

Rebirth of a Museum

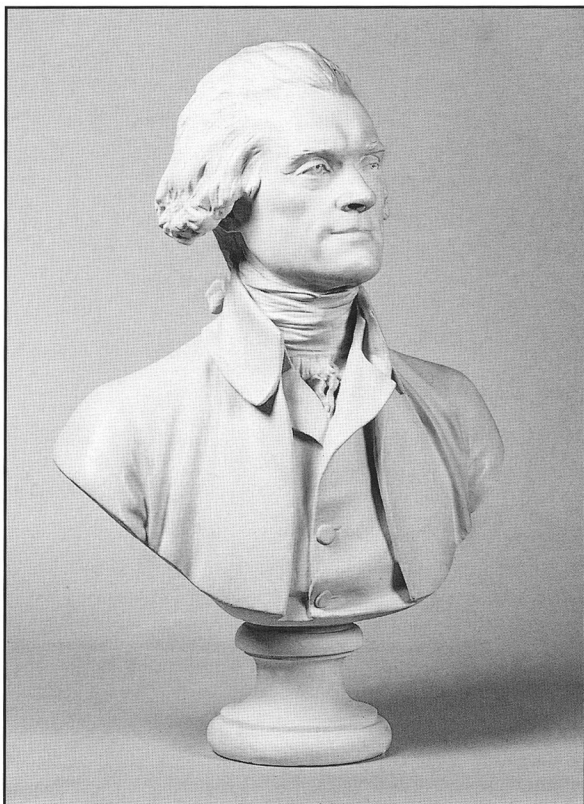
by Gail Leggio

Founded in 1804, The New-York Historical Society is the city's oldest museum. Its vast collections of American painting, sculpture, books, decorative arts, manuscripts, architectural materials, prints, photographs and ephemera (a miscellaneous rubric that includes everything from circus posters to ashtrays and cocktail napkins from the Stork Club) represent the collective memory of New Yorkers. The Historical Society's treasures encompass Thomas Cole's epic canvases *The Course of Empire* (usually installed in a replica of a room in the home of Luman Reed, the far-sighted drygoods merchant who commissioned the series), 430 original drawings for *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon, purchased from his widow for \$4,000, the largest collection of Tiffany lamps in existence, photographs of Civil War subjects by Matthew Brady, correspondence between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, and a hand-written draft of George Washington's inaugural address.

Until recently, however, the vast majority of these objects were inaccessible. The public scarcely guessed the scope of the collection. Indeed, very little of it was even housed in the Society's current home, a Beaux-Arts structure, erected in 1908 with wings added in 1938, on Central Park West. A decade ago, a scandal erupted when the public discovered that most of the Society's holdings were languishing in substandard off-site storage. Demoralized and running out of money, the New-York Historical Society nearly closed its doors in 1993. The revitalization of the Society since then has been dramatic, under the leadership of president Betsy Gotbaum. In mid-November the renaissance became official with the opening of the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture.

Occupying the entire fourth floor of the building, the Center offers access for 40,000 objects from the collection; at last everything is under one roof. Made possible largely by a \$7.5 million grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Center spreads across 21,000 square feet and includes the latest in museum information technology. To some extent, the Luce Center draws on the example of the Metropolitan Museum's American Wing Study Center, although the Met's facility is largely a reserve collection. The Historical Society's Luce Center, in contrast, contains masterpieces and "has a living organic quality to it,"¹ according to Jan Ramirez, director of the Society's museum division. Among the nearly 500 American paintings presented in glass-fronted cases are works by Albert Bierstadt, Frederic E. Church, Thomas Cole, Childe Hassam, John Frederick Kensett, Rembrandt Peale and Asher B. Durand. Encompassing social history as well as the fine arts, the collection also includes jewelry, toys and games, police and fire-fighting equipment and furniture maker Duncan Phyfe's tool chest. Designed by the architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle, the renovated space features an orientation area, special exhibit stations, audio tours, a classroom and user-friendly computer terminals. The idea is to provide several levels of interpretative guidance geared to the individual visitor's appetite for detail. An on-line catalogue will be available on the Internet.

