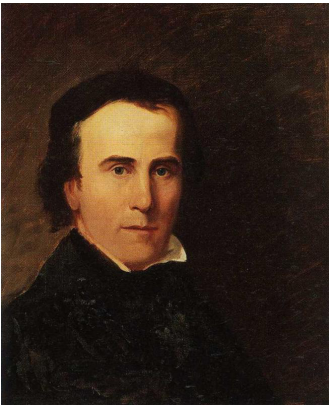


Thomas Cole

a biography

Hudson River School

Timeline



Thomas Cole, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1836, oil on canvas, 22 x 18 in., New-York Historical Society, Purchase, The Watson Fund, 1964.41

Thomas Cole was born on February 1, 1801, in Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, in northwestern England. At the age of 17, Cole immigrated to America with his family. Upon arriving in the United States, he worked briefly as a wood engraver in Philadelphia before moving to be with his family in Steubenville, Ohio, where his father had established a wallpaper manufacturing business.

In Ohio, Cole learned how to paint in oil from an itinerant portrait painter named Stein. He decided to seriously pursue art, and over the next few years he moved around Ohio and Pennsylvania painting portraits, genre paintings, and landscapes. He began sketching from nature in 1823, while staying with his family, who had since relocated to Pittsburgh. Later that year he moved back to Philadelphia to further his art education. He studied the landscapes of artists such as Thomas Doughty (1793–1856) and Thomas Birch (1779–1851) at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts and several of Cole's paintings were included in the Academy's exhibitions.

In 1825, Cole moved to New York City. That year he made a trip up the Hudson River to the Catskill Mountains and sketched the landscape. Upon his return, three of his works from this trip were purchased by prominent members of the nation's art community: John Trumbull (1756–1843), William Dunlap (1766–1839), and Asher B. Durand (1796–1886). These sales propelled Cole into New York's cultural community, which included figures such as the author James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) and the poet William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878). Cole's work became increasingly popular, and he began to work on commissions for wealthy patrons. In January of 1826, he was elected one of the founding members of the National Academy of Design.

Despite his success painting scenes of the American wilderness, Cole wished to paint what he called a "higher style of landscape" that would contain religious or moral narratives. His first ventures into this style were met with mixed reviews, and he decided that he needed to study in Europe. Cole set sail for England in 1829, where he met and was inspired by the English Romantic landscape painters Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) and John Constable (1776–1837). He then traveled to France and Italy, spending considerable amounts of time in Florence, Rome, and Naples. His time in Italy proved inspirational, and he painted many works influenced by

Italian and Roman culture. In these paintings, Cole often incorporated elements of European architecture and classical myth into romanticized landscapes. Upon returning to the United States in 1832, he had a successful exhibition in New York of his European paintings. It was at this time Cole became acquainted with the wealthy New York merchant Luman Reed, who later became his patron for *The Course of Empire* (1834–36), his famous series of five canvases that portrayed the rise and fall of an archetypal classical civilization.

Cole continued to paint American landscapes in the 1830s and 1840s, still incorporating allegorical and intellectual content into his works. He spent much of his time in upstate New York, and many of his paintings from this period portray sublime and dramatic scenes of the region and are notable for their captivating depiction of atmosphere and light. His other works from this period reflect an interest in Gothic fantasies and religious parables, further drawing on the architecture and history he experienced abroad.

In 1836 after his marriage, Cole settled in Catskill, New York, a small village on the Hudson River. After returning from his second trip to Europe, the artist, who had become increasingly religious and pious, joined the Episcopal Church and later designed a building for Saint Luke's Episcopal Church in Catskill.



Thomas Cole, *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1836–37, oil on canvas, 39 x 63 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift in Memory of Jonathan Sturges by his children, 1895, 95.13.3

Cole's Catskill home and studio was a popular destination for prominent writers and artists in the early 1840s. Though he had become a public figure by this time, he began to struggle financially, and he worried about selling his works. In 1844, Cole accepted the aspiring artist Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) as a pupil. Church went on to become one of the most famous American landscape artists of the next generation. During this time, Cole was working on his largest and most ambitious series, *The Cross and the World*, which aimed to capture an individual's quest for salvation and spiritual knowledge. Unfortunately, Cole was not able to complete the work. In February of 1848, he contracted pleurisy and he died that month, at the age of 47.

An early American landscape painter, Thomas Cole is often considered the founder of the Hudson River School—the first distinctly American artistic fraternity. The artist initially ventured from New York City to the Hudson River Valley in 1825, sketching as he traveled around the region. When he returned to the city, Cole created studio landscapes based on his drawings. The painting *Stony Gap, Kaaterskill Clove* was likely created shortly after he returned from his trip. In this early example of Cole's work, the artist blends romanticism and realism to create an engaging, highly-detailed image of a remote and pristine landscape.

