



DESTINATION
ART

SAVORING ART & NATURE TOGETHER

Train whistles were already echoing through the Hudson River Valley in 1836, when Thomas Cole (1801–1848) settled with his new wife, Maria Bartow, into a Federal-style house in the village of Catskill, New York. Perhaps Cole, an English immigrant, was unusually sensitive to their intrusion, having experienced industrialization’s unsavory aspects when he was a boy in Lancashire. Whatever the cause, the clamor of the steam-powered “iron horses” gave him pause.

“If men were not insensible to the beauty of nature,” Cole cautioned, “the great works necessary for the purposes of commerce might be carried on without destroying it ... but it is not so. They desecrate whatever they touch. They cut down the forests with a wantonness for which there is no excuse, even gain, & leave the herbless rocks to glimmer in the burning sun.” Therein lies the rub, one America has wrestled with ever since: will nature or man win out?

While visiting that Federal house, Cedar Grove, now operated as the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, we soon realize that the property is surrounded by exactly the kind of intrusive development Cole despised. Alas, we cannot turn back the clock, but in a number of creative ways, this region’s leaders have been working diligently to reclaim and preserve its cultural treasures. By helping visitors experience the settings, ideas, and creations of the Hudson River School, they enable us to better understand how and why these artists depicted our still-young country as they did.

Cole had first encountered the Catskill region during a sketching trip in 1825. Frequent hikes brought him to Catskill Creek, a place that came to symbolize home for him. According to



THOMAS COLE (1801–1848), *North Mountain and Catskill Creek*, 1838, oil on canvas, 26 7/16 x 36 7/16 in., Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, gift of Anne Osborn Prentice, 1981.56, on view in *Thomas Cole’s Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek*

H. Daniel Peck, professor emeritus of English at Vassar College and guest curator of the historic site’s new exhibition, *Thomas Cole’s Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek*, the artist would find inspiration here for the rest of his career. Six of the 10 scenes he painted of it are now on display in Cole’s re-created studio; together they reveal Cole’s juxtaposition of the sublime and the beautiful, aesthetic theories that had been imported from Britain. In this context, violent natural phenomena were seen as sublime, while pastoral scenes of such features as meadows

and ponds exemplified order and harmony — the beautiful. It was in their uneasy tension, Peck suggests, that Cole found the American character.

Though Cole was determined — borrowing a phrase from the modern scholar Leo Marx — “to keep the machine out of the garden,” the nearby Hudson River and Erie Canal had already become bustling commercial thoroughfares. As a painter Cole steered clear of them, preferring scenes that, in Peck’s view, “contain mysteries — enigmatic figures, evocative human



(TOP TO BOTTOM) The main house at Cedar Grove, where Thomas Cole lived from 1836 until his death in 1848 ■ The main house at Frederic Church's Olana; photo: Beth Schneck ■ The veranda on the western façade of Olana's main house; photo: Charles Phelps ■ Looking south from Olana's main house; photo: Beth Schneck



structures, and symbolic landforms — that tell stories of their own.”

Today visitors can explore the natural sites Cole and his colleagues enjoyed by following the Hudson River School Art Trail, launched in 2005 by a regional team of historic sites and partners and encompassing online maps, directions, educational materials, and a printed guidebook. It is a particular joy to walk the one and a half miles from Cedar Grove to Catskill Creek, land that is now overseen by the conservancy groups Scenic Hudson and Greene Land Trust. Another path connects Cedar Grove to the newly improved Hudson River Skywalk on the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, which affords spectacular views from a series of platforms.

ACROSS THE HUDSON

A stroll across the bridge — to the eastern shore of the Hudson — brings visitors to Olana State Historic Site, the estate of Cole's student Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) that is now operated jointly by the Olana Partnership and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation.

In the early 1870s, Church hired his friend the architect Calvert Vaux to collaborate on designs for a Persian-accented villa high on a hill overlooking the Hudson. For Church and his wife, Isabel, Olana became the New Jerusalem, with Bible readings an everyday occurrence in their sitting room, and their rooms filled to the brim with books, art, and sacred objects reflecting many faiths.

The Churches had traveled extensively in the Holy Land and Middle East, and they accepted the theories of the picturesque championed by the British minister William Gilpin (1724–1804), who celebrated the carefully composed landscape paintings of the 17th-century French painter Claude Lorrain, and later by the American landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–1852). In her book *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail*, Jennifer Raab writes, “For a painter whose details seemed to be constantly exceeding what a single canvas could communicate and whose greatest pictures were looked at through opera glasses in crowded rooms, the picturesque was, above all, a liberating language.”

By the 1840s, traveling panoramas of nature and of biblical lands had taken America by storm. The stereoscope, a hand-held precursor to the film strip, had appeared as well, delighting viewers by melding two images to convey a three-dimensional depth. From the late 1850s, Church's landscape paintings were drawing upon these optical innovations, functioning as pictorial experiments in scale, size, and movement.

