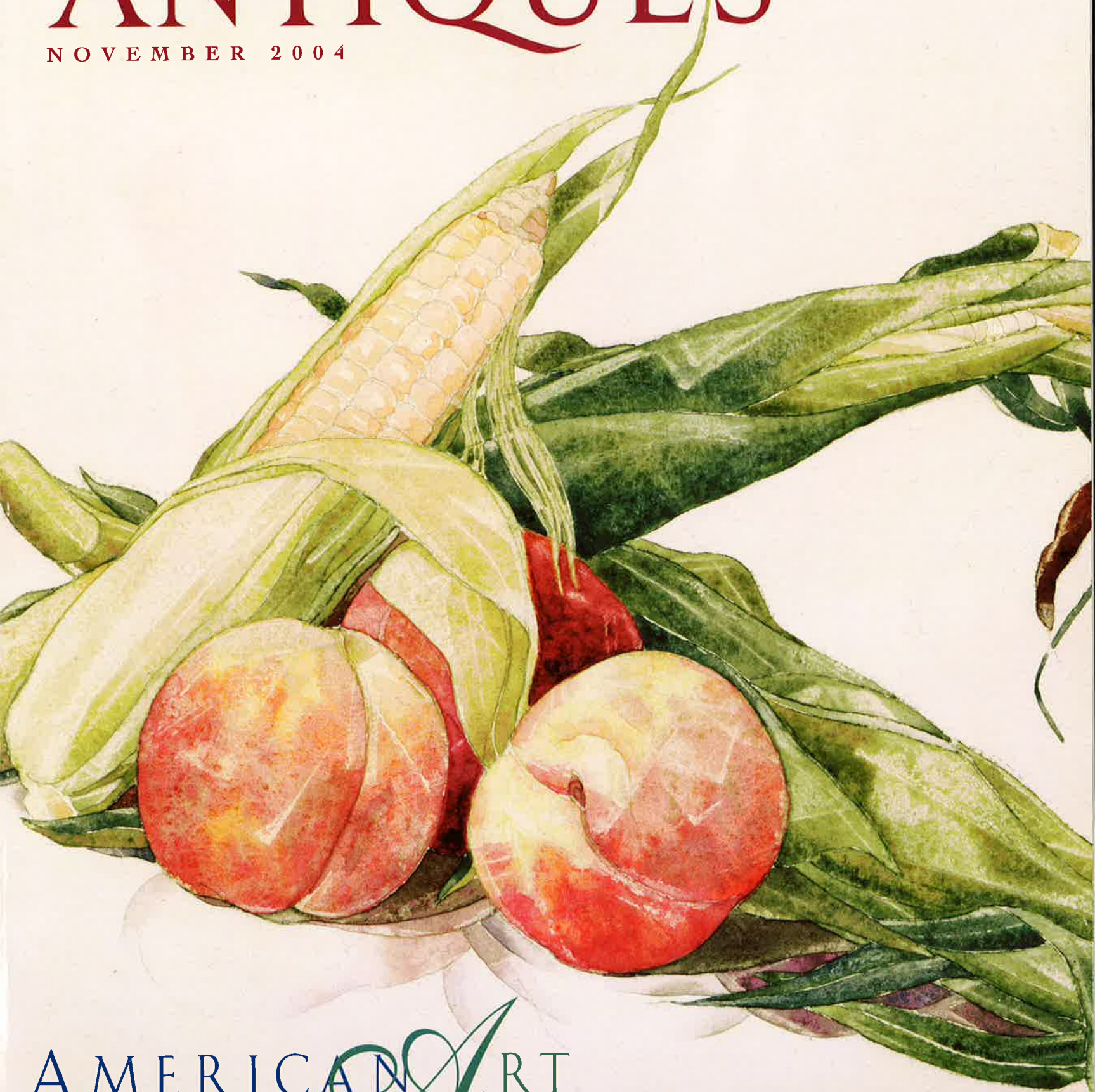


*The Magazine*

# ANTIQUES

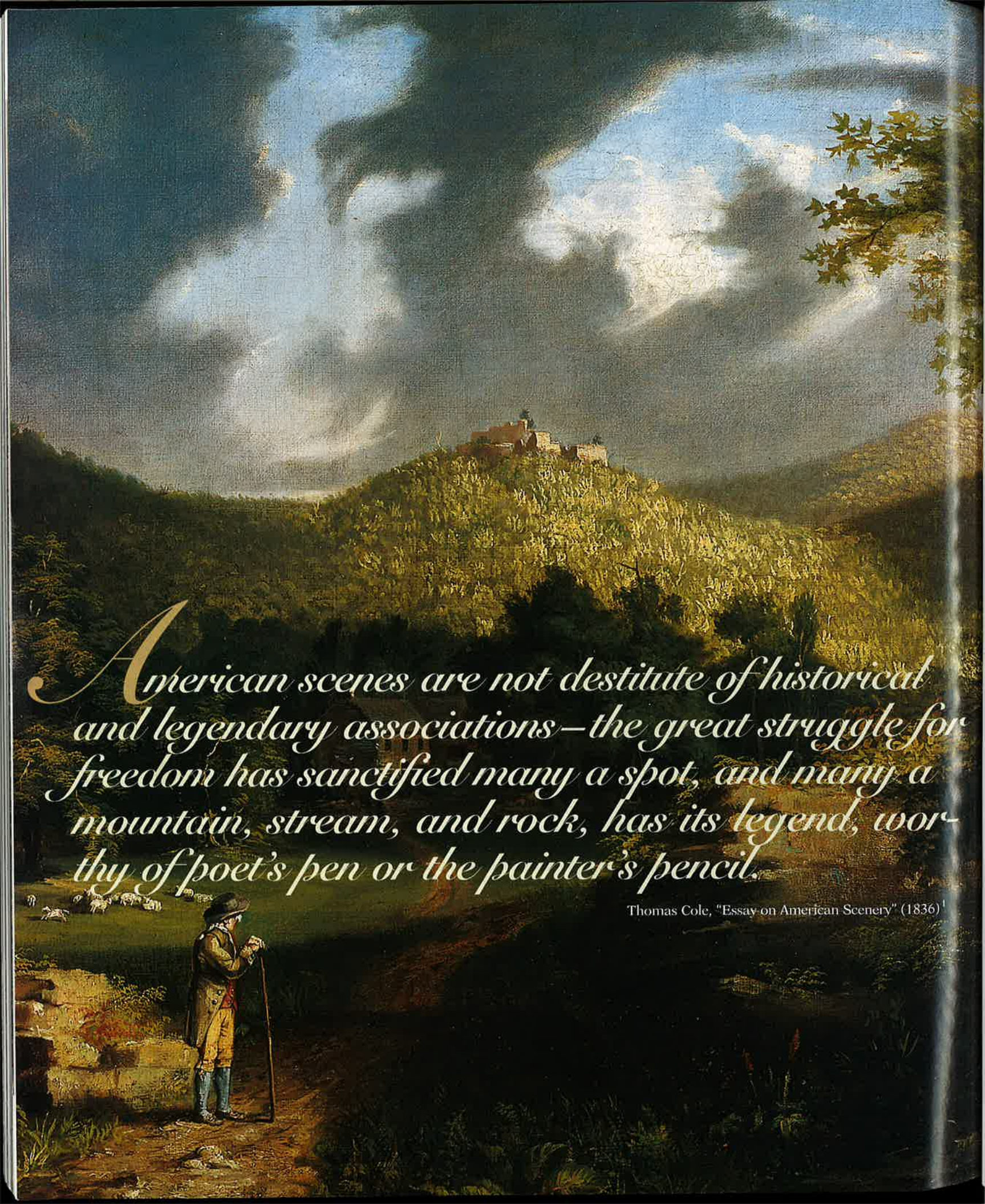
NOVEMBER 2004



AMERICAN ART

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*American scenes are not destitute of historical and legendary associations—the great struggle for freedom has sanctified many a spot, and many a mountain, stream, and rock, has its legend, worthy of poet's pen or the painter's pencil.*

Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery" (1836)



## Thomas Cole's *View of Fort Putnam*

Only twenty-four years old and striving to establish himself as a painter in New York City, Thomas Cole traveled up the Hudson River during the late summer of 1825 with money provided by George W. Bruen (1795–1849), a New York merchant and patron of his work. Cole made drawings of the landscape from Cold Spring to Albany and back through Catskill with the intention of using these sketches as the basis for paintings that would both embody his visions of the picturesque and the sublime in the American landscape and demonstrate his talent in depicting the natural world. Some months after returning to New York City, Cole exhibited several of these pictures in William A. Colman's picture gallery and bookshop. Two landscapes of Cold Spring were sold, and three other landscapes resulting from this trip remained in the gallery.

The circumstances surrounding the purchases of these three paintings have often been retold to form the legend of Cole's beginnings as an artist.<sup>2</sup> The earliest version of the story was written by the artist and writer William Dunlap (1766–1839) who published it under the pseudonym "An American" in the *New-York Evening Post* for November 22, 1825.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent accounts vary slightly in the details, but the events can roughly be summarized as

BY ELISE  
EFFMANN



*This and facing page:*

**Pls. I, Ia.** *View of Fort Putnam*, by Thomas Cole (1801–1848), 1826. Signed "T. Cole" at bottom center. Oil on canvas, 27 1/4 by 34 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, promised gift of Charlene Sussel.



*This page:*

Pl. II. *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, by Cole, 1825. Signed "T. Cole" at bottom, left of center. Oil on canvas, 27 by 33 3/4 inches. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, gift of Charles F. Olney.

Pl. III. *Kaaterskill Falls*, by Cole, 1826. Oil on canvas, 25 1/4 by 36 5/16 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, bequest of Daniel Wadsworth.

*Facing page:*

Fig. 1. *Crow-Nest from Bull Hill (Hudson River)*, engraved by G. K. Richardson after a drawing by William Henry Bartlett (1809–1854) as illustrated in Nathaniel Parker Willis, *American Scenery: or, Land, Lake and River Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature*, vol. 1 (London, 1840), p. 25. Signed "W.H. Bartlett" at lower left and "G. K. Richardson" at lower right. This work, which was published serially, is also known as the *Hudson River Portfolio*. Plate size 4 1/2 by 7 inches. The view is from Bull Hill on the east side of the Hudson River toward the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, and the steep cliffs of Crow's Nest to the southwest. Fort Putnam is silhouetted on a hilltop near the center. Library of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

follows. While visiting Colman's shop one day, John Trumbull (1756–1843), the elderly president of the American Academy of the Fine Arts in New York City, saw the three landscapes and was so taken with them that he was said to have exclaimed: "I am delighted, and at the same time mortified. This youth has done at once, and without instruction, what I cannot do after 50 years' practice."<sup>4</sup> He immediately purchased a view of the Kaaterskill Falls for twenty-five dollars and proceeded to tell Dunlap about the young artist's skill. Dunlap saw Trumbull's purchase and subsequently bought *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, a scene in the Catskills (Pl. II). A third artist, Asher Brown Durand, at the time primarily known for his engravings, saw the works and purchased the remaining painting, *View of Fort Putnam* (Pls. I, Ia). By the middle of November, the three paintings were on exhibition at the American Academy of the Fine Arts, where they were much acclaimed. Reviewing Cole's contributions to the show, the *New-York Review*, and *Atheneum Magazine* noted in reference to the Kaaterskill Falls painting belonging to Trumbull:

*This picture would, of itself, place Mr. Cole among the most eminent landscape painters, but his claim to that station is made out to the perfect satisfaction of the connoisseur, when the varied and contrasted excellencies of the three pictures... are viewed at the same time.*<sup>5</sup>

Cole's fame "spread like fire," as Durand was reported to have said, leading to profitable

introductions to patrons.<sup>6</sup>

Until very recently only one of these three paintings had been identified: *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)* (Pl. II). Dunlap, the first owner, sold it early on for a modest profit to Philip Hone (1780–1851), a wealthy businessman, politician, and diarist.<sup>7</sup> The picture has been in the collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio, since 1904. The painting owned by Trumbull, exhibited as *Catterskill Upper Fall, Catskill Mountain*, is now unlocated, but is known through a replica (Pl. III) commissioned by Daniel Wadsworth (1771–1848), a nephew-in-law of Trumbull. It is quite possible that *View of Fort Putnam* (Pls. I, Ia) remained with Durand throughout his life, for his son John (1822–1908) referred to "Mr. Cole's picture" in a letter written in 1849.<sup>8</sup> However, its whereabouts were unclear until it was recovered from a warehouse following a fire in the early 1990s. Darrel Sewell, then the Robert L. McNeil Jr. curator of American art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, initially identified the painting as an early work by Cole based on the signature and technical quality, and his attribution was later endorsed by the art historian and Cole authority Ellwood C. Parry III.<sup>9</sup>

The painting came to the museum in Philadelphia for study and conservation treatment. The canvas and paint required stabilization following minor water damage in the warehouse fire. Practically untouched for decades, the landscape was also obscured by discolored varnish and a heavy layer of grime. The painting is now the promised gift of its owner, Charlene Sussel, in honor of the museum's 125th anniversary.

Cole understood the conventions of his chosen genre from the outset, assimilating into his vision of the American landscape the concepts of the picturesque and the sublime from British landscape painting and its seventeenth-





century Italian and French precursors.<sup>10</sup> The undulating forested hills recall those of the Hudson River valley. The rustic cottage, the grazing sheep, and the crumbling stone wall provide picturesque elements, while the sublime is evoked by dark gray storm clouds breaking the light into patches of bright sun and areas of deep shadow. The artist's desire to imbue his landscapes with a deeper significance is clear in his choice of symbolic motifs, some of which, such as the juxtaposition of the living and dead trees in the foreground, became standard elements in Cole's work.

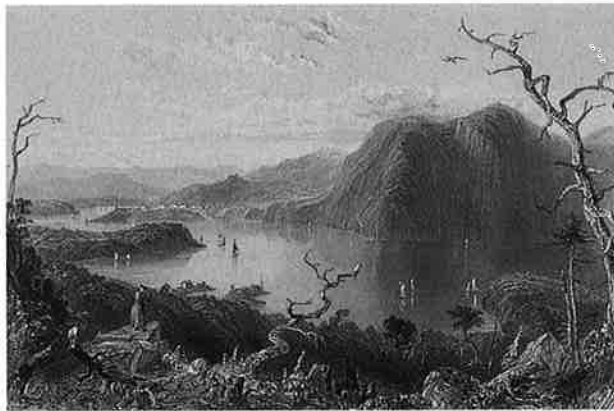
A number of technical features substantiate the identification of the painting as a very early landscape by Cole. The handling of the paint, with its impasto highlights, has the freeness and immediacy of his earliest work, before he took a more methodical and restrained approach toward brushwork. This lively handling of paint is even apparent in the ground layer, which was vigorously applied with a wide brush. It has been noted that this same treatment of the ground is used in *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, but by 1827 Cole had abandoned the brush in favor of painting in the ground with a knife.<sup>11</sup> Infrared reflectography of *View of Fort Putnam* reveals loosely drawn looping pencil strokes defining the landscape and clouds, which resemble the style of his outdoor sketches. Finally, the dimensions of *View of Fort Putnam* are almost exactly the same as those of *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*.<sup>12</sup>