This canvas depicts an undisturbed and peaceful mountain stream. The setting, Kaaterskill Clove, is a deep gorge in the Catskill Mountains through which the Kaaterskill Creek passes. In Cole's painting, the gentle creek runs through the middle ground of the image. Mountains loom in the distance behind the stream, their rounded surfaces covered in dark green vegetation. The right-hand side of the sky is filled with ominous gray clouds while the other half is a clear blue. A shaft of sunlight extends from the top-left corner of the canvas and illuminates a group of trees on the far riverbank. Trees overhang the water and their leaves have turned warm yellows, oranges, and reds, indicating that the scene is set in late-summer or autumn. Amid the changing leaves, other tree branches are bare and withered. In the foreground of the painting, the closer riverbank is obscured in shadow. Still, it is possible to discern the outlines of undergrowth and the branches of gnarled trees.

Through the depiction of the changing leaves and the "blasted trees" with their knotted branches, Cole explores the cycles of nature, and he illustrates the coexistence of death and growth in the forest. The scene is devoid of human presence, further emphasizing the primacy of the untamed wilderness. Typical of Cole's earlier work, *Stony Gap, Kaaterskill Clove* depicts a real location, although the painting's simple composition, with its drastic contrast between light and shadow, would have been invented by the artist. While perhaps less polished than his later paintings, the work appears to be typographically accurate based on precise details that capture the spirit of the location and the use of a specific title.

Landscapes like this one were extremely popular among American patrons in the mid-nineteenth century and it is through creating this style of work that Cole established a reputation for himself. Not only is the scene visually enticing, but it also represents a distinctly American wilderness. While the United States might not have had Europe's historical and cultural heritage, the beauty of the unfettered countryside was something which Americans could proudly claim as unique. In this way, Cole's depictions of sublime landscapes appealed to nationalistic sensibilities. Additionally, the artist worked to create what he called a "higher style of landscape," and would allude to religious or moral themes in his canvases. Protestant Americans would have been attracted to the wholesome nature of his paintings, as they believed the untouched American wilderness to be a visible manifestation of God's mighty power.



artistic philosophy and intent than geography. There is variation among the different artists associated with the school, but overall, they focused on depicting the remoteness, untamed beauty, and wild spaces of the American landscape. Their works were strongly nationalistic while these painters also sought to address concerns relating to morality, progress, God, and social stability.

Though some American artists painted landscapes in the 18th century, the genre grew in popularity and reputation in the early 19th century. By 1820, artists such as Thomas Doughty (1793–1856) and Alvan Fisher (1792–1863) were working as full time landscape painters, but it was really Thomas Cole who captured the public's attention with this genre. Often called the "father" or "founder" of the Hudson River School, Cole did not actively attempt to create a school of painting. Rather it was his popularity and personal landscape painting style, along with the fact that he taught popular landscape artist Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), that gives him this title. In 1825, Cole's sketching trip up the Hudson River and his subsequent paintings brought the artist immediate fame in the New York art scene. His works drew on a strong understanding of European landscape painting styles. He was influenced by the British Romantic movement and the aesthetic concept of the sublime, which attempts to capture a quality of grandeur that inspires awe, fear, and wonder. Cole's representation and interpretation of these themes in an American context was unprecedented, as was his appreciation for native and wild American scenery.

In the 1830s and 1840s other artists began to follow Cole's lead, and the most famous artist among this generation of landscape painters was Asher B. Durand (1796–1826). One of the artists who first discovered Cole in 1825, Durand turned to landscape painting himself in the early 1840s. After Cole's sudden death in 1848, Durand became the principal spokesperson and leader of the Hudson River School. The school prospered under his leadership, and in 1855 Durand published "Letters on Landscape Painting," which outlined the aesthetics of the school. Less interested in the sublime aesthetic favored by Cole, Durand stressed the importance of the study of nature and outdoor sketching in the creation of studio landscapes. With Durand's guidance the movement also drifted away from allegorical paintings to an emphasis on pure landscape.

The movement reached a high point in the 1850s and 1860s, as artists such as Church, Thomas Moran (1837–1926), Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823–1900), John F. Kensett (1816–1872), and Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823–1880) rose to prominence. Church, who studied in the Catskills under Cole from 1844 to 1846, became perhaps the most famous of all Hudson River School painters. Church made a name for himself by creating highly detailed and accurate depictions of natural wonders and phenomena. In 1853, and again in 1857, the artist traveled to South America, first to Colombia and later to Ecuador. His painting, *The Heart of the Andes* (1859), a ten foot work portraying a dramatic and botanically detailed scene from South America, was the most popular display of an artwork in the Civil War era, attracting 12,000 people in New York over the course of three weeks.

The only Hudson River School artist of this period to rival Church in fame was Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), a German immigrant who studied in Europe before traveling extensively in the American West. He established a reputation as one of the foremost "western" artists by depicting highly detailed and expansive landscapes, which portrayed the spiritual power and awe-inspiring geography of the less chartered American territories. These paintings provided a visual contrast to the urbanization, industrialization, and political strife of the eastern United States.



