

Asher B. Durand • *Kindred Spirits*



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON

On February 11, 1848, ten days after his forty-seventh birthday, Thomas Cole—America’s first important landscape painter—died of pneumonia. At the time of his death, he was at the peak of his powers and the acknowledged leader of the loosely knit group of American landscape painters that would become known as the Hudson River School. Cole’s unexpected death was a shock to America’s artistic community. In New York he was honored with a memorial exhibition of his works and a commemorative service highlighted by a eulogy delivered by William Cullen Bryant, a successful American nature poet and one of Cole’s closest friends. Among the tributes Bryant offered, one was especially prescient: “I say within myself, this man will be revered in future years as a great master in art.”

In appreciation of Bryant’s role in celebrating Cole’s memory and in recognition of the friendship between the poet and the painter, the New York collector Jonathan Sturges commissioned Asher B. Durand to paint a work that would depict Cole and Bryant as “kindred spirits.” Durand, several years older than Cole and a successful engraver, had been inspired by Cole in the 1830s to take up landscape painting and was soon a leading practitioner in his own right. Sturges’ request that the two men be shown as kindred spirits was inspired by the words of English poet John Keats, whose “Sonnet to Solitude” celebrates the ameliorative aspects of nature and concludes:

Yet the sweet converse of an innocent mind,  
Whose words are images of thoughts refin’d,  
Is my soul’s pleasure; and sure it must be  
Almost the highest bliss of human-kind,  
When to thy haunts two kindred spirits flee.

Durand’s *Kindred Spirits* was completed in 1849 and delivered as a gift to Bryant. It shows the poet and Cole standing on a ledge in the Catskill Mountains of New York, where both had been inspired to create some of their finest works. Although executed in the detailed and realistic style that Durand championed for American landscape painting, its composition brings together several sites—including the Clove of the Catskills and Kaaterskill Falls—that could not be seen from a single vantage point. As such, it was intended as an idealized tribute to American nature and to the two men whose art had extolled its special beauties.

---

Asher B. Durand’s *Kindred Spirits* is on loan to the National Gallery of Art courtesy of the Walton Family Foundation, Inc.

When first exhibited publicly in New York in 1849, *Kindred Spirits* was hailed as a masterpiece of American landscape painting. In the years since, it has come to be regarded as one of the defining works of the Hudson River School. The National Gallery of Art has rich holdings of works by artists from the School; important examples by Cole, Durand, John F. Kensett, Jasper Francis Cropsey, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt are regularly on view in the permanent collection.

The Gallery's collection includes key works from throughout Cole's career, ranging from the early *Sunrise in the Catskills* of 1826 (on view in Gallery 64) to his famous four-part allegorical series *The Voyage of Life*, 1842 (Gallery 60). Durand's *Kindred Spirits* paid homage first and foremost to Cole's ability as a painter of American wild scenery, as typified by *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains* (fig. 1 and Gallery 64). When this stirring grand composition was exhibited in New York in 1840, it inspired one critic to opine: "This is



FIG. 1  
Thomas Cole,  
*A View of the  
Mountain Pass  
Called  
the Notch of  
the White  
Mountains  
(Crawford  
Notch)*, 1839

truly an American picture. The boldness of the scenery itself, the autumnal tints which are spread over the forest, and the wild appearance of the heavens give it a character and stamp that we never see in foreign schools; and we pronounce the artist a master, without a rival among his own countrymen." Such critical assessments indicate that Cole's identity as America's leading landscape painter was well-established at the time.

Following Cole's example, Durand himself forged a career as an important landscape painter during the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. At first influenced by the more imaginative and allegorical aspects of Cole's art, he created such works as the intensely wrought *The Stranded Ship* of 1844 (Gallery 64). Following Cole's death, however, Durand concentrated more on pure landscape, developing two



FIG. 2  
Asher B.  
Durand,  
*Pastoral  
Landscape*,  
1861

compositional formats that became characteristic of the Hudson River School in general. One, which was vertically oriented, paid tribute to the shadowed beauties of relatively intimate forest scenes—as in *Kindred Spirits* and *Forest in the Morning Light*, c. 1855 (Gallery 64). The other depicted more panoramic and extensive landscape vistas, as epitomized by his *Pastoral Landscape* (fig. 2).

