

*Thomas Doughty: Precursor of the Hudson River School*  
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“Previous to and simultaneously with the new interest excited in American landscape art, by the true and genial works of Cole, Thomas Doughty promoted its success, and was long regarded as its representative.”<sup>1</sup>

Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists*, 1867

The honorable title “father of the Hudson River School” is generally bestowed upon Thomas Cole. Yet, Thomas Doughty (1793-1856) began documenting the American landscape before Cole, and was a predecessor in style, subject, and philosophy to the Hudson River School painters. Doughty poetically expressed his veneration for nature in hundreds of quiet, sensitive paintings. Though the artist first honed his skills by recording the scenery surrounding his hometown of Philadelphia, he made several sketching trips to upstate New York in his formative years and earnestly recorded the relationship between water, land, and sky. He visually described the Hudson River as though seamlessly connected to the limitless sky, a body of water capable of reflecting infinity and providing tranquility to the diminutive persons seeking solace near it. The human figure, dwarfed by and interacting with nature, is a recurring element in Doughty’s compositions, which anticipate the lofty paintings of Cole and Jasper Cropsey, as they convey the romantic idea that man’s identity is best nurtured when in harmony with natural phenomena. The few scholars who have attempted to place Doughty in the American art canon, most notably Frank Goodyear, have defined the artist biographically, mentioning but not probing his role as Hudson River School precursor, an identity which the present essay hopes to reveal.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that Doughty was the first American artist to couple the documentary and the imagined in his spiritual landscapes, which were

seminal in the development of the philosophic and stylistic principles of the Hudson River School.

An avid hunter and fisherman, Doughty had a personal relationship with the river. In addition to the Hudson, the Susquehanna River is present throughout his *oeuvre* and is especially prominent in his late works, as the artist spent his very last years on the banks of the Susquehanna, in Owego, New York. His visions were appreciated by nineteenth-century intelligentsia, yet by the end of his life, Doughty had become impoverished and overshadowed by younger, more successful American painters. The time is ripe for repositioning the elusive Doughty as the first American landscape painter, whose soft, lyrical pictures influenced later painters of the Hudson River.

Doughty was born in Philadelphia in 1793 to a ship carpenter. After working as a leather currier for two short years, he listed himself as a “painter” in the Philadelphia City Directory in 1816. That year, the twenty-three-year-old self-taught painter showed one of the first American landscape paintings at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>3</sup> His paintings were included in the first exhibition of the Boston Athenaeum in 1827, and soon after, he exhibited at the esteemed Royal Academy in London. He later became a Pennsylvania Academician, joining the ranks of Charles Wilson Peale and Washington Allston, and was recommended by Rembrandt Peale to Thomas Jefferson for the position of art instructor at the University of Virginia. In the decade following Doughty’s death, the early American art critic Henry Tuckerman remarked that it was typical for an affluent American family to own, in addition to a “good copy of Raphael,” a landscape by Doughty, Cole, John Frederick Kensett, Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, or Asher B. Durand.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that Doughty’s works were displayed in the years leading up

to the Hudson River movement, and not only did they pique the public's interest in nature as subject matter, they were the foundation upon which the sublime landscapes by Cole and later Hudson River painters grew.<sup>5</sup>

Doughty's health and finances worsened in his later years, despite kind-hearted attempts from the art world to remedy his condition. Months before the artist passed away, America's first art journal, *The Crayon*, published this notice:

A movement is on foot in favor of Doughty, the landscape painter, who is said to be in absolute want. Why not get up an exhibition of his works? Doughty is one of the pioneers of our landscape Art, and has painted many noble pictures...<sup>6</sup>

American Romantic poet William Cullen Bryant accepted all donations for the artist, but, unfortunately, an exhibition was never realized. Doughty did not receive due recognition during his lifetime, or as time has proved, thereafter.