At Olana, the artist took his experiments further by sculpting with nature. He dredged land to form a 10-acre lake and created meadows and woodlands planted with native species. Church also designed five miles of carriage drives that twist and turn up the hill toward his villa. He and Isabel traveled these roads daily, pausing at vantage points to admire views that suddenly appeared as if in a dream. As Church and Vaux designed the house (creating hundreds



CHILDE HASSAM (1859–1935), *Apple Trees in Bloom*, Old Lyme, 1904, oil on wood, 25 x 30 in., Florence Griswold Museum, gift of the Vincent Dowling Family Foundation in honor of director emeritus Jeffrey Andersen

of drawings in the process), they sited it — and its tower, verandas, and arched windows — to offer a variety of views from different perspectives.

In recent years, the landscape architects Nelson Byrd Woltz have delved deeply into research, fieldwork, and Church's own paintings, sketches, and drawings to assess the damage inflicted on this landscape by decades of neglect. They found that successional forest growth, overgrown meadows, fallow farmland, and eroding roadways had obscured Church's overall

vision for his estate. This year the fruits of their labors can be enjoyed in Olana's reclaimed vistas and restored forests and meadows. Next up is a restoration of the property's working farm.

While visiting Olana, be sure to stroll the carriage drives that Church designed to surprise and delight. Take in the woodlands and meadows, and experience how his cultivated landscape undulates and connects with the distant mountain range beyond. For Olana's exhibition this summer, guest curator Barry Bergdoll (Columbia University and Museum of Modern Art) has invited a group of exploratory architects to respond to the transitional outdoor ("ombra") rooms so essential to the house's character.

MEANWHILE, IN CONNECTICUT...

Later in the 19th century, industrial development continued to overtake nature, so it is not sur-

prising that many collectors gravitated toward painted scenes of unspoiled landscape. The train as leitmotif was still relevant, though by 1900 it had become an expected feature. Passenger trains now transported artists from New York City to Connecticut each summer, especially to the towns of Cos Cob and Old Lyme, which became hotbeds of the American Impressionist movement. Scenes of pastures, marshland, rivers, and stately New England architecture became primary elements in the paintings these men (and some women) created outdoors.

At Old Lyme, such talents as Childe Hassam and Willard Metcalf boarded in the house of Miss Florence Griswold, whose farm provided them with fresh flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Today many paintings created on and near this property can be enjoyed in the permanent collection of the Florence Griswold Museum.

Old Lyme is a gorgeous place under siege — one of the towns along the Connecticut shoreline that has been identified as being at high risk for sea level rise/flooding in the years ahead. In the distance, museum visitors can hear the muffled sounds of cars crawling along on Interstate 95 — the successors, perhaps, to Cole's dreaded iron horses. Old Lyme was an early hot spot when Lyme Disease was identified in the 1970s, and it continues to be at risk for all manner of tick-borne ailments.

But Old Lyme is also the place from which Roger Tory Peterson (1908–1996), a longtime resident, artist, and conservationist, advocated successfully for the ban on DDT. It's largely the result of his efforts and those of other local conservationists that osprey are again nesting there today, though other shorebirds, notably the marsh sparrow, are facing extinction, largely owing to the loss of habitat.

Today the museum's board and staff are collaborating with the landscape design firm

The dining room in Florence Griswold's house is adorned with paintings donated by the artists who lived there; photo: Joe Standart ■ The Florence Griswold Museum overlooks the marshes of the Lieutenant River; photo: Sean Flynn.





JAMES PROSEK (b. 1975), *Striped Bass*, 2017, oil and acrylic on panel, 33 3/4 x 42 in., courtesy of the artist and Waqas Wajahat, New York City, on view in *Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art*

Stephen Stimson Associates to re-envision its 12-acre site. Opening soon is an Artists' Trail winding through the property, which allows visitors to admire new plantings that have replaced invasive foliage and now attract birds and butterflies to the marshland along the Lieutenant River. Of the invasive plants that have been choking out natives, and destroying important habitats, the major players are phragmites (hideous tall grasses); euonymus, a thorny shrub that has taken over Connecticut's woodlands; Japanese knotweed; and Oriental bittersweet. These are the major culprits, but there are many others. Stimson's project, if successful, will provide a template for other shoreline communities. The museum's peppy new director, Rebekah Beaulieu, foresees a time when her institution and the Roger Tory Peterson Audubon Center (located a few min-

utes away) could join forces to make conservationists ("citizen naturalists") of all of us.

The Griswold's current exhibition, *Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art*, highlights four contemporary artists — Jennifer Angus, Mark Dion, Courtney Mattison, and James Prosek — who address climate change in provocative ways. "These artists were selected for the profound message their works convey about environmental conservation," curator Jennifer Stettler Parsons explains. "They transform natural and non-traditional materials, like insects and found debris, into art in order to make visible the human role in global climate change, and to reveal how our daily choices may endanger our planet's future."

Exhibitions like this help remind art lovers that many artists working today are just as interested in celebrating and protecting nature

as Thomas Cole once was. Some things don't change, fortunately. ●

Information: *Cole's Refrain* (thomascole.org) is on view through November 3, and will then be presented at the Hudson River Museum (Yonkers) from November 21 through February 28, 2020. *In Fredric Church's Ombra: Architecture in Conversation with Nature* is on view at Olana (olana.org) through November 3. *Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art* (flogris.org) is on view through September 8. For hiking details, visit thomascole.org/hudson-river-school-art-trail-guided-hikes.

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