Theatricality and Excess

A European Look at American Landscape Painting

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One of the reasons why art historians in Europe have shown so little interest in American art before 1945 may lie in the fact that so few of the original paintings can be found in European museums or galleries. Beginning with the exhibition *A New World. Masterpieces of American Painting 1760–1910* (fig. 1) in 1984, several major exhibitions of pre-1945 American art in Europe have changed this situation by providing a welcome chance to see the original paintings. The cities and locations of these exhibitions already signal major cultural events: *A New World* was shown at the Grand Palais in Paris, *Bilder aus der Neuen Welt. Amerikanische Malerei des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (fig. 2) at the Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin in 1988, *America. Die Neue Welt in Bildern des 19. Jahrhunderts* (fig. 3) at the Schloss Belvedere in Vienna in 1999, and *American Sublime. Landscape Painting in the United States 1820–1880* (fig. 4) at the Tate Britain in 2002. All of these exhibitions, which had the purpose of getting an often reluctant European public acquainted with American painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, were highly successful, both in terms of critical response and popularity with a general audience.

Looking at the catalogue covers of these exhibitions can be of help in telling us what Europeans appear to find interesting about American art. Curators and publishers must have assumed that in their selection for covers (which, inevitably, also function as advertisement for the exhibition itself) two types of material would be best suited to create interest: Images are taken either from the Hudson River School or from American Genre Painting of the nineteenth century, usually represented by George Caleb Bingham. The cover of the German catalogue *Bilder aus der Neuen Welt* (fig. 2) is especially instructive in this respect, because in its play on the double meaning of the German word *Bild* – both as painting and as image – it implies that the paintings show images that are representative of the New World. These images, no matter whether they are taken from the Hudson River School or from genre painting, have one thing in common: Both schools of painting present America as a frontier or wilderness, that is, as an unspoiled or yet untamed territory on the periphery of modernity where it is still possible to encounter nature in a pristine, pre-civilizatory stage (fig. 4) or experience liminal behavior in the form of colorful eccentricity. The implication for understanding Hudson River School paintings here seems to be – as, indeed, it often is in the United States itself – that they should be valued and treasured, because they capture the majestic splendor of a yet unspoiled American wilderness of quasi Edenic qualities – a virgin land, as one of the first major works in American Studies put it, that provided Americans with the promise of a new beginning.[1] We may also call this the narrative of American exceptionalism, because it is grounded in American self-images of a "promised land" and a "chosen people."

American landscape paintings would thus have their main function in providing direct and aesthetically powerful encounters with the majesty of American nature; where they do so successfully, they serve as a welcome medium of national self-definition. One of the recurrent topics in discussions of Hudson River School paintings are there-

1
Cover of the exhibition catalogue *A New World. Masterpieces of American Painting 1790–1910*, Grand Palais, Paris 1984

2
Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Bilder aus der Neuen Welt. Amerikanische Malerei des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, Orangerie, Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin 1988

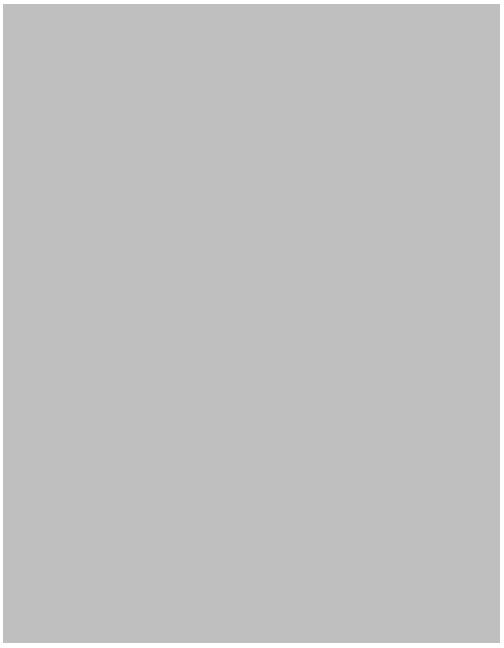
fore references to their scale, majesty and rhetorical power which seem to open up the possibility of a direct experience of the American wilderness. In his biography of Thomas Cole, Matthew Baigell provides a telling illustration when he says: "Regardless of theme or style, however, Cole's works are unique in American art because for the first time the viewer seems to be catapulted directly into the American wilderness. Never before had an American artist captured so completely the look and feel of raw nature as well as the apparent total indifference of nature to man's presence or intentions. These early landscapes simultaneously communicate feelings of wonder and fear."[2] The power of Hudson River School paintings seems to emerge from their skill in capturing the sublimity of the American landscape in direct and authentic fashion, so that we are exposed not only to the sublime power of the American wilderness but also of the American nation.[3] In this line of argument, cultural meaning and aesthetic value subtly reinforce each other: Hudson River School paintings draw their aesthetic power from the grandeur of an American landscape conceptualized, both in historical and moral terms, as a "New World," while, at the same time, the aesthetic power of these paintings provides a strong confirmation of America's promise as "nature's nation," "not yet contaminated by Old World guilt, corruption, and decay."[4]

