



EXPLORE AT YOUR OWN PACE GUIDE

THOMAS COLE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



WELCOME

Welcome to the Thomas Cole National Historic Site—the home and studios where the artist Thomas Cole lived and worked from 1836 until his death in 1848.

Cole pictured the American landscape in a new way—as a place of wild, natural beauty—a place to be treasured. His paintings helped define what is American about America, and they continue to influence how we understand the country today.

We encourage you to use this guide as a resource so you may explore the grounds and see all three historic buildings on site: the New Studio, the Old Studio, and the Main House.

—THOMAS COLE STAFF



Council on
the Arts

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   @thomascolesite

FIRST STOP

Exit the Visitor Center and follow the path to the right toward the New Studio building. Enjoy the outside architectural features, and the special exhibition inside. If you prefer, feel free to visit the Main House as your first stop. You may visit the buildings in any order you like!

Cole's NEW STUDIO

This is the one building on the property that Cole both designed and owned. He completed this new studio for himself in 1846, and worked here for the last year of his life. Designed in the Italianate style, the building has high ceilings and large two-story windows, supplying the abundant natural light that was so important for an artist's workspace.

On Christmas Day of 1846, Cole wrote in his journal:

"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.'"

THE BUILDING

By 1973, before the site became a museum, the New Studio was in terrible condition and was torn down. In 2015, the Thomas Cole National Historic Site completed a reconstruction of the building in the exact footprint of the original, with the exterior true to Cole's original design. Inside we created a state-of-the-art gallery for exhibitions that explore the legacy of Thomas Cole.

NEXT STOP

Exit the New Studio. Feel free to explore the grounds as you make your way to the Main House.

Photo © Peter Aaron Otto

GROUNDS

Several family members found immense pleasure in spending time on these grounds. Evidenced by journal entries and letters, we know that Maria Cole's uncle, John Alexander Thompson, loved to take care of the plants and trees on site, and that her sister, Harriet, held domain over the flower beds. Thomas and Maria's daughter Emily Cole was also a keen observer of nature and her extensive painted botanicals on paper and porcelain remain in our collections. Though Cole was not a gardener himself, he collected plant samples and brought seeds back with him from his travels.



200-YEAR OLD TREE

The large tree with sharp thorns is the very same one that Cole saw each day. It is the only one to remain from the original twelve honey-locust trees planted in 1817. When you enter the house, look for a small painting from 1868 that shows this same tree.

NEXT STOP

Walk onto the porch of the Main House. The best view is toward the end of the porch, facing the mountains.

Photo © Peter Aaron/Otto / Emily Cole, hand painted image porcelain, circa 1910 Thomas Cole National Historic site, Gift of Edith Cole Silberstein, 10/2002

PORCH

Cole 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. Young Cole saw first-hand how factories and smokestacks took over the countryside of his hometown, so he was especially alarmed to see the same transformation taking place here in Catskill in the 1830s.

Cole first came to this area by traveling up the Hudson River by boat in 1825, when he fell in love with the surrounding landscape. He returned nearly every summer and made his permanent home here in 1836.

This view of the mountains is one that Cole painted many times. But even then, this landscape was changing significantly. A

large hotel, the Catskill Mountain House, opened in 1824 drawing in crowds of tourists, and by 1836 there were over sixty mills, factories, and tanneries stretching west into the mountains.

A railroad built in 1836 brought pollution, noise, and social and environmental changes that would dramatically alter the land, and hillsides were being clear-cut for the leather tanning industry. Cole reacted strongly toward these changes through his writing and his paintings.

Inside the house you'll hear about Cole's thoughts on development through his own words and artworks. The push and pull between preservation and development was an emotionally charged issue then, just as now, and we still struggle with how to preserve natural beauty in an increasingly industrialized world.

EDITING THE LANDSCAPE

For years the view of the mountains from this porch was interrupted by phone and electric wires. Like Cole, the Site staff decided to “edit” this sign of industry out of the view, and embarked on the long process of burying the wires.

NEXT STOP

Enter the house through the front door.