One of the exhibit stations, titled "Tools, Talent and Trade," is devoted to the work of Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), with a display of his brushes, paints and personal belongings. The New-York Historical Society is the world's largest repository of Durand materials. An excellent recent exhibit was a fitting celebration of Durand and of the Historical Society's rebirth. Drawn predominantly from the rich resources of the Society, "Intimate Friends:



Jean-Antoine Houdon, *Bust of Thomas Jefferson*, 1789
New-York Historical Society

Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand and William Cullen Bryant” explored Durand’s friendships with Thomas Cole (1801–1848), founder of the Hudson River School, and poet-editor William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878). The iconic image of their friendship is *Kindred Spirits* (1849), in the collection of the New York Public Library. Commissioned as a gift for Bryant, in gratitude for his eulogy at Cole’s funeral, Durand’s painting depicts his two friends standing on a rocky outcrop, in conversation with each other and communion with nature. There is a biographical aspect to the image. Bryant and Cole had taken a walking tour of the Catskills in 1840, with Bryant, who had been instructed in Linnean botany by his father, identifying plant species. But *Kindred Spirits* is also a statement of belief. The hazy mountains in the distance, the cascading brook below them and the sun-dappled trees arching overhead are visible signs of the virtues of the New World and its edenic wilderness.

Co-curated by Barbara Novak and Ella M. Foshay, the exhibition documented the intellectual life of mid-nineteenth-century America, through the art, literature, manuscripts and letters of the three men, who were cultural leaders as well as creative individuals. They were all avid proselytizers for the vitality and autonomy of American art, which they believed was rooted in the national landscape. In an 1832 editorial in the *New York Evening Post*, Bryant wrote: “We have mountains and clouds, earth and skies as fitted to inspire the poet or the painter as Italy can boast.”²² In 1826 Cole and Durant helped found the National Academy of Design. In 1829 Cole, Durand and Bryant collaborated on another organization,

the Sketch Club, designed to foster the cross-pollination of ideas among artists and writers, and to spread those ideas to the public. One-third of the membership was made up of “amateurs,” businessmen and publishers with cultural interests. Luman Reed, the patron of Cole and Durand, was a member.³ Bryant published his sonnet “To Cole the Painter on his Departure for Europe” in *The Talisman*, a literary annual started by Durand and two other Sketch Club members. These fascinating cross-currents are explored in the trim 64-page catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, which juxtaposes excellent color reproductions with illuminating essays by Barbara Novak and Foshay.

The exhibition itself was a good argument for the success of the friends’ cultural mission. The approximately sixty paintings and drawings by Cole and Durand suggest the strengths—and diversity—of Hudson River School landscapes. One of the most charming works displayed was Cole’s *Study for Dream of Arcadia* (1838), painted as a gift for his friend Durand. Measuring only 8 ¾ by 14 ½ inches, the tiny oil-on-wood panel is a trompe l’oeil marvel: the little landscape appears to be pinned to a board, and the edges curl convincingly.

Close friends though they were, Cole and Durand emerge as very different painters. The English-born Cole was ambivalent about the European heritage, a fact Bryant hints at in his sonnet when he advises his friend to enjoy the beauties of Europe but also to keep America’s “wilder image bright.” Cole traveled and sketched extensively in Europe and even stayed for a time in Claude’s house on the Roman campagna. Many of Cole’s landscapes retain vestiges of Claudian conventions, such as *Italian Scene Composition* (1833), with its pensive shepherd leaning against a broken column and a tender light spreading across the landscape. Returning from his stay abroad (c.1829–1832), Cole started work on *The Course of Empire* (1833–1836), a five-painting series tracing the rise and fall of a society through the savage state, the arcadian or pastoral state, the consummation of empire, destruction and desolation. *The Consummation of Empire*, with its Greek Revival building boom in white marble, and *Destruction*, with its echoes of the Miltonic cataclysms painted by John Martin (1789–1854), whom Cole had met in England,⁴ are the flashiest paintings in the series, but Cole’s heart is clearly with the landscape that endures through all the machinations of overweening humanity. The same harbor and distinctive mountain profile are visible in all the scenes, and it comes as something of a relief, in *Desolation*, when the clutter of civilization is reduced to a lone Corinthian column.

