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THE AMERICAN SUBLIME IN TRANS-ATLANTIC PERSPECTIVE
LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT

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Video Description

Learn about the concept of "the sublime" in painting as represented by British artists in the 19th century and how they might have influenced American artists painting in this style just a few decades later with this lecture by Yale Professor of Art History and curator Tim Barringer. With the aid of dramatic images from the work of iconic painters such as John Constable and J.M.W. Turner, Barringer demonstrates the key characteristics of this artistic category of artistic expression

and draws parallels to works by American landscape artists including Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church. He also makes the argument for a quieter articulation of these same principles of the sublime in the luminosity and perspective of artists such as Martin Johnson Heade and Fitz Henry Lane, with a particular link offered through British artist Robert Salmon. This lecture is the final in a series of three offered in conjunction with the exhibition *Fitz Henry Lane and Mary Blood Mellen: Old Mysteries and New Discoveries*, which was on view at the Cape Ann Museum from July 7, 2007, through September 16, 2007.

Subject list

Asher Brown Durand
John Constable
J.M.W. Turner
Thomas Cole
Jasper Francis Cropsey
Frederick Edwin Church
Martin Johnson Heade
Robert Salmon
John Frederick Kensett
Thomas Moran
Fitz Henry Lane
John Wilmerding
Tim Barringer
The Sublime
Hudson River School
American Sublime
Luminism
Lane Lecture Series

Transcription

00:16
John Cunningham
Good evening, everyone. I would like to welcome you to the third and final of this series of lectures in connection with the Fitz Henry Lane - Mary Mellen exhibition, which I trust you've all seen at least once, twice or three times. The show continues here until September 16 and then reopens at the Spanierman Gallery in New York City on October 4. We're very grateful to Gorton’s Seafood, the Cape Ann Savings Bank and Varian for their support of these programs. Our speaker tonight is Tim Barringer. He's the Mellon, Paul Mellon Professor and the Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of Art History at Yale University. He's had a distinguished career as a curator and in publishing, lecturing, teaching about British art and American art. Tim's lecture tonight is entitled ‘The American Sublime in Trans-Atlantic Perspective’, which

explores the visual world of Fitz Henry Lane, which I think we've become familiar with, and the British traditions of visual arts, which Tim can bring a fresh perspective to us. So it's a great pleasure to have you, Tim, in Gloucester tonight. And thank you very much.

01:48
Tim
Well, let me say what a great pleasure it is to visit Gloucester for the first time and to have the chance to see this wonderful institution. I'm really grateful for the invitation to come here but also for the chance to see this spectacular exhibition which really is, I'm sure you've found, food for thought and, indeed, for some considerable disagreement, if you happen to prefer one of the two artists to the other and find yourself talking to someone who prefers it the other way around. That's the way art history should be. It gets us thinking and looking and thinking and talking and looking again. So it's one of the best small exhibitions I've seen in a long time. And I think it really will change the way we think. I hope it changes the way we think about women artists, their status, their importance, the way, I think it changes the way we think about landscape painting in the middle of 19th century too. So it's a really major exhibition. And I congratulate you on mounting here, which is absolutely where it should be.

02:46
And could we have the lights down? Please? Can you all hear me? Okay? Tell me if you can't. Great. So in this talk, I want to offer a very broad international perspective, a broad international context for the work of the two wonderful artists we see upstairs and to think, perhaps, about disturbing some of the assumptions, some of the familiar stories that we've learned and that we've been taught over the years about American art, British art, and about landscape painting. And what I want to start by doing is talking about this wonderful work. This is "Kindred Spirits",1849, a painting by Asher Brown Durand currently on show in the Brooklyn Museum if any of you have chance to see it. There's an exhibition there of the work of Asher Brown Durand. But this is no ordinary painting, because we see the self portrait of Durand on the left here, talking to his friend Thomas Cole, the great, the great, probably the most famous and the most original painter of the so-called Hudson River School. I hope by the time you leave this lecture, you'll never use that phrase again for reasons which I will tell you later.

04:14
So, what fascinates me is the comparison between this painting and the next painting. Could we have the next slide please. Let's put them up together. Next slide. Okay, two upright paintings. On the right, John Constable "The Cornfield", 1828, now at the National Gallery in London. On the left Durand's "Kindred Spirits", 1849, tragically sold about three years ago by the New York Public Library, a terrible, I think, I have to say betrayal of the trust by which they were given it in 1850. And it's now owned by the lady who owns Walmart, who fortunately, has lent it to the National Gallery in Washington where you can where you can now see it, temporarily at least.

05:06

What is the difference between these two paintings? After all, the compositions are very similar. If you look at it, great masses of trees on either side; an upright, unusual upright composition of vista down the middle; tremendous interest in the details of nature; in each case, a very, very similar perspective with the receding line down here. They're almost, in some ways, the same painting. In other ways they could not be more different. The painting on the left, after all, is a depiction of New York state, of the Catskills, of a landscape which, according to its artist at least, was completely untouched by human hand, the landscape which is left as God made it. On the right, a landscape which has been tilled and cultivated for thousands of years. Difficult to see actually. Could we go back one slide? But here you can see better. There's a church tower in the distance, old medieval church. Every inch of this landscape has been cultivated for generations. It's a feudal, it’s kind of old. A long, long history is written on top of this landscape. It's a cultivated, a kind of a manicured, English landscape. Next slide again, please. So there's a difference between, if you like, nature and culture between the New World, untouched, pristine, and the Old World, with all its long history but also all its corruption, decadence. You could argue that. There are two ways of looking at it.

06:43

One thing is for sure, however. The painter on the left was working in the tradition established by the painter on the right. There's a direct before and after connection. Asher Durand saw probably not the actual painting, possibly the actual painting. Certainly, he saw an engraving or a lithograph after this work. There's no question of that fact. So, there is a connection between British and American art. And that's really what I want to talk about in this talk.