Cole's Re-Decorated ENTRY HALL

Thomas Cole began working in Catskill regularly, and it was here that he fell in love with Maria, a young woman who lived in this house. They married here in 1836, at which time Thomas moved into the house. Together they had five children, and shared this home with Maria's sisters and uncle who owned the property.

Upon moving in, Cole got right to work and redesigned the interiors. He painted decorative borders onto the walls in both parlors, and selected the colors, textiles, and finishes you see throughout the first floor, all of which have been recently restored and recreated.

NEXT STOP

Enter the green parlor opposite the staircase to hear from Cole about his experience of living in Catskill, his ambitions, and his sentiments—all through his own words and artworks.

The brightly colored floor cloth beneath your feet is a piece of cotton canvas that has been hand-painted by an artist, and coated with layers of varnish. This was a popular decorative fixture in the 1800s, and we know Cole installed a floor cloth when he moved into the house. Cole grew up working in the decorative arts and at one time painted floor cloths himself.

EAST PARLOR

Cole kept journals and regularly wrote letters; it is our good fortune that many of them still survive. Through his writings and paintings, we are able to get a sense of the real Thomas Cole and the things that inspired him. Ask the guide nearby to show you the presentation. We invite you to take a seat and listen as Cole tells his own story.

THESE PAINTINGS ARE REPRODUCTIONS

These rooms were full of Cole's paintings during his lifetime, but the originals now reside in major museums all over the world. We decided that it was important to present these rooms as closely as possible to their original appearance, and at the same time tell Cole's story through his own work. Therefore, all of the paintings on the first floor are reproductions, carefully selected because of what they tell us about Cole's vision.

Photo © Peter Aaron/Otto

NEXT STOP

Enter the parlor across the hall to experience some of the challenges, ideas, and relationships in Cole's career.

WEST PARLOR

Cole and the family received many patrons, friends, and fellow artists in this room. As such, it was a space full of conversation, where Cole expressed his opinions and philosophy about what landscape art should be.

Take a few minutes to explore the room. Look for large white pieces of paper on tabletops. As you approach them, you will activate a story told through the original letters between Cole and his patrons. Many of these conversations (and even arguments!) about art and landscape raise questions and issues that we still grapple with today.

DÉCOR

Up near the ceiling is the exposed border Cole hand painted nearly two hundred years ago. This original painting by Cole was hidden beneath many layers of modern paint, before it was discovered in 2014 when a paint analyst removed the layers to determine the wall colors during Cole's time. The carpet is a recreation of the original, based on a surviving fragment that was discovered on Cole's painting chair.

Photo © Peter Aaron/Otto

NEXT STOP

Head upstairs to explore the family's more private rooms of the house.

SECOND FLOOR LANDING

Downstairs you heard from Cole about nature, his greatest inspiration. You saw the compromises and challenges inherent in being an artist through the sometimes difficult conversations he had with patrons. Upstairs, you can explore other things within Cole's life that inspired him deeply: family, music, color, architecture, literature, travel to other parts of the world, and more.

NEXT STOP

Enter the room
to your right.

SITTING ROOM

Cole was more than a painter. He was a poet, writer, and architect, and was fascinated with literature and music.

Beside the window sits his drafting desk, overlooking the Catskills. From here we see a view Cole painted many times and saw every day. It is at this desk where we imagine him writing letters, essays, journal entries, and drafting architectural designs for buildings he realized, including the New Studio across the lawn.



Ask the guide to tell you about the paintings in this room—many of which explore stages of life or civilizations.



Cole's concern for America's disappearing landscapes is manifest in his journals, letters, poems, and in his "Essay on American Scenery"—a published lecture he delivered in both New York City and Catskill.

In this spirit of writing, we invite you to sit and share your thoughts.

NEXT STOP

Head into the adjoining Children's Room.



Flip through a
Cole Family scrapbook
nearby to explore
further.

Cole and Maria 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 estate across the river. Mary and Emily lived the remainder of their lives here, unmarried. Emily was fascinated with flowers, and like her father was an artist. Elizabeth only lived for two days. Thomas Cole, Jr. was born shortly after Cole died in 1848. He became a reverend.

