



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-10-17-0519-17

Project Category: Learning Experiences

Funding Level: \$5,000 – \$500,000

Thomas Cole Historic House

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$200,000

Amount of cost share: \$200,470

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Abstract
- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

Please note that the instructions for preparing applications for the FY2018 Museums for America grant program differ from those that guided the preparation of FY2017 applications. This year, the maximum that may be requested from IMLS is \$250,000. Be sure to use the instructions in the FY2018 Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

Abstract – Thomas Cole National Historic Site

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site (TCNHS) is working with multiple partners to address a critical challenge that is facing this organization, as well as many house museums nationwide: how can a historic site use its powerful stories to engage broad audiences in the kind of proactive learning that opens minds and inspires a thirst for more knowledge? Must these sites choose between historic preservation and audience engagement, or is it possible to combine these two priorities? What can be done to reverse the national downward trend in attendance to house museums? Seven years ago, the TCNHS embarked on a project to investigate new ways to interpret a historic house, acknowledging that the traditional model of roped-off rooms and lecture-style delivery of information was not meeting the needs of many potential visitors. After benchmarking trips to over 35 museums, historic sites and other attractions, as well as several stages of planning, the TCNHS has designed a visitor experience that does something new: it allows people to enter the authentic historic spaces and become part of the story themselves. Through lengthy consultation with curators, historic preservationists, educators and exhibition designers, we are testing solutions to the questions about how to protect irreplaceable artifacts while enabling the public to interact with them. For example, rather than rope off an entire room, the TCNHS proposes to designate certain objects and pieces of furniture as hands-on, including places where visitors can sit down and write, get creative, and take part in a substantive conversation. In addition, new technology will be used to enhance learning and engagement, but the equipment will be hidden in creative ways so as not to destroy the magic of being in a 19th-century space. These activities will not take place in a separate room, such as a modern visitor center. Instead, we propose to merge hands-on exploration with the authentic spaces where history took place.

The partners on this project include Second Story – a design studio focusing on responsive environments, story-driven experiences, and experience innovation; Jean Dunbar – the renowned historic interiors specialist; Alan Wallach and Nancy Siegel – scholars and professors with a deep knowledge of Thomas Cole and American history; and the New York State Archives – a rich depository of primary-source material on Thomas Cole. Funding from the IMLS would be used to do the final design and production of historic interior decor and interactive multi-media exhibits on the second floor of the home of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), the seminal 19th-century artist who is considered the founder of the Hudson River School, the nation’s first major art movement. The overall reinterpretation of the house was divided into two phases: Phase One is on the first floor and Phase Two is on the second floor. Implementation of the first floor exhibits is now underway with a launch date of May 1, 2017. This application is for Phase Two, the second floor. Creating and installing the second-floor exhibits will take place between October 1, 2017, and May 1, 2019. Focus groups will help inform decision-making during 2018, and exit surveys will be conducted from May to September 2019.

The benefit to the public is to learn about a chapter of history that still reverberates through American cultural and civic life. The landscape-based themes that are explored in Cole’s work – such as the relative merits of preservation versus development and the idea of nature as a restorative power – are highly relevant to our lives today. The goal is for the knowledge and attitudes of the audience to change as they gradually realize that the issues Americans debated nearly 200 years ago are still unresolved and in many ways define American culture even now. The degree to which these goals are achieved will be measured using exit surveys. Our target is for a majority of visitors to report either a “significant” or “highly significant” change in their level of interest, knowledge and attitude about how 19th-century landscape painting is relevant today.

