

The Origins of the American Environmental Movement: Hudson River School Naturalism in the 19th Century¹

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The stage is set. The great Enlightenment experiment of the United States has begun. The turn of the nineteenth century has come and gone, and the past colonists of America were ripe to become future pioneers of not only an exorbitant westward landscape but new ways of seeing their world. While aboard the ship *Arbella* en route to the ‘New World’, John Winthrop preached that the settlement to be built would be ‘as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.’ (Banas, “John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity*”) Winthrop’s original manuscript was printed in old English, and the single quotations around this quote indicate a modernized transliteration of the original text. From the very beginning of their quest for settlement, these Puritans saw themselves as the privileged few traveling to the new lands of Canaan. The origins of American exceptionalism today can be traced back to this small moment in the experiences of the first Europeans to plant roots in America. Religion motivated the move to America and allowed for the expansion of the metaphor that America was the new promised land. Its mountains and valleys were the lands of Eden, lost so long ago to the curiosity and greed of humans. In the nineteenth century, the folktale heroism of Daniel Boone resounded in the heart of a youthful America, which sought to conquer the width of a continent and cast the light of its ‘shining city’ from coast to coast.

A young Thomas Cole sought to immerse himself in the physical lands of Eden that surrounded his new home. He devoted his life to recording the Created world, falling in love with landscape painting and the nature it recorded. Cole’s subject, the Hudson River Valley of New

York, provided the artist with an abundant wilderness from which to draw inspiration. The concept of ‘untouched nature’ captivated the painter and the gaze of westward moving pioneers and settlers alike. America’s borders were rapidly expanding along the Frontier line, with settlers building and rebuilding small civilizations as they went. Cole responded to this growing trend with an idyllic presentation of human integration into the natural world. He became obsessed with the idea of civilization building, recording his deepest fears with the mediums he knew best—oil and canvas. A realization grew amongst Cole and naturally inspired intellectuals who came after him that the expansion of civilization would quickly become synonymous with resource mining and natural degradation. Cole’s conceptualization, over time, of the idea of sustainability, is exhibited first and foremost in his legacy of landscape painting. His works provide a visualization of the love he had for the natural world and his attempts to reconcile a modernizing humanity with the damage the latter would bring upon the former. It is in this inevitable conclusion, at the crossroads of idyllic natural experience and the rough inconsistencies of human progress, that environmentalism was born—not as a fully-fledged movement, but in the foundational ideology of intellectuals who realized there would soon be a problem to confront.

During the revitalizing of American art in the years surrounding America’s bicentennial, Robert Rosenblum wrote about themes of nature in art from 1800-1950, noting that “these American painters have all sought a wellspring of vital forces in nature that could create a rock-bottom truth in an era when the work of man so often seemed a force of ugliness and destruction.” (Rosenblum, “The Primal American Scene,” 37) This was a period when art reflected subtle uncertainties that developed as a surge of industry loomed on the horizon. Rosenblum was writing generally about American art from the 19th century and the early 20th century, but his argument is exemplified in later, more specific work on the art of Thomas Cole.

Ellwood C. Parry III wrote the first full length monograph on Thomas Cole that convincingly described how Cole initiated the trend of nature painting in America. He honed in on Rosenblum’s argument in his description of Cole’s mindset while the artist was working on *The Course*

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of *Empire*. “It seems that Cole was particularly aware of the differences between the traditional framework of human history and the new geological time scale of worlds without end. Compared to the helpless transience of man and his works, so quickly turned to ruins, the setting for *The Course of Empire*—temporarily used as a stage for a human melodrama—goes on unchanged.” (Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, 145) He wrote that “Cole’s primary legacy was his example as a man of modest background and Christian principles who turned landscape painting into an honorable, if not always highly lucrative, calling in the United States.” (Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, 365-366) Parry added to this commercial assessment with the ideological evaluation that, “Cole shared in and helped to promote a national fascination with the sublime. This tradition has rightly been traced in American art from the beginnings of the Hudson River School all the way to the abstract expressionists over a century later.” (Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, 367) Parry’s works have since become the widely accepted view on nature painting, with most art historians crediting Cole with the founding of mainstream nature landscapes.