However, we live in an age of demystification and, thus, almost inevitably, the associations of immediacy, authenticity, and national grandeur on which the claim of a national representativeness of Hudson River School paintings is based have been undermined by a new historicist revisionism that reads these paintings not as powerful affirmation of a national identity and a national virtue, but as manifestations of the self-images and interests of particular classes or social groups through which power structures of society are reproduced.[5] The Hudson School River painters themselves had already pointed out that they painted idealized landscapes. Many of their paintings are composites such as, for example, one of the most famous paintings of the Hudson River School, Asher Durand's *Kindred Spirits* (fig. 5), which combines natural sites and wonders that could not be seen from the position presented in the painting. *Kaaterskill Falls* by Thomas Cole (fig. 6), one of the most Edenic examples of American landscape painting of the nineteenth century, depicts a site that was close to a hotel which had already become a favorite tourist spot at the time, as had, of course, the Niagara Falls, which were part of a thriving tourist industry at the time Frederic Church painted his grand picture *Niagara* (fig. p. 78). Indeed, one may jokingly say that the unusual, daring position in which the spectator of the painting is placed by Church – suspended almost above the water without any ground to stand on – was the only way in which Church could keep the hordes of tourists out of the picture that already crowded this "natural wonder."

More importantly, it has become clear over the years that the Hudson River School followed models of composition established first in Europe by painters like Nicolas Poussain, Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa, John Martin, and J. M. W. Turner.[6] By turn-

3
Cover of the exhibition catalogue *America. Die Neue Welt in Bildern des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Galerie Oberes Belvedere, Vienna 1999

4
Cover of the exhibition catalogue *American Sublime. Landscape Painting in the United States 1820–1880*, Tate Britain, London 2002



5
Asher B. Durand:
Kindred Spirits, 1849.
oil on canvas. Alice Walton Collection.
Courtesy of the Walton Family
Foundation

ing landscape painting, long considered inferior in the aesthetic hierarchy of painting, into a respectable artistic genre with its own pictorial conventions, these painters also established patterns of what a landscape was supposed to look like. Especially in the first generation, the painters of the Hudson River School applied these patterns to the American landscape in order to convert it into "art." In this sense, American nature was "rediscovered" via European painters like Lorrain, Rosa, and Turner who, together with English landscape theory, "guided Cole's understanding of American wilderness."[7] Clearly, then, the paintings of the Hudson River School were original creations neither in terms of artistic innovation, nor in terms of the authenticity of their representations. What they depicted were imaginary constructs that viewers wanted to see.

What was the origin of the American interest in these imaginary constructs? Critics and scholars who continue to value paintings of the Hudson River School for their "Americanness" stand in a long tradition and mode of reception that emerged in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and gained force at the time of the discovery of the Hudson River School in the 1820s as part of a nascent American cultural nationalism. For this cultural nationalism, the Hudson River School proved a godsend. Until its emergence, the United States did not yet have an acknowledged cultural tradition of its own. In 1824, Sydney Smith, a Scottish critic from Edinburgh – that is, not even from the center of the British world – had mockingly written: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to an American play? Or looks at an American picture or statue?"[8] In their own view, Americans had opened up a new chapter in the history of civilization by establishing a government on Republican principles, something for which no precedent existed in modern times. But in the enlightenment models of history which they used to legitimize their Republic as a new stage in progress of civilization, the maturity of a society was reflected in the state of its art and culture. For American nationalists, this turned out to be a constant source of frustration, at least until writers like James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, and painters like Thomas Cole began to argue that America had something which was unique: It did not yet have much of a history or cultural tradition, but it had nature of a special kind, a majestic, unspoiled wilderness that seemed to be a fitting metaphor for the country itself.[9] Thus, the Hudson River School could become the first national expression in art.[10]