07:12

So what was special about the American landscape? As early as 1816, DeWitt Clinton, a Governor of the state of New York, had declared, (and this just shows you how long ago it is that any politician could write like this), “Can there be a country in the world better calculated than ours [America] to exalt the imagination, to call into activity the creative powers of the mind, and to afford just views of the beautiful, the wonderful and the sublime? Here, in the United States, nature has conducted her operations on a magnificent scale. [Take that you English; your countryside is pathetic.] This wild, romantic and awful scenery. [wild, romantic and awful scenery] is calculated to produce an impression on the imagination.” National identity and ideas of the landscape were deeply intertwined. Yet, of course, such a project of articulating American identity in the middle of the 19th century, was fraught with complexities. This was, after all, a country heading for civil war, a nation beset by tensions between the abolitionist north and south where slavery persisted. It was a country too which was in the midst of a decision between industrial growth, between territorial expansion, and those who envisage the United States still as a small republic of self-contained rural communities, such as Thomas Jefferson, among the nation’s founding fathers, had proposed. So it's easier to imagine an ideal America than it is, in a way, than to live a real one in the middle of the 19th century.

09:05

Now, let's turn back to one of those words, and this is the word which I want to emphasize most, the word that Dewitt Clinton used, “Sublime”. Can I have the next slide please? “Sublime” is an extraordinarily powerful term for the 19th century. The Sublime is an aesthetic category which implies an event or a landscape of enormous emotional power. The 19th century admired paintings like this by J.M.W. Turner, which envisaged tremendous natural events, which threaten the viewer with real physical danger. If you look in the foreground of this painting, it's about 12 feet across, so the actual painting is bigger than it appears here on the screen. This is in the Tate Gallery in London. You can see these tiny figures here. And that one, I don't know if you can see a little blip there. That is Hannibal on his elephant crossing the Alps. The title of this painting, “Hannibal Crossing the Alps”, 1812. And, of course, the point is that no matter how grand you think you are, you can never ever compete with divine nature. You can never, ever compete with the Alps or with this great vortex of cloud. I’m moving the cursor like that in order just to instill that in your mind. You will be seeing that image time and time again by the end of this lecture. You'll see it transported to Connecticut, transported to the western states of the US, but this is where visually it begins. And the aesthetic which comes, which comes with it is that of the Sublime.

10:46

And let's have the next slide please. Here's one early use of that. This is Thomas Cole's great painting in the Metropolitan Museum. And you can see the slide slightly underestimates it. But here is Turner's vortex quoted by Cole; he saw that painting of Hannibal in Turner’s studio and went back and painted this work in 1836 in New York City. This painting is very significant for us, because it raises some of those big questions about the nation that I was just talking about. And Thomas Cole is, has a wonderfully vivid imagination, but it's also a fairly straightforward imagination. And once you've seen what I'm just about to tell you, I guarantee you will never see this painting again, in the same way. So if you want to cover your ears now, please do. But I have no doubt at all that this painting includes a great question mark. And that question mark is about the future of America. Which way shall we go? Shall we remain with the divine sublime wilderness here? Or shall we embrace civilization here? Now you may think okay, I've seen that view. I know the Oxbow and I've been to Mount Holyoke. I know this part of the world. It's actually there. Okay. But have you ever seen the Jewish character for “God be with us” carved into the hillside like that? Thomas Cole really does believe in signs and symbols, as well as reality. So this is actually a Hebrew character here that is carved into trees. Obviously, that's an imaginative invention of his. So a big question, which way will America develop? Thomas Cole had some sympathy with those who regretted modernization, urbanization, industrialization, massive growth in population, modernity. He said, “There are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity [this is Cole using that word], the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away. For those scenes of solitude, which from the hand of nature has never been lifted, those scenes of solitude still touched by nature affect the mind with a more deep-toned emotion than ought which the hand of man has touched.” This side of the painting, the untouched, is more affecting, more sublime than this side which is full of little farms and full of progress and full of civilization. Nature versus culture once again. Next slide, please.

13:23

But the truth of the matter is that art and artists need cities. And suddenly in the early 19th century, the great city in this country was no longer Boston or Philadelphia. The great commercial city, the great port, the great engine of the economy became, as it still is today, New York City. This is New York in 1855, with the Crystal Palace. There was a Crystal Palace in London in 1851, the Great Exhibition, and it was immediately replicated in New York City. That's the spot where the New York Public Library now is at the corner of 42nd and Fifth, if you know Manhattan. And you can see already New York was a teeming industrial metropolis, a metropolis full of industry, energy, full of artists and full of money. Artists do like money, and art will go wherever there is money. So, this became the center of artistic production in the United States. It was also, of course, a center for the import from, through the port, of works of art from Europe. So it was a wonderful place for American artists to get to see European works of art and to cogitate on them. The next slide, please.

14:46

This, however, is one of those first paintings. One of the first landscape paintings to come out of New York City; it was painted in 1828 by Thomas Cole himself. Thomas Cole, who lived in lower Manhattan, but who memorably, in 1826, took a tour on a steamer, brand new technology, up the Hudson River and got out somewhere around Hudson, New York and started exploring the Catskills and started painting, from nature, sketching the extraordinary things that he saw there. It's really remarkable, in a way, that very little landscape painting exists from the 18th century in America. There's some, but nothing of this quality. Next slide, please.

15:18

Cole started to create an entirely new kind of landscape painting, based on his knowledge, after all he was born in England, he had come to America at the age of 16. He'd learned already his art as an apprentice in Liverpool in England. So he knew how to do it. But he didn't know what to paint until he saw what he found up the Hudson River Valley. Next slide, please.

15:45

And he created, using Turner's vortex. Do you see it? There it is. He created an American Sublime, a Sublime which was very distinctive to this country. Unique, those fall colors, colors you don't get anywhere else in the world. And he picked on motifs like the oak tree blasted by a great thunderstorm and the great peaks, sometimes exaggerating them even on what he saw, curiously, actually bringing into his imagination something rather like the Rockies, even though he'd never seen them and nor had anyone else at this point. So he sort of imagined them and brought them into being that way. Let's have one more slide, please.

16:27

Now, this is the phrase that I want you to forget, "The Hudson River School". The reason for that is that, that phrase was first used by young and very pretentious American artists in Paris, in 1878, who were being terribly impressionist, and were hanging out with Monet and were saying, "Ack, people back at home, Hudson River School, terrible, boring, old fashioned, second rate".