The tangible results of this project will be a new permanent interpretive exhibition at the TCNHS that is projected to be experienced by 25,000 visitors in the first year and approximately 300,000 over ten years. Currently, annual visitation to the TCNHS is 20,000 and has been growing each year, resulting in a five-fold increase over the last seven years. In addition, over 50,000 unique visitors experience the Thomas Cole website annually, a number that is also expected to increase as a result of this project.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site (TCNHS) requests a *Museums for America* grant of \$200,000 from the IMLS in the category of “Learning Experiences” to create a permanent interpretive exhibition that combines historic interiors with innovative exhibition design, enabling visitors to become part of the story and engage in self-directed inquiry and problem-solving. The project is based on a specific goal identified in our strategic plan to create a more dynamic and engaging visitor experience, and it will greatly strengthen the ability of the TCNHS to serve its public. Funding from the IMLS would be used to implement Phase Two of an interactive multi-media installation in the home of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), the seminal 19th-century artist who is considered the founder of the Hudson River School, the nation’s first major art movement. Being aware of the challenges facing historic house museums today, including shrinking audiences and a lack of diversity, the TCNHS is reimagining how a historic site can serve the public. Research shows that younger visitors increasingly desire and expect to participate rather than silently receive information. Therefore, rather than separate visitors from the story with velvet ropes, we are integrating new technologies and innovative digital tools into fully restored, historically accurate 19th-century interiors, enabling hands-on engagement, and establishing a working model for other historic houses to consider. The proposed exhibition elements are designed to serve diverse audiences and enable them to become more engaged with issues and questions that face our society today. The impact of this project on the institution will be critical and transformational. Because the project involves proactive steps to prepare for demographic and industry-wide trends, it will help ensure the long-term strength of the organization.

The project advances the TCNHS Strategic Plan that was adopted in 2010 and updated in 2013, specifically addressing the #1 goal regarding programming: “to evolve a dynamic, engaging and holistic visitor experience that underscores Cole’s influence on America’s cultural landscape and encourages return visits.” The new exhibits will be *dynamic* in that they are responsive and tailored to the individual visitor rather than static. They will be *engaging* because they invite the visitor to become part of the story of Cole’s life, and they will be *holistic* because the entire visitor experience is being considered, from the first point of contact on the TCNHS website to post-visit learning.

The benefit to the public is gain knowledge about a chapter of history that still reverberates through American cultural and civic life. The landscape-based themes that are explored in Cole’s work are still debated today. In every community, people grapple with decisions regarding landscape preservation and development. Thomas Cole’s vision of nature as a restorative power is very much a part of our consciousness today, as seen in influential books such as Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods*. Cole’s consideration of America’s mountains and scenic valleys as national treasures is manifested in the formation of National Parks and our desire to visit them. This exhibition will invite visitors to confront questions that have no easy answers, and to learn how these same questions were addressed by a seminal American artist nearly 200 years ago.

The project comes at a critical time for the historic site. Because the TCNHS has recently moved its staff offices out of the 1815 Main House, the opportunity has arisen to make public and interpret a large amount of historic interior space that was previously used for administrative functions. In preparation, the staff and board completed a two-year project funded by the IMLS to create an Interpretive Plan for the historic site, a process that included new primary-source research about Cole’s artistic challenges, personal relationships and professional motivations. The project also enabled staff to gather best practices about visitor engagement and exhibit design from both inside and outside the museum field. Through benchmarking trips to over 35 museums and other attractions, the project team came to reevaluate the traditional hands-off, roped-off, lecture-style guided tour. Additionally, the two-year project included an in-depth study of audiences revealing significant gaps and opportunities: namely, that many people – especially those under age 55 and families with children – expect and prefer to be engaged on a visceral as well as an intellectual level. The TCNHS is committed to putting this learning into practice.

Audience surveys at the TCNHS also revealed a significant demographic challenge that this project seeks to address: only 3% of TCNHS visitors brought children under age 16 with them on their visit, 93% of visitors

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were Caucasian, 59% hold a graduate degree and 72% of respondents were over 50 years of age. These numbers are fairly typical for historic house museums, but as noted frequently in the press, many house museums are seeing declining attendance. These statistics are a significant motivator in the project team's decision to employ innovative and participatory experiences that appeal to audiences outside of the traditional house museum visitor. At the same time, the TCNHS intends to design the experience with flexibility and sensitivity so as not to alienate their core museum-going audience. During 2014 and 2016, the TCNHS conducted focus groups to involve target audiences in helping to plan the new exhibits. Participants indicated a high degree of interest in three themes in particular: Thomas Cole as the first “environmentalist,” the business of art, and Cole's creative process. These three themes are the focus of the reinterpretation of the site.

