

THOMAS COLE
NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

GUIDE BOOK

THOMAS COLE NATIONAL
HISTORIC
SITE



WELCOME

Welcome to the Thomas Cole National Historic Site – the home and studios where the artist and early environmentalist Thomas Cole (1801-1848) lived and worked from 1836 until his death in 1848.

Thomas perceived landscapes in the United States as places of natural beauty to be treasured rather than exploited. He advocated for the preservation of the landscape through his art and writing, and his iconic landscape paintings inspired the first major art movement of the United States, now known as the Hudson River School.

We encourage you to use this guide as a resource for exploring all three buildings on the Site: the New Studio, the Old Studio, and the Main House.

OBJECTS TO TOUCH, CHAIRS TO SIT IN:

Inside each space, there are both historic objects and reproduction items. While the historic objects should not be touched, the reproduction items can be! Look for **green dots** ● – these are items we encourage you to touch. Please handle **only the items with green dots**, for even the slightest oils from our hands will harm historic objects.

-Thomas Cole Site Staff



Furthermore:
a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund

This project is made possible by
Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund

Created by: Heather Paroubek and Issy Bohling

FIRST STOP

Exit the Visitor Center and take the path on your right to the New Studio. Or, you may visit spaces in any order you wish!

EXHIBITIONS

For information on this year's exhibitions, use the QR code or visit <https://thomascole.org/exhibitions>

Each year the Thomas Cole National Historic Site invites a guest curator to bring a new perspective to Thomas Cole's work by creating a new exhibition in Thomas Cole's reconstructed New Studio. The exhibitions bring together artwork from museums and private collections across the country.



OPEN HOUSE: Contemporary Art in Conversation with Cole is an annual series of curated contemporary artist installations located within, and in response to, the historic home and studios of artist Thomas Cole. Operating from the concept that all art is contemporary, the program activates conversations between artists across centuries. Exhibitions and artworks have ranged from those that literally reference Thomas's iconic works to those that expand on issues and themes relevant to him, including art, landscape, history, and balancing the built and natural worlds. *OPEN HOUSE* projects shed light on the connections between nineteenth century American art and our contemporary moment.

Mind Upon Nature: Thomas Cole's Creative Process is an exhibition in the Main House featuring original Thomas Cole paintings, sketches, and artifacts. This exhibition is refreshed annually with objects from the museum collection and works on long-term loan.

Cole's NEW STUDIO

The family of Maria Bartow (1813-1884), who married Thomas Cole, owned the majority of the property that now bears the artists name, but Thomas purchased the plot of land for this building and designed what he called his "New Studio." It was built in 1846 and Thomas worked there until his death in 1848. The original building was torn down in 1973 before the site became a museum. We reconstructed it in 2015 with a state-of-the-art museum gallery inside.

When Thomas died suddenly at the age of 47, he left behind a studio filled with artwork and boundless unfulfilled potential. Maria preserved the space as he left it and welcomed other artists to visit. In this way, his art and ideas continued to inspire and influence the next generation of artists and the evolution of art in the United States.

For more, use the QR code or visit thomascollection.org/new-studio

I am now sitting in my New Studio which is about completed though the walls are not quite dry. I have promised myself much enjoyment in it and great success in the prosecution of my Art, but I ought ever to bear in mind that 'the day cometh when no man can work.' -Thomas Cole, Journal Entry, Dec 25, 1846

EMILY COLE

Emily Cole (1843-1913) was a professional artist and one of Maria and Thomas's children. Emily used this space as her own studio and exhibition gallery. She was just five years old when her father passed away and grew to share her father's focus on nature in her artistic practice. When you enter the Main House, look for her painted porcelains and watercolors. Emily lived here her whole life and made a living selling her art.



Photo © Peter Aaron Otto / Emily Cole, Untitled (back of sunflower), TC.2002.2.19.27, photo by Peter Aaron Otto



NEXT STOP
Exit the New Studio to explore the grounds.

