



(left) Thomas Seir Cummings, *Thomas Cole*, c. 1826-1828. Albany Institute of History and Art.; (right) Thomas Cole in 1844

Thomas Cole (1801-1848)

"A Hartford Biography"

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While Thomas Cole never lived or worked in Hartford, he left a major mark on the city's artistic heritage. One of his earliest patrons was Daniel Wadsworth, a wealthy Hartford patron of the arts who commissioned seven of Cole's early works, six of which now hang in the Wadsworth Atheneum, which he founded. At the suggestion of Wadsworth, Frederic Church, one of Hartford's most illustrious native sons, studied with Cole. Among the Atheneum's many paintings by Church is his first recorded sale, *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636*, based upon a Cole painting from the same year and purchased from Church by the Atheneum in 1846, likely at Wadsworth and Cole's suggestion.

Thomas Cole was born on February 1, 1801 in Bolton-le-Moor, England. He and his family immigrated to the United States in 1818. At the time, England was suffering from a severe economic depression that followed the Napoleonic War. The family settled in Steubenville, Ohio. From 1823 to 1825 Cole studied painting in Philadelphia, then moved to New York City

In 1825, John Trumbull a prominent painter from Connecticut, who was President of the American Academy of the Fine Arts, saw some of Cole's paintings in Coleman's frame shop in New York City and bought one of them titled "*Catterskill Upper Fall, Catskill Mountain*" (location unknown) for \$25. Trumbull communicated his interest in Cole's work to his nephew-in-law, Daniel Wadsworth (1771-1848), a very wealthy art collector who lived in Hartford.



(Thomas Sully, *Daniel Wadsworth*, 1807, Wadsworth Atheneum)

In 1826 Wadsworth wrote to Cole asking him to paint a copy of the painting Trumbull had bought. Cole was reluctant to paint the same painting again and offered to paint another view of the scene, but Wadsworth insisted on a copy. Cole complied with a painting titled "*Kaaterskill Falls*". Cole was not entirely pleased with the painting and wrote to Wadsworth on November 20, 1826:

"I have labored 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...I hope that if ever you again favor me with an order for the picture I shall be more fortunate in its execution".



(Thomas Cole, *Kaaterskill Falls*, 1826, Wadsworth Atheneum)

Wadsworth was more than pleased however and happily paid the \$50 fee. Thus began a life long friendship and correspondence between the two men, which had a major impact on the artistic heritage of Hartford. In 1983 the correspondence between Cole and Wadsworth was discovered in the Watkinson Library at Trinity College in Hartford, bound together with the funeral oration for Cole by William Cullen Bryant. This correspondence gives us an intimate view of the relationship

between the two men from the time they met in 1826 until 1844, three years before they both died.

In 1827 Cole travelled by steamboat from New York to visit Wadsworth at his country estate Monte Video atop Talcott Mountain just outside of Hartford, Connecticut in what was then Farmington (now Avon). With him he brought his painting "*Saint John in the Wilderness*" which Wadsworth had bought.



(Thomas Cole, *St. John in the Wilderness*, 1827, Wadsworth Atheneum)

During the visit, Wadsworth commissioned a painting of Monte Video looking south from the tower at the top of Talcott Mountain toward the Farmington Valley. The present day Heublein Tower was later built on the same spot.



(Thomas Cole, "*View of Monte Video, the Set of Daniel Wentworth*", 1828, Wadsworth Atheneum)

Up to that time Cole had been painting mostly scenes from upstate New York. Wadsworth suggested he explore the White Mountains in New Hampshire and gave him a detailed itinerary. Cole followed Wadsworth's advice and painted "*View in the White Mountains*" for Wadsworth when he returned.



(Thomas Cole, *View in the White Mountains*, 1827, Wadsworth Atheneum)

In November Wadsworth, having bought the painting titled "*The Last of the Mohicans*", directed Cole to have it framed and shipped by steamboat to Hartford. He said he would have a similar frame made for "*St. John in the Wilderness*".



