50 AMERICAN ARTISTS

YOU SHOULD KNOW

Debra N. Mancoff

Artists still traveled abroad, but in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, American cities—notably Philadelphia and New York City—became vital art centers focused on the future, in contrast to European capitals that were associated with traditions of the past. In 1875 a group of artists founded the Art Students League in New York City and democratized opportunities in the arts by offering reasonably priced classes as well as opportunities for women. By the turn of the century, artists such as John Sloan, who had worked in commercial illustration, turned to urban life for subjects that were deemed vital, current, and indisputably American. With Sloan, as well as with artists of a new generation such as Edward Hopper, the American scene replaced American scenery.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, American artists continued to welcome European ideas, but increasingly did so on their own terms and in their own venues. In 1908 photographer Alfred Stieglitz opened the "291" gallery in New York City, where he showcased European Modernism. But his purpose went beyond introducing the work of artists such as Rodin, Cézanne, and Matisse to a new audience; Stieglitz's gallery became a wellspring of American Modernism, cultivating the bold experiments of artists such as Marsden Hartley and Georgia O'Keeffe. The 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, known as the Armory Show for its location in the 69th Regiment Armory Building in New York City, placed cutting-edge works by Picasso and Duchamp before the American public. Hailed by some critics and panned by others, the Armory Show became a departure point for American Modernists to take these new ideas in their own direction. In 1931 Julien Levy featured European Surrealism in his new gallery; in the ensuing decade his gallery became a gathering spot for expatriate intellectuals, as well as an inspiration for artists such as Dorothea Tanning and Joseph Cornell.

In the 1920s grass-roots movements gained strength. New York's Harlem neighborhood became the setting for the Harlem Renaissance, a groundswell of creativity in art, poetry, dance, and music, all from an African American perspective. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the arts were recruited to boost morale and move the nation out of the bleak hardship of the present toward a brighter future. The Regionalist movement, promoted by artists such as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, summoned an iconic and timeless vision of the hardworking American heartland, rallying the populace around shared history and values. As part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "New Deal," the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (1935–1943) hired artists to decorate the walls of public buildings with murals that featured American motifs, and a surprising range of young artists—including Paul Cadmus, Alice Neel, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko—took part. But over the course of the decade, as the American economic crisis abated and the threat of war built in Europe, displaced artists sought refuge in the United States, and the American art world once again embraced and assimilated European ideas.

Within a few years after World War II, a small circle of painters based in New York City—Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Rothko—redefined modern art. According to critic Harold Rosenberg, "the big moment came" when these artists decided "just to PAINT." Abstract Expressionism emphasized the gesture of painting; no longer rooted in an image, art became the result of action. In scale, daring, and expressive power, the work of these artists was lauded as monumental and distinctly American by the international art world.

In the decades that followed, modern art became an American enterprise, and the possibility of artistic expression expanded with each new innovation. Minimalists, such as Frank Stella and Richard Serra, stripped their work of any content extraneous to the material and the process. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg reintroduced the object, but drained it of its meaning. Pop artists, including Claus Oldenburg and Andy Warhol, erased the line between art and consumer culture. Louise Bourgeois and Nancy Spero asserted the female perspective. And younger artists have transformed media and materials. Cindy Sherman uses photographs to document characters that she creates with costumes and cosmetics. Jean-Michel Basquiat brought the subversive art of the streets into the galleries. Kara Walker has revived an old art form and revised old tales to unmask the racism of the present, as well as that of the past.

Jackson Pollock once characterized art as an act of "self-discovery," positioning the experience of the individual—not the work—at the center of artistic endeavor. And American artists have used their work to define and redefine identities, to recast history, and to bear witness to life in a society of individuals, each with his or her own distinct set of ideas—recalling the sentiment of Whitman's "simple, separate Person" whose creed is declared "*En-masse*." There can be no singular American perspective, and this is understood by the artist who draws upon his or her own experience and imagination to contribute to what is, in its essence, a multivalent vision. In thinking about the life of an artist in his adopted homeland, Dutch-born de Kooning mused: "An American artist must feel like a baseball player or something—a member of a team writing American history." In the pages that follow, here are fifty distinct versions of that history, each representing a unique—and uniquely American—point of view.

