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Cedar Grove, restored

by *Michael J. Lewis*

On recent restorations of Thomas Cole's house in Catskill, New York, and Olana, the house of Frederic Edwin Church.

It is a perfectly natural impulse for us to wish the house of a cherished writer to illuminate his works. We are strangely pleased to visit the various houses where Edgar Allan Poe boarded and find them cramped and forlorn. Or to discover that Sunnyside, Washington Irving's house on the Hudson River, is a fantasy of a romantic Dutch cottage that might have loomed in one of his stories, mysterious in the moonlight. Or that Mark Twain's house in Hartford is a Victorian carnival of spiky dormers and angular gables, vibrating like a paddle steamer about to shove off, or explode.

But all these houses ever really illuminate is biography—the writer's good taste, or lack thereof (or, in Poe's case, his poverty). Their relationship to the literature is indirect. Our interest in a writer is what happens in his mind and not outside his window. Not so with the painter, for whom the house, and its site, can mean everything. For example, Cedar Grove, the house of Thomas Cole (1801–48), the founder of the Hudson River School. It stands in Catskill, New York, overlooking the banks of the Hudson River, whose scenery and significance Cole made the central subject of American landscape painting. Not so long ago the Hudson River School was considered the very acme of mawkish sentimentality, but Cedar Grove, just restored, helps us see this painting for what it was, the first expression of environmental thought in America—and thought of the most tragic sort.

For a painter the house, and its site, can mean everything.

Cole's theme was not simply nature but nature as reflected in the pitiless glint of the machine. He was born in Bolton, England, the epicenter of the English textile industry. There the modern “spinning mule,” that critical improvement for making yarn from cotton fiber, was invented in 1779. The consequences were swift. Textile manufacture requires water for bleaching, and to provide it, the moors were drained and channeled into the nearby Croal River. Shortly before Cole's birth, chlorine was introduced, drastically shortening the bleaching time; soon chlorine bleach works lined the river. That canal that opened in 1808 between Bolton and Manchester passed through one of the most

heavily industrialized landscapes in the world. Cole and his family were involved in the textile industry, and he would have taken these developments for granted, as all children accept the world into which they are born.

In 1818 Cole's family abruptly moved to the United States and settled in Steubenville, Ohio. After some lessons with the itinerant portrait painter John Stein (who a few years later performed the same service to John James Audubon), he began to paint his own portraits. They were stiff and wooden (Cole never did learn to draw a face satisfactorily), and they sold poorly. When his father opened a shop in Pittsburgh to manufacture floorcloth, Cole joined him, "drawing patterns and preparing colors." On the side, he ran a private drawing school. When both businesses failed, Cole walked to Philadelphia, where he helped to draw the large illuminated transparencies for Lafayette's triumphant return in 1824.

The next year, Cole found the subject he was born to paint. In the course of a sketching tour of the Hudson River, he discovered the spectacular natural features of the Catskill Mountains, such as Kaaterskill Falls, that rare double waterfall that is higher than Niagara, and the Kaaterskill Clove, a steep and meandering gorge that plunges half a mile. Both sites were within a day's walk of the town of Catskill, where Cole settled a decade later. Upon his return to New York, he worked up his pencil and charcoal sketches into oil paintings, taking considerable liberties in the process. He might expunge thick undergrowth or an unsightly cabin while inserting his favorite emblematic devices, a violently blasted foreground tree or perhaps an American Indian hunter chasing a stag. The point was to remove the accidental and incidental in order to depict the essential truth of a landscape. "I can never paint successfully until I have generalized," he liked to say.

Cole's ascent was swift and sensational. He was discovered by John Trumbull, America's most famous painter, who introduced him to the public at the American Academy of the Fine Arts, of which Trumbull was a director. This was in 1826, a fateful year in American culture. The fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence induced a wave of nostalgia for the Revolutionary era, and the original "greatest generation," but it also marked the opening of the Erie Canal, which poured its treasures into the Hudson. At one stroke, the river that ran through America's most exquisite and unspoiled landscapes was converted to a commercial viaduct, as bustling and frenetic as anything Cole had experienced in Manchester.

