

Thomas Cole in Duanesburg

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Research Problem

My research focused on landscape painter Thomas Cole's trip to the town of Duanesburg, New York in the winter of 1826. This brief period, still early in his career, has often been overlooked by previous scholars, because his paintings from Duanesburg are not as technically accomplished as his later work, because the pastoral landscape of Duanesburg is much different from the sublime mountain scenes for which he is best known, and because his Duanesburg patron, scientist and railroad promoter George Featherstonhaugh, was thought not to appreciate his talent. I want to demonstrate, however, that the few months Cole spent in Duanesburg were an important formative influence for him.

Review of the Research Procedure

The papers of both Thomas Cole and George Featherstonhaugh are at libraries in Albany (the New York State Library and the Albany Institute of History and Art, respectively), so I had only to spend a week in Albany for the portion of the research covered by this grant.

Duanesburg is only twenty miles from Albany, so I also had the opportunity to visit the site where Cole worked during his stay there. I spent three days at the State Library, one day at the Albany Institute, and one day visiting Duanesburg.

At the New York State Library, I also looked at books on the history of Duanesburg and the adjacent town of Esperance (which Cole also painted during his time at Featherstonhaugh's estate), as well as sources on the history of other areas in upstate New York that Cole painted. Because my paper places Cole's work in Duanesburg in the context of his entire career, it was important for me to identify themes in Cole's work that originate in the Duanesburg paintings. Above all, I wanted to find out how Cole's paintings engage the history of the places where he worked. Thus, it was necessary to learn about the history of those places.

Summary of Findings

I found that the Duanesburg period represented a crossroads in Cole's career. On the one hand, he was working on commission, to please the taste of a specific patron, rather than working in the new fashion – painting what and how he wanted, and offering the resulting work for sale to the general public. On the other hand, I believe that in Duanesburg, Cole began to move away from the merely aesthetically pleasing, harmonious landscape compositions that were popular among American audiences of the 1820s, and toward the more symbolically significant landscape paintings for which he would later become renowned, landscapes that contain traces of a human presence and embody history.

On his first trip to upstate New York, in the summer of 1825, Cole visited heavily touristed areas of the Catskill Mountains. In his paintings from that trip, however, he edited out the human presence and focused on painting the sublimity of nature as though it had not been touched by man. In Duanesburg, he found a place where humans had a real relationship with the landscape, free of the artificial experience of the tourist. He painted scenes of the improvements at Featherstonhaugh's estate, such as grazing sheep and men cutting down trees. Thus, he became aware of the struggle between man and nature, and because Featherstonhaugh hoped to use his paintings to promote the commercial development of Duanesburg and its surroundings, he also became aware of the role he played in the development of the natural landscape and the destruction of the wilderness.

Conclusion

My paper has already been accepted to the Southeastern College Art Conference (SECAC), to be held in Greensboro, North Carolina in late October. My work in Albany brought my research for this paper to completion; the paper itself is in progress. I will also be

presenting my research on Thomas Cole in Buffalo in April 2014. Because this is a guest lecture, rather than a conference paper, it will need to be longer, and so I am expanding my topic to cover all of upstate New York, not just Duanesburg. Last summer's trip was valuable not only to my research on Cole in Duanesburg, but also for generating a thesis about Cole's work upstate. I believe that he imparted a specific sense of place to his upstate landscapes, that he engaged the history of the places he painted in more specific ways than art historians have previously acknowledged. I have an idea in mind for a book on artists in upstate New York, of which my research on Cole would make up the first chapter. I hope to set to work on a book proposal after my Buffalo talk.