



Essay on American Scenery Contest

Guidelines and Background:

Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was an English-born painter who began America's first major art movement, the Hudson River School—a group of artists whose paintings paid homage to American wilderness even as it was being dramatically altered by industrialization. Cole wrote about both his appreciation of but also his worry for the American landscape in an essay called *Essay on American Scenery*, published in *American Monthly Magazine* 1 in January 1836. At a time when American natural scenery was commonly thought of as inferior to the beauty of European landscapes, Cole argued that the wilds of America were just as, if not more, beautiful than any other place in the world. Moreover, in the face of mounting industrialization, he pleaded readers to value and preserve its quickly disappearing wilderness.

At the time of his writing, the American landscape was changing rapidly. The advent of railroads, factories, mills, and steamships brought dramatic change to Catskill, New York, where Cole made his home, as well as to much of the Hudson River Valley and the United States as a whole. As he observed his beloved town of Catskill and its surrounding environs transformed by industry, Cole wrote, "I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes is quickly passing away... another generation will behold spots now rife with beauty desecrated by what is called 'improvement.'"

Today, the American landscape, both physical and cultural, is changing too. We invite writers to reflect on these changes in our '*Essay on American Scenery*' Contest. Writers may respond, as Cole did, to a changing climate or physical landscape, the changing social and political landscape, or, simply, to changes to their hometowns, neighborhood, block, a single building or natural feature. *Essay on American Scenery* was a piece of persuasive nonfiction writing, but Thomas Cole, in addition to being an essayist, produced poetry, fiction, and creative work of all kinds in his lifetime. In that spirit, we welcome nonfiction writing, fiction, and poetry in response to this prompt. Standout entries will be selected by a group of judges made up of writers, art historians, poets, and staff from the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. Best submissions will be published on our website.

The prompt: How is the American landscape changing? How do you feel about it? Is there something you see, do, or experience now that you hope will be around for future generations?

To read Thomas Cole's *Essay on American Scenery*:

Visit [our website](#)

Parameters:

- Essays should be between 2,000-5,000 words. Exceptions to word minimum will be made for poetry.
- Submissions may be nonfiction, fiction, or poetry. While the prompt can be interpreted broadly, essays must address in some way a change to the American landscape (environmental, physical, societal, cultural) and how the author feels about it.
- Eligibility: Open to all.

Accepting submissions between: September 24-February 24

Winners announced: March 24

Send submissions via email to: mconley@thomascole.org

Or mail to:

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Questions? Call: 518.943.7465 xt 108