JAN VERMEER

ANTOINE WATTEAU

1620 The Pilgrim Fathers leave England for America in the *Mayflower*

1636 Harvard is founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as the first American university

1643 Louis XIV becomes King of France and rules for 72 years

1656 Diego Velázquez paints *Las Meninas*

1666 Antonio Stradivari constructs his first violin

1620 1625 1630 1635 1640 1645 1650 1655 1660 1665 1670 1675 1680 1685 1690 1695 1700 1705

1701 Founding of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut

1716 Prussian King Frederick William I presents the Amber Room to Russian Tsar Peter the Great

1752 Benjamin Franklin invents the lightning conductor

1769 James Watt invents a steam engine with a separate condenser

1787 U.S. Constitution adopted

1710 1715 1720 1725 1730 1735 1740 1745 1750 1755 1760 1765 1770 1775 1780 1785 1790 1795

COLONIAL LIMNERS

Portrait painters working in the prosperous, English maritime colonies offered their clients more than a simple likeness. A skillful "face painter"—or limner—bore witness to a sitter's social rank, wealth, and identity. Often itinerant, self-taught, and anonymous, limners deployed longstanding art traditions to craft an image of a new society.

In sixteenth-century England, the term *limner* (from the Latin *illuminare*, "to paint") designated a painter of portrait miniatures who captured a sitter's likeness in what Nicholas Hilliard (c. 1547–1619), court limner to Queen Elizabeth I, called the "truth of the line." More than a century later, in the English colonies across the Atlantic, the term referred to any portrait painter, but artistic conventions—featuring a flat, decorative surface, an absence of shadows, and an expressive line—linked the practice to its origins. Limners, self-taught or apprentice-trained, perpetuated these transplanted techniques for generations.

Works of art were an impractical luxury during the early settlement years in North America, but by the later decades of the seventeenth century, farming and trade brought prosperity to mercantile centers such as Boston and New York City. Along with fine homes and imported furniture, newly affluent colonists commissioned portraits of themselves and their families. Unlike any other painted subject, a portrait proclaimed identity and social position. The upright pose demonstrated the sitter's sense of purpose and decorum, and the fine details of costume, such as the imported Spanish lace and English brocade worn by Mrs. Elizabeth Freake (c. 1674) in a portrait by an anonymous limner, boasted of substance and wealth. But most portraits were only displayed in private homes and intended to chart the life of the family for the living members as well as for posterity—similar to the practice of noting events in a family's Bible. Married couples sat for paired portraits, and children posed with their mothers or on their own.

Not all colonial limners were anonymous, and some of their work reveals more recent European influence. The self-portrait (c. 1691) of Thomas Smith (c. 1650–1691) features a full range of iconographic attributes, including a skull in reference to the transience of human life and a naval battle seen through a window as a reminder of his earlier career as a mariner. Smith's composition, as well as his use of rounded forms shaded by the modulation of light and shadow, reveals an acquaintance with contemporary continental naturalism, but it is likely that he learned his technique secondhand, by studying engraved reproductions after European paintings. A group of portraits, painted between 1730 and 1745 in the Hudson River Valley region and formerly attributed to the anonymous Gansevoort Limner, are now believed to be the work of Dutch-born Pieter Vanderlyn (1687–1778). His style preserves the strong line and flattened surface of the Elizabethan limner style, but his range of poses and settings suggest knowledge of Baroque portrait conventions.

The limner style endured well into the early national period, particularly among self-taught, peripatetic painters. Ammi Phillips (1788–1865) traveled throughout the rural Northeast, painting severe-yet-telling likenesses such as that of the country doctor Cornelius Allerton (c. 1821), who poses with a medical text on his lap and his favorite horse in the distance. Joshua Johnson (fl. c. 1793–1824) is believed to be the first African American painter to build a named reputation. He was based in Baltimore, where he was registered as a "Free Householder of Colour," and his clientele included prominent middle-class citizens active in the abolitionist movement. William Matthew Prior (1806–1873), who launched his career in Maine and then relocated to Boston, advertised his skill in both a naturalistic style and in the "flat" style, which he offered as a "likeness without shadow or shade for one-quarter the price."