GROUNDS & PROPERTY

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is on the ancestral lands of the Mohawk and other Haudenosaunee peoples, and the Mohican, Lenape, and other Algonquian-speaking peoples. It was taken from them by a series of treaties and forced displacements in the seventeenth through eighteenth centuries.

A family by the name of Thomson bought property here in 1787. Three Thomson siblings (Thomas, John A., and Catherine) began the establishment of a homestead by 1814. In the years that followed, many people have nurtured this land. During Thomas Cole's residency, (1836-48), the property consisted of 110 acres. A salaried farmer, domestic laborers, and gardeners tended and maintained the plants and animals, and protected the property and structures. Saleable crops were grown (hay, oats, corn, and barley), and a variety of livestock were kept (horses, pigs, goats, oxen, beef cattle and chickens). The main source of income was fruit from the orchards.

Journal entries and letters inform us that Maria's uncle, John A. Thomson (1776-1846), took special care of the trees, while Maria and her sister Harriet Bartow (1808-1904) enjoyed taking care of the flower beds.

If you'd like, borrow a sketchbook from stations around the site and take inspiration from nature just like Thomas Cole, Emily Cole, and many other visitors have done.

For more, use the QR code or visit thomascole.org/grounds



HONEY LOCUST TREE

The large tree with sharp thorns in front of the Main House was planted in 1817, even before Thomas Cole came to live and work here. When you enter the house, look for a small painting from 1868 that shows this same tree.

Trees are like men, differing widely in character. -Thomas Cole, Essay on American Scenery, 1836

GREENING INITIATIVE

As we work to restore and maintain the grounds of this historic site, we are guided by principles of supporting biodiversity, reducing the use of toxic materials, and connecting people to the natural world. Learn more about our work at thomascole.org/greening.

TURN THE PAGE
to learn more about the house and the people that lived and worked here.

MAIN HOUSE

The Main House was constructed in 1815 by a group that very likely included enslaved persons. The 1817 census includes two enslaved persons and two free Black persons as part of the household. The Thomsons enslaved people from at least 1790 until 1817.

Thomas Cole moved into this house after he married into the Thomson family in 1836. During his time here, the number of residents at the property ranged from 11-14, and this included a free Black woman recorded on the 1840 census. This household of people acted as a support system to Thomas, enabling him to produce his artwork and support the household with his earnings.

After John A. Thomson passed away in 1846, ownership of the property passed to Emily Bartow (1804-1881). As a woman, she was only able to own property because she was not married. Thomas Cole never owned the house himself.

For more, use the QR code or visit thomascole.org/main-house



8 THOMAS COLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

*O Cedar Grove! when'er I think to part
From thine all peaceful shades my aching heart
Is like to his who leaves some blessed shore
A weeping exile ne'er to see it more.*
-Thomas Cole, 1834

ARCHITECTURE

The 1815 house is designed in the Federal style (of the period after the American Revolution when a federal system of government was being developed). It is characterized by symmetry, high ceilings, the bald eagle visible in the window over the front door, and features inspired by ancient Greek architecture.

WHO WAS LIVING HERE DURING COLE'S RESIDENCY?

Maria Bartow Cole, Harriet Bartow, Emily C. Bartow, Frances E. Bartow, Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, Theodore A. Cole, Mary B. Cole, Emily Cole, Elizabeth Cole, Sarah Cole, Egbert, David E., Martin, Mary, Benjamin McConkey, Peter, John A. Thomson, Charlotte Thomson, free Black woman recorded (without a name) on the 1840 census (age 55-59), Jonny W., and Mr. Whitbeck. Learn more at thomascole.org/household

NEXT STOP

Walk onto the porch of the Main House.

Photo by Escape Brooklyn

HOUSE + PROPERTY 9

PORCH

Thomas moved to America with his family in 1818 at age seventeen. He grew up in northern England – then the biggest hub for industrialization in the world. There, he saw firsthand how factories and smokestacks took over the countryside of his hometown. In the 1830s, he was alarmed to see a similar transformation taking place here in Catskill.

