

## NIAGARA FALLS, 1818

Louisa Davis Minot

Louisa Davis Minot (1788–1858), daughter of the solicitor general of Massachusetts, married a Boston lawyer in 1810 and, as was typical for the time, proceeded to bear five children. However, unlike most women of her era, in addition to being a wife and mother, she was also a published writer and an accomplished artist. It is not known how or where Louisa received her artistic training but there are two paintings attributed to her in existence, both depicting Niagara Falls, and, in 1815, her essay entitled “Sketches of Scenery on the Niagara River” was published in the *North American Review*, the first literary magazine in the United States. Based on her travels, during which she made studies for the canvases painted three years later, including *Niagara Falls* (1818), Minot’s essay details her awed response in the face of the majestic falls. “The roar deepened,” she wrote, “the rock shook over my head, the earth trembled ... It was sometime before I could command my pencil.”

Straddling the border between New York State and Canada, Niagara Falls is one of the world’s greatest natural spectacles. Formed by the Niagara River where it plunges over cliffs and down 170 feet, Niagara Falls became a great tourist attraction after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. However, the falls already had a long history of depiction by both visual artists and writers by the time of Minot’s visit in 1815, and nearly every major American landscape painter of the period painted the falls, including Frederic Edwin Church.

While many tourists and artists were drawn to the dazzling effect of the falls, few painters depicted them with such power and fury as Minot did. In her painting the sky is overcast with deep purple clouds blocking out the sun. The diagonals of these eerily-colored clouds echo the violence of the falling water as it collides with the churning river below. Depicted from the vantage point of a viewer at the foot of the falls,

the crashing collision of water occurs at eye level, a bit too close for comfort. When compared to Alvan Fisher’s depiction of the same site, *Niagara Falls: The American Falls* (c. 1821), which also hangs in this exhibition, the difference is striking. In contrast to the immediacy of Minot’s view, Fisher instead depicts the falls from a safe distance, so that they appear vast but relatively tame. If this is the cultivated tourist’s version of the falls, Minot’s vision is the dramatic uncensored version conveying the terror of being suspended in the gorge at close proximity to the roaring waters. This more dramatic, frightening version of nature was referred to within landscape painting as the “sublime,” which had been defined by the English philosopher Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757 as the sense of awe and even terror at the overwhelming power of nature. This was in direct opposition to the idea of the “beautiful,” which depicted the tranquil and picturesque aspects of nature.

Minot’s decision to depict the sublime aspect of the falls may have been influenced by the timing of her visit. The War of 1812, a two-and-a-half year conflict between England, America, and their Native American allies, had wrought devastation upon the Niagara region just months before her visit. Minot was deeply mindful of this context when she viewed the falls, and she commented on the struggle over the land in her 1815 essay. When she painted the falls in all of their violence, she referenced a tradition of landscape painting that adopted stormy seas, volcanic eruptions, and crashing waterfalls as metaphors for man-made war and destruction. Minot also included a few Native American figures in the lower right corner of the painting, along with well-dressed tourists and a rustic type on the left, and it is possible that these figures could refer to the various factions that had so recently fought over this land.

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How does Minot create a sense of drama and awe in this painting?
- Write a poem about this painting and how it makes you feel, and then compare your poem with those of your peers. How does your reaction compare to theirs? Do the differences and similarities in your reactions surprise you? Why or why not?



#### NIAGARA FALLS, 1818

Louisa Davis Minot (American, 1788–1858)

Oil on linen, 30 × 40 5/8 in. (76.2 × 103.2 cm)

New-York Historical Society, Gift of Mrs. Waldron Phoenix Belknap, Sr., to the Waldron Phoenix Belknap, Jr., Collection, 1956.4



## WHITE MOUNTAIN SCENERY, FRANCONIA NOTCH, NEW HAMPSHIRE, 1857

Asher B. Durand

Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) began his career as an engraver specializing in patriotic subjects, but he later developed into a portraitist (depicting presidents among others) and eventually became one of the foremost American landscape painters under the influence of his contemporary, Thomas Cole, around 1837. In 1840 he traveled to Europe to study the Old Masters in museums and private collections since such paintings were then unavailable in the United States. He described his time in Europe as a “year of toilsome exile,” and he found European-style landscapes (in which every component was carefully arranged to present a harmonious, balanced, and timeless effect) lacked the power and immediacy of the more naturalist landscapes then being painted in America. However, despite his apparent lack of enthusiasm, his later paintings show the influence of the low horizons and luminous atmospheres characteristic of Dutch and English landscape painters.