FURTHER READING
Margaretta M. Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America*, Philadelphia 2005
Elisabeth Louise Roark, *Artists of Colonial America*, Westport, CT, 2003

Thomas Smith, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1691, oil on canvas, 62.9 x 60.4 cm, Worcester, Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY

JOSHUA REYNOLDS

1701–1714 War of the Spanish Succession

1725 Antonio Vivaldi composes *The Four Seasons*

1738 Lewis Paul and John Wyatt invent the spinning machine

1760 George III becomes King of Great Britain and Ireland

1690 1695 1700 1705 1710 1715 1720 1725 1730 1735 1740 1745 1750 1755 1760 1765 1770 1775

John Singleton Copley, *The Copley Family*, 1776–1777, oil on canvas, 184.1 x 229.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Andrew W. Mellon Fund

JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY

On the eve of the American Revolution—and at the height of his acclaim—John Singleton Copley left his Boston home to advance his career in London. He never returned, but his portraits captured the distinct spirit of the emerging American identity and secured his fame as one of the founding fathers of a true American art.

Born into an Irish immigrant family of tobacco merchants, Copley's future was redefined in 1748, when his widowed mother married Peter Pelham, an English-trained artist and schoolmaster. Pelham introduced his stepson to European art theory and practice through critical writings and reproductive prints. Copley learned quickly, launching his career as a limner by the time he turned fifteen. Fueled by talent and ambition, Copley developed a repertoire of poses for his sitters based on European portrait prints and studied anatomy by copying illustrations in medical texts. Meticulous and keenly observant, he required repeated and lengthy sittings for his portraits, but the naturalistic result made his reputation. Upon viewing his portrait of the wealthy Salem merchant Epes Sargent, fellow American painter Gilbert Stuart proclaimed: "Prick that hand and blood will spurt out." A likeness by Copley elevated character over flattery, but he presented the citizens of colonial Boston as people of dignity, accomplishment, and substance.

In 1766 Copley sent a portrait of his stepbrother Henry Pelham to an exhibition in London. It caught the eye of Joshua Reynolds, the premier English society portraitist, whose praise of Copley's "very wonderfull Performance" was tempered with the advice that to fulfill his potential, Copley needed to study in Europe. Copley acknowledged the limited prospects for a painter in the colonies and lamented that his profession brought no more regard "than any other useful trade," even though he enjoyed prosperity and prominence equal to that of his clients. In 1769 Copley married Susanna Clarke, daughter of the head agent of the British East India Company in Boston. In an environment of increasing political friction, Copley's loyalties were divided. He attended a few meetings of the Sons of Liberty, and he painted impressive likenesses of outspoken patriots such as Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Paul Revere. But his portrait of Loyalist governor Francis Bernard on display in Harvard Hall was defaced in 1769—the heart cut out—and in 1773 his father-in-law's shipment of tea was tossed into Boston Harbor. Choosing his career over politics, Copley sailed for England in 1774. To make up for his limited art education, he made a tour of Italy, and when he returned to London the following year, his family, including his father-in-law, was already there to greet him.

Copley made his debut at London's Royal Academy with a grand scale "conversation" portrait of his own family, whom he showed engaged in a lively exchange in an idealized garden setting. The work displayed his newly heightened finesse of line and color and won him prestigious clients, but Copley was no longer content to limit himself to portraiture. In 1778 he painted *Watson and the Shark*, a bold foray into history painting that revealed a capacity for expressive drama equal to his keen observation of detail. While Copley excelled in complex pageants drawn from contemporary history, he also continued to paint portraits; near the end of his career he even counted the British royal family among his clientele. Yet his frank, naturalistic style was generally seen as best suited to the American personality. To celebrate John Adams's inauguration as the second President of the United States in 1797, the Copleys sent First Lady Abigail Adams a portrait of her son John Quincy. In it she saw his "true Character," and she praised the expressive vitality that Copley conveyed in "so pleasing a likeness."

John Singleton Copley, *Self-Portrait*, 1769, pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 60.3 x 44.5 cm, Winterthur Museum, Delaware

1738 Born on July 3 in Boston, Massachusetts
1748 Mother marries artist Peter Pelham
1753 Begins career as an artist
1756 Studies anatomical drawing from books
1764 Opens a studio on Cambridge Street, in Boston
1766 Sends work to London for exhibition
1768 Reputation secures commissions in New York City
1769 Marries Susanna Clarke
1774 Family is threatened for alleged Tory sympathies; Copley leaves for London, then travels to Italy
1775 Family joins him in London
1777 Makes his debut at the Royal Academy of Art, London
1779 Elected a full member of the Royal Academy
1785 Paints portraits of the daughters of King George III
1810 Declines a commission to paint a commemoration of the death of Lord Nelson
1811 Visited by Samuel F. B. Morse, who notes a decline in Copley's health and powers
1815 Dies on September 9 in London of complications after a stroke

