

## Research Article

## Catskills Composition by Thomas Cole

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The popularity of landscape painting in the United States grew during the 1830s due to the interest in exploration of native resources. American wilderness became a symbol of this country counterposed to the tamed nature of the Old World. Transcendentalist writings propagating the concept of divine presence in the creation supported the fashion for scenery. Ralph W. Emerson and Henry D. Thoreau popularized meditation in landscape as a method of spiritual purification. "In the woods [...] my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space," wrote Emerson in his famous essay *Nature*, "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me...."<sup>1</sup> The Transcendentalists perceived air as an expression of divinity according to the concept rooted in German philosophy and British Romantic poetry. William Wordsworth described this notion as "the living Air" in his poem "Lines, Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey."<sup>2</sup> These cultural trends influenced the depiction of scenery in the oeuvre of coeval American artists. Early critic Charles Buchanan wrote that light and air were innate for American landscape painting.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Cole, one of the founders of this genre in the United States, developed a specific type of waterscape that embodied the Transcendentalist concept of air. He based this composition on a revised Classicistic middle-ground arrangement that included water in the foreground, mountain in the central background, and equal sky- and landmasses. An example of such setting is his *Sunset, View on the Catskill* of 1833 (fig. 1). Here, Cole opened the creek to viewer and enfolded its waters by the shores to create an aerial space in the compositional center. He used chiaroscuro rather than colors as pictorial means to portray the invisible air. In this waterscape, the painter established the conceptual and formalistic setting, which he used throughout his oeuvre. Several generations of American landscape painters applied Cole's compositional formula in their artwork.



Figure 1. Thomas Cole, *Sunset, View on the Catskill*, 1833. Oil on wood panel, 41.9 x 62.2 cm (16 1/2 x 24 1/2 in.). New-York Historical Society, New York. Gift of The New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts. Courtesy of New-York Historical Society, New York.

This paper's original contribution is a study of the influence of philosophical ideas and a discovery of the impact of scientific concepts on the development of the waterscape formula in American landscape painting. The scholarship on Thomas Cole, championed by such specialists as Ellwood C. Parry, traditionally assigns his symbolism to the impact of religion and literature. The newer studies, e.g. by Jerome Tharaud and Samantha Harvey, follow this fashion.<sup>4</sup> However, philosophy and science also largely affected the Hudson River school masters. The waterscape formula, which Cole and his fellow-landscapists developed, rested on the theories of ether proposed by the nineteenth-century physicists. The presence of these theories at the basis of American landscape painting is new to the scholarship on this subject. Furthermore, meditation on nature that defined their landscapes paralleled the Transcendentalist idea of air and its components, ether and pneuma, as primary elements in philosophical and spiritual sense. The scholarship still undervalues this feature of

<sup>1</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Nature* (1836; rept. Boston & Cambridge: James Munroe & Company, 1849), 8.

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, "Lines, Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798," in *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Henry Reed (1837; rept. Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell, 1854), 193-194, 194.

<sup>3</sup> Charles L. Buchanan, "French Impressionism vs. American Landscape," *The Art World*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Apr. 1917): 48-49, 48.

<sup>4</sup> See Jerome Tharaud, "Evangelical Space: The Oxbow, Religious Print, and the Moral Landscape in America," *American Art*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2014): 52-75; Samantha C. Harvey, "Reading the 'Book of Nature': Thomas Cole and the British Romantics," in Kevin Hutchings, John Miller (eds.), *Transatlantic Literary Ecologies: Nature and Culture in the Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Atlantic World* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 73-90.

American art. Finally, the evolution of the waterscape in Cole's art, as well as his method of compositional revision and stylistic development helped the author to place chronologically his drawing *View of the Catskill Mountain House*. The production date for this artwork was unclear until now. Cole's sketchbooks show the transformation of the waterscape formula that progressed from older to newer paintings through a compositional revision in drawing. This paper presents the discovery of such progress as the method of successive compositional revision in the art of Thomas Cole.

### Origins of Cole's Waterscape Formula

Cole began developing the waterscape formula already in his early drawings, such as *Ruined Castle on a Rock* produced about 1818-1820.<sup>5</sup> Ellwood C. Parry noted on the "oddly empty" compositional center of this drawing.<sup>6</sup> However, its middle contains air and light created through a compositional pause and the gleaming water surface. The element of limpid air was an important symbol that Cole often used in his oeuvre. Tharaud describes landscape features of this artist's work as representations of Christian symbols, e.g., the river bents in *The Oxbow* as Omega from the Revelations.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Cole's rendition of sunlit air reflected the ideas of Romantic philosophy. Parry did not recognize the limpid atmosphere, fundamental for Cole's pictorial concept, as a meaningful iconographical element.

He derived the compositional setting of *Ruined Castle* from the works of French Classicists. This drawing strongly resembles the middle-ground formation of *Pastoral Landscape: The Roman Campagna* by Claude Lorrain, which exposes the same waterscape elements.<sup>8</sup> Both arrangements center sunlit air over a similarly shaped body of water held by the shores that elevate in the background. Nineteenth-century art historian Henry Tuckerman valued "a masterly treatment of light and shade" that created in the pictorial center of a landscape "a seeming space which is one of the most subtle illusions of the art."<sup>9</sup> Lorrain and Cole created such central space filled with air and light in their waterscapes. The similarity of Cole's drawing to the Claudian middle ground continues in details of a castle on the left and the trees

flanking the composition. Cole praised Lorrain as "the greatest of all landscape painters" and studied his oeuvre in reproduction and in European museums.<sup>10</sup> The American painter must have based this sketch on Claude's *Pastoral Landscape: The Roman Campagna*.

The design of this Lorrain's painting was available to Cole in prints. Already in the eighteenth century, Boydell reproduced *Pastoral Landscape* in the first volume of *Liber Veritatis*, a popular edition of Lorrain's compositions.<sup>11</sup> This and similar designs from *Liber Veritatis* influenced Cole's perception of spatial arrangement on canvas.

### Concept of the Limpid Air

The notion of the limpid air rendered in American nineteenth-century landscape painting emerged under the influence of Transcendentalism, which gathered this idea in Romantic reevaluation of the concepts of antiquity. Such representatives of Transcendentalism as Emerson read and referred to the teachings of Presocratics thinkers who propagated the idea of ether.<sup>12</sup> The American landscape painters adopted the ancient concept of ether as limpid air represented in the coeval philosophical trends.

The connection between ether and divine power was established in the deep antiquity. In his poem *Theogony*, Hesiod mentions the god of light Aether.<sup>13</sup> The primordial nature of Aether described by the poet indicates the prehistoric origin of this concept.