In the attempt to identify the location of the scene, two compositional elements stood out: the stone structure and the man's attire. The large building occupies the entire crest of the hill, much like a European castle, yet the landscape is distinctively American in character. The man is dressed in the fashion of the late eighteenth century, adding a touch of nostalgia to the figure. When these elements are reviewed alongside a list of documented paintings by Cole in the 1820s, the only possible candidate is *View of Fort Putnam*.<sup>13</sup>

Early documentary references to the painting support the identification of the subject as Fort Putnam. Cole kept a log of sketches made on his trip during the summer of 1825 and referred to number eight as "a View of the Ruins of Fort Putnam from the south," made between his renderings of Cold Spring from West Point and a view of the river to the north from Fort Putnam. Following this identification of the scene, he wrote that there was "a very fine effect to be produced by shadowing the mountain to the left by a cloud[,] the large tree(s) receiving the light."<sup>14</sup> The review of the

American Academy's annual exhibition cited earlier noted that one of Cole's pictures "is a distant view of Fort Putnam, in which the sun, shining through broken clouds, illuminates the distant hill and foreground, while the middle ground is shadowed."<sup>15</sup> These descriptions correspond precisely with the composition and light in *View of Fort Putnam*.

With the introduction of commercial steamboat travel up the Hudson River in 1807, its valley became a tourist destination for travelers keen on seeing the American landscape.<sup>16</sup> Renowned for its scenic vistas and Revolutionary War history, West Point and its surroundings, fifty miles north of New York City, was one of the major stops on the boat line. Built in 1778, Fort Putnam was positioned on a hilltop overlooking West Point to protect the dramatic bend of the river that gave the area its name (Fig. 1). It was a picturesque ruin by 1825, frequently visited by



tourists for the splendid view it afforded of the Hudson Highlands. The fort appears in the background of numerous prints and drawings of West Point made during the first half of the nineteenth century (see Pl. IV). Artists also rendered the Hudson Highlands from the fort, including the fallen stones of the structure in the foreground of their pictures (see Fig. 2). Cole sketched his view from the south looking north on a hill near the present-day West Point Museum; the Hudson River snakes between Bull Hill in the distance on the east side and the three hills of West Point that occupy the middle ground of the painting.<sup>17</sup> The road in the painting, now paved, is the West Point Highway, which leads onto the campus of the military academy. When visiting the site today it is clear that, although Cole initially worked from nature, he adapted the landscape to suit his pictorial scheme. The rounded height of the central hill has been exaggerated to focus attention on Fort Putnam, and the view has been telescoped to incorporate the more inti-

mate pastoral foreground scene.

Choosing Fort Putnam for one of his debut paintings allowed Cole to display his skill at rendering a landscape in a scene endowed with historical meaning. Control of the fort and surrounding area was of great strategic importance to the defense of New York and ultimately to the success of the American cause in the Revolution. The fort assumed greater significance when the commander at West Point, Benedict Arnold (1741–1801), treasonously plotted to give it to the British in 1780, and Major John André (1751–1780), a chief conspirator on the English side, was captured and executed. The visually sublime possibilities as well as the historical associations of the site are well-summarized in an excerpt from a book of engravings principally by Durand entitled *The American Landscape* (1830), which describes Fort Putnam as follows:

*It is a feature almost unique in American scenery, reminding the traveler of the romantic ruined towers of defence in the gorges of the Pyrenees, or the feudal castles which still frown from the rocky banks of the Rhine.... These ruins are rich with the most hallowed associations; for they are fraught with recollections of heroism, liberty, and virtue.... As we muse over this magnificent scene of great events, the imagination insensibly kindles, and the plain below, and the forts, and rocks, become peopled again with the soldiers and chiefs of the revolution.... Amid the ruins of Fort Putnam, the patriot may find materials to animate him with fresh hopes for his country's future welfare, as well as to recall the noblest recollections of her past history.<sup>18</sup>*

These were precisely the allusions and sentiments that Cole hoped to evoke in *View of Fort Putnam*, and it is certain that they were not lost on an educated audience.

