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Thomas Cole Site Opens Exhibition “Emily Cole & Valerie Hegarty: Life Cycles”

A Visual Dialogue Between Two Craft-Based Women Artists Across Centuries

Catskill, NY – March 17, 2026 – The Thomas Cole National Historic Site announced today the opening of a new spotlight exhibition titled “Emily Cole & Valerie Hegarty: Life Cycles” – running through December. The exhibition presents a visual dialogue between two craft-based women artists across three centuries: 19th-century artist Emily Cole, daughter of Thomas Cole, and 21st-century artist Valerie Hegarty. The exhibition takes place in the Sitting Room Gallery of the 1815 Main House of the Thomas Cole Site.

“I identify with Emily Cole, a female artist who ran her own business using craft-based work to explore life cycles in contrast to the more revered artistry of her father’s oil paintings,” said Valerie Hegarty. “Like her, I don’t believe in a hierarchy of artist methods and materials. I look for powerful expression in whatever media seem most appropriate to the subject. Emily Cole painted flowers not in a decorative way but in a naturalistic way – her close-up renderings suggesting a one-on-one relationship with the flower as opposed to her father’s more ‘God’s eye view’ of the landscape. In doing so, she positions humans and nature as equals. Although still lifes of flowers were considered a proper subject for women at the time, wildflowers have the subversive power to subsume a painting, crack a foundation, and plant seeds for new generations. Emily Cole makes the cycles of life come to life, even as they anticipate decline.”



Figure 1: Emily Cole (1843-1913), *Untitled (Plate with Blackberries)*, ca. 1910, painted porcelain, 2¼ x 11 in., Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Gift of Edith Cole Silberstein, TC.2002.3

The exhibition juxtaposes more than 30 works of painted porcelain and works on paper by Emily Cole with a mixed-media installation by Valerie Hegarty titled “Emily Cole and Her Father, My Mother and Me (Thomas Cole’s View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow, Blackberries, Wild Flowers, Robins, Nest, and Wallpaper).” The work by Valerie Hegarty was made specifically for the Thomas Cole Site in 2025 and explores the connection between Thomas Cole and Emily Cole and their fascination with cycles of life, while considering Hegarty’s own relationship with her mother, who is now experiencing dementia and who inspired her craft-related artistry. Even across centuries, those dynamics remain powerfully relevant.

The work by Hegarty, now installed in the gallery that was once Emily Cole's childhood bedroom, draws upon and reflects Thomas Cole's iconic painting *The Oxbow*, Emily Cole's painted flora, and decorations from Hegarty's own childhood home.

"I wanted to create a metaphoric collaboration between Emily Cole and her father to complicate the layers of history, fabrication, and recreation in this historic home. By embedding layers of wallpaper referencing rooms from my childhood home, I can insert myself and my mother within the historic narrative. In my installation, three-dimensional renderings of the flowers from Emily Cole's watercolors and ceramics break through her father's painting *The Oxbow*. Behind the painting, the wallpaper of the sitting room appears to push away from the wall, revealing a layer of wall with pink wallpaper—the color of my childhood bedroom—behind which is a fragment of wall with floral wallpaper—the wallpaper that was in my mother's bedroom when I was a child. I wanted to push forward three generations of women's artistic labor that is historically undervalued, into one moment of the present and show a chain of inspiration and artistic influence spanning nearly 200 years from Emily Cole and her father to my mother and me. Within the ruins of this excavation, a bird feeds its chicks in the nest, suggesting the site as a source of inspiration for continuing generations."



Figure 2: Valerie Hegarty at the Thomas Cole Site with "Emily Cole and Her Father, My Mother and Me (Thomas Cole's View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow, Blackberries, Wild Flowers, Robins, Nest, and Wallpaper)," Collection of Richard T. Sharp.