Though he never achieved the status of international celebrity, Doughty did enjoy a modest following. Nathaniel Parker Willis, a widely-read journalist of the nineteenth-century and editor of *American Scenery*, often included reproductions of Doughty's paintings in his publication, alongside illustrations by William Henry Bartlett. Willis extolled Doughty's works and believed the artist to be on a continual quest for beauty.<sup>7</sup> Estelle Anna Lewis, a nineteenth-century poet and art critic for *Grahams American Monthly*, was also impressed by Doughty's landscapes. Lewis commended his ability to portray the spiritual aspect of nature, but believed that Doughty painted "too much" and "too hastily."<sup>8</sup> She writes,

Doughty stands in the first rank of American landscapists... He commenced painting with the feeling that God made the world, and all the things therein. He was filled with the

power of this feeling, and he made it felt in his pictures which are full of the beauty of thought and feeling. If he had pursued art with the pure love of nature, which first impelled him to produce a picture, he would have been unequalled in the representation of nature.<sup>9</sup>

The editor of *The Knickerbocker* regarded Doughty similarly. In 1848, when reviewing the American art union exhibition in New York City, he reported,

Doughty's distances are superb... His meetings of hills are softly blended, as if the breeze interlaced the lines, and the air quivered the branches of trees together... Doughty's pictures and Cole's pictures should be placed apart from the rest. We all admit them to be our masters; Cole in one style and Doughty in another. Cole is epical, Doughty is epilogical; Cole in his later studies is the painter of Poetry; Doughty, in study perpetual, is the Painter of Nature. Let us honor both- the dead renowned and the living beautiful.<sup>10</sup>

A characteristic portrayal by *The Knickerbocker's* perpetual "painter of nature" is *Landscape* (Fig. 1), generally accepted to be a depiction of Fishkill Creek. It features a man dwarfed by a mountainous vista, fishing on a narrow beach. To his left, a freestanding crag hovers underneath a small cliff, which projects from the land that borders the creek and is teeming with numerous pine trees and feathery elms. Slightly downstream and to the left of the fisherman, a vaguely discernible figure rows peacefully. Suspended further in the distance, underneath the first of three sloping mountains, sits a white sail boat. An intimate and specific reading of the Hudson, *Landscape* is more picturesque than sublime. Doughty painted this humble view in 1846, following his second visit to England, where his works had been exhibited at the Royal Academy. His interest in the picturesque may have been prompted by the early nineteenth-century English landscape paintings he had seen while abroad, as well as English novels and poetry available in America.<sup>11</sup>

Bryant, a close friend of Doughty's, initiated the succession of American poetry that focused on nature and its inherent splendor with his publication of *Thanatopsis* in 1817. Doughty's *Landscape* pictorially parallels the written words of Bryant, who shared with Doughty a religious admiration for nature. Bryant's poem, *Inscription to the Entrance to a Wood*, describes this notion:

Enter this wild wood and view the haunts of nature. The calm shade shall bring a kindred calm, and the sweet breeze that makes the green leaves dance, shall waft a balm to thy sick heart... Even the green trees partake the deep contentment; as they bend to the soft winds, the sun from the blue sky looks in and sheds a blessing on the scene... The rivulet sends forth glad sounds, and tripping o'er its bed of pebbly sands, or leaping down the rocks, seems, with continuous laughter, to rejoice in its own being.<sup>12</sup>

Doughty's paintings, like Bryant's verses, pioneered America's romantic mood.

Doughty came of age in an America that viewed itself in a religious light. He followed the instructions laid out centuries before by John Calvin, who had asked that nothing be painted except "objects visible to our eyes."<sup>13</sup> Unlike Cole, who was annoyed at the public's taste for palpable "*things*" rather than "*thoughts*," Doughty seems to have been naturally inclined toward detailed observations.<sup>14</sup> Still, he was appreciated by the Romantics of his time, and even his topographical paintings bathe in atmospheric mystery. In *Landscape*, the vast sky, monumental bluffs, and towering elms eclipse the two figures below, so as to describe the small role humans play in the grand plan. William Stillman, editor of *The Crayon*, elucidates the theological attitude toward landscape painting, prominent in the nineteenth century and epitomized in Doughty's works. He proclaimed that "the creed of art is... the parallel of that of the true religion,

the reverence of God in one case becoming reverence of Nature in another, and the same spirit of Love being the vitality of both.”<sup>15</sup>

