

THOMAS COLE & TREES

200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THOMAS COLE'S ARRIVAL TO THE CATSKILLS



Grade Level: 6-12

Curriculum Alignments:

History: Colonial Foundations / Expansion, Nationalism, and Sectionalism / Westward Movement and Industrialization. **Art:** Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work / Interpret Meaning in Artistic Work / Investigate Ways that Artistic Work is Influenced by Societal, Cultural, and Historical Context. **Science:** Human Impacts on Earth Systems / Natural Resources / Ecosystem Dynamics, Functioning, and Resilience.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify the significance of natural scenery as unique to historical events and technologies of the United States.
- Discuss how painted imagery in Thomas Cole's 1825 landscapes are indicative of shifting environmental and social changes.
- Analyze the impact of land and nature within the larger history of the United States.

Description of Lesson Plan:

This summer marks the 200th Anniversary of Thomas Cole's first trip to Catskill, New York (1825-2025) which changed the course of American art. The paintings he made in the Hudson River Valley and Catskill Mountains launched not only his career, but the major American art movement known as the Hudson River School. Using the 1825 landmark year as a central moment of historical events in the United States, classes will discuss how Thomas Cole's tree paintings *Lake with Dead Trees* (1825) and *Hunters in a Landscape* (1824-1825) address the changing landscape of the United States. Classes may incorporate Georgia O'Keeffe's *Dead Tree Bear Lake Taos* (1929) to further analyze and compare artistic interpretations of trees and the American landscape. *On Trees: Thomas Cole & Georgia O'Keeffe* on view at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, June 21-December 14.

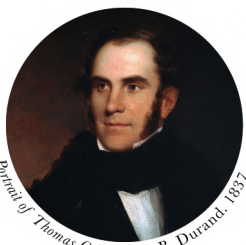
COLE
200 THE TRIP THAT
CHANGED
AMERICAN ART

THOMAS COLE NATIONAL
HISTORIC
SITE

BACKGROUND

Who was Thomas Cole?

Artist, Writer, Early Environmentalist



Thomas Cole was a British-born American artist, writer, and early environmentalist who lived from 1801 to 1848. In 1825, Thomas Cole arrived in Catskill, New York to paint and reflect on landscapes of the United States. When America

was still a new nation just forming its own identity and traditions, Thomas Cole became well-known for painting landscapes around the Hudson River and Catskills, a style which would later be known as the Hudson River School of painting. He painted and wrote extensively about the American landscape, and argued that it should be protected and preserved, and developed thoughtfully. As an artist, he urged for the preservation of the natural environment in the United States.

Bolton, England to Catskill, New York

Thomas Cole became regarded as the “founder of American art,” but he was, in fact, an immigrant to the United States. Cole was born in Bolton, England in 1801, during a time of heavy industrialization. In 1818 at age 17, Cole came to the United States with his family, and spent a period of time moving around the country before coming to Catskill, New York in the summer of 1825. While living in Catskill from 1836-1848, Cole began to express strong views concerning the impact of industrial development and its negative consequences on the natural beauty of the Catskills landscape that were such a source of inspiration to his work.



The Village of Catskill around 1797. Woodcut after a drawing by A.P. Fecit, Frontispiece of the New York Magazine, September 1797.

Discussion Questions for the Classroom:

- What historic events were taking place in the United States in 1825?
- How has the American landscape changed over the last 200 years?

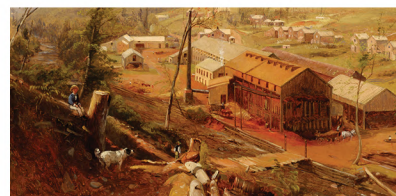
How was the American landscape changing?

1825: The Trip That Changed American Art

In the summer of 1825, Thomas Cole traveled to Catskill and created paintings that captured the landscape of the United States. Among those were the Catskills-inspired artwork, *Lake with Dead Trees* (1825), and from nearby New England travels came *Hunters in a Landscape* (1824-1825), depicting Cole’s consideration for nature, tree-life, and the rapidly changing landscape of the United States. When he returned to New York City, he quickly became the country’s foremost artist at the age of 24 by depicting the natural beauty of the country’s landscapes. His paintings would inspire the country’s identity of “America the beautiful” and the formation of the National Park System.

