

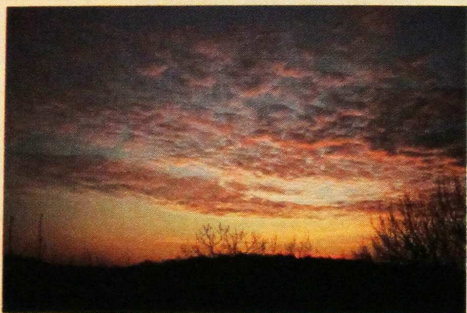


COURTESY OF THE NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, N.Y.C.

Catskill Creek, by Thomas Cole. In Cole's day the modest Catskill Mountains were the symbolic centerpiece of America's majestic wilderness. Below: Cole's clouds can still be seen over the Catskills.

In the early nineteenth century our fledgling nation began to seek its own unique vision of artistic expression. The contrast between the beauty of America's virgin wilderness, and the ugliness of Europe's industrial pollution and spreading slums provided a ready-made theme for American writers and artists that Europeans themselves had already recognized.

Thomas Cole was one of the first American artists to heed



the call to paint the wild. Cole was born in England but was so entranced by the image of America's wilderness in travel books that in 1818 he convinced his parents to leave Manchester and

its smoke-filled air and emigrate to a United States still blessed by pristine skies. And in all his works, Cole never forgot that the sky is "the soul of all scenery." Indeed, the sky has



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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SKY

Mirrors of



*Aurora Borealis, by Frederick Church, symbolized the nation's hope for
an imminent end to the grim Civil War.*

PAINTINGS

the American Mind by
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always played a preeminent role in American art.

Cole began painting America's landscapes shortly after 1820. At the time, New York's modest Catskill Mountains were the symbolic centerpiece of America's majestic wilderness. You may recall that it was a Catskill mountain thunderstorm that rocked Rip Van Winkle into his twenty-year nap. It was from the edge of Rip's still sleepy town of Catskill in 1845 that Cole painted one of art's meteorological masterpieces, *Catskill Creek*.

The scene looks west-southwest from the outskirts of the town and shows all the major features of the east face of the Catskill Mountains just after sunset on a placid autumn day. In the distance an innocuous smoke plume drifts lazily upward, the only sign of the encroaching "ax of Yankee civilization" that American landscape artists like Cole were so wary of.

But the sky and altocumulus clouds are still untainted and on fire; the lower fringe of each cloud element tinged crimson, pink, or golden by the setting sun. You can still see such scenes along the Hudson River today.

Cole's clouds are portrayed with photographic accuracy, the first time this was done in any painting. Indeed, the whole picture has a photo-like quality and may have been inspired by the pioneering photographs of Louis Daguerre, a French painter. His invention gave all artists a new standard of realism.

The sky and the weather were always prominently featured in Cole's paintings. His knowledge of meteorology, particularly concerning clouds, was up-to-date. He was familiar with Luke Howard's cloud classifications and used them whenever he wrote about clouds. And he imparted all this meteorological

knowledge to his student, Frederic Church.

Our Banner in the Sky

Church began his own illustrious career by following in Cole's footsteps. His early works include many glorious sunrise and sunset scenes in the Catskills and the Northeast. One of the most famous of these, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, contains an incandescent sunset sky crossed by brilliant bands of crimson altocumulus. When the Civil War broke out the following year (1861), Church asserted his patriotism by transmuting a similar sky with wavy white cloud bands into a dramatic depiction of the American flag he called *Our Banner in the Sky*.

Fittingly, four years later, Church painted a sky to literally ring down the curtain on the waning Civil War; the red and green curtains of *Aurora Borealis* bring the only light and warmth to an otherwise sterile, frozen wasteland in which the ship of state lies icebound.

