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ART REVIEW

‘Thomas Cole’s Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek’ Review: Elegies for an Imperiled Landscape

An exhibition of the English-born painter’s lesser-known Hudson Valley scenes evinces his love for natural beauty and sorrow over its devastation.

Thomas Cole's ‘View Near Catskill’ (1828-29) Photo: Thomas Cole/Thomas Cole Historic Site

By *Barrymore Laurence Scherer*
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Catskill, N.Y.

Although the English-born painter Thomas Cole (1801-1848) is widely regarded as the progenitor of the Hudson River School of American landscape painting, his best-known works often depict imaginary scenes. For example, in his pentalogy "The Course of Empire" (1833-36, at the New-York Historical Society) the same invented landscape forms the constant background in each of the cautionary tableaux narrating the rise and decline of an ancient allegorical civilization. Moreover, though Cole traveled throughout the Hudson Valley, eventually settling in the town of Catskill, N.Y., in 1836, he rarely painted the Hudson River itself. And he rarely revisited a scene on canvas.

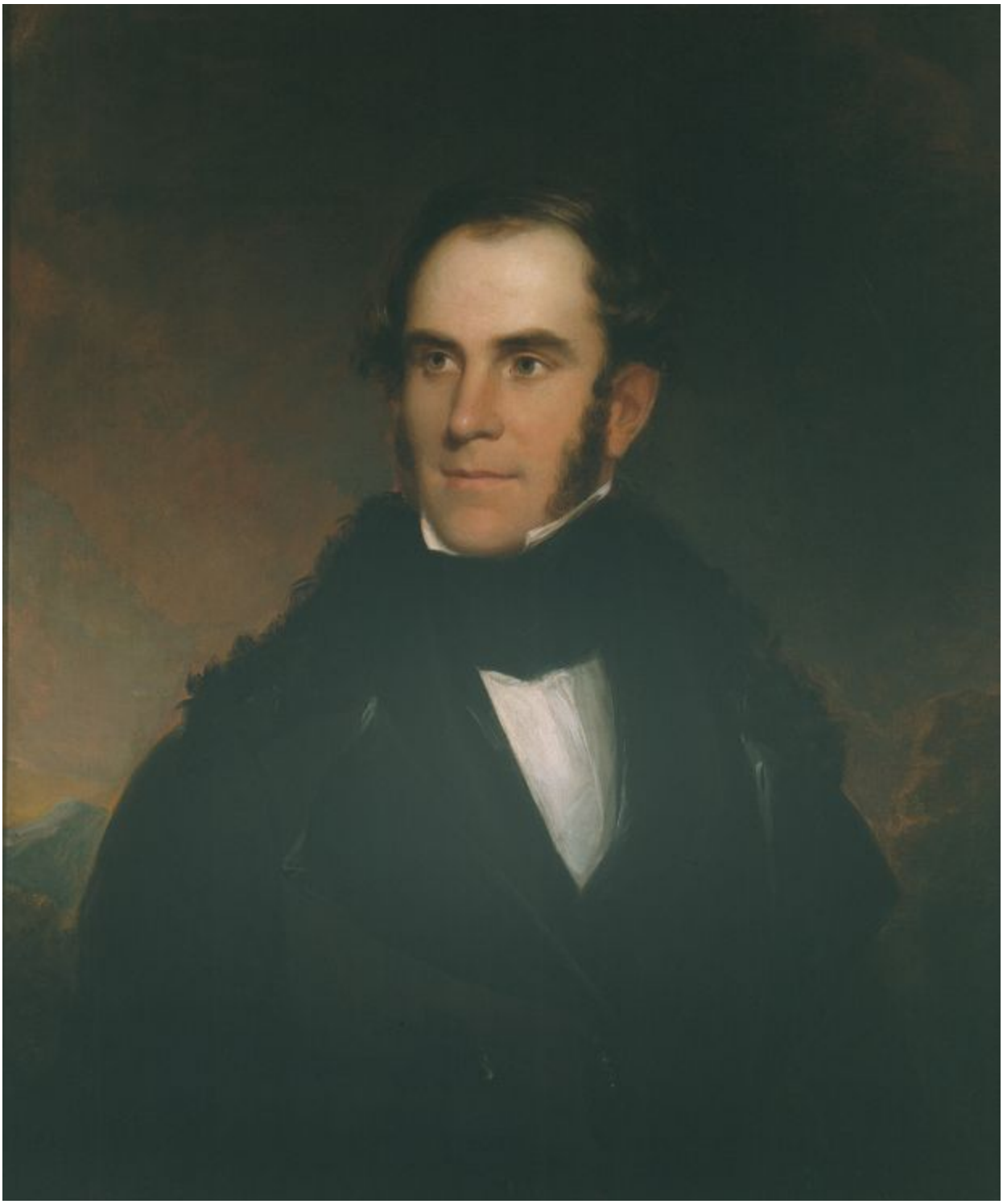
Nevertheless, from 1827 to 1845, Cole painted a succession of works depicting Catskill Creek, a tributary of the Hudson. These particular canvasses seem not to have been examined as an integral series until H. Daniel Peck, emeritus English professor at Vassar College, began to study them as such in 2007. His research yielded the book "Thomas Cole's Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek" (published this year) and inspired the current eponymous exhibition at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. (The show runs here through Nov. 3 then moves to the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, Nov. 22, 2019-Feb. 23, 2020.)