Parry’s claims about Cole’s Christian principles were further delineated by Donald Worster in Worster’s broader claims about the motivations of environmental activists and environmentalism. Worster argued at the very heart of it that, “that movement has, in the United States, owed much of its program, temperament, and drive to the influence of Protestantism.” (Worster, *Wealth of Nature*, 185) Worster observed that religious knowledge of God’s creations and anecdotal accounts, that were considered scientific record of the time, of the natural world were considered to be two sides of the same coin, only splitting apart in the latter years of the 19th century. “The contemporary disjunction,” he wrote, “between the study of history and of nature has a fairly obvious explanation. In the eighteenth-century world of the English parson-naturalist, there was no such split...As we moved away from that small rural community, the old broad-gauged, integrative ‘natural history’ began to fragment into specializations.” (Worster, *Wealth of Nature*, 31) Citing the scholarship of Stephen Fox, Worster pointed out that John Muir was the first great national leader of the environmental movement, who was deeply Protestant. (Worster, *Wealth of*

Nature, 193-194) Worster claims the idea of the “rights of nature” originated “out of left-wing Protestantism, out of Enlightenment rationalism, and out of frontier evangelism.” (Worster, *Wealth of Nature*, 195) His argument defined Protestantism as the religion for activists and claims the motivation of naturalists is sourced from the same place many industrialists garnered momentum.

In 2001, Robert L. McGrath wrote a general background of art and the American conservation movement, part of which considered the connections of 19th century art to conservation. McGrath repeated previous assertions that, “as custodians of nineteenth century visual culture, painters and photographers had a vital stake in defining the nation’s physical and moral geography.” (McGrath, 34) McGrath continued on to write that, “the painted image could be made to stand in for reality itself while serving as a rhetorical screen behind which wilderness might vanish altogether, leaving only its memory.” (McGrath, 37) He drew this conclusion from considering the economic place for art in the age of national parks, emphasizing that nature art merely reified the environment instead of advocating for its conservation in any depth.

When describing American writer James Fenimore Cooper and Thomas Cole, Roderick Nash wrote, “As with Cooper, Cole’s love of wilderness was at times clouded over with doubts and offset by an antipodal attraction to civilization.” (Nash and Miller, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 78) Nash and McGrath held similar views about the complexities of identifying environmentalists and environmentalism. Nash pointed out that many were torn between the industrializing society that they were a part of and their affinity for untouched nature. He established that while among their contemporaries Cooper and Cole were environmentally inclined, they did not want to place nature in a sphere separate from that of civilization and mankind. While Nash ultimately believed that Cole was an advocate for the “preservation” of land, he asserted that to document and appreciate the wilderness of America in the 19th century was not to fit into what would be considered an environmentalist today, because a sense of extreme urge to protect the environment was unfathomable in the face of a dynamic new society. (Nash and Miller, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 101)

In order to understand how the early environmental movement grew and expanded, it is crucial to keep in mind Worster's remark about the field of natural observation being a certified potpourri of amorphous methodologies and Nash's description of mixed feelings towards industry and nature. By aligning the work by environmental and art historians, Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School adopt a new place in the development of early environmentalism, for their art would serve as visual fodder for the environmentalist movement that was to come.

The Beginnings of Thomas Cole

Thomas Cole's legacy lies in his work with American landscape painting. In an American art climate where portraiture art by John Singleton Copely and Charles Willson Peale was the main focus, Cole's success with landscape painting laid the foundation upon which nineteenth century American artists built. Cole immigrated to the United States from England in 1819 with his family, initially settling in Philadelphia and ending up in New York by 1825. (Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, N. A., 19) During his twenty-five year career, Cole was a poet, painter, enlightened thinker, naturalist, and religious man. Cole's biographer, Louis L. Noble, wrote with a romantic air about Cole in his twenties as a man whose "poems were the outpouring of his thoughts for himself: his pictures were more for others." (Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, N. A., 50) Noble wrote on Cole several years after the artist's death, and his dreamy descriptions of Cole as a renaissance man render the artist as a deified 'starving artist' imbued with impossible diligence and unquestionable vision. A reading of Noble's work is as far as one needs to go to understand this. The way he writes about Cole is of a writer ruminating on a figure he stands small before, and holds the utmost respect for everything the man did. It is quite romanticized and embellished with detail, thus must be taken lightly, though with a critical eye. It was in New York where Cole met with success that would ferry him to the career that was to come.