Following the completion of the Interpretive Plan, the TCNHS was awarded an NEH Planning Grant in 2014 to work with scholars, designers and stakeholders to map out a new visitor experience at the historic site. The resulting plans called for not only restoring the original 1836 interiors with the correct wall coverings, floor coverings, etc., but also allowing visitors to enter them and participate in the engaging narrative of the artist's life. For its first twelve years open to the public, the interior of the Main House has been presented with a bare-bones décor of painted wood floors and white walls containing a growing collection of furnishings, art and artifacts. While the docent-led tours have been well-received, the TCNHS desires to provide a more accurate presentation of the look and feel of Cole's home. For the last five years, the TCNHS has been working with the historic interiors consultant Jean Dunbar to research and write a Furnishings & Finishes Plan for the Main House. During 2014, Ms. Dunbar supervised a paint analysis of the interior walls and trim and compiled cost estimates for the manufacture and installation of wall coverings and floor coverings. However, as the following description will show, the TCNHS does not intend to create a static installation focused on the decorative arts, but instead to bring the authentic environments to life using technology and interactivity.

The overall project has been divided into two phases so that the installation is manageable and less disruptive. Phase One focused on the first-floor rooms of the 1815 Main House, Thomas Cole's home, and also includes a redesign of ticketing and docent training so that all elements of the visitor experience are coordinated. These elements are now in production with a scheduled launch date of May 1, 2017. Phase Two focuses on the second floor of the Main House. The proposed launch date is May 1, 2019. The home's first floor rooms were considered by Cole and his family to be the public spaces of the house, where guests were greeted and where business was conducted. The second floor contained the family's private spaces, where personal activities took place. With this structure in mind, the Phase One exhibits are focused on Cole's public life and the business of art. The Phase Two exhibits, located upstairs, will focus on Cole's private life, thoughts and creative process.

The second floor exhibits will flow thematically from the first floor experiences; therefore, it is instructive to provide a brief overview of what visitors will experience before going upstairs. The organizing principle to the entire interpretation is to use the connection between “THEN” (Thomas Cole and the 1830s) and “NOW” (the visitor and our own time) to provide a route for the visitor to meaningful knowledge. We aim to rouse curiosity at the start of the visit, and to use that aroused interest to drive self-directed learning and inquiry for the remainder of the visit and beyond. The tool that we will use to achieve that curiosity is narrative. The most effective interpretations that the TCNHS team encountered on benchmarking visits were those that told a focused and compelling story that engaged the visitor in a human drama and enabled visitors to become part of the story themselves. The following elements will open at the TCNHS on May 1, 2017:

The story begins in the Visitor Center, where the very first item that visitors receive – their admission ticket – will invite critical thinking by pairing a Cole painting and a Cole quote with a question that connects THEN and NOW. For example, one painting is *River in the Catskills*, 1843, (Museum of Fine Arts Boston), featuring a view from Cole's porch with the addition of tree stumps and a woodsman with an axe. The Cole quote is “Yet I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away--the ravages of the axe are daily increasing--the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation,” and the question is “How has the place where you grew up changed during your lifetime?” There will be eight different combinations, enabling visitors to discuss

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them with each other. The visitors then meet their tour guide on the Main House's porch that overlooks a view that appears in many Cole paintings.

When visitors step inside, it will be immediately apparent that they have entered the home of an artist with a strong aesthetic vision. The walls of the entrance foyer will be a vibrant periwinkle blue color, and an elaborately patterned floor-cloth will cover the floor. On the stairs will be a striped carpet in rainbow colors – and all of these historically accurate elements were chosen by Thomas Cole himself. Through a doorway to the right is the East Parlor, painted a brilliant shade of green. The East Parlor is where visitors will first encounter this project's innovative methodology – restoring the rooms to their original 1830's appearance while also infusing them with new technology. The room will appear as a historic parlor with authentic furnishings and décor; however, upon entry the visitor will trigger a transformation, and panels on the wall that appeared to be static paintings will begin to tell a story. Through audio-visual projections onto framed canvases, the visitor will hear Cole's own words – all taken from his letters, essays and journals – and see the paintings that he refers to, providing a portrait of the hopes, passions and ambitions of the man. The presentation ends with a provocative and timely quote from 1836, "Nature has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet. Shall we turn from it? We are still in Eden. The wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly."

