

SCHOOL VISITS

HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES



**THOMAS
COLE** NATIONAL
HISTORIC
SITE



HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

Select one of the following Hands-On Activities to accompany your School Tour at the historic site.
Explore activity descriptions and curriculum alignments in the following pages.

Activities

My American Landscape: 2026 Student Art Exhibition

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

Sketch, Remember, Create: Landscape Drawing Exercise

Environmental Writing

Color Wheel Study: *Diagram of Contrasts*

Create-Your-Own Take Action Card

Natural Paints: Making Pigments at the Historic Site

Create a Garden of Memory

Student Art Shows

Display your students' artwork at the historic site! During their visit, students are invited to create art that will be put on display for a special student exhibition inspired by themes of landscape.

Reach out to education@thomascole.org for more information.





My American Landscape 2026 Student Art Exhibition

Appropriate for: K-12

Connects well with: art, history, and ecology curricula

Description: During their visit, students will learn about the life and artwork of Thomas Cole. Drawing from his paintings of United States scenery, students will be asked to create their own unique American landscape based on the place where they live. Classes are invited to create their exhibition artworks during their field trip to the historic site or in the classroom. Additional mediums are welcome for submission, such as writing, sculpture, ceramic, and collage (examples: landscape paintings, poetry, tree sculptures, nature dioramas, etc). Teachers can adapt the prompt below to best fit their classroom lessons.

The student art show and free reception will take place on **Saturday, November 14, 2026** at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site with activities, snacks, and music.

Prompt: Think of the place where you live or a memory in nature. What natural and man-made objects are a part of your landscape? Is it day or night? What season is it? What events, buildings, and living things make up its surroundings? How would you create your own American landscape?

Before your visit, explore our Lesson Plans: [Thomas Cole & Industrialization](#) and [Thomas Cole & Empire](#).

Pair this with our **Thomas Cole: Artist, Writer, Early Environmentalist** tour.



Botanical Drawing & the Art of Emily Cole

Appropriate for: K-12

Connects well with: art, design, and science curricula

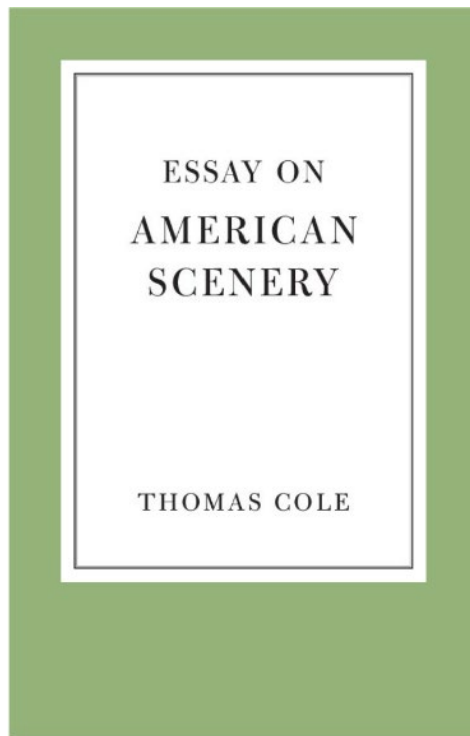
Description: Emily Cole (1843-1913) was a botanical artist who created over 100 watercolor works on paper and painted porcelain objects decorated with plants and flowers. The daughter of Maria Bartow and Thomas Cole, she lived most of her life in the historic household alongside her family and became 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 learn about the life and artwork of Emily Cole. After viewing her art in the galleries, students will explore the flowers and plants that she once painted outside in the gardens. They will choose their own plant to draw outside using a still-life method. They may also reference a botanical by Emily Cole and draw inspiration from it. Students will complete their painting in the Storehouse. Museum educators and teachers can discuss seasonal and weather-dependent options.

Before your visit, explore our [Emily Cole & Plants Lesson Plan](#).

Pair this with our **Creative Process** tour.

Emily Cole & Valerie Hegarty: Life Cycles is on view now.



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 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 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.

Pair this with our **Thomas Cole: Artist, Writer, Early Environmentalist or Contemporary Art & the Environment** tour.