Cole became cemented in the mainstream art world when three of his paintings were purchased by Colonel John Trumbull, William Dunlap, and Asher Brown Durand. The account of this encounter and sale is written down and published in *The New-*

York Evening Post from 22 November 1825. Ellwood Parry quotes the entirety of the article, which is anonymously signed but known to be written by William Dunlap, in *The Art of Thomas Cole* 25-26. Trumbull is most well known for his painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which appears as an engraving on the reverse side of the two-dollar bill. Dunlap was a playwright and artist who studied under Benjamin West, one of the most famous painters of the late 18th century. Durand was an engraver at the time, but would see such promise in the landscape work of Cole that he would later paint landscapes in the same style. The reputation of these men, and their appreciation of Cole's style, created Cole's success. The three paintings were several landscape paintings drawn from sketches that Cole made during a foray into the foothills of the Catskills. Most notably among these was *View of Kaaterskill Falls*, which is not known to exist but is replicated in an 1826 painting of the same view for Daniel Wadsworth. Cole's opportunistic encounter with three of America's established artists immediately placed him in a position to succeed. His style across twenty-five years of painting, while always centered on landscape painting, displayed three thematic differences in approach: wilderness, pastoral lifestyle, and allegorical messages. In different ways, Thomas Cole's approach to nature, the new country of the United States, and religion all played a significant role in the evolution of the artist's painting. Each approach to landscape painting displayed a different reason why the natural landscape of North America deserved consideration for the future.

The Wilderness

The subject of much of Cole's career, and the namesake of the group of artists that followed in Cole's footsteps, was the Hudson River Valley of New York. Cole was obsessed with the endless wonder and beauty of the region and repeatedly recorded his muse on canvas. In a lecture presented to the Catskill Lyceum in 1841, Cole stated that, "in selecting the scene [of American Scenery] the author has placed more confidence in its overflowing richness than in his own capacity for treating it in a manner worthy of its vastness and importance." (Thomas Cole, *Lecture on American Scenery*, 197) As Parry noted in his monograph of Cole, this new attitude towards landscape painting

enriched public appreciation of it. Where European artists sought subjects of Europe's rich history, the history of America was young and undeveloped. Cole filled this void with a subject that mainstream European artists could not compete with—the American wilderness. He elevated the subject of wilderness nature and imbued the theme with imagery of raw power, framing the untouched land as a celebration of an identity unique to America. Insofar as contextualizing this development in art, the westward push from the East coast to West coast of the United States brought with it the excitement of 'unexplored territory' and tales of frontiersmen and pioneers.

View of Kaaterskill Falls embodied these qualities when it was sold to Trumbull in 1825, and the version Thomas Cole produced in the following year did the same. Cole titled this second work as *Kaaterskill Falls* and it exists today, giving us an idea of what the original painting might have looked like (Fig. 1). The interaction between

Thomas Cole and Daniel Wadsworth, the patron and eventual lifelong friend for whom *Kaaterskill Falls* was created, served as one of the primary artist-patron relationships that Cole had during his career. Though Cole acquiesced Wadsworth's request for a painting on the same subject as Trumbull's painting, he did so reluctantly. In one of the letters that the two exchanged Cole expressed his feelings towards the matter in saying, "I have labored twice as much upon this picture as I did upon the one you saw: but not with the same feeling. I cannot paint a view twice and do justice to it." (Thomas Cole, letter to Daniel Wadsworth, 20 November 1826, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Cole and Daniel Wadsworth*, 4) With just a glance,

it is hard to believe Cole was speaking in terms other than abundant modesty.

Kaaterskill Falls depicts a view from the underside of an outcropped rock, over which a cascading stream of water plunges into the basin below (Fig. 1). This exact scene of raw American wilderness is far from how it might look to an observer in the same location. Most notable in this respect are the colorful leaves of a North American autumn and the powerful lighting in the sky that hints at majesty and emotion into the painting. Thomas Cole, like other artists of his time, would sketch his subject prior to painting and later work to frame the picture in an aesthetic way. More often

than not Cole's work presents a slightly modified landscape to allow for appropriate framing of the subject, though the subtleties of this process generally produce a convincingly realistic scene. The placement of the waterfall serves as an example of this artistic license, altered to frame the receding vista in the center of the image. On the subject of waterfalls, Cole had powerful words that told of the strong message in their imagery. "The same object at once presents to the mind the beautiful, but apparently incongruous idea of fixedness and

motion—a single existence, in which we perceive unceasing change and everlasting duration. The waterfall may be called the voice of the landscape." (Lecture on American Scenery, 205) This further description of an element found in *Kaaterskill Falls* further delineates the meaning of wilderness to the artist. Its effortless longevity towers over the comparably meager progress of human civilization.