And this is a phrase of criticism, an insult that they created for those people. So although it's since become a term of celebration, deep down, it's actually an insult. And I think that the term "Sublime", actually, "The American Sublime" better captures the grandeur of ambition of these artists, plus, of course, the fact that many of them painted in other areas than in the Hudson River Valley. Next slide, please.

17:28
So that's why I called my exhibition that. Okay, next slide. Thank you. However, I just thought you might be amused to see this. This is in Minneapolis. This is the poster for our exhibition, sitting in some kind of rather less than sublime American location. And I think we may begin to wonder whether Thomas Cole wasn't right about industrial development at this point. Next slide, please. And that's what the show looked like with the curator looking rather worried at the beginning of it. Next slide, Thank you.

18:03
But this is the one that I wanted to really share with you, partly because it's a somewhat local scene to here. At least it's the White Mountains. This is a view of the mountain pass called "The Notch of the White Mountains, Crawford Notch", 1839. And this will give you a real sense of the American Sublime and the idea of the Sublime as a form of art which is based on the idea of fear or terror, horror, really powerful emotions. Thomas Cole went sketching, in 1839, up to New Hampshire to the White Mountains, and he found especially impressive this particular mountain peak. He wrote in his notebook as he was sitting right here, "The Sublime is melting into the beautiful. The savage is tempered by the magnificent." Now why he was particularly impressed by Mount Washington, which is 6288 feet, was not just because of its own sort of geological grandeur, but because of the associations that came with it. And I think in order to understand the American Sublime properly, you have to understand the idea that landscapes are not just visual; they're also emotional. They're also associative. They're about human beings, as well as about rocks and trees and leaves. And so it was looking at this little house down here and this area down here that Cole was particularly moved, because many years earlier, 13 years earlier, there'd been a tremendous avalanche down here. And the family down here, the Wiley family, had been killed in this very area. And he said, "Looking at the ruins, the sight of that deserted dwelling, the Wiley house, standing there with a little patch of green [There it is.] in the midst of the dread wilderness of desolation, call to mind the horrors of that night when these mountains were deluged with rocks, and trees were hurled from high places down steep channel sides of the mountains. A dreadful mystery hangs over the events of that night. We walked among the rocks and felt as though we were but worms, insignificant and feeble. For, as worms, a falling rock could crush us. We looked up at the pinnacles above, [So, Cole's standing down here, looking up here.] and we found ourselves as nothing." That's the American Sublime, I think.

20:33
Now, next slide, please. Now, a number of artists followed Cole and I want, I've got one more important series of images of Cole's **[cough in the audience].** But I just wanted to show how this influenced the development of American Art. And certainly Jasper Francis Cropsey tried to

harness Cole's technique into a landscape painting which really celebrated modern America. Can we have the next slide, which is a detail of the middle of this there. You can see that when Cropsey paints "Autumn on the Hudson River", he actually paints a modern view. You can actually see modern ships, steam ships. And actually, you can see lots of details of the of the townships that grew up by the side of the Hudson. So he wants to show that America now is blessed by the Sublime not just the, the wilderness, the untouched wilderness, but actually, here is pretty much the finger of God shining down on the development of American modern industry and modern American culture. So that was one way of going.

21:37
Next slide, please. But look where he got his composition from. Can you put the next one on, please? So here is Turner, "The Birthday of the Prince Regent", 1821. And here is Cropsey's, "Autumn on the Hudson River Valley", 1860. And I think you can see how he's just flipped the composition around and used it again, he's reused it. He's, as it were, created a kind of rebirth. He's reenergized this very staid and conventional conservative kind of painting that Turner at some times was capable of and turned it into something quite new. Interestingly, this is the birthday party for George the IV. This painting was actually taken to Queen Victoria, at Windsor Castle, the granddaughter of George IV, and she said, "Mr. Cropsey, there are no such leaves as those in the world." And Mr. Cropsey left, and then he came back to Hudson, New York and sent a big package to Queen Victoria of all leaves this color and brighter. She evidently was not amused, but then she was never amused. So that was kind of a losing, a losing trick for Cropsey.

22:54
The next slide please. This is what, however, I want to concentrate on for a second, because this is the first of five extraordinary paintings which are now in the New York Historical Society. And I do recommend, if you have to be in New York, that you go to the west side of Central Park to the wonderful collections of the Historical Society. Look at these works, five works called the Course of Empire by Thomas Cole. And they're always thought to be a kind of metaphorical account of the development of America.

23:27
So the first one is called the "Savage State". This is America in its primeval form. And you can see some kind of Native American habitation down there, hunting going on in the foreground. It's not a real place. It's an imaginary location. But just watch that hill, because we're going to be following historical development that takes place around that little hill.

23:50
So next slide, please. The next one is the "Pastoral State". And by now we've got some buildings appearing. And we've got the industries beginning, someone spinning here, dancing, the arts have been born, shipbuilding, with a ship being built down there. Next one, please.

24:09

And then “Consummation of Empire”, this is the grandeur. This is the biggest canvas in the middle. This is where the empire that we're looking at. You can see here that the hill is still there. But now it's surrounded by new buildings. And it's always been thought that this was a kind of warning to Americans in New York. This is 1836, Andrew Jackson and there’s an economic boom going on, and Thomas Cole is saying, you know, be warned. Look what happened to the Romans, and look what might happen to us if we're not careful.

24:43
Next slide, please. But it occurs to me, and this has put the cat among the pigeons in American art history slightly, that what Thomas Cole, born in Liverpool, was really saying was actually. don't go the same way as the British Empire. After all, this is only 1836, not that long ago since 1776. And Thomas Cole is warning the Americans not to go down the same path as the British. And there are many, many echoes if we just go back one slide. And one more slide. That actually is Stonehenge, which is nowhere in the USA. Next slide. And then one more. This is Carlton House Terrace in London built 1826, the year before Thomas Cole visited London, and he quotes it here. Next one. And here is the painting by Constable which Cole saw of the opening of Waterloo Bridge, this great city astride a river, with the king here in the middle, and there's a king here in the middle.