Later, Greek philosophers developed the idea of ether as a component of air. Greek language reflects the understanding of the atmosphere as divided into a lower air stratum, *ἀήρ*, an upper stratum of ether, *αιθήρ*, and *pneuma*, the moving air. Presocratic philosophy considered air as primary element, which Anaximenes of Miletus and Diogenes of Apollonia named as a source of all other substances.<sup>14</sup> Plato described

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Cole, letter to William Dunlap, summer 1832, cited in Louis L. Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1856), 171; cf. *ibid*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Lorrain, *Liber Veritatis, a Collection of Two Hundred Prints, after the Original Designs of Claude le Lorrain, in the Collection of His Grace the Duke of Devonshire*, engr. Richard Earlom, 3 vols. (London: vols. 1-2 John Boydell, 1777; vol. 3 Thomas Davison, for Hurst, Robinson, & Co., 1819), vol. 1, cat. no. 42.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Ralph W. Emerson, *The Conduct of Life. The complete works of Ralph Emerson Waldo: Centenary edition*, 12 vols. (1860; rept. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1904), vol. 6, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric Hymns*, with an English trans. by Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), *Theogony* 124-125.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle recorded their teachings in his *Metaphysics*: "Anaximenes and Diogenes held that air is prior to water, and is of all corporeal elements most truly the first principle." *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vols. 17, 18, trans. Hugh Tredennick

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Cole, *Ruined Castle on a Rock*, ca. 1818-1820. Watercolor on paper, 6 x 8 1/2 in. Collection of Mrs. Edith Cole Silberstein. Repr. in Ellwood C. Parry, "Thomas Cole's Early Drawings: In Search of a Signature Style," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Art* (Sept. 1990): 7-17, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Parry, "Thomas Cole's Early Drawings," 8.

<sup>7</sup> "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Revelations 1:8). See Tharaud, "Evangelical Space," 63.

<sup>8</sup> Claude Lorrain, *Pastoral Landscape: The Roman Campagna*, ca. 1639. Oil on canvas, 40 x 53 1/2 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Adele L. Lehman, in memory of Arthur Lehman, 1965.

<sup>9</sup> Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (1867; rept. New York: Putnam's Sons, 1882), 527.

ether as the “most translucent kind” of air situated in the upper atmosphere.<sup>15</sup> His student Aristotle, on the other hand, maintained that ether is the material of celestial region and stars.<sup>16</sup> Emerson often referred to these philosophers, beginning with a comparison between the viewpoints of Plato and Coleridge in his early lecture.<sup>17</sup> These concepts influenced the nineteenth-century thinkers who attempted to unite the natural and the divine in their work.

German Idealism, particularly Hegel’s work, was especially prone to such merge of empirical and spiritual. In his early version of *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel transferred ether from the atmosphere into the realm of ideas as the absolute thought.<sup>18</sup> Scholarship confirms the importance of this philosopher for Emerson, who perceived Hegel’s view of nature as “objective spirit.”<sup>19</sup> His concepts served as a foundation for the philosophical trends of Transcendentalism.

British Romantic poets expressed views similar to both Hegelian notion of ether as absolute thought and Presocratic idea of air as the primary element. Wordsworth described air as “A Motion and a Spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things!”<sup>20</sup> The poet defined air as a living and thinking substance permeating the universe as ether in Presocratic philosophy. Emerson read “a good deal of Wordsworth’s poetry” and was personally acquainted with the poet.<sup>21</sup> The philosopher referred Wordsworth’s concepts on many occasions, including his writings and private correspondence.<sup>22</sup> In his writings and letters, Emerson also cited Coleridge whom he valued as a

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(1933; rept. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), *Metaphysics* 984a5-7.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), *Timaeus* 58d.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Meteorology* (Hartford: Aetna Press, 2015), 339b21-28, 340b29-31, 341a1-4ff; Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, trans. J. L. Stocks (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Library, 2000), vol. I, part 2, vol. II, part 3; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1072a21f.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, “Coleridge,” in *Emerson’s Literary Criticism*, edited by Eric Carlson (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 206-211, 207-210.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature* [Jena notebooks], paraphrased in C.L. Michelet’s foreword in G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature* Vol. I, ed. & trans. M.J. Petry (1970; rept. Abingdon: Routledge 2002), 179-190, 188.

<sup>19</sup> René Wellek, “Emerson and German Philosophy,” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1943): 41-62, 57. See also Robert Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 472-474.

<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth, “Lines,” 194.

<sup>21</sup> Eleanor M. Tilton, “Introduction,” in Eleanor M. Tilton (ed.), *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 7: 1807-1844 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 51-52.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Emerson’s letter to Mary M. Emerson, June 30, 1826, in Tilton, *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 7, 148-150.

thinker.<sup>23</sup> American Transcendentalism incorporated German philosophy and British poetry.

The resulting notion merged Hegel’s concept of ether as absolute thought with the ancient understanding of ether as the upper atmospheric layer. “Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator,” wrote Emerson in his *Nature*.<sup>24</sup> In these words, the leader of Transcendentalists defined the upper air stratum as the source of human and divine thought.

The Transcendentalist notion of ether that embraced nature, divine powers, and human mind appealed to the contemporaries. American artists were aware of this philosophical discussion. In his “Essay on American Scenery” produced in the same year with Emerson’s *Nature*, Cole mentioned ether while describing the sky that “breathes over the earth the crystal-like ether.”<sup>25</sup> The similarity of this concept to Transcendentalist’s teachings is evident.

Furthermore, the artist referred in this quotation to the concept of *pneuma*, the wind, which also originated in the ancient philosophy. Presocratics suggested the interpretation of *pneuma* as moving air. Anaximenes understood *pneuma* as a substance mediating between air and ether.<sup>26</sup> Although none of Anaximenes’s writings survived, his teachings were conveyed in the works of other philosophers. Aetius, for example, cites this Presocratic thinker’s ideas on *pneuma*: “ ‘our soul [*psuche*], being air [*aer*], holds us together, so do breath [*pneuma*] and air [*aer*] encompass the whole world.’ ”<sup>27</sup> This passage described *psuche*, an individual soul, as an equivalent of *pneuma*, the soul of the world.<sup>28</sup> Aristotle described a similar idea in *De motu animalium*.<sup>29</sup> Stoics produced a notion

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<sup>23</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe & Co., 1836), 55; Emerson, “Coleridge,” 206-211; Tilton, *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 7, 185, 237-238, 298-301, 496-497.

<sup>24</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, 62.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *American Monthly Magazine* 7 (Jan. 1836): 1-12, 5.

<sup>26</sup> See Silvia Benso, “The Breathing of the Air: Presocratic Echoes in Levinas,” in Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso, eds., *Levinas and the Ancients* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 9-23, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Aetius I, 3, 4, quoted in Benso, “Breathing of the Air,” 14. Cf. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, eds., *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 158-61.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Keimpe Algra, “The Beginnings of Cosmology” and André Laks, “Soul, sensation, and thought,” in Anthony Long, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 45-65, 59 and 250-270, 252, respectively.

of pneuma as a blend of air and fire, or air and ether.<sup>30</sup> Evidently, the notion linking soul and pneuma, the wind, was characteristic for several generations of Greek philosophers.

Romanticism adopted the concept of pneuma or air as the universal soul. Thoreau produced the idea of “generative energy,” which corresponded with Emerson’s notion of “living air” cited above.<sup>31</sup> However, Thoreau mostly substituted the term “spirit” for the term “pneuma” in accordance with the Christian tradition, which translated the Greek *πνεῦμα* into Latin as *spiritus*. American Transcendentalists and Romanticists applied the transliterated term “spirit” to the revised classical idea of the universal soul.

Analogously to British Romanticists and American Transcendentalists, Cole used the concept of pneuma in his artwork. This artist’s landscapes fused “the spiritual and the natural,” as Harvey.<sup>32</sup> Cole was familiar with the works of the British Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth.<sup>33</sup> The direct influence of Emerson’s writings on this artist needs a proof, but Cole was certainly able to access the Transcendentalist’s philosophy through the press and public discussion. The artist applied their concepts by merging the symbolical and physical aspects of air in his pictorial oeuvre.