However, as we have seen, what Cole and other painters depicted was not the American landscape per se, but a construct, imbuing, as Angela Miller puts it in a wonderfully succinct phrase, "the mute geography of nature with a cultural program."[11] This program was linked to themes and anxieties of a cultural nationalism propagated by conservative, anti-Jacksonian elites who welcomed landscape painting as a repository of images in the cultural struggle for the definition of a national identity.[12] In this struggle, they drew on idealized images of nature, but also of history, and of biblical events, to establish counter-models to a process of democratization in the Jacksonian period which they experienced as a threat. For this group of gentry members, Cole was welcome, as Angela Miller puts it, as "the voice of moral opposition to America's materially driven democracy."[13] As Alan Wallach has argued, with the gradual loss of privilege of the gentry in the Jacksonian Period, the matter of culture became even more important, because "the possession of culture ... could be used to help perpetuate, in a new form, old claims of superiority."[14] The grandiose, sublimesque and picturesque aesthetics of Hudson River School paintings appears in this historical context as a new, sensuously highly effective form of cultural authorization which gained additional force by the fact that it was often tied to an imagery of spiritual revelation.[15] Religion and national self-authorization thus went hand in hand. Underneath the exceptionalist narrative, a second narrative emerges that reveals American landscape paintings of the Hudson River School not to be representations of a New World, but of a cultural construct created by a cultural nationalism intent on instrumentalizing New World imagery for its own politics.

I think that this is an important argument against naively exceptionalist readings of the Hudson River School. But the case is, in effect, more complex than even such a historical contextualization may suggest. After all, when we speak of the Hudson River School today, we are actually referring to two different phenomena: the historical Hudson River School of the Jacksonian Period and the Hudson River School that was rediscovered in the 1930s and elevated to the status of a national style after the Second World War.[16] The Hudson River School we are talking about today is no longer that of the Jacksonian Period (and, one may add, its admirers are no longer members of the gentry). This also means, however, that the cultural meaning and aesthetic value of these paintings can no longer be explained by the rhetoric of cultural nationalism alone. If their aesthetic power is not constituted by their

6
Thomas Cole:
Kaaterskill Falls, 1826,
oil on canvas,
The Warner Collection of Gulf States Paper Corporation, Tuscaloosa, Ala.

representation of a national identity, understood either as authentic or as a cultural construct of American cultural nationalism, then we have to cast another, more contemporary look at possible sources for the aesthetic experience Hudson River School paintings provide. The catalogue covers, with which this essay began, may be of use here once again as a point of departure: Although developments in history and the history of art are never linear and straightforward, one can nevertheless recognize an unmistakable direction in American landscape paintings of the Romantic period that can be described as an increase in theatricality, with a corresponding retreat of moral and even transcendent meanings, until in paintings like Church's *Niagara* (1857, fig. p. 78), *Heart of the Andes* (1859, fig. p. 69), *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860, fig. 7), and *Cotopaxi* (1862, fig. 8) we are beginning to have representations of pure force, threatening voids, and flaming skies in which revelation no longer emanates from divine will but from what can be called "aestheticization."[17]

The main category used today to describe the aesthetic power of Hudson River School paintings is that of the sublime. The catalogue of the Tate Britain even suggests the existence of an American Sublime – placing American landscape painting in a valued European aesthetic tradition and, at the same time, claiming a specific national version of it. This concept of an American sublime raises the interesting question in what quality this specifically American dimension might be found. Although the term sublime is routinely used in the literature on the Hudson River School, it is rarely specified or employed with any consistency. One reason may lie in the paintings themselves, for one of the striking facts about the Hudson River School is its wide-ranging eclecticism.[18] It is neither consistently sublime, nor consistently beautiful or picturesque, but all of the above and in all kinds of combination, including frequent borrowings of different compositional patterns, and diverse intertextual allusions. There is an obvious influence of the landscape paintings of Claude Lorrain, still adhering to pastoral versions of an aesthetics of the beautiful (cat. 18) to which Cole added elements of the sublime, but not in any consistent fashion. In one painting, he seems to follow the example of Claude Lorrain, in the next that of Salvatore Rosa (cats. 13, 14), in the third both of them at the same time, combining, as in *The Oxbow* (1836, fig. p. 79), Claude Lorrain and Salvatore Rosa in one painting, while in his five-part series *The Course of Empire* (1836, figs. pp. 18–20) the model seems to have been all of the above

7
Frederic E. Church:
Twilight in the Wilderness, 1860,
oil on canvas,
Cleveland Museum of Art

8
Frederic E. Church:
Cotopaxi, 1862,
oil on canvas,
The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Robert H. Tannahill Foundation Fund, Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. Fund, Merrill Fund, Beatrice W. Rogers Fund, and Richard A. Manoogian Fund

and, in addition, the apocalyptic thrills of John Martin, also called "pandemonium Martin."[19]