Across the hall is the West Parlor – also included in Phase One and scheduled to open in May 2017. Like the East Parlor, this room will be restored to its historic appearance, featuring a scarlet carpet strewn with peacocks and lavender walls topped with a painted frieze that Cole designed himself. However, in three locations around the room there will be three micro-projectors that are hidden in historic objects such as lamps and books. When triggered they will project a silent image onto the surface of the desk or table and provide an intriguing fragment of a conversation between Cole and one of the opinionated historic figures who visited him here. For example, at the center table Cole and his patron Robert Gilmore discuss how best to depict "the wildness of America," and at the corner desk, Cole and the architect Ithiel Town debate whether a view covered with man-made structures can be considered a landscape at all. Each presentation concludes with a question for the visitor, again connecting a historic issue with a contemporary one. Available at each station are copies and transcriptions of the original correspondence so that visitors may dive deeper into the story.

This concludes Phase One of the permanent interpretive exhibition in the Main House. The project for which we are now seeking IMLS funding will begin as visitors enter the second-floor stair hall, which we plan to bring to life with motion-triggered audio. The project team observed several successful examples of rooms animated with audio, such as in the "dependencies" of Jefferson's Monticello. At the TCNHS, as visitors are led upstairs, the hall will be filled with the sounds of a very full household. The guide will explain that during Cole's residency – a period of twelve years between 1836 and his death in 1848 – there were between 11 and 14 people living in this modest size dwelling. The audio will include the running footsteps of Thomas Cole's young children, the voices of his wife Maria's three unmarried sisters who became their caretakers, Maria's uncle who was the owner of the house, Thomas's sister Sarah who lived there intermittently, several women and men who were the cooks and farmhands, and finally a quote from Maria who proclaimed in 1842, "The house is not half large enough for us." Enlivening spaces that visitors would otherwise pass through without taking notice was achieved to good effect at several sites the project team visited, including Ford's Theatre, which used a hallway to outline the events leading to Lincoln's assassination. This stair hall feature in Cole's home will effectively transition visitors from the public areas to the private areas that are found upstairs.

The tour would then proceed into a large room that has a dramatic view through a triple-hung, floor-to-ceiling window. The west-facing view stretches across the valley to the Catskill Mountains; it is the view that Cole painted more than any other. The room, referred to as "Mr. Cole's room" in written records from the time, is believed to be where Cole set up his painting workspace after his marriage in 1836 until he moved it to an outbuilding on the property in 1839, later called the "Old Studio." In front of the window is Cole's original desk where he wrote many of the letters and journal entries that were featured in the first floor exhibits. At this point in the tour, the visitor has become aware of several complex issues that were debated in Cole's time and

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which remain largely unresolved in our own time. For example, what makes the American landscape special and worth preserving? What criteria should be considered when deciding between preservation and development of a particular place? In the second-floor exhibits, the visitor will have the opportunity to weigh in and engage in problem-solving of their own.

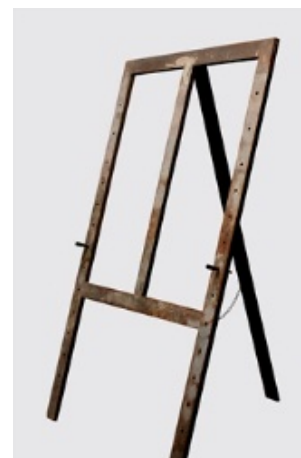
The first such opportunity will be presented at a replica of Cole's desk, situated next to a window nearby the original. Visitors will be invited to sit down and complete a letter that Cole has begun, inviting reflection on the issues that they experienced on their tour. The project team is inspired by examples of participatory experiences that are described by forward-thinking museum professionals such as Nina Simon, who argues that thoughtful invitations will encourage thoughtful answers. This experience, therefore, will be designed with paper that looks and feels like 19th-century paper and a writing implement that is similar to one that Cole would have used. This kind of immersion in historic events has also been shown to encourage sharing, as visitors photograph themselves and each other engaging in the activity and post to social media.

