

The American Land Inspired Cole's Prescient Visions

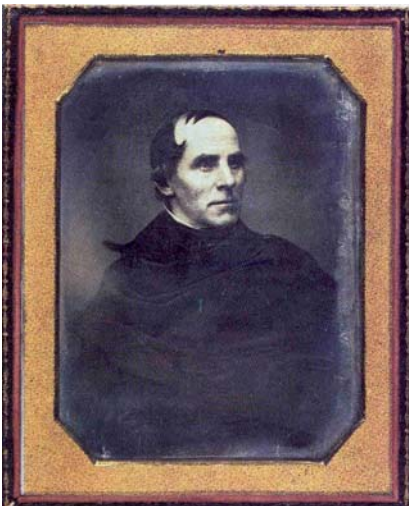
A major exhibition explains how the artist grappled with the tensions he saw between the natural world and the forces of progress

By Henry Adams, *Smithsonian*, May 1994



Cole painted *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (above) and its paired work, *Garden of Eden*, in 1827-28, two years after being "discovered" by artist John Trumbull, who saw his landscapes in a New York shop window. The Eden paintings were Cole's first use of landscape as the background for a religious or historical theme.

When the Erie Canal opened, in October 1825, it established New York as the commercial hub of the United States. At the same time, New York abruptly became the center of an American school of landscape painting. That month, in the window of a New York frame shop, the aging history painter Col. John Trumbull saw three small landscapes of the Hudson River painted by Thomas Cole, a man he had never heard of. Trumbull was so excited by the paintings in the window that he rushed to tell his friend William Dunlap, a playwright, journalist and painter. Ordinarily pompous, the colonel, for once, was humble. "This youth," he exclaimed, "has done what I have all my life attempted in vain."



At age 44, Thomas Cole sat for a daguerreotype that is attributed to Mathew Brady; he died three years later.

Accompanying Trumbull to look at the paintings, a skeptical Dunlap was immediately won over. "When I saw the pictures," he later wrote, "I found them to exceed all that this praise had made me expect." Soon afterward, when they met Cole, Dunlap was startled by the young artist's youthfulness, pallor and shyness. Later he recalled that Cole had stood "like a school boy in the presence of the trustees," blushing and stammering, even though neither of the two elderly artists "could produce a rival to the works he offered for the paltry price of \$25 each." The two grayhairs each promptly bought one of the landscapes; the third was acquired by the engraver Asher B. Durand, who eventually became one of Cole's most important followers.

Within a few weeks, Dunlap sold his painting at a staggering markup to a New York aristocrat named Philip Hone; but he more than made up for this profiteering by writing an effusive account of Cole's work in one of the New York newspapers. The effect of this promotion was immediate. As wealthy men eagerly bought Cole's paintings, his prices rose rapidly. In 1829 Cole sold his *Garden of Eden* for \$400, sixteen times what he had received for his paintings only four years earlier. Despite occasional fluctuations, his paintings steadily increased in value throughout his career.

Cole's success, however, was not simply financial. Dunlap's article opened the floodgates to an ocean of critical tributes. As Philip Hone wrote, "I think every American is bound to prove his love of country by admiring Cole." And in 1835, *The Knickerbocker* magazine wrote of Cole, "We look upon him, at this moment, as the best landscape painter in the world."

Although such statements sound fulsome today, Cole is still recognized as the founder of American landscape painting; and once again he is the focus of attention. The first retrospective of Cole's paintings for many decades, it brings together for the first time in 150 years his two allegorical series, "The Course of Empire" and "The Voyage of Life."

This is a very interesting time for a reconsideration of Cole's art. While viewers of 50 years ago tended to see his paintings as prettified and sentimental renditions of American scenes, the organizers of the current exhibition have focused on a more complex dimension to Cole's vision—a knot of conflict and ambivalence that carries through every phase of his career. As he matured, Cole seems to have been increasingly torn between nature and the forces of progress, grappling with the issue of our relationship with the land—an issue that still troubles American society today

Cole's rapid rise to fame in the early 19th century marked a sudden shift in American taste. In the 17th and 18th centuries, American painters distinguished themselves first in portraiture and then in history painting, but they showed little interest in the landscape around them. Then, with the emergence of Cole, landscape rather quickly supplanted figure painting as the most important expression of American artists, a position it retained throughout most of the 19th century.

Why, in Cole's time, did landscape suddenly attract great popular interest? For one thing, most of America's wealth came from land; while cities were growing rapidly, the vast majority of the population were still farmers. In addition, this was a period of remarkable national expansion. In 1803 Jefferson signed the Louisiana Purchase; in 1819 Florida was bought from Spain; in 1836 Texas declared its independence from Mexico, and in 1845 it was admitted as a state; and in 1848 the United States took from Mexico what is now California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, most of New Mexico and parts of Colorado—a territory greater than the British Isles, France and Italy combined. As Ellwood Parry has pointed out in his recent biography of the artist, the year Cole's art was discovered, the Erie Canal opened up the interior of the country to transport and commerce; the year he died, 1848, gold was discovered in California, transforming the United States into a truly continental nation.