Land, Industry, and the Catskills

The paintings Cole made in the Catskill Mountains were a response to an increase in trade, industry, and tourism impacting the region’s natural landscape. By the 1830s, over 60 mills, factories, and tanneries populated the Catskill Mountains, forests were being rapidly cleared as a resource to tan leather goods and



Tannery in the Catskills, attributed to William Hart, c. 1850s.

to make space for roads, and the antebellum United States was approaching the years of the Civil War.

200 YEARS AGO...

Thomas Cole's first years in the Hudson River Valley were synonymous with major historic American events such as the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, the abolition of slavery in New York State in 1827, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Panic of 1837, and more. His paintings, while focused on natural scenery, depict a changing environment during a time of great significance for a changing nation.

1825

1825

The Erie Canal opens waterways for trade and transport across New York State.

1825

Thomas Cole travels to Catskill, New York for the first time.

1825

John Quincy Adams is elected 6th president of the United States.

1825

Locomotion No. 1, the first steam-operated passenger train opens in England,

1825

James Monroe appears before Congress in 1825 to propose for the removal of Indigenous people in the east to lands in the west.

Explore a larger timeline of historic events on page 9.

LAKE WITH DEAD TREES

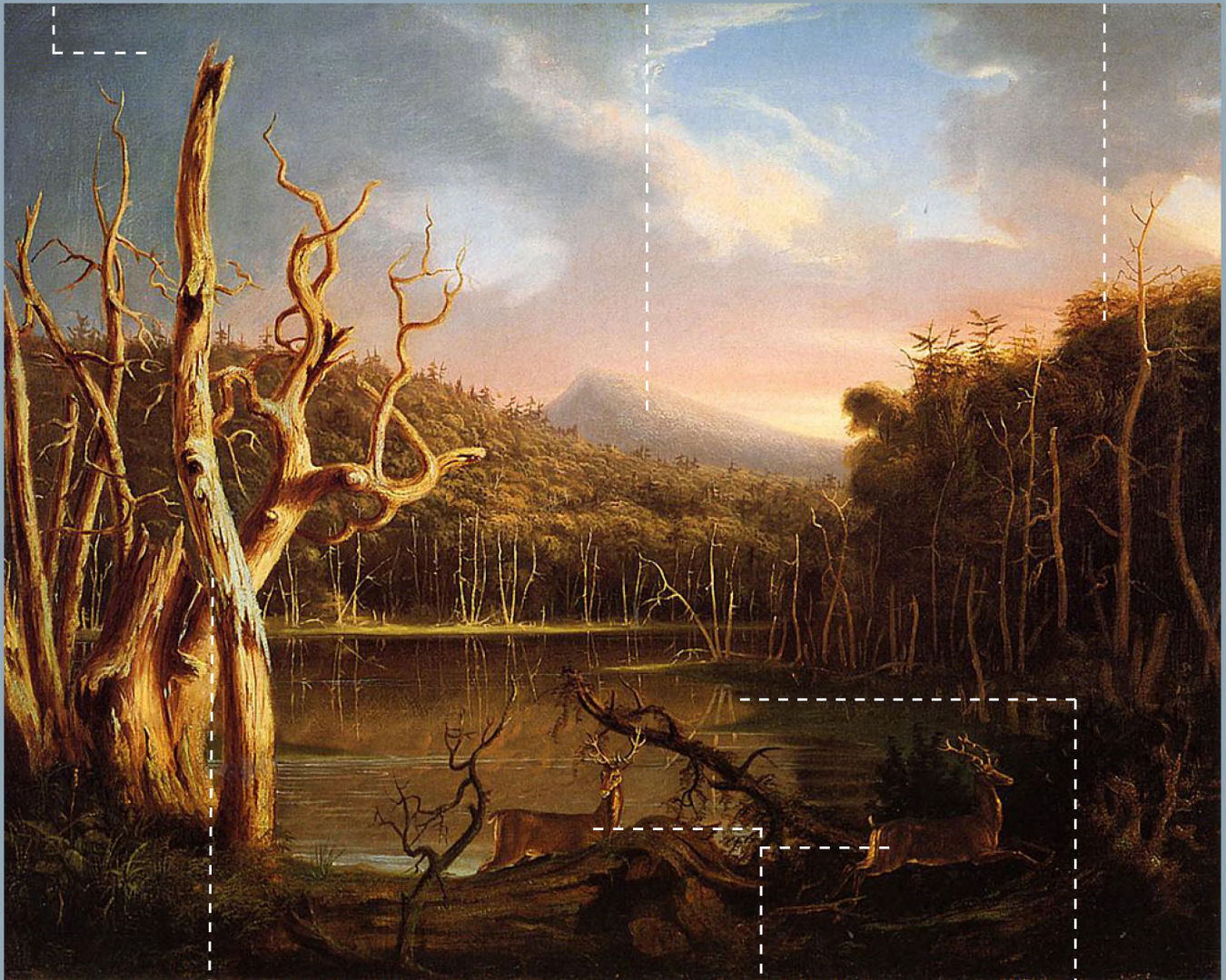
Thomas Cole, 1825, oil on canvas.

