MAN and the NATURAL WORLD:
ROMANTICISM
(Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Painting)
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Online Links:

Thomas Cole – Wikipedia

Hudson River School – Wikipedia

Frederic Edwin Church – Wikipedia

Cole's Oxbow – Smarthistory

Cole's Oxbow (Video) – Smarthistory

Church's Niagara and Heart of the Andes - Smarthistory
Thomas Cole. *The Oxbow (View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm)*, 1836, oil on canvas
Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was one of the first great professional landscape painters in the United States. Cole emigrated from England at age 17 and by 1820 was working as an itinerant portrait painter. With the help of a patron, he traveled to Europe between 1829 and 1832, and upon his return to the United States he settled in New York and became a successful landscape painter.
He frequently worked from observation when making sketches for his paintings. In fact, his self-portrait is tucked into the foreground of *The Oxbow*, where he stands turning back to look at us while pausing from his work. He is executing an oil sketch on a portable easel, but like most landscape painters of his generation, he produced his large finished works in the studio during the winter months.
Cole painted this work in the mid-1830s for exhibition at the National Academy of Design in New York. He considered it one of his “view” paintings because it represents a specific place and time. Although most of his other view paintings were small, this one is monumentally large, probably because it was created for exhibition at the National Academy. Its scale allows for a sweeping view of a spectacular oxbow bend in the Connecticut River from the top of Mount Holyoke in western Massachusetts.

Cole wrote that the American landscape lacked the historic monuments that made European landscape interesting; there were no castles on the Hudson River of the kind found on the Rhine, and there were no ancient monuments in America of the kind found in Rome.
On the other hand, he argued, America’s natural wonders, such as the oxbow, should be viewed as America’s “antiquities.” The painting’s title tells us that Cole depicts an actual spot, but, like other landscape painters who wished to impart a larger message about the course of history in their work, he composed the scene to stress the landscape’s grandeur and significance, exaggerating the steepness of the mountain and setting the scene below a dramatic sky.

Along a great sweeping arc produced by the dark clouds and the edge of the mountain, he contrasts the two sides of the American landscape: its dense, stormy wilderness and its congenial, pastoral valleys with settlements. The fading storm seems to suggest that the land is bountiful and ready to yield its fruits to civilization.
The wilderness, for nineteenth-century American artists, is mostly stress-free. Its God is an American God whose gospel is Manifest Destiny. Cole was skeptical about progress. For him, the image of America as Arcadia served to spiritualize the past in a country without antique monuments.

Thus it was Cole who introduced in painting the terms of the great debate over natural resources which has preoccupied Americans ever since. On the one hand, the landscape is an immense cornucopia, created by a providential God for men to use just as they please. In the opposite view - that of Cole, the American Transcendentalists, and every conservationist that followed them down to the present day - God had inscribed his being in the wilderness and to destroy it was sacrilege.
Top Left: Thomas Cole. 
*Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, 1833-1836, oil on canvas

Bottom Left: Thomas Cole. 
*Course of Empire: Desolation*. 1833-1836, oil on canvas

After seeing the ruins of classical antiquity in Italy, he turned to a subject that also preoccupied Turner: the course of empire. While engaged in the mid-1830s in painting his epic account of the same landscape from its primeval state through its architectural peak under the Roman Empire to its final state of desolation.
To grasp the meaning of Cole’s Arcadian scenes of the Hudson River, one must imagine them, as he did, in contrast to the go-getting populist energies of American development. They are deeply conservative, deeply nostalgic- and sometimes openly allegorical. They are a visual counterpart to the prescient remark made by the French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville, in the late 1830s: “It is the consciousness of destruction, of quick and inevitable change, that gives such a touching beauty to the solitudes of America. One sees them with a sort of melancholy pleasure; one is in some sort of a hurry to admire them.”
Founder of the **Hudson River School**, Cole in 1836 published an essay in the *American Monthly Magazine* in which he extolled the American wilderness as an expression of Divine Creation. To depict it he recurred to the idealized composition and illumination of Claude Lorrain’s seventeenth-century landscapes. In addition, Cole placed great store in the cyclical arrangement of pictures, sequences in which a tragic light is cast on man’s role in history.
The storm revealed in *The Oxbow* by wilderness itself is but a reminder, as it is in almost all of his Catskill paintings, of constant change. Cole’s paintings intuitively visualize what ecological historians reiterate today: wilderness, like nature itself, is not stasis but flux.