In a far more noticeable edit to the original scene, Cole added a lone figure standing at the edge of the falls, staring out into a ravine that seems to be swallowed by mountains (Fig. 1). This figure, dressed in vaguely traditional native American attire, is an archetypal image of the noble savage—



Figure 1 Cole, Thomas, *Kaaterskill Falls*, Oil on canvas, 1826, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT

one of the comparably respectful versions of stereotypical Native American portrayal. For an artist painting the raw, wild landscape of North America, the only step beyond framing a painting to seem majestic is adding the very archetype of the American wild in the middle of it. In the same lecture on landscapes, Cole said, “a very few generations have passed away since this vast tract of the American continent, now the United States, rested in the shadow of primeval forests, whose gloom was peopled by savage beasts and scarcely less savage men.” (Lecture on American Scenery, 201) Cole sends the message that Western civilization faces a more established and ancient entity in wilderness than any they might come to face. This depiction of humanity and wilderness establishes a respect for the power of nature, and is imbued with a sense of reverence. This statement, a prelude to what would become the driving force behind the motivation of environmentalists and conservationists, still considers humankind’s prominent rise as a part of wilderness celebration. The “gloom” of the “savage men” evolves into a beautiful wilderness when shared with civilized people. Cole’s statement reflects ideas about the majesty of the world around humans, and elicits feelings of wonderment and awe. Cole is not necessarily asking the viewer of his painting to protect the environment, but he is imploring them to value the beauty that it holds—the first step towards creating a likeminded, environmentalist group of individuals.

The Frontier

An artist can only paint the same scene so many times, before tiring of the repetitive nature of doing so. Thomas Cole often pointed out that his desired subject was ever filled with new and delightful images that had been yet untouched. A July 5, 1835 journal entry comments on, “virgin waters,” and “virgin forests...preserved untouched from the time of creation for [the artist’s] heaven-favoured pencil.” (Cole, *The Collected Essays*, 131) For most of his early work, Cole operated in a world that had no need to conflict with the sphere of civilization and human progress. The relative few generations of Europeans in North America had been too few to drastically impact the geography and natural landscape of America. However, the time would come when even the sublime virginity of North America’s landscapes would be sullied and

desecrated by the hands of man. Cole spoke about the crossroads of American progress and American wilderness in his “Lecture on American Scenery,” and has been quoted at length here to articulate the emotional sub-text within the artist’s declaration:

To this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness must pass away; for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with more deep-toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. (Lecture on American Scenery, 202)

This well-articulated statement reflects what must have been years of frustration at the open, yet unseeing, eyes of the general public of America. Everything Cole knew to be beautiful, from his time spent sketching in nature, was ignored by the relentless onslaught of human progress during his lifetime. To meet the increasing industrialization of cities and the growing population, wood must be cut and stone must be quarried. In the nineteenth century, taming the wild landscape manifested itself in the concept of the westward moving Frontier line.

The Frontier line has claimed a legendary position in the philosophy of the United States, in cultural context and in symbolic meaning. The excitement of one man taking on the untamed wilderness manifests in countless television shows about wilderness survival and mimicked in sci-fi trekkie tales of space travel. Not the work of Thomas Cole, this solidification of American identity around the Frontier was introduced by historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932). In the last years of the 19th century, Turner introduced his idea that the frontier—which was on its way to becoming a memory—was the defining feature of American ideology and culture. Turner stated, “The exploitation of the beasts took hunter and trader to the west, the exploitation of the grasses took the rancher west, and the exploitation of the virgin soil of the river valleys and prairies attracted the farmer.” (Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,”) Turner argued that the presence of a wilderness on the westward border of the settled North American continent provided an

opportunity for civilization to build its way up from savagery time and time again. Wilderness defeated humans at first, and had to be beaten back in order for humanity to thrive. The Frontier line expanded westward across the United States for the greater part of the nineteenth century, buoyed on by legends of the folk heroes who were the first pioneers to attempt to tame the wilderness.