Thomas first came to this area by traveling up the Hudson River in 1825. He returned often and later made his permanent home here in 1836, upon his marriage to Maria Bartow.

This view of the mountains is one that Thomas painted many times, but this landscape was changing rapidly. A large hotel – the Catskill Mountain House – opened in 1824, drawing crowds of tourists. By 1836, there were over sixty mills, factories, foundries, and leather tanneries stretching west into the mountains. An early railroad crossed through in the 1830s, and hillsides were being clear-cut for the tanning industry.

Inside the house, you will discover Thomas's thoughts on industrial changes to the land.

DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES

The copper-hearted barbarians are cutting all the trees down in the beautiful valley on which I have looked so often with a loving eye. - Thomas Cole to Luman Reed, March 6, 1836

With these immense avenues for trade ... the town of Catskill is destined to increase in wealth and population with great rapidity. -Catskill Association formed for the Purpose of Improving the Town of Catskill, 1837

TURN THE PAGE
to discover some major cultural/ political events going on in Thomas's lifetime.

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

1830

The Book of Mormon, by Joseph Smith, is published

1839

Daguerreotype photographic process is announced

1837

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

1843

A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens, is published

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

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

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

1848

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

1831

Nat Turner leads uprising against slavery

1837

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

1834

First use of US troops to suppress a labor dispute

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

NEXT STOP

Enter the house through the front door.

ENTRY HALL

Maria Bartow (1813-1884) lived here with her sisters, cousin, uncle, and hired laborers. They came to know Thomas Cole when he first rented their small cottage (no longer standing) as a studio space. Maria married Thomas in 1836, at which time he moved in and began to redesign the interiors. He painted decorative borders onto the walls in several rooms, and selected colors, textiles, and finishes throughout the first floor, many of which have been recently restored or recreated.

Together the couple had five children and shared this home with Maria's family and household staff. Check out the 1840 federal census showing a household of 11 people, reproduced nearby.

FLOOR CLOTH

When Thomas moved in he chose a floor cloth for this room. This floor covering is a piece of cotton canvas that has been hand-painted and coated with layers of varnish. It was a popular feature in the nineteenth century because it was inexpensive and easy to clean. The example here is a recreation of an historic design. Thomas grew up working in the decorative arts and at one time painted floor cloths for his father's business.



DON'T MISS THIS
Thomas wore this top hat because he wanted to present himself as part of the upper class, but always struggled with bringing in enough revenue to support the household.

NEXT STOP

Enter the green parlor to hear from Thomas about his experience of living in Catskill, his ambitions, and his sentiments.

Photo © Peter Aaron Otto

EAST PARLOR

Thomas wrote essays, journals, poems, and letters. Fortunately, many of them survive. Ask a staff member to show you the presentation, created using Thomas's writings and paintings. We invite you to take a seat and listen as he tells his story.

To read the transcription of the audio, scan the QR code or go to thomascole.org/primary-sources

"WILD?"

Thomas often described scenery in the area as "wild," although, indigenous people had inhabited this area for thousands of years, and many were still present up and down the east coast in the early nineteenth century. By depicting American landscapes as uninhabited, or showing solitary indigenous figures, Thomas Cole and other painters and writers contributed to the creation of fictions about American land: that indigenous people were either never here or, if they were, they no longer exist. These myths became legend and served to reinforce the government's intended erasure of indigenous culture, and the histories of the land.



DON'T MISS THIS

The upholstered chair with bookstand and candle holder belonged to Maria's uncle, John A. Thomson. He initiated the building of the house with his brother in 1814 and lived here with his relatives and laborers until his death.

Photo © Peter Aaron Otto

PAINTINGS

All of the paintings on the first floor are reproductions, carefully selected based on what was here in Thomas's time, and for what they tell us about his vision. You will see original paintings on the second floor.

NEXT STOP

Exit this room and turn right to the red room down the hall.

LIBRARY

In Thomas's time, a library was a space dedicated to expanding the mind and likely featured art as well as books. Red and black Pompeian designs and color schemes were associated in the 1830s with the display of art, suggesting that this room served as Cole's art gallery.

