Modern Landscapes


Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill), 1825
Signed, bottom, slightly left of center: T Cole.
Oil on canvas
27 x 33 3/4 in. (68.6 x 85.8 cm)
Gift of Charles F. Olney, 1904
AMAM 1904.1183

Painted from a sketch done on Cole's first trip into the Catskills, Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill) is one of three works that catapulted the young artist into a position of contemporary fame and profound influence on future American painting. The fresh naturalism of these paintings served as harbinger of an indigenous, national painting style - the Hudson River School - that celebrated the American wilderness and proclaimed it a divine "New World."

Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill) was one of three landscapes by Cole exhibited in late October or early November, 1825, at William Coleman's frame shop in New York City. The paintings, each priced at $25, attracted the notice of three major figures in the American art world. Colonel John Trumbull (1756-1843), elder statesman of American art and president of the Academy of Fine Arts, first bought Kaaterskill Upper Fall, Catskill Mountains (present location unknown). He then reported his discovery to the writer and artist William Dunlap (1766-1839), who bought Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill) (now at Oberlin), and to the artist Asher B. Durand (1796-1886), who purchased the View of Fort Putnam (present location unknown). All three paintings were exhibited at the New York American Academy of Fine Arts later in the fall, and Dunlap launched Cole's career with articles lauding his self-taught painting style and technique, the inspired product of his enterprising youth and "Americanness."

The emergence of this young American landscape painter coincided almost exactly with the official opening of the Erie Canal across upstate New York. The nationalistic fervor surrounding this event helped foster the mythic perception of Cole as the "American Adam" of landscape painting.

Cole's seminal painting is the culmination of a long tradition of picturesque and topographical landscapes in America. Yet it is relatively free of conventions, not only in its formal elements but also in its iconography. Some of its freshness may be attributed to Cole's itinerant experiences in Ohio and Pennsylvania as well as to his intermittent and uneven formal training. his unsophisticated, emotional response to this particular mountain lake, in which he perceived a "singular effect," encapsulates Cole's lifelong view that, in this divinely-revealed New World, "all nature... is new to art."

Nevertheless, Cole's presentation of this wilderness landscape, "the truly American forest," was tempered by his middle-class upbringing in Lancashire, his study of earlier paintings, and his own innate gifts, the latter evident in both the soft, lyrical color that suffuses Lake with Dead Trees and in the inventive foreground iconography. The painting also reveals Cole's recent, careful study of William Oram's Precepts and Observations on the Art of Colouring in Landscape Painting (London, 1810), whose compositional guidelines and color theories are particularly evident in the Oberlin painting and its development from the artist's initial preparatory pencil sketch.
Although an unidentified reviewer commented in 1825 that the two deer "might have been omitted," as they detracted from a foreground that "has great beauties, but is not so perfect,"10 Kenneth Myers has recently argued that they are part of a sophisticated iconographic scheme.11 He suggests that Cole intended Lake with Dead Trees as a pendant to Kaaterskill Upper Fall, Catskill Mountains (bought by Trumbull in 1825). Although the latter work is now lost, it is known via a replica, Kaaterskill Falls, which Cole painted in 1826 for Daniel Wadsworth.12 The pendants both represent what was actually a settled mountain area as wilderness, with the dead trees in the Oberlin painting perhaps alluding to the effects of lumbering and tourism. And both paintings represent the passage of time through cloud movement, foliage color, and light, while the transition from death to life can be seen in the barren tree trunks at the far left of Lake with Dead Trees, and in the deer moving towards the right and towards the pendant Kaaterskill Falls, with its falling water and receding storm clouds. In Myers's interpretation the placement of the iconographic elements leads the viewer from contemplation of a beautiful, if threatened, wilderness to participation in a sublime vision.

While still a relatively naturalistic landscape, Lake with Dead Trees signals the beginning of Cole's lifelong preoccupation with infusing his compositions with literary, religious, or other symbolic meanings. Cole's paintings, and specifically the formal and iconographic ideas represented in Lake with Dead Trees, were crucial to the development of the Hudson River school, which included such artists as Frederic E. Church, Jasper Francis Cropsey, Thomas, Asher B. Durand, and John Frederick Kensett.