Cole brooded incessantly over the pillaging of the landscape. The felling of a single tree could provoke fury and despair—and a kind of agonized poetry. His best-known poem, "On

seeing that a favorite tree of the Author's had been cut down," takes the incident of its title as a metaphor for the coming ravaging of the continent ("We feed ten thousand fires: in our short day/ The woodland growth of centuries is consumed . . ."). To read Cole's poetry is to confirm what one senses in the paintings, that they are not celebrations but lamentations, and that the curl of smoke

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from a settler's hut, fresh tree stump, and inevitable resting axe are not props of cozy domesticity but portents of destruction.

So perfectly perched is Cedar Grove to observe this melancholy process that one can almost believe that Cole married Maria Barstow just for her hilltop house. In itself it is not particularly romantic; it is a stately Federal house of 1815, a trim and symmetrical composition of three bays, fronted by a generous veranda. But its views are exquisite. To the east the Hudson stretches out while to the west the Great Northern Catskills sprawls stupendously, peak upon peak, like waves breaking in the surf. Cole never tired of painting them and from precisely this vantage point, which for him had something close to sacred significance. He was gazing out on them when he married Maria in 1836, in the west parlor of her house.

Cole never owned Cedar Grove, which belonged to Maria's uncle. He lived there as a tenant, along with Maria's three unmarried sisters, a merrily straggling household that eventually included the Coles' five children. Cole died there in 1848, having never built the house for his own family he had always envisioned. His descendants remained in possession of Cedar Grove into the 1970s, keeping loving care of the family shrine, which accounts for its unusually good state of preservation. Now officially known as the Thomas Cole Historic House, a private organization, it has been open to the public since 2001.

Cedar Grove showed little physical evidence of Cole's twelve-year tenancy until a forensic examination of the building, completed just this year. Its chief revelation is that he did indeed transform his house, as comprehensively as he could, but with color. Scrupulous paint analysis has removed layers of paint to yield the comprehensive color scheme which Cole presumably introduced after his marriage. Over the house's original paint scheme—the neoclassical palette of yellows and whites—he gave the rooms of the ground floor surprisingly vibrant hues. He rendered the central stair hall in a deep periwinkle, a chromatic fanfare to the house of a painter. The parlors to either side, while vivid, are not quite as intense, perhaps because Cole wanted a subdued backdrop on which to hang his paintings. The east parlor is a pleasant leafy green while the west parlor is a cool pale lavender, and rather restrained in value—again, Cole did not want his colors to compete, in this case with the mighty Catskill range outside.

Just as surprising was the discovery of fragments of painted decoration at the top of the parlor walls, a trompe l'oeil of fringed fabrics with a geometric pattern. In their tasteful domesticity, they seem to belong to a universe other than Cole's moody romanticism, but they remind us that he began his career in England, as his first biographer tells us, “as an engraver of simple designs for calico.” Actually, there is no surprise that Cole's interior would have projected polite decorum. He was himself a gifted architect—who had a hand in the design of the Ohio State Capitol—and knew that a decorative scheme had to harmonize with the character of the building into which it was fitted. (On the other hand, this may have been the one project for which Cole was not the decisive personality. The one client to whom every architect must say yes is his wife.)

The treatment of these newly discovered decorative fragments is exemplary. The truth is, there is no ideal solution when one finds vestiges of an early painting scheme. To expose it all to view yields only a mutilated and faded fragment, which might be desirable with a medieval fresco but is not in this case. And to try to replicate a scheme involving delicate and hand-painted detail is to produce a parody. One is invariably backed into a compromise: one recreates the geometric or stenciled patterns as best one can, leaving exposed a small and inconspicuous fragment of the original, so that the visitor can inspect the actual physical evidence on which the recreation is based.



Thomas Cole's studio. Photo: getawaymavens.com

The restoration has also brought about the rebuilding of Cole's painting studio. For most of his time at Cedar Grove, he painted in a converted barn, which now serves as the orientation center for visitors. But in 1846 he built himself a small wooden studio downhill from the main house, a utilitarian affair with no ornament except for the Gothic bargeboard under its eaves. This studio was demolished in the 1960s, but it was sufficiently documented by photographs and by Cole's own measured drawings to permit an exact rebuilding, and on the original footprint. It is now used for temporary exhibitions, and the last two I saw were superbly curated. Last year's show of Cole's architectural drawings demonstrated conclusively that he was an architect of professional competence; this year's exhibition, now closed, alas, was a splendid examination of Sanford Gifford's paintings in the Catskills.