The project team has also observed that it is difficult for families with children to engage in an activity such as writing unless there is an activity for the child as well. Therefore, in the adjoining room where the Cole children slept, we plan to make available a stack of blank postcards along with a set of three rubber stamps, an ink pad, and colored pencils. This activity is modeled on a successful example observed by the project team at the Clark Art Institute. Our three stamps would be three versions of the view out the window: one would show the view as it appears today, with a modern road, cars and telephone poles in the valley. The second one would show the view as it appeared in Cole's time, with clear-cut forests and the train running through. The third version would show the view as it appears in Cole's paintings, with pristine forests and mountains with little man-made interference. Visitors of all ages could stamp their chosen version of the view onto the blank postcard, color it in, and send it or keep it as a souvenir.

Across the hall is another large room that is currently used as a gallery for the display of Cole's paintings and drawings from the collection. We propose to keep the original artworks on view, and to add an interactive element that would stand in the center of the room. When visitors enter, they would be invited to step up to an exact recreation of one of Cole's large easels where the blank "stretched canvas" would actually be a well-disguised touch-screen. After having learned about Cole's motivations and challenges, visitors would be invited to imagine themselves as the artist.

Standing at the easel, visitors could digitally manipulate Cole's sketch of the view of the Catskills that they have seen throughout their visit, and decide which elements to exaggerate – the height of the mountains, for example. Like Cole, they would choose a time of day such as sunrise for a youthful or optimistic subject, and could choose the weather such as an approaching storm to convey a sense of foreboding. Should the scene be in summer or fall and how do the different seasons change the mood? The user would decide which foreground elements to add, understanding the meaning of each one: a hunter with an axe and a stump indicates development, for example. Then they would decide whether to include or edit out the signs of modern life, just as Cole did. For Cole it was the crossing railroad that he painted out of his 1837 version, for example, but for today's visitor it might be the overhead telephone wires. Each decision could be compared with one or more of Cole's twelve paintings of the view that approximates the one seen out the window. Through this highly engaging process, visitors could learn not only how to look at a 19th-century painting analytically but also how to tap into their own inner creativity.

Once their virtual composition is complete, visitors could be asked if views "look better" to their eyes without signs of contemporary life and if they agree with Thomas Cole's statements about the need to appreciate and preserve wild spaces. Visitors' opinions could be instantly tallied and compared to the average from previous visitors, inviting visitors to reflect on where they stand in the spectrum of current attitudes about the balance between conservation and development. This concludes Phase Two of the permanent interpretive exhibition.



Thomas Cole's large easel

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Across the lawn and down a path is Thomas Cole’s “Old Studio” where he moved his workspace in 1839. Visitors would have the option of seeing this building before or after their visit to the Main House as part of a menu of activities that are available to them. The Old Studio was restored in 2004 with a “Save America’s Treasures” award and was furnished in 2005 to appear as though Thomas Cole has just stepped out. Cole’s original two large easels dominate the space. The walls are made with terra-cotta colored bricks in between dark timbers, and an enormous north-facing window floods the room with light. It was in this somewhat small space that Cole created some of his best-known works.

Further down the path is the site of the “New Studio” that Cole designed and had built for himself in 1846. The building was demolished in 1974 before the TCNHS became a museum, but it was successfully reconstructed in 2015. The exterior of the New Studio has been faithfully recreated, and the interior has been outfitted with a level of climate control, security, fire protection and lighting suitable for the display of art. These conditions are difficult to achieve in 19th-century structures; therefore the construction of the New Studio enabled the TCNHS to expand its successful exhibition program and mount larger exhibitions with more significant borrowed artworks than was previously achievable. Visitors are now able to visit the New Studio, Old Studio, and the Main House in any order they wish, enabling diverse audiences to craft an experience that fits their needs.

