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The Hudson River School of Painters

America in the early 19th century was in the midst of an industrial, social and technological growth spurt. Following the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the need for a unique American culture was palpable, especially in the nation's capital, New York City. Ambitious and educated innovators like Samuel Morse, Washington Allston, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Washington Irving, and Fenimore Cooper led America in a revolution of science and culture that complimented and rivaled the dominant European ideals. In accordance to these social advancements, the American landscape artist emerged as a patron of American nationality and culture. The first coherent association of revolutionary American landscape painters was called the Hudson River School of Painting. Between 1825 and 1875, the artists of the Hudson River School explored and recorded the beauty of American wilderness through painting. These artistic pioneers were bound together in the vision and philosophy set forth by founders Thomas Cole, and Asher B. Durand. During their 50 years of operation, the Hudson River School acted as a record for American's rapidly growing new culture and life.

The Hudson River Valley was the site for the new group of American artists because of its natural beauty, but its success relied heavily on its proximity to New York City. The nation's capital was where the wealth and desire for American art and culture was concentrated. Wealthy patrons of the arts utilized the easy access to Europe, where they looked for cultural guidance and inspiration. In New York City, prestigious art academies, such as the National Academy of Design, were established so artists could study, work, show, and sell their paintings. In accordance to these circumstances and the

developing trend of naturalistic philosophy, artists turned to the natural beauty of the Northeastern wilderness, especially that of the Hudson River Valley.

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At the end of the 18th century, prevailing New York artists Samuel Morse and Washington Allston traveled to Europe to study High Renaissance history painting, which was called "The Great Style". Like most American thinkers of the time, they turned to Europe for enlightened inspiration. Both returned to the United States motivated by the romantic art and thought of Europe. Morse was elected president of the National Academy of Design in 1825, where landscape artists began to converge and unify in thought and style. His later accomplishments in scientific technology would later outshine his career in the arts, but his influence transcended all spheres of study. Alongside Morse, Washington Allston became one of the first to paint the American landscape with romantic and mythical inspiration from European art, which lent his work heightened esteem in the New York community.[2]

In succession to Allston, Pennsylvanian painter Thomas Doughty was the first artist to dedicate his work to the natural grandeur of the American landscape. Doughty was committed to displaying the Divine through nature. In addition to his vision, Doughty's devotion to accurate detail, idealized mood, and ordered composition set his works on a revolutionary level of American landscape. He exhibited his work at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Art in 1823, where it was viewed by a young and impressionable Thomas Cole, future forefather of the Hudson River School. [3]

Thomas Cole was born in Lancashire, England in 1801. Cole worked as a calico designer and engraver's assistant before migrating to Philadephia in 1818, where he continued working in a variety of artistic trades. Dissatisfied with his career in the arts,

Cole rededicated himself to landscape painting after viewing the work of Thomas Doughty. From that point he became a role model for the emerging romantic landscape movement.

Based on the work of Doughty, Cole was inspired to paint the American landscape through imagination and appreciation. The young artist dedicated himself to America's untamed wilderness, taking the summer of 1825 to hike the Hudson Valley for inspiration. Cole was one of the first artists to meticulously sketch and paint the natural beauty of the American landscape that developed into the methodology behind the Hudson River School. Later that year, Cole was discovered by New York artists John Trumbull, William Dunlap and Asher B. Durand. The young artist's oil paintings of the Hudson River Valley were first spotted by Trumbull in a frame maker's shop, where they were bought and collected by former New York mayor Phillip Hone. Hone, being a wealthy and important figure in NYC society, brought recognition to Cole and his unique art. [4]

Before his New York debut in 1825, Cole and New York Drawing Association colleague Asher B. Durand attended an address by Richard Ray at the Academy of Fine Arts. Ray verbalized the feeling of New York society, and connected artists to the aristocratic patron. In his speech, he directed landscape artists to the natural grandeur of upstate New York in order to bring American Art into the homes of New York patrons.

"…Your country points you to its stupendous cataracts, its highlands intersected with the majestic river, its ranging mountain, its softer and enchanting scenery. There, where Nature needs no fictitious charms, where the eye require no borrowed assistance

from the memory, place on canvas the lovely landscape, and adorn our houses with American prospects and American skies." [5]

Ray's speech inspired Cole as thinker as well as a painter. Cole wrote essays, poetry, and notes on his observations of the divinity of nature, adding a philosophical and religious aspect to his work. In 1826, Cole dedicated himself to the highly esteemed field of allegorical painting. Although inspired by reality, Cole's paintings depicted incredibly dramatic, idealized scenes such as in the *Garden of Eden and the Expulsion.* After he traveled to Europe between 1829 and 1832, Cole's paintings, such as *The Course of Empire* series and *The Voyage of Life,* adopts a painterly quality, dramatic composition and seemingly divine light in addition to the already present historical and allegorical content. [6]

