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A Durand Celebration In NY State

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On a recent tart spring morning I visited Cedar Grove, the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, New York. It was the first step in my development of this story about the Asher B. Durand exhibition that opened there on May 20, which features paintings from both public and private collections, including the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute Museum of Art and the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College.

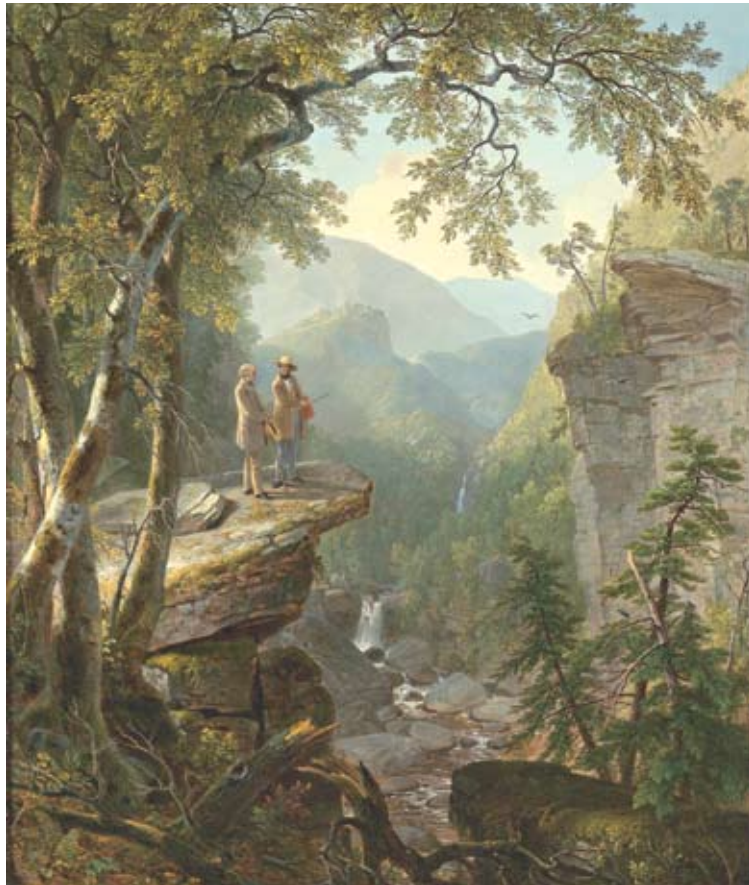
The Durand exhibition signals the 2007 exhibition season at Cedar Grove and continues a series that explores significant figures in nineteenth-century American landscape painting.

I was struck by the pristine beauty of the property, where an extensive landscape restoration is underway to bring the site back to something of its original state. Located immediately beyond the toll exchange of the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, Cedar Grove is just past the crossroads, at a jumble of past and present. Once through the gates and onto the grounds, past lovely gardens, there's a meditative feeling of oasis, sanctuary. This is the cradle of the Hudson River School of Painting.

The fine old Federal style brick house, c. 1815, has been beautifully restored and stands like a temple in a grove. The accompanying studio and other outbuildings define the property that was home to the man many regard as the father of American landscape painting. This is the heart of the Hudson River Valley, with a magnificent view of the Catskill Mountain range. It is the perfect venue for the exhibition titled, Asher B. Durand: Intimate Observations, now running through 28 October, which celebrates the tremendous legacy of Durand's paintings, but also the close friendship shared between the two visionary painters, Durand and Cole.

An early bonus

On that same morning I had the pleasure of attending part of a lecture given by James McElhinney, an artist and writer with an MFA from Yale, who lives in Manhattan and teaches at Pratt Institute and the Art Students League of New York. I was originally scheduled to meet David Barnes, a member of the Board of Governors of



Asher B. Durand (American, 1796-1886), *Kindred Spirits*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 44 X 36 in. Courtesy of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Cedar Grove who frequently lectures on Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School of landscape painting, also scheduled to talk about Cole and Durand, but our schedules crossed.

The site was not yet officially open for the season, but a series of lectures and talks had been scheduled for docents and staff members, with several experts and academics speaking on topics related to the Durand exhibition and Cole. The educational initiative at Cedar Grove is impressive, and the lecture series is widely admired.

"Our lecture series grew out of a desire to fill Cedar Grove with lively conversation," says Thomas Cole National Historic Site Director, Elizabeth Jacks, "as it was in Cole's time when artists and writers would frequent these rooms."

Jacks explained they get up to 100 people for their art history lectures and adds, "There's no need to dumb down the content – our visitors want the world's top scholars and the latest research and we give it to them."

I found my way into the house through a side entrance; it was easy

to imagine Cole coming and going through the same door during his daily round. Like most in the federal period, the house is not grand, but elegantly proportioned with rooms symmetrically arranged on either side of a center hall. This arrangement is sometimes called the American Plan. As with the property, the residence possesses a serene stillness, a sense of history and feeling of time outside of time. So much has changed and yet so much remains the same at Cedar Grove. There is a presiding spirit here.