FURTHER READING

Emily Ballew Neff, *John Singleton Copley in England*, Houston 1995
Carrie Rebora Barratt, *John Singleton Copley in America*, New York 1995

CHARLES WILLSON PEALE

THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH

JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID

1695 England is the first country to pass an act abolishing press censorship

1707 Act of Union fuses England and Scotland as the kingdom of Great Britain

1722 Johann Sebastian Bach composes his 48 Preludes and Fugues

1744 Auctioneer Sotheby's puts on its first auction in London

1762 Catherine the Great ousts her husband to become Empress of Russia

1690 1695 1700 1705 1710 1715 1720 1725 1730 1735 1740 1745 1750 1755 1760 1765 1770 1775

Charles Willson Peale, *The Staircase Group: Raphaelle and Titian Ramsay Peale*, 1795, oil on canvas, 226.1 x 100.3 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

1789 George Washington becomes first President of the United States

1801 Thomas Jefferson becomes third President of the United States

1815 Congress of Vienna redraws map of Europe

1830 Eugène Delacroix paints *Liberty Leading the People*

1848 Political upheavals throughout Europe

1780 1785 1790 1795 1800 1805 1810 1815 1820 1825 1830 1835 1840 1845 1850 1855 1860 1865

CHARLES WILLSON PEALE

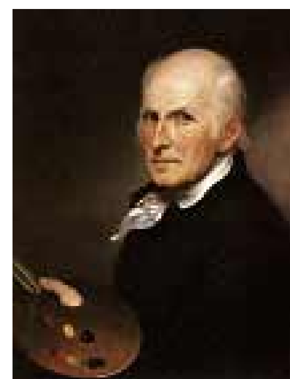
Through talent, energy, and boundless curiosity, Charles Willson Peale moved the arts in North America from the private to the public realm. A painter, a naturalist, and a self-taught man of letters, Peale founded the nation's first museum as well as a dynasty of painters who carried his ideas forward for several generations.

A chance glimpse of some poorly painted landscapes prompted Peale, who had trained as a saddler, to try his hand at painting. Aside from a few sessions with portraitist John Hesselius, he learned through experimentation, and in 1765, when he fled Annapolis for Boston to avoid his creditors, he found work in the studio of John Singleton Copley. Thanks to the generosity of a group of Maryland patrons, in 1767 he traveled to London, where he made the acquaintance of prominent artists, including the American history painter Benjamin West. He returned to Annapolis in 1769 with a strong grounding in European art practice as well as a firm commitment to the radical cause of independence. He even discarded the clothes that he purchased in London. In 1772 Peale was the first to paint a portrait of George Washington; he would paint him six more times before the general's death.

In his portraits, Peale built upon Copley's direct honesty to express his belief in the positive force of the new American spirit. He cultivated a natural aesthetic, often portraying his sitters out-of-doors and informally dressed, without conventional wigs and powdered hair. Rather than express their stern composure, his sitters were encouraged to relax and smile, as seen in the portrait of his extended family (1771–1773; 1809), whom he described as a model of "utmost harmony" in their affectionate gestures and companionable industry. By this time the Peale family industry was art: Peale's brothers painted miniatures, and he would train his sons and daughters—eleven surviving children from three marriages—in his chosen profession.

Late in 1775 Peale moved his family to Philadelphia. He wholeheartedly supported revolution, and when war broke out, he painted battle flags, designed posters, and conducted experiments to improve gunpowder and telescopic sights. Peale joined the Philadelphia militia and rose to the rank of captain. Throughout the conflict, he continued to paint, and in 1782 he mounted a portrait exhibition of American revolutionary heroes. In 1786, acting upon his conviction that the pursuit of knowledge was the "first of duties" in a democratic society, he opened the Philadelphia Museum, the first American natural history collection. Peale's displays of natural specimens, curiosities, and rare objects reflected his enlightened perspective: the greatest lessons for humanity were to be found in the comprehension of nature's order. He even raised his family in the building that housed the museum; his children painted the display backdrops and helped with the taxidermy.

