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## **Interactive Education at Cedar Grove: Studying Thomas Cole In-Depth**

2008 is an exciting time to be a part of the team at Cedar Grove for administrators, scholars, docents, and interns alike. The Thomas Cole National Historic Site is experiencing a period of intense growth this year, with the help of a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities through its “Interpreting America’s Historic Places” program. This grant of over \$320,000, awarded to TCNHS in September of 2007, will allow the site to improve its methods of communication and education. With the NEH grant, Cedar Grove will be able to take art historical education to the next level, in the form of an interactive website, digital catalogue raisonné of Cole’s works, on-site computer kiosks, a short film, and new interpretive exhibitions. For the purposes of this paper, I will be mainly discussing the interactive website, which I worked on with Professor Karen Lucic during the summer of 2008 through the Vassar College Ford Scholarship program.

As a former docent and intern at TCNHS, I can relate to the difficulties of teaching visitors to the site about Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School in the short time frame allotted for a tour. Longer tours risk tired feet and shortened attention spans, and at times the diverse interests of a tour group prohibit the docent from touching upon all the varied aspects of the site. Interactive education options at Cedar Grove will enable visitors of all kinds – students, art enthusiasts, scholars, tourists, historians – to learn more about Thomas Cole at their own pace, in a relaxed setting, and in ways that cater to

their own interests. Interactive education also enables TCNHS to reach outside its usual audience by making the website accessible at the public level, allowing people interested in the Hudson River School to access the website from the comfort of their own home.

### **What is the Interactive Website?**

The interactive website at TCNHS is loosely based on the Rubin Museum's "Explore Art" website, which is definitely worth a visit for learning about Himalayan art ([www.exploreart.org](http://www.exploreart.org)). Historicus Inc.'s Charles Forcey designed the Rubin website, and he is currently designing Cedar Grove's website as well. The TCNHS website will include two main parts – the "decoding" of some of Cole's most famous paintings, and an interactive map of the Hudson River Valley during the nineteenth century. Both parts will be accessible by links from the main page, which features an introduction to the site.

The decoding section, which was the bulk of my research this summer, will feature two parts: a "Gallery" section, including eight of Cole's most famous paintings, and a "Narrative Series" section, which is comprised of Cole's *The Course of Empire* and *The Voyage of Life*, for a grand total of seventeen paintings. Each painting will have an "About" section that introduces the work and provides background information. The decoding itself is made up of pre-determined "hotspots," items within the painting that will be highlighted when the user drags the mouse over them. When the user clicks on these highlighted objects, they will become enlarged and a pop-up box of text will appear, explaining the significance of the item. For example, a visitor to the site exploring Cole's painting *Falls of the Kaaterskill* will be able to click on the Native

American figure in the center, and a pop-up box will appear explaining the significance of the Native American in Cole's work. Each painting will have anywhere from four to twelve of these hotspots. Kait Manning's preliminary research into the hotspots was the point of departure for my summer project, and her thorough notes were immensely helpful in the writing of the decoding text.

In addition to the "About" section and the decoding component, there will also be a "Comparisons" section, which provides the viewer with comparative images and short accompanying explanations on a side bar. Examples of these comparative images include Cole's sketches and oil studies for the final painting, other finished works by Cole, works by other Hudson River School artists, and contemporary European works that Cole may have been influenced by. In addition, there will be a "What Did Cole Think?" section for each painting, which offers Cole's own thoughts – in the form of his journal entries, poems, correspondence, and compositions - relevant to the work in question.

When writing the "About" sections and pop-up texts, it became apparent that some terms might be unfamiliar to a new audience. Therefore, throughout the decoding section, words or terms that require further explanation will be highlighted in bold, and linked to a glossary page. Users can click on these terms – such as "Hudson River School," "*en plein air*," and "Kaaterskill Falls" – and they will be brought directly to an alphabetized glossary page. The same format will apply to the names of notable people, including Cole's patrons, family members, and fellow artists, which will be linked to a section entitled "Cole's Circle." Included will be short entries with biographical details and an explanation of the person's connection to Cole.

The interactive map section, still in progress, will feature a period map of the Hudson River Valley, stretching from New York City in the south to the Adirondacks in the north, with a close-up on the Catskill Mountains region. This base map will have several different functions. The first of these is “Sketching Spots,” which locates on the map most of the different areas of the region frequented by Cole and the Hudson River School artists on their sketching trips, such as Kaaterskill Falls, the Catskill Mountain House, Lake George, and the Highlands. When a user clicks on one of these locations, a pop-up will appear with a short explanation of the area’s significance and images of sketches and paintings created at that location. Many of these areas will be connected to the Hudson River Art Trail, and a link to the Art Trail’s website will allow viewers to plan their own visit to these hallowed grounds.

