



ON THE TRAIL OF THE HUDSON VALLEY PAINTERS

by Emilie C. Harting

I stand on a wide plateau of rock at the edge of a 2000-foot cliff in the Northern Catskill Mountains of New York State and look sixty miles to the horizon to the north, east and south. Down in the wide green valley, farms are spread out in green patchwork fields, and villages, small clusters of buildings, hug the sides of the Hudson River as it cuts through like a wide swaying band of blue. Over the water and to the east, the Berkshires roll onward into the skyline. In James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Natty Bumppo proclaims that this is the one place on earth where you can see all of creation. This area was not only sacred land to the Native Americans. It was also celebrated in the nineteenth century by the Hudson River School of painters who made the sweeping landscapes known throughout the world.



The Falls of Kaaterskill (1826) by Thomas Cole

I'm panting softly because I have just finished a hike along the Catskills' steep eastern edge, the Escarpment Trail, also known as the "Artists' Trail," since it was a favorite of such artists as Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Jasper F. Cropsey, Asher B. Durand, and others. Thomas Cole, who was considered the founder of the Hudson River School of Painters, walked this section of the Catskills often, and sketched views for such well-known works as "Sunrise in the Catskill Mountains" at spots along the way. In time the paintings helped promote the area as a summer resort.

Now at the end of the hike, there is only the short way down hill to the North Lake where cars will take us back to Kaaterskill Falls, also the subject of many paintings, for a picnic. We are on a hike sponsored by the Hudson Valley Ramble, an annual weekend when over two hundred guided walks are given all along the river.

For some time we walked along the rim of Kaaterskill Clove which runs west to east from Haines Fall to the Hudson River. The term "clove" came from the Dutch word for cut or cleft in the landscape; it is a bedrock gorge with the Kaaterskill Creek running through it. We went up and down old carriage roads, many now covered with round rocks, crossed empty and flowing creek beds, skirted ponds and climbed along stone ledges—all terrain which inspired the artists and is common in the paintings. Though I live two hundred miles away in Pennsylvania, I have always loved the Hudson Valley, and my appreciation of the area has deepened since I've been studying the artists and walking in the areas they interpreted. As we wound our way around the mountain, I

kept thinking of a scene in Asher B. Durand's "Kindred Spirits." Painter Thomas Cole and nature poet William Cullen Bryant stand conversing on a rock ledge bulging out from a cliff while a dramatic gorge unfolds below them.

When I look at the oil paintings I see the views through a foreground. Often there are small objects—Native Americans, horses, farmers, or houses—in the bottom third of the painting. I have to go up into the middle and upper sections to get into the scene. But here I have, in effect, eliminated that artistic device, and the magnificent landscapes are totally accessible.

From up high, the Kaaterskill Clove looks like a deep ravine of forests dipping down to a crease in the center. Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, and Asher B. Durand painted the clove a number of times, and often set up their easels to sketch at Inspiration Point, where we had lunch. As we looked off to the folds of mountains rising on the other side, one of our guides, Ed Henry, explained the geology of certain peaks, dips, and indentations.

The rock plateau where we are ending our hike was the site of the famous hotel The Catskill Mountain House from 1824 to the 1960s when it was razed. As we catch our breath our guide points to a little white dot off in the distance. It is Cedar Grove, the home of Thomas Cole. Cole settled in this area first, having been schooled in Philadelphia and then New York. After he moved up from Manhattan, he had a studio on the grounds of his house and invited other artists to come and paint with him in the summer months. One of them was Frederic Church. Up river a larger, grander structure sits perched up on a high hill. It is the Middle Eastern style mansion of Frederic Church, Cole's pupil, who went on to become one of the most well known landscape artists of the period. Both painters could see the Catskill Mountain House from their own places across the river and painted it a number of times.

The Hudson River School of Painters followed in the footsteps of the English and French landscape painters, who, as part of the Romantic movement in art and literature, no longer thought of the wilderness as dark and foreboding. In America, they paralleled the Transcendentalist movement with its belief that one could see God in Nature. Poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson called the dramatic effect of light on landscape in the paintings "sublime." Thomas Cole explored the theme of spiritual uplifting the most. He worried about the invasion of industrialism that brought burned fields, sawmills and the stink of tanneries—and images in his works convey that theme. Successors such as Frederic Church and Asher B. Durand built upon Cole's studies of forests and rural areas, but did not have the complex religious messages.

At the same time Ralph Waldo Emerson was saying that we needed to have our new American culture, distinct from Europe, Church was celebrating the new wilderness, which was distinct from the mannered countryside of the English landscape artists such as Turner. Church's panoramic paintings celebrated the expansive landscape; he saw his world in the Northern Catskills as a microcosm of the rapidly developing American wilderness.



The next day I explore the two specks, the artists' houses that had been pointed out in the river valley at the end of the walk: Olana, home to Frederic Church and Cedar Grove, home of Thomas Cole. The world Church put into oils can be seen from the hillcrest in front of Olana, his Middle Eastern style castle. The forested land rolls down to the wide river in the valley and on to the Catskill Mountains beyond.