(Thomas Cole, *Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans"*, 1827, Wadsworth Atheneum)

In November 1827, "*Kaaterskill Falls*", "*View in the White Mountains*", and "*The Last of the Mohicans*", were boxed up and shipped by steamboat to Hartford. The boat ran into rocks off Guilford, Connecticut in a storm. The *Middlesex Gazette* reported that "*No lives were lost, but the goods on board were considerably damaged...*" Wadsworth read of the accident and feared that his paintings were aboard the ship. But they arrived in Hartford with only some minor damage. Wadsworth wrote to

Cole on December 4, 1827. *"When I heard of the misfortune of the Linus (the steamboat) I could not but fear that the pictures were on board – but before I could be sure of it they arrived at my door - & I opened them with fear and trembling. – I now hasten to inform you of their safety as (soon as) possible...."* The bill for *Mohicans* was \$100 and \$15 for the frame. The *White Mountains* was \$75.

In May 1828, Cole shipped another painting to Wadsworth, again by steamboat, titled *"View of l'Esperance on the Schoharie River"*. As usual Wadsworth was very pleased with the picture.



(Thomas Cole, *View of l'Esperance on the Schoharie River*, 1828, private collection)

This appears to be the only painting of Cole's bought by Wadsworth that is not in the Atheneum. It may have been sold by Wadsworth, or more likely willed to a third party upon his death.

In 1828, 27 year old Cole was in good health but complained to Wadsworth that he was not in good spirits. His problems were not financial, since he was regularly selling paintings.

"It is not riches that I aspire to – I flatter myself I have a nobler object in view, it is the attainment of excellence in my art – and I find I cannot get the means of improvement that I wish... I shall look forward with hope to the time when I shall be able to produce pictures that shall affect the mind of the beholder like the works of a great poet... it is probable, perhaps more than probable that I should fall short of this exalted excellence." (November 10, 1828)

In December 1829 he shipped two more paintings to Wadsworth by steamboat, *View of Monte Video*, (commissioned two years earlier) and *View on Lake Winnipiseogee*. The paintings were \$50 each. Wadsworth's letter written upon receiving the two paintings is missing. Wadsworth was again pleased with the paintings. However he apparently criticized the *Winnipiseogee* painting for the lack

dark shadows. It is practically the only criticism Wadsworth offered of any of Cole's paintings in their correspondence. This was the last painting Wadsworth himself bought from Cole.



(Thomas Cole, *View on Lake Winnepiseogee*, 1828, Wadsworth Atheneum)

In June of 1829 Cole, who had been trying for some time to travel to Europe to study the old masters, was finally able to go. He spent the next three and a half years in England and Italy. Writing from Florence Italy on July 13, 1832, he said:

"Years have passed away since I saw you & time & the world have undoubtedly wrought many changes in both of us; but the recollection of your friendship - the many happy hours I spent at Hartford and Monte Video also those rambles - those sunsets I enjoyed with you have never faded in my mind and I look at those pleasures as 'flowers that never will in other garden grow'... Is Monte Video as beautiful as ever? It must be so, ... I anticipate the pleasures of seeing with you another sunset from the Tower-One of the views if Monte Video I had engraved in England and I intended to send you a number of the proofs."

Cole returned to New York in November 1832. Wadsworth did not receive his July 13th letter until November and responded on December 12. There appears to have been a break in their relationship after their last meeting in New York before Cole left for Europe. Cole was apparently writing to mend the break. In Wadsworth's letter of December 12th he explains that he was very ill when they were last together and remained so for most of the time Cole was in Europe. He was now recovered and "ardently and affectionately" wished to see Cole again as soon as possible. Their relationship was mended. French says that in 1832-3 Cole had a studio in Wadsworth's mansion in Hartford. This is unlikely since there is no mention of any such visit in the correspondence or any other reference. Wadsworth writing in December 1834 implies that they have not seen each other for at least two years.

Cole became a naturalized citizen of the U.S. on April 8, 1834. He rented a studio in Catskill and met Maria Bartow, the owner's niece. They were married in 1836.

