

Thomas Cole

Thomas Cole was recognized as the “father of the Hudson River School of painting and hence one of the figures most directly involved in the development of a native tradition of American art...” He was “considered by his contemporaries the leading landscape painter in America...”

Thomas Cole was born on February 1, 1801, in Lancashire, England. He was seventh of eight children and the only son of James and Mary Cole. His father was a woolen manufacturer who fell on hard times. Because of this, they moved to a nearby town where Thomas was apprenticed as a calico designer and where he learned the art of engraving. He especially enjoyed walking in the countryside with his youngest sister, playing the flute, and composing poetry. He was an avid reader and became interested in the natural beauties of the North American states. Thomas’ father caught his son’s enthusiasm. He moved his family to Philadelphia where he began business as a dry goods merchant. Thomas took up the trade of wood engraving.

The family was soon moved again. This time to Steubenville, Ohio, but Thomas remained in Philadelphia. Not long afterwards, he sailed to St. Eustatius in the West Indies where he made sketches of what to him was nature in a grand form of wonder and beauty. A few months later, he returned to the US and joined his father in Ohio. There he helped his father by drawing and designing patterns for wallpaper.

A book offered to him by a German portrait painter gave him information on design, composition, and color. He made brushes and pigment from home-made materials, and painted landscapes. These paintings, however, were not marketable. When the family moved to Pittsburgh, he sketched landscapes along the Monongahela River. In 1823, he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He also wrote poems and short stories, one of which was published in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

In 1825 the family moved to New York where a painting was finally sold from a store window for ten dollars. The buyer then financed a trip for Cole to the banks of the Hudson for the purpose of study and sketching. Three paintings resulted. One was sold to John Trumbull, *The Falls of the Catskill*, and was hung in his studio. Thereafter, Cole’s fame spread. In 1827, Cole moved to the Catskills, sketching *en plein air*. He made notes for future use in his painting as to appropriate colors, harmonies, and tones for atmospheric conditions.

In 1829, Thomas went to Europe for two years, sponsored by Robert Gilmore of Baltimore with a loan of \$300. In Europe he met influential English artists, including Sir Thomas Lawrence, John Constable and J.M.W. Turner. He visited Paris and several cities in Italy including Naples, Rome, and Florence. His palette changed from dark browns to include grays and touches of red and yellow. Details were subordinated to broad bold brushstrokes to define masses. Parts of landscape became more unified.

Back in the US, Cole was encouraged by a wealthy merchant, Luman Reed, to paint a series of works entitled *The Course of Empire*. He would show the rise and fall of a nation; from savage state, to pastoral state, to the great city, to destruction, and, finally, desolation. The five changes would take place at successive times of the day. The background showed a series of mountain peaks in each of the series indicating that the same location was present in each successive scene. He completed the series in 1835.

In 1836, Cole married Maria Bartow. They had two children and settled permanently in Catskill. He planned another series, *The Voyage of Life*, beginning in 1839, showing Childhood, Youth, Manhood, and Old Age. The pictures were idealized and unreal but the image is a

romantic picturesque journey beset with trials. The American public seemed not to favor the new style and subject matter of Cole's work. Cole sailed again for England in 1841, traveling to France, Greece, Switzerland, and Italy. He again studied the old masters and gradually regained his old love of nature.

In 1842, after his European trip, Cole was baptized in the Anglican Church, and his art became dominated by strong religious influences. His pastor was Louis Lagrand Noble, who became his close friend and biographer. Several projects were in his mind, but not completed, before his death on February 11, 1848. In his last days, he insisted on working in complete privacy, not even permitting his wife to observe his work.

The Hudson River School was a name devised by a New York art critic to denote a group of landscape painters whose work he considered provincial and limited geographically. It may be said to have existed from 1825-1875, when Albert Bierstadt moved West and began what became known as the Rocky Mountain School - works of immense landscapes, produced using different techniques. The Hudson River School included Thomas Cole, Thomas Doughty, Asher Durand, Alvan Fisher, Frederic Church, John Kensett, Worthington Whittredge, John Casilear, William and James Hart, Sanford Gifford, Jasper Cropsey, and Thomas Rossiter. They were not united by a common style. Each developed a personal style distinguishable from the others. They were not geographically limited within the East; some were painting in the Berkshires and White Mountains. Cole sketched in Maine. And Frederick Church journeyed to Mexico and the Andes. Nor did these artists live in close proximity to each other. They did share, however, a spirit of devotion to nature and a common background of aesthetic ideas. They projected a unified vision of the American landscape, celebrating the wonders of nature in this country by presenting clear vistas of natural landscape. Cole wrote, "the painter of American scenery has indeed privileges superior to any other; all nature here is new to art."

Louis Lagrand Noble. *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*. Ed. Elliot S. Vesell, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1964.

-Donald Freund, Docent, 1998