With Mr. Peck as curator, the intimate show was assembled from public and private collections and is presented chronologically in the handsome 2016 reconstruction of Cole's 1846 "New Studio" on the homestead grounds. It consists of 12 Cole paintings—10 of Catskill Creek and two thematically linked to them. Three paintings of the same general location supplement these, representing the continuation of Cole's legacy by his contemporary Asher B. Durand (1796-1886), Cole's pupil and artistic heir Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), and the American Pre-Raphaelite painter Charles Herbert Moore (1840-1930).

Thomas Cole's ‘Catskill Creek, N.Y.’ (1845) Photo: Thomas Cole/New-York Historical Society

Cole’s artistic celebrity benefited from the wealth yielded by America’s burgeoning commerce and industry, which fostered the national desire to produce and promote native art and, thereby, assume a cultural place beside Europe. Yet Cole himself viewed America’s industrial development as a pernicious threat to its landscape. Essentially a proto-environmentalist, he deplored not just the visual ruin of the land, but the resulting destruction of what we now understand as its ecology.

In these Catskill Creek paintings, Cole documented a landscape that was increasingly imperiled. Each is charged with an elegiac sensibility that grows more pronounced in the works of the 1840s. By then, this particular setting had been drastically altered by the construction of the Canajoharie and Catskill Railroad in 1836. In the course of this, many trees were cut, ruining the forested texture of the landscape, and a bridge was built to carry the line across Catskill Creek, thereby scarring it. Though Cole’s paintings allude to the destruction wrought by the builders he called “copper-hearted barbarians,” the show’s paintings don’t actually depict the offending railway itself.



Asher B. Durand’s ‘Portrait of Thomas Cole’ (1838) Photo: Asher B. Durand/Berkshire Museum

Cole was also angered by other forms of commercial intrusion on his beloved Catskills. However, in his “Mill Dam on the Catskill Creek” (1841) he includes the titular water mill as a picturesque element. Unlike the textile mills and iron works of his Lancashire youth, which

belched smoke and hellish coal fire day and night, small watermills like this one worked in harmony with the flowing river. Nestling it cozily in the middle of his composition, he carefully delineates its weathered roof and rough siding boards with parallel brush strokes of the same mingled browns, terracottas and violet shades with which he paints the rugged crags of the distant mountains, thereby further integrating the mill with its natural surroundings. “Mill Dam” also features a group of lovingly rendered trees on the left bank of the stream, their gnarled trunks almost glinting in the afternoon sun, their leafy crowns seemingly atremble in a gentle breeze.

Cole loved Catskill Creek so deeply that while in Rome, on his second and final European tour (1841-42), he was apparently moved by profound homesickness to paint it again—either from memory or from sketches he had packed —in “Settler’s Home in the Catskills.”

An installation view of ‘Thomas Cole’s Refrain: The Paintings of Catskill Creek’ Photo: Peter Aaron/OTTO

Perhaps the show’s greatest triumph is the pairing of Cole’s “Catskill Creek, N.Y.” (1845)—likely his final oil painting of the scene—with his preliminary “Study for ‘Catskill Creek’” (c. 1844-45). Here Cole capitalizes on the bold simplicity of the mountain range’s profile against the opalescent sky with its scudding clouds of gilded pink. He contrasts this crepuscular expanse against the deeper autumnal textures of the trees in the foreground, the standing tree at left made all the more poignant as it rises defiantly amidst the broken limbs and stump of an arboreal victim of the railroad—which ironically had ceased running three years earlier.

The paintings gathered here represent deeply personal statements whose visual quietude is unlike the more public voice of Cole's large narrative works. In them, we bear witness to Cole's joy in unblemished natural beauty and his profound sorrow over its creeping devastation.

—Mr. Scherer writes about music and the fine arts for the Journal.