25:50
Next one please. This is destruction. This is the “Destruction of Empire”, (Next slide, please.) which uncannily echoes Turner's picture of the “Burning of the Houses of Parliament”, 1834. This is 1836. And finally, desolation. Next one, sorry, next slide. Of course, sorry, this is now Turner’s vortex. You can really see it, can't you in this painting? Next slide, please. This is desolation, the “End of Empire”. Here's the same hill still standing there. But everything is over. Next slide please. Quoting surely Constable’s “Hadley Castle” in the Yale Center for British Art. (Come and see it in New Haven.), this great painting, same composition, same sense. This is the river Thames. But Cole has this sense of desolation of everything having been over for the British Empire in 1836. So I think Cole is actually speaking in a kind of Anglo-American language. Now he's not celebrating Britain's achievements as an empire. He's saying, you know, watch it, New York, or you'll go the same way as the British did. His grip on British history was a little sketchy, but never mind. It was a good point to make at the time. So I hope you can see that the painters of the American Sublime are engaged in a two way dialogue with an artistic tradition that comes from across the Atlantic, but doing something completely new in America.

27:21
Next slide, please. And so here finally are all five of them together. Cole wanted them to be hung like this, so that actually you can follow the lines, right through the compositions like this. And one day, someone will have the nerve to find a wall big enough to put them up like this. We didn't do that in our exhibition when we borrowed them in London. But it was wonderful to see these pictures back in London. And that the interpretation I've just given you made more sense

there than it has done in, when they've been hanging in New York. Next slide, please. That's how we hung them and that's how you'll see them today, from start to finish like that.

27:50
Next slide, please. Now, of course, change was afoot anyway. This is Samuel Coleman's picture of “Storm King on Hudson” in about 1870. And you can see that really that idea of the untouched wilderness is almost lost in, certainly up and down the Hudson, by 1870, because steam ships and West Point Academy and all kinds of industry are already there. Next one, please. And Cropsey very interestingly started to try and find sublimity in things like the railroad. After all the achievements of those early railroad builders were sublime. This is the “Starrucca Viaduct in Pennsylvania”. Next slide, please. That's the color version, Cropsey’s attempt to find the kind of modern Sublime as opposed to a wilderness Sublime in America. Next one.

28:49
But I want to concentrate, before paying very briefly homage to the local hero Fitz Henry Lane, I want to pay, concentrate on another artist who I think carries these questions to even higher level of sophistication and grandeur, and that is Frederick Edwin Church. Frederick Church's painting of “West Rock New Haven” makes it look as if New Haven, Connecticut is a very paradise like place. I have to tell you it ain’t, but maybe it was in 1851. And this is a very new kind of painting. Actually, I think you can see something in common here with Fitz Henry Lane in terms of the level of meticulous detail, leaf by leaf, and also the kind of brilliance in the light, which is something that you didn't see in Cole. Cole was looking through the eyes of Turner and Constable. He saw English light even though there was American light in front of him. This is very different. This is very strikingly different from European painting.

29:51
Next slide please. Church, however, was rather well named, because he had another very distinct and important aspect of American culture just built into him as a person. He was a direct descendant of Richard Church, who was one of the first pilgrims who crossed over to and founded the city of Hartford in 1638. So, Frederick Church in 1850, was still just as much of a Puritan as Richard Church in 1638. And he painted, Fred, Fred Church painted this wonderful image of his ancestor crossing over the wilderness to found Hartford all those years earlier. And you can see a kind of sacramental, a religious kind of belief that, as it were, God is present in the American wilderness here, which is a very important, I think, aspect of all this. And I'd be very interested to know what your views are about Fitz Henry Lane's religious affiliations, because it's something I don't know much about, but I think it is very significant for understanding art of this period.
30:57
Next slide, please. And then, of course, the great work. John Ruskin, probably the greatest art critic ever to live, took his handkerchief out and tried to remove this as though it was a stain on the glass. But, of course, it isn't. It's Frederick Church’s extraordinary achievement in capturing the rainbow that rises up over Niagara Falls. This amazing painting in the Corcoran Gallery in Washington is an extraordinary attempt to harness, to capture, the sheer grandeur of the

grandest of all of American physical monuments, at least in the eastern part of the country, the most enormous, natural phenomenon. And Frederick Church on a huge canvas, a panoramic scale of canvas, actually managed to come up with a technique which could rival or equal the grandeur of Niagara. As one critic said, “All that's left out is the roar.” You know, everything you can see is there, you just can't hear it. And this was a very remarkable achievement. This was the American Sublime, but no one could do this in Europe. It does interest me and I don't know what to do with this information. This picture was exhibited in 1857, the same year that David Livingstone discovered Victoria Falls in Zambezi. It's almost as if, you know, the British Empire had to get its own back and find something almost as big as this. And there we are.

32:30

Next slide please. This, if you had to, if you pushed me, I would say is the greatest American landscape painting of the 19th century, with all due respect to Fitz Henry and others. This is Frederick Church's great painting “Twilight in the Wilderness”, which was offered to the Yale University art gallery for $100 in 1960. They turned it down and said it was vulgar. Anyway, never mind, it's now in Cleveland, and you can see it there. This is “Twilight in the Wilderness”. And this is the moment of which I feel that both the British heritage of art and the American originality of the American creativity of Church come to their highest peak. Let's just look at this. This is 1860. This is the year before the Civil War breaks out; everyone knew that this country was going to be ripped in two and that there was going to be blood. And I can't help thinking that this sky represents that. This actually is more, even more interesting. The landscape was painted and probably sketched in Vermont. But the sky was painted out of Church’s window on 12th Street in Manhattan. So you actually have urban fog and smog and smoke. And you have rural perfection. It's like that Thomas Cole painting, which had the wilderness and the civilized part of America, except it's not split down the middle this way. It's split down the middle this way. And that's circumstantial, you’re not supposed to know that. But we do know that, because we have the sketch that Church made. What fascinates me more is that darkness is falling over America here, and that terrible things are portended in the sky, but then, also, there is the ultimate light of redemption in the distance. This is a very, very remarkable painting. If you get very close to it. You can actually see down here that there's a cross. Thomas Cole had painted a picture called the “Cross in the Wilderness”, which is actually an architectural cross. But this is just two sticks crossing each other, but I am absolutely sure, knowing Church’s way of thinking and his writings, that he meant to suggest that the only way to get to salvation, to the future, is through some kind of religious meditation or religious action.