Thomas Cole's 1825 trip to South Lake in the Catskill Mountains was the inspiration for this artwork. Nearby was a working mill and a popular mountain resort, the Catskill Mountain House, est. 1824. A dam from the mill caused water levels at South Lake to change and the surrounding trees suffered as a result.

Dark and cloudy skies suggests the clearing or approaching of a storm.

Kaaterskill High Peak, part of the Catskill Mountain Range, is visible from South Lake in the Catskills.

The trees along the lake are twisted and bare with no leaves, while the forest surrounding them still holds some shape.



A blasted tree trunk suggests something destructive has happened here.

Deer run past twisted and fallen trees. The shape of their antlers and fur-color blend in with the surrounding nature.

The water is brown and murky, and reflects the surrounding trees. There is no sign of movement or travel on the lake.

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What is the state of nature?

How are trees represented here?

What actions are taking place in this scene?

What do you think the artist is trying to say with this work?

HUNTERS IN A LANDSCAPE

Thomas Cole, 1824-1825, oil on canvas.

Mount Chocorua, in the White Mountains of Massachusetts, inspired the below scene.

The road leads into a darkly painted forest.

A broken and knotty tree trunk climbs out from a rocky hillside.

A clearing in the trees reveals large mountain peaks and a clear body of water.



A clear path suggests human travel.

Two men meet along the path. One carries a walking stick, while the other carries a musket.

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What kind of path are the men traveling on?

Where are the men traveling to?

What signs of technology are represented here?

What do you think the artist is trying to say with this work?

BACKGROUND

Who was Georgia O’Keeffe?

Artist, Abstractionist, and Transcendentalist



Georgia O’Keeffe was an American abstract artist who lived from 1887 to 1986. She grew up in Wisconsin and later traveled to New Mexico, where she became well-known for abstract artworks inspired by personal feeling, place, and regional nature. Part of the American Modernists movement, O’Keeffe is perhaps best-known for her abstract paintings depicting flowers, plants, bones, and desert landscapes. Being in nature inspired an intuitive art-making practice for the artist and it was in travels across the United States and New Mexico especially that inspired her understanding of land.

New York, New York to Taos, New Mexico

O’Keeffe first traveled to Taos, New Mexico in the summer of 1929 after several years of living and painting in New York City. Her paintings from New York reflect the city’s skyscrapers, bright lights, and roads. When O’Keeffe came to Taos, New Mexico for the first time, she felt inspired by the change of scenery and artmaking possibilities of the desert landscape. She later made her home in Abiquiú, New Mexico from 1949-1984.



Radiator Building—Night, New York, Georgia O’Keeffe, 1927.

Discussion Questions for the Classroom:

- How does nature inspire Georgia O’Keeffe’s artwork?
- How do O’Keeffe and Cole’s works compare?

Artists and the American Landscape

Like Thomas Cole, Georgia O’Keeffe drew great inspiration from the natural scenery of lands in the United States. She too was so affected by her first visit to a place that she painted it within the same year of her travels. Her painting, *Dead Tree Bear Lake Taos*, was made during her 1929 trip to Taos, New Mexico. Like Cole, nature was an abounding force for O’Keeffe, who rooted her artwork to specific locales and landscapes that would also be affected by historic American events in the years to follow.

