Forest Cathedrals

“The Hidden Glory” of Hudson River Landscapes

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Abstract

This essay analyses masterpieces of Hudson River School landscape painting within relevant religious, artistic, and literary contexts. The Hudson River School, America’s first indigenous art movement, included Thomas Cole, Asher Brown Durand, Frederic Edwin Church, and George Inness. The essay rediscovers significant spiritual meaning within recurring visual motifs, specifically tree arches and rib vaults, and forest cathedrals. The motifs illustrate themes that captured the imagination of nineteenth-century America, the sublime wilderness and divine nature. Viewing these major landscape paintings from wider perspectives contributes to critical religious and socio-cultural discourses.

Keywords: Hudson River School, landscape painting, pointed arch, sublime wilderness, divine nature

Introduction: The Hudson River School and Thomas Cole

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a Romantic movement that emphasized inspiration and subjectivity swept over the arts (see Honour; Rosenblum and Janson). European and American landscape painters rejected the sanitized, idealized formulas of the past, preferring to portray what they could see and feel in nature. Romantic artists often detected and depicted spiritual elements underlying the material world. For many, the landscape held the key to timeless, moral truths. In America, artists were challenged with representing an untamed, awe-inspiring “forest primeval” (Longfellow: 1).
The Hudson River School (a slightly satirical name coined in hindsight by art critics) was a large group of painters, mostly from New York State. The beauty of the northeastern countryside stimulated them, especially the Catskill and Adirondack Mountains crisscrossing the Hudson River north of Manhattan. The leading early members of the Hudson River School, the “first-generation,” were the English émigré Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and Asher B. Durand (1796–1886).

Art historians usually credit Thomas Cole as the founder of the Hudson River School. Cole migrated from England to America in 1819 and immediately acquired a passionate attachment to the unspoiled scenery of his new homeland. Cole’s family first settled along the Ohio River, thirty miles west of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This is where he received his first training from an itinerant portrait painter. By 1825, Cole had moved to Manhattan and in that year he sailed north up the Hudson River to explore the Catskill Mountains. He spent his time hiking through the wilderness feverishly sketching the scenery. Soon thereafter, he displayed three works from this trip in a Manhattan store window. Three pillars of New York’s art establishment, Asher B. Durand, William Dunlap (1766–1839), and John Trumbull (1756–1843), bought the paintings.

Thomas Cole’s landscapes included Christian allusions. He grew up in an Anglican community, but officially joined the Episcopal (Anglican) Church only after he married Maria Bartow in late 1836 (Wright). Thereafter, Cole was very active in St. Luke’s Episcopal Church at Catskill, New York. By the 1840s, he “always paused to pray before he began to paint” (Wright: 297).

Cole recorded his religious thoughts in poems, essays, journals, and other writings, including his “Essay on American Scenery” of 1836. In his “Essay,” Cole wrote, “the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness” (1836: 4). He rejoiced that, compared to Europe, the American landscape was relatively unchanged by human interference. Cole declared, “We are still in Eden,” referencing the home God created for Adam and Eve as described in the book of Genesis (2:8-3:24). Cole encouraged Americans to go out and enjoy the natural paradise.

We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly. . . . May we at times turn from the ordinary pursuits of life to the pure enjoyment of rural nature; which is in the soul like a fountain of cool waters to the way-worn traveler; and let us learn the laws by which the Eternal doth sublime [emphasis added] and sanctify his works, that we may see the hidden glory [emphasis added] veiled from vulgar eyes (1836: 12).

