



Following in the Footsteps of Asher B. Durand: A Walker's Guide

Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape

on view at the Brooklyn Museum through July 29, 2007

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One of America's preeminent landscape painters, Asher B. Durand was renowned for his many scenic views of the Hudson River Valley and the Catskills—the quintessential symbols of American wilderness for much of the nineteenth century.

The first known vacationers visited the Catskills in 1819, and America's first successful mountain tourist hotel, the Catskill Mountain House, was established shortly thereafter, in 1823. The same year Thomas Cole became one of the first artists to paint the Catskill wilderness. The area was subsequently immortalized in the art of Durand and other landscape artists, and in the novels and poetry of James Fenimore Cooper and William Cullen Bryant. By midcentury it was one of America's most famous tourist destinations.

Many of the locales represented by Durand more than a century ago can be visited today. This guide details a few of the sites depicted in the exhibition *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape* and provides information on how to visit them. Visitors should consult the trail guides cited at the end of this text to gauge length and difficulty of walks.

Fig. 1. Asher B. Durand (American, 1796–1886). *Kindred Spirits*, 1849. Oil on canvas. Crystal Bridges—Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas (Photo: ©2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)



Kaaterskill Clove

Kaaterskill Clove, a distinctive ravine known as the heart of the Catskills, was one of the places most visited by tourists and most painted by Hudson River School artists. Several grand tourist hotels, now long gone, provided accommodations for thousands of seasonal visitors who rose early for the daily ritual of viewing the sunrise over the Hudson.

Artists often stayed at local boardinghouses, which were cheaper and quieter than the hotels, and explored the many creeks, cloves, and cascades of the area in search of interesting natural details. In contrast, most visitors saw only the well-known views and seldom strayed far from the hotel grounds.

The more intrepid could hike the mountain trails along the north rim of the clove to Kaaterskill Falls and other cascades or hire a guide for longer excursions through the dense woods to Kaaterskill High Peak, on the south side of the clove.

Once the most popular in America, the trails around Kaaterskill Clove afforded magnificent mountain vistas, towering cascades, and narrow cliff walks. Today these trails are still the most popular, accessible, and historically significant of the Catskill region, designated the Catskill Forest Preserve in 1885.

Durand's *Kindred Spirits* (fig. 1) is perhaps the most famous representation of the Catskill landscape. A view up a deep clove toward a cataract that may or may not be Kaaterskill Falls, the painting is actually a “composition” combining many of the characteristic geologic and natural features of the Catskill landscape. The foreground ledge may have been based on a rock formation known as Church's Ledge, and the waterfall modeled on Fawn's Leap, one of the smaller waterfalls on the south side of Kaaterskill Clove. Within this rocky gorge, Durand has depicted his recently deceased friend and mentor Thomas Cole engaged in earnest discourse with his friend the poet William Cullen Bryant. Both men were fervent admirers of the natural wonders of the region.

Durand's *Kaaterskill Clove* (fig. 2) depicts a classic view of the site, looking across the forested mountains toward the hazy Hudson River Valley. The area shown in Durand's verdant vista, protected as part of the Catskill Forest Preserve, looks much the same today, although the painting does not accurately represent the view Durand himself would have seen. The artist omitted the many signs of regional industry—farms, sawmills, tanneries, paper and furniture factories—that dotted the landscape at the time, and the many treeless clearings where the wood had been felled for industrial uses.

There were many overlooks along the rim of the clove that offered marvelous vistas; the spectacular view described in *Kaaterskill Clove* has been identified as that seen from the Santa Cruz Falls. Situated on the south rim of the clove, almost directly opposite the famous Kaaterskill Falls, Santa Cruz Falls was, in Durand's day, a popular scenic point on the path from Haines Falls to Kaaterskill High Peak. This popular all-day hike was included in local guidebooks in the 1870s, though today High Peak is seldom visited.

In two other paintings in the exhibition, Durand sought to suggest the characteristic scenery of Kaaterskill Clove. *The Catskills*, 1859, was composed from sketches



Fig. 2. Asher B. Durand (American, 1796–1886). *Kaaterskill Clove*, 1866. Oil on canvas. The Century Association, New York, 1866.6

made in Palenville, the town at the mouth of Kaaterskill Clove, and nearby Platte Clove in 1858. One of these oil sketches, *A Sycamore Tree, Plaaterkill Clove*, can also be seen in the exhibition.

Landscape with Birches, circa 1855, suggests the view east toward the Hudson River from one of the many scenic points in Kaaterskill Clove.

TO VISIT

The area around Kaaterskill Falls is accessible from the many trails starting at the North-South Lake Public Campground, near Haines Falls, New York (14 miles from Saugerties, exit 20 on I-87; take Rt. 32, then Rt. 32A, then Rt. 23A west).

Although Santa Cruz Falls is now on private land and cannot be

accessed by hikers, the view in *Kaaterskill Clove* is very similar to that seen from the parking lot at the foot of Bastion Falls on Rt. 23A, 3.5 miles west of the intersection of Rts. 23A and 32A in Palenville. There is also a hiking trail to Kaaterskill Falls beginning here.