Although Church traveled to Newfoundland and Labrador, he never actually went as far north as the forbidding polar setting of *Aurora Borealis*. In fact, the work's immediate inspiration was an extraordinary auroral display seen in the United States on December 23, 1864, which was widely interpreted as an omen favorable to the Union cause. Meanwhile, Church had already begun the travels that would take him around the globe in search of noble and exotic scenery.

New Horizons

Even before the Civil War, many other American painters had begun to look beyond the northeastern United States for their artistic training and sky scenes. Many took trips to Europe or to the western United States. Some artists, like the German-

born Albert Bierstadt, made a career of painting scenes of the West, while others, like James McNeill Whistler, who painted many scenes inspired by London's industrially thickened fog, reversed the trend of the early 1800s and left America to settle in Europe. Most, however, eventually returned home to the Northeast to paint its familiar scenery and skies in new ways.

George Inness made two long visits to Europe before returning home to make his name painting the skies of the Northeast. On his second trip in 1854, Inness came under the sway of the so-called Barbizon school of landscape painting. His portrayal of trees with bright trunks and limbs shining through luxuriant foliage is a Barbizon trademark. Inness also adopted the Barbizon practice of depicting "intimate, quiet views of the tamed countryside."

Fortunately, Inness regained his artistic independence by 1860, when he moved to the western Boston suburb of Medfield, Massachusetts. There, on an early summer morning, he began his long, distinguished career as a weather painter with a work called *Clearing Up*.

The scene faces north along the meadows of the upper reaches of the Charles River near Medfield and provides a panoramic view of the sky that is so convincing it must represent an actual observation. Visibility is excellent, as it often is in the wake of a storm. The early morning sun peeks in from the right, casting long shadows and a reddish glow on the clouds. The clouds are cumulus "streets" that line up parallel to the wind and are often seen in the rear of low-pressure areas. The orientation of the cloud streets indicates a west wind, a further sign of clearing. Even the cloud layer seen through the gaps between the cumulus is consistent. This higher layer consists



COURTESY G. W. V. SMITH ART MUSEUM/SPRINGFIELD, MA



Top: Clearing Up, by George Inness, was obviously inspired by actual observations. Bottom: Albert Pinkham Ryder's Toilers of the Sea depicts the feelings of darkness and isolation brought on by profound social changes in the late nineteenth century.

of broken, translucent, and whiter cirrus, cirrostratus, or altostratus often seen at the western edge of the cloud shield of a departing low. In fact, the painting's only meteorological inconsistency is the grafting of a Barbizon calm at the ground onto a weather situation that calls for a brisk westerly wind.

Inness later painted many stormy and misty scenes. He also created an American form of Impressionism somewhat independent of his European contemporaries. He was one of the leaders in the changing currents of art in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Strange and Foreign Skies

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century both western Europe and the northeastern United States were profoundly rocked by fundamental societal changes. Artists on both sides of the Atlantic independently developed similar responses. The world was rapidly becoming industrialized and urbanized. Science and technology were making great in-

roads into the domain of the irrational and mysterious. But these changes displaced people and reduced the quality and security of both their outer and inner lives. Some artists responded by painting strange new skies to mirror their inner moods, stressing darkness despite the debut of the electric light, and isolation despite the teeming crowds of the city.

It is no wonder, therefore, that one of the strangest and most foreign-looking of all American skies was painted in a small, dusty apartment in the middle of Manhattan. There, in plain view of New York's bustling port with its majestic ocean liners, and the towering new Brooklyn Bridge, Albert Pinkham Ryder created *Toilers of the Sea*, a lonely, almost macabre scene of a small sailboat on a lonely sea. *Toilers* was the first painting to use a moonlit corona in altocumulus clouds to evoke feelings of fear and dread and has since served as a prototype for the nocturnal skies of horror movies. Ryder himself admitted "I am trying to find something out there beyond the place on which I have a footing."

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, artists like Church, who had earned their livings by producing realistic paintings of nature scenes, fell from favor; a new breed of artists arose who were hypnotized by the spell of Europe's presumed cultural superiority.