Upon his return to America in 1841, Durand strove to combine the pictorial conventions he had seen on his tour with the direct observation of nature, completing pencil and oil sketches outdoors. For his studies he chose only the most beautiful and characteristic trees and rocks, and then placed them within carefully arranged compositions. While he created oil sketches outside in nature, his finished paintings were always executed in his studio. After Cole’s death in 1848, Durand assumed a leadership role among American painters, and in 1855, at the age of fifty-nine, he published a manifesto entitled “Letters on Landscape Painting” in a prominent American art journal. In his letters he advocated learning to paint from nature before studying the Old Masters, and cautioned against the “picturesque” model that followed the European prototype. He also defended the landscape of the American East Coast as a worthy subject in response to a growing trend among young artists like Frederic Edwin Church, who chose to travel to the West and even to South America in search of exotic subject matter. Durand’s 1857 painting *White Mountain Scenery, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire* embodies these ideals.

Located in the center of New Hampshire, the White Mountains are the highest peaks in the northeastern range, and, after an 1826 avalanche buried a family alive, they were believed to be among the most inhospitable American environments. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the area was a remote wilderness, but by 1850 the site could be reached by railroad, and by 1900 the mountains had become an established tourist destination. Named for American presidents, the range includes Mounts Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Monroe, and Madison, along with Mount Chocorua, named for a legendary Native American chief who leapt to his death from White Mountain in order to avoid white settlers. These presidential names conferred national significance on the region, and the legend of Chief Chocorua serves as a reminder of the continuing encroachment of European civilization on native lands. The painting, completed after years of on-site observation, was commissioned by New York collector Robert Stuart, who was so pleased with Durand’s painting that he offered to pay the artist more than the agreed-upon fee.

The scene, depicted from an elevated viewpoint high above the Pemigewasset River Valley, shows the pass between the two peaks of the White Mountains known as Franconia Notch (in the center distance). Several large trees in the foreground frame the composition from the left, curving toward the center, while a placid river leads the viewer’s eye up through the valley and deep into the middle ground of the painting. A small tourist coach or carriage in the lower left references the burgeoning tourist trade in the region, and a small group of people and cattle near the center of the foreground offers a sense of the vast scale of the landscape. The tone is soothing and reflective despite the deep sense of panoramic space created by the bird’s eye view and reinforced by the shift from warm greens and browns in the foreground to cool blues and violets in the distance.

There are a few buildings, but they fade into the background, lacking the clarity of the natural landscape surrounding them. A suffusive golden light lends the picture a soft, hazy quality, and the trees' shadows form deep undulating shapes across the grass. The effect is that of a peaceful pastoral, and the large canvas seems to envelop the viewer, inviting him or her inward. One can imagine the immense pride such an image would have generated in contemporary Americans, as well as the sense of calm and serenity the painting might have bestowed upon its busy, city-dwelling owner.



**WHITE MOUNTAIN SCENERY, FRANCONIA NOTCH, NEW HAMPSHIRE, 1857**

Asher B. Durand (American, 1796–1886)

Oil on canvas, 48 1/4 × 72 1/2 in. (122.6 × 184.2 cm)

New-York Historical Society, The Robert L. Stuart Collection, the gift of his widow Mrs. Mary Stuart, S-105

#### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Spend a moment looking at the painting. What, if any, feelings does this painting inspire in you? What elements of the painting (i.e. color, composition, subject) contribute to this effect?
- How does this painting differ from Louisa Davis Minot's landscape *Niagara Falls*?



## CAYAMBE, 1858

Frederic Edwin Church

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) studied with Thomas Cole in the 1840s. Shortly thereafter, in the late 1850s, he rose to spectacular national and international fame, and by the 1860s he was widely regarded as the most renowned American landscape painter. Like Cole and Durand before him, Church traveled to Europe in 1867, but he is far better known for his paintings of the American West and South America. Church was particularly known for his panoramic canvases of exotic locales. The popular demand for these paintings, which were referred to as “Great Pictures” and were often displayed in theatrical settings, was so strong that Church was able to charge admission to see them in private galleries before they were sold to private collectors. In fact, a year after *Cayambe* was completed, the New York exhibition of his ten-foot canvas *Heart of the Andes* (1859) was the most well-attended display of a single artwork in the Civil War era, attracting twelve thousand people in three weeks.