Stillman was not alone in advocating for landscape painting’s role as spiritual catalyst. The editor of *American Whig Review* declared that art should assist Americans in relinquishing material existence and recognizing the spiritual and ideal.<sup>16</sup> Doughty’s works of the 1820s, ‘30s, and ‘40s foreshadow this public pronouncement of art’s necessarily spiritual function by illuminating the beauty, freedom, and mood of the nation. Landscape painting dually pleased art critics in the antebellum era both by advertising and spiritually elevating America’s bounty. It was not uncommon for poems and philosophical essays about the spiritual significance of nature to accompany art criticism in American journals, and it is likely that *The Knickerbocker* inspired Doughty and other Hudson River painters with essays such as “Picturesque Beauties of the Hudson River, And Its Vicinity” and “The Nobility of Nature.”<sup>17</sup> Before *The Knickerbocker* published these treatises, Doughty founded and edited his own monthly magazine, which testifies to the artist’s reverence for nature. Entitled *The Cabinet of Natural History*, Doughty’s magazine paired written and visual descriptions of America’s indigenous flora and fauna. Doughty’s experience as publisher of this publication endowed him with an understanding of America’s geological composition, which he drew upon when rendering the Hudson River landscape.

Critics of the 1830s and ‘40s assigned three main purposes to American art: to refine taste and create a native culture, to convey Romantic or religious transcendentalist visions of nature, and to represent observed reality truthfully.<sup>18</sup> Doughty’s art was valued for having fulfilled all three objectives. In an 1833 essay in *The Knickerbocker*, J.

Houston Mifflin writes that Doughty's works have "a character decidedly American," and states that the artist, "infuses into his picture all that is quiet and lovely, romantic and beautiful in nature."<sup>19</sup> In an 1839 essay for the same magazine, Thomas Hofland asserts that Doughty's works are "conceived and executed in the spirit of free, untrammelled genius deriving its inspiration from a gorgeous and unhackneyed species of scenery. We can not think that any European artist could produce such pictures."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Doughty perceived the glory in nature, but was also invested in recording it accurately. His painterly landscapes are unique, as his loose brushstrokes nearly defy his detailed impressions, which present nature as though enveloped in a misty haze. In his book *Painters of Faith: The Spiritual Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America*, Gene Veith states that for nineteenth-century Protestant America, "art is not primarily an imitation of nature... nor an expression of the individual's creative imagination... Rather, in a vision that embraces both objectivity and creativity, art is an imitation of God."<sup>21</sup> Doughty articulated the Protestant ideal of art in the content of his paintings. It is precisely his union of opposing style and subject that make his work exceptional and distinctively American.<sup>22</sup>

Despite physical and fiscal hardships, Doughty painted quiet masterpieces until his death in 1856. *Autumn on the Hudson* (Fig. 2), one of his largest and final great paintings, highlights the Hudson River cloaked in autumnal light.<sup>23</sup> The foreground trees and shrubbery are colored in varying shades of red and green, while the river bluffs, merging in the distance, gently assume the blue hue of both the sky and the water. The year before this was painted, in 1849, the artist was named "Dean of the painters of the

United States” at a banquet in honor of the opening of the new galleries of the American Art Union. Responding to a toast in his honor at this event, Doughty exclaimed,

I do not profess to tickle the ear with elegant sentences, I would rather appeal to the eye and the heart through the medium of canvas and color... I would rather, if my humble ability would allow me, present to your view or to the mind’s eye, one of those beautiful scenes with which our country abounds.<sup>24</sup>

As avowed, Doughty subsequently painted *Autumn on the Hudson*, which bespeaks his ability to reproduce, in Tuckerman’s words, “with genuine emphasis and grace, autumnal effects.”<sup>25</sup> For forty years, this foundational landscape painter married direct observations of nature with meditative, poetic feeling, and approached New York’s legendary river with spiritual intent.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life, Comprising Biographical and Critical Sketches of American Artists: Preceded by an Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of Art in America* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Son, 1867), 506.

<sup>2</sup> See Frank H. Goodyear Jr., *Thomas Doughty: An American Pioneer in Landscape Painting* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1973), 11.

