

PRE-VISIT PACKET

HOW WE TEACH:

In our work with students, we focus on Thomas Cole's work as an artist, writer, and early environmentalist. We believe that concentrating on these three identities helps students understand that myriad worldviews, tools, and identities are useful in understanding, communicating in, and creating change in the world.

Art-making and engaging in conversations about art help to develop important skills (like collaboration, creativity, visual literacy) that can be used across all disciplines. Honing our skills as artists, writers, and environmentalists allow us to become better thinkers, communicators, observers, collaborators, and makers of change. We believe that memorizing dates and names is less useful than understanding history and our world today through discussion and creation; for students, the experience of seeing, making, and talking about art will aid them for the rest of their lives, in and out of school.

Finally, we use Thomas Cole's artwork as a jumping off point to have complex conversations about issues affecting our world today. When students visit our site, through discussion of Thomas Cole's work, studios, and home, we ask them to consider questions like:

- How is the landscape changing?
- What does progress mean? How have definitions of "progress" changed over time?
- How do humans impact their environment?
- How do we make art from our experiences in nature? How can we use art to effect change?
- How do we use many tools and modes of communication to express our ideas?

PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS FOR VIEWING AND DISCUSSING ART:

We believe that the most important learning experiences come from discussion, not lecture. On your tour, our museum educators will provide information about Thomas Cole and his house, family, and work, but will also engage students in discussion about what they see. We use the inquiry-based teaching method Visual Thinking Strategies to encourage students to find meaning in art without being told what to see or what something means.

Get your students in the habit of finding meaning in art and discussing their thoughts about art as a group by practicing Visual Thinking Strategies in your classroom. Visual Thinking Strategies includes these central three questions that help move students towards self-sufficient art viewing and meaning-finding:

- What do you see?
- What makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Supplementary questions:

- If you were inside this painting, what would you hear, smell, feel on your skin, or taste?
- What do you think the artist was thinking about when he or she made this?
- Why do you think the artist chose to include x, y, or z?
- What emotions does this artwork bring up for you?

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PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: PRACTICE DISCUSSING THOMAS COLE ARTWORK

Go to explorethomascole.org to look at Thomas Cole paintings and zoom in on details. Project this painting on a smartboard or LCD projector and lead students in an open discussion about what they see. Some great works to begin with are *The Oxbow*, arguably Thomas Cole's most famous work, any of his Catskill Creek paintings, or his *The Course of Empire* or *Voyage of Life* Series.



View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow, Thomas Cole, 1836

ASK STUDENTS ABOUT PAINTINGS:

- What do you see?
- What makes you say that?
- What more can you find?
- Why is one half of the painting different from the other (of *The Oxbow*)?
- How does this painting make you feel?



View on the Catskill—Early Autumn, Thomas Cole, 1836-1837

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VOCABULARY:

We do not expect students to know everything about Thomas Cole, his life, or work when they arrive. Nor do we expect them to remember dates, names, or obscure terms. We have found, however, that having some familiarity with what they will be seeing and learning before they arrive helps create a more meaningful experience for students. If you think it will aid your students, feel free to go over some of these key terms before arriving.

THOMAS COLE:

Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was a British-born American artist who founded the Hudson River School of art, a group of artists who painted American wilderness. We call Thomas Cole the father of American art because, while there were artists creating art in the United States before Thomas Cole, he was the first person to introduce a style of art that celebrated American landscapes, and that was entirely unique to this country. Thomas Cole was born in 1801 in Northwestern England and emigrated with his family to the United States in 1818, ultimately settling in Catskill, New York in 1836.

HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL:

In the early 1800s when it was still a new nation, many in the United States were searching for a style of art that they could call their own – something uniquely American. Thomas Cole became the leader of an informal alliance of landscape artists now known as the Hudson River School, who created this style of art—landscape painting that celebrated American scenery. The artists of the Hudson River School were united by their belief that their art might lead to spiritual renewal and contribute to the formation of a uniquely American national culture. Their work established a notion of America as a new Eden, a concept that still resonates with artists, environmentalists, and landscape enthusiasts to this day.

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION:

The Industrial Revolution was a period in the 1700s and 1800s in which rural farming communities quickly became industrial and urban. This was a time during which the landscape changed dramatically, as people stopped making things by hand and instead relied on machinery and factories to produce clothing, tools, building supplies and much more. Thomas Cole lived during the Industrial Revolution and was deeply worried about how industry was changing the environment, and created art and writing that decried these changes.

PRE-VISIT BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITY:

As he watched the landscapes he loved change during the Industrial Revolution, Thomas Cole's artwork and writing became focused on how humans impact the environment. We ask students to consider: How is the landscape changing today? Is there something you do, see, or experience that you hope will be around for future generations?

Ask students: If you were to create a piece of art or writing that answered the question, "How is the American landscape changing?" what would you include? How would you express your feelings? Ask them to generate a few ideas by drawing, writing, or in group discussion.