It took American artists several decades to wrench themselves free from this cultural inferiority complex. Long after Edward Hopper returned from Europe in 1910, for example, he recalled that "[America] seemed awfully crude and raw when I got back. It took me ten years to get over Europe."

By 1920, however, Europe lay devastated in the wake of World War I and American artists tentatively began to reassert their cultural

*Only high clouds
afford a feeling
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independence. And once again, the American landscape and sky would serve them well.

Spacious Skies and Dust Bowl Days

While in Europe, Hopper had produced insignificant landscapes with sorry imitations of European skies. After his return to America he stopped this practice, but it took him years to begin painting clouds again. Once he finally did, however, he would have nothing to do with the puny and lowly European cumulus "effects" he had so slavishly imitated. No! Only the higher clouds afforded a feeling of spaciousness worthy of America.

Hopper learned to paint mountain wave clouds, bands of cellular altocumulus, and especially cirrus with a master's touch. One of the finest examples of painted cirrus uncinus appears in his *Ground Swell* (1939), where several long parallel rows of cirrus stretch diagonally across a limpid sky. Each row occupies the crest of a wave in the jet stream produced by vertical wind shear, while the trails of falling ice crystals line up properly at right angles to both the rows and the wind shear. The frothy ocean swell below echoes this alignment, but probably for purely artistic reasons. The sky itself, however, is surely based on actual observation, for nothing else could account for such perfect cirrus.

World War I had sent Americans plowing their way westward across

the Great Plains to raise amber waves of grain to feed starving Europe. There they could finally see in unmasked glory the towering thunderstorms that produced most of the rain that watered the region. But there came a day when the rains failed, the grain withered, and the scorching west wind whipped up the Dust Bowl.

A homegrown school of American artists known as the Regionalists were ready to record this natural disaster—and at the same time praise the quiet heroism of middle-class Americans compelled to endure the combined hardships of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression.

Alexandre Hogue's *Drouth-stricken Area* documents the Dust Bowl. The sun beats down mercilessly on a landscape crossed by shifting sand dunes that have almost buried an abandoned farmhouse. The sky offers no relief. A pronounced brown stripe of dust-filled air overlies the horizon, while one tiny, sterile cumulus guarantees that not a single drop of rain will fall. Only the buzzards are doing well; one fat scavenger waits patiently for the death of an almost skeletal cow pathetically searching for water in a sand-filled tank.

Storm Clouds

Rain did eventually return to the Great Plains and John Steuart Curry was there to capture some of the dramatic moments. In *The Line Storm* (1934) the horizon is covered by an approaching arc or shelf cloud. Lightning flashes in the black, rain-filled air below, while fragments of scud cloud race toward his majesty, the thunderstorm, to do proper obeisance.

Curry may have been the first painter to present an unambiguous view of a tornado. In *Tornado* (1929), a family heads for the safety



KANSAS STATE CAPITOL. COURTESY DAVID MATHIAS/PHOTO 1

Above: *Tragic Prelude*, a mural by John Stuart Curry, shows an Old Testament John Brown guided by a tornadic pillar of cloud. **Right:** *Ground Swell*, by Edward Hopper, is a cirrus cloud masterpiece.

of a storm cellar as a funnel cloud approaches in the distance.

Ten years later, in *Tragic Prelude*, Curry invested the tornado with great symbolic significance, using it as a biblical pillar of cloud to guide John Brown (modeled after Michelangelo's Moses) in his struggle for a free Kansas. The tornado hangs from a rotating wall cloud and reaches the ground in a rain-free region, where it raises the typical cloud of debris that fans out from the base of a funnel cloud.