There is a long gap in the surviving correspondence between February of 1835 and June of 1843. Cole's marriage and Wadsworth's poor health were likely the main reasons for the gap in their correspondence. During that time planning for an art museum and cultural institution on the site of the Wadsworth mansion on Main Street had begun. The Wadsworth mansion was moved to Buckingham Street and construction of the museum began in 1842. In June 1843 Wadsworth, whose health continued to decline, wrote that the planning committee of the new museum was anxious to have some of Cole's works for the museum but noted, "*& though they are all anxious to (have) some of your works, as they admire greatly, & have known more of (than) of other artist, - they are desirous of going on safely, & making no engagements which they do not feel a certainly of (being) able to fulfill.*" The building was completed in 1844. The Atheneum committee negotiated with Cole to buy his painting *Mount Etna from Taormina*, which was painted in 1843. They agreed on a price of \$400 and the painting was delivered in March of 1844. Wadsworth had contributed \$50 towards the purchase.



(Thomas Cole, *Mount Etna from Taormina*, 1843, Wadsworth Atheneum)

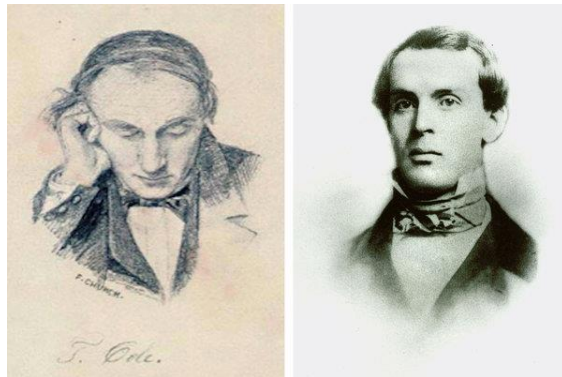
Cole visited Wadsworth in early 1844. In a letter from early 1844 Cole writes: "*My last visit to your house was a very agreeable one & it is now as well as the more extended one of some years back among the pleasant reminiscences of my life.*"

In 1844, Joseph Church, a descendent of one of Hartford's founders, who owned a jewelry store on Main Street in Hartford, asked Wadsworth to write Cole. Church's son Frederic wanted to study art with Cole. Joseph Church was well known to Wadsworth as one of the subscribers to his new museum. Wadsworth wrote Cole on May 8:

"Joseph Church, Esq. a gentleman of respectability of this town has a son between seventeen and eighteen years of age, who has evinced considerable talent for landscape painting & who has a strong desire to pursue the art...The young gentleman has received a good education and has considerable mechanical genius. His personal

appearance and manners are possessing. Will it be convenient and agreeable to you to receive him into your own family as a pupil or if not to have him board near you and give him the advantage of your instruction...Young Mr Church has practiced of considerably in oil and with some success by himself without instruction."

Cole agreed to accept young Church as an apprentice. Young Church wrote Cole on May 20, 1844. *"I have seen your letter addressed to Mr. Wadsworth in reply to the one written by him with reference to me and I may say I have seldom felt more sincere joy than I experienced when I learned your favorable answer."* Cole first met Church in Hartford in 1844 when he visited Wadsworth on his way to paint on Mt. Desert Island. *"Cole wrote his wife on August 22 that he had just "spent a day with Mr. Church in Hartford very pleasantly – Mr. Church will be with you in a few days after you get this."* (Howat, page 9)



Left: "Portrait of Thomas Cole" by Church. Right: a daguerreotype of Church taken around the time he stayed with Cole. Credit Left: Matt Flynn/Smithsonian Institution. Right: Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, N.Y., from Hodara)

According to French: *"Thomas Cole had never given instruction; but through the intervention of Daniel Wadsworth, an intimate friend of both, an arrangement was made whereby 1844-1846 Mr. Church became a pupil and lifelong friend of the great landscape-painter."* *"By the time Church arrived, Cole was married and living at Cedar Grove, a 110-acre farm owned by his wife's family (and now the 5 ½-acre Thomas Cole site)." (New York Times 9/12/2014)* Dearinger states that Church was the only student Cole ever accepted, however correspondence from Cole indicates that he did give instruction to other students. Writing to another prospective student 1847 Cole describes his teaching arrangements:

"On the recommendation of friends I have taken several young painters to study under me. These having been with me for a year or two each are now gone away ... The terms on which I took my other students was 200 (dollars) per annum for this: I will furnish you with a painting room, give you the necessary instruction and admit you into my studio at suitable hours. In the summer season you will at times accompany me in my sketching excursion." (quoted in Howat, page 9)

Student and teacher quickly developed a strong bond. Church mastered his teacher's methods, and Cole praised the genius of his young student. Cole is reported to have said that Church had "*the finest eye for drawing in the world.*" Church in turn had a deep influence on Cole. Church often accompanied Cole on his walks in the nearby countryside as well as on painting excursions to East Hampton, New York; Madison, Connecticut, and the Berkshires. Several writers including Howat, Wilmerding, and Charles Dudley Warner, a close friend of Church, have described their contrasting artistic temperaments, Cole as a Romantic and Church as a naturalist. Each incorporated elements of the other's spirit in their works. Their relationship was explored in depth in a catalogue that accompanied a 2014 exhibition at Cole's house in Cedar Grove titled "Master, Mentor, Master" curated by John Wilmerding.

Church returned to Hartford in 1846. Shortly after his return he painted *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford*. According to Kornhauser, Howat, and Wilmerding, the subject was most likely suggested by Cole, who had included it in a list of possible subjects for a painting. The work was shown at the National Academy of Design in the spring and was purchased by the newly opened Atheneum for \$130. It was Church's first documented sale.



(Frederic E. Church, *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636, 1846, Wadsworth Atheneum*)

Both Howat and Wilmerding have compared this painting to an 1846 painting by Cole titled *The Pic-Cic* that almost certainly served as a model for Church's painting.



(Thomas Cole, *The Pic-Nic*, 1846, Brooklyn Museum)

Cole died likely of pleurisy on February 11, 1848, just two years after Church studied with him, but Church remained close to Cole's family for the rest of his life, later building his own home, Olana, just across the Hudson River from Cedar Grove. Cole is buried near his Cedar Grove home in Catskill. Wadsworth died just a few months later on July 28, 1848 and is buried in the Old North Cemetery in Hartford.

Thanks to the relationship between Daniel Wadsworth, Thomas Cole, and Frederic Church, the Wadsworth Atheneum has one of the finest collections of Hudson River School paintings in the world. In 1948, they mounted a major show of Cole's work marking the 100th anniversary of his death.

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NOTES

Born February 1, 1801, Bolton-le-Moor, England
Family immigrated to US 1818 during depression that followed the Napoleonic war.
Family live in Steubenville, Ohio
1823-25 studied in Philadelphia
1825 met Wadsworth through John Trumbull (Wadsworth's uncle in law)
Cole/Wadsworth correspondence begins. Wadsworth commissions first painting, a copy of one owned by Trumbull. (Kornhouser)
1827 Cole visits Wadsworth in Hartford. Wadsworth suggests the White Mountains in New Hampshire. Paints "View in the White Mountains" for Wadsworth.
1828 paints "View of Monte Video, the Seat of Daniel Wadsworth"
1829-1832 travelled to Europe (inspired by Turner and Constable)
In Hartford c. 1832-3, studio in the Wadsworth mansion (French)
Protégé of Daniel Wadsworth
1841-2 Second trip to Europe.
1844 Wadsworth writes to Cole re. Church (Kornhouser page 188 for letter)
Teacher of F. W. Church (1826-1900), (Church his most illustrious student)
1827 Wadsworth commissions "View of Monte Video"
Cole later wrote of his "recollection" of their friendship and "of the many happy hours I spent at Hartford and Monte Video-also those rambles-those sunsets I enjoyed with you (that) have never faded in my mind and I look at those pleasures as "flowers that never will in other garden grow' ...I anticipate the pleasures of seeing with you another sunset from the Tower-One of the views if Monte Video I had engraved in England and I intended to send you a number of the proofs."
(Kornhouser extract from the Cole Wadsworth correspondence)
Several paintings in Atheneum
"Montevideo on Talcott Mountain" Wadsworth estate.
1844 Atheneum formed

Died February 11, 1848, Catskill, New York (likely of pleurisy)
1948 Thomas Cole show at Atheneum honoring centenary of his and Wadsworth's death