Cole’s more recognizably American landscapes, painted in the Catskills and New England, have an understated poetry. His 1834 oil-on-wood panel *Sunset (View on Catskill Creek, New York)* depicts one of the artist’s favorite locales. Twilight bathes the distant mountain, shadowy trees and gleaming water. The tiny figure of a boatman in the foreground and a drinking animal beyond impart a feeling of comfortable habitation. The awe that imbues his more sublime landscapes seems muted here, but personal pleasure is still blended with reverence. In his 1836 “Essay on American Scenery” Cole writes that “in gazing on the pure creations of the Almighty,” he feels a calm religious tone steal through his mind. A similar idea is voiced in Bryant’s 1829 poem “A Walk at Sunset.”⁵

Cole was not a plein-air painter; on-the-spot transcriptions from nature were not part of his method. “I must wait for time to draw a veil over the common details, the unessential parts, which shall leave the great features, whether the beautiful or the sublime, dominant in the mind.”⁶ This rather Wordsworthian preference for experience recollected in tranquility distinguishes Cole from Durand, who loved to sketch outdoors and was particularly drawn to the common details of nature. Durand painted a few allegorical landscapes, such as *The Morning of Life* and *The Evening of Life* (1840), but he was nowhere near as interested in the



John James Audubon, *Greater Flamingo*, 1838
New-York Historical Society

genre as Cole. Although Durand traveled and sketched in Europe in the 1840s, he preferred American scenery to the Alps.

Durand is an earthy painter, superb at capturing the shade-dappled sous bois of American woods and as good a painter of rock surfaces as Gustave Courbet (1819–77). Durand's *Study from Nature, Stratton Notch, Vermont* (1853) is remarkable for its texture—the peeling bark on the fallen tree—as well as for its composition. The spidery tendrils of the branches that frame the distant mountains suggest the German Romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), although the setting is unmistakably New England, with its wind-blown gold autumnal leaves. *Study from Nature, Rocks and Trees* (1856) is vintage Durand, a bold diagonal composition of vibrantly textured rocks and slender trees, their trunks whitened by sunlight or darkened by shadow.

The most exciting Durand works in this exhibition, the things that whet the viewer's appetite for a full-scale retrospective, are the drawings and oil sketches. His large underpainting *Primeval Forest* (c.1854) sends off sparks. As mysterious as one of Friedrich's brown-wash drawings, it has the architectural presence of a landscape by Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). Novak makes the comparison in her insightful catalogue essay, and the Durand drawings on display support her argument. She suggests that Durand—both in his art and in his 1855 “Letters on Landscape Painting,” published in *The Crayon*—“fused two of the major characteristics of American experience in the mid-nineteenth century, empiricism and spirit, faith, belief.”⁷ The viewer of this exhibition will probably agree that Durand is an important figure in the history of the landscape genre, and leave coveting one of the artist's intensely vital graphite sketches of tree branches.

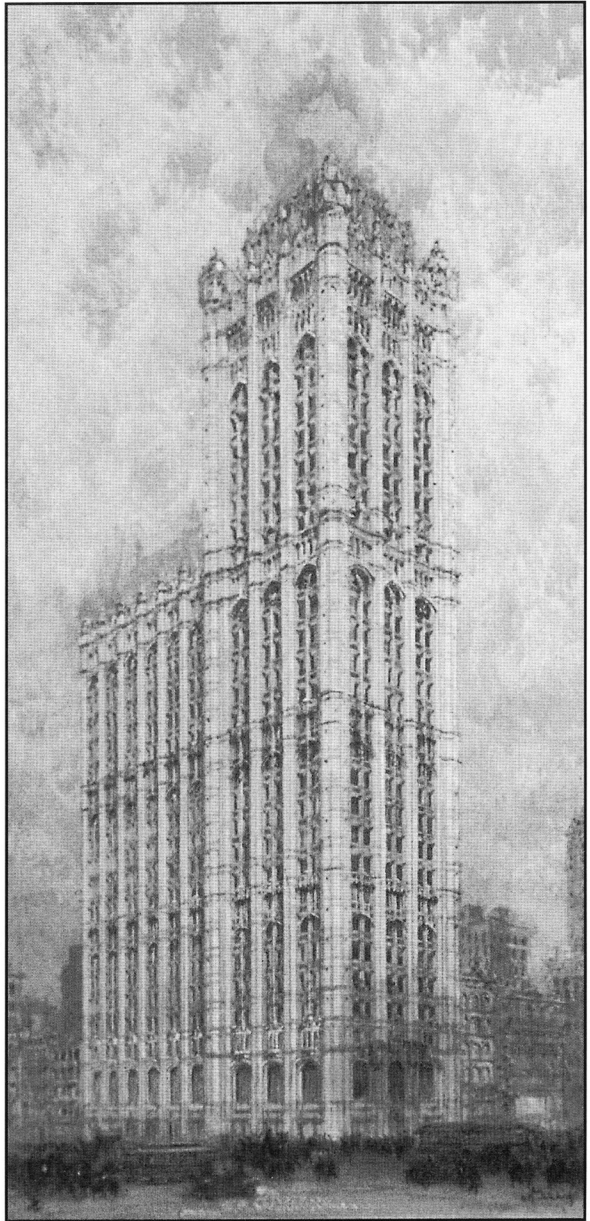
The depth and breadth of the Historical Society's permanent collection was demonstrated by another in-house exhibition, “Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert.” The Society's Cass Gilbert Collection contains an immense amount of material, including extensive office records from the architect's New York practice, established in 1899, with project files, the daily memoranda of on-going building schemes, proposals for fittings, building specifications and contracts, Gilbert's correspondence, sketches, presentation drawings and drafted specifications. For anyone interested in the evolution of the American city, the iconography of New York City, or how style and technology contribute to architectural development, this is an important exhibition. The accompanying catalogue, edited by exhibition curator Margaret Heilbrun and published by Columbia University Press, should become an essential volume in the field.