Although accomplished in historical paintings, Cole's paintings were most praised for their philosophical substance. The artist's work was a reflection of a new and purely American idea called Transcendentalism. The literary, philosophical, and religious movement was headed by writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Washington Irving, and Fenimore Cooper. The philosophy itself glorifies the beauty of nature and idealized thought as the only valid proof of Divinity. In accordance to Transcendentalism, Cole wandered, sketched, and painted the nature of the Catskill Valley to unveil God's presence in nature. At the end of his life in 1848, Cole created a body of work that is praised for its groundbreaking beauty and intellectual influence in American art. [7]

Cole's partner Asher Brown Durand, shared his vision for the virtuous role of landscape art in American society. In an article called "Letters on Landscape Painting" from a 1855 New York Literary magazine, Durand explains his lack of material

motivation in his art, stating “It is better to make shoes, or dig potatoes, or follow any other honest calling to secure a livelihood, than seek the pursuit of Art for the sake of gain.”[8] Durand abandoned his engraving business in 1836 and redirected his efforts to painting. After unsuccessfully starting with portraiture and history painting, he began focusing on landscapes and continued to do so for a full ten years. Like Cole, Durand’s efforts were drawn from his deep religious philosophy based on Transcendentalism. In the same article, he credits nature alone for the grandness of his painting: “True Art teaches the use of the embellishments that Nature herself furnishes, it never creates them.” [9] Durand captured what he believed to be divinity in his scenic paintings of the American northeast.

As this new genre of landscape art gained respect among American society, artists began to follow the philosophical and visual example of the masters Cole and Durand. A second generation of Hudson Valley Painters was born. John Casliear, John Frederick Kensett, David Johnson, Sandford Gifford and a collection of lesser known artists emulated the forefathers of the Hudson River School. Out of the group, Casilear and Kensett enjoyed the most successful and significant careers, pioneering a sub-category of romantic landscape called Luminism, also known as air-painting. The Luminists, as they are now called, were interested in painting light as it is affected by seasonal weather. Their works are known for their delicately applied tone of grey that is reflective of time and atmosphere. [10]

John Casilear began his artistic career as an engraver at a New York shop run by Peter Maverick. He joined the studio of Durand in 1831 where he soon became an exclusive landscape painter. After his first landscape exhibition in 1836, Casilear traveled

with Durand to Europe to learn from the old Masters. The inspired artist sent former shop mate John Kensett a letter in which he described the “everlasting hills” as his new workshop.[11]Kensett was easily persuaded to join Durand and Casilear in Europe, and subsequently joined the Hudson River Valley painters.

Upon his return to the United States, Casilear painted in the idealized fashion of Durand, but with notable difference in technique. Casilear’s paintings were modestly composed and had a silvery tone, which Durand cautioned against. Despite his teacher’s warning against the use of grey, Casilear acted under his own poetic interpretation of nature. Future artists from the Hudson River School would develop Casilear’s technique throughout the mid-19th century. [12]

John Frederick Kensett, friend and college of Casilear, is also considered a Luminist painter. Originally an engraver, Kensett was born 1816 at Cheshire Connecticut. He joined Durand and Casilear in Europe, settling in France in 1840. Kensett returned to New York in 1847 to a successful career, which is attributed to his skill for socializing. He became a leader in New York politics and significant contributor to social circles in capital city. Kensett’s early works depict a dark and tortured view of nature, but as he matured the mood of his paintings softened and he began to explore the affects of air and atmosphere. [13]

Kensett’s paintings were financially successful, and highly influential to fellow Hudson River School artists such as David Johnson. Johnson was born in New York in 1827 and studied with Jasper Cropsey. In commemoration of Durand and Cole, Johnson

considered nature to be his "master and teacher."[4] He is known for creating larger works like Kensett, but with a drier application of paint. Although he had success in the 1860s and 70s, Johnson's paintings are not well known. [14]

New York artist Sanford Gifford also followed in the footsteps of Cole and the Luminists. The artist began his career in 1845 studying portraiture at the New York Drawing school of John Rubens Smith, but later redirected his devotion to landscape. Inspired by experience and the work of Cole, Gifford gained a newfound intellectual enjoyment of Nature and life as a landscape artist. Gifford sketched the Catskill Mountains and the Berkshire Hills over summer months much like Cole did in 1825. The second generation Hudson Valley painter developed his own style of miniature luminist landscape views. Unlike his predecessors, Gifford expanded his subject matter to include European landscape, which would soon become a trend in the Hudson Valley Painting School.

As the 19th century progressed, America was expanding westward, and the Hudson River School entered its last phase of existence. Painters from the Hudson River school incorporated the group's appreciation and idealization of nature into new territory. Artists like Jasper Cropsey, Frederick Church, Albert Bierstadt, and George Inness drew from exotic subject matter, used new European techniques, and enjoyed great financial success. Simultaneously, the artists veered from the moral instruction of Cole and Durand.[5] By the 1880s the artistic climate would change for good, and the Hudson River School would descend into history.