Thomas Cole's rendition of *Daniel Boone Sitting at the Door of His Cabin on the Great Osage Lake* (Fig. 2) is an early example of Cole's consideration of human interaction with the wilderness subject he so heavily favored. Boone sits with a faithful hound in the lower left quadrant of the painting, his attention fixed on the general direction of the artist's location. The greater part of the canvas is dedicated to a vista across the Great Osage Lake in Kentucky. Similar to the framing of Cole's landscape paintings, a pair of isolated trees sit on either side of the canvas. They guide the eye of the audience from the foreground of the scene to the background, where looming mountains shrouded in golden light and dark clouds extend past the splendid view of the Great Osage Lake.



Figure 2 Cole, Thomas, *Daniel Boone Sitting at the Door of His Cabin on the Great Osage Lake*, Oil on canvas, 1826, Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, Massachusetts

Here, Cole merges landscape with genre to provide an image with both naturalistic attributes and an attention to human narrative—landscape referring to a consideration of natural views and scenery, while ‘genre’ refers to the painting of candid scenes from everyday life. The small dog’s upturned eyes wait patiently for Boone’s command; Boone himself is seated but not sedentary. There lies an element of restlessness in way his legs are positioned and the manner that he rests his right hand on the rock in front of him, as though waiting for the moment he can leverage it to push himself up and be on his way. *Daniel Boone Sitting* merges the artist’s opinion of nature with the social understanding of the Frontier. Cole, with all his nature exploration and recording, might have fancied himself a bit of a refined Daniel Boone-figure—or at least obligated to pay homage to the legacy of those who delved into the natural world before him.



Figure 3 Cole, Thomas, *Home in the Woods*, Oil on canvas, 1847, Reynolda House Museum of American Art

Daniel Boone Sitting at the Door of His Cabin on the Great Osage Lake (Fig. 2) was one of Cole’s earlier works, but he continued to revisit the mixing of landscape and genre throughout his career. This style commands the intermingling of nature with humanity, and explores the ways in which the two can coexist. *Home in the Woods* (Fig. 3), a later work of Cole’s, depicts just that. From Daniel Boone’s independent

taming of the wilderness developed a more systematic method of pioneering. Cole’s rendition

of one example of this depicts a small family of five, subsisting off the land through hunting and fishing. Cattle graze on the river bank in the background, an element consistent with the progress of pioneers.

The artist portrays an estimation of American pastoralism, not highlighting the difficulties of subsistence survival but instead showing the audience an idyllic setting. It is a romanticized scene, where the small family on the fringe of the Frontier enjoys a quaint life of reclusion and peace. Cole spoke on the matter of pioneering when he said, “an enlightened and increasing people have broken in upon the solitude, and with activity and power wrought changes that seem magical.” (Lecture on American Scenery, 201) And yet time and time again, Cole has recorded his thoughts about the desecration of the wilderness and the sullyng of virgin “waters” and “forests”. (Lecture on American Scenery, 201) *Home in the Woods* reflects a kind of enlightened simplification of the relationship between humans and the environment. As hard as Cole might try, he could not tear himself from the idea that humanity must progress, while simultaneously maintaining a deep love for the raw, natural world he discovered through landscape painting. The genre style paintings in which he attempts to reconcile humans and nature are imperatively idyllic in distinction. For only an idyllic representation would produce a world where human progress could succeed and the natural world could retain its majesty.

Allegories of Humanity

It was the inconsistency between reality and desire that drove Thomas Cole to produce some of the most splendid works of his life. The desire to explore the highest heights of human civilization, the desire to relish in the awesome beauty of the natural world, and the reality that these two desires would clash until only one remained. *The Course of Empire* was a five-painting series that Cole worked on from 1833 to 1836. The narrative relates the rise and fall of a civilization, beginning with the taming of wilderness and ending with nature’s retaking of the ruins of civilization. “It was a paradigm of the Romantic spirit—melancholy, grand in conceptual scope, and didactic and moralizing—and it succeeded in delighting its audience.” (Powell,

