

American Arcadia: Thomas Cole at the NY Metropolitan Museum of Art. Vanishing Beauty of Untrammeled Wilderness

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The English-born Thomas Cole (1801-1848) is arguably America's first great landscape painter – the founder of the Hudson River School, the painter who brought a romantic sensibility to the American landscape, and sought to preserve the rapidly disappearing scenery with panoramas that invoke the divinity in nature. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Thomas Cole: Atlantic Crossings" is an astounding exhibition featuring a painter of extraordinary power and vision, underscoring his environmentalism and the deep sense of loss that pervades many works as he reflects on deforestation, the intrusion of the railroad, and the vanishing beauty of the untrammeled wilderness.

Like J. M. W. Turner, whose originality he much admired, Cole is able to capture the grandeur of majestic vistas while never losing loving sight of the delicate details that summon our emotional engagement with the scene. In his View on the Catskill (1836-37), poetic touches come together to create a charmed and rustic idyll: horses, brown and white, race through a green meadow, a mother and child collect wildflowers beside a winding creek, a hunter returns home to his family – the varied ingredients of an irretrievable Arcadia.



View on the Catskill (1836-37) (Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Oxbow (1836) is one of Cole's seminal masterpieces. A panorama of the Connecticut River Valley following a thunderstorm, The Oxbow is a landscape of stark contrasts

structured along a diagonal that separates the wild, wooded and windswept hillside of the foreground, from the tranquil, light-filled and cultivated valley that we see in the distance, where virtually every inch of the landscape has been altered by human hands. The artist includes himself in the foreground, presumably sketching the very scene that we are viewing: a confrontation – in fact, for Cole, an irreconcilable conflict – between the world of untamed wilderness on the one hand and the humanly-imposed world of peace, order and homogeneity, on the other. By placing himself within the former, the artist is undoubtedly asserting where his own sympathies lie. He looks back at us, as if to say “Come to the woods” – or as a John Muir would put it: “In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world.”

The Course of Empire (1836) is an epic five-part series in which Cole allows us to witness the rise and fall of human civilization. Cole brilliantly includes the same distinct mountain peak in each scene, so that we are in effect looking at a landscape as it is transformed over millennia by human ingenuity and progress – only to be undone from within by excessive wealth, luxury and greed.

While the Roman Empire undoubtedly served as Cole’s model, his tale is clearly meant to be a universal one. The human saga commences with The Savage State, the primitive society of hunter-gatherers, in which Cole has included canoes and teepees. In Arcadia or Pastoral State, we see the beginnings of art, music, architecture, religion, science and soldiery: it seems that, for Cole, this was mankind’s happiest time.

Cole was undoubtedly thinking of America as much as he was of Ancient Rome, and the emperor that he includes in the central canvas could very well have been Andrew Jackson – the seventh president of the United States whose expansionary policies Cole consistently railed against. Of course, Jackson was also the president who decimated the Native Americans with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, sending thousands West on the Trail of Tears.

Like John Constable, Cole had a keen eye for clouds – their movement, density and form; as well as their expressive potential: the way they not only serve the story, but can tell one in their own right. Cole adopted Constable’s use of the plein air oil sketch to study cloud formations and other meteorological phenomena, including the atmospheric effects of light and weather. Included in the show is Constable’s Hadleigh Castle (1829), a large and somber canvas depicting the battered ruins of a once mighty fortification as it stands atop a ragged bluff. The painting with its unreserved mood of loss had an immense impact on Cole, the effect of which can be seen in Desolation, the fifth and final part in The Course of Empire.



Constable's Hadleigh Castle (1829) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Cole's large-scale works reveal a philosophy of nature in which the natural world is essentially a manifestation of God and not simply an agglomeration of resources to be utilized and exploited by man – a conception of the living world which has only grown more urgent given the current dismissal of environmental regulations which protect America's wilderness treasures.

Thomas Cole's paintings testify not only to the intoxicating beauty of the unspoiled scenery, but also to the inwardness and interiority of the natural world. In our current reductionistic climate – where nature is viewed as a series of things and processes existing *partes extra partes* – Cole's holism represents an important corrective. Cole refuses to see nature as a mere agglomeration of things and processes existing merely in external relation to one another.

This exhibition boldly reinterprets Cole as a proto-environmentalist – championing nature in its fresh wild state, decrying the erasure of unblighted wilderness, and ultimately the destruction of the landscape as a redemptive source of healing and renewal. Empires will rise and fall, Cole reminds us; but look at the world as on the first morning of creation – Cole will explicitly offer us such a vision in his *Garden of Eden* (1828) – and you will discover, “a calm religious tone steal through [the] mind, and when [one] has turned to mingle with his fellow men, the chords which have been struck in the sweet communion cease not to vibrate.”

Cole's defense of the regenerative power of the landscape is grounded in his panentheism – which emphasizes not only God's transcendence, but also the perception of the immanent divine in all things. His paintings speak to us in a voice that cannot be ignored – we see in them an elevated beauty of the natural world: a reflection of divine transcendence that makes an undeniable claim upon us all.

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