Westward Expansion & the Great Depression

In nearly 100 years after Cole’s 1825 trip to the Catskills, the United States would continue to face changes throughout O’Keeffe’s lifetime. After the rise of Manifest Destiny, the American frontier continued to encroach upon lands in the West. Following the Mexican-American War, New Mexico eventually became U.S. territory in 1912. When O’Keeffe was painting there, it was still a young state, and its landscape and people had experience significant changes in just a few short years with the the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 and the dispossession of Blue Lake, Taos from the Taos Pueblo to make way for the National Forest.

DEAD TREE BEAR LAKE TAOS

Georgia O'Keeffe, 1929, oil on canvas.



A dark forest of shapes looms above the central

A teal-blue sky suggests it is dusk.



The tree's limbs and branches lack life. They look like hands and fingers.

The red surrounding the central tree takes the shape of more tree trunks or a red curtain.

Twisted tree branch.

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What is the state of nature?

How are trees represented here?

How does this painting make you feel?

What do you think the artist is trying to say with this work?

ACTIVITIES

ART:

Go out into your own backyard or a nearby park. Take a short walk and take note of the surrounding nature. What is the state of nature that you see? If it is springtime, you might see a plant budding. If it is fall, there may be signs of decay and the leaves changing. Select a tree to draw and observe it closely. Now, think of yourself or another person and what they might look like as this tree. You might try and pose like this tree or create a tree dance. Closely observe your chosen tree and sketch it carefully. As you are sketching, think of an emotion the tree might have. Is there a current event that might impact the feeling of this tree or its condition of life?

WRITING:

Students may reflect on how trees are personified in Thomas Cole and Georgia O’Keeffe’s art. Thomas Cole once wrote, “Trees are like men, differing widely in character.” Ask them to consider the prompt, “How are people like trees?” For history and science classes, students may be asked to consider what the impact of nature and natural resources had on the expansion of lands in the United States?

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION:

Consider how the land around you is being maintained. You may notice an empty woodlot in your neighborhood has now become a parking lot, with small cultivated trees. Your neighborhood may have a community garden that is searching for volunteers. Your school may have an empty courtyard or greenhouse. Explore ways to incorporate more pollinator-friendly plants and new plant-life into these spaces.

IN THOMAS COLE'S LIFETIME...

When Thomas Cole is born in 1801:

Napoleon Bonaparte is campaigning for world conquest

1807
United Kingdom abolishes the slave trade

1812
Violence breaks out in response to mechanization of the textile industry (Luddite Rebellion) in England.

1818
Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley, is published

1838
Cherokees are forced from their lands in a 1,200-mile westward journey (Trail of Tears)

1838
Frederick Douglass escapes from slavery and becomes vocal abolitionist

1812
War breaks out again between the United States and Great Britain (War of 1812)

1826
The Last of the Mohicans, by James Fenimore Cooper, is published

1830
The Book of Mormon, by Joseph Smith, is published

1837
NYC banks fail and unemployment reaches record highs (Panic of 1837)

1839
Daguerreotype photographic process is announced

1843
A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens, is published

1827
New York is the last of the northern states to abolish slavery

1830
Congress passes an act which enables the government to displace indigenous populations by force (Indian Removal Act)

1837
Congress passes a law to suppress the debate on slavery (The Gag Law)

1843
Sojourner Truth begins career as antislavery activist

1845
The phrase "Manifest Destiny" is coined, and the Republic of Texas is annexed into the United States

1848
First women's rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, NY

1831
Nat Turner leads uprising against slavery

1834
First use of US troops to suppress a labor dispute

1837
First women's college (Mount Holyoke Female Seminary) is founded in Massachusetts

1848
"The Communist Manifesto," by Marx and Engels, is published

When Thomas Cole passes away in 1848:

Abraham Lincoln is serving his first term in Congress

*"Hark! I heard the tread of Time
Marching o'er the fields sublime"*
-Thomas Cole, Journal Entry, Feb 1. 1846