In the attempt to draw on the authority of the aesthetic concept of the sublime, its meaning and function had been conventionalized and harnessed "for New World purposes."[20] For this, the Burkean sublime had to be transformed. In looking at American landscape paintings, the viewer is rarely confronted with an overpowering divinity or external force, "dwarfing the observer."[21] Instead, in quasi Emersonian fashion, he is placed in a position to draw inspiration from nature by contemplating the majesty of God's creation, often in a panoramic overview.[22] Conventions of the sublime proved useful for American landscape painting in this context, because they seemed to confirm the equation of a grandiose, majestic nature with American national identity. In this equation, religion was a third supporting element. Mythological or typological references often link nature and moral meaning in American landscape painting of the nineteenth century. Otherwise, the, at first sight, strange coexistence of sublime landscape and religious allegories which we encounter in Hudson River School paintings would be hard to explain. It is important to realize, especially from a European point of view, that this religious dimension is not a leftover from earlier, pre-secular times, but part and parcel of the program of the Hudson River School painters for whom nature, nation, and divine predestination are inextricably linked. The sublime of the Hudson River School is hardly ever the Burkean sublime, then, because this would have meant to question the ennobling, benevolent character of the American landscape and thus, by implication, the manifest destiny of the American nation.

With the exception of some allegorical paintings, the sublime in American landscape painting is therefore almost always tempered by dimensions of the pastoral, which, in the words of Richard Slotkin, "assumed that the laws of human nature, if left to work

without the hindrance of artificial institutions, would inevitably produce a 'natural' society in which all of Europe's cultivation and none of its debauchery would flower."[23] The closer one lives to nature, the more human and civilized one will become. If we have images of the dark sublime, reminiscent of Salvator Rosa or the apocalyptic visions of John Martin, it usually appears within a religious or moralizing context of meaning (cat. 7). This does not mean that the grandiose landscapes of the Hudson River School fail to follow the conventions of the sublime. We consistently encounter its typical visual repertoire – violently exaggerated and contorted rock formations, dark caves, towering cliffs, vast vistas, wild, weather-beaten trees, stupendous mountains, hanging rocks, spectacular waterfalls and dangerous torrents – but the sum total is a shift from the threatening and overpowering to the majestic, benevolent or simply spectacular.

There are two interesting consequences of this nationalist transformation of the sublime. In its Burkean version, the strong aesthetic effects of the sublime are produced by the presence of an unknown force. That, in effect, is part of the terror it produces. In the religious allegories of the Hudson River School, a moment of revelation is created by the interference of a stern divine power. But in the landscape vistas, the visionary moment in which man's divine potential is realized is no longer the result of a threatening or overpowering experience. Ships helplessly exposed to a stormy sea, animals in flight, or men in danger to life have disappeared and come up only in religious or historical allegories. These allegories still tell narratives, whereas landscape paintings of the Hudson River School often focus on the representation of a suspended moment in which narrative is arrested and disappears. However, if there is no narrative, human beings may also be expendable. In most American landscape paintings, man is therefore either reduced to an insignificant supporting role as bystander on the sidelines or he has disappeared altogether. His place is taken by the viewer who can no longer delegate the experience of revelation to a representative in the painting. On the one hand, this explains the experience of immediacy and directness celebrated by Baigell. But there is also a risk at work here. As Thoreau makes clear in his report on climbing Mount Ktaadn, it is possible to climb a mountain or look at a landscape painting without having an experience of revelation.[24] The sublime, in this case, becomes a mere convention of representation.

One may argue that this problem in the representation of the sublime – to represent an experience that is by definition unique and unrepresentable and to do this by a set of painterly and iconographic conventions that are always in danger of becoming a formula – provides an explanation for two striking features in the development of the Hudson River School: One is the growing interest in narrativization and allegorization in Cole (fig. 9 and figs. pp. 18–20), the other is a move toward the theatrical, sometimes even sensationalist in Church (fig. 8). Already in *Niagara*, we have a certain degree of sensationalism in terms of subject matter, spectator positioning, and exhibition practices. Subsequently, Church, in his relentless search for ever bigger and more remote wonders of the

creation, moved toward an extension of this theatrical dimension not only in terms of scale. His exhibition practices became increasingly effect-conscious, almost reminiscent of Barnum in their promise to present the wonders of the world. In his paintings, the sublime expands no longer spiritually, but horizontally, while the idea of the sublime as a manifestation of an unknown is replaced by that of a yet unknown territory.

