

From Nana's Back Porch: Famous Artists of the Hudson River School

Hello and welcome! I'm Nana. And today we're going to talk about a famous group of artists that are known as the American Hudson River School.

In the early 19th century, a group of American painters dedicated themselves to a style of painting that would have its roots in America, rather than looking back to Europe for inspiration. They were inspired by the great open and untamed landscape of the west in America that lay outside of the cities in the east and they thought of exploration.

These landscape painters helped to create what is known now as the Hudson River School. The name Hudson River School is thought to have been given by a New York Tribune art critic named Clarence Cook, or even by artist Homer Dodge Martin. It was not a name that was given as a compliment, but used as a way to criticize the plein air, or the way that they painted outside, that's what plein air means.

The Hudson River School paintings have three themes of America in the 19th century. And these are: discovery, exploration, and settlement. They painted the American landscape as a pastoral setting where people and nature can co-exist peacefully.

Sometimes the critics complained that their paintings were, you know, kind of idealistic. The wilderness around the Hudson valley was fast disappearing. In general, the Hudson River School artists believed that nature in the form of the American landscape was a reflection of God.

Thomas Cole is generally known as the founder of the school. He took a steam boat up the Hudson River in the fall of 1825 and he stopped in the Catskill mountains. He hiked for weeks in the mountains and produced the first paintings of the area. The brilliant colors of fall inspired him.

Now, artists, you must know that there were no newspaper photos of the American west in 1825. There were no bright colors shown on any TV or the internet anywhere. If you wanted to see an area, a landscape, or something that happened, you had to have an artist go to the scene and paint it or draw it, and then take it back to the newspaper where they would reproduce the painting in black and white on an edition of the newspaper.

Thomas Cole's close friend Asher Durand was a prominent member of the school also. Together they began the process of painting these mystical, beautiful, very large canvases of the pristine western part of the United States.

The second generation of the Hudson River School emerged after Cole's premature death in 1848. Cole's prize pupil Frederic Church, John Kensett, and Sanford Gifford. And these three artists were also the founders of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. That I found just stunning, it's a wonderful thing to know.

Most of the paintings of the second generation were painted between 1855 and 1875. During that time, Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt were celebrities, they were stars of these art shows. Thousands of people would pay 25 cents per person to view the paintings such as Niagara Falls and The Icebergs. These were epic, epic size canvases.

The size of these landscapes reminded Americans of the vast, untamed, and magnificent wilderness areas in their own country. This was a period of settlement in the west and the preservation of national parks, and the establishment of even green city parks happened during this time.

These paintings really came into their own as America was coming out of the civil war. They believed in the manifest destiny, which was a popular philosophy that Americans were destined to expand to the west across the country, and had taken hold at the same time industrialization and was transforming this country.

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"There are no mistakes in chalk pastel art!" – Nana

These paintings of wide open spaces ready to be settled gave hope to a population coming out of war. Fresh and unspoiled land, they point to the spirit of adventure, freedom, and discovery that made this nation stand up again after this critical time in our history.

I urge you, if you ever have the opportunity, to go to the Washington museums. In the Smithsonian are unbelievable paintings that will take your breath away and not just because I consider myself an art lover and somewhat an artist, but you are in the company of the most wonderful American artists that you'll ever be in any company with.

The paintings reach 25 and 30 feet long, and they're each just stunning to your eyes. Take the opportunity. If you don't get the chance to go to Washington to see these paintings, or there are some that are scattered out apart across the country, make an effort to go. And if you don't, get a book from the library and look up the Hudson river artists and let those paintings just make you go "Oh, look at this."

Thank you for joining me today on this bit of history about some of my very favorite artists, American artists, that I am very proud of and you should be too! and I'm proud of each and every one of you because You ARE Artists.

Love, Nana.

Thank you for listening, artist friends! Please leave a review and share this with a friend. We invite you to join us in the You ARE an Artist Clubhouse at ChalkPastel.com where we have over 700 (Yes, 700!) video art lessons. We would also love for you to join us on Instagram, Facebook, and more, and be sure to tag us when you share photos of your artwork. We cannot wait to see. I'll be talking to you again soon.