### Pneuma and Ether in Cole’s Writings

Cole not only depicted ether and pneuma in the central aerial space of his waterscapes, such as *Sunset, View on the Catskill*. The painter also described these concepts in his poems and diaries. Cole often merged ether, the limpid air, and pneuma, the moving air, and applied the term “spirit” to the resulting notion of the universal soul.

One of Cole’s diary entries from 1835 emphasized the fundamentality and complexity of this notion. The author described “the spirit, that mysterious principle, unknown even to itself, that vivifies this earth, and generates these thoughts.”<sup>34</sup> The last expression echoed Anaximenes’s concept of air as a thinking substance resounded in Hegel’s and Emerson’s writings.<sup>35</sup> Cole’s understanding of air as universal

mind or soul reflected the Transcendentalist views.

The painter’s perception of pneuma was also close to the concept expressed by the Transcendentalists. Emerson wrote of pneuma as spirit: “That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit.”<sup>36</sup> The philosopher described air in form of the omnipresent mind, thus merging Wordsworth’s view with Hegelian notion of ether as the universal knowledge.

Correspondingly, Cole’s perception of these ideas was similar to the views of Hegel and British Romanticists. “A spirit of peace and gentleness breathes over the landscape,” wrote the artist of the Catskill scenery.<sup>37</sup> This description approaches the concept of the universal spirit unfolded in Emerson’s *Nature*.<sup>38</sup> In his mature verses, Cole explicated this concept: “Clouds were driven, / As by God’s breath, into unearthly forms.”<sup>39</sup> He sees wind as an equivalent of divine breath, thus placing pneuma between the natural and divine phenomena. Cole had a precise enough understanding of the concepts of ether and pneuma to express his ideas verbally. His texts show that the artist should have relied on concepts of ether and pneuma popularized by the Transcendentalists in the terms of spirit and universal mind.

### Painting Ether and Pneuma

Cole expressed the fundamental for his oeuvre notion of pneuma in *Sunset, View on the Catskill*. He painted this canvas a year after his first European tour, when the impressions from the Classicists’ art he saw in museums were still fresh. That is why the composition of sunset became a cast of the emblematic waterscape formula, which he learned in Europe.

In this canvas, the artist created an inner space of the sunlit air through a strong chiaroscuro contrast. He separated the scene in two almost even halves of the sky and the earth. The mountains belong to the upper part of the composition, while the sky’s reflection in the creek balances its lower half. In this canvas, Cole developed the middle-ground Classicistic waterscape into a composition of the entire tableau. He opened the creek toward observer and enclosed it in a semicircle of the shores supported by the false elliptic frame. The resulting composition forms a chalice for the atmospheric mass representing pneuma.

He derived the composition of this canvas from Lorrain’s *Landscape with Apollo and the Muses* (fig. 2) that presents a very similar arrangement in the depth of this large painting. Lorrain enveloped a distant lake in hills, trees, and mountains and positioned the lightest ethereal area of the sky over the

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle’s De motu animalium*, trans., comment. and essays by Martha Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985): 703a4-6, 703a23-24, 703a28-29, 736b30f, 456a6-10.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Barker, “Stoic contribution to early modern science,” in Margaret Osler, ed., *Atoms, pneuma, and tranquility: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought* (1991; rept. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 135-54, 138.

<sup>31</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854; rept. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2009), 142.

<sup>32</sup> Harvey, “Reading the ‘Book of Nature’,” 85.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 83; Noble, *Life and Works*, 1856, 410.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Cole, diary entry 31 May 1835; quoted in Louis L. Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole* (Cambridge: E.S. Vesell, 1964), 144.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Laks, “Soul, sensation, and thought,” 252.

<sup>36</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Cole, diary entry 22 May 1836; quoted in Noble, *Life and Works* 1964, 162.

<sup>38</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, 8, 25, 42, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Cole, “A Sunset,” ca. 1843, in Noble, *Life and Works* 1964, 263.



lake as if to indicate the presence of ether in the lake's chalice. Cole used this technique in his *Sunset* for the same purpose.

Another detail referring to the concept of pneuma connects these paintings. Claude's *Landscape* presents a view on Mount Parnassus with the Temple of Immortality with Apollo resting under the trees.<sup>40</sup> The foliage of a tree hosting Apollo differs from all others, as if the wind moved only this tree's branches to indicate Apollo's divinity. In this specific detail, Lorrain alluded to the concept of pneuma as divine breath. Cole applied the same device in *Sunset*: a light wind touches the tree branches in the wilderness, on the left shore, but not on the right bank over the dwelling of man who destroys nature.



Figure 2. Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Apollo and the Muses*, 1652. Oil on canvas, 186 x 290 cm (73 1/4 x 114 in.). Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. Purchased with the aid of the Art Fund and a Treasury Grant 1960. Courtesy of National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

The influence of the Claudean formula is evident already in Cole's paintings of the 1820s. The middle ground of his *View Near the Village of Catskill* of 1827 exposes a waterscape backed by a mountain and flanked by a tree, as in *Apollo and the Muses*.<sup>41</sup> This Lorrain's canvas was reproduced in the second volume of *Liber Veritatis*.<sup>42</sup> Cole should have studied this design and copied its compositional setting.

However, Cole has not yet created his waterscape formula in the early *Village of Catskill*. The artist was evidently searching for the effect of the air goblet: he filled the sky with limpid air mirrored in water and illuminated shrubs around one pond. Nonetheless, the broken body of water excluded the bowl-like

<sup>40</sup> "Claude Lorrain (Claude Gellée), *Landscape with Apollo and the Muses*." *National Gallery Scotland*, accessed 21 August 2017, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/4760/landscape-apollo-and-muses>.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Cole, *View Near the Village of Catskill*, 1827. Oil on wood panel, 24 1/2 x 35 in. Fine Arts Museum / De Young Museum, San Francisco. Gift of John D. Rockefeller 3rd and Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, 1993.

<sup>42</sup> Lorrain, *Liber Veritatis*, vol. 2, no. 126, [*Landscape*], with *Mount Parnassus and the Muses*, the *River Helicon personified*, under the *Character of a River God below*.

spatiality. This problem exists also in Cole's drawing of *Ruined Castle* and in Claude's early canvas *Roman Campagna* with an inchoate waterscape arrangement. Evidently, *Roman Campagna* served Cole as an inspiration for both *Ruined Castle* and *Village of Catskill*.

Before creating his *Sunset* with the explicit waterscape formula, Cole should have studied Claude's oeuvre in Europe. The American artist saw Lorrain's drawings and paintings in the British Museum during his London stay in 1829-1830 and in the Louvre in 1830.<sup>43</sup> The latter museum held several Lorrains at that time that contained a waterscape.<sup>44</sup> The influence of these Classicistic canvases on the young artist was decisive for the compositional development of Cole's post-European landscapes.

In 1830, the Louvre collection also contained artworks by Nicolas Poussin. These two competing Classicists often used the same compositional elements. Poussin's *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake* of 1648, for example, also exposes the major features of the middle-ground waterscape.<sup>45</sup> Charles Landon reproduced this design in his book *Vie et oeuvre complète de Nicolas Poussin* published in 1811.<sup>46</sup> Cole could have seen this Poussin's composition in print and transferred its middle ground arrangement into his canvases.