In *Kaaterskill Falls* (bottom left), flora (“in ever stage of vegetable life and decay”, as the painter put it), and water, and Native American, do not exist in undisturbed balance. Nature and human history are already, have always been, engaged.

The development of the Catskill region, the tourists and manufactories that Cole simultaneously acknowledged and masked, simply continue that interaction, taking it in a new direction.
When Transcendentalists perceived God, or the “Oversoul”, everywhere but only to be known in the act of seeking—especially in solitary communion with nature as recommended by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau— the implications for landscape painting were acute. What is more, Transcendentalism valued individuality and non-conformity, qualities many American believe may be equated with their of love of liberty and their pioneering— for this read expansionist- spirit.
Significantly, the history of class differentiation offers an unexpected bridge between Transcendentalism and the Hudson River School in that, through the endeavor of landscape viewing, upper and emergent middle classes could gauge their separateness from working classes (who were supposed, for reasons social and economic, to be unable to aestheticize nature) but yet rationalize such leisure activity as gave them the opportunity to view landscape—travel, walking in the woods, looking at art—as moral improvement.
Asher Brown Durand. *Kindred Spirits*, 1849, oil on canvas

Cole, for whom the wilderness and God were one (One), was much praised by the Transcendental poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878). A fixture in New York literary circles for 50 years, Bryant designated Cole’s landscapes “acts of religion”, which made them a hard act to follow, and wrote poetry characterizing him specifically as an American artist.

Bryant’s Transcendentalist musings on nature and art weighted future readings of Cole’s paintings by the founding generation, and they have monopolized art-historical regard for Cole’s cohort, Asher B. Durand.
By painting Cole and Bryant together in *Kindred Spirits*, Durand created a visual record of the relationship between the art and literary circles of the early nineteenth century, as well as their common beliefs toward the American landscape and Nature.

The landscape painting, which combines geographical features in Kaaterskill Clove and a minuscule depiction of Kaaterskill Falls, is not a literal depiction of American geography. Rather, it is an idealized memory of Cole's discovery of the region more than twenty years prior, his friendship with Bryant, and his ideas about American nature.

Durand included the names of these kindred spirits within the landscape itself by carving in paint their names into the birch tree on the left side of the painting.
If Thomas Cole represents the first generation of the Hudson River School of painters, then Frederic Edwin Church, the only pupil Cole ever instructed, certainly represents the generation that followed. Yet despite the teacher/student relationship that they shared, they differed in the ways in which they conceived of the American landscape. For Cole, landscape painting was a pictorial device in which to reach allegorical or narrative ends. While Church at first followed his teacher’s instruction in this regard, the younger artist set allegory and narrative aside in favor of a more focused and precise depiction of nature.
Church was born in Hartford, Connecticut, to a wealthy family; his father was a prosperous silversmith and watchmaker. Daniel Wadsworth, one of the most influential art patrons of his time and the founder of the oldest public art museum in the United States—the Wadsworth Atheneum—introduced Church to Cole in 1844.

Although still but a teenager, Cole remarked that Church possessed “the finest eye of drawing in the world.” Church’s immense skill is demonstrated by his election as an Associate of the National Academy of Design in May of 1844.

Just barely 24 years of age, Church was the youngest artist so honored. But one year later his status was to that of Academician. Clearly, his career was off to a meteoric beginning.
Although Church was not the first artist to depict the Great Falls of Niagara—John Vanderlyn, John Trumbull, and Cole had made attempts earlier in the nineteenth century—he was the first to somehow capture the roaring essence of what many then considered to be the greatest natural treasure in the United States. In contrast to earlier painters, however, Church placed the viewer close to the falls and suspends them immediately above the ledge from which the water thrillingly descends. Even the panorama-like horizontal format and the colossal size accentuate the sublime nature of the composition.

Even though Church depicted the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, this image became wildly popular, both in the United States and in Europe, and has, over time, become a uniquely “American” image.
Frederic Edwin Church. *Heart of the Andes*, 1859, oil on canvas
This picture was inspired by Church's second trip to South America in the spring of 1857. Church sketched prolifically throughout his nine weeks travel in Ecuador, and many extant watercolors and drawings contain elements found in this work.
This work was based on the precepts on the construction of “heroic” and didactic landscape painting. As soon as he finished it, Church put it on view in the gallery of the Tenth Street Studio Building, a block of studios that had been designed by the architect Richard Morris Hunt for well-off artists, including Church himself.