Thomas Cole, 70) The series followed Cole’s tour of Europe, during which he studied the works of European masters and took particular note of the ruins that covered the world once dominated by classical Empire. Despite the allure of an age-old tradition, Cole wrote to Daniel Wadsworth about his pining for the America wilderness. The particular passage is quoted at length below to relay the layered emotion behind Cole’s observations:

I have seen Rome & Naples & have spent nearly a year in Florence & have been delighted & I trust benefitted by the rich treasures in Nature & Art I have seen—I have reveled among pictures & statues—have mused among the ruins of antiquity and drank in the beauty of Italian Landscape—but with all this I have not been so happy as I was before I left home—And nothing has touched my heart like those wild scenes of America from which the hand of Nature had never been lifted. (Cole, letter to Wadsworth, 13 July 1832, in *The Correspondence*, 56)

To unpack all that Thomas Cole expressed in this letter to his lifelong friend and patron is to understand his internal struggle with the problem of American wilderness. He had seen firsthand the ruins that were left after the destruction of empires, and pondered at the stark mutilation of society and the natural world in this process. Whereas several years ago Cole might have been curiously excited at the prospect of the modern empire that America was building, he could now think only of the ramifications such an empire might hold for the subjects he painstakingly recorded on canvas. *The Course of Empire* was to be an enlightening and cautionary message to his fellow countrymen—the sum of the hindsight and foresight that Thomas Cole had to offer during the golden years of America’s country-building. A brief overview of the series will show how Cole framed his didactic message across five canvases.

The series begins with sunrise, and the most wild of settings in *The Savage State* (Fig. 4).



Figure 4 Cole, Thomas, *The Savage State*, Oil on canvas, c. 1833-36, New York Historical Society

‘Savage’ folk run through the forest, armed with bow and arrow, rendered in a likeness of Native Americans. The sharp mountain peak cast with golden rays from the sun demonstrates the light of civilization beginning to appear over this raw landscape.

The Arcadian State, the second of the series, demonstrates that society has begun to take form (Fig. 5).



Figure 5 Cole, Thomas, *The Arcadian State*, Oil on canvas, c. 1833-36, New York Historical Society

Clustered groups of individuals are scattered amongst the tamed foliage of this pastoral setting. The combination of landscape painting and genre painting in this scene certainly reflects the sort of Frontier-living that Cole idealized in *Home in the Woods* (Fig. 3). The classical garb worn by the figures in *The Arcadian State* are certainly a reflection of Cole’s time spent in Europe amongst

the work of classical and neo-classical artists. The third painting in the series is presented in full midday light, for it is the peak of civilization (Fig. 6).



Figure 6 Cole, Thomas, *The Consummation*, Oil on canvas, c. 1833-36, New York Historical Society

The empire is gleaming and white, shining in its radiance and celebration of military conquests and cultural revelations. *The Consummation* is the height of human progress as seen in the mind of Thomas Cole. It is again modeled after the great empires of antiquity, going so far as to portray Caesar—or a Caesar-esque figure—riding beneath a triumphant arch (Fig. 6).

Unfortunately for the aspirations of this civilization, reality comes crashing down quite literally in *Destruction* (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Cole, Thomas, *Destruction*, Oil on canvas, c. 1833-36, New York Historical Society

All the hopes, dreams, and achievements of this idyllic civilization crumble as their society devolves into total war—herein lies the burning admonitions of Thomas Cole—to rise to success is only to fall further and harder given time. The series concludes

with a starkly different scene of overgrown vegetation and a sense that ‘raw’ wilderness is retaking the world. *Desolation* was to be seen as a haunting reminder that humanity need only destroy itself for nature herself to retake what was always hers (Fig. 8).



Figure 8 Cole, Thomas, *Desolation*, Oil on canvas, c. 1833-36, New York Historical Society

This series was commissioned by Luman Reed, but designed entirely by Cole himself. Given the tumultuous circumstances of the 1830s, it is more than likely that the *Consummation* and *Destruction* scenes were inspired by in part by contemporary events—namely the Jackson administration and Jacksonian democracy. In a journal entry dating to August 21, 1835, Cole prophetically noted that he, “felt a presentiment that the Institutions of the U[nited] States will ere undergo a change—that there will be a separation of the states.” (Thomas Cole, Journal Entry of 21 August 1835) He continued to write, “Riot & murder are commonplace occurrences,” and “What a weakness this proves in the government!” (Thomas Cole, Journal Entry of 21 August 1835) Such observations certainly weighed on his mind as he slowly painted a visual representation of the downfall of a successful civilization. “It appears to me that the moral principle of the nation is much lower than the formerly... It is with sorrow that I anticipate the downfall of this republican government; its destruction will be a death blow to Freedom.” (Thomas Cole, Journal Entry of 21 August 1835) To make matter worse, the political message of Cole’s work fell either on unheeding ears or no ears at all.