34:50

Now let's see. I've told you then about the Americanness of this painting, “Twilight in the Wilderness” by Frederick Church. But about the Britishness of it, I can't see on the face of it much that’s British here. Can have the next slide? This painting was in the collection of James Lennox in New York City, “Fort Vimieux” by Turner. Frederick Church saw it and wrote in his diary that he thought it was the greatest landscape painting he'd seen in one of them. But I don't think it was even that one that he was thinking of, maybe the technique, maybe the color.

35:33

Next one, please. This painting, which you may know from Boston. Something strange has happened to the slide, but you probably know it. This is Turner's great painting of 1839, now in Boston, the "Slave Ship". And this painting was not in America, but it was described very extensively by John Ruskin, and we know that Church read that description. Ruskin said, "the red in the sky represented the bloody guilt of the slavers." That it was blood written in the sky. And that you can see the legs of slaves thrown overboard from the ship and dying. Now, of course, the British slave trade had been abolished in 1807. This is Turner looking back into history. But, of course, the war here in America was about slavery.

36:22

Let's go on again. Next slide, please. A painting about slavery with red blood in the sky. Church reads about it. A painting with red blood in the sky about slavery. It seems to me that what Church is doing is picking up on the greatest, possibly as Ruskin said, the greatest landscape painting in the British tradition and making an American equivalent, a slave ship, a painting about the war, about slavery. I think it's an extraordinary achievement. Next slide, please.

36:53

He then did a painting called "The North Icebergs". And it's a terrible vision of kind of human catastrophe. Because look, it's actually showing you the wreck of hope, the wreck of an exploratory mission into the Antarctic. But look what's happened. We have a cross; there is still hope there in the Antarctic. This huge painting, exhibited in London. Ruskin admired it. It was engraved in England and sold in England. It remained in England. It went out of fashion in England, and somebody built a brick wall in front of it in a boys' school in Manchester, where it was discovered in 1981, and then sold by the very happy boys' school for some enormous sum of money. And it's now in the Dallas Museum of Arts. It was thought for many years to be lost and destroyed. But it was actually in England all those years.

37:45

Next slide. And this is 1862, the next year, Cotopaxi, apparently nothing to do with the United States at all, except in 1862, when you exhibit a painting like this, which is all full of fire and violence, then you've got to be making some kind of comment on the Civil War in 1862, when Americans are killing each other in the fields. Next slide.

38:09

Sorry, back. Sorry, I'll go ahead in a second. But this really came to the kind of climax of Frederick Church's attempts to create a kind of Turnerian American landscape. This was the this was the end of it, in a way. And after the Civil War, a completely different set of hierarchies came into place, which I'll talk about in a second.

38:37

Let's now think for a second about other things that happened in that period, in the moment just before the American Civil War, because so far, I've been giving you, if you like, the Grand

Opera. I've been giving you the massive exhibition paintings; you actually had to pay money to go and see Church's paintings, just the one painting in a big huge tent. You were given a tube like a large, for want of a better word, like a kitchen roll, and you were expected to look through that tube at inches of painting at once. And the guide would stand there and give you a description, and you were expected to stay there for a full hour looking at that one painting, and then you would leave, then you've got your dollars-worth or whatever it was, ten cents. This was like going to the movies. This was like going to the panorama. These were grand paintings for public entertainment, which is why they fell so spectacularly out of fashion after the American Civil War and have only just in the last few years come back into fashion, in fact, in museums across the country. This painting, for example, is very recently cleaned, only about 10 years ago to reveal its full grandeur.

39:45

Next slide please. But there is another story to be told. And it was a story told by John Wilmerding, the curator of the exhibition upstairs, in a memorable exhibition catalog which, of course, has your boy on the front, Fitz Henry Lane. He used to be called Fitz Hugh Lane in those days. And John Wilmerding discovered (Can we have next slide, please?) a whole group of artists working at the same time, 1850, 1860, late 40s, such as Martin Johnson Heade. Here a great work in the Yale Art Gallery, I wish you'd come down and see in New Haven. This is one of his many pictures of salt marshes. But these paintings are small, no bigger than the ones upstairs, maybe 20 inches of across -- intimate, quiet paintings. Sometimes, even within a small canvas, huge spaces will open up. And this certainly looks like a huge expanse of space, but the actual picture is only a fraction of the size of the ones I've been showing you. And rather than that kind of operatic, public language, these are private paintings. However, I'd like to suggest that the word "sublime" can also apply to these works, because sublimity, after all, can also reflect on an experience which is a sort of transcendental or a kind of poetic experience of nature. It lifts you up out of what's apparently a humdrum scene. After all, you know, a couple of hayricks, some salt marshes, nothing there. There's nothing there in these paintings. They have no content, and yet ten minutes looking at this, and you have to be a very hard-hearted person not to feel some kind of spiritual uplift. That I think is the Sublime on the small scale, if you like. A kind of a small… it's like a sonnet, 14 lines rather than epic poem, but it gets you to the poetic effect. Next slide, please. And even in these works, I think, with their very remarkable light. Could we just have the next one?

41:56

And the next one. I wanted to put this in your mind, even though you only need to go upstairs to see it. This, of course, is the great Boston painting about "Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay" by Fitz Henry Lane. And I was thinking about the quality of light and the poetry of light in this. But even here, I think there are ways in which, knowingly or not, I can't necessarily answer that question. Someone likely is also working along the same lines as painters in England. Let's go back one. For example, this extraordinary work by Edward William Cooke, who's not a well-known painter, but he is a Victorian artist exactly contemporary with Fitz Henry Lane, was creating similar, slightly more spectacular, but similar effects of light. This is a painting of the Venetian lagoon

from 1857, just when Lane was painting here. And one more back. And this remarkable painting, which if you ever go to London, please go see in the Tate gallery, was hanging just around the corner from the Lanes and the Heades when we had our exhibition of American Sublime in London. So there was a chance to actually compare this painter, William Dyce, with the American so-called “luminous painters”, the painters of small scale pictures of New England light. And I think there is something very, very close. Of course, the English weather is definitely different. This is Pegwell Bay in Kent, near London, but there's something about the light, which suggests that that even here there can be comparisons made between British art and American art.