The didactic material is well handled. I first had misgivings when the east parlor turned into a multi-media theater, its windows becoming screens for a short film documenting Cole's painting from the

standpoint of the house. The roving camera passes feelingly across his canvases, lingering over key features, accompanied by a well-timed narration in the voice of Cole, taken from his own writings. Such a filmstrip approach almost always turns out badly, and is too pious, earnest, or artificial; one almost never gets the intelligence, relaxed humor, or unaffected directness with which most artists talk about their work. But the role-playing actor in the video gets it exactly right, even to the jolly spirit of mischief that sparkles in Cole's words.

With Cole's house you have that pleasant feeling that he might come bounding up the stairs.

And then the film is over and the lights come on, and we stand once again in Cole's green-walled east parlor. Such high-tech cleverness usually falls flat, calling attention to itself, but here for once it works well. In every respect this is a first-rate restoration. One will quibble over some of the details, as is the case with every restoration. I am convinced by the carpeting on the stairs and also by the floor covering, brilliantly recreated from surviving fragments, but I am not convinced they existed simultaneously; they are too discordant. Likewise, it was a responsible decision to put only replicas of Cole's painting on the first floor of the house, and to mark them with schematic frames so that no one is deceived by the facsimile. Still, there is something a bit jarring about the flat cartoon frames that surround them. In compensation, one has the real thing upstairs, a choice selection of Cole's paintings, and a beautifully curated display of his pigments, color wheel, and palette. All this is well done, but also with discretion; one does not have that sterile, squeaky-clean feeling that ruins most "comprehensive" restorations, where one has the sense of being in a model of the original building, recreated at one-to-one scale on the original site. With Cole's house you have that pleasant feeling that he might come bounding up the stairs at any time, coat aflutter, looking for a stray brush.



Just two miles away from Cedar Grove, as the crow flies, is Olana, the Moorish fantasia built by Cole's most famous pupil, Frederic Edwin Church. The house is on the east side of the Hudson, above the town of that name, and plans are underway to build a pedestrian path between the two houses. When completed, it will be possible to experience the physical world of Hudson River School painting as its artists experienced it, on foot and moving through nature. But it will also offer a profound lesson about the convulsive changes that the Civil War wrought on the American consciousness.

I expect visitors who arrive at Cedar Grove after having toured Olana will be disappointed. Olana is simply staggering, a coordinated ensemble of landscape and architecture in which 250 acres of meadows, lakes, and dense forest form a green backdrop to the chromatic explosion of the house—an emerald setting in which gleams the ruby. The richly variegated landscape reminds one of Central Park, as well it should; it is the work of Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, the creators of the park.

Church lived at Cedar Grove for two years, studying with Cole, from whom he borrowed the idea of assigning each room of his house a specific color, precisely gauged to the activity or emotional character of the space. But here the colors are intense, even strident, no polite essay in Regency taste. In comparison to this polychromatic jubilee, Cedar Grove is primness itself, the house of an upright merchant farmer of the Federal period, and nothing more. But if one sees the houses as one should, in chronological order, and is suitably amazed at Olana, one will feel a nagging desire to return to Cole's modest viewing platform overlooking the Catskills, wondering what elusive quality is missing in the later house.

Cole worked at a time when it was still possible to see in the American landscape the promise of a second Eden. Rather than regret the lack of any picturesque ruins in the American landscape, of the sort that grace the paintings

of Claude and Poussin, he took this as a sign of divine favor: "You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage—no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation." So he claimed in his celebrated "Essay on American Scenery," arguing that the poetic associations aroused by the American landscape were thoughts about the future, not the past. "Nature has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet," he wrote. "Shall we turn from it? We are still in Eden."

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But after Antietam and Gettysburg, it was no longer possible to call America a second Eden. There is certainly nothing Edenic in Olana, whose architecture is an exotic confection of Persian and Moorish motifs, swirled together in an eclectic synthesis, and pushed almost to the point of hysteria. It is glorious and spellbinding, as the products of a shell-shocked culture can be, but there is none of the quiet sincerity that marks Cole's quiet workshop. He may have lamented the despoliation of the

landscape, but he responded with more than passive grief. His paintings crystallized a certain understanding of the essential fragility of nature, even at its most majestic, and its vulnerability to man's slow, inexorable work of despoliation. This was ecological thinking expressed first on canvas before it moved on to literature and then to science. It is this wistful sense of apprehension and loss that gives Cole's paintings their emotional undertow and that makes a visit to Cedar Grove immensely satisfying.

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