THE LATEST STYLE

The wall color and border design that Thomas chose for this room were likely inspired by his trip to the ancient ruins of Pompeii, and from seeing fashionable Pompeian-inspired rooms, and the artist J.M.W. Turner's red-walled gallery during his trip to London.

DON'T MISS THIS

Near the ceiling is the exposed border that Thomas hand-painted nearly two hundred years ago. These original paintings (as well as others on this floor) were hidden beneath many layers of modern paint before they were discovered in 2014 by a paint analyst.

NEXT STOP

Exit this room and turn into the parlor to your right to experience some of the challenges, ideas, and relationships in Thomas's career.

WEST PARLOR

In this room, Thomas and the family visited with patrons, friends, and fellow artists. As such, it was a space full of conversation, where the business of art was conducted, and where Thomas expressed his opinions and philosophy about what landscape art should be.

On tabletops around the room you will find various stories told through letters. These conversations about art and business raise questions that we still grapple with today.

A TEAM EFFORT

Thomas benefitted from having a large extended family that provided support for his growing artistic career. Maria's sister Harriet is known to have shown Thomas's paintings to visitors, and Maria was a savvy advisor on Thomas's negotiations with potential buyers.

DON'T MISS THIS

The wall paint in this room has been made and applied through historically accurate methods. The paint was hand-mixed with oil from natural pigments, and then applied using a brush. The color, here and in other rooms, is true to the time of Thomas's residency.



NEXT STOP
Head upstairs.
Follow the
railing to the
Bedroom.

MARIA & THOMAS'S BEDROOM

Maria and Thomas frequently exchanged affectionate letters during periods of absence while he travelled. His art career required that he have a presence in both New York City and Europe, but he missed his family terribly. Writing in his journal from Rome in 1841, he records:

I am in Rome far away from my dear wife and family....The necessity of renovating my artistic feeling and gathering fresh materials for my profession have dragged me away from home. And my life will be laden with sadness until I see my wife and family again. I have made a great sacrifice of my affections to what I consider to be my duty.

DON'T MISS THIS
Thomas's Trunk accompanied him on his two European trips, carrying everything he might need, from clothes, to sketchbooks to canvases. The trunk was not custom made but purchased at a store in New York. His initials were necessary because Thomas was not traveling in a private carriage and had to be able to identify his trunk among strangers.

I received your letter this morning & hasten to beg you not to let me in any way prevent you from going abroad. If you feel it at all necessary or that it will be advantageous I want you by all means to go. I have thought of it so long that I have quite made up my mind to be perfectly resigned to it. But I don't believe that I ever can again. So if you ever think of going without me do go now. - Maria to Thomas, June 10, 1839

NEXT STOP

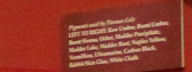
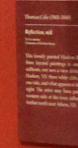
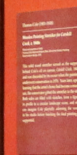
Exit the Bedroom and turn into the room on your left.

MIND UPON NATURE: THOMAS COLE'S CREATIVE PROCESS

With this exhibition about Thomas Cole's creative process, we encourage you to explore the artist's working process and ideas. Here you will find an array of sketches and paintings, the books and objects that inspired him, and the pigments and materials he used to create his paintings. This exhibition is refreshed annually and highlights original objects and artwork from the museum collection and major works on long-term loan.

... the painter must create... he must know what are the forms the clouds take in the morning— when light and rosy— he must know too that there are no two parts in the whole sky alike no two clouds in light shade or colour...

- Thomas Cole, Journal Entry, Feb 22, 1840



THE BARTOW SISTERS

Maria's sisters shared this space as a bedroom. Her eldest sister Emily Bartow was the head of the house after her uncle passed away. Harriet Bartow was a teacher, and the flower garden outside was generally referred to as hers in letters. The youngest sister, Frances Bartow, spent time in the Hartford Retreat for the Insane, then known as the first hospital in the United States to employ "moral treatment" for individuals with mental illnesses. Frances was identified as "insane" on the 1870 census. No personal records of hers have yet been found.