Olana, home of Frederic Church photo: Stan Ries

Just south of Olana I wind around on scenic roads locals have recommended and see the kind of land Church cleared to build his castle. I am again reminded of scenes in his paintings. The undulating terrain of apple and dairy farms has changed little since Church came up here from Manhattan to build his estate high up on a hill. I make my way back north, go over the bridge and down to the village of Catskill to Thomas Cole's House and studio. The light in the house seems dramatic as I look at his easels and sketchbooks. On the porch a guide leads me to a spot where there is a slight clearing in the trees and a view to the mountains. "See that flat spot just before the peaks go up. The Catskill Mountain House stood there, and the tram railway is that dark path going up the hill."

I've come full circle. There is a certain aura about the place where the Hudson River School began. And remarkably, much of what we see today is just as the painters had left it — a wilderness sublime, a source of inspiration then and always.

IF YOU GO:

The Escarpment Trail is listed in many guidebooks. ***Catskill Trails: a Ranger's Guide to the High Peaks*** by Edward G. Henry, Black Dome Press, describes the Escarpment and many other trails in the Northern Catskills.

You can drive to North Lake and walk several hundred feet up a steep hill to the site of the former Catskill Mountain House. There is a large model of the hotel at the **Bronck Museum in Coxsackie**, New York, ten miles north. Call 518-731-6490 for tour schedule. Admission \$4; over 64, \$3.50; ages 12-15, \$2; ages 5-11, \$1.

The Catskill Center for Conservation and Development has periodic guided walks on the Escarpment Trail and a number of others. Tel 845-586-2611. Their walk is part of the Hudson River Ramble, a September weekend of walks in the Hudson Valley.

Highland Flings/Footloose Holidays, P.O. Box 1034, Kingston, N.Y. 12402, Tel: 800-453-6665. Arranges guided walks in the Hudson Valley for individuals and groups.

Olana, the Middle Eastern inspired Victorian estate Frederic Church begun in the 1870s, has an extensive exhibit on Church, the development of the estate from farmland, and the Hudson River School. 5720 State Route 9G Hudson, New York. Grounds are open daily 8-dusk. Mansion tours Wed-Sun 10-5 from April 2-Oct 31. Tours \$3; over 62, \$2; ages 5-12, \$1; Grounds free. Tours limited to 12, and reservations suggested. Tel: 518-828-0135

Cedar Grove, the Federal Style house and studio where Church mentored budding landscape painters, has a gallery of prints and paintings, and a number of Cole's belongings. Location: 218 Spring Street, Catskill, New York. Tel: 518-943-7465

The Hudson Valley Art Trail is a new map brochure and web site linking the 20 major art museums, sculpture parks and artist's homes in the Hudson Valley. Brochures are available at M&T Bank branches between NYC and Albany, or at the art sites themselves. More information, including an art events calendar, can be obtained from HudsonValleyArtTrail.com

IF YOU WANT TO SPLURGE:

For a select look at the region's historic restaurants and inns, visit VintageHudsonValley.com. This wonderful collection of properties, ranging from the Castle on the Hudson in Tarrytown, near to where artists Jasper Cropsey and Albert Bierstadt lived; to The Garrison Resort across from West Point, with its sweeping views of the fjord-like mountains of Cold Spring; offers luxury accommodations within 90 minutes or less of the Catskill Trails. Using Vintage Hudson Valley as your base, you can explore the valley's center too, amid the rich farmland of Dutchess County, which artists like Asher B. Durand knew so well, and eat at award-winning inns like Le Chambord in Hopewell Junction.

NEARBY PLACES TO EAT AND SLEEP:

Many walkers in the Northern Catskill enjoy staying at Albergo Allegria, a Victorian B & B at #43 Route 296, Windham, New York, Tel: 518-734-5560, about forty-five minutes from the beginning of the Escarpment Walk. If you call, make sure to ask for one of their larger rooms. There is also a very good European/American style restaurant, **The Refuge**, with price fixed dinners, across the street: Tel 518-734-9673.

The Inn at Blue Stores, 2323 Route 9, Hudson, New York 12534, Tel 518-537-4277, is a ten minute drive from Olana and a number of other sites, and the farmland on backroads from here to Olana is not vastly different from when Frederic Church came to the area. Built in Spanish style for a gentleman farmer (the blueprints are framed and up in the hallway), this elaborate Victorian B&B is a complement to a tour of Olana with its Middle Eastern décor.

Hudson has convenient places to eat: **The Red Dot**, a bistro, at 321 Warren Street, Tel 518-828-3657; and **Cascades**, a deli an expresso bar at 407 Warren Street, Tel 518-822-9146, for luscious and healthy sandwiches and salads.

The New York State Tourism Website has a link to the many Hudson River School Art Museum Collections (to get there, go through cultural tourism to arts and heritage). The Hudson Valley runs almost 200 miles from Manhattan to Albany so you have to know approximately where you want to stay. Places are listed by county on the website.



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