Sketch, Remember, & Create

Landscape Drawing Activity

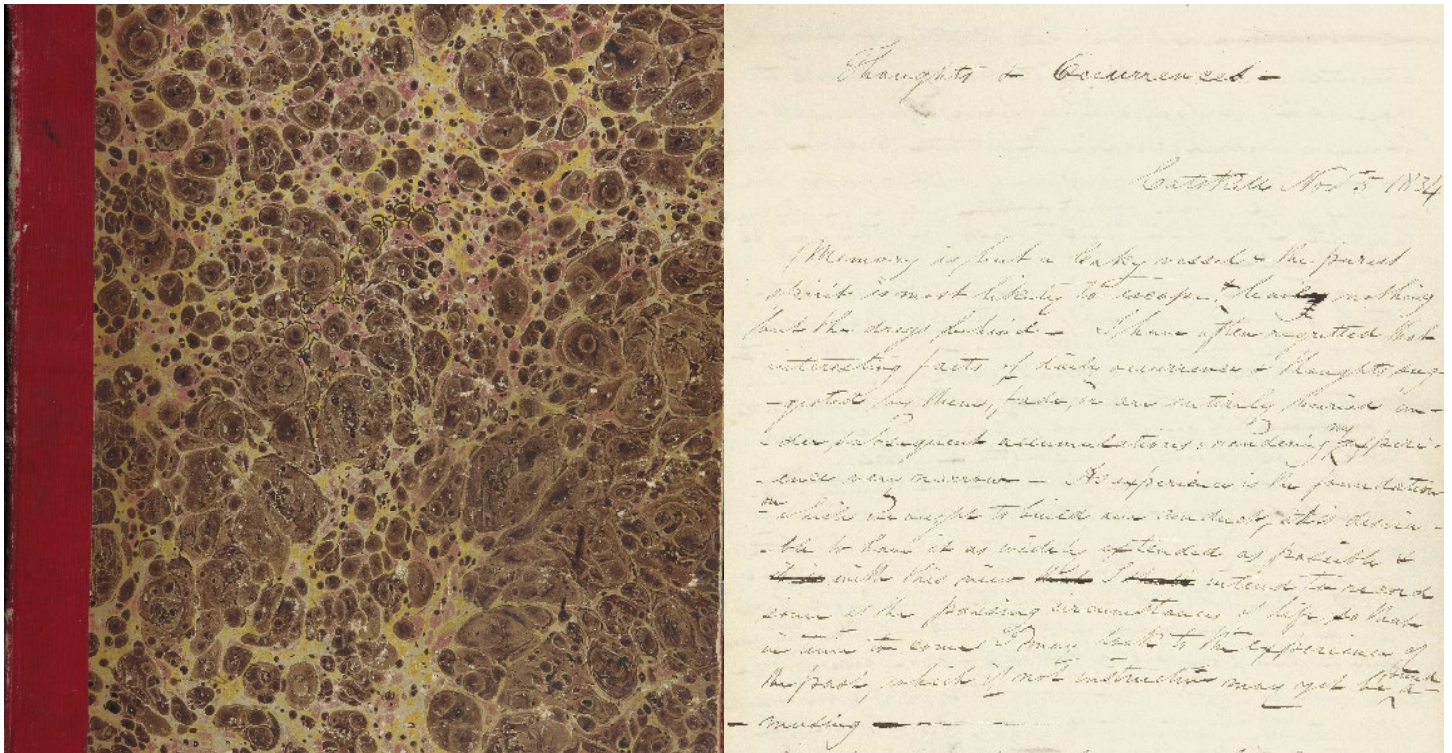
Appropriate for: Grades 1-12

Connects well with: art and technology curricula

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.

Pair this with our **Creative Process** tour.



Environmental Writing

Appropriate for: 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. Writers today continue to 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.

Pair this with our **Thomas Cole: Artist, Writer, Early Environmentalist** tour.