SITTING ROOM

Thomas was troubled by the political climate of the United States, which he suspected was headed toward a major internal conflict. The Jacksonian Era of his time was marked by an authoritarian president, a large number of political parties, expansion westward, reform movements, and the Trail of Tears.

Thomas wanted to make art that mattered and made people think. He had high aspirations about the power of art, and complained that people wanted “things, not thoughts.” In the 1840s he drafted “Lecture on Art,” in which he articulates his thoughts about how art could help to create an improved world.

As you explore the newspaper clippings, letters, and essays on the table and desk, you will hear from Thomas about his ambitions and the political climate of his era.

To read the transcription of the audio, scan the code below or go to thomascole.org/primary-sources



26 THOMAS COLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

DON'T MISS THESE

Sarah Cole was a professional artist, known as one of the first female printmakers in the country. In this room are two of her paintings depicting the English countryside. Sarah also counseled her brother, Thomas, during moments of doubt.



THE DÉCOR

The wallpaper and carpet are historic designs recreated for this space.

NEXT STOP

Head into the adjoining room.

SITTING ROOM 27

HOUSE STUDIO

For a short time before the birth of his first child, Thomas used this room as a studio. Maria was often with him, reading to him while he painted and offering advice. Thomas wrote to Maria, "But how can I paint without you with me to praise or to criticize?" In her journal, Maria recorded: "a volume of Scot in my hand to read to T. who was painting the Sky of his Compagna Scene." (April 6, 1843).

We believe it was here that he painted *View of Schroon Mountain, Essex County, New York, After a Storm*.

Ask a staff member to play the presentation. We invite you to dive into Thomas's creative process by joining him on his journey into the Adirondack mountains.

To read the transcription of the audio, scan the code below or go to thomascole.org/primary-sources



THE CHILDREN'S ROOM

After Maria and Thomas had their first child, this room became the children's bedroom. The couple had five children, four of whom survived into adulthood. Theodore was the eldest, and would go on to become property manager at Olana, Frederic Church's home across the river. Mary and Emily lived the remainder of their lives here. Emily was fascinated with flowers, and like her father was a professional artist. Elizabeth lived for only two days. Thomas Cole, Jr. was born shortly after Cole died in 1848. He became a reverend in nearby Saugerties.

Photo © Peter Aaron Otto

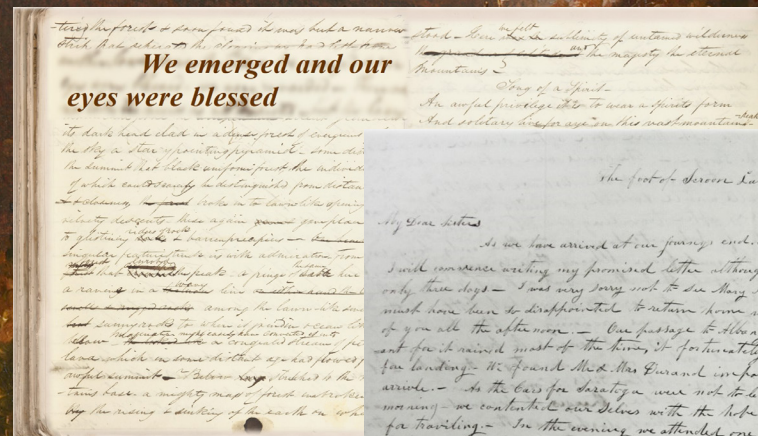
TURN THE PAGE
to dive deeper into
View of Schroon
Mountain.