The Sublime Wilderness

Thomas Cole’s writings and paintings express a religious Romanticism. His theology was Christian (he admired the work of the creator described in Genesis), but was also related to a history of European authors who expressed pantheistic beliefs (equating nature with divinity) (Cladis). For Cole, nature’s sublime aspects, untouched by human hands, were the manifestations of the power of God. He sensed an intimate association of the earthly creation and the heavenly creator (Powell).
In the seventeenth century, European and American poets, philosophers, and rhetoricians began using the term sublime to describe the imposing violence of nature. English poet, John Milton (1608–1674) wrote of sublime landscapes in his epic poem “Paradise Lost” (1667). German aesthetic philosopher and son of a Lutheran pastor, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) encouraged artists to move beyond mere imitation and add their feelings to what they perceived. The process of creating art, Baumgarten advised, should include imitating the process of God’s creation of nature (Baumgarten: 1-10). Anglo-Irish political leader and Christian philosopher, Edmund Burke (1729–1797) suggested separating the appreciation of the beautiful from an awareness of the sublime. Whereas the beautiful may be simply appealing, nature’s sublime elements have the power to overwhelm and destroy.

Early nineteenth-century American fiction often told the stories of people living in a sublime wilderness. James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) and Washington Irving (1783–1859) led the way. Cooper explored New World themes (a sixteenth-century European term) in his Leatherstocking Tales, most famously in his fictional novel The Last of the Mohicans (1826). The novel tells of the woodsman Natty Bumppo and his friends among the Mohican, an idyllic vanishing people, and their adventures in upper New York State, an idyllic vanishing forest. The purity of natural men living in a primeval wilderness untouched by modernity’s corruptions corresponded to the Hudson River School’s visual records of America’s vanishing environment (see Cole 1827).


Thomas Cole painted View of Schroon Mountain following a stay in Europe during which he came under the spell of English Romantic painters John Martin (1789–1854) and J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851). Cole’s imposing, luminous autumnal scene and vigorous brushwork demonstrate their influence. The scene’s wildness and drama – its sublime qualities – were appreciated as a befitting style for depicting the wildness and drama of America’s interior.
terrain. Just two years before he painted this scene, Cole wrote, “There is one season when the American forest surpasses all the world in gorgeousness — that is the autumnal; — then every hill and dale is riant in the luxury of color – every hue is there, from the liveliest green to deepest purple from the most golden yellow to the intensest crimson” (1836: 9). Cole described art as “man’s lowly imitation of the creative power of the almighty” (Stradling: 66). In Schroon Mountain, Cole imitated the divine creative process.

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) was born into a prosperous family in Hartford, Connecticut. At a very young age, he displayed a precocious talent for art. Daniel Wadsworth (1771–1848) was a neighbor of the Church family, as well as a major patron of Thomas Cole and the founder of the Wadsworth Athenaeum. In the early 1840s, Wadsworth introduced Church to Cole. Thomas Cole had been one of America’s preeminent landscape artists for two decades. Church became Cole’s one-and-only art student between 1844 and 1846.

Although the work of Cole and Church is quite distinct, as was the case with Cole, there was a strong religious component to Church’s landscapes. Church was a devout Christian his entire life. He was raised in the Trinitarian Congregational Church. As a young adult, he attended Trinitarian churches in Manhattan and Brooklyn. After achieving financial success, Church built a Moorish-style mansion, which he named Olana, near Hudson, New York. When he moved into the mansion in 1872, he joined a Presbyterian congregation that met nearby (Kelly: 197).

Cole had a moralizing mindset and often gravitated toward literary themes, however, Church often seemed to approach landscape painting as a scientific investigation, creating grand panoramas filled with meticulous details. According to Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900), Church’s close friend and his first biographer, “Though Church employed his talents realistically rather than with the allegorical spirituality of [Cole, nevertheless, Church’s art] was informed with spirituality; the spirituality that made him an interpreter of nature rather than a transcriber, and enabled him to reveal her soul through its manifestations in form” (Kelly: 174). Church’s subtle symbolism is communicated through the artist’s virtuoso skill in capturing, “with startling clarity, the radiant play of light across rocks, trees, hills, and clouds” (Kelly: 37).

In Storm in the Mountains, Church embodied “nature’s awe-inspiring power” (1847; see also Carr: 70) and the heroic features of the American landscape in a blasted tree trunk (Schneider: 388). Behind the tree’s twisted, splintered arch, a storm passes on through a deep valley. The tree is a substitute for a human being and the scene is a potent metaphor for the “endless cycle of life and death” (Church 1847). The little saplings sprouting out of the ground represent new birth; the bowed, blasted trunk represents inevitable death.