The Course of Empire was received as a resounding success, one to mark his permanence in

the American art tradition. It was Cole’s usual beautiful landscape mixed with European-favored classicism. The *New-York Mirror* published a series of art reviews on *The Course of Empire* after the paintings were presented to the public. The author of these particular articles wrote his own descriptions for each painting, instead of relying on Cole’s captions and explanations. Ironic in hindsight but overwhelmingly frustrating for Cole was that—in the words of art historian Ellwood Parry—the art reviewer led, “to a particularly American conclusion that destruction and desolation could never happen here because of the unique combination of freedom, progress, and the love of God on this side of the Atlantic.” (Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, 186) While it is fair to conclude that Cole held a worldview characteristic of an adamant cynic, *The Course of Empire* remained largely ineffective at influencing the momentous tide of westward expansion and industrialization.

What is clear in *The Course of Empire* is Cole’s consideration of issues that far outdistance the impact of a single individual. Parry notes that in the context of the five paintings that comprise *The Course of Empire*, “it seems that Cole was particularly aware of the differences between the traditional framework of human history and the new geological time scale of worlds without end. Compared to the helpless transience of man and his works, so quickly turned to ruins, the setting for *The Course of Empire*—temporarily used as a stage for human melodrama—goes on unchanged.” (Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, 145) As an artist providing a message through his work, he grappled with a society that was seemingly more tumultuous than ever before. Religion, which had held a critical role in American society since its inception, had begun to clash with the newfound field of natural sciences. Cole’s protestant background and his ever-noting observation of the natural world experienced an ever growing fissure as the two fields split apart. Science was no longer a part of religion, but a field capable of tearing it down. Amongst the internal struggle, Cole dealt with the looming reality that his beloved wilderness had only years left before it too would fall to the surging tide of human progress. He vocalized this struggle in the concluding lines of his “Lecture on American Scenery” in saying, “I cannot but express my sorrow that much of the beauty of our landscapes is quickly passing away; the ravages

of the axe are daily increasing, and the most noble scenes are often laid desolate with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a people who call themselves civilized.” (Lecture on American Scenery, 210) It is not nature itself that will die out, but civilization—when it has consumed all resources available, leaving nature to find a way in a world without humanity’s greed (Fig. 8).

The Struggle of Reconciliation

The most compelling draw to Thomas Cole’s art is how it considers both traditional themes and the developing future, and provides a wonderful visual representation of the internal struggle taking place in the hearts and minds of nature-inclined intellectuals. Cole was a staunch protestant and even attempted to rise to the role of a preacher for a time, and yet in his naturalist artwork he was compelled to explore newfound fields such as geology, biology, and meteorology. His student, Frederic Edwin Church, would go on to use Cole’s style of landscape painting to visually document the work of natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt. Renowned art critic Robert Hughes describes that, “[Church] had set out to give a detailed account of plants, geology, and atmosphere, scientifically true and symbolizing Humboldt’s and his own belief in the unity and harmony of the cosmos.” (Hughes, *American Visions*, 162) Humboldt worked thirty-five years before the voyage of the *Beagle* and Darwin’s establishing of the theory of evolution, a concept that presented serious flaws in the validity of religious history. The world seemed to be turning upside down, and the deep rooted problems Cole identified in his “Lecture on American Scenery” were not showing signs of ameliorating.