The role of Durand adds another layer to the story of Cole's painting. Five years Cole's senior, Durand had only recently achieved a name for himself with his engraving of Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* when he purchased *View of Fort Putnam* in 1825. The two young artists developed a strong friendship, and it was partially through Cole's encouragement that Durand ended his career as an engraver and portraitist at the age of forty in favor of trying his hand at landscape painting. Durand made two extended sketching trips with Cole in 1837 and 1839 and launched his second artistic career with nine landscapes in an exhibition at the National Academy of Design in New York City in 1838.

Durand is often said to have assumed the role of the foremost landscape painter in the United States after Cole's unexpected death in 1848.

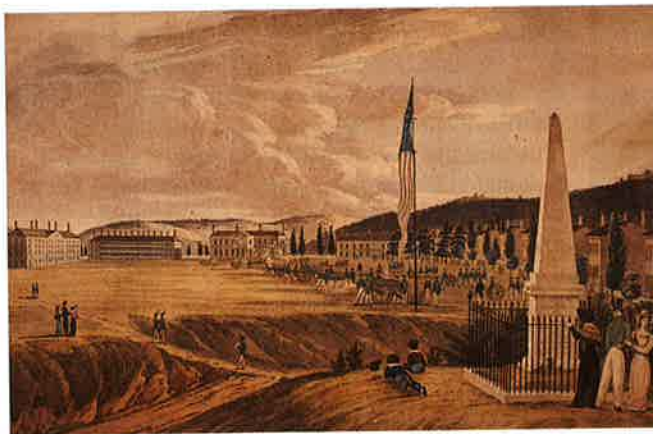
The acquisition of *View of Fort Putnam* by the Philadelphia Museum of Art comes at an auspicious moment for the collection, because Cole's *Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonhaugh in the Distance* (Pl. V), painted in early 1826, has also recently been promised as a gift to the museum by an anonymous donor.<sup>19</sup> George William Featherstonhaugh,<sup>20</sup> a geologist and entrepreneur, probably became acquainted with Cole through Trumbull, and may have seen Cole's first three paintings exhibited at the American Academy. Unfortunately, Cole's relationship with his new benefactor was not a happy one, as articulated by the clergyman and writer Louis Legrand Noble (1813–1882) who, in his biography of Cole, referred to Featherstonhaugh as a "heartless employer" and called Cole "the Dupe of an unworthy Patron."<sup>21</sup> Cole himself, in a letter to Trumbull in February 1826, expressed his dissatisfaction with the commission to paint several views of Featherstonhaugh's upstate Duaneburg estate:

*I have closely applied myself this winter but I have not painted many pictures. I sometimes wish I had remained in N York. The scenery from which I have been painting here is certainly fine, extensive, but not of the character that I delight in—and it is much more difficult to make a picture of a soft scene than those that possess more character—and they cannot inspire that vivid feeling that I believe it is necessary an artist should have and by which he is enabled to work with spirit and effect.<sup>22</sup>*

Painted within half a year of each other and quite different in their artistic intent, the landscapes bear out the distinction Cole makes in this letter to Trumbull. In *Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonhaugh in the Distance*, Cole took the inherently less inspiring scenery to create an impressive and expansive panorama set off by the sort of picturesque foreground elements that he favored.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the sinuous space and dramatic effects in *View of Fort Putnam* suggest the kind of intensely personal, spiritual engagement he could achieve best in subjects of his own choosing.