Jasper Cropsey worked in an architect's office before dedicating himself to landscape painting in 1841. Between 1847 and 1849 the artist studied in Europe and lived in Cole's old Roman studio. Cropsey's produced Italian and Scottish landscapes that were similar to Coles in method, manner and mood. Also in Hudson River School tradition, Cropsey traveled and painted the American northeast. While living in London, Cropsey exhibited his work on American landscape before returning to American in 1863. Cropsey's was known for his distinguished handling of autumn colors and light, as seen in his work titled *Autumn on the Hudson River* (1860).[15] The artist had a very successful financial career, even presenting Queen Victoria with 9ft canvas. Cropsey built a luxurious studio/house called Aladdin, in Warwick, NY. In his later years, the aging artist lost patronage and painted landscapes succumbed by temperamental weather.[16]

Perhaps the most popular of the later Hudson River School painters was Frederick E. Church. Born in Hartford Connecticut in 1826, Church his landscape paintings at the National Academy when he was only 19 years old. The artist studied with Thomas Cole between 1844 and 1846, but did not share his teacher's virtuous view of nature. Instead, he became very skillful at producing painfully accurate, dramatically lit landscapes. In 1846, Church left Cole and moved to New York City in 1847 where he took his own student, William Stillman. Church traveled the United States in search of more challenging subjects before delving into South American, European, and Asian landscape. He completed breathtaking views of natural American wonders such as *Niagara*, completed in 1856, and *The Heart of the Andes* in 1859. Church's paintings were huge panoramic views that were rich with painstaking detail against blurred

foregrounds. Compared to the work of other Hudson Valley Painters, Church's work lacks religious content, but is more visually impressive in detail and size. In later years, the art of Frederick E. Church was criticized for being too technical and overly brilliant, but the artist was nevertheless a huge financial success. [17]

Also straying from the traditional ideals of the Hudson River Painters, Albert Bierstadt was German-born, and subjectively painted scenes from the American Mid-West. The artist was raised in New Bedford, Massachusetts and studied at the Dusseldorf Academy with friend and colleague Samuel Gifford. Like Gifford, Bierstadt learned to paint with a luminist quality. [18]He traveled through Germany, Switzerland, and Italy before the set off for the American Midwest. Perhaps inspired by the size of the land or by his collogue and rival Church, Bierstadt depicted huge pieces, such as *The Rocky Mountains* to emphasize the grandeur of the developing west. The piece was the main attraction at the Metropolitan Fair in 1864 and became another huge financial success for the Hudson River School. [19]

By the 1870's, the remaining students of the Hudson River School were overshadowed by new concepts from the French landscape artists of the Barbizon school. The Barbizon paintings made a splash on the American art scene at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The paintings differed from American Romantic ideals completely. They depicted a variety of subjects in more expressive brushstrokes that ignored the detail that the Hudson River school revered.[20]

One of the only artists to adjust to this drastic shift was George Inness. Inness was born in Newburgh, New York in 1825. He started his career as an engraver until 1840

when began painting with French immigrant snowscapist Regis Gignoux. Inness entered the National Academy of Design in 1843 and exhibited his work one year later. His earlier works, such as *The Old Mill* (1849) [21]are reflective of the Hudson River School philosophy and rendering. After spending time in Italy and France between 1870 and 1874, Inness was exposed to the Barbizon landscapes that would spell the end for the Hudson River School. Later works such *Niagara Falls* done in 1885, show the Barbizon use of loose brushstroke and scattered light that became the new method of painting in Europe and American art. [22]

By the 1880's The Hudson River School diminished in the wake of Impressionism. Europe was the standard for Western culture, and American artists followed suit. Today, the Hudson River Valley School of Painting is noted as one of the fundamental artistic movements in American History. Due to the School's monumental influence, the American artist emerged as a leader of intellectual thought and culture.

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[1] Howat, John K, James Biddle and Carl Carmer. *The Hudson River and Its Painters.* New York: Viking Press, 1972. 29-30.

[2] Ibid., 28.

[3] Minks, Louise. *The Hudson River School: The Landscape Art of Bierstadt, Cole, Church, Durand, Heade and twenty other artists.* New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing Inc, 2000. 10.

[4] Howat, John K, James Biddle and Carl Carmer, 29.

[5] Ibid., 35.

[6] Ibid., 35.
[7] Minks, Louise. *The Hudson River School: The Landscape Art of Bierstadt, Cole, Church, Durand, Heade and twenty other artists.* New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing Inc, 2000. 11.
[8] Howat, John K, James Biddle and Carl Carmer, 1972. 40.
[9] Ibid., 40
[10] Ibid., 40-1

[11] Ibid., 41.

[12] Ibid., 41.

[13] Ibid., 42.
[14] Ibid., 41-2.
[15] Ibid., 43.
[16] Ibid., 43-4
[17] Minks, Louise. *The Hudson River School: The Landscape Art of Bierstadt, Cole, Church, Durand, Heade and twenty other artists.* New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing Inc, 2000. 84.

[18] Howat, John K, James Biddle and Carl Carmer. 44-7.
[19] Ibid., 46.

[20] Ibid., 44-6.
[21] Ibid., 47.

[22] Minks, Louise. *The Hudson River School: The Landscape Art of Bierstadt, Cole, Church, Durand, Heade and twenty other artists.* New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing Inc, 2000. 84.