Curry's renditions of severe weather all present a vantage point so close to the action that only part of the thunderstorm can be seen. This raises a most intriguing and surprising point. For centuries, European and American artists had been depicting clouds accurately both from the side and from below. There also were many examples of lightning, rainshafts, rainbows, and other storm features, but for some reason very few artists have stepped back far



EDWARD HOPPER (1882-1967); *GROUND SWELL*, 1939. IN THE COLLECTION OF THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART. MUSEUM PURCHASE, WILLIAM A. CLARK FUND 43.6

enough to portray the entire structure of an anvil-topped cumulonimbus in an otherwise clear sky. Among the rare exceptions: Leonardo da Vinci drew a cumulonimbus with an anvil in his *Notebooks*, while Peter Paul Rubens painted a small, distant, and rainless anvil-topped thunderstorm in *Henry IV at the Battle of Arques*.

Views of complete thunderstorms have since been painted by a number of storm-chasing artists, the first of whom may have been Wilson Hurley. Hurley was born on the Great Plains but later settled in New Mexico. There the brief summer monsoon brings a shallow layer of humid air that provides the fuel for almost daily thunderstorms, which blossom into



COURTESY WILSON HURLEY

Anvil Top, by storm-chaser Wilson Hurley, one of the first modern artists to paint a complete thunderstorm.

the dry air above. The result is some of the most magnificent views of isolated thunderstorms in the world. As Hurley himself notes:

In New Mexico when our summer thunderstorms arrive, it is common to see a cloud such as this in the early afternoon isolated from other clouds and showing its complete anatomy in the clear air.

Hurley has captured the cumulonimbus in many moods. *Anvil Top* (1977) shows a young thunderboomer. The anvil is still rather small and simple in form. At its edge are distinct cirrus streamers. These curl under the anvil, revealing the flow of air outward along the anvil top and then down under its sides. Closer to earth growing cumulus turrets will soon rise to join and broaden the anvil, complicating the entire storm structure.

An American Trademark

In late October, 1950, an expedition from the American Museum of Natu-

ral History was camped on the crest of Mount Albert in the Shickshock Mountains of Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula when it was surprised by an early season snowstorm. The expedition was there to document the natural environment for a museum diorama to preserve for posterity the rapidly disappearing artifacts of the natural world. On such expeditions, artists accompany the geologists, zoologists, and botanists to create paintings to record the exact settings. Whether these scenes be called art or illustration, they contain some of the most beautiful of all painted skies.

James Perry Wilson was the artist in charge of the Shickshocks expedition. His scene, *Canada Lynx and Varying Hare* captures the late afternoon sky of October 26, 1950. The view faces northward, so Mount Jacques Cartier can be seen on the right and the St. Lawrence River on the left. The first snowstorm of the season has just passed to the northeast, leaving a clearing sky of paper-thin stratocumulus. Clear-sky gaps in

the cloud deck grade from orange at the horizon to deep blue above.

The storm produced snow only at the highest elevations (above 3,000 feet), while rain fell in the lowlands and valleys. As the wind backed to northerly in the wake of the storm the north-facing, windward slopes were enveloped in a supercooled cloud that coated the north side of all exposed trees and rocks with a layer of glaze.

The clearing sky of *Canada Lynx and Varying Hare* can be considered an American trademark. In Europe the sky seldom clears for long after snowstorms, and European paintings of snow scenes almost invariably show low visibility and overcast skies. American snowstorms, by contrast, often end with dramatic clearing, and this is the way most American painters have portrayed them.

Grandma Moses was one American artist who often showed clear skies above snow-covered ground. Self-trained, she took up painting after raising a family. Almost all her works show the rural countryside of upstate New York in the various seasons. In her winter scenes the ground is usually snow covered. In many of these, snow is actually falling. When it is not the sky is usually darkened by stratiform clouds, though sometimes it is clear blue or sports a few tiny stratocumulus clouds.

Grandma Moses continued painting the sky until June 1961, when she was almost 101 years old. In that month she began her final work, *Rainbow*. The painting is unfinished. In it, the springtime trees are just coming into leaf for another fruitful year. But Grandma Moses would soon pass on to another vista. She added the pastel rainbow at the last moment—perhaps as her rite of passage to a world where the skies are always beautiful. □