<sup>3</sup> For information on Doughty as the first American landscape painter, see Whitman Bennett, *A Practical Guide to American Book Collecting (1663-1940)* (New York City: The Bennett Book Studios, 1941), 65; David Bernard Dearinger, *Paintings and Sculpture in the Collection of the National Academy of Design* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2004), 165; Ed Van Put, *Trout Fishing in the Catskills* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2007), 69; Peter Vay, *The Inner Life of the United States* (New York: Dutton, 1908), 289. Unfortunately, all of Doughty’s pre-1820 works are now lost.

<sup>4</sup> Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists*, 30-31.

<sup>5</sup> Notably, Cole modeled his early works after Doughty, to whom his reputation owes much. When Cole embarked upon his famed 1825 excursion up the Hudson River and through Pennsylvania, he was impressed by Doughty’s paintings on view at the Pennsylvania Academy.

<sup>6</sup> William Stillman, “Domestic Art Gossip,” *The Crayon* 3 (May 1856): 159.

<sup>7</sup> Howard Doughty, “Thomas Doughty: Painter of Scenery,” *Appalachia* 103 (June 1947): 309.

<sup>8</sup> E. Anna Lewis, “Art and Artists of America,” *Graham’s American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art* 45 (November 1854): 484.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 483-4.

<sup>10</sup> “The Fine Arts: Doughty’s Landscapes,” *The Knickerbocker* 32 (October 1848): 363.

<sup>11</sup> Reprints of 18th-century English literature at the turn of the nineteenth century were decisive in inspiring Americans to find and then exalt the picturesque in nature. See Frederick A. Sweet, “The Hudson River School and the Early American Landscape Tradition,” *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907-1951)* 39, no. 2 (Feb. 1945): 18-19.

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<sup>12</sup> William Cullen Bryant, "Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," in *Poems* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1859), 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1921), 108.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Cole, "Thoughts and Occurrences, (May 22, 1838)," in Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole N.A.* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, 1856), 264.

<sup>15</sup> William Stillman, "The Creed of Art," *The Crayon* 2 (November 1855): 317.

<sup>16</sup> C. Edwards Lester, "Art and Artists in America," *American Whig Review* 2 (December 1845): 658-663.

<sup>17</sup> "Picturesque Beauties of the Hudson River, And Its Vicinity," *The Knickerbocker* 6 (July 1835): 83;

"The Nobility of Nature," *The Knickerbocker* 10 (August 1837): 97-104. Such poems and essays on the spiritual significance of nature were often translated from German.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Farmer Meservey, "The Role of Art in American Life: Critics' Views on Native Art and Literature, 1830-1865," *American Art Journal* 10, no. 1 (May 1978): 74.

<sup>19</sup> J. Houston Mifflin, "The Fine Arts in America, and its Peculiar Incentives to their Cultivation," *The Knickerbocker* 2 (July 1833): 34.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas R. Hofland, "The Fine Arts in the United States with a Sketch of their Present and Past History in Europe," *The Knickerbocker* 14 (July 1839): 50.

<sup>21</sup> Gene Veith, *Painters of Faith: the Spiritual Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2001), 34.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that Doughty also painted imaginary and fanciful scenes, as evidenced by such paintings as *Round Tower on the Rhine* (1830), *Fanciful Landscape* (1834), and *Romantic Landscape with a Temple* (1834).

<sup>23</sup> It may have been *Autumn on the Hudson* that a man named Perley refers to in a letter to the editor of *The Crayon* in 1855, which praises the collection of Doughty's brother, Col. William Doughty, who owned at least fifteen of Doughty's paintings. Perley mentions two of Doughty's works, which he calls "splendid autumnal effects." He encouraged "admirers of Doughty's works" to "visit this collection, where the varied touches of his master-hand contrast strongly with each other, yet harmonize and blend." See "Correspondence," *The Crayon* 1 (Feb. 1855): 137.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Doughty (1849); quoted in Howard Doughty, "Thomas Doughty: Painter of Scenery," 307.

<sup>25</sup> Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists*, 507.