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JASPER CROPSEY AND CONSERVATION

In Knights of the Brush, James F. Cooper observes that “the Hudson River School artists spoke convincingly about what we could call environmental concerns, a first step toward arousing public support for the establishment of the great national parks.”¹ If a great majority of contemporary Americans demonstrate concern for environmentalism, the paintings of the Hudson River School artists popularized, celebrated and commemorated the nation’s vast open spaces and landscape; the work of America’s first original school of art emphasized the grandeur of the American wilderness and immortalized its beauty. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, Jasper Cropsey created powerful images of America’s wild landscapes. Cropsey projected his strong sense of Christian morality onto his canvas and his moving depictions of the American landscape shaped the nation’s perception of its natural heritage, promoted conservation, helped spark the modern era of environmental protection, and inspired Scenic Hudson to protect Storm King Mountain and the Hudson Highlands from industrial encroachment.

Jasper Cropsey believed that the glory of God shined through the beauty of nature; he “perceived beauty in moral and spiritual terms.”² To paint nature was to honor God. The mountains, trees, rivers and streams represented God’s creation; the painter acted as God’s minister, transcribed God’s work, and honored His order. To paint God’s creation was to capture its holiness, to honor God, and to remind Americans that they did not transcend nature. Rather, they lived with in it, and were dwarfed by its grandeur.

Art reflects the moral standards of a nation, defines the role of a civilization and disseminates its values; the popularity of the Hudson River School painters uncovers America's historic environmental consciousness. Thus despite America's penchant for the Jacksonian frontier spirit and the commercialization of wilderness, her landscape artists reveal a cultural appreciation for the outdoors. The idea of natural beauty as holiness was reflected in the paintings of the Hudson River School; their work paralleled the religious awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and linked nature with God. If American religious revivals interpreted the nation's wilderness as manifestations of God's creation, they revived America's spirituality by stressing spiritual guilt, redemption, introspection and a new standard of personal morality. The paintings of Jasper Cropsey and religious movements of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries solidified the holiness of the environment in the American cultural psyche.

Jasper Cropsey was a product of this tradition. His work conflated America's wilderness with God, projected reverence and respect onto the environment and reflected deference towards God's order and creation. According to historian James F. Cooper, the Hudson River School painters "feared that empire building in the New World would lead to its moral and spiritual decline."³ If God's creation demanded respect, American expansion dispersed God's order; to conquer the wilderness was to inflate the status of man in God's creation and to subordinate holiness to the wishes of mankind.

Jasper Cropsey echoed these religious doctrines throughout his professional and personal life. Born on State Island on February 18, 1823, Jasper Cropsey enrolled in a five-year architectural apprenticeship at age fourteen to design religious-inspired structures. Drawn to a Gothic style imbued with "spiritual, Romantic, and religious

associations,” Cropsey’s 1867 apartment building betrayed a Gothic inspiration; his home Aladdin in Warwick New York “featured crenellated towers, lancet windows, and a medievalized mansarded entrance tower” and his final residence, Ever Rest, in Hastings-on Hudson, betrayed a Gothic influence.⁴ For Cropsey, to build in the Gothic-style and to exert “craftsmanship, technical skill, and attention to detail honored the artistry of God.”⁵ This influence of the holy extended to Cropsey’s professional art career. By the 1850s, Cropsey’s representations of nature, known for their vivid colors and Christian undertones, soon inspired a following. As a first-generation member from the Hudson River School, Cropsey reached prominence by depicting painted autumn landscapes “that startled viewers with their boldness and brilliance.”⁶ Cropsey’s work gained an international audience and he became known as the ‘American Painter of Autumn.’

Autumn- On the Hudson River is Cropsey’s quintessential painting. “Painted in England on the eve of the American Civil war, it contributes a visual sermon in two parts. The first part is about nature manifested through God blessing the American enterprise. The second is about the imminent loss of this second Garden of Eden.”⁷ The painting depicts a dreamy and warm afternoon on the western bank of the Hudson River, sixty miles from New York, between Newburgh and West Point. Cropsey sought “to convey an idea of the vastness and magnitude of the American landscape...[and] the richness and variety of colour in the foliage during the ‘Indian summer’ period of the year.”⁸ Colorful foliage frames the Hudson River Valley, the sun peaks from behind converging grey clouds and illuminates the valley below. “The Moodna, a clear stream that flows from Orange County into the Hudson, sparkles with light, while the tiny town of New Windsor beside it is almost obscured in darkness.”⁹ The light represents the eye of God and the

bank of red flowers and autumn leaves suggests “bloody corpses and poppies rather than dry autumnal leaves. At the lower left are several clusters of three white flowers, a theme Cropsey used often to evoke the Trinity.”¹⁰ As Cropsey fused iconology and aesthetics to demonstrate America’s chance at a second Eden, he believed that uninhibited western expansion and encroachment on virgin wilderness undermined the nation’s religious experiment and mission.

