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Eternal Charm Along the Hudson River



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times--**BACK HOME** Visitors to the New-York Historical Society view the exhibition "Nature and the Grand American Vision: Masterpieces of the Hudson River School."

By KAREN JONES Published: October 26, 2012

When the New-York Historical Society reopened its doors in 2011 after a three-year renovation, the museum's director, Linda S. Ferber, was prepared for almost anything — except the ire of some visitors. "On opening night we had all these dazzling things to see," she said, "and all many people wanted to know is, 'Where are the Hudson River School landscapes?'"

Anchored on Thomas Cole's "The Course of Empire" (1834-1836), the landscapes are part of the exhibition "Nature and the Grand American Vision: Masterpieces of the Hudson River School," which was completing a national tour at the time of the society's 2011 reopening.

"The landscapes had been in high demand since they went off display," Dr. Ferber said. She said visitors and the staff "were greatly relieved" when the exhibition returned in September.

"There is a collective possessiveness about them in New York, and people are happy they are home," she said.

The Hudson River School refers to a group of mid-19th century New York-based artists who painted the then largely untouched American wilderness in sweeping landscapes rich in detail and emotional impact.

“Americans have always felt, and still feel, the welfare of the nation is inextricably linked to the physical terrestrial environment,” Dr. Ferber said. “When looking at these landscapes viewers could embrace this ripe virgin territory upon which all things were possible.”

Using New York State’s Hudson River Valley region as its initial muse, the movement depicted majestic scenes of the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains and later, the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Rockies. They captured “our great natural landmarks” for audiences eager to see them, Dr. Ferber said, especially since most of the works were done before widespread use of photography. “These were the contemporary artists of their day and a period when Americans saw nature as a national anthem.”

The Hudson River School’s continued popularity with museum visitors is based on familiarity and accessibility, Ford W. Bell, president of the American Alliance of Museums, said. “Some people say they don’t know much about art, but they know those paintings. You don’t see them and say I don’t get it. Everyone gets them.”

He added, “The paintings expertly capture the essence of what people think of as the American spirit and the wide open spaces our forefathers encountered that are hard to find today.”

From February 2011 to September 2012, the exhibition traveled to four museums, including the Columbia Museum of Art in South Carolina. “We knew the exhibition would resonate with our audience,” Karen Brosius, executive director of the museum, said. “Here people have a deep connection to place and the Hudson River School captured that.”

Though Hudson River artists depicted an America “filled with promise,” they were also motivated to paint the wilderness before it disappeared, she said. “The industrial revolution was coming, the railroads were coming and cities expanding.”

The Columbia museum built a special room to display the exhibition’s signature work “The Course of Empire.” A departure from landscapes that portray actual locations, “Empire” is a five-painting series depicting the rise and fall of a great civilization, from pastoral beginnings to decay and destruction.

“‘Empire’ is about landscapes as a grand narrative,” Dr. Ferber said. Though Cole used Imperial Rome for inspiration, his series is often considered “a thinly veiled allegory” for where the United States was in 1836 and today. “Viewers ponder if the cyclical theory of history Thomas Cole was exploring will apply to the U.S., especially in a post-9/11 period,” she said.

“Masterpieces of the Hudson River School” also spent 17 weeks at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, attracting more than 55,000 visitors, said Kevin M. Murphy, curator of American Art for the museum. “I have never had the experience as a curator of people stopping me in the galleries to make sure I knew how much they appreciated the exhibition.”

Reaction to “The Course of Empire” was predictably strong, Dr. Murphy said, with audiences taking time to examine and discuss each painting. “Regardless of what Cole may or may not have meant with them, they provoke talk and debate about different visions for America,” he said.

Dr. Murphy said the political implications of “Empire’s” five paintings — “The Savage State,” “The Arcadian or Pastoral State,” “The Consummation of Empire,” “Destruction” and “Desolation” — are as clear for today’s audiences as those 175 years ago. “Every politician promises the ‘Pastoral State’ and says electing the other guy will lead to ‘Destruction.’ Visitors understand that. It reinforces that these paintings are not just objects to be regarded. They have played and still play an active role in our society and culture.”