Cass Gilbert (1859–1934) was born in Ohio and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota. After training in St. Paul and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first American school of architecture, founded in 1865, Gilbert apprenticed briefly in the New York office of McKim, Mead & White. Returning to St. Paul, he entered and won a competition for the Minnesota State Capitol. Besides giving him valuable experience overseeing a complex building project, the Capitol established Gilbert's national reputation and allowed him to implement the ideals of the City Beautiful movement. Despite his Midwestern origins and early success, however, Gilbert became a major figure in the architectural history of New York, producing two buildings—the U.S. Custom House (1907) and the Woolworth Building (1913)—that helped define the metropolis in an era of extraordinary change and vitality, both technically and stylistically.

In 1899 the U.S. Treasury Department invited architects to submit plans for a new U.S. Custom House, to replace the inadequate structure on Wall Street. The new edifice, to be built on Manhattan's Bowling Green near the docks, would provide the extra space needed for storing records. Symbolically, the building would represent New York City's

importance as the center of United States foreign trade and its emerging power on the world stage of commerce. Gilbert's winning design was conservative, combining French Beaux-Arts and Italian Renaissance motifs. Gilbert hired employees trained by the l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Implicitly, this historicism gave the building the dignity of older structures in European capitals. Although the Treasury Department called for a ground-floor entrance, Gilbert insisted on a piano nobile, a grand second-floor entrance. The interior was modeled on the reading room of the Library of Congress. (Gilbert had planned murals for the oval dome of the rotunda, but they would not be executed until 1937, when Reginald Marsh, as part of a WPA project, painted the passage of an ocean liner through New York harbor.) A mansard roof and elaborately ornamented second floor give the building a distinctive profile.

With four heroic sculptures representing the continents by Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) and forty-four massive Corinthian columns featuring the head of Mercury, god of commerce, peering from the capitals, the U.S. Custom House is a dramatic building. Twelve cornice statues, sculpted by eight different artists, portray ancient and modern seafaring powers: Greece, Rome, Phoenicia, Genoa, Venice, Spain, Holland, Portugal, Denmark, France, England, and Belgium. Belgium was originally Germany, and the Historical Society exhibition featured the remodeling drawings for the figure's transmogrification during World War I. If Gilbert's building evokes the panoply of history in its details, it also celebrates the modern power of the United States. The elaborate Beaux-Arts cladding is deployed over a twentieth-century steel skeleton. As Richard Guy Wilson writes, the U.S. Custom House "with its large physical presence and palpable processional route, is not European but



The Woolworth Building from City Hall Park, early presentation drawing (c. 1910) from the Cass Gilbert Collection, The New-York Historical Society.