43:43
I would also say that Dyce introduces another interesting issue, which I would love to think about and I’d love for you to think about next time you look at American paintings from after 1860, which is what to do with Darwin, when suddenly the landscape gives you the problem of fossils. And in this case, there's a…(Can you see it?)…there's a comet there. This is Dyce’s wife and his two sisters picking up fossils, you know, the evidence that the Bible is wrong, very difficult for someone like Fitz Hugh, or at least the literal interpretation of it that was common at the time, was wrong, or possibly wrong. It was a huge problem for landscape painters, and particularly for religious ones like Dyce, who stages the problem in this extraordinary picture. It's called “A Recollection of the Fifth of October”, 1858. You, very precise scientific almost like a photograph, influenced by photography, but painted meticulously with oil paint, a remarkable work, and I put it in your mind to compare with Fitz Hugh Lane.

44:51
Next slide, please. Now, keep going. And one more. Thanks. And then, of course, there's that interesting character Robert Salmon, who I very much hope that you might do an exhibition here of some time. Because here is the actual living link. Can we have one more slide, please? The actual living link between Fitz Henry Lane and the British tradition. Robert Salmon, an Englishman born and English trained artist, who came, about whom very little is known. But he came to Boston in 1828 and painted and I quote, “In a little hut near the wharves in South Boston.” He was an eccentric; he was even more eccentric than Fitz Henry Lane, which is quite an achievement, I think. And, clearly, there is a connection between the light in these works by Robert Salmon (Can we just go back one? And forward one?) and the works that you see upstairs. Now I'm not saying that Salmon invented it and Lane ran away with it. Far from it. I think it's another case of a dialogue between master and pupil. But this time, unlike the one upstairs, Lane is the man learning, not the man ostensibly teaching. But I think it moves both ways. I think, as with Mellen upstairs, probably there is a two-way influence between these two very interesting artists. So I leave that with you as a wonderful example of the connection between British and American art. And yet, no one could ever think of Fitz Henry Lane as a British painter in anyway; clearly he’s completely separate and different.

46:30

Next slide, please. And, of course, on some occasions, artists on the small scale produced works with such an explosive power that the energy of the work belies the small physical scale of the object. This is the great painting by Martin Johnson Heade from 1859 in the Metropolitan Museum, “The Thunderstorm Approaching”. And this has got to be one of the most remarkable, original and unprecedented images in the 19th century. I think, quite extraordinary. Next slide, please. It was such a pleasure to be able to introduce this work for the first time ever to a London audience. They'd never heard of any of these artists. We were credited with discovering Thomas Cole. They’d never heard of him or of Church. It was great. All you have to do is go to the Met, look at the wall; that’s how you discover those artists. But I thought you might be interested in seeing how Lane was installed in the London hang. Lane and Heade and how wonderful those paintings look there.

47:38

Next slide. And particularly, I was happy with this wonderful group of Lanes that we were able to get for the Minneapolis showing when the exhibition toured to Minneapolis. For my money, these were the most remarkable, the most surprising objects in the exhibition. They seem to get more interesting, the more of them you assemble together. And it was very interesting that the critics of the *London Times* and the *Observer*, *Sunday Telegraph* all chose to reproduce Fitz Hugh Lane, not Frederick Church, Thomas Cole. In fact, one of them said that the title… I was very annoyed about this, *The Guardian*, my newspaper that I've been reading for 20 years. The review said, “How many sunsets can you take?” We should have had a few more Lanes, a few less Churchs. Next slide, please.

48:30

So, and next one. We'll move on. Next one. Thanks. Just to leave you with one very memorable image, an image, actually, which I several times thought of when I was looking at the works upstairs. This is John Frederick Kensett. A work which is in the storage area at the moment of the Metropolitan Museum. You can see it, but it's in the, in the closed, in the open storage area. There’s something about these painters on a small scale, which suggests a kind of leap of the imagination, even moving towards something you might call abstraction. And I think it's extraordinary to think of an artist, you know, away from Paris, away from Metropolitan centers, away from certain kinds of thinking which we're used to identifying as modernism and modern, producing a picture like this. And I think we should think of Kensett and Heade and particularly Lane as distinctly modern. And don't believe them if they tell you they're not. This is modern art. And it's modern art for the 19th century. And it's of global importance not just local.

49:39

Next slide, please. Well, I just wanted to conclude with a bit more whiz bang American Sublime. And just to draw to your attention one or two more artists and what happened after the Civil War. What happened after the Civil War was that rather than going to New England, to New York state for subject matter, artists tended to head west. The transcontinental railroad was opened in 1869, and that meant that you could access subject matter on a scale that Thomas Cole, Fitz Henry Lane, could never have imagine and they may not even have wanted to see,

such as the Grand Canyon. Thomas Moran, extraordinarily enough, born about three miles away in England from where Thomas Cole had been born in England. And they both came as young boys or young teenagers to America. Thomas Moran was the first person to really find a way to paint the Grand Canyon. But how did he do it? Well, of course, he looked at Turner. Look at that; there's that vortex back again. In the 1880s he was still painting the way that Turner had in 1812 with that Hannibal painting that I started off with.

50:55
Next slide. And also, he was turning back to people like David Roberts, who had painted Rome in very similar lighting conditions. I think one of his extraordinary things is the comparison between Thomas Moran in the Grand Canyon and David Roberts 30-40 years earlier in Rome in among the ruins. This is a kind of natural amphitheater, this is a man-made ruined amphitheater.

51:19
And last slide, please. I'll leave you with this image. I wish I had a color image of it but this is the picture which seems to me stands with one foot in the world I've been discussing with you and one foot in our own world. And this is “Manhattan” by Thomas Moran. He came back from the Grand Canyon and he suddenly realized that the most extraordinary thing about America on the verge of beginning of the 20th century was not the natural world but the skyscrapers of Manhattan. That is the modern American Sublime that we live with today. Thank you.

52:13
Very happy to take any questions, if you have any.

52:19
Unknown
What do you think Lane knew of the British landscape painters, especially Turner and Constable beyond, presumably some engravings?