However, what is lost in spiritual transcendence is made up by painterly excess in Church's paintings, an excess that goes in two diametrically opposed directions at once: on the one hand, a spectacular, theatrical mode, and, on the other, a strong element of naturalization toward sheer presence that manifests itself in Church's great emphasis on detail, and anticipates, although still in unprogrammatic fashion, the strong focus on factuality and thingness that we often find in twentieth century American art. These highly spectacular "cosmoramas"[25] have shaped our image of American landscape paintings of the Hudson River School and, by implication, of American art of the nineteenth century.[26] This is true for the United States, but especially so for Europe, where it has become almost habitual to use the flaming sky imagery and the massive naturalism of American landscape painting as key images of American art of the nineteenth century. Not only do the catalogue covers of the major exhibitions in Europe illustrate this point, but also major books on nineteenth-century American landscape painting such as Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture*, or Angela Miller's *The Empire of the Eye* (fig. 10). The catalogue cover of an exhibition of Hudson River School paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 2003 (fig. 11) seems to depart from this pattern, as some other American publications do as well, which prefer not to show flaming skies but the civilized middle landscape. And yet, when we open the volume and look at the title page inside we are back to flaming skies.

These book covers, whether of catalogues or major studies of American landscape paintings, seem to announce that in approaching American art of the nineteenth century we can expect something spectacular, something out of the ordinary, grand, and extraordinary as in Grand Canyon, but also grand as in grandiose exaggeration in which the artist has become a performer and salesman – a sense of spectacle that was already anticipated in Cole's epic series *The Course of Empire* and there especially in *The Consummation of Empire* and *Destruction*, both of them epics worthy of Cinemascope. Indeed, many scholars have stressed the overt theatricality of Cole's allegorical series.[27] I therefore do not see any schizophrenia in the "two

9
Thomas Cole:
Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, 1827–28,
oil on canvas,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,
Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–65, 47.1188

Thomas Coles," the Romantic landscape painter and the painter of historical allegories. In effect, the sublime and theatrical showmanship seem to go together almost effortlessly to form a new type of painting that can indeed be considered unique, no matter how many traces of Salvator Rosa, Claude Lorrain, and John Martin may be found in Hudson River School paintings.

It was Alexis de Tocqueville who had first emphasized a strong element of performance in American culture, interestingly enough at about the time of the emergence of the Hudson River School, and it was the American Van Wyck Brooks who claimed (in *America's Coming of Age* in 1915) that the most fitting category for describing American art would be neither that of highbrow, nor of lowbrow.[28] Instead, Brooks argues, we have to look for something else, a third type of aesthetics that may present a new type of culture in modernity. Attempts to increase interest in American art before 1945 should thus not desperately try to make a case for it as high art in the traditional sense. As our catalogue covers demonstrate, the Hudson River School that we see and appreciate today is one after Hyperrealism and Pop Art, which, in its conflation of high and low, has taken the embarrassment out of glaring colors, and thus, also out of flaming skies. Thus, and paradoxically enough, this type of landscape painting can look very modern today and not quaint at all, exactly because of its strikingly "antimodernist appearance" (Truettner, p. 144).[29] In this contemporary perception, it appears as a colorful precursor of the idea of empty transcendence which Ed Ruscha (fig. 12) and other contemporary American artists have made the basis for a radically semioticized universe in which revelation is produced by the magic of the dematerialized sign.[30] It is this unexpected modernity through which the Hudson River School has begun to overshadow and replace in public perception the painters it has been said to imitate.

10
Cover of the book *Empire of the Eye* by Angela Miller, 1993

11
Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Hudson River School: Masterworks from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art*, Hartford, Conn., 2003

1 The different views of "unspoiled nature" developed in the United States at this time were one of the first and major topics in the field of American Studies when it emerged after the Second World War. On this point cf. Novak 1980, p. 4: "In *Errand Into the Wilderness*, Perry Miller suggest that 'Nature ... in America means wilderness.' In *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith speaks of the American agrarian dream at the Garden of the World. In *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis suggests the idea of Adamic innocence before the Fall. To these three (Nature as Primordial Wilderness, as Garden of the World, as the original Paradise) we can add a fourth – America awaiting the regained Paradise attending the millennium."

2 Baigell 1981, p. 11. Another – charmingly naive – version of this argument is provided in a preface to the richly illustrated volume *The Hudson River and Its Painters*, edited by John K. Howat: "Regarding natural landscape as a direct manifestation of God, these men attempted to record what they saw as accurately as possible. Unlike European painters who brought to their canvases the styles and techniques of centuries, the Hudson River painters sought neither to embellish nor to idealize their scenes." James Biddle, Preface, in Howat 1972, p. 15.