Peale stopped seeking portrait commissions after about 1795, but remained fascinated with painterly techniques. He installed his full-length double portrait of his sons Raphaelle and Titian Ramsay on a staircase in his home behind a real stair; the illusion was so credible that President Washington once nodded a greeting to them. When two intact mastodon skeletons were discovered near Newburgh, New York, in 1801, Peale sponsored an expedition to unearth them and then painted a grand historical account of the event. In 1810 he retired to his farm in Belfield, outside Philadelphia, but twelve years later he resumed the management of his museum, releasing his son Rubens to found a similar collection in Baltimore. Active until his death, Peale carved a place for the arts in American society as an egalitarian endeavor that enhanced the public good.



Charles Willson Peale, *Self-Portrait*, 1822, oil on canvas, 74.9 x 61.6 cm, The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco

1741 Born on April 15 in Queen Anne's County, Maryland
1754–1761 Apprentices to a saddler in Annapolis, Maryland
1765 Moves to Boston; meets John Singleton Copley
1767–1769 Travels to London; studies with Benjamin West
1769 Returns to Annapolis
1772 Paints his first portrait of George Washington
1775 Moves with his family to Philadelphia
1782 Opens a portrait gallery of the American Revolution in Philadelphia
1786 Founds the Philadelphia Museum, the first American natural history museum
1801 Organizes an expedition to uncover two mastodon skeletons
1805 Co-founds the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia
1805 Marries Hannah Moore
1810 Retires to his farm in Belfield, Pennsylvania
1822 Comes out of retirement to manage his Philadelphia Museum
1827 Dies on February 22 in Philadelphia

FURTHER READING

Lillian B. Miller, *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy*, 1770–1870, New York 1996
Edgar P. Richardson, Brooke Hindle, and Lillian B. Miller, *Charles Willson Peale and His World*, New York 1983

GEORGE CATLIN

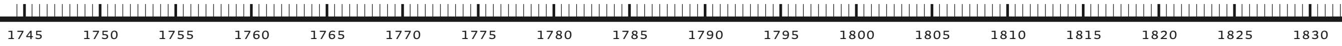
EUGÈNE DELACROIX

1754–1763 Seven Years' War

1776–1783 American Revolution

1788 British colonization of Australia begins

1803 Doubling of U.S. territory by the Louisiana Purchase



PAUL GAUGIN

1830 Indian Removal Act is passed

1838–1839 Cherokees forced to relocate

1866 Civil Rights Act confers U.S. citizenship on people of all races

1871 Charles Darwin publishes *The Origin of Species*

1876 Custer's Last Stand

1890 End of the Indian Wars

1835 1840 1845 1850 1855 1860 1865 1870 1875 1880 1885 1890 1895 1900 1905 1910 1915 1920

GEORGE CATLIN

George Catlin held conflicting views about the fate of the indigenous peoples of North America. He accepted the westward expansion of the United States as progress, but lamented the loss of a "truly lofty and noble race." To this end, he set out on an ambitious project: to make a pictorial record of the native peoples of North America.

After leaving a law career in the early 1820s, Catlin painted miniature portraits in Philadelphia for several years before he discovered his singular subject. A delegation of Native Americans from the tribes of the western territories came to the city, and Catlin, impressed with their distinctive costume and decorum, longed to record their appearance for posterity. Like many in his generation—believing in Manifest Destiny—Catlin regretted the loss of native culture as a dire yet inevitable aspect of the advance of "civilization." As an artist, he believed that he could make an invaluable contribution by painting the likenesses, the practices, and the material culture of all the native peoples of North America. In thrall to the romantic myth of the diminishing wilderness, he wanted to portray "a vast country of green fields, where the *men* are all *red*" and create a gallery that paid tribute to a vanishing way of life.

In 1830, after moving to St. Louis, Catlin met William Clark, who, at the turn of the century, had explored the western territories with Meriwether Lewis. Now serving as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Missouri Territory, Clark invited Catlin to meet with a tribal delegation at Fort Crawford, in present-day Wisconsin. During a subsequent trip to Fort Leavenworth, in present-day Kansas, Catlin painted twenty-eight portraits. In 1832 he set out on his own, traveling up the Missouri River to document life among the Teton Sioux, the Crow, the Mandan, and others. He moved swiftly, but kept a thorough record: he annotated his vibrant images with the names of sitters, their tribal affiliations, and explanations of their costumes, status, and traditions. He returned with more than 175 images, including landscapes and scenes of daily life. He made three more journeys: he joined a U.S. Army "friendship" expedition to the lands of the Comanche and Wichita in 1834; a steamboat up the Mississippi to Fort Snelling (in present-day Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota) and the northern territories in 1835; and a circuit of the Great Lakes in 1836. In 1837 he debuted his "Indian Gallery" in New York City, featuring nearly five hundred images of the likenesses and life of people he described as "the finest models in Nature."