52:30
Tim
Well, you've sort of answered your own question. I think the key to this is… lies in print culture. I don't, I'd love to say that there were a lot of paintings by Turner, Constable and all of them circulating in the US. And there is some evidence that actually there were more than we think. Certainly, more paintings by second division artists who may not have been even recognized as English. You know, looking back we don't pick their names up because we don't know who they were. There were very few paintings of top class, by Turner, Constable just really just one or two collections until the 1860s. So that's too late for Lane. However, we underestimate the way in which a mind like his could read engravings, lithographs, even wood engravings, which are a rather crude form of engraving, very thick black lines like in those illustrated magazines. *Harper's Weekly* was wood engraved later on. Those kinds of things were devoured by artists, even Thomas Cole. I mean, I'm thinking he grew up in Liverpool. Not too many paintings by

Turner, even in England, in Liverpool when he grew up, but he knew all about Turner because he knew the annual, or even more than once a year, there would be publications of steel engravings of Turner's work. There were wood engravings in some of the newspapers. And also, after the 1820s there were lithographs, which were cheap, quick. And of, course, Lane knew how to do it. He knew the technique. So he could really see through the lithograph's eyes. He could decode it. We tend to think anything in black and white, you just turn the page; you're not interested. You know, (Sorry about this slide.) but, of course, a 19th century eye was not so saturated with images. You know, you didn't see as many images. So there was no Google Image for Fitz Henry Lane. So when he did see one, he actually really interrogated it, you know, the composition, the way in which an engraver does his hatching. Well, that would indicate color, that would indicate the depth of paint, the chiaroscuro, the balance of light and dark. So you could learn a very great deal, and I actually think we underestimate consistently the forms of print culture. Answer to your question: I wouldn't be surprised if Lane saw ten English oil paintings, landscapes, in his life. I don't know, depends how much time you spent in New York and what he did when he was there, who he knew in Boston, what Robert Salmon had in his hut. You know, I mean, did Salmon bring a complete set of Turner's picturesque views of England and Wales? Very likely; most artists would own that. That's 200 images. That's it. That's an education. So he didn't go to the Tate and see the great master works of British art because it didn't exist. But he did probably have a surprising grip on what these people were doing.

55:32

Now, someone like Church, interestingly, didn't go to England until he was quite old. I mean, he'd already done his great work when he went to England in the late 60s. But he knew everything. He read the *Art Journal*; we know that. If you've been to Olana, his wonderful house on the Hudson Valley, look at the bookshelf sometime. This man knew what was going on in Paris, in London. The *Art Journal*, he got it delivered every week somehow; you know, somebody brought it up to Olana. And he read it. So he knew all about Turner, Constable. He knew about the pre-raphaelites; he knew about Edwin Landseer. He knew what was going on in England. He knew, probably, about Courbet. So I think someone like Church really had his feelers out. Church knew Heade; they both worked in the same building together. So I think there was a real awareness of what was going on in London. The interesting thing that changed is up to 1865 there was no question that the artistic capital of the world for people from America was London, or Dusseldorf. And after 1865, it shifted to Paris. And that's a huge chasm in American Art. It's one reason why art historians trained to appreciate the Barbizon school and the Impressionists can't see the merit in this kind of painting. They struggle with it, because it doesn't look right. It looks English not French. And that's bad, as far as art historians are concerned.

57:00

Any more questions?

57:07

Unknown
The difference between light in Europe and light in America?

57:10
Yes. I have been known to say that doesn't exist. But the truth is, it's different. Now is that meteorological or is that something cultural? It's very hard to say. All I can say is that there's something about that… I mean, of course, the different parts of the US have completely different light. So when American light in John Wilmerding's sense really means New England light or east coast light, actually. And, you know, day in day out in New York City or in New Haven, there is a quality of light there. I'm sure it's here, too. I'm looking forward to clouds clearings, so I can see. But there is a quality of light which is very intense. And of course, in Britain, there's much more humidity in the air, usually. I mean, if you look at Constable's sketches, it's all about the clouds. And if you look at Lane, it's not all about the clouds. You know, there's a lot of clear skies. So I think there is something meteorological there. But of course, the other thing is the value you put on it. And certainly there's a lot of writing, both then, people like Emerson, Thoreau writing about the light, making it into a kind of national treasure. You know, they make it something national. So it's very hard to separate the cultural from the, as it were, you know, the scientific, the objective. But I think it's a really good question. I have to say, you know, it's too easy to say American painters would have painted exactly the same as English ones, if they'd been looking at the same light. Because that's too simple. It's obviously not as simple as that. But there's something about the combination of, you know, light in the religious sense and light in the physical sense that someone like Church had no problem with that connection. So there's another set of interesting meanings around the word light with the Quaker inner light. And when where does that come into it? That's very much a North American 18th century concept as well. So I think it's a really interesting one, someone should write his PhD on it.

59:26
Unknown
I'm interested in this series of five paintings about "The Fall of Empire" by Cole, because I'm not accustomed to associating exponents of the Sublime with teachers of moral lessons. And that effort to teach that kind of moral lesson, through a series of pictures reminded me more of Hogarth and artists of the 18th century. Maybe you might comment on that.

59:57
Tim
I think it's brilliant comment really, really, really Interesting. Certainly, the preachiness of Thomas Cole, you know, the kind of evangelical. You know, watch out, behave like that and you'll get it kind of side of Thomas Cole very much fits in with the Hogarthian moralizing, storytelling, kind of idea of what art should be. Art should be about teaching people lessons. And then on the other hand the Sublime, is rather a kind of amoral category, because it's about how do I feel? There's a very kind of baby boomer thing Sublime. It's all about me; it comes down to me. And interestingly, though, I mean, Edmund Burke published it in…the original

theory of the Sublime was articulated by Edmund Burke in 1757, which is pretty much when Hogarth was at his peak, so that they both come out of the 18th century.

1:00:53
But you're absolutely right to say there's a slight sort of disjunct between the use of Turnerian sort of Sturm and Drang, of the kind of dramatic gestures and the finger wagging side of Thomas Cole. I think that's a, it's a really nice point. I mean, of course, the thing is with Cole, you know, it doesn't always come off. I think “The Course of Empire” just about succeeds. But there are works by Thomas Cole, which, frankly, are, you know, incredibly simplistic and look very, frankly, naive, and we left them out of the exhibition because we didn't want people to be rude about it, you know. And I think what happens in those works that don't succeed for us, is that those two rhetorics are just too far apart; they fall apart, or they compete with each other. So and, of course, when his followers tried to do the big, bombastic, you know, moralizing history paintings, they just didn't have the single minded devotion to pull it off. So Asher Brown Durand tried to do God. His extraordinary painting called “God”, which is an Old Testament scene, and, you know, you can't figure out what's supposed to be happening in this thing, because he didn't really believe it in the way Cole, kind of naively, did. So, I think you really hit on something that you should write a PhD on that.