Other American landscapists also applied the Classicistic middle-ground waterscape in their oeuvre. Already in mid 1820s, Thomas Doughty used this element in *View of the Fairmount Waterworks* before Cole developed his formula.<sup>47</sup> However, Doughty's composition remained within the canons of the Classicistic arrangement. Cole, on the other hand, created a full-scale waterscape from a middle-ground element and boldly sliced the body of water to open the ethereal goblet to observer. He further produced a distinctive chiaroscuro setting to underline the centered lucid space.

### Nineteenth-Century Physics and Chiaroscuro

The popular coeval discoveries in physics strongly influenced the concept of ether in landscape painting. Nineteenth-century

<sup>43</sup> Noble, *Life and Works*, 1964, 107-27.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., Claude Lorrain, *David Anointed by Samuel*, 1647, oil on canvas, 46 1/6 x 59 in., acquired in 1682; *Landscape with Paris and Oenone*, known as *The Ford*, 1648, oil on canvas, 46 15/16 x 59 in., acquired in 1665; *Landscape: Shepherd and Herd*, c. 1630-35, oil on canvas, 12 7/8 x 16 15/16, acquired in 1742.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake*, c. 1648. Oil on canvas, 46 1/2 x 77 7/8 in. National Gallery, London.

<sup>46</sup> Charles P. Landon, *Vie et Oeuvres Complète de Nicolas Poussin. Vies et Oeuvres des Peintres les plus célèbres de toutes les écoles* (Paris: C.P. Landon, 1811), plate 218.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Doughty, *View of the Fairmount Waterworks, Philadelphia*, c. 1824-26. Oil on canvas, 21 1/8 x 29 1/8 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

physicists explained light propulsion and gravitation through ether, a substance supposedly existing in space and atmosphere. Ebenezer Brewer's popular *Guide to the Scientific Knowledge of Things Familiar* comprised the notion of ether as a "very subtle fluid, which pervades all space, and surrounds everything we see."<sup>48</sup> Responding to this theory, Cole referred to the hypothetical substance of "the crystal-like ether" in his "Essay on American Scenery."<sup>49</sup> Brewer and other popularizing authors spread the theories connected to ether, such as luminiferous ether, across the wide public that included the artists.

Doubting the vacuum's ability to transport light through great distances, physicists thought of ether as a medium transmitting solar light to earth. Already Isaac Newton discussed a possible light-bearing medium of ether when considering corpuscular and wave theories of light in his first memoir and his debates with Robert Hooke in the 1670s.<sup>50</sup> In the early nineteenth century, Thomas Young revised the light wave theory and assumed luminiferous ether to be the light propulsion medium.<sup>51</sup> The light-bearing ether became a popular notion, to which Cole referred as "liquid gold" and "living gold."<sup>52</sup> Whether the artist accessed scientific reading or followed the resulting debates in the press is yet unclear.

The notion of ether developed further to explain the related physical phenomena. In the late 1810s, Augustin Fresnel created the ether drag theory concerning the motion of this medium along the movement of the earth.<sup>53</sup> By the mid-century, a British scientist Robert Hunt tried connecting particles and waves of light with ether as the means of light propagation.<sup>54</sup> Even in the 1870s, James Maxwell did not separate his concept of a field of energy from ether. He claimed that ether is "capable of becoming a receptacle of [...] energy."<sup>55</sup> In this concept, the physicist relied on the coeval

light-wave theory that placed ether between the illuminating and illuminated bodies as a light-transferring substance.

American landscape artists adopted the coeval theories of ether from physics. Cole referred to this substance as pervading the universe in his poem: "through the universal ether gazed / up to the golden orbs..."<sup>56</sup> The quality of ether to contain light became an important element of American landscape painting. The depiction of the light-bearing substance required a chiaroscuro-based composition. Cole, therefore, used a contrast of shadowy shores with the illuminated sky and its reflection in his *Sunset* to create an almost palpable central space containing the illuminated ether.

The theories of ether influenced Cole's younger colleagues as well. Jasper Cropsey was one of them, although such specialists as Anthony Speiser ascribe the metaphoric of ether in his work exclusively to religious symbolism.<sup>57</sup> In the 1880s, Cropsey produced an expressive portrayal of luminiferous ether in his mature rendition of *Indian Summer*.<sup>58</sup> Cropsey arranged this canvas according to Cole's waterscape composition and created an effect of lucid air in the central part of the canvas. This vivid light is indicative of the concept of light-bearing ether independent from the motif of sunrays falling from above described by Speiser as a Christian symbol.<sup>59</sup> The artist created a strong chiaroscuro contrast between the dark canvas's edges and its brilliant center that dissolves in a luminescent mist, which refers to Maxwell's popularized idea of ether as "a receptacle" of light.<sup>60</sup> The famous experiment by Albert A. Michelson and Edward W. Morley refuted the existence of ether in 1887, a year after the production of *Indian Summer*.<sup>61</sup> Before this date, the concept of luminiferous ether led to the formation of an entire branch of the Hudson River School, the luminists.

<sup>48</sup> Ebenezer C. Brewer, *A Guide to the Scientific Knowledge of Things Familiar* (1840; rept. London: Jarrold & Sons, 1865), 48.

<sup>49</sup> Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," 5.

<sup>50</sup> Isaac Newton, *Opera*, ed. Samuel Horsley, vol. IV (London: Nichols, 1782), 322-342, 297-298. See also Philip E. B. Jourdain, "Newton's Hypothesis of Ether and of Gravitation from 1672 to 1679," *The Monist*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Jan. 1915): 79-106, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Young, "Experiments and Calculations relative to physical Optics," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 94, 1804 (1): 1-14, 12-13.

<sup>52</sup> Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," 5.

<sup>53</sup> E.g., Augustin Fresnel, "Lettre d'Augustin Fresnel à François Arago sur l'influence du mouvement terrestre dans quelques phénomènes d'optique," *Annales de chimie et de physique* 9 (1818): 57-66, 286.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Hunt, *The Poetry of Science, or, Studies of the physical phenomena of nature* (Boston: Gould, Kendall, & Lincoln, 1850), 96f.

<sup>55</sup> James C. Maxwell, *A Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1873), II: 782.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Cole, "Mine eyes bedimm'd with tears aloft I raised...", July 28, 1835, in Noble, *Life and Works* 1856, 204. Compare with Noble's references to air as "illimitable ether" and to atmospheric ether in his description of *The Dream of Arcadia*, Noble, *Life and Works*, 1856, 385, 413 and 256, respectively.

<sup>57</sup> Anthony Speiser, "Jasper F. Cropsey: Painter of Faith," in Anthony Speiser and Kenneth W. Maddox (eds.), *Jasper Francis Cropsey: Catalogue Raisonné, Works in Oil* (Hastings-on-Hudson: Newington-Cropsey Foundation, 2013), xv-xxxv, xv, xxvi.

<sup>58</sup> Jasper F. Cropsey, *Indian Summer*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 7 x 13 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Bequest of Martha L. Loomis, 1953. Cropsey's earlier versions are: *Indian Summer*, 1866, oil on canvas, 53 x 95 in., Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, and *Indian Summer of the Delaware River*, 1862, oil on canvas, 24 x 41 ½ in., private collection.

<sup>59</sup> Speiser, "Jasper F. Cropsey," xv.

<sup>60</sup> Maxwell, *Treatise on Electricity*, II: 782.

<sup>61</sup> Albert A. Michelson and Edward W. Morley, "On the Relative Motion of the Earth and the Luminiferous Ether," *American Journal of Science* 34: 33-345.

