

9: Thomas Cole *Genesee Scenery* (ca. 1846–47)

Marlene Hamann-Whitmore

This exquisitely intimate oil sketch, one of the Memorial Art Gallery's gems, might surprise the viewer who knows Thomas Cole only for his large-scale paintings celebrating the majestic grandeur of the nineteenth-century American landscape. The works for which he is most famous—dramatic and encyclopedic vistas filled with rocky cliffs, dazzling skies, and spectacular foliage—served as artistic accounts of specific places, as well as metaphors for the spirited sense of American independence and the presence of an omnipotent God.

Although he was born in England, Cole is often referred to as the patriarch of American landscape painting and a founder of the Hudson River School. The seventh of eight children, he and his family immigrated to the United States in 1819. After arriving in Philadelphia, and moving several times, they eventually settled in New York City in 1825. Between 1819 and 1825, the young Cole traveled to the West Indies, worked with his father designing wallpaper patterns in Steubenville, Ohio, and floor-cloths in Pittsburgh, and wrote poetry and painted whenever possible.¹

Though trained as an engraver, Cole was self-taught as a painter. Living on Greenwich Street in New York with his family, and painting on his own, he placed his finished works in the shop window of an acquaintance. There they attracted the attention of John Trumbull and Asher B. Durand, who quickly helped spread the word of Cole's talent.²

By 1827 Cole had taken up residence in the Hudson River town of Catskill, New York, 125 miles north of New York City, where he would live for the rest of his life. He traveled to Europe in 1829, married in 1836, and began his famed "Voyage of Life" series in 1839. That same year, Cole traveled to western New York at the invitation of Samuel B. Ruggles, then Canal Commissioner of New York State.³ Ruggles invited Cole to paint a view of the gorge of the Genesee, in what is now Letchworth State Park. The commission was timely, as the gorge was targeted for blasting in order to make way for the proposed Genesee Valley Canal.

The impetus behind the Genesee Valley Canal—an ambitious and extended public works project—was the desire to build on the cultural and financial success of the Erie Canal. By connecting the existing east-west canal (which opened in 1825) to a north-south appendage, financiers and farmers alike sought to build "a waterway capable of accessing the forests of the Genesee Valley, the coal fields of Pennsylvania, and major river routes to the south and west."⁴ The plan was to construct 107 miles of canal, stretching from Rochester south to Olean, through the Valley of the Genesee, extending the possibilities of transporting natural resources and finished goods, not to mention consumers, throughout the region. Construction began in Rochester in 1837 and the first section opened in Mount Morris, forty-five miles south, by 1840.⁵

For Ruggles, Cole's commission had two chief purposes: to preserve a view that would possibly be altered forever with the construction of the new canal, and to provide a wonderful presentation piece to then-New York Governor William Seward. In fact, the commission would ultimately generate not one but two large-scale paintings, as well as MAG's oil sketch and several preparatory pencil sketches.

Cole set off from Catskill to Genesee in late July. "The Valley of the Genesee has heard of your promised visit," Ruggles wrote, "and rejoices in the anticipation—I need not say that I honor their judgment."⁶ On August 3 Cole wrote his wife, Maria, from nearby Canandaigua: "We have traveled through a great deal of very beautiful agricultural country; but after all, there are no Catskill Mountains....To-morrow we shall proceed to Genesee."⁷



From Geneseo, Cole would probably have traveled to Portageville, where he and Ruggles were most likely guests at Hornby Lodge, the home of Elisha Johnson. Johnson, a former mayor of Rochester, an extremely capable man, and the resident engineer for this section of the canal, had



constructed Hornby Lodge in 1837–38, and it was by all accounts a unique and beautiful structure.⁸ Cole himself described it as a “Log Building Erected on a romantic spot near the Falls of the Genesee near Portage” and made several sketches of and from Johnson’s home as it overlooked the gorge.⁹ One such sketch, *On the Genesee*,¹⁰ became the basis of the commissioned painting, *Portage Falls on the Genesee*. Another pencil sketch, together with MAG’s *Genesee Scenery* oil sketch, led to a second large painting, *Genesee Scenery (Mountain Landscape with Waterfall)* in 1847.¹¹

The first painting, *Portage Falls*, was completed in 1839, presented to Governor Seward, and currently hangs in the Seward House in Auburn, New York.¹² A dynamic combination of gorge and fall foliage (even though the sketches were completed in August), it is a testament to artistic license and Cole’s devotion to the creation of the sublime. Hornby Lodge is clearly visible as it crowns the cliff on the

left, the Genesee River barely emerges from the cover of autumn trees below, and Deh-ga-ya-soh Creek appears as a trickle on the far right cliff between an outcropping of rocks.

