

Exhibition: *Nature and the American Vision:
The Hudson River School*

Dates: December 7, 2014–June 7, 2015

Location: Resnick Pavilion



(Image captions on page 4)

(Los Angeles – November 25, 2014) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Nature and the American Vision: The Hudson River School*, the West Coast presentation of the New-York Historical Society's premier collection of 19th-century American landscape paintings. The Hudson River School—a group of New York–based artists, poets, and writers—forged a vision of American cultural and national identity through their visual exploration of nature. Drawn entirely from the New-York Historical Society, this exhibition features 45 paintings and represents 23 renowned artists who led the American landscape movement, including Thomas Cole, Asher Brown Durand, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt, among others. *Nature and the American Vision* also examines the movement beyond the Hudson River, with works by artists who reflected both realistic and romantic attitudes toward nature in scenes of New England, the American West, and South America. For the first time on the West Coast, all five paintings that compose Thomas Cole's series *The Course of the Empire* (c. 1834–36) are on view. *Nature and the American Vision: The Hudson River School* is curated by Dr. Linda S. Ferber, Senior Art Historian and Museum Director Emerita at the New-York Historical Society.

"It is an honor to share the New-York Historical Society's exceptional holdings of iconic American landscape paintings with Los Angeles. The Hudson River School paintings are a critical part of American visual culture, and we're thrilled for this rare opportunity to host these works on the West Coast," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director.

"Regarded as the first cultural movement in the history of the United States, the Hudson River School extolled the beauty of the divine through artists' depiction of the vast North American landscape, ultimately forging a national and cultural identity,"

comments Ilene Susan Fort, senior curator and the Gail and John Liebes Curator of American Art at LACMA. “The paintings in this exhibition not only depict upper New York State, but also offer a unique visual travelogue from the East Coast to the West Coast, and to Europe and South America.”

Exhibition Background

Originating high in the Adirondack Mountains, the Hudson River served as a vital military and commercial waterway, commanded over the centuries by Native Americans, the Dutch, and then the English until the American Revolution. Such associations enriched the visually evocative terrain of the Hudson River Valley and New England, producing schools of painting and literature grounded in specific scenery and history. Hudson River School artists would eventually seek inspiration farther from home, in places such as California's Yosemite Valley and the Andes in South America.

Artists of the Hudson River School used traditional techniques to create large, scenic landscapes that evoked a sense of adventure while documenting a vast new territory, including natural wonders, forests, commanding mountain ranges, roaring rivers, and miles of rich land for agriculture. As this notion became popular, national and local pride stimulated the development of an American Grand Tour, celebrating a medley of sites known for their picturesque and sublime qualities.

Exhibition Highlights

Nature and the American Vision is organized thematically and illuminates the locations that attracted artists and travelers. The paintings in this exhibition demonstrate the power of landscape imagery as a narrative device that conveys ideas about nature and culture.

Thomas Cole, *The Course of the Empire* (c. 1834–36)

Painted by one of the leading artists of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole examines the cyclical pattern of history in his famous series *The Course of the Empire*. Drawn from Cole's imagination around 1829, the series comprises five paintings, each depicting a successive stage of a growing civilization: savage, the Arcadian or pastoral, consummation, destruction, and desolation. *The Course of Empire* presented a theory of history that was considered by many to be a cautionary narrative for the new nation.

Louisa Davis Minot, *Niagara Falls* (1818)

Tourists began traveling to Niagara Falls after the 1825 completion of the Erie Canal. The site had attracted a number of artists long before, including Minot—one of the rare female artists associated with the Hudson River School. The artist's work

exploited an aesthetic concept known as the sublime, in which works are meant to stimulate in the viewer a sense of awe and fear of the overwhelming power of nature depicted on a grand scale.

Frederic Edwin Church, *Cayambe* (1858)

This painting embodies Church's personal experience of the tropical sublime during his time in Ecuador. The moon rises, yet the scene is bathed in the light of the setting sun; the tropical heat suggested in the foreground vegetation is countered by the snowcapped, cloud-shrouded peak of the inactive volcano in the distance. Church composed the South American scene in accordance with traditional European landscape formats; however, his inclusion of exotic palm trees would have baffled most of the North American public.

Albert Bierstadt, *Donner Lake from the Summit* (1873)

Bierstadt was commissioned by railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington to commemorate the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. His painting speaks to two national memories: the ill-fated Donner party—settlers trapped in the High Sierras by the onset of winter in 1846—and the transcontinental railroad. The size of the painting and its vista convey the grandeur of the American land; the course of civilization is evidenced by the felled trees in the foreground, and God's blessing is implied by the sunlit heavens.

Credit

This exhibition has been organized by The New-York Historical Society.

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About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes over 120,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art, Latin American art, ranging from pre-Columbian masterpieces to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over a million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives, such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement at lacma.org. Situated in Hancock Park on over 20 acres in the heart of Los Angeles, LACMA is located between the ocean and downtown.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions:

(left): Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, c. 1834, the New-York Historical Society, gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts

(center): Louisa Davis Minot, *Niagara Falls*, 1818, the New-York Historical Society, gift of Mrs. Waldron Phoenix Belknap, Sr., to the Waldron Phoenix Belknap, Jr., Collection

(right): Frederic Edwin Church, *Cayambe*, 1858, the New-York Historical Society, the Robert L. Stuart Collection, the gift of his widow Mrs. Mary Stuart, S-156

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