Thomas Cole also painted blasted trees, in part to advocate for preservation of America’s natural resources. However, the Italian landscape master Salvator Rosa (1615–1673) popularized the emblem as a reflection on life and death. Rosa, who came from a humble background, was educated at the convent of the Somachi Fathers outside Naples. He enjoyed the patronage of Catholic Cardinals throughout his career. Rosa’s savage, proto-Romantic paintings served as exemplars for the Hudson River School.
In other works, Church employed symbols that are more obvious. In one of his most famous paintings, *The Heart of the Andes* (1859), he showed two people kneeling at a small white cross, before a sweeping vista of “God’s awesome creation” (Boerke). Upon seeing *The Heart of the Andes*, one impassioned viewer exclaimed, “The deep meaning of nature, its purifying, elevating influences are profoundly felt in the presence of this truly religious work of art” (Anonymous: 427).

Frederic Edwin Church was extraordinarily ambitious, personally and professionally, and he eventually became the most financially successful Hudson River School painter, along with Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), who is known today primarily for his panoramic views of the American West.

**Divine Nature**

Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) was born in a rural area of New Jersey not far from Manhattan. The son of a watchmaker and silversmith, Durand apprenticed with an engraver and ran an engraving firm in Manhattan between 1817 and 1820. He gained fame for his 1823
engraving of John Trumbull’s (1756–1843) monumental painting depicting the presentation of the Declaration of Independence (1817), which hangs today in the U.S. Capital building. Durand’s engraving became America’s most widely collected early print.

As mentioned, in 1825 one of Thomas Cole’s Catskill scenes displayed in a bookstore window caught Durand’s eye. A bit later, Durand decided to give up engraving to become a painter and, in the eighteen-thirties, he began to devote himself almost exclusively to landscapes. Durand and Cole became sketching companions in the Adirondacks and Catskills. In 1840 and 1841, Durand traveled to Europe and was impressed by the grand, formalized ideal landscapes of Claude Lorrain (1600–1682). Some considered the French master’s classical scenes more balanced, harmonious, and aesthetically pleasing than nature itself. Studying Claude’s work improved Durand’s compositions. After Thomas Cole’s death in 1848, Durand rose to a position of leadership among the Hudson River School.

In June 1840, as Asher B. Durand sailed from New York to London, he wrote in his journal, “Today again is Sunday. I have declined attendance on church service, the better to indulge reflection under the high canopy of heaven, amidst the expanse of waters – fit place to worship God and contemplate the wonders of his power” (Lawall: 84). Durand did not need a “temple made with hands” to commune with God (Lawall: 84). Durand believed the proper way to sense God’s presence and appreciate the glory of his creation was through considering nature. In his “Letter on Landscape Painting,” Durand wrote that nature’s “simple truths” are “the true Religion of Art” (Durand 1855a: 2).

[The study of nature] is fraught with lessons of high and holy meaning, only surpassed by the light of Revelation. It is impossible to contemplate … its inexpressible beauty and grandeur . . . without arriving at the conviction – “That all which we behold is full of blessings” – that the Great Designer of these glorious pictures has placed them before us as types of the Divine attributes, and we insensibly, as it were, in our daily contemplations, – “To the beautiful order of his works learn to conform the order of our lives” (Durand 1855b: 34).

Durand painted Kindred Spirits the year after Thomas Cole died. The painting “embodies the marriage of naturalism and idealization” that defines Hudson River School aesthetics (Durand 1849). Kindred Spirits shows Cole and the Romantic poet William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878) standing on a rocky ledge above a narrow valley, lined by steep, limestone cliffs. A shelter of overhead tree branches reach down to a smaller tree in the bottom right corner. The trees seem to embrace the two men. In the distant vista, vertical slivers of white paint represent Kaaterskill Falls, a rare two-stage waterfall that attracted visitors to the Catskill Mountains.