*View of Fort Putnam* is extraordinarily significant within Cole's oeuvre, and its rediscovery enlarges what is known about his youthful skill and artistic intentions. Like its companion paintings, *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)* and *Catterskill Upper Fall, Catskill Mountain*, the *View of Fort Putnam* clearly appealed to contemporary taste both in subject matter and execution. The rise of tourism in the nineteenth century created an increased interest in celebrating the beauty of American scenery. Cole's three paintings incorporated the concepts of pride in the native landscape and nostalgia for the not-so-distant past. However, the scene of West Point also contains a more overt reference to the Revolutionary War. Like a medieval castle, Fort Putnam endows the landscape with a sense of grandeur and history that intentionally rivals the European tradition. This reference is underscored by Cole's assimilation of the notion of the sublime into the scene, with its vaguely threatening clouds and areas of deep shadow. It was this very mixture of



skillful painting, depth of meaning, and acknowledgment of a broader tradition that attracted the eyes of Trumbull, Dunlap, and Durand to the three paintings that launched Cole's career.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cole; "Essay on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine*, 3rd series, vol. 1 (January 1836), pp. 1–12. Excerpt reprinted in *Art in Theory*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, with Jason Gaiger (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998), p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent retelling of the tale, see Carrie Reborra Barratt, "Mapping the Venues: New York City Art Exhibitions," in *Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825–1861*, ed. Catherine Hoover Voor-sanger and John K. Howat (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2000), pp. 47–81.

<sup>3</sup> Reprinted in Ellwood C. Parry III, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination* (University of Delaware Press, Newark, 1988), pp. 25–26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *New-York Review, and Athenaeum Magazine*, vol. 2 (January 1826), p. 153; reprinted *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Durand is quoted as saying this in Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, ed. Elliot S. Vesell (1853; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> After buying the painting for twenty-five dollars, Dunlap wrote that "P. Hone, Esq., soon offered me \$50 for my purchase, which I accepted, and my necessities prevented me from giving the profit, as I ought to have done, to the painter" (William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* [1834; Dover Publications, New York, 1969]), vol. 2, part 2, p. 360.

<sup>8</sup> "Mr. Cole's picture I have not sent to-day because Conely is not here to attend to the boxing of it up. I will send it tomorrow by the [illegible]" (John Durand to Asher Brown Durand, June 4, 1849 [Asher Brown Durand papers, manuscript division, New York Public Library, New York City]). This could, of course, refer to a different painting, for Durand owned at least one other work by Cole, a small study for *Dream of Arcadia* of 1833 (Denver Art Museum), which was included in the Thomas Cole Memorial Exhibition at the American Art-Union in New York City in the spring of 1848. The study is now in the New-York Historical Society in New York City.

<sup>9</sup> Report dated October 2, 1998 (curatorial files, Philadelphia Museum of Art).

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of the picturesque and the sublime and their application in British and American landscape painting, see Alan Wallach, "Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire," in *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History*, ed. William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (National Museum of American Art, Washington, D. C., and Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994), pp. 28–31; and Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820–1880* (Tate Publishing, London, and Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2002), pp. 11–22, 133.

<sup>11</sup> See Claire M. Barry, "Painting the Imagination: The Creation of *The Garden of Eden* by Thomas Cole," in Franklin Kelly, *Thomas Cole's Paintings of Eden* (Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1994), p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> The version of the view of Kaaterskill Falls commissioned by the Hartford collector Daniel Wadsworth (Pl. III) is two inches shorter in height and two inches longer in width than Durand's and Dunlap's paintings. Although not identical in its dimensions, Wadsworth's painting undoubtedly provides a reasonably accurate representation of





what the painting Trumbull owned would have looked like, Cole voiced his doubts about the merits of Wadsworth's copy when writing to him in 1826, "I have laboured twice as much upon this picture as I did upon the one you saw; but not with the same feeling, I cannot paint a view twice and do justice to it—If you had permitted me to take another subject you would have had a better picture—I should not have sent the picture had you not expressed a great wish to have this view—Some parts of this may be better than Col Trumbull's painting but on the whole it is not... The view is a little different to the other—it would be gratifying to learn that the picture is more pleasing to you, than I fear it will be" (Thomas Cole to Daniel Wadsworth, New York, November 20, 1826, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Cole and Daniel Wadsworth: Letters in the Watkinson Library, Trinity College, Hartford, and in the New York State Library, Albany, New York*, ed. J. Bard McNulty [Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, 1983], p. 4).