Never had the debut of a single American painting been so carefully staged. Church had it framed in a big niche with raised panels in false perspective, a bracketed cornice, and heavy draperies on a curtain rod drawn back to disclose the painting-literally, a “picture window,” so that, as a reporter from Boston put it, “you seem to be looking from a palatial window or castle terrace upon an actual scene of picturesque mountains, tropical vegetation, light and loveliness.”
It was the Colonial Sublime, suggesting that the North American viewer owned the South American view as his back garden. All around stood palms and aspidistras, and dried specimens of plants he had gathered in Ecuador. The public sat on a semicircle of benches, and some twelve thousand people over the next few weeks paid a quarter each to do so. Church had it lit by gas, so that visitors could come at night. All comers were invited to view it through opera glasses or, lacking those, through metal tubes which, by isolating a small circle of the painting while one’s gaze roved around erratically, made the “scene” look even realer.

In his work, he reconciled science with religion, fusing myriads of observable facts with an overarching sense of the presence of God in His creation. He was a model citizen, devoutly Christian, descended from generations of Yankee ministers and merchants, untouched by the taint of bohemianism, and extremely patriotic. Following Thomas Cole, he advised younger artists not to study in Europe, in case they lost their American essence.
As with *Niagara*, the twenty-five cent ticket price for *The Heart of the Andes* entitled viewers to borrow a pair of opera glasses and a set of pamphlets that explained the composition through the geographical ideas von Humboldt wrote of in his *Kosmos*. Indeed, if *Niagara* was a depiction of a singular scene, *The Heart of the Andes* is instead a pictorial composite view of Humboldt’s theories.

The monumental snow-capped mountain in the deep background is Mt. Chimborazo, one of the highest peaks in South America. Moving to the foreground, Church leads the viewer through a variety of topographical zones which all contain unique flora and fauna. There is but a little human presence in this vast depiction of space. A colonial Spanish hacienda appears in the central middle ground, resting on the banks of a river. This waterway flows to the viewer’s right, eventually arriving at a waterfall—a Niagara in miniature—on the right side of the painting. A well-travelled footpath in the left foreground leads the eye to a pair of people who worship before a simple wooden cross.
Frederic Edwin Church. *Icebergs*, 1861, oil on canvas
When unveiled in New York on April 24, 1861, the painting profited from its maker's already considerable fame. An unsigned review in the New-York Daily Tribune, the same day, called it the "most splendid work of art that has yet been produced in this country."

Sir Edward Watkin, a railway magnate in Manchester, England, who later became a Liberal member of Parliament, bought the painting after it was shown in London in 1863. He kept it at Rose Hill, his country place. Watkin died in 1901, and then Rose Hill became a boys' school.

Flash forward more than three-quarters of a century. In 1979, Sotheby's negotiated the sale of the painting—which seemed to have vanished from the public consciousness—for $2.5 million, then the highest price ever paid for an American picture.
The buyers were Lamar and Norma Hunt. Mr. Hunt, who died in 2006, was the son of legendary Dallas oilman H.L. Hunt. He was also the younger sibling of Nelson Bunker and William Herbert Hunt, who at the time their kid brother was buying the picture were in the business of trying to corner the world's silver market.

One account has it that Mr. and Mrs. Hunt intended the picture for their Dallas home, but when they realized that its size, 64½ inches by 112½ inches, prohibited hanging it there, they donated it to the Dallas Museum, where it has occupied pride of place for the past three decades.

Having already painted pictures in both North and South America, Church was ready for something more adventurous, and he took a one-month schooner cruise in 1859, through the North Atlantic in the vicinity of Labrador and Newfoundland with his friend Louis Legrand Noble, who wrote "After Icebergs, With a Painter," which served as an early public-relations notice for the painting.
Martin Johnson Heade. *Approaching Thunder Storm*, 1859, oil on canvas
The less theatrical side of Church- his sense of stillness, calm, and pervasive light- had its effect on another aspect of nineteenth-century American painting, known as Luminism. Luminism was more a description than a school. It denoted a group of similarities among rather different painters: a polished realism in which all brushwork is suppressed, gestures of the hand played down, the atmospheric effects achieved by superfine gradations of tone and exact study of the “luminous envelope” around near and far objects. The origin of Luminism lie in English-style, provincial marine painting, mainly in Boston.
George Inness (1825-1894), *The Lackawanna Valley*, 1855, oil on canvas
Rather than celebrating nature in the tradition of the Hudson River School, George Inness’ *Lackawanna Valley* seems to commemorate the onset of America’s industrial age.