An inside view McElhinney gave his lecture in one of the front parlors, a space reserved for exhibitions, where roughly 25 of the docent-students had congregated. It's part of a larger educational initiative that Jacks says reflects the Cole House's philosophy for training docents.

"We brought in two speakers, for a total of six presentations, by professors from Vassar and experts from the New York Historical Society (and other institutions)," she says. "We are looking for more volunteers."

I entered at a point in the lecture

during a discussion of methods and materials. A large flat-bottomed, rounded piece of glass with a shaft handle (called a muller), that's used to grind paint, was being passed around. McElhinney explained how oil and sometimes beeswax were mixed with pigment and ground together with this muller.

In Cole and Durand's time, most pigments used were earth colors derived from natural elements. Cinnabar, ochre, terra verde, mars rust, azurite, lapis lazuli and other naturally occurring minerals were ground as pigments, so as to pass through a nearly alchemical transformation into paintings. By the first quarter of the nineteenth century, industrial pigments flooded the market with chemicals that caused an explosion of changes in the color industry.

These changes also reflect a transition from the agrarian era into the industrial revolution, as well as the transition from a native, uncharted and wild, virginal America, to the rise and growth of cities. This phase also represents the passing of the palm from Cole to Durand. Ultimately, however, it was a movement away from formally composed and academic landscape compositions, toward Luminism, Impressionism and the advent of photography. Elements of Hudson Valley style

Both Cole and Durand painted in a highly traditional and time-honored manner established by Venetian and northern European painters centuries before. An imprematura, or wash of ground color, in earth tone or sky tone – used half-strength on top of the gesso (or prepared canvas) – was applied first. The paintings are, in effect, built up color transparencies and must be thought of in terms of layers.

I later queried McElhinney by letter, asking if he could shed a little more light on how the transition from natural colors to chemical colors – and color theory in general – may have effected the quality of the work. I also wondered if their use of specific colors corresponded to particular philosophical or spiritual beliefs about the numinous aspect of nature reflected in the work.

McElhinney explained, "Artists at that time sought to reconcile the picturesque sublime with scientific

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Asher B. Durand (American, 1796-1886), *The First Harvest in the Wilderness*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 31-5/8 X 48 in. Transferred from the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences to the Brooklyn Museum.



Asher B. Durand (American, 1796-1886), *Katterskill Clove*, ca. 1866. Oil on canvas, 38-1/4 X 60 in. Courtesy of The Century Association, NY.

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ideas about nature. Organized religion did not provide the desired answers, which one might argue led artists to embrace alternative spiritual constructs."

It seems there were many different variables and influences affecting both men at the time, and – McElhinny thinks – "the increased importance of color theory to artistic practice in the nineteenth century is based largely on the invention of new pigments."

Finally McElhinny believes that "art and life were generally more deeply connected than they are today, and what we today frequently mistake for mere style in the work of the Hudson River School artists reflects a highly integrated view of nature, based on religion, science and poetry and a deep faith in its value. We could use more of that today." Celebrating Durand

In the opening line of the lavishly illustrated catalogue for the show Jacks states, "I do believe that 2007 may go down as the Year of Durand."

There are concurrent Durand exhibitions at three major museums in New York City this year including the Brooklyn Museum of Art, curated by Linda S. Ferber, Vice President and museum director of the New York Historical Society and The National Academy in New York City. In addition, there is a publication accompanying the Historical Society show, a definitive and long overdue work about Durand (1796-1886). The Cole House exhibition is curated by Elizabeth Stevens, Edye Weissler, Diane Shewchuk and Kirsten Jensen with an accompanying essay by Lee A. Vedder.

"It's a special pleasure to bring Durand back into Thomas Cole's home after a 150-year absence," says Jacks, "as the two men were not only a great influence on each other, but also the greatest of friends."

Intimate Observations is the fourth in a series of exhibitions at Cedar Grove devoted to nineteenth-century masters of landscape painting. Each has been designed to foster discussion about the influence of Cole on American culture through the generation of artists known as the Hudson River School. It has been said that if Thomas Cole is recognized as the founding father of American landscape painting, Asher Brown Durand was its dean. Durand achieved considerable success as an engraver producing banknotes, books and magazine illustrations, as well as portraits and reproductions of other artists' work. He achieved fame when he received a commission from the American Artist John Trumbull to make an engraved copy of his painting Declaration of Independence, which had been enlarged for the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol.