PROJECT WORK PLAN

The project activities will include the following major components:

1. Final design, manufacture and installation of the tech/interactive exhibits in the Stair Hall, Sitting Room, Children’s Room and Gallery Room (i.e., the audio, touch screen, and participation areas).
2. Final design, manufacture and installation of the authentic 1836 interiors in the Stair Hall, Sitting Room & Children’s Room (i.e., wallpaper, furnishings, floor coverings and lighting).
3. Final design and manufacture of the auxiliary aspects of the exhibition (i.e., print & marketing materials).
4. Training for docents and visitor center staff.
5. Evaluation of the visitor experience with regard to outcomes: engagement, expectations, clarity, satisfaction and learning. Measuring visitor demographics.

TIMELINE

	Auxiliary & Admin Components	Technological Exhibits	Historic Interiors
Oct-Dec 2017	Kickoff meeting with design firm, Second Story - confirm goals, schedule and roles.	Obtain high-res images. Scripting of audio for stair hall.	Pack and/or cover furnishings.
Jan-Mar 2018	Hire artist to create line drawings for the rubber stamp designs.	Storyboard the digital canvas experience.	Finalize design & source floor coverings and wallcoverings.
Apr-Jun 2018	Write content and design the letter-writing station. Draft new tour script.	Refine & finalize script and storyboards.	Order floorcoverings and wallcoverings. Restore original Cole furnishings.
Jul-Sept 2018	Produce materials for letter-writing and rubber-stamps.	Production of audio for stair hall.	Select specific paint materials and hire specialty painter.

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	Test tour with focus groups and refine tour script.	Programming and production of digital canvas.	
Oct-Dec 2018	Install interactive stations and test.	Install A/V equipment and test.	Paint historic finishes on walls, trim & doors. Install floor coverings.
Jan-Apr 2019	Train docents with new exhibits and tour content.	Conduct docent training on use of equipment.	Reinstall furnishings and artifacts.
May 2019	Open new exhibits.		
Jun-Sept 2019	Conduct evaluation.		

The project will be managed by Elizabeth Jacks who has been the TCNHS Executive Director since 2003. She formerly worked as Director of Marketing at the Whitney Museum, NY, and has a B.A. in Art History from Duke University and an M.B.A. from Northwestern University. She has administered many large grant projects including two from the IMLS and six from the NEH. She has overseen several major construction projects including the restoration of Cole’s 1839 Old Studio and the reconstruction of Cole’s 1846 New Studio, a \$1.5 million project completed last year. The lead consultant, Second Story, specializes in story-driven, educational and immersive experiences for cultural organizations and brings award-winning experience ranging from the Smithsonian to Sundance. The consultant team – including Second Story, Nancy Siegel, Alan Wallach, Jean Dunbar and Catherine Harris – have been successfully working with the TCNHS and each other for several years during the planning of this project. Please see attachments for details about the consultants and staff.

Regarding project resources, the TCNHS will contribute the required \$200,000 as cost share. A large portion will be TCNHS staff time on the project. TCNHS staff will prepare the second-floor rooms for the potentially disruptive and messy installation by carefully packing up all collection objects, wrapping and removing furniture, and cleaning the spaces. In addition, TCNHS staff will write the tour content, conduct docent training, and carry out audience evaluation. The TCNHS Executive Director will also direct the entire project to ensure adherence to budget, timeline, and the interpretive themes. Funds from the IMLS will not cover the entire Phase Two project cost; therefore, additional funding is being sought from New York State, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Greater Hudson Heritage, and American Express Partners in Preservation.

The project evaluation will be in three parts. In the summer of 2018 as the exhibit content is finalized, the staff will test the new tour with focus groups before the exhibits open to the general public. This will allow the staff to edit the tour script according to feedback received. The goals will be two-fold: the first is to iron out logistical issues such as tour length, ease of use, and visitor flow. The second is to measure outcomes and impact. Please see the “Project Results” section below for more detail. After the exhibits open, the TCNHS staff will conduct exit surveys to assess audience reactions and the level of learning that is taking place, again using outcome-based evaluation. These will be compared to TCNHS survey results from 2016, 2014, 2012 and 2010 in order to obtain trend data. The surveys will also measure demographic information to see whether audience diversity has been achieved.