1:02:18
Unknown
Do you see a dialogue between the big Sublime and the small Sublime?

1:02:24
Tim
That's very interesting. Well, I mean, I suppose I would go into retreat, if I was pushed too far on the small Sublime, since scale is such an important part of, you know, the effect of the Sublime. Making yourself feel small, is very, very significant, is one of the ways in which the Sublime works. That's certainly true. But I think, no, I think the term is sufficiently capacious to actually include not just two, but many different forms of response. I think the point is that in the end, it has to be a psychological response of the viewer.

1:03:05
Unknown
No, I was thinking, that's interesting, but what I was speaking of was whether someone like Lane might not be talking back to the noisy Sublime.

1:03:17
Tim
Right. Or you can he might, actually deliberately be critiquing it. Well, it's possible. I mean, I'm certainly I'm sure he was aware of what people like Church were doing. And it must have seemed…,you know, he was older. And, you know, he was very much set in what he was going to do by that point. So it may well be that he did feel some kind of, you know, resistance to this

new and theatrical, panoramic kind of painting that was going on. However, I mean, I think, yeah, I think it could be, although on the other hand, you know, he didn't really have a forum in which to intervene. You know, he didn't have a way of, of taking the stage in a way that someone like Church was doing. So I mean, I think I think he probably just got on with his own thing, frankly. But where I think we could really see Lane engaging with the idea of the Sublime is in those extraordinary figures looking out over, you know, over expanses of great beauty, but also a kind of troubling, so much detail, that the world has this this sense of being so complex and so difficult to understand that, on the one hand, they're calm, everything's tranquil. On the other hand, you wonder what kind of inner torment is going on there. And I'm immediately taken to that painting by Heade, where you still have the single figure looking out, but this time the water's gone black, you know, and the war is coming and Heaven knows what's going to happen. And I mean, I see a connection there, that, you know, we are given a surrogate figure in the composition, in order to allow us to feel with him or through him, or in his stead or something like that.

1:05:10
I don't know how many of you have seen that painting by Caspar David Friedrich, German one. I'm sure Lane never saw it and knew nothing about it, of the wanderer in a sea of fog at the top of mountain looking out over the fog, and you see the back of his head. And, you know, it's one of those great romantic paintings where you have to identify with that figure in the painting and see what he sees. I saw that painting for the first time in the flesh in an exhibition this winter. And it's even more powerful. It's irresistible, and in the flesh only about this big, not so huge. But the space that opens up, when you look through the eyes of the guy in the paint is just massive. And I think that's where Lane is offering us a Sublime. It's a Sublime seen through the eyes of those tiny fingers. So we shrink ourselves to their size and then we see the world in front of them in this kind of hypnotic clarity that they experienced. That's just a gesture towards the kind of Lane… Laneian view of the Sublime.

1:06:14
Unknown
Do you see, Mary Mellen, as an original, making an original contribution, or simply as the student?

1:06:25
Tim
Whooa, that's a loaded question. There's no such thing as a simple student; I'll tell you that after nine years of teaching at Yale. I think it's an impossible question. Sorry. Yes. The question was, do I see Mary Mellen as a simply a student, as sort of, as it were, a secondary figure reflecting Lane, or as a creative artist in her own right. I mean, I only saw the exhibition for the first time a couple of hours ago, and I'd need some more time to think about it. I mean, ostensibly, there's no evidence of her creating anything of her own in terms of compositions here, assuming that he never ripped her off, which is always possible. But, of course, the historical record is tailored in such a way, regularly, so as not to allow women in the 19th century to do that. So it wouldn't

be the first time that I'd seen someone's oeuvre chopped down to make them look inferior, when, in fact, they weren't. So that, you know, it's not possible to say on the basis of what we see upstairs.

1:07:29
What I do see is something very fascinating, which is two artistic personalities, which are clearly very different, and two different sets of skill. And I think we'd have to say that Lane's skill is a far higher order in manipulating paint. But they're very different. Two different ways of seeing color, two different ways of using paint. And yet they are in the exhibition upstairs and being worked out through the same compositions. Now, I wouldn't want, I mean, I think, frankly, if she had not been a figure of creative vigor, she would have made better copies; the copies are not good. They don't look like the Lanes, I mean, the technique is quite different, the paint is different. Now, you could argue the old-fashioned argument would be, well, she just wasn't good enough to do that, of course, because she was a woman. That's what people used to say. Now, they find other ways to say the same thing. But maybe, in fact, there are simply two different ways of doing it. You know, and, in fact, that she couldn't muzzle herself completely. So that, in fact, she wasn't going to paint with tiny little brushes, with very, very, very thin paint, and make it look like a kind of enamel surface in that magical way that Lane does. But she didn't do it. And I don't believe that if she sat next to him, hour after hour after hour, she couldn't have done it if she wanted to. So there's a sort of, somewhere on the surface, the level of facture, the actual putting on a paint onto the canvas, there's a kind of…no, I'm going to do it this way. And art history may judge that's not as good as his way. But it is her mark, and you can really see it. And you know, if you spend long enough, as we did, my wife and I, this afternoon, not looking at the labels, and after about ten minutes in there, you can really say, “Well, that's her.” And then there was one I thought, “Ah, that's interesting.” So there's one up there that I would really want to take another look at, but I'm not going to tell you which one. But, certainly, you can recognize two personalities, certainly. So I think there is a latent artistic personality there. And there's a kind of… I just began to wonder whether she wasn't deliberately… I mean, think of that bright light just occasionally. That bright light shining out which is kind of almost garish, almost chromium kind of light that she adds in that you never find in the absolutely perfect enameled world of Fitz Henry Lane. And I just wonder whether she wasn't saying, “Right, I'm going to have it my way now.” Bang. I don't know, but I don't want to see her reduced to simply a kind of mechanical copyist. I think there's a personality there.

1:10:32
Thank you very much.