Thomas Cole (1801 - 1848)
_A Niagara Falls_, 1830
Oil on Panel
Friends of American Art Collection, 1946.396

Nature as an artistic subject received very little attention in eighteenth century America. The early settlers' understanding of the land during the colonial period rarely extended beyond that of daily provider. The early nineteenth century, however, marked a new relationship between nature and the individual. After the Revolutionary War, Americans developed a great sense of identity with the country and found in nature a symbol of their unity, pride, and optimism. It became the artist's mission in the 1820s to define for the public the character of American geography and God's presence within it.

Thomas Doughty (1793 - 1856) was one artist who accepted this mission and recorded landscapes all over New York, New Hampshire, and the northeast coast. He became the senior member of a group of artists who painted scenes of the sparsely settled Catskills, Adirondacks and White Mountains. With their similar styles and choices of subject matter, these artists became known as the "Hudson River School." Their compositions included mountain and lake scenes, broad wilderness panoramas, interior woodland, and shore scenes.
Thomas Cole, born in England and coming to the United States at age 18, became the leader of the next generation of Hudson River School artists. It was his goal to go beyond the reportive landscapes of Doughty and endow his paintings with the moral imperatives associated with the more traditional paintings of European art academies. According to Cole, one would just need to “read” the language of nature to discover a “source of delight and improvement.” His landscapes combined selected elements from observed nature, literature, allegory, and religion, providing spiritual inspiration at a time of tremendous change and development in the young nation.

Cole first visited Niagara Falls in 1829. “I anticipated much”, he wrote, “but the grandeur of the falls far exceeds anything I had been told of them -- I am astonished that there have been no good pictures of them -- I think the subject a sublime one -- but I may fail in my representation as others have done before me.” He filled his sketchbook with drawings of the falls from various points -- from below, upon Table Rock, and from a projection on the eastern brink where the eye commands the entire sweep of the cataract. As a compilation of these different views, the finished painting *Niagara Falls* portrays a uniquely American scene: the sugar maples with their red autumn leaves, the two Native Americans dwarfed by the falls gazing in reverence, and the powerful falls with their status as one the world’s natural wonders. The awesomeness of the falls was recalled years later when, in 1835, Cole delivered a lecture on American scenery:
“And Niagara! that wonder of the world! -- where the sublime and the beautiful are bound together in an indissoluble chain. In gazing on it we feel as though a great void had been filled in our minds -- our conceptions expand -- we become part of what we behold! At our feet the flood of a thousand rivers are poured out -- the contents of vast inland seas. In its volume we conceive immensity; in its course, everlasting duration; in its impetuosity, uncontrollable power. These are the elements of sublimity. Its beauty is garlanded around in the varied hues of the water, in the spray that ascends the sky, and in that unrivaled bow which forms a complete cincture round the unresting floods.”

To the artist, Niagara represented the grandeur of God’s creation, and the wilderness the splendor of the new land. In its vastness, the falls, the river, and the forest also symbolized the possibilities for the country’s expansion. Cole wrote:

“American associations are not so much of the past as of the future... Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower -- mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil.”

Cole’s words were prophetic; by the 1850s, development in the United States had transformed America’s landscape. The issue of industrialization made many doubt the wholesomeness of God’s chosen land, and the work of Hudson River School painters reflected this questioning of nature and the country’s progress. Landscape paintings became either nostalgic views of unspoiled wilderness before civilization intervened (and, by extension, pleas for the
prevention of further destruction) or idealistic pictures of nature and progress working in harmony. MR

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Since the painting of this picture in 1830, Americans’ understanding of Native Americans and their rights have changed dramatically. How might a viewer in 1830 have regarded their presence in Niagara Falls? What role did Cole intend for them in the painting? How does a viewer in the 1990s understand their relationship to the scene? How does the season portrayed in the painting foretell the Native Americans’ future?

2. Niagara Falls is a compilation of many different views that Cole sketched and then combined to form an effective and dramatic picture. Have each student select an area near home or school to sketch in various drawings. Have each student combine the most interesting views into one picture, creating an ideal representation of the area.

3. At what point in United State’s history did Americans recognize the toll that “civilization” was having on our country and natural resources? Have students research what steps were taken to monitor and/or preserve our disappearing wilderness. What president led this effort?
4. Compare Cole’s *Niagara Falls* with Watkin’s *Yosemite* photograph (slide 10). Explore with students the advantages and disadvantages of “reproducing” nature with each medium. How does the medium determine the artist’s working process and style?

5. See “Discovering Virtues in the Land” activity sheet in “Sample Lessons” section
DISCOVERING VIRTUES IN THE LAND: AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Grade level: secondary; can be adapted for elementary
Work of art: Niagara Falls (slide 6)

"I am by no means desirous of lessening in your estimation the glorious scenes of the old world -- that ground which has been the great theatre of human events -- those mountains, woods, and streams, made sacred in our minds by heroic deeds and immortal song -- over which time and genius have suspended an imperishable halo...

And Niagara! that wonder of the world! -- where the sublime and beautiful are bound together in an indissoluble chain. In gazing on it we feel as though a great void has been filled in our minds -- our conceptions expand -- we become a part of what we behold!"

From Thomas Cole: Essay on American Scenery, 1834

The vantage point is the view or angle from which you observe a scene. Landscape painters like Cole choose their vantage point very carefully. What is Cole's vantage point in Niagara Falls -- an eye-level view, a bird's eye view, a view from below? How does Cole's vantage point of American nature in the painting convey the economic potential of the new nation?

Based on evidence in the painting, how does Cole indicate that spiritual values will play a significant role in the development of the nation? What role does weather play in conveying a sense of divinity pervading the land? What might sunlight symbolize? Storm clouds?

Cole carefully represents particular seasons and times of day in his landscape paintings. How does the time of day and season emphasize where these respective cultures (the Native American and the American settlers) are in their development?

Adapted from work by Museum Classroom Participants from Evanston Township High School