Childe Hassam, *Flags on 57th Street, Winter 1918*
New-York Historical Society

American.”⁸ When the quintessential modernist Le Corbusier arrived in the United States, eager to see the skyscrapers, he found himself admiring another American style: “In New York, then, I learn to appreciate the Italian Renaissance. It is so well done that you could believe it to be genuine. It even has a strange, new firmness which is not Italian, but American!”⁹

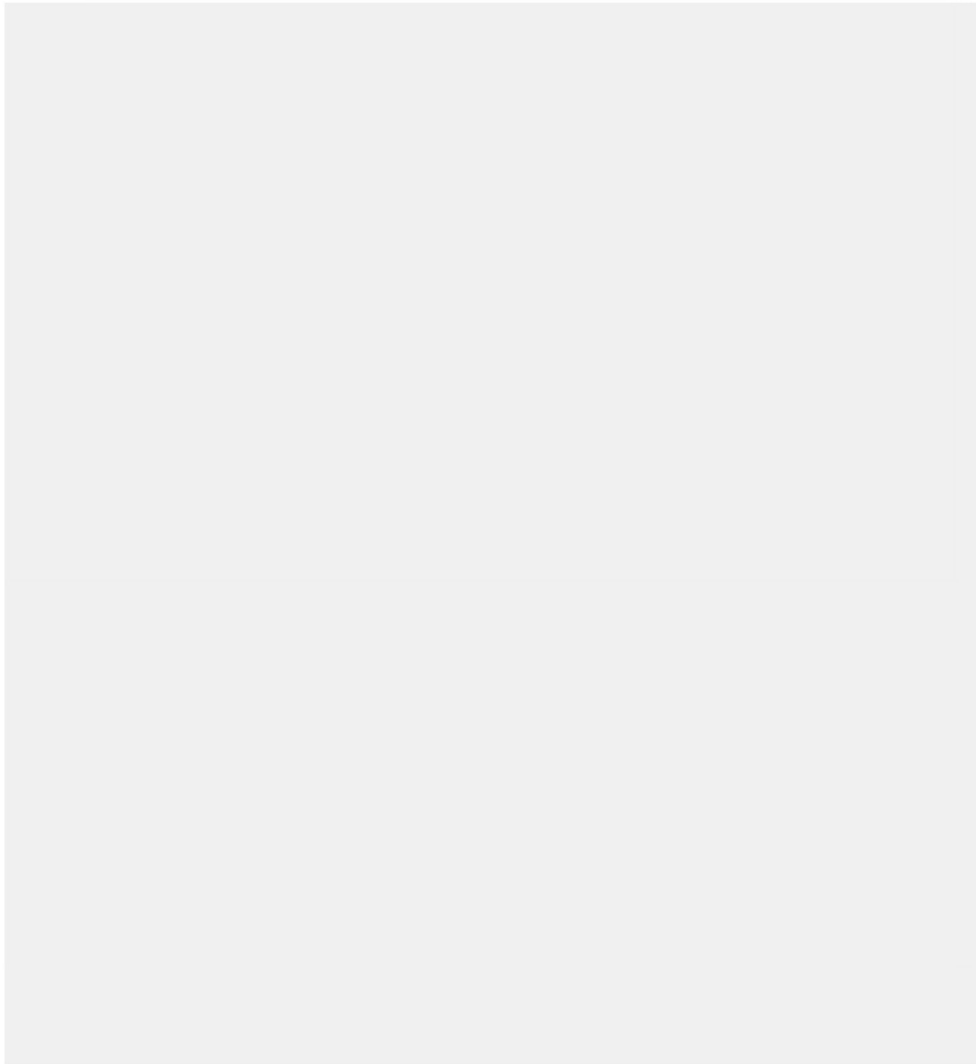
The U.S. Custom House was popularly dubbed the Temple of Commerce. Cass Gilbert’s most famous creation, the Woolworth Building, became known as the Cathedral of Commerce,¹⁰ a reference to its historicist model, the Gothic style, as well as to its celebration of American business. Rather than a government building, the Woolworth Building was a private commission, the self-aggrandizing brainchild of F. W. Woolworth, the five-and-ten-cent store tycoon. Gilbert took the idea and turned it into one of the most famous structures in the world. Rising fifty-five stories above City Hall Park,

this monument to entrepreneurship was the tallest building in the world from 1913 to 1930. Opened, with ceremonial flourish, by President Woodrow Wilson, the Woolworth Building caused a sensation. The New-York Historical Society exhibition featured, in addition to a wealth of design and technological information, a delightful selection of promotional and tourist ephemera. In its day, the Woolworth Building was as much a pop icon of New York City as the Statue of Liberty.