Catlin also gave lectures to educate the public—but also to promote his gallery, which he hoped to sell to the government. When he failed to get an offer, he took his collection on tour, arriving in London in 1840 with more than three hundred portraits; nearly two hundred landscapes and cultural vignettes; a Crow lodge and other material goods; and two grizzly bears, which he soon had to sell to the London Zoo. When ticket sales began to flag, Catlin brought in Ojibwe and Iowa people to appear as "living exhibits." He published the first of his five books in 1841 and continued to give lectures, but by the end of the decade, he had yet to find a patron. In 1852 he declared bankruptcy. Over the following years, making his home in Belgium, he traveled to Central and South America, as well as the Pacific Coast, looking for a location to open a "Museum of Mankind." He returned to the United States in 1871 for an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution but again failed to sell his collection. Catlin died feeling that he had not fulfilled his ambition, but his paintings preserve an unparalleled image of Native American life, as rich in dignity as in information and scope.

left side
George Catlin, *Sha-Có-Pay, The Six, Chief of the Plains Ojibwa*, 1832, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 61 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

above
Unknown Photographer, George Catlin, 1870, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, The Paul Mellon Collection

1796 Born on July 26 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania
1830 Joins General William Clark on a Mississippi journey to Fort Crawford (in present-day Wisconsin)
1832 Takes a three-month voyage up the Missouri River
1834 Travels with a U.S. Army regiment through Comanche and Wichita territory
1835 Journeys north to Fort Snelling (in present-day Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota)
1836 Travels around the Great Lakes
1837 Exhibits his "Indian Gallery" in New York City
1840 Begins a tour of his "Indian Gallery" in London
1841 Publishes *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*
1852 Goes bankrupt
1852–1857 Travels throughout South America
1857 Publishes *Life Amongst the Indians*
1872 Dies on December 23 in Jersey City, New Jersey
1879 Smithsonian Institution receives the contents of the "Indian Gallery" as a gift

FURTHER READING

George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman (eds.), *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery*, Washington, DC, 2002
William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery*, Washington, DC, 1979

below
George Catlin, *Hidatsa Village, Earth-Covered Lodges on the Knife River*, 1832, oil on canvas, 28.6 x 36.8 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

right side
George Catlin, *Wi-Jún-Jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light, Going to and Returning from Washington)*, 1837–1839, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 61 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

THOMAS COLE

CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH

J. M. W. TURNER

1771 Arkwright establishes the first cotton mill

1766 Auctioneer Christie's holds its first sale in London

1784 Jacques-Louis David paints *The Oath of the Horatians*

1804 Napoleon has himself crowned French Emperor

1825 Bolshoi Theater opens in Moscow

1750 1755 1760 1765 1770 1775 1780 1785 1790 1795 1800 1805 1810 1815 1820 1825 1830 1835

Thomas Cole, *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, 1825, oil on canvas, 68.6 x 86.4 cm, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, gift of Charles F. Olney

right side
above
Thomas Cole, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1836, oil on canvas, 55.9 x 45.8 cm, The New York Historical Society

below
Thomas Cole, *The Course of the Empire: Destruction*, 1836, oil on canvas, 84.5 x 160.6 cm, The New York Historical Society

1844 J. M. W. Turner paints *Rain, Steam and Speed: Great Western Railway*

1851 First issue of *The New York Times*

1869 Completion of the first transcontinental railway in the United States

1883–1885 Construction of the first skyscraper in Chicago

1893 Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 *(New World)* premieres

1840 1845 1850 1855 1860 1865 1870 1875 1880 1885 1890 1895 1900 1905 1910 1915 1920 1925

THOMAS COLE

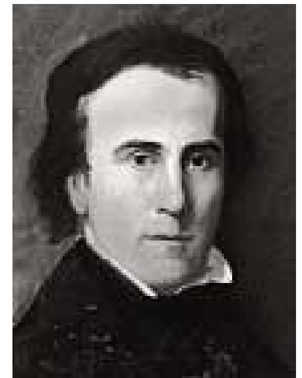
Thomas Cole discovered unbounded pictorial potential in the rugged terrain of the Hudson River Valley. He revered its primal beauty and declared that "all nature here is new to Art." But he sought to paint more than a novel vista: Cole saw the wilderness as the moral arena in which nature and culture struggled for dominion.

