

THOMAS COLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



2024 Hands-on Activities

Creating Your *Essay on American Scenery*: What is the American Landscape?

Appropriate for: Grades 1-12

Connects well with: art, history, and English curricula

Description: In 1836, Thomas Cole wrote an essay called *Essay on American Scenery* that celebrated American landscapes and expressed his fear that they would be destroyed. In pairs, students will read different paragraphs from the essay (scaled appropriately for grade level) and report back to the group to discuss what they read and its meaning. Students will then break into groups and complete mini “Essays on American Scenery” by creating artwork and writing.

Students will work in our kitchen garden and education space, creating poetry, prose, and artwork that responds to the questions: “What is the American landscape?” “What makes up a landscape?” “Is there something you see, do, or experience today that you hope will be around for future generations?” Students will then gather as a group to share their interpretations of these questions.

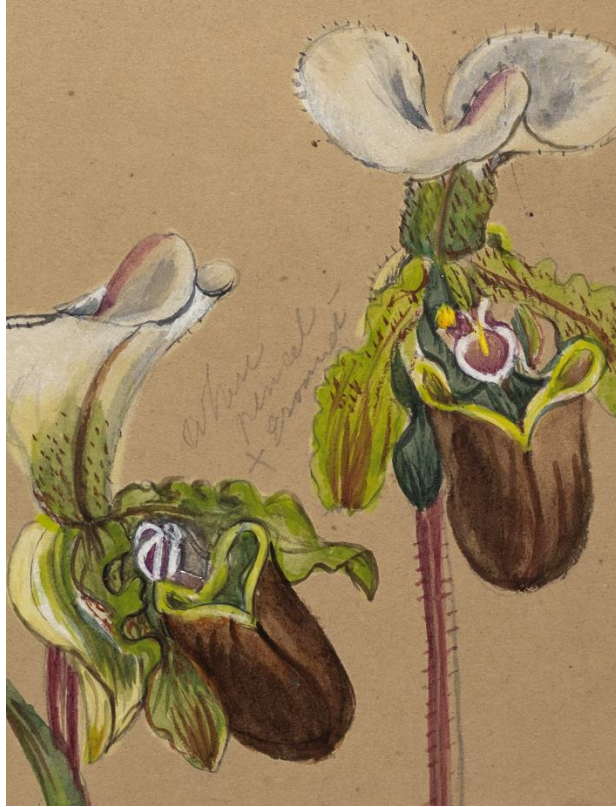
Sketch, Remember & Create

Appropriate for: Grades 1-12

Connects well with: art curriculum

Description: A key part of Thomas Cole's creative process involved leaving out certain details in a landscape and remembering, and later, capturing others. Students will sit outdoors in a wide circle, facing away from each other, looking out at the grounds all around them. They will have **two minutes** to observe what they see, then for **three minutes** they will turn in to sketch what they saw, without referencing the real-life view.

Students will continue to rotate places in the circle so that they are looking at a different view and will repeat this sequence up to four times. They will then pick from their sketches a favorite view to turn into a painting and spend the remaining time painting their chosen scene.



Botanical Drawing & the Art of Emily Cole

Appropriate for: Grades K-12

Connects well with: art, design, and science curricula

Description: Emily Cole (1843-1913) was a botanical artist who created over 100 watercolor works on paper and painted porcelain objects decorated with plants and flowers. The daughter of Maria Bartow and Thomas Cole, she lived most of her life in the historic household alongside her family and became regarded as “Catskill’s china painter.” American flower painting emerged as a distinct genre in the mid-nineteenth century as scientists and artists were influenced by European still life painting traditions and scientific discoveries.

During their visit, students will have an opportunity to explore the flowers and plants in the Site’s gardens. **OPTION 1:** Outside, they will choose a plant to draw and paint it using a still-life method. **OPTION 2:** Inside, they will reference a work by Emily Cole and draw inspiration from it. Museum educators and teachers can discuss seasonal and weather-dependent options.



Exhibition-Related Activity: Painting Human Presence in the Landscape

Appropriate for: Grades 3-12

Connects well with: history, science, and art history curricula

Description: In Thomas Cole's paintings representing United States scenery, he emphasized large mountains, expansive land, and massive trees as a response to encroaching industry and clear-cutting that was actively taking place at the time. People, by comparison, are often tiny, solitary figures in an overwhelming landscape.

Humans have long interacted with the land in many ways. Indigenous communities continue to protect over 80% of the world's biodiversity. By painting wild and unpeopled scenes, Thomas Cole contributed to the notion that Indigenous people were quickly disappearing from the landscape. His landscapes are at times absent of the people and communities that were present in these settings. This activity asks students to consider their relationship to the environment and how we might foster meaningful interactions with our natural world.

Environmental Writing

Appropriate for: Grades K-12

Connects well with: English, art, and environmental science curricula

Description: Thomas Cole often wrote about his feelings on the changing environment through personal journals, essays, and poetry. Today, poets like Joy Harjo, Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, Amanda Gorman, and more use writing to speak about nature, human relationships to land, and environmental justice.

Students will write poetry about their experiences in and with nature. They will explore the Site's grounds and gardens and gather ideas using a [five senses worksheet](#). They will then compose a final piece of writing. They may enclose their final poems into a colored envelope to take home or exchange with their peers.

This activity may be modified as an ekphrastic poetry lesson by request.



Color Study: *Diagram of Contrasts*

Appropriate for: Grades K-12

Connects well with: art, music, and math curricula

Description: Thomas Cole's 1834 painting *Diagram of Contrasts* may look like a modern work of art, but the artist was fascinated by light, shadow, and color. Students will create their own color study, exploring value and color relationships.

*I made a small circular diagram of colours today. It reminded me of an experiment I have long wished to try...It is what may be called the Music of Colours. I believe that colours are as capable of affecting—by combination, degree, and arrangement—as sound. – Thomas Cole, *Thoughts & Occurrences*, 1834*