<sup>13</sup> "List of Pictures Painted in New York, 1826," from Cole's early notebook, reproduced in Parry, *Art of Thomas Cole*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Cole's 1825 sketchbook, p. 30 (Detroit Institute of Arts). This drawing is unlocated, but several others from the trip, including the sketch for *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, are in the Detroit Institute of Arts.

<sup>15</sup> See n. 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Bruce Robertson, "The Picturesque Traveler in America," in Edward J. Nygren et al., *Views and Visions: American Landscape before 1830* (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1986), pp. 189–211.

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank David M. Reel, the curator of art at the West Point Museum, United States Military Academy, for his generosity with both his time and knowledge.

<sup>18</sup> *American Landscape: No. 1* (New York, 1830), pp. 11–12. Asher Brown Durand wrote the introductory "Prospectus of The American Landscape" and was the principal illustrator

and printer of the plates, which were based on pictures by William James Bennett (1787–1844), Robert Walter Weir, and Cole. The preface and all the captions, except for the engravings of Fort Putnam and Lake Winnepesaukee, were written by William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878). Although Bryant notes that the captions for those two were "furnished by pens which have acquired reputation in more elaborate efforts," it is unclear who wrote them.

<sup>19</sup> Both paintings were included in the exhibition held at the museum in the fall of 2002 entitled *Gifts in Honor of the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Philadelphia Museum of Art*. In the accompanying catalogue of the same title (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 2002), *View of Fort Putnam* is illustrated on p. 50. The other painting was not promised to the museum until after the publication of the catalogue, and so does not appear in it.

<sup>20</sup> Featherstonhaugh's name, in accordance with his British heritage, is pronounced "Fanshaw."

<sup>21</sup> Noble, *Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Cole to Trumbull, Duaneburg, New York, February 24, 1826 (Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection, Winterthur Library, Winterthur, Delaware); reprinted in Parry, *Art of Thomas Cole*, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that, although the painting appears to depict the landscape in autumn, it was actually painted in late winter.

**ELISE EFFMANN** was the Andrew W. Mellon fellow in paintings conservation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art before becoming an assistant conservator of paintings at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas.

#### Facing page:

**Fig. 2. *Fort Putnam***, by James Smillie (1807–1885) and finished by Asher Brown Durand (1796–1886) after a painting by Robert Walter Weir (1803–1889), published by Elam Bliss (1779–1848), New York City, 1830. Inscribed "Painted by Rob<sup>t</sup> W. Weir" at left and "Etched by J. Smillie, finished by A. B. Durand" at right. Etching, plate size 4 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 6 inches. The town of Cold Spring is visible beyond Constitution Island on the other side of the Hudson River beyond the ruin of Fort Putnam. *Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, New Hampshire, special collections.*

**Pl. IV. *West Point Military Academy***, by John Hill (1770–1850) after a drawing by George Catlin (1796–1872), May 15, 1828. Inscribed "Published May 15, 1828" at bottom center; "Drawn by G. Catlin—Engraved Printed & Coloured, by J. Hill" at lower left, and "To the cadets of the West Point Military Academy, this print is respectfully dedicated by their friend & servant, Geo. Catlin" at bottom. Hand-colored engraving, 11 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> by 18 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. Fort Putnam, at the far right, overlooks the plateau of the military academy. *United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, West Point Museum collection.*

#### This page:

**Pl. V. *Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonhaugh in the Distance***, by Cole, 1826. Signed "T. Cole" at center right. Oil on canvas, 33 by 48 inches. *Philadelphia Museum of Art, promised gift of an anonymous donor.*