

The Industrialization of the Hudson River in Art

For every idyllic image of the Hudson River Valley in *Shifting Shorelines*, there are many others in which human industry intrudes upon the view.



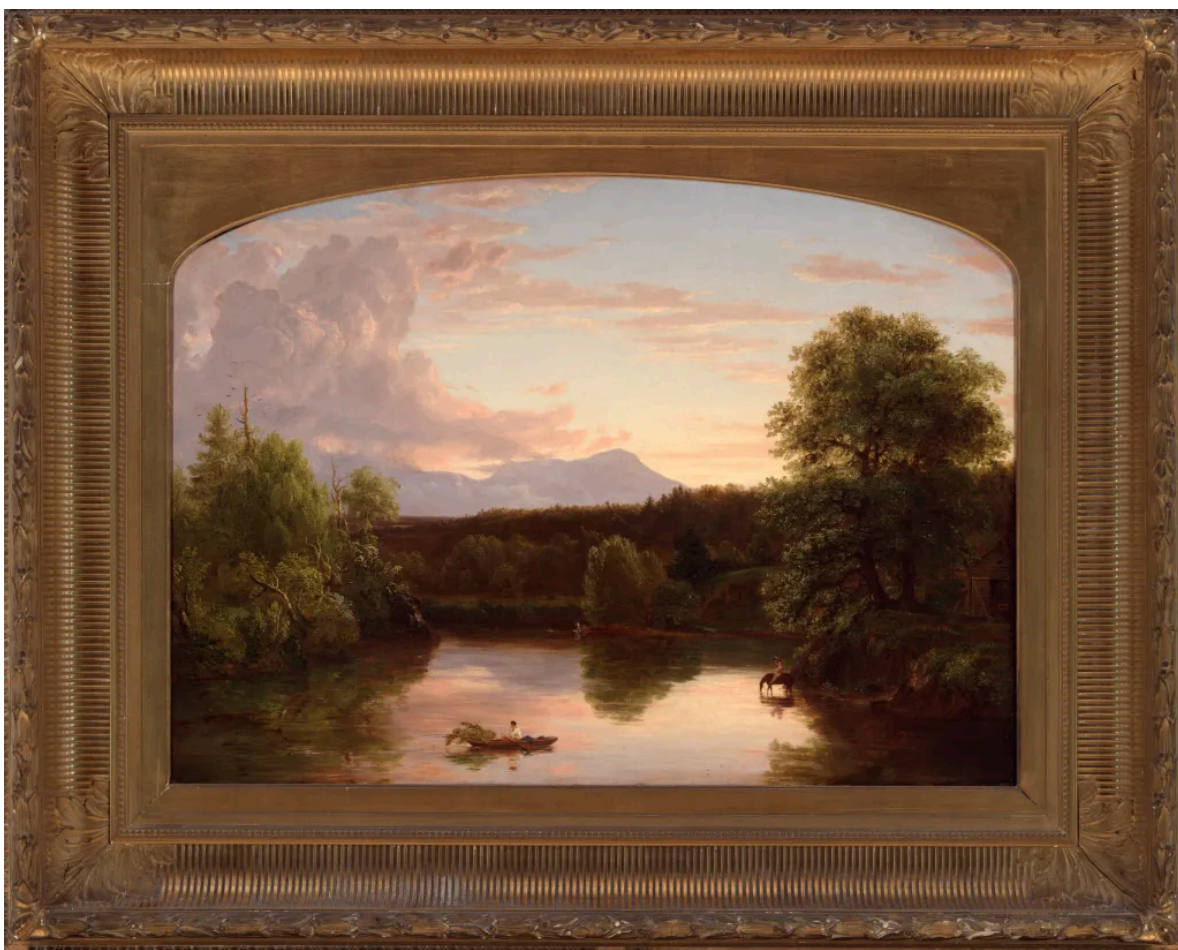
Louis Bury November 12, 2024



Thomas Moran, "Lower Manhattan from Communipaw, New Jersey" (1880), oil on canvas; 25 1/4 x 45 1/4 inches (64.1 x 114.9 cm) (courtesy Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, Hagerstown, Maryland)

The Hudson River School's Romantic portrayals of nature have gone in and out of vogue since the group's mid-19th century heyday, but their legacy has always loomed large. *[Shifting Shorelines: Art, Industry, and Ecology along the Hudson River](#)*, at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery, contends with that legacy by highlighting what it omits. The curatorial team's gritty selections emphasize the river's Indigenous, ecological, industrial, and enslavement histories. Walking through the exhibition's thematic groupings feels like looking at a series of art historical core samples, each of which provides holistic perspective on how artists past and present have depicted the Hudson beyond just idealizing its grandeur.