Similarly, Cropsey’s famous *On the Susquehanna*, painted in 1877, captures the beauty and wilderness of autumn in Susquehanna National Park, Maryland. The mountains in the background dominate the river and valley below; “cows have found their way down a path to the river’s edge, their brown, red, black, and white shapes reflect in the water.”¹¹ As the sun’s rays illuminate the canvas from right to left, the mountain peak silhouettes against the yellow-gold sky and dissolves into soft blue against a yellow-tinted sky. Man is absent from nature; the trees, the mountains, and foliage rule God’s tranquil and undisturbed creation. Conversely, 1877’s *Lake George* offers an intimate view of Jasper and Maria Cropsey in a small boat on the water. Yet “Cropsey [still] reasserts his position as painter, observer and celebrant of nature” and contrasts the grandeur of the landscape with the ambiguity of man.¹² The yellow sky, the colorful foliage of trees, and the pink slopes of the imposing Catskill Mountains dominate the canvas and are reflected in the water; “this symmetry in composition expresses the balance and harmony that can exist in nature.”¹³ The Cropseys’ are an obvious encroachment, but they do not disturb nature’s tranquility; rather, they “coexist in silent accord with the natural surroundings.”¹⁴

This shaped the nation's moral, spiritual and aesthetic tradition. As Cropsey immortalized the beauty of the Hudson Valley in his paintings, Americans sought to protect nature's wilderness from destruction. The paintings of Jasper Cropsey projected values of conservation, beauty and spirituality; as Americans admired Cropsey's work, they ingested its values and ideas. While the emergence of the environmental movement "can be traced to many large cultural and historical forces transforming the nation since World War II, the immediate cause was small enough: the announcement in 1963 by New York's utility company, Consolidated Edison, of plans to build a power plant on Storm King Mountain near the Hudson River."¹⁵ Most residents from the nearby town of Cornwall-on-Hudson hoped the project would boost the local economy and create more jobs, but a small group of longtime residents opposed Con Edison's plant. They considered the entire Hudson River Valley an expression of a distinctly American culture, "venerated by the nation's earliest writers...as well as the Hudson River school of landscape artists."¹⁶ In 1963, a small group of concerned citizens formed a group called Scenic Hudson and began a campaign to preserve America's artistic muse and biologically sensitive region from commercial development.

Scenic Hudson regarded the Hudson River Valley as an embodiment of America's national heritage and scenic beauty; the works of Jasper Cropsey exemplified these principles and formed an early tradition of American environmentalism. And if environmentalists and concerned citizens believed that sought to place American national heritage and scenic beauty ahead of commercial development, the Hudson River School painters offered both historical precedent and ideological guidance. Scenic Hudson's legal briefs betray this parallel. In short, the group argued that the Con Edison proposal

“subordinated engineering and cost considerations to the paramount need for preserving natural beauty and resources.” Moreover, they feared that “the project would cause great and irreparable damage to the unique heritage of natural beauty in the area” and would endanger “the quality of beauty of the Hudson Highlands, and of Storm King in particular.” If Cropsey believed that the grandeur of the American landscape reflected God’s creation and dwarfed man, Scenic Hudson sought to protect the Hudson Highlands from human destruction.¹⁷

Storm King Mountain served as an important inspiration for the Hudson River School painters and America’s earliest writers such as James Fennimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving. In *Autumn- On the Hudson*, Jasper Cropsey “adopted a high vantage point, looking southeast toward the distant Hudson River and the flank of Storm King Mountain.” According to the National Gallery of Art

A small stream leads from the foreground, where three hunters and their dogs gaze into the sunlight. All along the meandering tributary there are signs of man's peaceful coexistence with nature: a small log cabin, grazing sheep, children playing on a bridge, and cows standing placidly in the water. Here, man neither conquers nor is subservient to nature; both coexist harmoniously. In fact, the landscape is depicted as a ready arena for further agricultural expansion. While autumnal scenes traditionally are associated with the transience of life, Cropsey's painting is more a celebration of American nationalism. As a critic wrote in 1860, the picture represents "not the solemn wasting away of the year, but its joyful crowning festival."¹⁸

Wall Street lawyer Stephen Duggan and his wife Beatrice “Smokey” Duggan, founders of Scenic Hudson, sought to preserve the landmarks that defined America’s heritage and culture and ensure, as Cropsey had hoped to do, that man does not conquer nature. In November 1963, they began to challenge Con Edison’s development plans.

Con Edison proposed building a pumped storage facility with an upper storage reservoir, a powerhouse 800 foot long with eight pump generators at the base of the mountain, and transmission lines stretching 1,500 miles across the surrounding counties.

The power plant would have generated 2,000 megawatts of energy at peak times and drawn 1,080,000 cubic feet of water per minute. The building plans also promised to lower taxes in the surrounding towns and provide the region with 2,000,000 kilowatts of energy per minute. But when the company mistakenly published a drawing exaggerating the size of the plant relative to its surroundings, the Scenic Hudson movement attracted a large following; local residents joined their cause.¹⁹ Concerned citizens feared that the project would threaten endangered fish, the delicate balance of salt and fresh water, and jeopardize the aesthetic integrity of the Hudson Highlands.