Creating View of Schroon Mountain

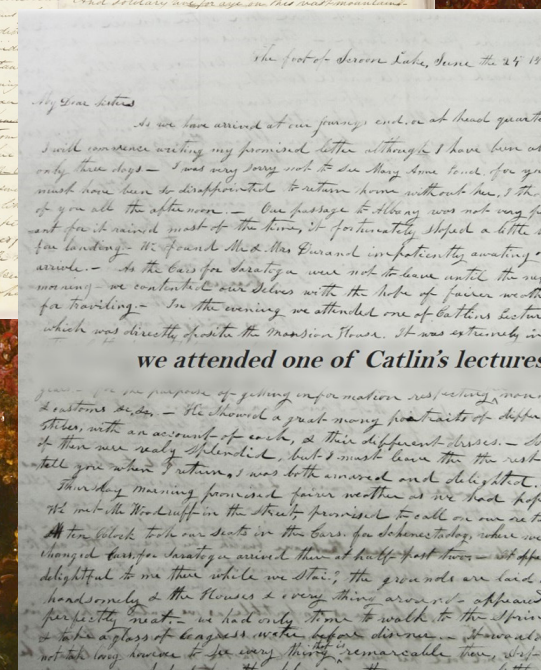
Thomas placed several indigenous figures (two in the foreground, and others in the distance), into this painting - a departure from his more common inclusion of solitary figures.

In July of 1837 the Coles travelled to Schroon Lake in the Adirondacks where Thomas made sketches that he later used to complete this painting. On their way they stopped in Albany to see the artist George Catlin and his "Indian Gallery" - a touring exhibition of hundreds of paintings depicting figures and customs of indigenous people, whose aggressive removal was legally sanctioned by President Jackson's "Indian Removal Act" of 1830.

The following year, when Thomas finished this painting, one of the culminating events of the Indian Removal Act occurred. The U.S. government sent troops to violently evict all indigenous nations remaining east of the Mississippi River - particularly the Cherokee. They were forced on a deadly 1,200 mile walk west. Families were separated, and many died from sickness or starvation. It came to be known as the "Trail of Tears."



DON'T MISS THIS
Maria and Thomas's written recollections of their trip to the Adirondacks enabled us to retrace their steps. Check out the reproductions of those writings nearby.



Lumber Industry
Thomas described dashing through the woods and finding "mutilated trees" and "clearings." Many trees in this area were cut down for the lumber industry, and it was because of such clearings that he was able to find this view.

NEXT STOP
Leave the Main House and walk back to the Visitor Center in the white barn to enter Thomas's studio where he painted for seven years.

COLE'S OLD STUDIO

This studio is where Thomas painted many of his major works, including *The Voyage of Life*, a series of four paintings that explore the stages of life. A reproduction of one of them, *Childhood*, is displayed on his original easel. Thomas worked here until 1846, at which time he moved into his "New Studio."

When Thomas died of pleurisy in 1848 at age forty-seven, he left behind a young family. Maria was pregnant with their fifth child, and his children were all under the age of ten. His newly constructed studio ("New Studio") was full of half-finished paintings. Through his mentorship and ideas, Thomas inspired generations of artists including Frederic Church, Susie Barstow, Asher B. Durand, and Sanford Gifford, who would collectively become known as the Hudson River School painters.

For more, use the QR code or visit thomascole.org/old-studio



DON'T MISS THIS

The size of Thomas's original easel helps put into perspective the scale at which he was working, and why he built a bigger space for himself in his New Studio.

