

Spirituality in Art from the Hudson River School of Artists

The Hudson River School of artists was America's first artistic alliance; a group of landscape painters active from about 1850 to 1900. The artists neither lived nor painted exclusively in the Hudson River Valley nor was it strictly a school or art academy. Beginning with the works of Thomas Cole and Asher Durand and ultimately evolving into the Luminist schools, landscape painting was the widespread genre of 19th century American art. Thomas Cole was the acknowledged founder in the establishment of the Hudson River School and along with Durand did much to revolutionize the styles and themes of American painting as well as its methods. By the early 1840's, several artists, including Jasper Cropsey, John Frederick Kensett, Martin Johnson Heade and Frederic Edwin Church, took up landscape painting. They had a desire to define a specific vision for American art. The vast new nation that lay before them filled them with a sense of awe for its natural majestic beauty and the feeling of optimism for the potential it held. The artists started to associate this country's unspoiled wilderness with the new nation's apparently unlimited potential. Ultimately, the Hudson River school artists endowed the land with a sense of national identity, the promise of prosperity, and the presence of God.

"Thomas Cole believed that there is a direct connection between the beauty of creation and God the Creator. He saw the mission of the artist as a spiritual one, to spread the word of God through art devoted to nature." ¹

Protestant Christianity was a tradition that the Hudson River School artists consciously sought to exemplify in their distinctly religious art. Thomas Cole was a devout Christian and considered himself to be a moral teacher and religious prophet. "As Thomas Cole maintained, if nature were untouched by the hand of man- as was much of the primeval American landscape in the early 19th century-then man could become more easily acquainted with the hand of God."² Jasper Cropsey belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, where the art-friendly legacy from the old world helped make New York City the art center in America. His use of light evoked the doctrine of Providence in which God shed universal grace over all His creation, rather than Cole's evangelical approach.

Protestants avoided the traditional religious symbolism. They were exceedingly fond of allegory landscapes which they considered the most religious of all subjects. Allegory landscapes were a means of making the invisible visible, a viewing of God's spiritual qualities. Nature and spirit were intimately connected and nature itself was understood to be a vast parable signifying much larger spiritual truths. *"When nature is seen as a type of God's spiritual work, it can function symbolically but also has significance in itself."* ³

The Hudson River School Protestantism emphasized personal salvation as a free gift from a gracious God. *"God and nature, not man, are to be the foundation for art."* ⁴ Consequently, the motif of tiny figures in the untamed wilderness exalted the natural land and showed the insignificance of man. The human self was dwindled to ant like proportions with Thomas Cole and disappeared completely with Frederic Church. Jasper Cropsey integrated signs of human existence into natural scenes.

The Hudson River artists created visual embodiments of the ideals about which Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Cullen Bryant and Walt Whitman wrote. Agreeing with Emerson that painting should become a medium through which the universal mind could reach the mind of mankind, the Hudson River painters believed art to be an agent of moral and spiritual transformation. They perfected an art of transcendence in their paintings to create the illusion of vast space, extreme distance and depth upon depth. They had lush foregrounds, diminutive figures and opened back into the distance. The Hudson River School landscapes were suggestions of an American Eden, an unspoiled paradise to be inhabited by the new American Adam.

Thomas Cole was also a prolific writer. His *Essay on American Scenery* was published in January 1836 and addressed nature as the characteristic that set America apart from Europe. His poetry suggested a gentle God, but his paintings represented a harsh God. He was quite interested in chiaroscuro, the interplay of light and dark or good and evil. Jasper Cropsey was less interested in chiaroscuro and more concerned with light itself, which was omnipresent in *Mount Washington from Lake Sebago, Maine*. Cropsey had a very distinct Hudson River School style. He had a positive depiction of society along with a vision of nature that was so vast and all encompassing; it embraced and included humans as well as their tools. Frederic Church portrayed dramatic conflict between light and darkness, i.e. goodness and evil.

The iconography of the Hudson River School artists provided the detail they considered necessary to equate truth and beauty. "Lakes represented the 'eye of human countenance', a mirror reflecting the sublimity of the rest of the landscape and, most importantly, linking the sky and the earth, God with man."⁵ The artists portrayed man as a small part of a larger environment, but with a different purpose. Man's small stature implied a harmony with nature as well as his place in God's larger plan. Mountains represented physical geology, the differences from Europe plus the vastness of the American continent and the sign of God's hand on the American landscape. The lack of ruins was one of the signs that America was young, new and free of the monarchy corruption. To Cole, the sky represented "the soul of all scenery". Storms had several meanings including their original purpose to represent the dark and violent side of the primitive garden. Trees were the true heroes of Hudson River art as "they are like men...they exhibit striking peculiarities, and sometimes grand originality." The trees of the American landscape had a primitive quality that set them apart from Europe. Waterfalls suggested something special in the American experience, both "unceasing change and everlasting duration" and "fixedness and motion" according to Cole.

The Hudson River School represented a time when art was culturally relevant and had an important role in elevating the mind and the heart of viewers and society.

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² Public Broadcasting Service, "I Hear America Singing", Hudson River School, www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/icon/hudson.html, accessed 8/29/2005

³ Veith, Gene Edward, *The Spiritual Landscape in 19th Century America*, Regnery Publishing, Inc. 2001

⁴ Ibid

⁵ "We are still in Eden": Iconography of Hudson River School, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/hudson/icon.html>, accessed 1/24/2006

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