Aside from Cole, Church’s greatest influence was the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). Humboldt had spent five years exploring South America as a part of his quest to map the world and catalogue its life forms, and his writings encouraged painters to join expeditions in order to capture the beauty and grandeur of the tropical world. The popularity of Humboldt’s ideas in the United States paralleled the influence of other writers advocating the honest depiction of nature, such as John Ruskin (1819–1900), of whom Church was also a devoted fan. Both Humboldt and Ruskin believed that painters should transform the details of nature into compositions conveying the majesty of creation. Adopting this mindset, Church began by completing oil sketches during his travels, maintaining a naturalist’s scientific approach with botanical and geological specificity. He then completed his larger, finished paintings back in his studio, where he could create compositions worthy of Humboldt and Ruskin’s theories.

Church followed Humboldt’s itinerary on his first trip to South America in 1853, and in 1857 returned to South America armed with commissions that had resulted from his first visit. His decision to depict *Cayambe*, a volcano in the Ecuadorian Andes, was no coincidence. Humboldt had designated *Cayambe* one of the most

beautiful volcanoes in South America. *Cayambe* lies directly on the equator, and Humboldt described it as “one of these eternal monuments by which nature has marked the great division of the terrestrial globe.” Church composed the South American scene under the influence of traditional European landscapes, but his careful attention to the local flora and fauna is evident in the abundant and crisply detailed foliage in the foreground of the painting. Trees often frame conventional European and American landscape paintings, but the exotic palm trees framing *Cayambe* would have been completely foreign to most American audiences. The vantage point is high above the landscape, as if the viewer were looking down into the tropical valley, and a river leads the eye back to the volcano in the distance. Majestic, it looms over the lush landscape, a potent symbol of both creation and destruction. The volcano towers so high above the surrounding tropical landscape that its peaks are capped in snow, and the moon rises to the left of the volcano, despite the fact that the scene is still bathed in the light of the setting sun. These jarring juxtapositions give the painting a sense of otherworldliness.

The scene seems long abandoned, as evidenced by the ancient ruins in the lower left corner of the painting. Church included these structural remains as a symbol of and memorial to the once-great civilizations that inhabited the Andes long before the arrival of Europeans. Their presence gives the viewer a sense of visiting a pre-modern time. The ruins reference the inclusion of ancient artifacts interspersed with landscape views in Humboldt’s illustrated atlas, *Views of the Cordilleras*, a combination that visually ties landscapes to the civilizations they fostered. They also allude to the interests of *Cayambe*’s owner, Robert L. Stuart, who owned sugar refineries with trade interests in Latin America. Stuart had a strong interest in archaeology and was the first president of the American Museum of Natural History as well as a major collector of American art and artifacts. Church shared this interest in American artifacts. He later collected Aztec reliefs that, as a founding trustee, he bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the hope of promoting awareness of American antiquities.



**CAYAMBE, 1858**

Frederic Edwin Church (American, 1826–1900)

Oil on canvas, 30 × 48 1/8 in. (76.2 × 122.2 cm)

New-York Historical Society, The Robert L. Stuart Collection, the gift of his widow Mrs. Mary Stuart, S-91.

**DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

- Describe the setting. How would you characterize the structure visible in the painting? Why do you think the artist chose to include it? How does the lack of people contribute to the painting's overall effect?
- In 1859, thousands of people paid admission to see a single painting. What types of entertainment do people pay admission to see today? How has modern technology changed our approach to entertainment and the fine arts?
- Is it warm or cold in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Frederic Edwin Church created many sketches while traveling and then made paintings from those sketches to show people what he had seen. How do you document or preserve memories of your trips?

## THE COURSE OF EMPIRE: DESOLATION, 1836

Thomas Cole

Thomas Cole (1801–1848) has been credited with establishing landscape painting as the predominant genre of art made in the United States in the nineteenth century. Having emigrated from England to the United States at the age of seventeen, Cole made his first journey up the Hudson River in 1825. By 1833 he was known as one of the country's most innovative landscape painters and the founder of the first American school of painting, a loose association of mostly New York-based artists who came to be known as The Hudson River School. It was Cole's goal to encourage the establishment of a serious American culture worthy of international regard.