Deh-ga-ya-soh Creek increases in volume and importance as it takes center stage in Cole’s 1839 pencil sketch, *Looking Across the Genesee River from Hornby Lodge*, which is a direct source for MAG’s painting. This lovely line drawing records the falls of Deh-ga-ya-soh Creek as they cascade beneath a gathering of small buildings that were once part of an active milling operation on that site.¹³

In MAG’s *Genesee Scenery* Cole has made several important changes to the pencil sketch. The focus has shifted from a general view with a visible home base on the opposite cliff to a closer examination of Deh-ga-ya-soh Creek and the surrounding hillside. He has eliminated some of the outbuildings in order to draw attention to the mill and the cascading waters. The waterfall has increased in intensity and drama, as has the backdrop of the hillside. He has kept the wooden footbridge, along with the suggestion of two figures enjoying the view. The birds in flight in the upper right—perhaps a reference to the turkey vultures that still glide over the gorge—offer the viewer a subtle but lovely invitation to travel beyond the picture plane.

Although currently dated ca. 1846–47, MAG’s painting bears all the hallmarks of an oil sketch done on site—thus the temptation to date the piece to August 1839. *Genesee Scenery*

(Facing page)
Thomas Cole,
1801–1848
Genesee Scenery, ca. 1846–47
Oil on panel, 6¼ x 4¾ in.
Gift of Howard and Florence
Merritt, 94.40

is of a size and medium that was easily transportable by artists in the field. It was evidently painted quickly, with more regard given to impression than carefully rendered detail. And yet there are more compelling reasons to keep the date fixed at ca. 1846–47.



Thomas Cole,
1801–1848
Portage Falls on the Genesee,
1839
Oil on canvas, 84¼ x 61½ in.
Seward House,
Auburn, New York

Thomas Cole,
1801–1848
*Looking Across the Genesee River
from Hornby Lodge*, 1839
Pencil sketch, 14¼ x 10 ½ in.
Founders Society Purchase,
William H. Murphy Fund,
The Detroit Institute of Arts
Photograph ©1963,
The Detroit Institute of Arts

Thomas Cole
*Genesee Scenery (Mountain
 Landscape with Waterfall)*, 1847
 Oil on canvas, 51 ½ x 39 ¼ in.
 Museum of Art, Rhode Island
 School of Design,
 Jesse Metcalf Fund,
 Photograph by Erik Gould



Although Cole did sometimes paint *en plein air*,¹⁴ his correspondence makes it clear that it was not his preferred method of working.¹⁵ Instead, he preferred to make oil sketches once he returned to the studio. These sketches, as is the case with *Genesee Scenery*, often acted as the bridge between an on-site pencil sketch and a large-scale studio painting. And in fact, the composition of MAG's *Genesee Scenery* more closely resembles the large finished painting than the original sketch. Thus, a pencil sketch completed in 1839 was resurrected as a studio oil sketch many years later, as Cole contemplated the additional opportunities presented by an earlier view of the gorge from Hornby Lodge.

It was not unusual for Cole to return to sketches at a later date as the basis for one or more new paintings. A finished painting by Cole was often a composite of several sketches, dramatic lighting, and the artist's

imagination. He also considered the delay between drawing on site and painting in the studio to be beneficial, as he wrote to his good friend and fellow landscape painter Asher B. Durand:

*Have you not found?—I have—that I never succeed in painting scenes, however beautiful, immediately on returning from them. I must wait for time to draw a veil over the common details, the unessential parts, which shall leave the great features, whether the beautiful or the sublime dominant in the mind.*¹⁶

Genesee Scenery indeed bridged the gap, both in time and the artist's vision, between Cole's visit to the Genesee Valley in 1839 and the design and completion of the large-scale oil on canvas. The finished painting of 1847 retains the color palette, the mill, and the footbridge introduced in MAG's oil sketch. However, the large version offers a dramatically expanded panorama. Cole extended and embellished the background to produce the illusion of a never-ending view from his vantage point at Hornby Lodge. By this convention, used repeatedly in his grand landscape paintings, he entices the viewer's eye and imagination to travel well past the hard and fast edges of the canvas. Cole also introduced several additional figures, small and subservient to their natural surroundings, in the finished large painting.

To be sure, MAG's miniature captures an intimacy and freshness absent from the large painting. The scale of the gorge present in the oil sketch is truer to Cole's original pencil sketch and, based on the contemporary view, a much truer version of the scene as it once appeared. Whether that makes for a better painting can of course be debated. Yet this much is certain: one visit to the Genesee Valley inspired Cole to complete several paintings over a span of eight years. The falls of Deh-ga-ya-soh Creek, pictured here, are less dramatic, but still visible today. Long gone are the wooden bridge, the two tiny figures, and the red wooden building that once served as a mill. However, in his intimate sketch, Cole captured a sense of place, and the true essence of one small but stunning view of the Genesee.



Deh-ga-ya-soh Creek,
 Letchworth State Park,
 New York, 2004
 Photograph by James M. Bishop

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