Kindred Spirits was both an homage to Thomas Cole and a tribute to William Cullen Bryant; the two were close friends. When Bryant delivered Cole’s funeral eulogy, he said of Cole’s paintings, “It hardly transcends the proper use of language to call them acts of religion” (Marranca: 373).
“Thanatopsis” was one of Bryant’s best-known poems. The term “thanatopsis” (or a meditation on death) comes from the Greek words *opsis* (“view of”) and *thanatos* (“death”). The poem begins,

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. . . . (Bryant 1817).

Bryant’s poem goes on to compare each person’s fleeting existence to nature’s omnipresence. It demonstrates the influence of Deism, which was an eighteen and nineteenth-century Anglo-American philosophy or natural religion. Its central tenet was that one could attain spiritual awareness through 1) reason and 2) the senses, including by studying nature.
Deism discounted direct revelation and religious doctrine. The philosophy shaped the Transcendentalist ideas and writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862).

**Transcendentalism and the Forest Cathedral**

The literary and philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism emerged in the second quarter of the nineteenth century around Boston, Massachusetts. German Romantic ideas and Asian, particularly Hindu, concepts reigned in traditional Puritan theology (Anwaruddin). By 1830, a new generation of writers and philosophers reached the conclusion that truth “transcended” what could be learned from traditional western doctrine. Henry David Thoreau wrote, “We need the tonic of wildness . . . At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature” (39).

Ralph Waldo Emerson trained to be a Unitarian minister, but he reached a wider audience as a public essayist and lecturer, intellectual, and practical philosopher. Emerson’s essay “Nature” (1836) suggested one could become conscious of the divine spirit through studying the natural world. The essay was a watershed in Transcendentalist philosophy. Henry David Thoreau was a mystic, Transcendentalist, and Emerson’s close associate. *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (1854) documented Thoreau’s two-year quest for enlightenment in a simple hut he built beside Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. Isolated from urban culture and corruption, Thoreau meditated and experienced a pantheistic sense of the divine. “We need to witness our own limits transgressed,” he reflected (238). “I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature” (The Walden Woods Project).

Thoreau’s special love seems to have been trees; he understood trees scientifically but also responded to them emotionally and spiritually. Nothing “stands up more free from blame in this world than a pine tree,” Thoreau wrote. Trees embody the “ancient rectitude and vigor of nature” (Higgins: 115). Trees were Thoreau’s shrines; the forest was his cathedral. The forest’s “spires inspired him more than the village steeple. He called the woods his ‘sanctum sanctorum,’ a place where he got ‘what others get from churchgoing’” (Higgins: 95).

**A Way through the Woods**

Thoreau, like William Cullen Bryant, used religious imagery to describe the sacredness of nature, and the sacredness of trees in particular (Higgins: 98). As Thoreau wandered through forest recesses along natural paths, he reflected: “You glance up these paths, closely imbowered [sic] by bent trees, as through the side aisles of a cathedral, and expect to hear a choir chanting from their depths. You are never so far in them as they are far before you. Their secret is where you are not and where your feet can never carry you” (Torrey: 184-85).

The twentieth-century poet, Robert Frost (1874–1963) also wrote about forest paths. Frost spent much of his childhood in Massachusetts, where he was baptized into the Swedenborgian Church. Frost is known for his evocative depictions of rural life. In 1915, he wrote the poem “The Road Not Taken.” Frost’s poetic protagonist arrives as a place where “two roads diverged in a yellow wood” and must decide which path to follow. It seems as if this one decision will determine the entire course of his future. Although each path seems
inviting, the protagonist notices one is more “grassy and wanted wear.” Perhaps leaving his fate in the hands of divine providence, he takes “the one less traveled by, [concluding] that has made all the difference.”