*The Course of Empire* was Cole's most ambitious and complex series. According to his letters, he first began thinking of this theme during an 1829 trip to Europe, where he saw evidence of the continent's turbulent recent history, most notably the French Revolution, Napoleon's exploits, and the industrial revolution, as well as more ancient examples of fallen empires like Rome. What he saw in Europe seemed to demonstrate the truth of the then-dominant theory of history in which all civilizations (most notably the Roman Empire) are born, prosper, and then die. It was believed that all societies were subject to the same inevitable cycle of growth and decay. However it remained to be seen whether the United States, a country modeled after republican Rome, would follow this pattern or prove its superiority to the Old Country and break free from the cycle.

While Cole's work celebrated the American landscape, his outlook for the new country had grown pessimistic. New York City was growing rapidly and fortunes could be made, and lost, quickly. Living on the shores of the Hudson River, Cole was amazed by the speed of deforestation as the railroad encroached, and he mourned the rapid disappearance of the American wilderness. Having once celebrated the approach of civilization and progress, he lamented the loss of the pristine landscapes that had inspired his early success. Considered in this context, *The Course of Empire* is Cole's American take on history painting as well as a warning for the United States.

Cole planned *The Course of Empire* over several years and then finally began the project in earnest in 1833, when he secured the commission of Luman Reed, a wealthy New York City merchant and major patron of the arts. Reed would not live to see the completion of the series in 1836, but the paintings joined his collection in one of the first semipublic galleries in the United States. Through this display, the paintings became famous and were immediately recognized as Cole's masterpiece.

To achieve this ambitious series, Cole drew on established landscape aesthetics and art historical precedent as well as literary sources. Each of the five paintings presents a different time of day to illustrate a specific phase of civilization, from the dawn of its birth to the dusk of its fall. The series begins with *The Savage State* (c. 1834), in which indigenous hunters roam at the dawn of a stormy day. Next is the ideal mid-morning scene of *The Arcadian or Pastoral State* (c. 1834); in which a temple has been built and civilized mankind seems to live in harmony with nature. The progress of civilization peaks in the lavish high noon scene of *The Consummation of Empire* (1835). Here nature is barely visible, overwhelmed by buildings, processions, and overall decadence, and the republican way of life has fallen under the control of a tyrant. This concentration of power and the rise of the corrupt empire are represented in the painting by a red-cloaked conqueror (visible on a bridge in the foreground of the work), who is often interpreted as a stand-in for then president and former general Andrew Jackson, of whom Cole was no admirer. Civilization begins its descent in earnest with *Destruction* (1836). Here the empire, weakened and lazy with luxury as described in Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89), falls to barbarian invaders. The depiction of a city engulfed in flames would have resonated with New Yorkers who had survived the Great Fire of 1835, in which roughly six hundred buildings were destroyed.



Nature reasserts itself in the final painting of the series, *Desolation* (1836). Of this painting Cole wrote, it “must be a sunset—the city a desolate ruin—columns standing isolated amid the encroaching waters—ruined temples, broken bridges, fountains, sarcophagi, . . . no human figure—a solitary bird perhaps: a calm and silent effect. This picture must be as the funeral knell of departed greatness, and may be called the state of desolation . . . Violence and time have crumbled the works of man ... The gorgeous pageant has passed, and the roar of the battle has ceased—the multitude has sunk into dust—the empire is extinct.” In this last work of the series, day has ended. Moonlight illuminates the vast sky, and the still waters below give the painting a sense of tranquility. Herons nest on the remaining column, and lush greenery has overtaken the classical ruins of the now fallen civilization. The colors in *Desolation* are muted in comparison with the vibrant tones of *Consummation* and the soothing pastels of *The Pastoral State*. A lone column stands in the foreground, a reminder of a once proud civilization and its steep decline, and a warning to Cole’s contemporary audience.

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Write down three words you would use to describe *Desolation*, and then compare your words with those of a partner in your class. What do the words you chose reveal about the painting? What do they reveal about your own feelings about nature?
- Thinking about American politics and society today, how do you think the United States has fulfilled or not fulfilled Cole's prediction? Or do you think the outcome has yet to be determined? How so?



### THE COURSE OF EMPIRE: DESOLATION, 1836

Thomas Cole (American, 1801–1848)

Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 × 63 1/4 in. (99.7 × 160.7 cm)

New-York Historical Society, Gift of The New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts, 1858.5