



*Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, 1825

Thomas Cole (American, born in England, 1801-1848)

Oil on canvas | 27 x 33 3/4 in. (68.6 x 85.8 cm)

- What is the general tone or mood of this painting?

**VISUAL ANALYSIS**

*Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)* is one of Thomas Cole's most well-known works of the period and one of three paintings that effectively launched his artistic career. Painted in 1825, from sketches made during his very first visit to the Hudson River Valley, the piece evokes a tranquil lake framed by dying, barren trees on the sides and

foreground, and the Catskill Mountains in the background.

The colors of the setting sun cast a soft glow on the trees, while ominous clouds float in the darkening sky. Two deer are frozen in the midst of running through the woods, caught in the viewer's gaze. Cole's subdued, soft use of color and careful balance of composition are characteristic of his early paintings—both elements work to frame and illuminate the delicacy of the lake, as well as infuse a Romantic, idealized notion of landscape into the scene. The texture and sheen of the paint are

➤ Why do you think that undeveloped land was of particular interest to the Hudson River School painters?

visible, and *impasto*, or a thick building up of paint, can be found in areas like the trees on the left and in the sky.

### FUNCTION/Form & Style

Cole's portrayal is a clear, naturalistic, yet also idealized depiction of American "wilderness," and thus served to stir a sense of national pride in the American viewer in an age of territorial expansion and industrial development. Yet, simultaneously, the *idyllic*, untouched and uncorrupted quality of the land implies the threat of destruction by industry, and the increasing materialism of Americans throughout the 19th century. This kind of imagery and subject matter became a trademark of a school of painters founded by Cole, called the Hudson River School.

Much of the iconography in *Lake with Dead Trees* expresses this threat of destruction, and the difficult paradox faced by Americans that still resonates today: the need to expand and use natural resources, versus the desire to preserve the most *picturesque* aspects of the American environment. The dead and decaying trees portrayed in the painting figure prominently in the concept of the fragility of life and the

inevitable onset of death. The trees themselves are a particular trademark of Cole's, and may refer to the onset of the lumber industry. Their grotesque, curling branches also echo the subtle form of the deers' antlers. In fact, most of the imagery in the painting—the movement of the clouds and sky, the trees, the setting sun—represents the passage of time, and the transition from life to death, again implying the environmental transitions of landscapes from scenic to industrialized.

### Cultural and Historical Importance

The Hudson River School was a group of mid-19th century (c. 1830-1870) painters that celebrated the raw, powerful beauty of the American landscape and the perfection and grandeur of nature. They mainly focused on the Hudson River Valley and areas surrounding the Catskill Mountains. These painters were influenced by British landscape painters such as Turner and Constable, as well as British ideas of romanticism and pastoral settings. This also coincided with American *Transcendentalist* thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, both of whom had influence on the movement. Thomas Cole is

### VOCABULARY

**Idyllic:** Charmingly simple or rustic.

**Impasto:** The application of thick layers of pigment to a canvas or other surface in painting.

**Patrons:** Those who support, protect, or champion someone or something, such as an institution, event or cause; a sponsor or benefactor.

**Picturesque:** Visually charming or quaint, as if resembling or suitable for a painting.

**Transcendentalism:** The literary and philosophical movement propagated by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, asserting the existence of an ideal spiritual reality that transcends the empirical and scientific and is knowable through intuition.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concepts of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Informational, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Writing Process; Writing Applications; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Sciences:** Earth Science; Life Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Art:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

generally regarded as the leader of the movement, and he was joined by artists such as Asher B. Durand, Albert Bierstadt, John Casilear, Frederic E. Church, and William Cullen Bryant.

By the mid-19th century, history painting as a dominant genre had gone into decline. Many artists and thinkers were wondering what kinds of images could represent America's national identity, and evoke a sense of nationalistic pride in American viewers. At this time, new landscapes were being discovered as Americans ventured farther westward. Land was being used in new ways by pioneers, settlers, expansionists, and the government, without regard to the people—Native Americans—who were the original inhabitants. The United States was also dealing with the political and social effects of Jacksonian America and populism, under President Andrew Jackson. During the Industrial

Revolution, new technology such as railroads, canals, and wagon trails, helped further westward expansion. In fact, Cole painted *Lake with Dead Trees* the same year the Erie Canal was completed.

Americans had very resourceful and territorial views on land, and Cole was truly the first artist to paint America's landscapes in order to make Americans see them in a manner other than practical. Therefore, it became logical to turn to America's scenic landscapes that hadn't been corrupted by industrialization, as ideal images to portray the new, growing United States of America.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Cole is arguably the premier American landscape painter of the 19th century. Born in England at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, he grew up in a

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**LANGUAGE ARTS:** Research Romanticism as a movement and as an ideal that can be found in all kinds of art forms. What are some of its main qualities and characteristics? Who are some major Romantic figures in art, literature, and music? Why? (*High School*)

**SCIENCE:** Explore the Industrial Revolution and its effects on land in the 19th century. Were there some forms of industrialization (i.e. railroads, factories, etc.) that polluted more than others? What were they and what caused this? (*Middle and High School*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** Study the technologies that were most important in starting the Industrial Revolution. How aware or concerned were average American citizens about industrial expansion? Did artists help raise that awareness? (*Middle and High School*)

Research the Hudson River School in more detail. What did these artists have in common, both professionally and personally? Can you find other landscapes of the Catskills to compare and contrast to Cole's? (*Middle and High School*)

**VISUAL ARTS:** Cole was one of the first American landscape painters to leave the studio and paint from nature, in order to gain a true feel and experience of the land. Leave your classroom or studio, and go outside to draw or paint a scene from nature. How does this change your working process and art, if at all? (*All Ages*)

working class family involved in textile manufacturing, and so from an early age, was well-informed of the effects of industrialization and progress. Cole's family immigrated to Philadelphia in 1818, but then moved on to Ohio.

Cole later returned to Philadelphia, where he was greatly influenced by painters like Gilbert Stuart, Thomas Sully, and Thomas Doughty. As a painter, he was largely self-taught and never received formal training. Eventually, Cole moved to New York City, where he began to sell a few landscape paintings. There, he was helped tremendously by John Trumbull, president of the American Academy of Fine Arts, who introduced him to many wealthy American *patrons*. *Lake*

*with Dead Trees* was one of three early landscape paintings that garnered attention and helped launch Cole's career and popularity.

In London, 1829, Cole met J.M.W. Turner and John Constable, two very well-known, highly influential British landscape artists. A little more than 10 years later, he traveled to Italy, and worked there for two years painting landscapes, incorporating what he learned into his later American works. After gaining a substantial following of artists who made up the Hudson River School, Cole was nominated for membership in the American Academy of Fine Arts by Samuel Morse, and later became a "charter member" of the National Academy of Design.