Hudson River School artists also often portrayed forest paths. Asher B. Durand specialized in a few specific subjects, including trails and streams through woodlands. In *Forest Stream with Vista*, two trees span a rippling brook, framing a glowing Arcadian sunset that softly fades into the distance. The trees lean inward toward each other, forming a rough pointed arch (see Leggio). Their extended upper branches recall the “high canopy of heaven” that Durand

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1 Frost’s imagery and language seem to belong to the world of fairy tales. The path through the woods is the journey of life. Throughout western literature, authors characterize the mysterious woods as a place of adventure or of life-threatening dangers. This is where the big, bad wolf stalks “Little Red Riding Hood” and where a wicked witch waylays “Hansel and Gretel” (1812). Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Carl Jung (1875–1961) asserted such sylvan frights so prominent in children’s literature symbolize the unconscious world and its ability to cloud reasoning.
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mentioned in his 1840 journal. The scene is reminiscent of looking through a nave, or the central aisle of a basilica church, toward a chancel or sanctuary. The trees are the natural “vaults of a cathedral,” and the forest becomes a “temple of nature” (Bedell). Forest Stream with Vista could serve as an illustration for William Cullen Bryant’s poem “A Forest Hymn” (1824).

The groves were God’s first temples. Ere man learned
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,
And spread the roof above them,—ere he framed
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back
The sound of anthems; in the darkling wood,
Amidst the cool and silence, he knelt down,
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks
And supplication. . . .
Father, thy hand
Hath reared these venerable columns, thou
Didst weave this verdant roof. Thou didst look down
Upon the naked earth, and, forthwith, rose
All these fair ranks of trees (1860: 1-23).

Collectors recognized and appreciated Durand’s religious allusions. American Baptist minister and author, Elias Lyman Magoon (1810–1886) owned a similar composition (Through the Woods, 1856; Vassar College of Art Gallery). Magoon wrote about his painting, “As my eye rests on those great, calm children of the woods in the foreground [the arched trees], and then irresistibly falls back reach after reach through the glorious perspective to the still mightier hills in the remote distance, I have the fitting aisle of a majestic cathedral wherein to extemporize te deums and High Masses at my own sweet will” (Lawall: 180).

When Asher B. Durand visited London in 1840, he met with Charles Robert Leslie (1794–1859), the American expatriate executor of the estate of John Constable (1776–1837). Leslie showed Constable’s paintings and plein-air sketches to Durand. Durand was very impressed. Historians often place Constable alongside J. M. W. Turner as the most important British landscape artists. Constable’s outdoor sketches captured the fleeting effects of trembling atmospheric lights and the movements of clouds. His attention to scientific, climatic accuracy proved influential on Durand’s development. Perhaps Constable’s compositional techniques were also influential. In 1825, Constable produced two works entitled Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop’s Grounds. Each shows the Cathedral’s famed spire, the tallest in the United Kingdom, pointing majestically upward toward a sunny sky, under a tree canopy composed of pointed arches.

The Framing Arch

The artists of the Hudson River School used an assortment of compositional devices to improve their images’ aesthetics and to focus the viewer’s vision. A framing arch of trees was one such compositional device.

1901), and his sister Julie Hart (1835–1913) each became late members of the Hudson River School of landscape painting. Julie Hart enjoyed commercial success like her brothers, which was extremely unusual for a female landscape painter of her era (see Krieger).

Asher B. Durand’s compositional arrangements and his gentle, atmospheric use of light had a strong impact on the Harts, especially William. An unmistakable pointed arch anchors the composition of *Autumn Scene in the Adirondacks* (1877). From the foreground, a rough sequence of arches and dense undergrowth recedes into the central background, creating a type of tree tunnel and focusing attention on the glowing heart of the image.²

² The tree tunnel was a recurrent motif in Hudson River School painting and it still appears in modern and contemporary landscape painting. French Impressionist, Claude Monet (1840–1926), for example, periodically painted tree tunnels. The English artist, David Hockney (born 1937) has made woodland tree tunnels a key motif in his work. Hockney paints the same tunnel in different seasons and usually includes a “beautiful countryside scene” in the distance beyond the tunnel (Nairn).
Western artists have used manmade and naturally occurring arches as framing devices for centuries. For example, the Italian Renaissance master, Raphael (1483–1520), placed the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle below two receding classical arches as they stride toward the viewer in the School of Athens (1509-11). In Mountain Landscape with Rainbow (1809-10), the German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) used an arching rainbow to indicate a division between the physical and spiritual realms. The rainbow symbolizes the covenant God made “with every living creature” following the great flood (Genesis 9:12-17). Friedrich’s arch indicates where the earthly and divine spheres meet.