American luminists have eloquently applied the theory of light-bearing ether on canvas. Their slick oil technique conveys the effect of ether permeating the atmosphere. In *The Wilderness* by Sanford Gifford, for example, the painting's surface created in melted brushstrokes seems to emanate light.<sup>62</sup> This canvas based on Cole's waterscape formula is filled with inescapable lucid substance without shadows. Ether pervades even the shady banks encasing the lake because Gifford painted them with the same golden dye as the lights. Preferring chiaroscuro to a colorful palette, the luminists created a coherent representation of the ether theories that existed in coeval physics.

### The Dawn of American Landscape Painting

In the nineteenth-century North America, a new type of art patron emerged that combined commissioner, collector, and sponsor of artists. One of such patrons was a businessman Luman Reed, who acquired Cole's *Sunset, View on the Catskill*. Reed's patronage of American painters was based on his patriotic feelings and "desire to participate in the creation of a native art," as Miller.<sup>63</sup> The rising national consciousness led to appreciation of the native nature. This sentiment motivated Reed to support such local masters as Thomas Cole. American landscape school born under the influence of this artist dominated this country's painting "until the late 1860s," according to Wright.<sup>64</sup> Cole's iconic trends in composition, color, and chiaroscuro are present in the oeuvre of several generations of landscapists.

In the 1830s, Cole was already known in America and American communities in Europe. However, his fame and the number of commissions increased through Reed's patronage. The latter had a picture gallery open to the public one day a week, which drew visitors and promoted the exhibited artists.<sup>65</sup> Reed's business partner Jonathan Sturges well acquainted with his collection grew into one of Cole's strong supporters.<sup>66</sup> The famous *View on the Catskill, Early Autumn* of 1836-1837 was Sturges's commission depicting his property in Catskills.<sup>67</sup> With Sturges's consent, Cole painted a

retrospective of the scenery before the construction of the railroad in the area.<sup>68</sup> The genesis of this painting is evident from the sketches on the pages his *Catskills Sketchbook*.

Chiaroscuro as foundation of Cole's paintings was conditioned equally by his goal of depicting the air and his training as engraver.<sup>69</sup> Cole's drawings show the progress of the chiaroscuro arrangement in his paintings. The pages 66-67 of his *Catskills Sketchbook* (fig. 3) display three studies of a waterscape formula, the larger drawing is inscribed "1834" in the lower right corner. These sketches created a year after the completion of *Sunset* demonstrate the compositional development from this canvas to *Early Autumn*.

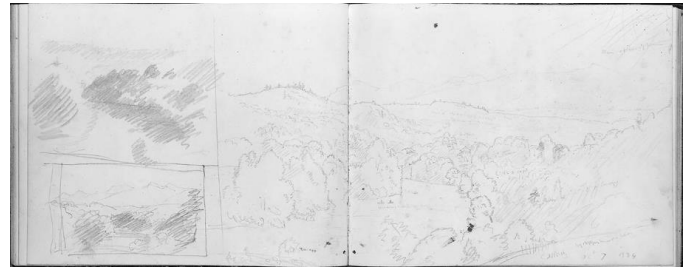


Figure 3. Thomas Cole, [River Landscape], 1834. *Catskills Sketchbook* pages 66-67. Graphite on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm (8 ½ x 11 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Maxim Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Watercolors and Drawings, 1800-1875. Not in Karolik (1962) cat. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Two small drawings on the page 66 display a simple design of partly shadowed banks embracing the white inner space of limpid air. The upper sketch reiterates *Sunset*'s chiaroscuro setting. The slightly altered lower sketch prepares the arrangement of *Early Autumn* (fig. 4). This arrangement is repeated in the panoramic drawing stretched over both folios, in which Cole studied the scenery for the latter painting. These sketches demonstrate that he used a method of successive compositional revision to develop the setting in drawing from the earlier to the newer canvases. The pages 66-67 of *Catskills Sketchbook* also confirm that chiaroscuro was fundamental for Cole's compositions.

In the upper sketch on the page 66, Cole created the sky and river mostly of untouched white paper. The central hourglass-shaped area connecting the sky and water represents pneuma that binds ether with the lower air strata. Cole transferred this chiaroscuro design into *Early Autumn*. Thoreau described a similar mediating substance in *Walden*: "the spirit that is in the air [...], intermediate in its nature between land and sky."<sup>70</sup> The younger contemporary of Cole may have seen paintings by this master or his followers.<sup>71</sup> Thoreau's description reveals

<sup>62</sup> Sanford R. Gifford, *The Wilderness*, 1860. Oil on canvas, 30 x 54 5/16 in. The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo.

<sup>63</sup> Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 151-52.

<sup>64</sup> J. Robert Wright, "Thomas Cole and the Episcopal Church," *Anglican and Episcopal History*, vol. 83, no. 3 (September 2014): 292-318, 293.

<sup>65</sup> Ella M. Foshay, *Mr. Luman Reed's Picture Gallery: A Pioneer Collection of American Art* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 38.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 195f.

<sup>67</sup> Oswaldo R. Roque, "View on the Catskill, *Early Autumn*," *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, exhib. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987), 128-9, 128.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>69</sup> Noble, *Life and Works*, 1856, 16, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 123.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Smithson on influence of landscape painting on Thoreau's work: Isaiah Smithson, "Thoreau, Thomas Cole and



a possible influence of the pictorial spatial concept of American landscape painting on his perception of nature.



Figure 4. Thomas Cole, *View on the Catskill, Early Autumn*, 1837. Oil on canvas, 99.1 x 160 cm (39 x 63 in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift in memory of Jonathan Sturges by his children, 1895. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 5. Thomas Cole, *River in the Catskills*, 1843. Oil on canvas, 69.85 x 102.55 cm (27 1/2 x 40 3/8 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815-1865. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Cole's *View on the Catskill, Early Autumn* is homage to the area as it was before the construction of the railroad. Catskills was his sanctuary that inspired a large number of artworks since his first visit in 1825. *River in the Catskills* (fig. 5), painted in 1843 as a rendition of the same view with the railroad, shows deforestation and the air-polluting train, which this artist decried according to Faison's study.<sup>72</sup> Industrialization meant to Cole the depletion of pneuma in this area. Maddox opposes the pastoral *Early Autumn* to the

"antipastoral" *River in the Catskills*.<sup>73</sup> In the latter, the destructive changes brought by industrialization onto the wilderness signify the withdrawal of pneuma from this area.

The artist morphed the composition of *Early Autumn* into its counterpart, *River in the Catskills*, in a sketch on the pages of *Sketchbook 1839-44* (fig. 6). Folios 5 verso and 6 recto of this book contain two sketches: a brief outline on the left and a detailed study drawn over both folios after the completion of the outline, the method Cole used in *Catskills Sketchbook*. The outline on folio 5 verso of *Sketchbook 1839-44* is similar but not identical to *Early Autumn*, which indicates that the artist kept the composition of this painting in mind while sketching from nature. The detailed study shows the main features of *River in the Catskills*: railroad, absence of trees, angular river bends, and mountains shifted to the right. Cole made a date inscription on folio 6 recto: "September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1842." He created both drawings on this day, outlining after *Early Autumn* and studying the scenery for *River in the Catskills* according to his method of successive compositional revision.