J. Weidman

Biography

Born in Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, England, on 1 February 1801, Cole emigrated with his parents to Philadelphia in 1818. Cole remained in Philadelphia, working as an engraver's assistant, when his family moved to Steubenville, Ohio, later that same year. In May and June 1819, he traveled to the West Indies, and joined his family that fall in Steubenville. Cole lived and traveled in Ohio until the spring of 1823, then joined his family in Pittsburgh, where they had moved earlier that year. By November 1823, Cole was back in Philadelphia, where he drew from casts and old master and American landscape paintings (both originals and copies) at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, studying work by such artists as Salvator Rosa and Thomas Doughty. In April 1825, Cole moved to New York City, and in late summer took his first sketching trip up the Hudson to the Catskills. From then until his death, he traveled and lived in New York State (the town of Catskill in particular) and New England, except for several trips to England, France, and Italy (1829-32 and 1841-42). He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1834. After becoming seriously ill in early February 1848, he died at Catskill on the 11th, probably of pleurisy.

Cole is generally regarded as the first great American landscape painter. He was the first artist to paint and publicly exhibit scenes of the Catskill Mountains and the Mountain House resort area, and remains the most influential artist in that region. Cole was also a founding member of the National Academy of Design (1826) and the teacher of Frederic E. Church.

General References


**Provenance**


New York, American Academy of Fine Arts, 1825. Late fall. No cat.

New York, Stuyvesant Institute, 1838. *Exhibition of Select Paintings by Modern Artists, Principally American, and Living*. 19 November - mid-December. Cat. no. 76, as "Hill Lake, Catskill Mountains."

Columbus, Mo., Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, 1950. October - November. No cat.


**Exhibitions**


New York, American Academy of Fine Arts, 1825. Late fall. No cat.

New York, Stuyvesant Institute, 1838. *Exhibition of Select Paintings by Modern Artists, Principally American, and Living*. 19 November - mid-December. Cat. no. 76, as "Hill Lake, Catskill Mountains."

New York, American Art-Union, 1848. *Exhibition of the Paintings of the Late Thomas Cole*. March. Cat. no. 72.

Columbus, Mo., Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, 1950. October - November. No cat.

Rochester, N.Y., Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1969. Thomas Cole. 14 February - 23 March (also shown at Utica, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute; Albany Institute of History and Art; New York, Whitney Museum of American Art). Cat. no. 2.


Literature


Gilmor, Jr., Robert. Letter to Thomas Cole. 1 August 1826. Manuscript and History Division, New York State Library, Albany.


Catalogue, Descriptive, Biographical and Historical, of the Exhibition of Select Paintings by Modern Artists, Principally American, and Living.... Exh. cat., Stuyvesant Institute, New York, 1838. Cat. no. 76, as "Hill Lake, Catskill Mountains."

Exhibition of the Paintings of the Late Thomas Cole.... Exh. cat., American Art-Union, New York, 1848, cat. no. 72.

Bryant, William Cullen. A Funeral Oration, Occasioned by the Death of Thomas Cole, Delivered Before the


King, Hazel B. "American Artists Discover America." Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin 3, no. 1 (February 1946), pp. 8-9, 17, cat. no. 11, as "Catskill Lake."


**Technical Data**

The painting is in good condition. The canvas was lined prior to its acquisition by the Museum in 1904. The painting was cleaned in 1946, 1958, and completely in 1988, when considerable surface dirt and grime, as well as a white accretion from edge tape, were removed.

The thick, white, finely-layered ground is textured, possibly with a brush, in a crisscross pattern. There is overall cracking and slight cupping of the ground. The painting is primarily painted alla prima, but there is some layering of colors. The paint is moderately applied, with areas of impasto in the trees at the left and in the central sky. The paint surface is in good condition, with minor cracks and slight cupping. There are a few small areas of inpainting, especially at the left and bottom edges.

**Footnotes**


9. Pencil on paper, 17.1 x 26 cm, The Detroit Institute of Arts, inv. 39.254. Executed in the autumn of 1825 on Cole's first sketching trip to the Catskills, the drawing is basically an outline sketch with notations on light and color; in the final painting, the two deer and the upright and fallen dead tree trunks are added to animate and shape the foreground space.


12. Oil on canvas, 63.8 x 90 cm, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum, inv. 1848.15.