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Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* depicts humans living in such harmony with nature that their habitation blends into the beautiful surroundings.

Thomas Cole (1801-1848), THE OXBOW (OR, VIEW FROM MOUNT HOLYOKE, NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS, AFTER A THUNDERSTORM) (1836). Oil on canvas. 51 ½" x 76". Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

In Harmony with Nature

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The *Oxbow* takes its name from the shape of the Connecticut River as it winds back on itself below Mount Holyoke in western Massachusetts.¹ Thomas Cole's painting depicts this wonder of nature, which in its pure size and beauty, literally and figuratively, dwarfs the artist who looks up at us from his canvas (positioned a few yards to the left of the parasol) within the painting. The foreground is wilderness, with trees that have blown over from the wind or from the storm on the left side of the composition that shows a downpour of rain. Looking closely at the valley in the distance, one realizes that the land is cultivated and a human settlement exists. Yet those fields and buildings are so trivial in comparison to the rest of the landscape that they go almost undetected. For Thomas Cole, this is an example of humans living in such harmony with nature that their habitation blends into the surroundings. The artist clearly reveres the beauty in God's creation and commends humans for knowing their place within it.

This famous painting is a masterwork in America's first art movement, the Hudson River School. Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was the leader of this group of artists who maintained studios in New York City, but travelled throughout New York State from the spring through the fall making drawings of the beautiful and unique landforms. These drawings then served as the basis of large paintings executed during the winter months in their studios.

Before this period, the artists in the struggling British colonies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had not been very concerned with art beyond portraiture of their wealthy patrons. Fine art academies – the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the Boston Atheneum, and the National Academy of Design in New York City – were formed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. By 1825, New York was the wealthiest and largest city in the United States, surpassing Philadelphia, largely because of the opening of the 383-mile Erie Canal that connected Buffalo to the Hudson River at Albany. This allowed the efficient transport of raw materials produced in upstate New York to the City. At the same time New York became the capital of the nation's art world.²

Landscape painting became popular in America during the 1820s partially because of the genre's success in England (John Constable and J. M. W. Turner) and Europe (Caspar David Friedrich), but the (literary and visu-

al) artists working in America struggled to find their own national identity. The poet William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) identified the verdant land as America's wealth and often contrasted it to the densely populated and resource-depleted landscape of Europe. They referred to America as the "Garden of Eden" and interpreted the land as a manifestation of God. They believed God's presence is found in every aspect of nature and through the meditation on nature, one could commune with God.³ This view stemmed from the metaphysics of German philosophers that were influencing the work of German landscape painters such as Caspar David Friedrich, but also from the American Transcendentalist movement of the 1830s.

Thomas Cole and the other Hudson River School painters were influenced by all of these factors – the new commercial importance of the Hudson River, the search for a characteristic "American" art genre, and the interpretation of the American landscape as a manifestation of God's creation. Their paintings often depicted spectacular scenery in New York and New England. Cole, an Englishman by birth, described the idea of American landscape painting:

...whether [an American] beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic – explores the central wilds of the vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is still in the midst of American scenery – it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity – all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!⁴

The circumstances of *The Oxbow* commission are quite valuable to our understanding of Thomas Cole's personal motivations for the piece. During the fall and winter of 1835, Cole was working on a different commission for the prominent New York merchant and patron Luman Reed – a series of paintings, *The Course of Empire*, tracing the human transformation of one site from a primitive state through an agrarian society, a thriving empire, a decadent empire, and finally to a state of ruin. The artist drew inspiration for this project from observing, during his travels to Europe between 1829 and 1832, how Turner used landscapes as metaphors for social and political issues as well as vehicles for themes of historical significance.⁵ The paintings were going very slowly as Cole encountered numerous difficulties in painting the figures, and he became lonely and depressed.⁶ Reed suggested that Cole suspend his work and paint something in "his accustomed" manner for the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition opening in April 1836. Cole had made a sketch some years earlier from Mount Holyoke and returned to the subject at this time.

Cole, in his own words, reveals the iconography of the painting:

Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the bosom of that seclud-

ed valley, begirt with wooded hills through enamelled meadows and wide waving fields of grain; a silver stream winds lingeringly along – here seeking the green shade of trees – there glancing in the sunshine; on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers – from yonder dark mass of foliage the village spire beams like a star. You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage – no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation; but freedom’s off-spring – peace, security and happiness dwell there, the spirits of the scene.... And in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind’s eye may see far into futurity – mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil.⁷

A great debate was raging at the time between Americans in favor of a Jeffersonian agrarian society and those advocating for a Jacksonian *laissez-faire* economics that embraced unrestricted industrial, commercial, and financial development.⁸ Thomas Cole was an early environmentalist who found the rapid destruction of the wilderness abhorrent. *The Oxbow* clearly pronounces his personal preference for the wilderness, while championing the virtue of an agrarian civilization in which Americans respect their covenant with God.

NOTES

1 See images of the full painting and its details in color on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s webpage www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/08.228 (accessed June 6, 2012).

2 Penelope J. E. Davies, et al., eds., *Janson’s History of Art*, 8th edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012), 832-834.

3 *Ibid.*, 833.

4 Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *American Monthly Magazine*, 1 (January 1836), quoted in John W. McCoubrey, *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 98.

5 Fred S. Kleiner, Christin J. Mamiya, and Richard G. Tansey, eds., *Gardner’s Art through the Ages*, 11th edition (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), 834.

6 Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque, “The Oxbow by Thomas Cole: Iconography of an American Landscape,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 17 (1982), 63. This article, which includes sketches Cole used in creating *The Oxbow*, is available at www.metmuseum.org/pubs/journals/1/pdf/1512787.pdf.bannered.pdf (accessed June 6, 2012).

7 Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” in McCoubrey, 108.

8 *Janson’s History of Art*, 834.



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