NARRATIVE LANDSCAPES

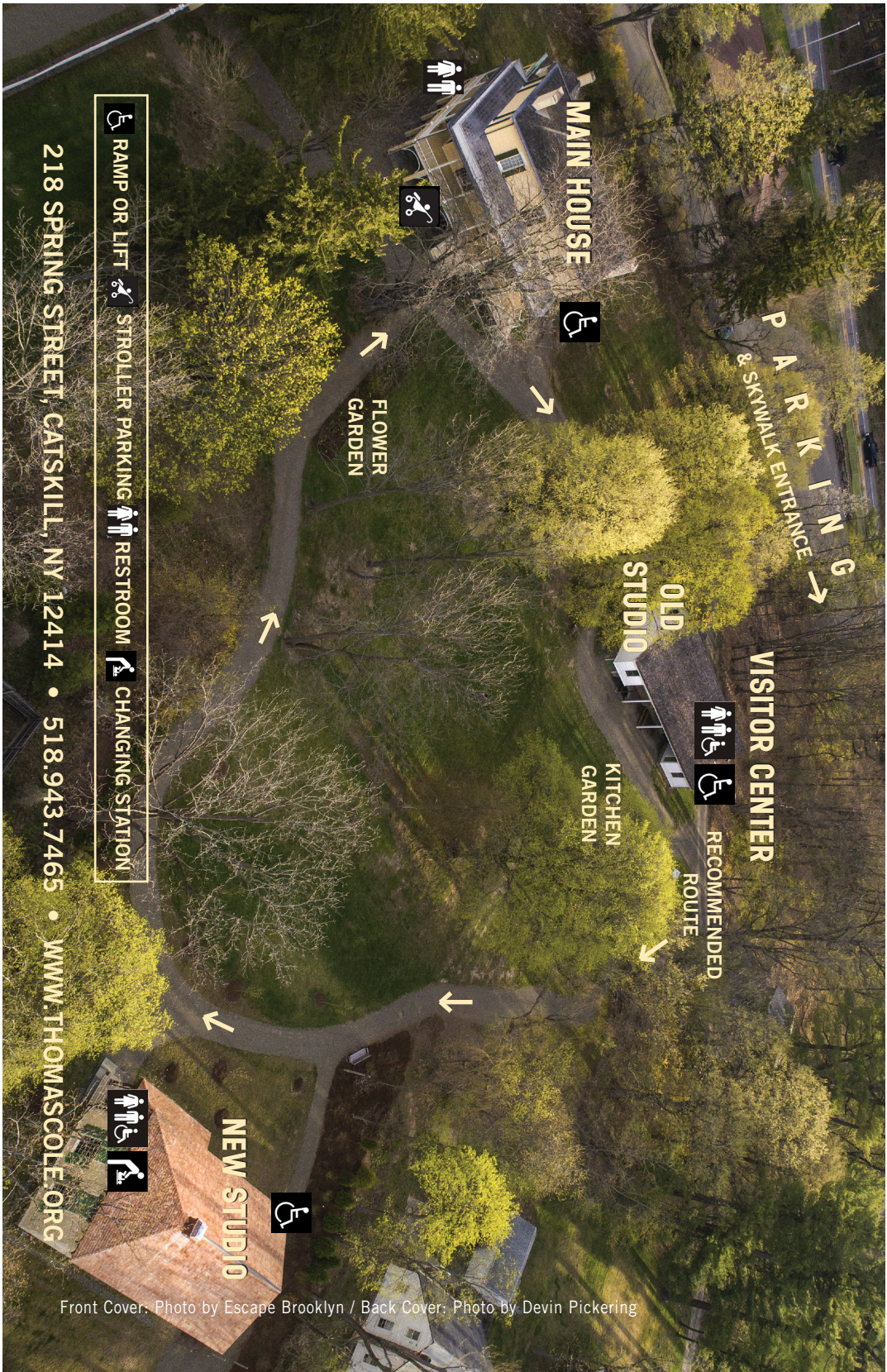
The *Voyage of Life* series illustrates Thomas's wish to create paintings that combine landscape with narrative elements to convey ideas about humanity – what he termed a "higher style of landscape."

NEXT STOP

Return to the Visitor Center to browse our selection of books and other Thomas Cole-inspired items. If you're looking for nearby walking trails, places to grab lunch in the village, or even Thomas's burial site, we can help.

Mr. Thomson has lately erected a sort of Store-house + has let me have part of it for a temporary painting room. It answers pretty well – is somewhat larger than my old one and being removed from the noise and bustle of the house, is really charming. [...]
I am engaged upon my great series.

- Thomas to Asher Durand, December 18, 1839



PARKING
& SKYWALK ENTRANCE →

VISITOR CENTER

RECOMMENDED
ROUTE

MAIN HOUSE

FLOWER
GARDEN

OLD
STUDIO

KITCHEN
GARDEN

NEW STUDIO

♿ RAMP OR LIFT ♿ STROLLER PARKING ♿ RESTROOM ♿ CHANGING STATION

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