The influence of both Cole and Durand bore fruit in the works of the generation of landscape painters that matured in the 1850s, including, in particular, Kensett and Cropsey. Kensett's specialty became quiet scenes of the northeast coast, as in *Beacon Rock*, *Newport Harbor* and *Beach at Beverly* (both in Gallery 67). Cropsey, although intrigued by the possibilities of dramatic landscape allegories—see, for example, his *The Spirit of War* (Gallery 64)—ultimately became a leading portrayer of American autumnal scenery. His masterpiece, *Autumn—On the Hudson River* (fig. 3), deftly manages to combine both of Durand's compositional types, uniting a foreground view at the edge of a forest with a sweeping vista across miles of landscape to a radiant sky.



FIG. 3  
Jasper Francis  
Cropsey,  
*Autumn—  
On the  
Hudson River*,  
1860

As the Hudson River School style flourished in the 1850s and 1860s, there were, inevitably, artistic reactions to its domination of national taste. Some artists, most notably George Inness, pursued independent courses, as evident in his masterful *The Lackawanna Valley* (fig. 4). Although nominally a typical Hudson River School composition of expansive scenery, its suggestive, rather than descriptive, portrayal of nature and its open recognition of the noisy and smoky intrusion of industry into the landscape were at odds with the movement's vision of American nature. John La Farge, during his brief career as a landscape painter, even more emphatically rejected the aesthetic tenets of the Hudson River School. His *The Last Valley—Paradise Rocks* of 1867–1868 (Gallery 67) not only eschewed established compositional elements (no framing trees or orderly visual cues provide a logical path through the scene depicted), but it also was painted entirely out of doors, a process that was extremely radical at the time not just in America, but in Europe as well. Although Durand had regularly espoused the practice of sketching outdoors, he would not have conceived of executing such a large-scale picture entirely in the open air.

Other artists, such as Philadelphia's William Trost Richards, also pursued artistic courses that were at variance with Hudson River School practice. His *October* of 1863 (fig. 5) may be instructively compared with Cropsey's *Autumn—On the Hudson River*, both of which celebrate the beauties of fall scenery. Whereas Cropsey's monumental painting presents an expansive scenic view that envelops the viewer, Richards' modestly sized *October* draws the spectator in with its meticulously detailed picture of a small corner of the forest.

The importance of the Hudson River School began to wane after the Civil War, and its leading practitioners increasingly looked to non-American sub-



FIG. 4  
George Inness,  
*The Lackawanna  
Valley*, c. 1856



FIG. 5  
 William Trost  
 Richards,  
*October*, 1863

jects for inspiration. Thus, later works by Inness (*View of the Tiber near Perugia*), Church (*El Rio de Luz*), William Stanley Haseltine (*Natural Arch at Capri*), and Sanford Robinson Gifford (*Sioux, Egypt*)—all on view in Gallery 67—were more about the exotic beauty of foreign lands than they were about American nationalistic experience. After the 1870s, most of the artists associated with the Hudson River School were increasingly deemed out of touch with contemporary artistic concerns. It was only with the revival of interest in the School during the 1930s and 1940s that works like Durand’s *Kindred Spirits* once again assumed their central importance as key monuments in the history of American art.

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

The National Gallery of Art is open Monday through Saturday, 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, and Sunday, 11:00 am to 6:00 pm. For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services, please inquire at the Art Information Desks or call (202) 842-6690; TDD line (202) 842-6176. The National Gallery’s Web site can be accessed at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Admission to the National Gallery of Art and to all of its programs is free of charge except as noted.

A large-print version of this brochure is available.

Brochure written by Franklin Kelly, senior curator of American and British paintings, and produced by the Department of Exhibition Programs and the Publishing Office. Copyright © 2005 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

COVER: Asher B. Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, 1849, oil on canvas, Courtesy of the Walton Family Foundation, Inc.

FIG. 1: Thomas Cole, *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)*, 1839, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Fund

FIG. 2: Asher B. Durand, *Pastoral Landscape*, 1861, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Manoogian Foundation, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

FIG. 3: Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Autumn — On the Hudson River*, 1860, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Avalon Foundation

FIG. 4: George Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*, c. 1856, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mrs. Huttleston Rogers

FIG. 5: William Trost Richards, *October*, 1863, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, The William Stamps Farish Fund