

***Inventing the American Landscape:
Art & Nature in the Hudson River Valley***

A talk delivered to a meeting of:
the Hudson Valley Greenway Conservancy
Greenway Conservancy for the Hudson River Valley, Inc.
Greenway Heritage Conservancy HRV, Inc.
Maurice D. Hinchey Hudson Valley River Valley National Heritage Area

By

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Let me open by expressing my sincere thanks to Barnabas McHenry and Kevin Burke for inviting me to address this august gathering. Today I want to talk to you about two big, intertwined ideas. First, that American landscape art – manifested through drawing, painting and prints -- was born in the Hudson Valley. Second, that from the beginning the artist's appreciation of scenery went hand in hand with the mission of public access and the values of environmental responsibility. George Perkins Marsh, an early voice in the American conservation movement observed that,

“Vision is a faculty, seeing is an art”

Few today know that one of the great American drawing academies was founded at West Point. When Sylvanus Thayer became superintendent in 1818, he specified two hours of drawing a day, for all second and third-year cadets. Apart from knowing how to produce mechanical drawings and maps, military officers were expected to know how to think visually—not just to produce chorographic views of new territories, but also to be able to discern anomalies and

changes in the terrain, which could inform their decisions under fire. Thayer's drawing-master was French miniaturist Thomas Gimbrede, who noted that,

“Drawing is all curved lines and straight lines. Anyone can draw a curved line. Anyone can draw a straight line. Therefore, anyone can draw”

These were heady times in American schoolrooms. Reformers like Rembrandt Peale, Hector Humphreys, Horace Mann and others promoted universal education, including drawing and penmanship. A working-person might know how to read a book, but not their master's longhand. Teaching cursive handwriting to all was another way to level the playing-field.

Peale observed that drawing and writing were reciprocal skills.

“Writing is nothing more than drawing the forms of letters. Drawing is nothing else than writing the forms of things”.

Horace Mann called drawing a moral force. As the Young Republic began to form its identity, public demand for scenic vistas fueled a publishing boom—at first in Philadelphia, then soon after in New York. Artists like William and Thomas and William Birch, Charles Willson Peale, Thomas Doughty and others specialized in river views—at first along the Schuylkill and Delaware, and later the Hudson Valley.

Within a couple of decades, the great North River had become a magnet for landscape artists.

A young Briton who had emigrated to Ohio, before moving to New York produced this painting of Fort Putnam in 1826, giving birth to what is known today at the Hudson River School. His name was Thomas Cole.

Five years earlier, Irish painter William Guy Wall and author John Agg had traveled from what was then believed to be the source of the Hudson River in the Adirondacks to New York Harbor.

Over the next four years, Wall and printmaker John Hill produced a remarkable series of hand-colored etchings, which were published with travel-narratives by Agg.

The Hudson River Portfolio is divided between canonical picturesque views and natural wonders, including a preponderance of waterfalls. I wondered why. And then it occurred to me that people looking at these images in 1820 might have seen more than just thrilling scenery. Some would have recognized these falls as untapped hydropower, perfectly suited to manufacturing.

While it is only a theory, it is possible that some of Wall's backers were looking to promote commercial development in the upper Hudson Valley. Tourism would not develop in these regions for another couple of decades, after canals and railroads had penetrated the wilderness.

Years later, two thousand miles to the west, upon meeting a group of prospectors entering the Boulder Valley in central Colorado, an Arapahoe chief named Niwot is quoted as saying,

“People seeing the beauty of this valley will want to stay, and their staying will be the undoing of the beauty.”

Indeed, the steamboats and railroads that delivered travelers to upriver resorts, Lakes George and Champlain, to Adirondack camps and the White Mountains an American Grand Tour, dependent upon the same industrial economy that poisoned wild rivers and filled the air with soot from coal-burning vehicles, factories and cities. In his painting of the Lackawanna Valley, George Inness shows us the fate of the forest—a field of stumps. The trees have been recycled as fence-rails and railroad ties. Distant Steamtown, with its fuming chimneys and brick-bound dystopia recalls the question posed by William Blake,

“And was Jerusalem builded here
among these dark Satanic Mills?”

In his epic poem *The Lament of the Forest*, painter Thomas Cole described the rape of the land, stripped of its beauty by human greed. Here are a few lines, which presage Richard Powers’s Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *The Overstory*.

*“Echo, whose voice had answered to the call
Of thunder or of winds, or to the cry
Of cataracts — sound of sylvan habitants
Or song of birds — uttered responses sharp
And dissonant; the axe unresting smote
Our reverend ranks, and crashing branches lashed
The ground, and mighty trunks, the pride of years,
Rolled on the groaning earth with all their umbrage.*

By the time Cole’s student Frederic Church painted Niagara, the falls had already become a well-established tourist destination. Artists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, who had accompanied railroad and mineral surveys of the American West helped sell the idea of national parks to Congress. Cole’s lament and George Perkins Marsh’s dire predictions helped shape the thinking of subsequent activists like John Muir, John Burroughs and Rachel Carson. If we are to preserve nature’s treasures, we must continue to develop new ways to bring human beings into deeper contact with nature, without consuming it—except as personal experience, while *leaving no trace*. One need not be an artist in order to benefit from writing, drawing, and journal-keeping. These are proven methods for transforming experience into knowledge. Pulling into a highway scenic overlook to snap a few pictures avoids any significant

engagement with nature, which can be its own best advocate, if only people will take time to interact with it. Clean rivers, heritage itineraries, historic sites, improved hiking and rail-trails, and open spaces, let citizens reacquaint themselves with nature.

The more profound their experience, the more likely they will be to discover how deeply they care about these resources, and perhaps take steps to protect them. Over the years, many artists have taken up the cause. Explorers and artists were always pathfinders. In many ways, they were the first tourists. They showed the world what America looked like.

Following their example—perhaps at an easel, or with sketchbook in hand—we can deepen our experience of nature, enriching our encounters with all of its wonders.

With the rise of social media, and a new revolution in printed matter underway, there are countless opportunities for nature conservancies and preservationists to partner with the arts. Environmental humanities programs at University of Pennsylvania, Colby College, and elsewhere are rapidly discovering that the arts—not just as individual expression, but more as personal engagement—can provide common ground between science, history, and the societies they serve. This was true in the nineteenth century. It is still true today.

The American landscape was invented in the Hudson Valley—a vision being reborn today.

Foregrounding the arts in new initiatives like the Empire State Trail not only honors that legacy.

It will assure their success. Thank you.