CATSKILL, NEW YORK

River Views of the Hudson River School

by Elizabeth B. Jacks

The Hudson River is one of the most storied places in the American landscape, with such beloved national icons as the Statue of Liberty and West Point, populated with figures as celebrated and diverse as George Washington and John Rockefeller. It has a dramatic beauty that is highly unusual for a river due to its origins as glacier melt, with high banks on either side where the ice sliced its way through during the last ice age. Because this year is the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s voyage up the river, the Hudson River is also home to a great variety of festivals, exhibitions and celebrations.

For Henry Hudson and his crew, the river was experienced via a slow sail starting from the great wide harbor that is now New York City surrounded with skyscrapers. As one traveled north, the graceful blue Catskill Mountains gradually took shape on the left; it was the Catskills that would later draw throngs of American tourists in the nineteenth century. One of the most influential people to make this same journey was Thomas Cole (1801-1848), who in 1825 captured the region’s wild beauty on canvases that assured his fame and launched what is now known as the Hudson River School of landscape painting.

This art movement, America’s first, eventually grew to dominate American vi-

All illustrations are courtesy the Westmoreland Museum of American Art.

ABOVE: Jasper F. Cropsey, On the Hudson Near West Point, 1877, o/c, 12 x 20.

RIGHT: Thomas Cole, Indians Viewing Landscape, c. 1827, o/panel, 6 x 7 1/4.

ABOVE LEFT: Views from the front porch of the Main house.

LEFT: Thomas Cole’s Federal style brick home, c. 1815.

The Hudson River School, known for its focus on the natural beauty of the Hudson River Valley, has been a significant influence on American culture for over fifty years, which is quite astonishing considering how quickly cultural fashion changes today. It had a profound impact on the shape of this country’s ideals and assumptions, encompassing such cherished notions as equating nature with a divine presence, a feeling of awe for America’s natural wonders, and the belief that America is something of a Promised Land. The tender young roots of this art movement can be traced back to a charming property in Catskill, New York, that was recently opened to the public: The Thomas Cole National Historic Site, historically known as Cedar Grove.

Only ten years ago, Thomas Cole’s home stood in ruins. The graceful Federal-style 1815 Main House was shedding roof shingles with each gust of wind, and a pool of water filled the basement after pipes had frozen and burst. The spacious wrap-around porch, still boasting a magnificent view of the Catskills that looked eerily similar to many of Cole’s paintings, was too dangerous to walk on as the rotted boards gave way underfoot. In 1998 when the Greene County Historian, Raymond Beecher, came to the site to consider what could be done, he almost “slammed the...
The site had been dealt near fatal blows before. Thomas Cole died at the young age of forty-seven, leaving his wife pregnant with their fourth child. The only other adult male in the family, Thomas’s wife’s uncle and the owner of Cedar Grove, had died two years before, leaving a mountain of debt. The property, which at its height spread over 100 acres and included frontage on the Hudson River, began to dwindle as the family sold plot after plot to survive. In the 1930s, the construction of the Rip Van Winkle Bridge over the Hudson River was diverted at the last minute from plowing through the Main House in order to make way for the bridge approach ramp, but the ramp did cut right through Cedar Grove’s remaining farmland. In the 1960s, the entire contents of the house, including dozens of Thomas Cole paintings now worth millions of dollars, were auctioned off for mere hundreds of dollars. In the 1970s, Cole’s Italianate-style studio which he had designed himself in 1846, was demolished and carted away in dump-
sters. Dr. J. Grey Sweeney, a young scholar who was there that day, could save nothing but a few bricks and a roll of photographs that he shot as the walls came down. By the time Mr. Beecher stood in the basement of the Main House in 1998 with water up to his ankles, the site was a mere shadow of its former self.

Fortunately, the story does not end there. In 1999, after catching the attention of the region’s representative to the US Congress, the site was made an affiliate of the National Park Service through the “Thomas Cole National Historic Site Act.” Mr. Beecher and the other core group of community members including Jack Van Loan and Robert Stackman, who made it their mission to save the site, thought this marked the end to its peril. The legislation included such reassuring phrases as “There are authorized to be appropriated such sums as are necessary to carry out this Act.”