Color Wheel Study: *Diagram of Contrasts*

Appropriate for: K-12

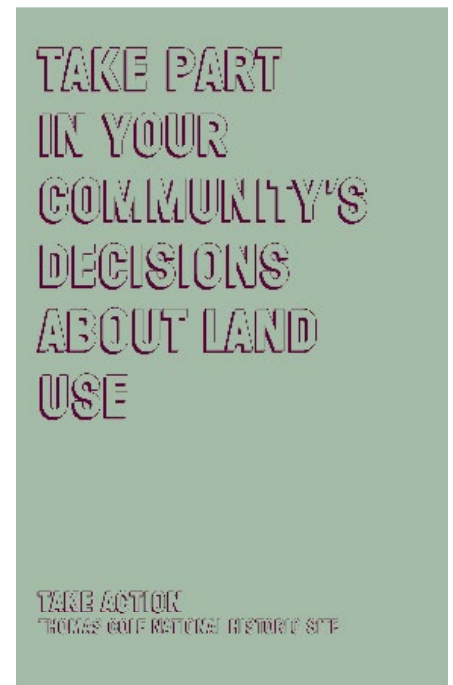
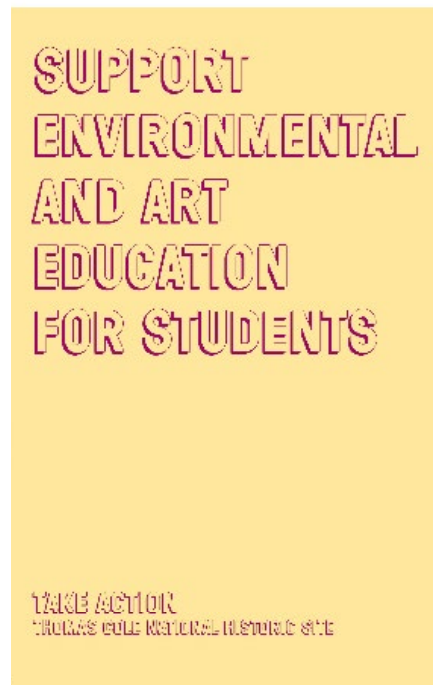
Connects well with: art, music, and math curricula

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.

Grades K-3 will create their color wheel by cutting and pasting shapes onto brown paper. Grades 3-12 will work with paints and drawing materials.

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, 1834, Thoughts & Occurrences

Pair this with our **Creative Process** tour.



Create-Your-Own Take Action Card

Appropriate for: K-12

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

Description: Thomas Cole mourned the loss of nature in his personal writings, poems, and his 1836, *Essay on American Scenery*. During school visits, students will hear excerpts from Thomas' writings and explore environmental themes in his artworks. As a group, we will discuss ways to protect the natural world today.

Students will each receive a Take Action card from the Thomas Cole National Historic Site and will be prompted to create their own Take Action statement.

Pair this with our **Thomas Cole: Artist, Writer, Early Environmentalist** tour.



Natural Paints: Making Pigments at the Historic Site

Appropriate for: Grades K-3

Connects well with: art, science, and technology curricula

Description: Prior to the production of commercially manufactured tubes of paint in the 1840s, artists created their own paints by grinding down colorful rocks and minerals and combining them with linseed and other oils to create pigments. Pigments like madder root, vermilion, chrome yellow, cobalt, and more were staples in Thomas Cole's landscapes, but it was from tree bark that he created some of his first dye tests. Botanical artists like Emily Cole would continue to turn to natural materials for other artistic expressions and as objects of study.

While Emily used glazes and lusters as materials for her china-painting, today plant-pigments can offer a sustainable alternative to plastic-based paints and art materials. Museum educators and teachers will discuss seasonal and available plant-dye options.

Pair this with our **Creative Process** tour.

Learn how to create natural paints for your classroom: [Pigment Making Guide](#)



Create a Garden of Memory

Appropriate for: Grades K-12

Connects well with: art, science, and technology curricula

Description: *Emily Cole & Valerie Hegarty: LIFE CYCLES* brings together the work of two women artists from different centuries. Emily Cole carefully painted flowers, plants, and other details from nature, while Valerie Hegarty creates artworks that explore memory, history, family, and place. Both artists help us think about how art can hold stories and how inspiration can be passed from one generation to the next.

Flowers bloom, fade, and return again—just like the cycles of life. What memories do flowers hold? What grows, changes, or returns in your own life? How can nature remind us of people, places, or moments we want to remember? Students will create a paper flower and add it to our shared display, inspired by the work of Emily Cole and Valerie Hergarty. As each flower is placed together, it becomes part of a community artwork inspired by growth, change, and connection.

Before your visit, explore our [Emily Cole & Plants Lesson Plan](#).

Pair this with our **Creative Process** tour.

Emily Cole & Valerie Hegarty: Life Cycles is on view now.