

LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN THE UNITED STATES

America's Future Direction? In America, landscape painting was most prominently pursued by a group of artists known as the Hudson River School, so named because its members drew their subjects primarily from the uncultivated regions of the Hudson River Valley. Many of these painters, however, depicted scenes from across the country, so "Hudson River School" is actually too restrictive geographically. Like the early-19th-century landscape painters in Germany and England, the artists of the Hudson River School not only presented Romantic panoramic landscape views but also participated in the ongoing exploration of the individual's and the country's relationship to the land. Acknowledging the unique geography and historical circumstances of each country and region, American landscape painters frequently focused on identifying qualities that rendered America unique. One American painter of English birth, Thomas Cole (1801-1848), often referred to as the leader of the Hudson River School, articulated this idea:

Whether he (an American) beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic – explores the central wilds of this vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is still in the midst of American scenery – it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity – all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!



THOMAS COLE, *The Oxbow (View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm)*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 4'3" x 6'4". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Another issue that surfaced frequently in Hudson River School paintings was the moral question of America's direction as a civilization. Cole presented the viewer with this question in *The Oxbow (View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm)*, FIG. 28-55. A splendid scene opens

before the viewer, dominated by the lazy oxbow turning of the Connecticut River. The composition is divided, with the dark, stormy wilderness on the left and the more developed civilization on the right. The minuscule artist in the bottom center of the painting (wearing a top hat), dwarfed by the landscape's scale, turns to the viewer as if to ask for input in deciding the country's future course. In their depiction of expansive wilderness, Cole's landscapes incorporated reflections and moods romantically appealing to the public.



ALBERT BIERSTADT, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, 1868. Oil on canvas. 6'10". National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

Wild, Wild West Other Hudson River artists used the landscape genre as an allegorical vehicle to address moral and spiritual concerns. Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) traveled west in 1858 and produced many paintings depicting the Rocky Mountains, Yosemite Valley, and other sites in California. These works, such as *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (FIG. 28-56), present breathtaking scenery and natural beauty. This panoramic view (the painting is 10 feet wide) is awe-inspiring. Deer and waterfowl appear at the edge of a placid lake, and steep and rugged mountains soar skyward on the left and in the distance. A stand of trees, uncultivated and wild, frames the lake on the right. To impress on the viewer the almost transcendental nature of this scene, Bierstadt depicted the sun's rays breaking through the clouds overhead, which suggests a heavenly consecration of the land. That Bierstadt focused attention on the West is not insignificant. By calling national attention to the splendor and uniqueness of the regions beyond the Rocky Mountains, Bierstadt's paintings reinforced Manifest Destiny. This popular 19th-century doctrine held that westward expansion across the continent was the logical destiny of the United States. Such artworks thereby muted growing concerns over the realities of conquest, the displacement of the Native Americans, and the exploitation of the environment. It should come as no surprise that among those most eager to purchase Bierstadt's work were mail-service magnates and

railroad builders – entrepreneurs and financiers involved in westward expansion.

REAFFIRMING RIGHTEOUSNESS Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) also has been associated with the Hudson River School. His interest in landscape scenes was not limited to America; during his life he traveled to South America, Mexico, Europe, the Middle East, Newfoundland, and Labrador. Church's paintings are instructive because, like the works of Cole and Bierstadt, they are firmly entrenched in the idiom of the Romantic sublime. Yet they also reveal contradictions and conflicts in the constructed mythology of American providence and character. *Twilight in the Wilderness* presents an awe-inspiring panoramic view of the sun setting over the majestic landscape. Beyond Church's precise depiction of the spectacle of nature, the painting is remarkable for what it does not depict. Like John Constable, Church and the other Hudson River School painters worked in a time of great upheaval. *Twilight in the Wilderness* was created in 1860, when the Civil War was decimating the country. Yet this painting does not display evidence of turbulence or discord; indeed, it does not include even a trace of humanity. By constructing such an idealistic and comforting view, Church contributed to the national mythology of righteousness and divine providence – a mythology that had become increasingly difficult to maintain in the face of conflict. Landscape painting was immensely popular in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in large part because it provided viewers with breathtaking and sublime spectacles of nature. Artists also could allegorize nature, and it was rare for a landscape painting not to touch on spiritual, moral, historical, or philosophical issues. Landscape painting became the perfect vehicle for artists (and the viewing public) to 'naturalize' conditions, rendering debate about contentious issues moot and eliminating any hint of conflict.



FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860s. Oil on canvas, 3'4" x 5'4". Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.