Emily Cole (1843-1913) was the daughter of transformational artist Thomas Cole (1801-1848) and created her own successful artistic career. While Emily was only five years old when her father died, she grew up within 19th-century artistic circles. She became an esteemed professional artist in her own right and created a striking body of dynamic botanicals on porcelain and watercolors on paper, depicting flowers and plants at or near her Hudson Valley home that she could observe first-hand across seasonal cycles. While many china painters of the period depicted botanicals in full bloom, Emily painted flora in all stages of life from expectant bud to wilting stems. In doing so, she explored nature close-up in contrast to her father's legendary broad vistas, while continuing his legacy of depicting cycles of life. Where he focused on oil painting, however, she excelled at painting on porcelain.

An active artist for more than 40 years, Emily Cole exhibited and sold her art in New York City and the Hudson Valley, received critical acclaim, traveled internationally, studied at the National Academy of Design, and was a founding member in 1892 of the New York Society of Ceramic Arts, an organization that advocated for decorated ceramics to be exhibited in museum galleries. She had a kiln on the Catskill property to fire her painted

porcelain as well as the work of other china painters. The Thomas Cole Site holds the largest-known collection of Emily Cole's surviving artwork.

Valerie Hegarty is a New York City-based artist who makes paintings, sculptures, and installations that explore issues of memory, place, and history. She relishes the materiality of her process, incorporating a range of materials such as canvas, wood, Foamcore, paper mache, epoxy, and ceramics. Her large-scale installation work incorporates a process she calls "reverse archeology" in which layers of painted paper are adhered to the walls and floors of the gallery and then scraped back to create a material memory of a space. Although representational, her works contain surprising juxtapositions and uncanny transformations where materials and meanings are constantly shifting.

Valerie has had solo exhibitions at the Malin Gallery, Nicelle Beauchene, NY; Marlborough Gallery Chelsea; Locust Projects, Miami; Museum 52, London; The MCA in Chicago; and Guild & Greyskul, NY, among others, including a commission for a public sculpture on the High Line, NY and a show of site-specific installations in The Brooklyn Museum's period rooms. She has been awarded numerous grants through foundations such as the Colene Brown Art Prize, The Adolph Gottlieb Foundation, The Pollock Krasner Foundation (thrice), The New York Foundation for the Arts (twice), the Rema Hort Mann Foundation, the Tiffany Foundation, and Campari NY. She received an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a BFA from San Francisco's Academy of Art College, and a BA from Middlebury College, VT.

"Valerie Hegarty's artistry reveals an entirely new way of considering the artistry of Emily Cole," said Maura O'Shea, Executive Director of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. "Separated by centuries, their work comes together in this exhibition to share their love of nature and natural life, their fascination with the qualities of ceramics and craft, and their own experiences with generational influences. It's a truly illuminating mix."

"The artistic legacy of Emily Cole is a critical chapter in the story of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, one that puts the museum on the map of American craft traditions," said Amanda Malmstrom, Associate Curator of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. "We are overflowing with gratitude to Valerie Hegarty for illuminating Emily's life and work with such care, depth, and exuberance. Together, the work of Emily Cole and Valerie Hegarty prove that, from artistic, allegorical, and ecological perspectives, flowers truly pack a punch!"

The exhibition is made possible by the Felicia Fund.

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Council on the Arts

Thomas Cole National Historic Site

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site showcases the life and work of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), whose American landscape painting defines an enduring visual identity for the nation. Inspired by the natural beauty that surrounds the site, Cole founded the influential Hudson River School art movement. The site's six-acre campus in Catskill, NY, includes Cole's home and two studio buildings; the Cole Center, a new visitor center designed by Architectural Digest 100 Stephen Shadley; gardens and grounds with panoramic views of the Catskill Mountains; and a scenic walkway over the Hudson River connecting the site with Olana, the historic home of artist and Cole student Frederic Church. The Thomas Cole Site hosts exhibitions as well as art-making activities and innovative school and public programs. Visitors experience first-hand the themes that Cole explored, from the power of art to landscape preservation to the restorative properties of nature. The Thomas Cole Site is a National Historic Landmark and an affiliated area of the National Park System, and it operates as an independent 501c3 nonprofit organization.

Visitor Information

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is open year-round, and hours vary by season. For details see: thomascole.org/visit. The grounds are open every day for free from dawn to dusk. Keep in touch on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube at [@thomascolesite](https://www.instagram.com/thomascolesite).