Trees and arches have been associated in western ecclesial architecture and decorative art for a long time. At the medieval St. Edward’s Church in Gloucestershire, England, two ancient yew trees frame a thirteenth-century arched portal. Yew trees symbolized death and resurrection in the pagan Celtic culture. The northern portal of the Gothic-era Beauvais Cathedral in France includes an elaborate carved tympanum representing the Tree of Jesse, the genealogy of Jesus Christ that goes back to Jesse, the father of King David. A tree pattern, and various other symbolic subjects, decorate the borders of an eighteen-century Ketubbah. A Ketubbah is a binding agreement that is part of traditional Jewish marriages, outlining the duties and obligations of the groom.

The Forest as Cathedral

Sanford Gifford (1823–1880), like William Hart, was a “second-generation” Hudson River School painter. Gifford’s characteristic style developed after his 1855–1857 sojourn in Europe, where he studied the work of J. M. W. Turner and met Turner’s champion, the art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900).
In addition to being the foremost English art critic of the late nineteenth century, John Ruskin was a product of the Protestant Evangelical Revival and an astute Bible scholar. Ruskin deeply admired Gothic architecture and medieval artisanship, an admiration he expressed in *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). Ruskin thought seven lamps, or moral principles, should underlie design: beauty, truth, sacrifice, power, life, obedience, and memory. Ruskin advocated Gothic designs for secular and Protestant buildings. In 1860–1869, Gifford spent six weeks in Venice studying the Gothic structures that inspired Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps*. Perhaps there is a connection between Ruskin’s love of Gothic architecture and Gifford’s pointed arches, which became a recurring motif in Gifford’s late career (see, for example, Gifford 1867, 1871).

Sanford Gifford’s compositional use of pointed arches became quite complex. In his 1876 painting *Autumn, a Wood Path*, a series of arches becomes a natural rib vault. The vault, a common architectural feature in Gothic churches and cathedrals, is a series of arches that forms a roof to cover large interior spaces. A rib (or ribbed) vault is supported by a series of diagonal ribs, dividing the vault into panels. Rib vaults crown the cloister of the Santiago Cathedral and crown the wood path of Gifford’s painting. The ribs of Santiago Cathedral, however, are far more orderly than Gifford’s rough canopy of overhanging branches. In both cases though, a protective covering over a pathway invites the visitor to continue into the opening to see what wonders lie ahead.

The paintings of the Hudson River School refer to pointed arches, rather than rounded arches. The pointed arch is one of the most recognizable features of Gothic architecture. The original Gothic era lasted from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. Gothic pointed arches
were an innovation for European ecclesial structures. The semicircular arches of the earlier Romanesque era were by necessity half as high as they were wide, which limited the loftiness of Romanesque interiors. Pointed arches, on the other hand, could have any ratio of height to width. In general, Gothic buildings were much taller than were their Romanesque predecessors, thanks to their pointed arches.

During the nineteenth century’s age of Romanticism, European cultural trendsetters embraced the past and favored the medieval era over the classical (see Jarrells: 57-76). Like John Ruskin, the English architect and theoretician A. W. N. Pugin (1812–1852) advocated a revival of Gothic architecture and with it a return to the devout Christian practices of the Middle Ages (Hill). Ruskin, Pugin, and others, spurred a cultural return to the Gothic style in Europe and western societies and colonies around the globe. Gothic buildings were omnipresent in New York State and New England and the Hudson River School painters were familiar with the pointed arch’s architectural importance and its Christian symbolism. Pointed arches not only supported Gothic structures, they visually pointed upward (to heaven) and visually referenced the *mandorla*.