During the licensing proceedings of the Federal Power Commission (FPC), Scenic Hudson (represented by Lloyd K. Garrison, great grandson of the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison) presented evidence that the existing power plants were already destroying large numbers of fish and that the proposed project “would mar one of the nation’s scenic and cultural treasures.”²⁰ Lacking precedent for admitting environmental and cultural arguments, the FPC dismissed Scenic Hudson’s claims as irrelevant and approved the Storm King license in March 1965. Lloyd K. Garrison appealed the decision to the federal circuit court.

Scenic Hudson charged that by not considering the public interest, the beauty and historical significance of Storm King Mountain, the board had violated the Federal Power Act of 1920 (which had created the FPC and granted it authority to license power plants). Conversely, Con Ed maintained that because Scenic Hudson was not economically affected by the project, it had no standing in the courts. During the proceedings, Con Ed’s attorney, Randall LeBoeuf, referred to the Scenic Hudson lawyers as birdwatchers and “stated that the plant Con Ed had designed would actually improve the beauty of Storm

King Mountain.”²¹ On December 29, 1965 the federal circuit court found that “in order to ensure that the agency [FPC] will adequately protect the public interest in the aesthetic, conservational and recreational aspects of power development, those who by their activities and conduct have exhibited a special interest in such areas must be recognized as having a legal right to protect those special interests.”²²

By upholding Scenic Hudson’s claims, the Court recognized the validity of Jasper Cropsey’s doctrines. An earlier Court of Appeals ruled that “the Storm King project is to be located in an area of unique beauty and major historical significance. The highlands and gorge of the Hudson offer one of the finest pieces of river scenery in the world.”²³ Jasper Cropsey and the other Hudson River School painters documented the beauty and unique features of the American landscape; they formed America’s national heritage and established a national precedent for environmental concern. After it was finally settled in December of 1980, the Storm King precedent extended legal standing to environmental interests and helped “to establish the legitimacy of environmental issues and open the way for lawyers and the courts to play a highly significant role in all manner of land-use and environmental battles.”²⁴

Still, Cropsey and the environmentalists of the 1960s compromised with progress. Cropsey’s 1851 *The Spirit of War*, for example, features castles and warriors within the context of the American landscape; other Hudson River School paintings incorporated “benign images of railroad, ship, town, bridge, and ax into the arcadian American wilderness.”²⁵ Cropsey and the other painters relied on America’s railroads to transport them to uncivilized areas of the American West; while they understood the importance of industrialization and economic expansion, they feared “that something dreadful might

happen to America if it strayed from the 'heavenly' path."²⁶ Similarly, Scenic Hudson sought to balance necessary expansion with prudent environmental stewardship. Both groups urged Americans to live within the means of their environment; if Cropsey projected God onto the American landscape and projected harmony between humans and the environment, the environmental movement relied on his construction of an American artistic heritage and precedent to preserve the Hudson Highlands from devastation. Thus, the Storm King Mountain case represents a twentieth century extension of Cropsey's religious idealism. Such an interpretation undermines modern conceptions of the environmental movement as radical or liberal. A conservationist interpretation of the works of Jasper Cropsey suggests that modern environmentalism is a conservative expression of American heritage and tradition.

Footnotes

- ¹ Cooper, James F. Knights of the Brush: the Hudson River School and the Moral Landscape. New York: Hudson Hills P, 2000. 45
- ² Ibid., 30
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid., 68
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid., 53
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ O'toole, Judith H. Different Views in Hudson River School Painting. New York: Columbia UP., 2005. 40
- ¹² Ibid., 134
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ "What Started It All." Natural Resources Defense Council. 12 Apr. 2007
<<http://www.nrdc.org/legislation/helaw.asp>>.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Reply Brief on Behalf of SHPC Intervenor Index Point II, Storm King Collection
- ¹⁸ National Gallery of Art < <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=46191+0+none>>
- ¹⁹ "What Started It All." Natural Resources Defense Council. 12 Apr. 2007
<<http://www.nrdc.org/legislation/helaw.asp>>.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Kent Law, Public Interest Law <
[http://www.kentlaw.edu/classes/rstaudt/2006PublicInterestLaw/docs/ScenicHudson/Storm%20King%20PP
T.ppt](http://www.kentlaw.edu/classes/rstaudt/2006PublicInterestLaw/docs/ScenicHudson/Storm%20King%20PP%20T.ppt)>
- ²³ Court of Appeals (354 F. 2d 608, 613)
- ²⁴ "What Started It All." Natural Resources Defense Council. 12 Apr. 2007
<<http://www.nrdc.org/legislation/helaw.asp>>.
- ²⁵ Cooper, James F. Knights of the Brush: the Hudson River School and the Moral Landscape. New York: Hudson Hills P, 2000. 4534
- ²⁶ Ibid.