It remains one of the most elegant and significant buildings in the city; it is no overstatement to argue, as this exhibition did, that Cass Gilbert was “inventing the skyline” of the modern metropolis. The skyscraper depends on the development of steel-frame construction and the elevator. The lightweight terracotta cladding opened up space for the 5,000 windows that Woolworth, anxious that every office have natural light, specified. Architectural terracotta has many benefits: it can be any color, it can be carved, and it is weather- and fire-resistant. The last quality is alluded to in the decoration of the building by the presence of carved salamanders, the legendary elemental creatures that live in fire. The sculptural details throughout the building are both opulent and witty. On one corbel is a caricature of Cass Gilbert, holding a model of the building. On another is a caricature of Woolworth with a sack of nickels and dimes. The tycoon paid for his \$13 million building in cash.

The Woolworth Building is a marvel of engineering, as were the Flamboyant Gothic

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cathedrals. Gilbert drew on the ornamental vocabulary of late medieval cathedrals, churches and town halls. The tower features flying buttresses and pinnacles. A series of twenty-first-century photographs in the exhibition demonstrated the splendors of the building where most of us never go, at roof level. The lobby, the first grand public space in a private office building, is laid out like a cross, with barrel vaults and a domed mosaic ceiling. The private swimming pool in the basement, now gone, was an emblem of corporate luxury. But the lobby is still a wonder, a mix of splendor and playfulness. Even today, a glimpse of the Woolworth Building soaring above the neighboring streets can lift the spirits. As Paul Goldberger writes: “It is all enough to make one believe, just for a moment, in that

insipid phrase about architecture being frozen music.”¹¹

The Woolworth Building was a hard act to follow, and Gilbert never made a structure as celebrated, but he continued working and evolved with the times. His most daringly modern design grew out of the exigencies of World War I. Gilbert volunteered his services, gratis, toward the construction of any war-related projects. The U.S. Army Supply Base (1918), a supply and warehouse complex on the South Brooklyn waterfront, is Gilbert’s most utilitarian project, a striking example of form-follows-function design. Gilbert worked in conjunction with the Henry C. Turner Company, a contractor specializing in construction using a recently patented method of pouring reinforced concrete. At a cost of \$35 million, the complex was a state-of-the-art facility, with two warehouses, a system of piers, and direct rail lines to the Northeast’s principal manufacturing and commerce centers. The warehouses—eight-story, two-tiered, with timber roofs and vertically moveable doors—were the largest concrete structures in the world in 1919. For Gilbert, the stark design was aesthetically the right choice. For a conservative architect, Gilbert proved himself highly adaptable at a time of extraordinary change. The monumental classicism of the U.S. Custom House, the skyscraper Gothic of the Woolworth Building and the severe modernism of the U.S. Army Supply Base are encompassed in less than two decades, evidence of the inspired pragmatism of American architecture. The Cass Gilbert archives showcased in this exhibition are a treasure house for architects, historians and students.

“Intimate Friends” and “Inventing the Skyline” were both excellent exhibitions, on worthwhile subjects, handsomely installed. The most exciting aspect of the current season, however, is that the materials in these shows were drawn almost entirely from the New-York Historical Society’s own collections. A major resource for the history, culture and art of the United States is, at last, becoming available. With the concurrent opening of the Henry Luce III Center for the Study of American Culture, every object in the collection of the museum will have a computerized record in the database. In addition to reference computers, the Center offers research computers linked to the staff’s own network. As the New-York Historical Society enters its third century, it promises to offer high-tech access to a wealth of information, alongside the pleasures of the traditional museum, in which the visitor stands in the presence of physical objects that resonate with aesthetic, historical and cultural meaning.

Notes

1. Cited, Grace Glueck, “A Tiptop, Shipshape Attic Right Out of Edith Wharton,” *New York Times* (November 17, 2000), p. E30.
2. Ella M. Foshay, “Intimate Friends,” in *Intimate Friends: Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, William Cullen Bryant* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 2000), p. 14.
3. Foshay, p. 13.
4. Abraham A. Davidson, *The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), p. 19.
5. Foshay, p. 26.
6. Foshay, p. 29.
7. Barbara Novak, “A Note on Durand’s *Studies from Nature*,” in *Intimate Friends*, p. 43.
8. Richard Guy Wilson, “Architecture, Landscape and City Planning,” in *The American Renaissance 1876–1917* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 109.
9. *Ibid.*
10. The phrase was coined by S. Parkes Cadman, a radio preacher, in 1917. See Donald Martin Reynolds, *The Architecture of New York City* (New York: Collier, 1984), p. 179.
11. Paul Goldberger, *The City Observed: New York* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 14.