

The Hunter's Return
Thomas Cole, American, 1801-1848
1845, Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 x 60 1/2 inches
Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

About the Artist

Thomas Cole was born in England in 1801 and came to the United States with his family in 1818. He began his career as a portrait painter, but soon began painting landscapes. In the summer of 1825, he took a trip up the Hudson River to do sketches of the native scenery. In the Catskill Mountains he found a wild, spectacular landscape that held a particular attraction for him. Cole made many trips to the area and, in the late 1820s, visited the White Mountains of New Hampshire. There he found Mount Chocorua, the mountain that appears in several of his paintings, including *The Hunter's Return*.

Cole was followed by others who chose to paint nature with a reverence for its power and beauty. He was one of a group of painters referred to as the Hudson River School because of the dramatic landscapes they painted in this area. They were dedicated to celebrating the glory of nature, especially the landscapes of the growing nation during a period of expansion following the War of 1812.

About the Art

The Hunter's Return was commissioned by New York art collector George Austen. The painting was seen only once between 1848 and its rediscovery in 1983. For more than 100 years the only evidences of its existence were an entry in the Cole memorial exhibition catalogue, a note in Cole's list of subjects for paintings, and the existence of a small sketch and drawings.

The Hunter's Return pictures autumn foliage surrounding a clearing where a family appears to be living in harmony with powerful forces of nature. Cole was often away from his family when he went to search for subjects to paint and when he went into New York City to take care of business matters. He may be giving the viewer an idea of his own feelings when he returned to his loving family. In *The Hunter's Return* we see a cozy log cabin in a beautiful setting. In this place, the pioneer family is able to live off the abundance of the land, but Cole also gives the viewer clues to the loss caused by man's movement into such natural areas.

Additional Information

Thomas Cole was known for the religious or moral messages of his paintings, and his ideas about the American landscape were shaped by the time in which he lived. This was still a new country, and many saw it as an American Garden of Eden, abundant and untamed. The mountain, forests, waterfall, and other glories of nature, as seen in *The Hunter's Return*, can represent the wonders of the American frontiers. The tree stumps

and fallen logs are symbols of man's destruction of nature and serve as a warning that humanity must be aware of the responsibility to maintain a careful balance in dealings with nature.

The movement referred to as the Hudson River School came into being in the mid-1820s. The opening of the new Erie Canal aided expansion to the Midwest and ultimately to the rest of the country. The newly accessible territories seemed to offer endless opportunities and vast resources. The Hudson River artists were men who believed the glories of nature were evidence of God's power. Their paintings were produced to show reverence for that power at the same time that they were celebrating the importance of the growing nation.

Cole raised a strong voice against excessive greed and expansion at all costs. He became dismayed by many of the changes he saw. In 1841, speaking to the Catskill Lyceum, he stated:

"I know, full well, that the forests must be felled for fuel and tillage, and that roads and canals must be constructed, but I contend that beauty should be of some value among us; that where it is not *necessary* to destroy a tree or a grove, the hand of the woodman should be checked, and even the consideration, which, alas, weighs too heavily with us, of a few paltry dollars, should be held as nought in comparison with the pure and lasting pleasure that we enjoy, or ought to enjoy, in the objects which are among the most beautiful creations of the Almighty. Among the inhabitants of this village, he must be dull indeed, who has not observed how, within the last ten years, the beauty of its environs has been shorn away. Year by year the groves that adorned the banks of the Catskill wasted away."

About the Time and Place

The year Thomas Cole painted *The Hunter's Return*, 1845, saw great expansion into U.S. territories. Florida joined the Union in March as the 27th state, and Texas became the 28th state in December. In the July-August issue of *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Editor John L. O Sullivan asserted the U.S. claim to the Oregon Territory by right of our manifest destiny to overspread and possess the whole of the continent. President Polk stated that U.S. title to the Oregon Territory was clear and unquestionable up to the Alaskan border.

"The Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842 and to Oregon and Northern California in the Years 1843-1844" was published by John C. Fremont, who left for California on a third expedition funded by Congress with Kit Carson serving as a guide.