For every idyllic landscape in the show, such as Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole’s placid view of a Catskills sunrise (“North Mountain and Catskill Creek,” 1838), there are at least two others in which human industry — smokestacks, quarries, barges — intrudes upon the view. The most stark among them is Ashcan School painter George Benjamin Luks’s “Roundhouse at High Bridge” (1909–10), which depicts a Bronx sky so thoroughly darkened by pollution that the canvas verges on monochrome. The color palette of Daniel Putnam Brinley’s “Hudson River View (Sugar Factory at Yonkers)” (c. 1915) is less apocalyptic, yet its cluttered factory town foreground predominates the scene.



Thomas Cole, “North Mountain and Catskill Creek” (1838), oil on canvas, 26 7/16 x 36 7/16 inches (67.2 x 92.6 cm) (courtesy Yale University Art Gallery)

The exhibition’s contemporary artists, many from marginalized backgrounds, offer particularly compelling takes on aesthetic visibility. Anthony Papa’s mid-1990s paintings, made while he was an inmate at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, depict the Hudson River from behind the scrim of the prison’s barbed wire fences, hinting at the human systems of control that often remain outside landscape painting’s frame. In Alan Michelson’s 31-minute film “Shattemuc” (2009), whose title comes from a Native term for the Hudson, a marine searchlight projected at night onto the river’s shoreline creates a surveillance atmosphere. Athena LaTocha’s mixed media abstraction, “The Discovery of Slowness” (2022), takes a long view on visibility; its green washes of ink on paper, sandwiched between lead impressions of rock outcroppings, situate anthropic forces as imperceptible blips within the geologic record.

Shifting Shorelines makes the case that while individual artworks are products of their historical contexts, in aggregate they can help us obtain perspective on phenomena so dispersed across space or time that they'd otherwise be hard to perceive. You can glimpse this dynamic, with poignance, in the thematic cluster of works about Manhattan's downtown west side piers, where ghostly pieces by Gordon Matta-Clark, Every Ocean Hughes, and David Hammons limn the queer and bohemian histories of a much transformed place. You can see it, too, in the Center for Land Use Interpretation's "A Journey up the Hudson River from the Battery to Troy" (2006), a powerful photojournalistic slideshow tour of the river's infrastructural and industrial sites. What humans do with that wider perspective is another matter. Then as now, many people are content to romanticize the relationship between nature and culture, or else to look away from it entirely.



Johann Hermann Carmiencke, "Poughkeepsie Iron Works (Bench's Furnace)" (1856), oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/4 inches (73.7 x 92.1 cm) (courtesy Yale University Art Gallery, Bequest of Evelyn A. Cummins)



Alex Matthew, "Oystering at Prince's Bay" (c. 1853), oil on canvas, 25 1/8 x 33 1/4 inches (63.8 x 84.5 cm) (courtesy of Historic Richmond Town)



Thomas W. Commeraw, oyster jar marked "Daniel Johnson and Co." (1799–1804), ceramic with salt glaze; oyster jar marked "Daniel Johnson and Co." (1799–1804), ceramic with salt glaze; oyster jar marked "Henry Scott" (1820–40), ceramic with Albany slip glaze; Collection of Chris Pickerell (image courtesy Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University)



George Wesley Bellows, "Rain on the River" (1908), oil on canvas, 32 3/8 x 38 1/4 inches (82.2 x 97.2 cm) (courtesy the RISD Museum, Providence, RI)



An-My Lê, "Hudson River I from Trap Rock" (2006), pigment print, 30 x 42 inches (76.2 x 106.7 cm) (courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery)



Lisa Sanditz, "Tivoli Bay" (2016), oil on canvas, 54 x 70 inches (137.2 x 177.8 cm) (courtesy the artist)

Shifting Shorelines: Art, Industry, and Ecology along the Hudson River continues at the Wallach Art Gallery (615 West 129th Street, 6th Floor, Manhattanville, Manhattan) through January 12, 2025. The exhibition was curated by Annette Blaugrund, Betti-Sue Hertz, Elizabeth Hutchinson, and Dorothy Peteet.