The second function of the map is “Artists’ Homes,” which locates the homes and studios of the Hudson River School artists and the writers associated with them, such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant. The same format will apply to this function; when a location is clicked, a pop-up introduction will appear, along with images of the site (period drawings and paintings as well as contemporary photographs). The list of locations will be comprised of both sites that remain standing today and sites that no longer exist, such as Cropsey’s Aladdin. In the case that the home is open to the public, a link to the site’s website will also be available in the pop-up.

A third map function is “Catskill in Cole’s Time,” which will utilize the close-up map of the Catskill region to provide period engravings, illustrations, and photographs of the area in order to demonstrate what it may have looked like when Cole was living and

working there. These types of images include: tourist attractions, such as Loeffler's photographs of the Catskill Mountain House and the surrounding mountains; industry, such as photographs of Austin's Paper Mill and the ice factories; the village of Catskill, such as photographs of Main Street and Cole's Grove; transportation, such as illustrations of the Hudson River steamboats and the Catskill railroads; and the many drawings and photographs of Cedar Grove. Brief explanations will be offered for these locations around Catskill, and how Cole was affected by or related to them.

Lastly, we hope to have a fourth function, "Transportation," which will trace the routes of the steamboats up the Hudson River and the development of the railroad in Catskill, from when Cole first arrived there in 1825 until 1850. In addition to entries that explain the significance of these developments, we will provide popular images of the steamboats and railroads, as well as memorabilia, i.e. ticket stubs and advertisements.

The final part of the interactive website, which will be accessible from the main page, is a "Learn More" section, which will contain links to other sources of information, such as online versions of Cole's essays and poetry, and James Fenimore Cooper's novels. Other links will include the Greene County Historical Society (which was a valuable source of information in the making of the website), the New-York Historical Society, the New York State Library, the National Gallery of Art, Cedar Grove, and many others. An extensive bibliography of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School will follow the links as a resource for beginners and scholars alike.

Set to launch in May 2009, the website will be available through the computer kiosks in the Visitor Center and also through Cedar Grove's homepage. The website will complement a ten-minute film introduction to Cole and Cedar Grove, which will be

looped on a flat-screen TV panel in the Visitor Center. In addition, the digital catalogue of Cole's works, including finished paintings, oil studies, and related works by other artists, will be linked to the interactive website. The team is currently in the midst of obtaining reproduction rights to the works so that users will have high-resolution images of the paintings that can be enlarged in great detail. The catalogue will be searchable by artist, date, medium, and keyword, as well as sorted by the location depicted in the work (for example, The Catskills, or Italy) and category (such as Allegorical, Religious, or Imaginary). Together, these components will provide a state-of-the-art resource for both visitors and scholars.

### **What Will We Teach?**

The content of the interactive website spans many aspects, giving users a comprehensive understanding of Cole and the Hudson River School. One of the main goals of the website is to illustrate Cole's creative process, as in the current exhibition at Cedar Grove. By allowing users to pull up images of Cole's sketches and oil studies alongside the finished paintings, the website explores how Cole worked both in and out of the studio. Cole's *plein-air* sketching is emphasized, and comparisons seek to explain how he adapted these "real" views of a site into dynamic, finished paintings. Comparisons also demonstrate Cole's influences, such as the ancient ruins and sculptures he saw on his trips to Europe, and paintings by masters such as Salvator Rosa, Claude Lorrain, and J. M. W. Turner. By providing such comparisons, we aim to highlight Cole's multi-faceted approach to creating his most famous masterpieces.

Through the decoding hotspots, the website also illuminates the symbolism of Cole's works, which can often be difficult to discern for viewers unfamiliar with art and culture of the nineteenth century. By allowing the viewer to zoom in on significant details in Cole's paintings (which are often difficult to make out in book reproductions) and by providing an explanation for why Cole chose to include those details, the website will give the viewer the necessary tools to "read" his paintings. This tool is especially helpful with respect to Cole's narrative series, which are rich in symbolism and allusions to other famous works of art and literature. Our interpretations of the paintings are based on Cole's own writings when possible; they are then supplemented by the vast scholarship available on the artist's life and career.