When Durand began painting landscapes in the mid-1830s, Cole encouraged him. The two men became close friends and colleagues. Apparently, in 1837, both men went on a sketching expedition to Schroon Lake in the Adirondacks. This seems to have confirmed Durand's decision to focus on landscape painting. Durand made hundreds of drawings and oil sketches during subsequent annual summer trips to the Catskills, Adirondacks and White Mountains, which he later incorporated into finished academic compositions. Both men were determined to uplift landscape painting, often regarded as a lesser form of genre painting, to a new level of importance. Sadly, however, Cole died in 1848 at the young age of 45, after which Durand assumed the mantle as the leader of American landscape painting. Hudson River School in full mastership

Both Cole and Durand were fellows of the National Academy of Design in New York. In fact, Durand went on to become president there. He worked toward the development of the American landscape tradition and attempted to raise the profile of American art internationally. Cole (1801-1848) and Durand (1796-1886) were both fired in the crucible of prevailing American philosophical, political and spiritual milieu reflected in their paintings.

Spiritual notions around a creator leaving its imprint in nature impelled these men, as well as other members of the Hudson River School, to attempt to record and reveal this divine presence. In this regard, Ralph Waldo Emerson's Nature, first published in 1836, is of the utmost importance. Cole and Durand received these ideas, as well as others that informed their work through a variety of contemporaneous sources. James Fenimore Cooper's tale, The Last of the Mohicans, provides a contemporary literary parallel. Released in 1826, this historical novel takes place in 1757 when France and England disputed control of the American colonies. Its main character, a scout named Bumppo, personifies the natty individualism and pioneering spirit so

germane to the American identity. Cole went on to paint The Last of the Mohicans, which with The Four Ages of Man and the Course of Empire series, were copied and mass produced through engravings. These works put squarely him into the mainstream of popular arts and culture.

The American identity

According to the essay by Vedder in the exhibition catalogue, "... the fledgling American nation was seeking a cultural identity apart from Europe and an approach to art that expressed the uniqueness of the new country."

European influences on the romantic landscape vision, however, are undeniable. The French painter Claude Lorraine was producing idealized landscapes in the seventeenth century. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, German artist Caspar David Frederick had developed a spiritually charged vision of nature complete with schematic rockeries that may correspond to Goethe's philosophic ideas or to Swedenborgian doctrine. In addition, extensive journeys throughout the Americas, the German scientist Alexander Von Humboldt, in his magisterial Cosmos extolls, "...what an inexhaustible treasure remains still unopened by the landscape painter."

Later, in mid-nineteenth century France, the Barbizon and so called plein air painters, Corot, Rousseau and Millet, reacted against Romanticism. They advocated naturalism, leaving the confines of the studio and stodgily composed paintings of the academy to paint nature outdoors. We can say that the American School in general, and the Hudson River School specifically, were remarkable in their sincere almost naive vision. Yet they certainly belong to a larger, contemporaneous, international movement. Moreover, Thomas Cole was born in England.

The exhibition There are nine Durand paintings on loan for the exhibition, as well as engravings, books and related ephemera. One of the earliest works represented, View of the Hudson Near Newburgh: Farm Yard on the Hudson (1843), is a good example of what Vedder refers to as, "...bucolic rural life in the East reflect(ing) a romantic side to his communion with nature..."

It is an idealized view of life on the farm,



Asher B. Durand (American, 1796-1886), *The Stranded Ship*, 1844. Oil on canvas, 37 X 51 in. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

complete with hayricks and happy rustics, depicting a utopian agrarian environment (as devoid of hardship as it is the unpicturesque). Vedder goes on to say, "by the mid-1840s, Durand was a recognized leader of the domestic or pastoral arm of American landscape school, while Cole dominated the heroic and wilderness sublime approach..."

Still, it is easy to see, that while both painters drew inspiration from nature (often through a series of sketches and quick oil studies made as aide memoire during their sketching trips), their paintings for the most part, are highly composed in an academic tradition and painted in studio. Cole's untimely death in 1848 marks a turning point for Durand. He moved from Cole's highly allegorical depiction of nature in the direction of scientific accuracy. Durand's later works, such as Forest Interior with Distant Mountains (c.1855) and The Picnic, Bolton, New York (c. 1863) reflect a shift in his work away from pastoral idylls toward a more faithful recording of nature.

Vedder explains, "This shift coincided with the rise of naturalism and truth to nature advocated by the British art theorist and avid amateur geologist, John Ruskin (1819-1900), who argued that the geologic features of the landscape were

alive with spiritual meanings and essential to the landscape painters' vision. For Durand, 'the simple truths of nature constitute the true Religion of Art.'" (Letters on Landscape Painting, The Crayon, 1855)

Cedar Grove, The Thomas Cole National Historic Site, is located at 218 Spring Street, near the western entrance to the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, in the village of Catskill, New York.

Admission is \$7 per person during regular open hours. Admission to the grounds is free of charge.

Hours are Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

For more information, call (518) 943-7465. www.thomascole.org

Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art is currently running through July 29 at the Morris A. and Meyer Schapiro Wing, fifth floor. This exhibition of nearly sixty works is the first monographic exhibition devoted to Asher B. Durand's career in more than 35 years.

The Brooklyn Museum is located at 200 Eastern Parkway. Admission is \$8.

For more information, call (718) 638-5000. www.brooklynmuseum.org

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