Contemporaries of Thomas Cole grappled with the same ideas he struggled with, but from a more scientific based perspective. John Burroughs (1837-1921), a nature essayist, wrote woefully that, “The culture of the race has so long been of a non-scientific character; we have so long looked upon nature in the twilight of our feelings, of our hopes and our fears, and our religious emotions, that the clear midday light of science shocks and repels us.” (Burroughs, “The Ambiguous Impact of Science,” 23) Burroughs refers here to the clashing of religious history with developing ideas about evolution and natural selection. Burroughs went on to write, “our young people go to the woods with pencil and note-book in hand; they drive sharp

bargains with every flower and bird and tree they meet; they want tangible assets that can be put down in black and white. Nature as a living joy, something to love, to live with, to brood over, is now, I fear, seldom thought of.” (Burroughs, “The Ambiguous Impact of Science,” 24) The theoretical credibility behind Burroughs’ reasoning is that while humans might seek to understand the beauty of nature, in doing so they inevitably desecrate the essence of that which they were only trying to understand. Similar to Cole’s frustration at the destruction of nature in the name of resource mining, Burroughs condemns the materialization of nature through quantifying measurements.

George Perkins Marsh (1801-1882) presented a similar rationale to explain the cycle of naturalism and environmental materialization in his landmark ecological study, *Man and Nature*. Though it contains logic at its core, the circular argument that Marsh developed finds no solution to any problem. Marsh summarized his approach with the following logic:

In proportion to a man’s advance in natural knowledge, and his consequent superiority over outward physical forces, is his emancipation from the influence of climatic and local causes, and the more clearly does he manifest those attributes of his proper humanity which vindicate his claim to be called a being, not a thing—a special creation living indeed *in* Nature, but not a product of her unconscious action, or wholly subject to her inflexible laws. (Marsh, “The Pastoral Vision Refuted,” 16)

In contrast to this, Marsh also claims that, “The love of landscape and rural beauty has been increased much in proportion to our familiarity with the different branches of natural knowledge.” (Marsh, “The Pastoral Vision Refuted,” 20) Chief among Marsh’s argument is the claim that as humanity accumulates natural knowledge it establishes dominance over the natural world. His logical continuation is that humans more and more are separating themselves from the idea of a natural world, and instead of living as a part of it are living *in* it as superior beings. His argument describes the necessity of learning about natural science, but in doing so it distances humanity from nature itself.

The contradictory subtext is that humanity materializes and diminishes nature through the study of natural sciences while maintaining a stark fascination with the beauty of it.

In these theoretical assessments, although problems are identified, no rational solutions were conceived. Even Thomas Cole had little idea how to solve future environmental problems in any large scale way. It was to the same ears, of which many fell deaf to the realness of his allegorical paintings, that Thomas Cole presented his pleading call for some measure of action. “I contend that beauty should be of some value among us; that where it is not NECESSARY to destroy a tree or grove, the hand of the woodman should be checked.” (Lecture on American Scenery, 210) Cole presented the concept of sustainable living in the simplest way possible. If resource mining was carried out in a more calculated manner, perhaps Cole’s beloved wilderness could retain a semblance to its true form. Alas, even if nineteenth century Americans could agree with this simple solution in theory, there was little way of controlling every way in which the rapidly expanding borders of the United States affected the environment upon which they encroached. The environmental problems that are faced by our world today are the materialization of far more than naturalists of the nineteenth century could even begin to predict.

The end of the nineteenth century produced the results that were inconceivable earlier: legislative action to mandate the conservation and preservation of natural wilderness. The establishment of Yellowstone Nation Park in 1872 marked a pinnacle of success for naturalists, the likes of which Thomas Cole never came close to witnessing. The painter’s primary legacy will always lie in reshaping the conceptions of landscape painting, and elevating the style to heights it had never reached. Cole’s successful work with Hudson River Valley scenery cemented the importance of the world around those in the nineteenth century. His work inspired multiple generations of artists to step out of their studio and paint as a subject that which had only previously been considered as background. Artists like Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt founded the Rocky Mountain School, focusing on similar landscape scenery as Cole but in the western territories of the United States. Cole’s obsession

with wilderness, willingness to imagine an idyllic coexistence of humans and wilderness, and desire to question civilizations were all paramount to building a lifetime devoted to a cause. Cole’s realizations about empire building and resource use proposed questions that no one seemed prepared to answer, not even the artist himself. Thomas Cole died in 1848, not knowing if the immense issues he happened upon during his life would ever reach a resolution. His contributions to the field of naturalism paved the way for later environmentalists to take action towards increased conservation and preservation. Cole’s landscape paintings, above all else, were able to capture the intrinsic value of the natural world and persuade wide audiences to go forth and seek it out in all other nature.

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