3 William Truettner traces this approach back to the 1930s, the historical moment of the rediscovery of Hudson River School paintings. As he points out, "scholars and collectors in the 1930s believed his landscapes more or less truthfully represented nature. ... Despite occasional distortions, Cole provided what was then called a window on the past – the look, the spirit, the unadorned beauty of the American wilderness in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. – In addition, Cole seemed to provide that window without a lot of artistic fuss. The style of his landscapes, scholars argued, was nature's own – simple, direct, the product of a democratic cast; 'unpretentious' American art was perceived as art that openly revealed itself as spontaneously created." (William H. Truettner: "Nature and the Native Tradition. The Problem of Two Thomas Coles," in Washington 1994, pp. 137/38).

4 Martin Christadler: "Romantic Landscape Painting in America. History as Nature, Nature as History," in Gaethgens/Ickstadt 1992, p. 99. See also Alan Wallach: "Europe, in a frequent nationalistic construct, stood for history and the past, America for the future. European associations ultimately pointed to a history of corruption and decline; America presented a new beginning." (Alan Wallach: "Thomas Cole. Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in Washington 1994, p. 52).

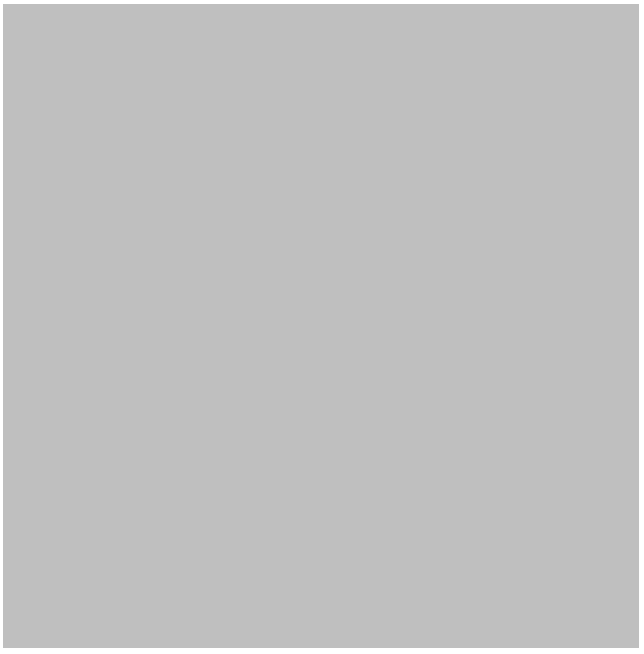
5 For a typical argument of this historicist approach, cf. Alan Wallach: "Instead the aristocracy justified its support for Cole's art in patriotic terms, as usual equating its particular interests with those of the nation as a whole." (Alan Wallach: "Thomas Cole and the Aristocracy," in Doezema/Milroy 1998, p. 94).

6 As Wallach writes, during "the 1820s Cole was considered the 'American Salvator' in recognition of the extravagant sublimity of many of his early landscape paintings." (Wallach 1994, p. 55) For example, in his biography of Thomas Cole, Parry quotes a letter from one of Cole's patrons, Robert Gilmor, Jr.: "I cannot refuse my suffrage in favour of your pictures. They are the best I have seen from your pencil & confirm my opinion of your style which is that of Salvator Rosa." (Parry 1988, p. 63). Then, "during the 1830s, when a new tranquility began to manifest itself in his art, he became the 'American Claude' – or, as one writer put it, 'our' American Claude.'" (Wallach 1994 [see note 4], p. 55) In his *Essay on American Scenery*, Cole describes the impoverishment of those who have not yet learned to look at nature with open eyes by saying, among other things: "What to them is the wild Salvator Rosa, or the aerial Lorrain?" (in Cole 1965, p. 2)

7 Truettner 1994 (see note 3), p. 151

8 Smith's essay is reprinted in Spiller 1929/30, pp. 3–13.

9 In his *Essay on American Scenery*, Thomas Cole writes: "I am by no means desirous of lessening in your estimation the glorious scenes of the 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. No! But I would have it remembered that nature has shed over *this* land beauty and magnificence, and although the character of its scenery may differ from the old world's, yet inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe." (in Cole 1965, p. 12) The American scenery possesses qualities that have already been lost in the Old World: "yet the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness." (ibid. p. 5) Wildness here means "still unspoiled" and therefore imbued with moral meaning: "He who looks on nature with a 'loving eye,' cannot move from his dwelling without the salutation of beauty; even in the city the deep blue sky and the drifting clouds appeal to him. ... The delight such a man experiences is not merely sensual, or selfish, that passes with the occasion leaving no trace behind; but in gazing on the pure creations of the Almighty, he feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind ..." (ibid. p. 3) In short, even though Cole registers with regret "that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away," he concludes: "We are still in Eden." (ibid. p. 12)



