

## View from Mount Holyoke (The Oxbow), 1836

“The imagination can scarcely conceive Arcadian vales more lovely or more peaceful than the valley of the Connecticut,” wrote the artist Thomas Cole in his “Essay on American Scenery.” “Its villages are rural places where trees overspread every dwelling, and the fields upon its margin have the richest verdure.” This idealized view of rural America was already starting to collapse when Cole painted *View from Mount Holyoke*, also known as *The Oxbow*. By the 1830s, Mount Holyoke had become one of the most popular tourist destinations in the United States, surpassed only by Niagara Falls, and the influx of sightseers was bound to disrupt its pastoral atmosphere. In selecting this corner of the country to preserve in a monumental painting, Cole produced an enduring visual record of a vanishing way of life.

Landscape was a popular and profitable type of painting in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when a growing population of urban dwellers looked on rural life as a remedy for the problems of industrialization. If they were too caught up in business to make weekend trips to the country, these affluent people could at least turn their gaze on a peaceful picture of the life they’d left behind. Cole’s decision to portray the famous view from Mount Holyoke was initially commercial: he took advantage of the American taste for identifiable native scenery to paint what he hoped would be a marketable painting.



5-A Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 51½ x 76 in. (130.8 x 193 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908 (08.228). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Intent on producing a crowd-pleaser, Cole adopted a trick from the panorama, a theatrical display in which an enormous picture is revealed to the spectator one section at a time. On a canvas nearly six feet wide, Cole painted the view from the top of the mountain as though it were experienced over time, with a dramatic storm thundering through the landscape. On the right side of the picture lies the Arcadia that Cole described in his essay—an idyllic place with tidy farms, a respectable number of shade trees, and a meandering river to enrich the soil. The distinctive feature of this peaceful place is the river’s graceful bend into a U-shape that recalls an oxbow, itself an emblem of human control over nature. The scene is set just after the storm, when the skies are clearing and filled with a golden light.

In contrast, the left side of the picture shows the mountain wilderness still in the grip of the thunderstorm. The landscape is dark, with heavy skies and an ominous flash of lightning. The blasted trunks of the primitive forest appear unrelated to the useful trees scattered across the valley below. The two realms are linked by a small but significant detail: the red-and-white umbrella leaning diagonally from the mountainside to make a visual bridge across the river. Below it lies an artist’s sketching gear, including a portfolio bearing the signature of Thomas Cole. The artist himself appears a few yards away, a tiny figure in a flat-crowned hat nestled with his easel into the rocks and trees. Even though the neatly divided farmland implies a human population, Cole is the only visible actor in this sweeping panorama, and he has planted his sunshade like a flag to claim the wilderness as his own territory.

It’s difficult to know what Cole believed. He admired a landscape tamed and cultivated by human hands, but he also recognized that the “wildness” of the American landscape, a sphere of moral significance for Americans, was threatened by the arrival of civilization. On the hillside beyond the oxbow, Cole left a hidden message: the word *Noah* is roughly incised in Hebrew letters, a code that read upside down spells out *Shaddai*, the Almighty. Is Cole suggesting that the landscape be read as a holy text that reveals the word of God? If so, wouldn’t any human intrusion be a sacrilege? On the other hand, the artist’s careful division of the landscape implies that civilization drives out the danger and chaos inherent in the natural world. Perhaps the painting itself embodies Cole’s ambivalence. It was produced, after all, expressly for public exhibition in the expectation of material gain—an artful exploitation of the nation’s natural beauty.

## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

**E** = ELEMENTARY | **M** = MIDDLE | **S** = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this painting; its left and right halves, and its foreground and background.

### DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE **E | M | S**

Explain to students that an oxbow is a U-shaped piece of wood that fits under and around the neck of an ox, with its upper ends attached to the bar of a yoke. Where is the oxbow in this painting?  
*It is located in the central curve of the river.*

### **E | M | S**

Have students find these objects.

An umbrella: *It is found in the lower center extending over the river.*

Thomas Cole sketching in a top hat: *He is located in the lower center between large rocks.*

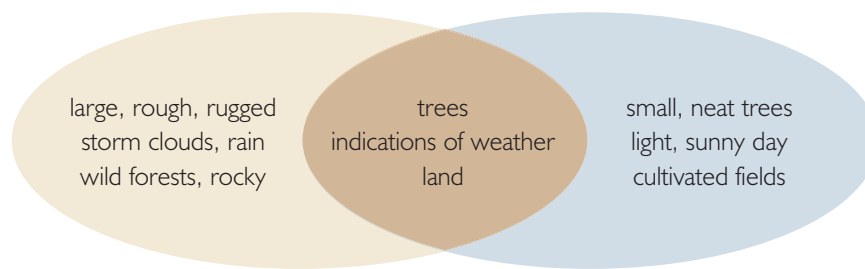
Lightning: *It appears in the far left, center.*

Birds: *They are left of center on the edge of the storm.*

Smoke: *It appears in several places on the right.*

### **M | S**

Have students compare and contrast the left and right sides of this painting. Which side is wilderness and which is cultivated farmland? This comparison may be written in a Venn diagram. Draw two overlapping circles. Where the circles overlap, list objects that appear on both sides of the painting. In the left circle, describe the objects on the left side of the painting, and in the right circle, describe objects on the right.



### INTERPRET **E | M | S**

Ask students why someone living in a city might want a picture like this in his home.

*In the 1830s, many Americans were moving from farms to cities. This scene could remind them of the country's rural peace and beauty. Others might have seen this view when they were on vacation and wanted to remember it.*

### **E | M**

Ask a volunteer to pretend to be a TV weathercaster and give the weather forecast for the next few hours for this scene of the Connecticut River valley.

### **S**

In the 1830s, America's wilderness was being settled. Untamed forests were transformed into cultivated farms and towns. Ask students what the approaching storm over the wild forest might symbolize.

*It could suggest the coming destruction of the wilderness or the taming of wilderness by settlement.*

Point out the double meaning of the Hebrew word (*Noah* and inverted *Almighty*) carved into the center hillside.

Ask students to consider what Cole's message might be about the rapidly changing face of the American continent.

**CONNECTIONS** **Historical Connections:** Puritans; the idea of a City on a Hill

**Historical Figures:** Ralph Waldo Emerson; Henry David Thoreau

**Literary Connections and Primary Documents:** "Essay on American Scenery," Thomas Cole (secondary); *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson (secondary); *Democracy in America*, Volume I (1835) and Volume II (1839), Alexis de Tocqueville (secondary)

**Arts:** Hudson River School; landscape painting; Romanticism