Figure 6. Thomas Cole, *River Landscape (Catskill Creek from Jefferson Heights)*, September 8, 1842. *Sketchbook 1839-44* pages, folios 5 verso – 6 recto. Graphite on cream wove paper, 28.4 x 43 cm (11 3/16 x 16 15/16 in.). Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton. Gift of Frank Jewett Mather Jr. Courtesy of Princeton University Art Museum and Art Resource, NY.

Cole's younger colleagues revised his compositional formula further to express new concepts. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the waterscape appeared in the oeuvre of almost every American landscapist. In the 1870s, Kensett and Gifford revolutionized the formula into a horizontally unfurled laconic composition probably influenced by American postwar pragmatism in philosophy. A small conceptual canvas *Lake George, Free Study* that Kensett painted in 1872 presents such horizontal composition with a strip of land instead of a chalice of shores enveloping the lake.<sup>74</sup> However, the painter kept the division of canvas in two halves: of the sky and of land and water.

In *Free Study*, the celestial blue dominating the canvas depicts ether. W.C. Bryant, Cole's close friend and the leading

Asher Durand," in Richard Schneider (ed.), *Thoreau's Sense of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 93-114, 93-95.

<sup>72</sup> Edward Faison, "Seeing Landscape in Landscape Art," *Arnoldia*, vol. 73, no. 2 (2015): 2-18, 3.

<sup>73</sup> Kenneth W. Maddox, "Thomas Cole and the Railroad," *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1986): 2-10, 7.

<sup>74</sup> John F. Kensett, *Lake George, Free Study*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 10 x 14 1/8 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Thomas Kensett, 1874.



American Romantic poet, named this color “the ethereal blue.”<sup>75</sup> Kensett arranged the chiaroscuro in three gradually darkening bands of the sky, mountain, and water. Each of the strips brightens toward the lower one for contrast, while the sky above the mountains becomes the lightest area. The thinning color of the sky underlines the ethereal nature of the air in this painting.

Despite the absence of the aerial spatial center, ether remained the main conceptual element of *Lake George, Free Study*. The same can be said about Gifford’s horizontal waterscapes created during the 1870s, such as *Mount Katahdin from Lake Millinocket* or *Mount Rainier, Bay of Tacoma*.<sup>76</sup> These paintings feature the strongly simplified waterscape formula comprising its most essential compositional and conceptual elements. However, the presence of luminiferous ether is evident in these canvases’ chiaroscuro and palette. The depiction of air as universal soul was specific for American art. Cole’s waterscape formula distinguished the young original school of American landscape painting.

### Catskill Mountain House

Catskills became popular with the artists and tourists admiring native nature. “Few native localities are more endeared to the lovers of scenery where beauty and grandeur are happily combined, than the Catskill mountains,” wrote Tuckerman in his *Book of the Artists*.<sup>77</sup> One of the favorite destinations in this area was Catskill Mountain House, a resort situated on a mountain slope of a spectacular valley. Cole created at least three canvases, an oil study and several drawings of this scenery. All these works, except for the vertical vista of 1831, display Cole’s waterscape revised: he increased the amount of landmass, moved the lakes to the right and encircled them entirely by land. In these compositions, the artist was searching a way to align civilization and the wilderness, as he did in *The Oxbow*.<sup>78</sup> The chalice of air open to the observer in the views of Catskill Mountain House became a Holy Grail located far off, hidden in its shores, and waiting for the pilgrims.

Cole’s most known depiction of this resort is *A View of Two Lakes and Mountain House, Catskill Mountains, Morning* (fig. 7). The painter drew the scenery from a popular observation point on the southern slope of North Mountain. Carbone opined that Cole was influenced in his depiction of the resort by an engraving from William Bartlett’s drawing *The Two*

*Lakes and the Mountain House on the Catskills*.<sup>79</sup> The engraving was published in the album of prints *American Scenery, or, Land, Lake, and River Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature* in 1840.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the compositions by Cole and Bartlett are similar and drawn from the same vantage point. However, no evidence confirms that Cole had seen Bartlett’s *Two Lakes* before he created his first design of this scenery.



Figure 7. Thomas Cole, *A View of the Two Lakes and Mountain House, Catskill Mountains, Morning*, 1844. Oil on canvas, 91 x 136.9 cm (35 13/16 x 53 7/8 in.). Brooklyn Museum, New York. Dick S. Ramsay Fund. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Cole worked on the scenery of Catskill Mountain House for decades before *American Scenery* was published. The painter sought a compositional solution of this location for his patron Robert Gilmor already in 1826. In July of that year, Cole wrote to Gilmor criticizing the patron’s choice of a vista from the road, because “it is a view up the side of a hill with very little or no distance” and “[n]o water.”<sup>81</sup> The artist searched for another vantage ground, which he found on North Mountain approximately during the summer 1826.

From this observation point, Cole sketched the drawing *View of Catskill Mountain House* (fig. 8). A panoramic study on folios 16 verso and 17 recto of *Sketchbook 1839-44* also was created from this spot.<sup>82</sup> The panorama is datable to 1844

<sup>79</sup> Teresa A. Carbone, “Cole, T.” In *American Paintings in the Brooklyn Museum. Artists Born by 1876*, vol. 1 (London: D Giles Ltd, 2006), 385-87.

<sup>80</sup> *American scenery, or, Land, lake, and river illustrations of transatlantic nature*, from drawings by W.H. Bartlett, engraved by R. Wallis et al., ed. N.P. Willis, 2 vols. (London: George Virtue, 1840), vol. 1, plate 50, 105/6. See also William H. Bartlett, *The Two Lakes and the Mountain House on the Catskills*, 1838. Engraving after an original watercolor, engr. by R. Brandard, 4 ¾ x 7 1/8 in. Published for the Proprietors by Geo. Virtue, London, 1839.

<sup>81</sup> Tomas Cole letter to Robert Gilmor, 1826, July 28; quoted in Carbone, “Cole, T.,” 385.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Cole, *Panoramic Drawing of the Catskill Mountain House, Sketchbook 1839-44*, folios 16v-17r. Graphite on

<sup>75</sup> William C. Bryant, “The Waning Moon,” in William Cullen Bryant, *Poems* (Dessau: Katz Brothers, 1854), 258-59, 258. See Noble, *Life and Works*, 1856, 7, 400.

<sup>76</sup> Sanford R. Gifford, *Mount Katahdin from Lake Millinocket*, 1879, oil on canvas, 4 ½ x 8 ½ in., private collection; *Mount Rainier, Bay of Tacoma*, 1875, oil on canvas, 21 x 40½ in., Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma.

<sup>77</sup> Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists*, 223.

<sup>78</sup> See Harvey, “Reading the ‘Book of Nature’,” 84, 86.

because the folio 6 verso of this *Sketchbook* is inscribed “August 5<sup>th</sup> 1844.” Specifying the creation data for *View of Catskill Mountain House* is difficult. Carbone and Louis Hawes opined that the panorama preceded this single drawing.<sup>83</sup> However, producing a detailed study before a compositional concept would be illogical. Cole usually chose a standpoint, drew an outline, and only then studied the scenery in detail, as he did preparing for *Early Autumn* and *River in the Catskills*.