12
Ed Ruscha:
La Brea, Sunset, Orange, De Longpre, 1999,
acryl on canvas,
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh,
Heinz Family Fund, 1999.47

[10] Cf. Novak 1980, p. 20: "Cole's career coincided with the discovery of the American landscape as an effective substitute for a missing national tradition." Kornhauser acknowledges this key role of the Hudson River School when she says: „The rise of a school of landscape painters in New York in the mid-nineteenth century has proven to be one of the most important cultural developments in the United States." See Kornhauser's essay in this publication, p. 14.

[11] Miller 1993, p. 5.

[12] Cf. Wallach 1998 (see note 5). For Wallach, Cole's paintings reflect the ideological needs of a landed aristocracy in decline. In view of the popularity Cole's paintings found eventually – or, for that matter, similarly "nostalgic" texts such as the *Knickerbocker* writings of a Washington Irving or Cooper's novels – I find this far too narrow as an explanation. All of these texts, as well as Cole's paintings, were more than "elegies from an aristocracy and a way of life forever lost." (ibid. p. 89) They were also attempts to articulate alternative values that, because of their adherence to principle, possessed an uncompromisingly utopian dimension and could therefore become attractive for groups that were far removed from that of the gentry at that time.

[13] Miller 1993, p. 24.

[14] Wallach 1998 (see note 5), p. 82.

[15] Cf. Novak 1980, p. 16: "There was a widespread belief that America's natural riches were God's blessing on chosen people."

[16] A truly excellent history of the reception of Cole's work (and that of the Hudson River School) is provided by William H. Truettner in his essay "Nature and the Native Tradition. The Problem of Two Thomas Coles." On the cultural and national meaning of Cole in the 1930s, Truettner writes: "The style of his landscapes, scholars argued, was nature's own'simple, direct, the product of a democratic culture in which academic art had in many instances emerged from folk art. Style, in this sense, was given a democratic cast; 'unpretentious' American art was perceived as art that openly revealed itself as spontaneously created. A landscape by Cole became 'American.' in other words, because its style seemed directly to express the artist's intuitive response to a particular scene. That process, at some fundamental level, was thought to duplicate the development of a political system in this country. Like democracy, unpretentious American art had sprung from the soil, from an honest, open spirit that pervaded the land." (Truettner 1994 [see note 3], p. 138) Together with American folk art and such genre painters as Mount and Bingham, Cole, as an example of the Hudson River School, was thus considered a key figure "for setting the artistic standards of a native style." (ibid., p. 145).

[17] On this point, cf. Martin Christadler's characterization of some of Church's major paintings between 1855 and 1866 (*Heart of the Andes*, 1859; *Icebergs and Wreck*, ca. 1860; *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860; *Aurora Borealis*, 1865; and *Rainy Season in the Tropics*, 1866): "As Church produced his series of major paintings in the crisis decade between 1855 and 1866 ... he seems to have searched out and composed landscapes that confronted him and the viewer with the possibility of a universe of sheer matter, governed by flux, catastrophe, and energy, challenging the customary modes of meaning attribution and spiritualization." (Christadler 1992 [see note 4], p. 105/06) However, whereas Christadler sees this increasing focus on "pure force" as a metaphysical comment on the indifference of the creation, reflecting the "culture's growing uncertainty about the moral meaning of landscape and of the natural world generally," (ibid., p. 99). I think that at this stage Church has already reached a level of aestheticization in which the fascination with the spectacle itself begins to dominate.

[18] From the point of view of a modernist aesthetics, eclecticism is a negative term, from my point of view it is a basic aspect of art, since all art is generated by intertextuality. Moreover, it is also a basic element of creativity, since, semiotically speaking, innovation arises from the ever new recombination of signs.

[19] Cf. Parry who, in quoting from Cole's diary, emphasizes Cole's eclecticism: "Quoting a few lines will serve again to show how loosely Cole used such basic aesthetic terms as beautiful, sublime, and picturesque at this stage of his career." (Parry 1988, p. 81) See also Wallach on Cole: "Yet his practice as an artist was essentially improvisatory and eclectic and consequently anti-academic. Indeed he possessed no fixed idea of artistic decorum but instead freely combined styles and traditions in composing his series." (Wallach 1994 [see note 4], p. 82)

[20] Wolf 1985, p. 321.