While documenting the achievements of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad, Inness has also created a topographically convincing view of Scranton, Pennsylvania.

The artist took relatively few liberties with his compositions, but in compliance with the wishes of his corporate patron, he intentionally exaggerated the prominence of the railroad’s yet-to-be completed roundhouse.

His inclusion of numerous tree stumps in the picture’s foreground, although accurate, lends an important note of ambiguity to the work.
Whether it is read as an enthusiastic affirmation of technology or as a belated lament for a rapidly vanishing wilderness, this painting exemplifies a crucial philosophical dilemma that confronted many Americans in the 1850s; expansion inevitably necessitated the wide-spread destruction of unspoiled nature, itself a still-powerful symbol of the nature’s greatness.

Although it was initially commissioned as an homage to the machine, Inness’ Lackawanna Valley nevertheless serves as a poignant pictorial reminder of the ephemeral nature of the American Dream.
José María Velasco. *The Valley of Mexico from the Hillside of Santa Isabel*, 1875, oil on canvas
By the end of the eighteenth century, a school modeled after the Art Academy of San Fernando in Madrid was established (the Real Academia de San Carlos), and consequently, a new chapter of Mexican art history began.

This important school fostered Romantic and Neoclassical aesthetics through previously unexplored genres of painting. For example, beginning in the nineteenth century, students emerging from the new school at the Academy began to illustrate local vistas of the Valley of Mexico. The development of these images offered the perfect opportunity for artists to explore the Romantic qualities of “pure landscape,” which in Mexico, through the teachings of the Italian professor Eugenio Landesio, emerged as a popular genre in the Academy.

However, and as observed in Velasco's The Valley of Mexico from the Hillside of Santa Isabel, the valley represented much more than a mere opportunity to practice this newly established genre of painting. This imagery offered an opportunity to highlight symbols of patriotism valuable to a newly independent society.
While Eugenio Landesio and his contemporaries had created similar landscapes of the Valley, José María Velasco presented a monumentality and an open quality to his images that surpassed compositions such as El Valle de Mexico desde el Cerro del Tenayo created by his Italian mentor only a few years earlier.

Velasco’s compositions united pre-Hispanic symbols and contemporary national sentiments. For example, the white peaks that predominate his vistas are the Popocatepetl and Iztacchihuatl volcanoes. For centuries the land’s romantic topology has captured the imagination of Mexicans.

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish to the valley of Mexico in 1519, these two volcanoes were the main characters of a legendary ill-fated love between an Aztec princess (Iztacchihuatl, or “white woman”) and a courageous warrior (Popocatepetl, or “smoking mountain”).
Towards the composition’s background, the spectator can admire the receding waters of Lake Texcoco and the contours of Mexico City. The ancient Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán was founded in the middle of this lake in 1325.

This was a familiar site for Velasco, given that the artist’s home was located at the foot of the small hill shown in the middle of the canvas. This unassuming hill was also an important colonial sacred site where the Virgin of Guadalupe first appeared to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531.

The artist is known to have painted in this location many times. This version of The Valley of Mexico from the Hillside of Santa Isabel is perhaps the most celebrated of a dozen or so images with the same subject done by the artist between 1875 and 1892. At one point, the brushstrokes that form the peaks of the snow-covered volcanoes, the rock formations and other details were done from memory, making it possible for the artist to change and manipulate the details of the landscape as he saw fit.
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ACTIVITIES and REVIEW
STUDENT PRESENTATION #1:

After completing your research on Cole’s *Oxbow*, devise a question to present to and answer for the class. Create a five-point rubric in which a ten-minute response might be formally assessed.
STUDENT PRESENTATION #2:

After completing your research on Velasco’s *Valley of Mexico*, devise a question to present to and answer for the class. Create a five-point rubric in which a ten-minute response might be formally assessed.
VIDEO: Thomas Cole’s *Oxbow* on Smarthistory