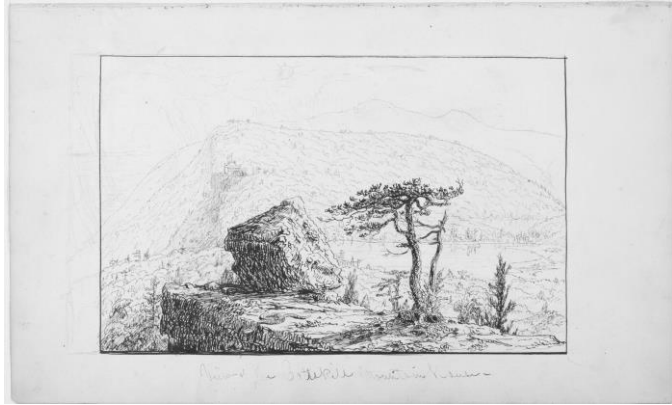


Figure 8. Thomas Cole, *View of the Catskill Mountain House*, 1826-1844. [Verso: *Mountain Landscape with Lake*]. Pen and black ink over graphite on cream wove paper, 23.9 x 39.4 cm (9 7/16 x 15 1/2 in.). Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton. Gift of Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. Courtesy of Princeton University Art Museum and Art Resource, NY.

The drawing *View of Catskill Mountain House* was Cole's first compositional idea, which he studied in a panoramic sketch and developed on canvas subsequently. The design of *View of Catskill Mountain House* is almost identical to the canvas *Catskill Mountain House: The Four Elements*.<sup>84</sup> The same revised waterscape formula seen from above aligns the drawing and *The Four Elements*. Both these compositions, unlike *A View of the Two Lakes*, center the South Mountain and the Kaaterskill High Peak behind it.<sup>85</sup> Finally, the details correspond: the heavy rain falling from clouds on the top of the South Mountain in the painting is sketched in pencil in the drawing. The artist evidently based the composition of *The Four Elements* on this single drawing, which is also Carbone's opinion.<sup>86</sup> The panoramic study, on the other hand, served as the pictorial source for his painting *View of Two Lakes* created in 1844. Both Carbone and George maintain that Cole

produced *Four Elements* in 1843-1844.<sup>87</sup> Ellwood Parry dates *View of Two Lakes* to the end of 1844 – early 1855.<sup>88</sup> Then *Four Elements* preceded this painting and, consequently, *View of Catskill Mountain House* preceded the creation of the panoramic study in 1844.

Cole also could have drawn *View of Catskill Mountain House* many years before he created the canvases of this scenery. This artist similarly made in 1829 a sketch for his canvas *The Oxbow* produced in 1836.<sup>89</sup> Textual evidence confirms such possibility for the Mountain House. Cole recorded his observation of a storm in the Catskill Mountains in the late autumn 1826.<sup>90</sup> A 1987 letter from Alexander Gallery in New York to the Princeton University Art Museum dated *The Four Elements* to the late 1820s.<sup>91</sup> The gallery curators evidently connected this painting to Cole's description of the rainstorm. Depiction of the rain in *View of the Catskill Mountain House* was his initial vision transplanting the storm into the resort valley. The artist could have outlined this drawing between 1826 and 1829, when he left on his first European tour, or upon his return to the States.

Cole returned to this composition in 1843, after his second European journey. He felt newly inspired by the Catskills' "magnificent mountains," as he wrote to George W. Greene.<sup>92</sup> This inspiration initiated the creation of the panoramic drawing and, subsequently, the canvas *View of Two Lakes*.

The technique of *View of Catskill Mountain House* corroborates the suggestion that the drawing was an early production started before Cole's first European sojourn. This drawing consists of several pencil and ink layers made on different dates. A hand that produced the partly erased pencil underlay of this drawing was much less trained, than the hand that sketched the panoramic study. Hawes even claimed that the easily sketched sun in *View of Catskill Mountain House* was "[s]ome child's pencil scribbles."<sup>93</sup> However, the

<sup>87</sup> Carbone, "Cole," 386; Hardy S. George, *Tempests: Tempests and Romantic Visionaries. Images of Storms in European and American Art* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Museum of Art: 2006), 77.

<sup>88</sup> Ellwood C. Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination* (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 303.

<sup>89</sup> See Alan Wallach, "Making a Picture of the view from Mount Holyoke," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Art* (Sept. 1990): 35-45, 37-38.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Cole, "Storm in the Catskills," in Noble, *Life and Works*, 1964, 43-45.

<sup>91</sup> Alexander Gallery, New York, letter to the Drawings Department, Princeton University Art Museum, 1987, curatorial files: Thomas Cole, *View of Catskill Mountain House*, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Cole letter to George W. Greene, 1842, Aug. 29, Thomas Cole Letters, [undated] and 1840-1842. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>93</sup> Hawes, "Sketchbook by Thomas Cole," 21, footnote 19.

paper, 11 3/16 x 16 15/16 in. Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton.

<sup>83</sup> Carbone, "Cole," 386; Louis Hawes, "A Sketchbook by Thomas Cole," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1956): 2-23, 21.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Cole, *Catskill Mountain House: The Four Elements*, 1843-44. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36 in. Alexander Gallery, New York / private collection.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Carbone, "Cole," 385.

<sup>86</sup> Carbone, "Cole," 386.

shadows from this light source inked by Cole's hand on the slope of South Mountain refute Hawes's claim. Cole must have produced this drawing at a much earlier date than the panoramic study of 1844.

The monotonous inking of the background and middle ground in *View of Catskill Mountain House* indicates Cole's style and proficiency of the 1820s. During this decade, he studied illustrations in instructional books, such as *Precepts and Observations on the Art of Colouring in Landscape Painting* by William Oram.<sup>94</sup> These illustrations strongly influenced Cole's style of these years and made his inking studiously monotonous.<sup>95</sup> The main ink layer in *View of Catskill Mountain House* consistently displays the manner he used in the 1820s.

However, the foreground rocks and trees in this drawing show a much higher artistry and technique. The artistic maturity is noticeable in precision and variety of the ink strokes, as well as in the overall expressiveness of the depicted elements. The shadows on and from this foreground formation fall in a different direction than those in the first ink layer. This second, invisible light source is a sun setting on the right, as in *Sunset* (fig. 1). The mastery of the front overlay suggests that it was a revision made in Cole's prime years.

This front overlay depicts a tersely cutting into the landscape rocky foreground, absent in the panoramic sketch and different in *Four Elements* and *View of Two Lakes*. Cole must have initially left the front of the drawing empty, as in the panorama, and added the platform later, possibly even after he completed the paintings. Thus, the creation dates for *View of Catskill Mountain House* range from 1826 for the initial pencil-and-ink outline up to the mid-1840s for the foreground addition. Then he must have created his first design for the Mountain House independently from Bartlett, which does not exclude the latter's possible influence on some elements of Cole's *View of Two Lakes*.

The final enigma of *View of Catskill Mountain House* are four slightly oversized birds and three rowers in a boat boldly inked over the lake in a manner similar to that of the rocky foreground formation. This detail of the mature ink overlay is reproduced in the catalog of the Hudson River school drawings exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 1969–1970.<sup>96</sup> Today, only their traces remain on the surface of this

drawing.<sup>97</sup> Evidently, these birds and boaters were erased after the Brooklyn exhibition, because some specialists doubted their authenticity, as Hawes doubted the sun in this drawing. The deleted birds and boaters could have been Cole's afterthought added in the 1840s essential to underline interaction between man and nature, a topic important for the artist in the Catskills scenery.