Other magnificent views down the clove are afforded from the many outlooks on the trails along the north rim of the clove. Parking is available on Schutt Road, just to the right before the entrance to the North-South Lake Public Campground.

Fawn's Leap and other waterfalls in the clove are on public land but not easily accessible. For hiking directions, see Russell Dunn's *Catskill Region Waterfall Guide*.

View from North Mountain

Thomas Cole's view from Bear's Den (fig. 3; on display in the *American Identities* galleries, 5th floor) is the classic North Mountain vista. Here we see the Catskill Mountain House in the middle distance on South Mountain, with Kaaterskill High Peak and Roundtop Mountain in the far distance. Cole's choice of vantage point was quite unusual; in his time the most famous views of the area were from Kaaterskill Clove and Kaaterskill Falls, near the hotels on South Mountain.



Fig. 3. Thomas Cole (American, 1801–1848). *A View of the Two Lakes and Mountain House, Catskill Mountains, Morning, 1844.* Oil on canvas. Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 52.16

The work of later painters such as Sanford Gifford, Jasper Cropsey, and Jervis McEntee promoted more interest in this site, and today the North Mountain trails are the most popular in the North-South Lake area, primarily for the magnificent panoramic view of the Hudson River Valley and the two lakes reached from Bear's Den and other spots along the Escarpment Trail. Owing to its



Fig. 4. Asher B. Durand (American, 1796–1886). *Pitch Pines, North Mountain, Catskills, New York, 1848.* Graphite on gray-green paper. The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1918.73

inclusion in the Catskill Preserve, the landscape looks much as it did in Cole's painting.

During a stay at Catskill Mountain House late in the summer of 1848, Durand made a sketch of windblown pines (fig. 4). Quite possibly he was there to collect studies in preparation for *Kindred Spirits*. This particular sketch was made on North Mountain, where pitch pines are still the dominant tree species.

TO VISIT

The trailhead to the Escarpment Trail can be reached from the North-South Lake Public Campground. From the parking lot at the beach at North Lake, there is also a short trail leading up to Pine Orchard, where a trail marker indicates the former site of the Catskill Mountain House. The view from this vantage point is not to be missed.

Dover Plains

Durand visited Dover Plains in 1847, a few years after it had become the last station on the railroad from New York. He may have stopped to visit the area's tourist attraction, the natural rock cavern called the Stone Church, whose entrance evocative of a Gothic arch is seventy feet high and fourteen feet wide.



Fig. 5. Asher B. Durand (American, 1796–1886). *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York, 1848.* Oil on canvas. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of Thomas M. Evans and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1978.126

Although Durand somewhat exaggerated the size of the mountains in the background of his painting of Dover Plains (fig. 5), the work is mostly true to life. The drumlin, or small knob formed by glacial action, in the right foreground was removed a few years ago when it was sold for use as road gravel.

TO VISIT

Dover Plains is about 20 miles east of Poughkeepsie, and some 80 miles north of New York City (near the New York–Connecticut border). Durand's view can be found by driving south on Rt. 22 from the village of Dover Plains. Turn left on Rt. 6, and turn right (uphill) on Sherman Hill Road. After passing the last house, look back to the right, toward the northwest.

Shandaken Mountains

Although the area around Kaaterskill Clove was undoubtedly the most famous in the Catskill region, Durand did not restrict his travels to the clove vicinity. He also visited the towns of Marbletown, Olive, Shandaken, and Shokan in the 1840s and early 1850s, making numerous sketches that he later turned into paintings, including *Clearing Up* (fig. 6).

The exact site of *Clearing Up* has not been documented, but it may be the view from the town of Olive looking south and west toward the town of Shandaken and the Catskill High Peaks. The valley in the foreground, where the Bush Kill joins Esopus Creek, is now the Ashokan Reservoir. The term “Shandaken Mountains” is no longer in use; it once referred to the inland mountains, including Slide, Wittenberg, and Cornell, which are now part of the Catskills.

Other views of the Shandaken Mountains in the exhibition include the paintings *Shandaken, Ulster County, New York*, 1854 (possibly a view from Ashokan High Point from Olive or Marbletown), and *View of the Shandaken Mountains*, 1853 (which is very similar to *Clearing Up*).

TO VISIT

The towns surrounding the Ashokan Reservoir are located on Rts. 28 and 28A, west of the Kingston exit (exit 19) from I-87. From Haines Falls, take Rt. 23A west to Rt. 214, to Rt. 28 east and then Rt. 28A.

Recommended Reading

Raymond Beecher. *Kaaterskill Clove: Where Nature Met Art*. Hensonville, N.Y.: Black Dome Press, 2004.

Russell Dunn. *Catskill Region Waterfall Guide: Cool Cascades of the Catskills and Shawangunks*. Hensonville, N.Y.: Black Dome Press, 2004.

Robert A. Gildersleeve. *Catskill Mountain House Trail Guide: In the Footsteps of the Hudson River School*. Hensonville, N.Y.: Black Dome Press, 2005.

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Fig. 6. Asher B. Durand (American, 1796–1886). *Clearing Up*, 1854. Oil on canvas. Collection of Barrie and Deedee Wigmore