and the beginnings of environmentalism in the United States. These curriculum materials are intended to help teachers discuss the paintings of the Hudson River School, in hopes that the works explored here can be used to create lessons in social science, language arts, geography, natural history, and science, among other subjects.

The Hudson River School, which emerged by 1825 and continued to thrive until the end of the nineteenth century, was the first truly American art movement. While the term “Hudson River School” originated as a dismissive nickname referring to the perceived provincialism of its members, in time it came to represent a distinctive and vibrant movement devoted to the depiction of untamed American scenery as a symbol of America’s independent spirit. In Europe, writers and painters were exploring landscape as a vehicle through which to communicate universal truths, and landscape painting was acquiring more prestige as nature was increasingly associated with spirituality and the divine in Western culture. As these ideas spread to the United States, landscape acquired new connotations within American culture. The Hudson River School celebrated the exploration of the natural world as a source of spiritual renewal and an expression of national identity. Combining rigorous specificity achieved through the direct observation of nature with a romantic enthusiasm for the beauty and inherent nobility of the American landscape, the painters of the Hudson River School presented scenes seemingly untouched by modernization, in spite of rising tourism. If Europe, with its historic battle sites and ancient ruins, represented the past, then America, with its virgin forests and sweeping vistas, represented the future.

The success of the Hudson River School was made possible by the increasing prosperity and growing national confidence in the United States in the early nineteenth century. As American cities grew, urban populations developed a taste for regional landscape subjects linked to picturesque touring routes. Originating high in the Adirondack Mountains and emptying in the Atlantic Ocean, the Hudson River, for which the art movement was named, served as an important military and commercial waterway, shifting from Native American control to the Dutch and then to the English before American independence. Key battles of the American Revolution were fought along its banks

and that history seemed to bestow even greater significance upon the river's natural beauty. In 1825, the completion of the Erie Canal linked the Hudson with the Great Lakes, making it an even busier commercial route. With the advent of steamboats, a new tourism industry emerged. Boats carried visitors past serene, picturesque landscapes and delivered them to hotels along the river's shores. Literature and travel prints fed the growth of this tourism, which came to be known as the American Grand Tour. Even before this new rush of attention, the artists of the Hudson River School were drawn to the waterway to paint its magnificent views of unspoiled nature. Peaceful pastoral scenes were celebrated, along with the awe-inspiring majesty of sites like Niagara Falls, depicted by Louisa Davis Minot in 1818 as a churning, majestic symbol of the power of nature.

The Hudson River School consisted of primarily New York City-based landscape painters led by Thomas Cole (1801–1848), an English émigré whose crowning masterpiece, *The Course of Empire* (c. 1834–36), is addressed in these curriculum materials. Cole immigrated to the United States in 1818 at the age of seventeen, and, soon after making his first journey up the Hudson River in 1825, developed a reputation as one of the country's most innovative landscape painters. He went on to influence artists like his friend Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), who advocated the therapeutic effects of American landscape paintings on city dwellers (and whose *White Mountain Scenery, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire* [1857] can also be found in this packet), as well as his talented pupil, Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900). Successive painters would continue to portray the same landscapes as Cole and his contemporaries under different light and seasonal conditions, and, in doing so, championed nature's value as an endless source of inspiration.

While the first generation of Hudson River School painters made the expected journey to Europe to learn from the Old Masters and be exposed to European taste and culture, second-generation American painters no longer felt obligated to travel there. Instead, they turned to the unfamiliar landscapes of the American West, which had become more accessible with the development of the railroad, as a source of inspiration and also expanded their travels even farther, to South America and the Arctic. Church combined the fundamental values he had adapted from Cole with a new interest in science and a passion for exploration. His *Cayambe* (1858), painted after a sketch from his second expedition to South America, marks a new chapter for the Hudson River School, having broadened its scope to encompass the farthest reaches of "American" landscape.

After the Civil War, the Hudson River School began to wane in popularity as Americans became enamored of imported European styles, notably the French Barbizon School of landscape painting. From 1825 to 1876, however, the Hudson River School represented much more than a style of painting. In these seemingly serene landscape paintings, a growing tension is evident, between the desire to conserve the pristine American wilderness and the powerful drive for the young nation to prove itself by pushing for progress, expansion, and industrialization. These curriculum materials are intended to facilitate the use of these paintings as primary sources in the classroom. Close observation, together with the in-depth investigation of the works of art in this exhibition, will reveal issues of history, politics, ecology, and identity, all of which remain startlingly relevant today.

## Works Cited

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## Credits

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