The TCNHS staff and trustees are committed to sharing their process and results with the wider museum community and plan to make presentations at the following conferences in 2018 or 2019: the Museum Association of New York, the Historic Artists’ Homes and Studios (a program of the National Trust), and the American Association of Museums. The interactive design firm, Second Story, is committed to joining the presentations. In addition, the project team has been in close contact with the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site in Buffalo NY, which underwent a similar transformation in the last three years, and we plan to share, jointly, what we have learned.

PROJECT RESULTS

This project addresses the IMLS Performance Goal of “Learning” and the Performance Measure Statement: “Develop and provide inclusive and accessible learning opportunities.” The corresponding data will be collected through the exit surveys administered to visitors after the exhibits open in May 2019.

The exit surveys will also measure progress towards the organization’s goals, both in visitor learning and in audience growth and diversification. The main interpretive goal of the new exhibition can be summarized by “the big idea” that was drafted with our 2012 Interpretive Plan: *to immerse visitors into Thomas Cole’s world so that they may obtain a clearer view of the mind of the artist, gain insights into his art, and experience a new understanding of the profound connection between American culture then and now.* The TCNHS is particularly committed to connecting “then and now” in the new interpretive exhibits, as the issues that Cole addresses in his art and writings still run through American culture, conversation, and policy today. For example, Cole helped to define what is American about America: its wild, vast, and “unspoiled” landscapes, giving rise to our desire to preserve them. In his “Essay on American Scenery” he wrote, “the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.” Further on he adds, “The wayside is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement.” In a heated exchange with one of his patrons, Luman Reed, Cole writes “The copper-hearted barbarians are cutting all the trees down in the beautiful valley on which I have looked often with a loving eye.” These highly relevant and timely issues will be introduced in the first floor exhibits and then opened up to visitor participation and decision-making on the second floor.

The progression of the overall experience is to bring visitors into Cole’s world (starting with the porch and entrance foyer), excite them with an engaging storyline (via the East Parlour’s presentation), present intriguing issues and raise questions (starting with the dialogue with historic characters in the West Parlour), and then enable them to synthesize and react to this learning in Phase Two exhibits. The goal is for the knowledge and attitudes of the audience to change as they gradually realize that the issues Americans debated nearly 200 years ago are still unresolved and in many ways define American culture even now.

The degree to which the audience’s knowledge and attitudes have changed will be measured using focus groups in 2018 and exit surveys in 2019. Focus groups were used successfully in 2016 to prototype new exhibits, measure the degree of interest in different themes, and test logistical issues. Using information from the focus groups, the staff will adjust the exhibits between November 2018 and April 2019 before the official launch of the Phase Two exhibits in May. Our target for the first year that the new exhibits are open is for a majority of visitors to report either a “significant” or “highly significant” change in their level of interest, knowledge and attitude about how 19th-century landscape painting is relevant today. Exit surveys will also reveal the degree to which audience diversity has been achieved. On the project team is the evaluation consultant Catherine Harris who will design the evaluation tool and compile results.

The tangible results of this project will be a new permanent interpretive exhibition at the TCNHS that is projected to be experienced by 25,000 visitors in the first year and approximately 300,000 over ten years. Currently, annual visitation to the TCNHS is 20,000 and has been growing each year, resulting in a five-fold increase over the last nine years. In addition, over 50,000 unique visitors experience the Thomas Cole website annually, a number that is also expected to increase as a result of this project.

Knowing that exhibitions will inevitably need frequent updating and periodically a complete overhaul, the exhibits have been designed to be changeable. The screen in the Gallery can be reprogrammed with new content, new images, text and even video. In this way, the infrastructure can be used beyond the useful life of the initial content. The TCNHS staff and trustees are committed to their own continued learning, finding new insights to share with the public into the future.