The team would soon learn however, that there was a world of difference between funds that are “authorized to be appropriated” and funds that are actually appropriated. The suggested renovation and operating budget drawn up by planners in the National Park Service ran into the millions. The actual funding appropriated to renovate and operate the historic site...
through the National Park System came to exactly zero—until now.

Partially due to the site’s national significance, partially through the community’s persistence, and partially due to extreme luck, the site was restored. Over $2 million to renovate the Main House and Cole’s surviving “Old Studio” (not to be confused with the “New Studio” that had been demolished) was raised through state grants, federal grants, individual donors, garden parties, corporate philanthropy and private foundations.

The Main House opened for a celebration in July 2001, marking the 200th anniversary of Cole’s birth. At the time, it was operated only by volunteers. After the opening, the house might have remained locked and inaccessible were it not for a remarkable woman named Sybil Tannenbaum who decided to spend her summers sitting on the porch, recruiting her friends to join her, showing the house to anyone who showed up and paid the $5 fee.

In the years that followed, the site experienced a meteoric rise. The first paid staff person was hired in 2003. Cole’s “Old Studio” was restored and loan exhibitions of Hudson River School paintings began in 2004. A visitor center and gift shop, a lecture series, site signage, and a second staff person were added in 2005. Grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the National Endowment for the Humanities followed in 2006, bringing a
new film about Cole for the visitor center and an extensive online education center all about his paintings. The site’s operating budget nearly doubled (from $182,000 to $330,000) in four years, and attendance to the site grew tenfold. An additional staff person was added in 2008, and finally in 2009 the word came from the National Park Service that the site was slated to begin receiving $150,000 in operating funds in 2010 and every year from now on.

One of the aspects that makes the Thomas Cole site so insightful is its location, now well known through the influential landscape paintings of the period. Many of the other artists that are considered masters of the Hudson River School, including Frederic Church, Sanford Gifford, and Jasper Cropsey, traveled down the same paths in search of sublime views. Remarkably, many of the views are little changed since Cole’s time. The painting sites are now mapped and illustrated for self-guided exploration through a program called The Hudson River School Art Trail that the Thomas Cole Historic Site launched a few years ago. The sites on the trail are all located within a ten or fifteen minutes’ drive from Cole’s home, creating a concentrated area for a weekend’s exploration.

Guest curated by Dr. Nancy Siegel, As-
Associate Professor of Art History at Towson University in Towson, Maryland, River Views of the Hudson River showcases paintings by Hudson River School artists depicting the river along with several other associated bodies of water such as the legendary Kaaterskill Falls. Part of the magic of this exhibition is that the landscapes in the paintings can be seen just outside the gallery walls at the Thomas Cole site.

Among the highlights of the exhibition are views from high up in the Catskills, in which the river is but a silver ribbon in the middle of a vast eastward prospect. For example, Jervis McEntee’s Sunset in the Catskills from 1867 shows off the dramatic view from the eastern ledges of the Catskill “Escarpment” and an unusual small painting by Thomas Cole depicts two Native Americans overlooking what could be the Hudson Valley from a rocky perch.
The Catskills scenery is still stunning today due to a few important words in the New York State Constitution that guarantees the area remain “forever wild.” Ironically, but not accidentally, the landscape is more “wild” and pristine today than it was in Cole’s lifetime when the tanning industry devoured the forests that originally carpeted the Catskills. Cole painted the untouched forests back into place, and miraculously the landscape now actually looks like his paintings.

Ironically, Arthur Parton’s luminous painting, Mount Merino, is a window into the Hudson River of the past when the City of Hudson still had a harbor called South Bay. The harbor is shown in tranquil beauty before the railroad closed over the mouth of the port in the mid-nineteenth century. The once bucolic scene is barely recognizable today, having been filled in with industrial waste and then built up with self-serve storage units and the like. The comparison of the landscape today with the nineteenth-century paintings reveals our own choices about how we have used and shaped our land since that time.

Thomas Cole’s home, meanwhile, is still a work in progress. This year the large brick piers that once marked the entrance will be rebuilt, along with the stone wall topped by a picket fence that graced the street frontage in his time. Apple orchards will be replanted all around the five-acre historic site, and an architect is already hard at work on drawing up the plans to rebuild Cole’s New Studio.