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Thomas Cole, *Sunrise in the Catskills*, 1826, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 35 1/2 in., National Gallery of Art, Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, 1989.24.1; Asher B. Durand, *A Pastoral Scene*, 1858, oil on canvas, 21 7/8 x 32 3/8 in., The National Gallery of Art, Gift of Frederick Sturges, Jr., 1978.6.3; Albert Bierstadt, *Valley of the Yosemite*, ca. 1864, oil on paper on canvas, 14 x 19 in., Joslyn Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. C.N. Dietz, 1934.14; Frederic Edwin Church, *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859, oil on canvas, 66 1/8 x 119 1/4 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Margaret E. Dows, 1909, 09.95

The Hudson River School was a large, loosely-organized group of New York City-based landscape painters active in the mid-19th century. The first truly American school of painting, it initially emerged around 1825 and flourished for multiple decades and across several generations of artists, peaking in popularity in the 1850s and 1860s. Its name, originally a disparaging term, was applied retrospectively in the late 1870s. It refers to the fact that many artists were inspired by and portrayed scenes from the Hudson River Valley. Though this region was the symbolic center of the movement, in reality these artists depicted landscapes beyond upstate New York and were connected more by their



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1906, oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 76 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908, 08.228; Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Savage State*, 1833–1836, oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 63 1/4, New-York Historical Society, Gift of The New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts, 1858.1

1801 Thomas Cole is born on February 1 in Bolton-le-Moors, England

1818 Moves to the United States with his family; settles in Philadelphia and then Ohio

1823 Relocates to Pittsburgh to work for his father

1825 Moves to New York City; takes his first trip to the Catskill Mountains

1826 Becomes a founding member of the National Academy of Design

1829 Sets sail for Europe, where he visits England, France, and Italy

1832 Mounts an exhibition of his European paintings in New York City

1836 Moves permanently to Catskill, New York

1841 Sets off on his second European tour visiting England, France, Italy, and Switzerland

1842 Creates his four-part allegorical series *The Voyage of Life*

1844 Takes on aspiring artist Frederic Edwin Church as his pupil

1848 Dies on February 11 in Catskill, New York

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Thomas Cole, Detail. *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1906, oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 76 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908, 08.228



presenting a pilgrim who travels in a boat along the "River of Life," from childhood to old age. These paintings are more explicitly religious than some of Cole's other, subtler allegorical works,

Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Childhood*, 1842, oil on canvas, 52 7/8 x 76 7/8 in., The National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1971.16.1

In addition to his detailed depictions of the Hudson River Valley and the Catskill Mountains, Thomas Cole often created works imbued with intellectual elements and moral values. In his quest to create a "higher style of landscape," Cole painted romanticized allegorical works that presented morally virtuous lessons or visualized the word of God through scenic images. Over the course of his career, he created many ideological landscapes, including the four-part series, *The Voyage of Life* (1842). These large-scale canvases chronicle the stages of life by



is similar to that of the first painting: rich green vegetation surrounds the waterway and there are red, rocky mountains in the distance. The boy enthusiastically ventures downstream towards a castle

Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Youth*, 1842, oil on canvas, 52 7/8 x 76 3/4 in., The National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1971.16.2

the man being guided throughout the series by a guardian angel.

The first painting, *Childhood*, shows a baby sitting in the middle of a golden boat while an angel steers it down a calm, narrow river, emblematic of the infant's sheltered existence. The boat has emerged from a shadowy cave, nestled within a craggy cliff, into a lush and verdant landscape. The scene is illuminated by a warm, rosy light and the baby reaches out in wonder. In *Youth*, the second canvas, the young pilgrim steers the boat himself, as the angel waves from the banks of the river. The landscape



With this scene, Cole is implying that only divine intervention can bring the man salvation. Finally, in *Old Age*, the "River of Life" has arrived at the ocean, which represents eternity. The man, weakened

Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Manhood*, 1842, oil on canvas, 52 7/8 x 79 3/4 in., The National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1971.16.3

in the sky. The ethereal palace is a beacon that represents the adolescent's ambitions for glory.

In the third canvas, *Manhood*, the scene is dark and tempestuous. The river is a choppy rush of water filled with threatening rocks, currents, and eddies. The landscape is no longer fertile, instead the trees are withered and cracked and the sky is stormy. The voyager stands in the boat with his hands clasped together in a pleading gesture. He has lost control of his life as he hurtles towards the rapids. The angel, bathed in a small circle of heavenly light, watches the man from the sky.



also be viewed as a metaphor for America. Cole imagines the still young nation at an adolescent stage, and foreshadows the challenges and potential disasters ahead.

Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Old Age*, 1842, oil on canvas, 52 1/2 x 77 1/4 in., The National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1971.16.4

with age, sits on his vessel and can see the angel guiding him for the first time. She directs his gaze towards a heavenly light that fills the upper left-hand corner of the canvas. He has reached the end of his journey on Earth and is now headed to eternal heaven.

This visually striking series presents Cole's religious tale with great drama. *The Voyage of Life* illustrates the Christian message of salvation and warns of the trials and tribulations along the way. Not only can the series be understood as a symbolic depiction of the human experience, it can



THOMAS COLE
American, born England, 1801–1848

STONY GAP, KAATERSKILL CLOVE
1826–27, oil on panel, 17 7/8 x 25 3/8 in.

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