

THOMAS COLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Director of External Relations, Jennifer Greim, jgreim@thomascole.org

New Decorative Painting by Thomas Cole Uncovered on the Walls of his 1815 Home in Catskill, New York.

Discovery Reveals Significant Further Impact of Cole's Journey to England and Italy (1829-1832), which was the focus of the 2018 Exhibition *Thomas Cole's Journey* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and The National Gallery in London.

Catskill, NY – June 10, 2019 – The Thomas Cole National Historic Site announced today the discovery of new decorative painting, long hidden by subsequent layers of modern paint, on the walls of a first-floor room in the artist's home. The discovery offers new insight into Cole's use of his home to display and promote his art, an innovation in the evolution of American art. This discovery brings the total number of hand-painted borders to four, following the discovery of the three borders announced by Senator Chuck Schumer in 2015. However, this latest discovery alters our understanding of how Cole used the formal rooms of his 1815 home.

The section of decorative painting that has been revealed is about 24 inches long; the full extent of the painting must still be uncovered through meticulous preservation work. The painted area consists of a frieze of red-and-black Pompeii-influenced design elements on a light red wall. The discovery is significant in several respects:

Red-and-black Pompeiiian designs and color schemes were associated in the 1830s with the display of art, suggesting that the room served as Cole's art gallery. The room is located on the first floor between the larger East and West Parlors, the walls of which were also decorated by Cole. Notably, the new painted border decorated a room that held no books in the 20th century but was referred to by Cole's descendants as the "book-less library." An early inventory of the house's contents confirms that the room originally served as a library, the room most often used to display art.

The discovery reveals a new dimension to the influence on British-born Cole of his landmark return visit to England (1829-31) and his trip to Italy (1831-1832), both the focus of the 2018 exhibition *Thomas Cole's Journey* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and subsequently at The National Gallery in London. That exhibition presented, as The Metropolitan Museum describes it, "Seminal works created by the artist in the years immediately after his return to New York, between 1832 and 1837—

notably *The Oxbow* and *The Course of Empire*— ... as a culminating creative response to his complex experiences of British art and society and of Italian history and landscape.” The new discovery reveals the importance of that journey on Cole’s presentation of his art and on his emerging interest in interior design and architecture. He would go on to design the Ohio Statehouse, among other buildings.

Cole was deeply influenced by interiors that he saw in London, at a time when English decorative arts were highly influenced by Roman antiquity. Before London’s major art museums existed, English poet and art collector Samuel Rogers famously exhibited his extraordinary collection of art in his home, welcoming guests to art-filled rooms that featured Pompeiian design. Historical records show that Cole visited Rogers’ house.

Cole also visited the residence of renowned artist J.M.W. Turner in London. There, Turner displayed his own work—which was for sale—in a gallery of his own design. Here, Cole saw new reason for an artist to incorporate his art into his own environment. In 1832, Cole visited Pompeii, where he saw the characteristic Pompeiian red-and-black decorations, which came to be associated with Western libraries and the display of art.

“The influence of London and Italy on Cole’s interior design is clear,” said Jean Dunbar, historic interiors expert. “He could not have seen this in New York. He returned from his journey to create a gorgeous English house interior – with its own gallery and the proper colors and decoration to display art.”

Cole’s striking interior design of the first-floor rooms and his wall decoration create an intentionally dynamic environment for visitors to experience his paintings. Cole created a 360-degree immersive experience for the presentation of his art.

Cole’s creation of this ensemble of rooms on the first floor of his home signaled the start of his passionate interest in architecture. He had trained as a designer of surfaces and was now working in three dimensions. He subsequently advertised his services as an architect.

This new discovery of a painted Pompeiian library follows earlier revelations of decorative painting on the walls of the East and West Parlors and an adjacent pantry by renowned finishes expert Matthew J. Mosca. It was a dramatic surprise when Mosca, working with historic interiors expert Jean Dunbar, made the first discovery in October 2014. Expecting to find a solid color, he instead uncovered hand-painted details. Acclaimed conservator Margaret Saliske then painstakingly revealed the original painting in the East and West Parlors, including folds of drapery and geometric elements, such as a Roman meander. The designs in the East and West Parlors are not as strongly tied to the display of art as the new Pompeiian design. The painting continues around the entire perimeter of each room as a frieze. Cole executed this work sometime after his marriage in late 1836. Analysis of documents and records by Dunbar has established that Cole redecorated the Parlors with new carpeting, furnishings, and painted finishes.

“The discovery of another painted border in the Main House is thrilling! With each new discovery, our understanding of the importance of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site to the evolution of American art continues to grow. Thomas Cole’s home provides the only surviving example of his interior designs, as well as a new way of understanding this artist we thought we knew,” said Elizabeth B. Jacks, Executive Director of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site.

“With the discovery of the Pompeiian library, Thomas Cole’s decoration of his home suddenly emerges as an artistic whole, rather than a group of rooms—with a gallery at its heart,” said historic interiors expert Jean Dunbar. “Though English and Roman rooms inspired it, this was more than simply a place to market paintings or impress visitors. While some Americans displayed art at home, Cole integrated art with décor to create an immersive imaginative experience for family, friends, and visitors. Like Cole’s painting, the fusion felt both cosmopolitan and distinctively American.”

As of 2019, the decorative painting in the East and West Parlors has been uncovered and stabilized and has been restored in the West Parlor with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Gerry Charitable Trust. The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is now seeking funding to uncover, stabilize, and restore the newly discovered frieze and complete the restoration in the East Parlor.

Ongoing Exhibitions in the Thomas Cole Site’s 1815 Main House

- + *The Art of Emily Cole* (through July 28), the first solo exhibition dedicated to Thomas Cole’s daughter, Emily Cole, revealing her exquisitely painted botanicals.
- + *The Parlors*, a kaleidoscopic immersive experience with the artist’s own decorative painting on the walls and multimedia installations that convey his passionate concern for the environment.
- + *Mind Upon Nature: Thomas Cole’s Creative Process*, an exhibition featuring Cole’s original paintings, sketches, palettes, and other unique objects.

Ongoing Exhibition in the Thomas Cole-designed New Studio

- + *Thomas Cole’s Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek* (through November 3), an exhibition exploring, for the first time as a series, Cole’s iconic Catskill Creek landscapes, which were painted from 1827 to 1845 and are the most sustained sequence of landscapes he ever made.

Visitor Information

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is open Tuesday through Sunday from June to November 3. Hours vary by season. For details see: www.thomascole.org/visit. Keep in touch on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter at @thomascolesite.

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is an international destination presenting the original home and studios of Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School of painting, the nation’s first major art movement. Located on 6 acres in the Hudson

Valley, the site includes the 1815 Main House; Cole's 1839 Old Studio; the recently reconstructed New Studio building; and panoramic views of the Catskill Mountains. It is a National Historic Landmark and an affiliated area of the National Park System. The Thomas Cole Site's activities include guided and self-guided tours, special exhibitions of both 19th-century and contemporary art, printed publications, lectures, extensive online programs, activities for school groups, the Cole Fellowship program, free community events, and innovative public programs such as the Hudson River School Art Trail—a map and website that enable people to visit the places in nature that Cole painted – and the Hudson River Skywalk – a new walkway connecting the Thomas Cole Site with Frederic Church's Olana over the Hudson River. The goal of all programs at the Thomas Cole Site is to enable visitors to find meaning and inspiration in Thomas Cole's life and work. The themes that Cole explored in his art and writings—such as landscape preservation and our conception of nature as a restorative power—are both historic and timely, providing the opportunity to connect to audiences with insights that are highly relevant to their own lives.