Another goal of the website is to communicate the overarching themes of the time period in which Cole was working, and how those themes affected the meaning of his work. For example, the growth of the nineteenth-century tourism industry is explored by contrasting Cole's paintings with popular engravings from tourist guides such as those by Bartlett, as well as by including Cole's written reactions to Catskill tourism. Cole's response to American expansionism and the effects of industrialization is demonstrated by his journal entries in which he rails against the construction of the Canajoharie & Catskill Railroad, and by comparisons to paintings such as his *River in the Catskills*. Cole's position in the disagreement over the government of the fledgling United States is illustrated through a close analysis of *The Course of Empire* and by examining Cole's relationship to his Federalist patrons. All of these issues weighed heavily on Cole's mind while he was working, and are essential to a study of his work. Therefore, the website

draws from the extensive amount of diverse scholarship on Cole in order to fully communicate these ideas to viewers.

The website is also meant to convey Cole's role as a renaissance man, an exemplary figure of his time. Rather than focusing exclusively on his achievements as a painter, the interactive website seeks to illustrate the many contributions that Cole made during his career. The website demonstrates Cole's role as an accomplished author by including excerpts from his journals, correspondence, magazine articles, lectures, and of course, his poetry. The analysis of Cole's painting *The Architect's Dream*, as well as the inclusion of his architectural drawings and studies of ancient European ruins, explores Cole's turn as an amateur architect. Cole as musician is highlighted in Durand's painting *Kindred Spirits*, while Cole as geologist is investigated in his preparatory nature studies. All of Cole's various roles are significant to an understanding of the breadth of his career.

Lastly, the website studies the connections between Cole and the Hudson River School. The comparison of Cole's works with paintings by his followers, such as Durand, Church, Cropsey, Gifford, and others, demonstrates Cole's position as the acknowledged founder of what is considered to be America's first national art movement. These comparisons show how the later Hudson River School artists were indebted to Cole, and also how they broke from his signature style as a way to reflect their own ideals. By tracing the artists' sketching trips around the Hudson River Valley and mapping the locations of their homes and studios, it is possible to convey their deep connection to Cole as well as open doors for further study, by providing links to other websites and educational resources.

## **Who Will It Benefit?**

The power of the Internet in our age cannot be denied. It is the hope of TCNHS that through the interactive website, the site be able to better meet the diverse interests of its audience. This includes reaching out to one of its most important groups: high school students. High school students from the Hudson Valley Region often tour Cedar Grove with their educators as a way of learning about local history and art. However, I have often found that it is difficult for docents to engage with the students simply through a tour of the house and grounds. It is increasingly necessary for Cedar Grove to develop new methods of securing these students' interests. The interactive website will appeal to students by using an already popular tool for research, entertainment, and communication. With many teenagers already quite computer-savvy, an interactive website is a fitting choice for capturing their attention. In regards to the content of the website, I have tried to write in such a way that a teenage audience could comprehend the material, while at the same time appealing to the needs of college students, the general public, and scholars.

For these scholars, the digital catalogue raisonné will be a comprehensive resource of Cole's sketches and paintings, as well as related works by his contemporaries. The searching and sorting functions in the digital catalogue will accelerate the process of finding basic information for any of Cole's paintings, and the high-resolution images will allow for viewing the works in great detail, a major help to any scholar. The extensive bibliography and links to other useful websites will aid in Hudson River School research, while the decoding will offer insightful analyses of Cole's paintings. In the creation of

the website, we have frequently looked to unpublished sources, such as Cole's letters, family papers, and sketchbooks, in an attempt to shed light on previously unknown material and to keep the website fresh and interesting for an already knowledgeable audience.

The interactive website can also be used to train new docents. By studying the information on the website and digital catalogue, whether at Cedar Grove or at home, docents will be fully equipped to answer visitors' questions. Although I feel the best way for new docents to learn about the house and grounds is still by shadowing tours, the interactive website will provide vital information on Cole's life, his artwork, and his creative process. With both of these options at their disposal, new docents can be trained quickly and efficiently. In addition, the website can provide the docent with quick, on-site answers to visitor's questions that may be out of his or her range of knowledge.

In conclusion, by examining all of these diverse aspects of Thomas Cole's life and career, the new interactive website, combined with the digital catalogue, film, and interpretive exhibitions, will offer the viewer a fascinating multi-dimensional look into the mind of one of America's greatest artists. TCNHS is immensely lucky for the opportunity to apply cutting-edge technology to the study of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School. I am thrilled to be a part of the project team, and could not be more excited for what the future holds for Cedar Grove.