Cole spent his boyhood in the industrialized Midlands in England, where he was apprenticed to an engraver in a calico factory. He immigrated with his family to the United States in 1820; they settled in Steubenville, Ohio, where he gave art lessons. He claimed to have learned oil painting there from an itinerant painter, and by the time he moved to Philadelphia in 1824, he had mastered the medium. In 1825 he moved to New York City, where an exhibition of his innovative landscape paintings drew wide acclaim. He quickly acquired several wealthy patrons who sponsored his sketching tours in the Hudson River Valley, as well as the admiration of established painters such as John Trumbull and Asher B. Durand, who purchased his works.

The magnificent views of the mountains and waterfalls along the Hudson motivated Cole to transcend the topographical format of traditional American landscape. Through his reading, Cole was well-versed in British landscape theory. Utilizing these ideas, he emphasized the sublime aspect of the terrain's jagged cliffs, dense forests, and glorious autumnal foliage as an embodiment of raw natural power, unspoiled by cultural intrusion. This was the wilderness, the powerful symbol of America, seen from a European perspective as a new Eden: primitive yet endowed with the bounty of providence. In his paintings of Kaaterskill Falls and the cliffs above the Hudson River, Cole created a pictorial analogue to the wilderness portrayed by American authors William Cullen Bryant and James Fenimore Cooper; Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* inspired Cole to include the "last Mohicans" in several works. And like these authors' vision of the wilderness, Cole's was elegiac, a Romantic evocation of the endangered natural world, sacrificed to the "ravages of the axe" on "the road society has to travel." He expressed his moral allegory through the elements of natural spectacle—seasonal change, storm-blasted trees, oncoming storms—in a tribute to the vitality of nature.

Cole made the first of two trips to Europe in 1829. He returned to the United States with an expanded vision of the moral possibilities of landscape painting, and his vast panoramic prospects provided the setting for meditations on transience and decay. In the cycle *The Course of Empire* (1835–1836), Cole anchors each of five compositions with the craggy profile of a mountain in the distance. The human imprint on the land changes, a grand society rises and falls, and after, nature reclaims the land in all the grandeur of its primal power. By this time Cole mistrusted the commercial growth and territorial expansion of his adopted nation. In essays and lectures, as well as poetry, he wrote of the dire future of a land made "destitute" in the name of progress. By the middle of the 1830s, he had moved to Catskill, New York, to live in the region that fueled his imagination. During the next decade, he took on a select number of students; the first was Frederic Edwin Church.

Cole died young, but his influence drew artists to the region. Although the new painters of the Hudson River School tempered Cole's moral message, they perpetuated his reverential appreciation for the sublime beauty of the natural landscape. The next generation seeking to portray the primal American landscape would also be stirred by Cole's interpretations, but they would be compelled to turn westward to seek the surviving wilderness.



1801 Born on February 1 in Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, England
1815 Is apprenticed to an engraver
1820 He and his family immigrate to the United States
1820 Teaches painting and drawing in Steubenville, Ohio
1824 Moves to Philadelphia
1825 Moves to New York City; goes on first sketching trip on the Hudson River
1829–1832 Lives in England and Italy
1832 Returns to New York City
1834 Opens a summer studio on the property of Cedar Grove, in Catskill, New York
1836 Marries Maria Bartow, whose family owns Cedar Grove; publishes "Essay on American Scenery"
1841–1842 Takes second trip to Europe
1844 Begins to teach Frederic Edwin Church
1848 Dies on February 11 in Catskill

Further Reading

Earl A. Powell, *Thomas Cole*, New York 1990
William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (eds.), *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, New Haven, CT, 1994

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site can be visited online at: http://www.thomascole.org

Thomas Cole, *The Course of the Empire: The Consumation of the Empire*, 1835–1836, oil on canvas, 130.2 x 193.51 cm, The New York Historical Society