### Beauty and Grandeur

The excessive revisions indicate that Cole pursued beauty of a self-sufficient artwork in *View of Catskill Mountain House*. Beauty had both aesthetical and ethical values for the artist. In "Essay on American Scenery," he underlined "an almost inseparable connection between the beautiful and the good, so that if we contemplate the one the other seems present."<sup>98</sup> This notion is close to the union of ethical and aesthetical conceptualized in Emerson's *Nature*.<sup>99</sup> In Europe, John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites fused these categories into a phenomenon, which the early critic Robert de la Sizeranne dubbed "the Religion of Beauty."<sup>100</sup> The merge of ethical and aesthetical was characteristic for Romanticism and the early post-Romantic culture.

Cole further associated the contemplation of beauty in nature with religious devotion. He asserted that "in gazing on the pure creations of Almighty, he [the observer] feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind..."<sup>101</sup> Wight traces Christian tendencies in the oeuvre of this master.<sup>102</sup> In his landscapes, however, Cole mainly was interested in meditation on nature. This trend began in Romantic poetry with Coleridge's call to "worship Nature in the hill and valley."<sup>103</sup> Scholars maintain that the devotion to nature's beauty as an earthly expression of deity was characteristic also for European Romantic painters, such as Friedrich.<sup>104</sup> This trend indicates the devotional aspect of Cole's *View of Two Lakes*.

American Transcendentalists generated a fashion of religious quest in the wilderness based on a concept of nature as a

<sup>97</sup> See [artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/3559](http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/3559).

<sup>98</sup> Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," 2.

<sup>99</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, 17.

<sup>100</sup> Robert de la Sizeranne, *Ruskin et la religion de la beauté* (Paris: Hachette et cie, 1897); Robert de la Sizeranne, *Ruskin and the Religion of Beauty*, trans. the Countess of Galloway (New York and London: George Allen, 1899).

<sup>101</sup> Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," 4.

<sup>102</sup> Wright, "Thomas Cole," 298.

<sup>103</sup> Samuel T. Coleridge, *Osorio, A Tragedy, as originally written in 1797* (rept. London: John Pearson, 1873), 21.

<sup>104</sup> See Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 38; William Vaughan, *Romanticism and Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 142-143, and Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 76f.

<sup>94</sup> William Oram, *Precepts and Observations on the Art of Colouring in Landscape Painting*, ed. Charles Clarke (London: R. Taylor and Co., 1810).

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Parry, "Thomas Cole's Early Drawings," 14-15; Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. William Truettner and Alan Wallach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 23-112, 27-28.

<sup>96</sup> Jo Miller, ed., *The Drawings of the Hudson River School, 1825-1875*, exh. cat. Brooklyn Museum, 1969–1970, (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1969), 42, cat. no. 29.

temple. Numerous tourists visited local scenery, transforming a tour to the Mountain House, which Myers dubbed their “new Mecca,” into a pilgrimage.<sup>105</sup> Cole’s canvases embodied the novel awareness of the ethical role of nature’s beauty. He sought to evoke in observer of his art a meditative state characteristic for contemplation of nature. A pilgrim meditating on scenery in *View of Two Lakes* is a key to this picture’s meaning, as are the figures in Friedrich’s landscapes.

In this painting, Cole thematized a union between civilization and nature in Romantic tradition of a spiritual pilgrimage. The artist shifted the lakes into the middle ground, thereby returning to the Claudian setting, and positioned the resort similarly to the Temple of Immortality in *Landscape with Apollo* (fig. 2). The Catskill Mountain House overlooks the valley as sentinel safekeeping the nature, in contrast to an inessential shadowy hut on *Sunset*’s outskirts. In *View of Two Lakes*, Cole suggested that the solution to the early ecological issues lies in giving men the role of nature’s keeper.

The papers criticized *View of Two Lakes* when the canvas was first exhibited in 1845. The observer of *New York Herald* wrote of Cole: “As a colorist he is feeble, but, for conception of grandeur and high-toned execution, he has no rival in America.”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, Cole’s restrained palette degraded in this painting into an almost monochrome brownish-green. Cropsey repeated this arrangement ten years later with much brighter colors but less repose. In his *Catskill Mountain House*, Cropsey copied most of the compositional elements from Bartlett.<sup>107</sup> Cole was more autonomous in design, but used limited stylistic means, such as monotonous palette, fractured chiaroscuro, and decentralized broken body of water. As a result, his altered composition produced no aerial space within this landscape, albeit he accomplished this task in the drawing *View of the Catskill Mountain House*.

### The Waterscape Formula

Cole applied the waterscape formula during his entire life and passed this composition to his younger colleagues from the Hudson River School. Cole’s famous pupil Frederic Church based many of his depictions of North and South American scenery on this waterscape composition. Church’s programmatic canvas *The Heart of the Andes* depicts the grandeur and beauty of Ecuadorian scenery with the waterscape formula in the foreground.<sup>108</sup> His compositions

aligned with the Transcendentalist aestheticism of environment advocated by Thoreau.<sup>109</sup> The artist’s manner approached the rigorous detailization and search for the ultimate beauty of the Pre-Raphaelite and Ruskin, whom Church admired.<sup>110</sup> Since the 1850s, the tendency to blend the ethical and aesthetical spread widely in American culture.

Albert Bierstadt, another young member of the Hudson River school, continued the theme of nature’s beauty and grandeur. Bierstadt composed many of his representations of American West in the waterscape formula, for example *Rocky Mountain Landscape* located in the White House.<sup>111</sup> The brightly lit center of this painting focuses viewer’s attention on the air captured in the chalice of the lake and stately mountains. The shadowy foreground juxtaposed to the illuminated center underlines the lucidity of the air. Such chiaroscuro arrangement “reveals the spirit that is in the air,” as Thoreau wrote in *Walden*.<sup>112</sup> This painting depicts the limpid air as universal spirit undisturbed in the wilderness according to Transcendentalists’ concepts and Cole’s composition.

In his chalice-shaped waterscape, Cole formulated the conceptual and formalistic principles that became fundamental for the nineteenth-century American landscape painting. The waterscape formula pictorially expressed the defining concepts of coeval American culture: luminiferous ether, the air as universal mind, and pneuma as wind and nature’s soul. Cole depicted these invisible constituents of air through the means of chiaroscuro by creating an illusory aerial space in the compositional center. He applied the method of successive compositional revision in drawing to transform an earlier composition into a setting of a new canvas. The artist developed his waterscape in the scenery of Catskills that became his home and the major source of inspiration. Cole’s waterscape formula defined the national landscape and distinguished the original American school of landscape painting. Its laconic design distilled the main trends of the nineteenth-century philosophy, science, and literature to create the visual self-awareness of American nation.

<sup>105</sup> Kenneth Myers, *The Catskills: Painters, Writers, and Tourists in the Mountains 1820-1895* (New York: Yonkers, 1987), Chap. III: 37-64.

<sup>106</sup> Anon., *New York Herald*, 1845, 3; quoted in Carbone, “Cole,” 387.

<sup>107</sup> Jasper F. Cropsey, *Catskill Mountain House*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 44 x 29 in. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis.

<sup>108</sup> Frederic E. Church, *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859. Oil on canvas, 66 1/8 x 119 1/4 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>109</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 128, 130, 174, 183.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Pablo N.S. de Santamaria, *The Journey of Frederic Edwin Church through Colombia and Ecuador, April-October 1853* (Villegas Editores, 2008), 115.

<sup>111</sup> Albert Bierstadt, *Rocky Mountain Landscape*, 1870. Oil on canvas, 36 5/8 x 54 3/4 in. White House, Washington, D.C., Gift of The Barra Foundation, Inc., 1981.

<sup>112</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 123.