

ART REVIEW

Glory of Landscapes, Then and Now

By Grace Glueck

July 28, 2006

BACK from a two-and-a-half-year tour at six other American museums, the Wadsworth Atheneum's formidable collection of 19th-century Hudson River School paintings is now on display in a special homecoming show, "American Splendor: Hudson River School Masterworks From the Wadsworth Atheneum." It's rare that you see these ultrafamiliar paintings in such concentration; their combined presence gives the show a synergistic sparkle and energy that you don't get when you see them in smaller groupings.

Not every Hudson River collection can boast 11 works by Frederic Church, 13 by Thomas Cole and 5 by Albert Bierstadt, a leading painter of the American West, along with powerful examples by other artists of the school. They are among the more than 60 paintings on display here, arranged by Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, the Wadsworth's curator of American painting and sculpture.

In a clever stroke, the museum has also mounted a complementary show, "Shifting Terrain: Contemporary Landscape Photography," a group of 30 images by photographers who approach the land with modern eyes, chronicling its destruction as well as its beauty. But more about that in a minute.

The Wadsworth's Hudson River School paintings form one of the country's oldest collections, started in the early 19th century by Daniel Wadsworth (1771-1848), a wealthy Hartfordian who was an architect, amateur artist and avid North American traveler. In 1825 he met the high-minded landscapist Thomas Cole, and the two became lifelong friends. A booster of artists, Wadsworth introduced Cole to Frederic Church, whom he discovered in Hartford, and Church became Cole's most accomplished pupil. John Trumbull, a relative by marriage, was also nurtured by Wadsworth.

Wadsworth's ambition to help elevate American taste by sharing his growing collection with the public was realized in 1844 with the establishment of the Wadsworth Atheneum. It was stocked with contemporary landscapes by Cole, Church and other painters who formed the vanguard of the Hudson River School, the first truly American painting movement, which flourished between 1825 and 1875. Their celebration of the discovery, exploration and settlement of wilderness land supported Wadsworth's own vision of the country's potential.

Cole (1801-48), the undisputed first-generation leader of the movement, made his first sketching trip on the river in 1825, and the paintings that came out of it brought him instant success. "Kaaterskill Falls," one of five Catskill views put up for sale in a New York picture dealer's shop at \$25 apiece, was snapped up by Trumbull, then president of the American Academy of the Fine Arts. Two other well-known artists, Asher B. Durand and William Dunlap, also bought from the show. Trumbull called his painting to the attention of Wadsworth, who ordered a copy of it, and Cole was on his way.

The painting is a romantic vision of what was considered one of the country's great scenic wonders, a twin-tiered cascade in the eastern range of the Catskills falling 260 feet into a cove. An obligatory American Indian surveys the scene from a central precipice, and the viewer perceives it from beneath a rocky arch that Cole painted in as a framing device. The tourist hotel nearby is out of sight. A sky with dynamic color shifts throws a roseate light over the whole, accentuating the wild glamour of the tableau.

Cole's stagey "Scene From 'The Last of the Mohicans,' Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund" (1827), is even more manipulative. Inspired by a passage from the 1826 best seller by James Fenimore Cooper, set around Lake George, the painting uses the majestic White Mountains as its backdrop, along with some fanciful, made-up geological formations. The narrative takes place in the foreground, with minute figures deployed on a flat, circular rocky ledge like an outdoor stage, set before a huge upthrust of rock. A natural pillar next to it is topped by a round boulder, or rocking stone, that gives a distinctly phallic effect.

Cole's pupil Church (1826-1900), who studied with him at his Catskill studio from 1844 to 1846, outsplendored the master in his depiction of scenic effects, enjoying a reputation by midcentury as the country's most talented landscape painter. One Church extravaganza here is the huge "Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica" (1867), commissioned by Elizabeth Colt, widow of the arms manufacturer Samuel Colt and a principal benefactor of the museum. Church served as adviser for the picture gallery at Armsmead, her aptly named Hartford mansion.

Inspired by the writings of Alexander von Humboldt, the naturalist and explorer, Church had begun to travel outside the United States. He aimed at producing works that were both spiritually resonant and scientifically accurate.

In “Vale” the viewer looks down at a broad tropical landscape after a storm, with a river winding toward a distant peak in the picture’s center. Carefully detailed vegetation swarms in the foreground, under a rosy swirling mist that hovers between sky and land. The huge expanse of clearing sky is bathed in a luminous glow, with just a trace of clouds. In its play of light and mist the painting reflects the influence of J. M. W. Turner.

Happily, this show covers the entire period of the Hudson River School and its changes in style and outlook brought about in midcentury by European influences. The detailed, painstaking work of Church, Bierstadt and Durand began to look old-fashioned in the face of newer European movements like the French Barbizon School and advancements in the realm of photography. John Frederick Kensett and Sanford Robinson Gifford, although second-generation painters like Church, produced less tempestuous work. Their reductive composition and more subtle atmospheric effects are characterized today as Luminism.

One example here is Kensett’s marvelous “Coast Scene With Figures (Beverly Shore)” (1869), a quiet beachscape in which two tiny figures at the left of the composition regard a long line of active surf as it breaks along a seaweedy shore. To their left are massive rocks topped by scrub trees. A broad expanse of tame white sky helps set the tranquil mood of the painting. The people are dwarfed by the scale of the landscape, while a fine tension is maintained among the four elements of the scene: the sea, the shore, the rocks and the sky.

Now about those contemporary photographers. Some, like Rena Bass Forman, John Pfahl and Sally Mann hold to traditional views of the picturesque and the sublime. Ms. Forman makes beautiful, quiet images of mountains and water in rich, dark tones like those of 19th-century photography. Mr. Pfahl salutes the power — poetic and real — of Niagara Falls by shooting it in color at different times of year and in different weather conditions. And Ms. Mann evokes history-haunted Southern landscapes using plate-glass negatives to achieve an antique look.

Others are concerned with environmental effects, like Edward Burtynsky’s mountains of used tires in a hideous industrial landscape and the hulks of oil tankers and naval ships beached for breaking up on the once-pristine shores of Third World countries. David Maisel’s “Terminal Mirage” series, aerial photographs of the industrial surroundings of the Great Salt Lake, take the form of startling geometric abstractions in multiple colors, the grids from evaporation ponds laid out on the lake and its shoreline to obtain industrial minerals.

Whimsy and humor get a play here too. Bien-U Bae's screenlike panels in black, white and gray show snaky trees twisting together like disco dancers, and one of Rosemary Laing's series, "groundspeed," depicts a giant flowered carpet covering a forest floor, converting it into a comfy semblance of an English parlor.

It all makes a fine foil to the beloved clichés of the Hudson River School.