*Christ in a Mandorla*. Santa Maria in Valle, Cividale del Friuli, Italy. ca. 1350. Sailko, CC-BY-SA-3.0, no changes made.
A mandorla (the Italian word for “almond”) is the almond shape surrounding a holy person, such as Jesus or Mary, which first appeared in Christian art during the fifth century. A radiant glow, or divine light, emanates from the interior of mandorlas. In Gothic interiors, the spaces within pointed arches also often emitted a radiant glow due to the beaming colored light of stained-glass windows. Hudson River School painters almost invariably placed their lightest tones in the interior of their tree arches, to draw viewers’ attention into the central dazzling glare and encourage reflective thought. After considering the central glow, viewers turned their eyes to the bracketing tree trunks, and naturally followed the trunks upward, to the top of the compositional arch and the heavenly realm.

**George Inness**

George Inness (1825–1894) was an important contributor to the early Romantic realist stage of the Hudson River School, but he was also the last major innovator of the movement. Inness grew up in Newark, New Jersey and, like Asher B. Durand, began his career as an engraver in Manhattan. He took classes at the National Academy of Design and studied the landscapes of Durand and Thomas Cole.

Inness took frequent trips to Europe. In 1851, he traveled to Rome, and, like Durand a decade earlier, scrutinized the paintings of Claude Lorrain. Of the French master, Inness wrote, “There was a power of motive, a bigness of grasp [in Claude’s work]. They were nature, rendered grand instead of being belittled by trifling detail and puny execution” (Bell). During an extended stay in Paris during early 1850s, Inness also fell under the spell of French realism. Théodore Rousseau (1812–1867) was of particular interest. Rousseau lived in Barbizon near the Forest of Fontainebleau and painted humble, poetic woodland scenes. Rousseau thought a supernatural force generated and lived within all natural forms, and he tried to capture that force through his art.

Around 1860, Inness moved to a small village in a rural area of Massachusetts and began painting intimate corners of the local landscape. He supplanted the scenic, monumental aesthetics of Cole and Church with a more-personal, softer style related to the landscapes of the French Barbizon painters. Inness’ rural subjects, however, sometimes seem like mere pretexts for gentle explorations of harmonized color and modulated lights and shadows.

Art historians often associate Inness’ idiosyncratic visual language with Luminism, which began as an outgrowth of the Hudson River School. Luminism features incandescent, infused light and eliminates traces of brushwork in favor of infinite gradations of tone and precise color variations. Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865) successfully explored the expressive potential of Luminism in coastal scenes of his native Massachusetts and in seascapes of Maine. Lane was a student of Transcendentalism and Spiritualism (a belief system that includes using mediums to communicate with the spirits of the dead) (Novak: 252-53).

George Inness was raised in a very religious family that included members of the Baptist, Methodist, and Universalist Churches. During the 1850s, he began studying the writings of the Swedish Lutheran mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Swedenborg taught that God speaks to people through the natural world. Inness converted to the Swedenborgian religion during the 1860s and his work became visionary, his goal was not to describe nature accurately, but to express nature’s hidden spirit and character. Inness refused to include every
detail in his landscapes, so the viewer could mentally complete the scene. Inness also refused to finish a work, because divine forces never stopped changing nature (Stavitsky). He became an “artist-philosopher” and his paintings became “philosophical and spiritual ideas” (Bell).


Although very specific religious and philosophical concepts underlie Inness’ work, viewers can still sense enduring Hudson River School elements even in his most innovative latter paintings. In *Landscape*, a cropped tree branch on the left and a more complete tree on the right angle inward suggesting they could join in a point somewhere above the depicted scene. In *Sunny Autumn Day*, an ocher grove on the left and single orange tree on the right form a loose arch in the center the composition. The arch device is weaker, though still discernable.

**Conclusion**

The Hudson River School was one of many nineteenth-century cultural and religious movements that sought spiritual enlightenment through communing with nature. The Hudson River School painters shared compositional formulas and iconography, such as the tree arch, tree rib vault, and forest cathedral motifs. Each artist, however, found a special way to indicate the divine presence through his or her work. Viewing these major landscape paintings from wider perspectives contributes to critical religious and socio-cultural discourses.

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