STUDIO AND CHILDREN'S ROOM

This adjoining room is where the children slept. It also served as a temporary painting space for Cole in the two years before he and Maria had children.

NEXT STOP

Exit these rooms
and follow the stairway
railing down the hall
to the Bedroom.

Cole Couple BEDROOM

Cole wrote to his wife, Maria from New York City:

"I was dreaming about you last night so you see if I cannot enjoy your company in the daytime I take advantage of my sleeping hours."
[1837]

Despite his love for his family, the area, and this house, Cole felt it was important to travel for his career and to have a presence in both New York City and Europe. He took extended trips abroad

twice, but missed his family terribly. Writing in his journal from Rome in 1841, he records:

"Last evening was the anniversary of my marriage. Five years have elapsed and 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."

WHY DID COLE FEEL HE MUST TRAVEL?

European artistic training and exposure to the long history of art-making there was considered necessary experience for a budding artist. And indeed, it was important for Cole. By encountering the pictorial landscape traditions of Europe, Cole was able to create a vibrant, new type of landscape: the American sublime.

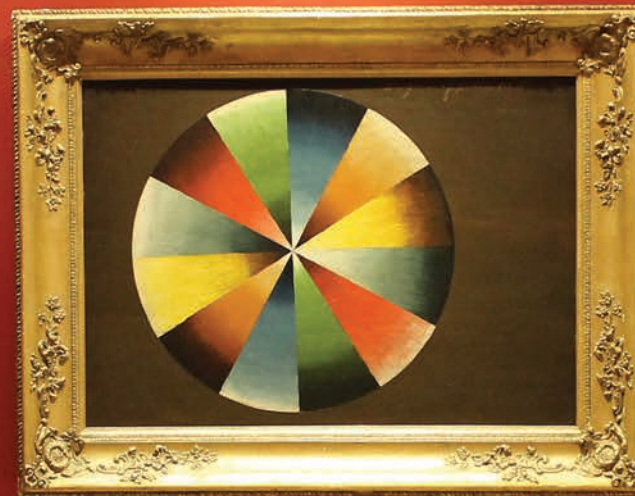
NEXT STOP

Leave the bedroom and turn into the room on your left.

Exhibition: MIND UPON NATURE: THOMAS COLE'S CREATIVE PROCESS

In this exhibition about 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 by Cole, the books and objects that inspired him, and the pigments and materials he used to realize his paintings. Feel free to pick up and examine anything on the table to the left to gain insight into Cole's thinking and process.

Originally the bedroom of Maria Cole's three sisters, this room has been transformed into a gallery space for many of the original Cole paintings we have in our collection and those generously on loan to us.



NEXT STOP

As you leave the Main House, walk back to the Visitor Center in the white barn to enter Cole's studio and see where he painted.

Cole's OLD STUDIO

It is in this studio where Cole painted many of his major works, including *The Voyage of Life*, a series of four paintings that explore the stages of life. One of them, *Childhood*, is reproduced on his original easel.

When Cole died of pleurisy in 1848, he was forty-seven and left behind a young family. His wife Maria was pregnant and his children were all under the age of ten. His newly constructed studio was full of half-finished paintings, and in many ways his life was cut short during the most productive part of his career.

Through his mentorship and ideas, Cole inspired generations of artists—like Frederic Church, Asher B. Durand, and Sanford Gifford—who would collectively become known as the Hudson River School painters. Together they planted the seeds of today's environmental movement and their work inspired the creation of our cherished National Parks.