[21] Novak 1980, p. 34.

[22] In a helpful essay on the "disintegration of the sublime" in Emerson, Dieter Schulz writes: "The disintegration of the High Romantic sublime in Emerson manifests itself in four closely related symptoms. First, Emerson consistently omits or reduces the initial two phases of the sublime, the phase in which, according to Schiller, the subject feels threatened and overpowered by an external force. The element of fear is to him either non-existent or swallowed up in the ecstasy of the inspired moment." (Schulz 1983, p. 28) In applying Foucauldian notions of "the eye of power," Wallach has argued that the spectator of American landscape paintings is placed in a superior position, like a lord overseeing his creation. (Wallach 1994 [see note 4], p. 74) In contrast, the characterization by Schulz tries to describe the spectator's activity and emotional response as inherently contradictory and, hence, more complicated: "Faced with the destructive forces in nature, the ego shrinks, as it were; it is made aware of its own insignificance and lack of power. Yet it also feels irresistibly attracted, sensing as it does that the forces manifesting themselves in nature emanate from an eternal principle; and to the extent that the principle corresponds to an element in the soul, it is made aware of its own divinity. Hence the elation that succeeds the initial sense of fear." (Schulz 1983, pp. 26/27). As a description of aesthetic experience, the latter characterization appears far more plausible to me. In Wallach's version, aesthetic experience seems to derive from nothing else but a "figure of aristocratic domination" (Wallach 1994 [see note 4], p. 75), that is, a feeling (more precisely: an optical illusion) of total control and, thus omnipotence.

[23] Slotkin 1973, p. 203. Novak speaks of the Claudian convention in American landscape painting as an "unquestioned 'given' and provides an answer to her own question, why this convention persevered so tenaciously by saying: "Also, the pastoral aspect of the Claudian convention reinforced those myths of America as a new Eden that were so important in the nineteenth century." (Novak 1980, p. 228–230)

[24] Thoreau 1962, pp. 69–71.

[25] Christadler 1992 (see note 4), p. 108.

[26] Novak speaks of the "operatic works" of Church (and Bierstadt) (Novak 1980, p. 25) and, a bit later, of "the operationally sublime." (ibid, p. 28)

[27] For a superb analysis of the difficulties critics and scholars had in coming to terms with Cole's allegorical paintings, see the essay by Truettner 1994 (see note 3).

[28] Critics have misunderstood this – and are continuing to do so – to mean that American art should not even try to aim at the level of high art but should be happy to settle for second-best. However, critics like Van Wyck Brooks (in *America's Coming of Age*), George Santayana (in his influential essay "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," or Gilbert Seldes (in his book *The Seven Lively Arts*) wanted to draw attention to an entirely new dimension and quality of aesthetic experience, of which the compromise term "middle-brow" can give only a misleading idea. In this "third" type, both a traditionally conceived high art, always in danger of being suffocated by its own tendency toward sacralisation, and popular forms, threatened by commercialization, would be left behind and the best aspects of both realms would be combined to merge into a powerful and vital new type of modern culture in which the dualism between high and low would be overcome. What may be seen as shortcomings from a traditional European point of view is thus turned into unexpected strength. In painting, perhaps the best example of such a state "in-between" is the work of Edward Hopper. To be sure, neither Cole nor Church aimed at such a state in-between but, as we can now see in retrospect, they involuntarily produced one as result of a number of choices they made. In their introduction to the volume *American Icons*, the German scholars Thomas Gaethgens and Heinz Ickstadt also emphasize the "public" dimension of American paintings of the nineteenth century (although, in contrast to the argument developed here, they are inclined to give the term public a more democratic meaning) and conclude: "It was a tradition that countered the imported European division between high and low art and clashed with the institutionalized definition of art promoted by the academies." (Gaethgens/Ickstadt 1992, pp. 4/5)

[29] Truettner 1994 (see note 3), p. 144.

[30] Referring to Church's painting *Icebergs and Wrecks*, Martin Christadler had already observed a "freeing of the signifiers": "We can see in Church's painting the beginning of the freeing of the signifiers from their function of reference to 'reality,' the characteristically Modernist construction of an 'autonomous' object, separated from the world, liberated from the burden of representation. Again I would argue that in the case of Church this 'aestheticization' of a world of ice and empty space served the painter to distance and to control the anxieties arising from the recognition of a possibly nonmoral nihilistic universe." (Christadler 1992 [see note 4], p. 109)

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