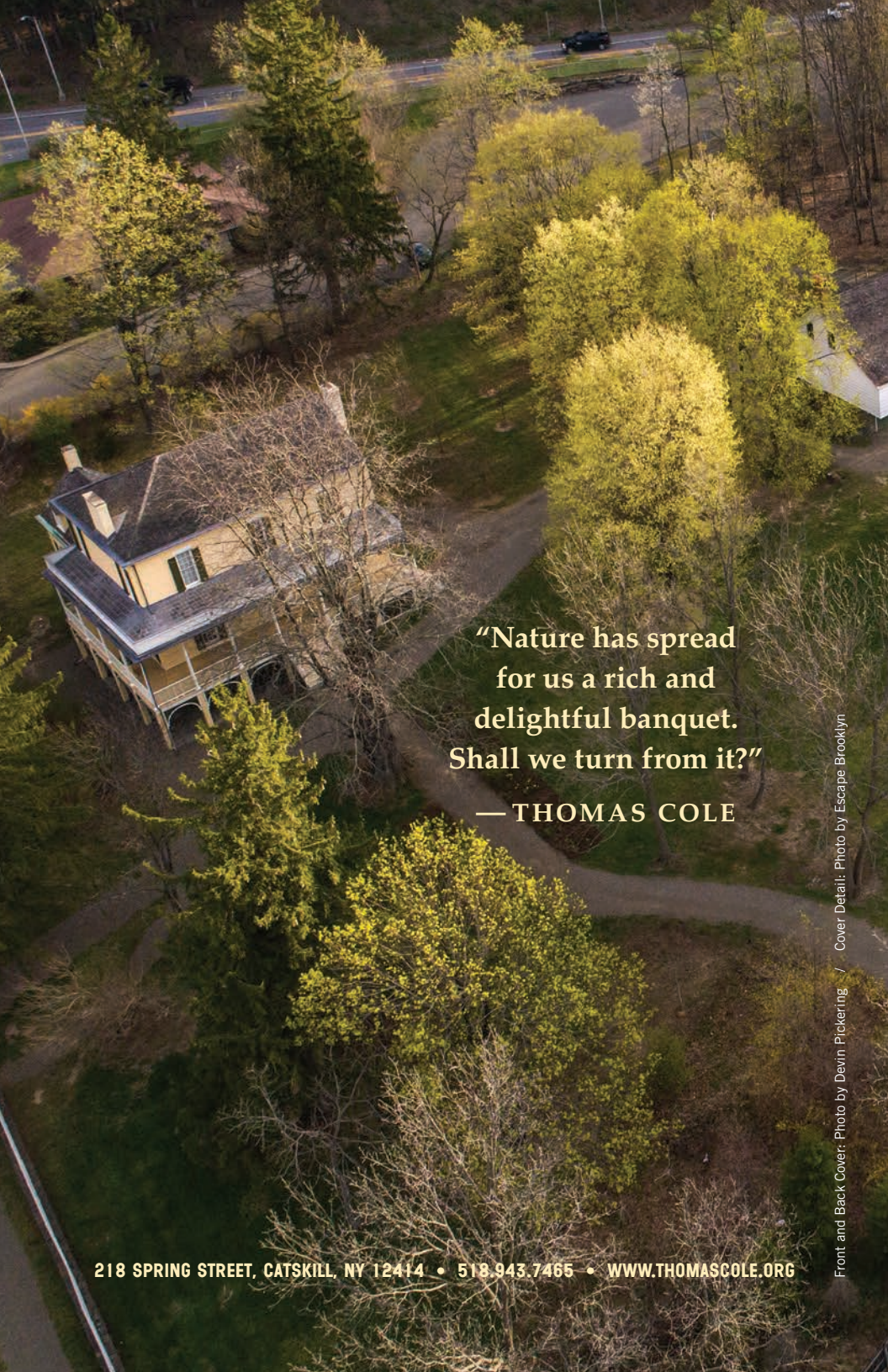
To pay homage to Cole's influence on American art and culture, the TCNHS rebuilt his New Studio in 2015 and presents major exhibitions that offer new scholarship about American art and explore the continuing influence of Cole's ideas in our present moment.

NEXT STOP

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

The Voyage of Life series illustrates Cole's deep desire to create landscapes that were not only about beautiful places, but that also told complex stories and often contained allegories as a way to consider the cyclical nature of human experience.

Photo by Devin Pickering



"Nature has spread
for us a rich and
delightful banquet.
Shall we turn from it?"

—THOMAS COLE

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