In the midst of this rapid change, Cole and the Hudson River painters emphasized unspoiled nature over the ordered, man-made environment. Most of their patrons were not farmers but city people, such as wholesale grocer Luman Reed. Reed had grown up in the country but had moved to the city and prospered there. For people like him, landscape paintings did not represent the environment they actually lived in; rather, these paintings contrasted with their crowded urban environment, allowing a nostalgic return to the world of their childhood. A passage from Asher Durand's "Letters on Landscape Painting" in *The Crayon*, one of the first American art magazines, makes this clear. "To the rich merchant and capitalist," he wrote in 1855, "Landscape Art especially appeals.... Suppose such a one, on his return home, after the completion of his daily task of drudgery, his dinner partaken, and himself disposed of in his favorite arm-chair, with one or more faithful landscapes before him.... many a fair vision of forgotten days will animate the canvas, and lead him through the scene: pleasant reminiscences and grateful emotions will spring up at every step, and care and anxiety will retire far behind him."



The Falls of Kaaterskill (1826) typifies Cole's depictions of nature as yet unspoiled; here, in the Catskills.

Perhaps Cole was particularly sensitive to this taste for the "faithful landscape" because he spent his early years in a very different setting. Born in 1801 in Lancashire, England, he had grown up in an area already being blackened by the "Satanic mills" of which Blake wrote. His family was poor, and he was apprenticed to an engraver of calico designs. His mother and his dotting sisters provided his chief companionship; in his free moments he took walks with his younger sister Sarah, sketched, played his flute and read. To a large degree his artistic ideas seem to have been shaped by the romantic poets such as Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth, with their keen sense of romantic longing and their nostalgic love of the heroic past and the world of nature.



Niagara Falls, 1829

When Cole was 17, he emigrated with his family to the United States: his father, a hand-weaver, had been unable to compete with the new industrial machinery. On arrival, they settled briefly in Philadelphia; then his family moved on to Ohio. Catching up with them the following year, Cole made the journey on foot from Philadelphia to Steubenville, where they had settled. For a time he designed wallpaper for a factory his father had established and taught drawing for a ladies seminary his sisters founded. When both these ventures failed, he attempted to support himself as an itinerant portraitist, wandering from town to town offering likenesses for a modest fee. The pay was poor, and he finally gave up when he found that he had been preceded by another wandering painter named Des Combes. Despite limited skill, Des Combes had already portrayed the principal citizens of the region, exhausting most of the available patronage.

Cole had felt uncomfortable with portraiture, anyway. The pressure of working with the sitter right there in front of him caused him agonies of embarrassment and shyness. Uncertain what to do next, he began to make drawings of gnarled and twisted trees, partly naturalistic, partly a strange expression of his inner emotional turmoil.

Gradually, by his mid-20s, Cole developed the ambition of becoming a landscape painter. In the winter of 1823, wrapped in a tablecloth since he didn't have a warm coat, he crossed the Allegheny Mountains to Philadelphia. There, he painted and studied Old Master paintings at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. In the spring of 1825 he made his way to New York, spending the late summer sketching along the Hudson. Then, in a small garret room on Greenwich Street in New York City, he executed three landscapes—the paintings discovered by John Trumbull—that would establish his reputation.

During the first phase of his career, from 1825 to 1829, Cole concentrated on American scenes. What startled and excited viewers of his paintings was the degree to which he represented the savagery of nature, untouched or nearly untouched by the hand of humans. The effect was ominous, and yet filled with promise, suggesting the vastness of the very landscape that was being opened up to commerce and civilization. But too restless to remain content with a single theme, Cole set off in 1829 for a three-year trip to Europe, visiting England, France and Italy, in turn.

England, his first stop, proved a disappointment, for he received a cold welcome. Cole was infuriated that his work was "skied" in exhibitions—that is, hung in the top tier, where it was hardest to see—to make room for what he described as the "vilest daubs, caricatures, and washy imitations." Paris was also a letdown. "The subjects which the French artists seem to delight in are either bloody or voluptuous," he complained. "Death, murder, battles, Venuses, Psyches, are portrayed in a cold, hard, often tawdry style of color and with an almost universal deficiency of chiaroscuro. The whole is artificial and theatrical."

Italy, however, was for Cole the "land of poetry and beauty." In Rome, he rented Claude Lorrain's former studio; in Florence, he produced a series of landscapes of Italian subjects—ancient ruins bathed in golden light and filled with a gentle nostalgia for the vanished glories of the past. This became the second major theme of his art—the pastoral, Arcadian landscape, generally in an Italian setting.

On his return to the United States in 1832, Cole divided his time between New York City and the town of Catskill, where he rented an outbuilding on an estate. There he met and married his landlord's niece, Maria Bartow, a "sweet, madonna-looking" maiden, who eventually bore him five children. It was a comfortable life. Cole had a studio built for himself that was modeled on an Italian villa, and while he painted, Maria often read to him. Occasionally, he went on rambles to find storms or lonely mountains to paint, or made forays to New York City to drum up new patronage, even though cities filled him with a "presentiment of evil." Alternating between Italian and American scenes, he developed his third major artistic device: paintings in a series, which comment on and complement one another in both visual form and theme.

In two instances, Cole created a group of paintings dealing with the most profound issues of morality and history. His five-painting work *The Course of Empire* (1834-36), the most ambitious project of his career, traced the evolution of an imaginary empire from a state of wild nature through civilization, consummation, destruction and final desolation. The central painting, *Consummation* (below), gave him particular difficulty. After a long summer of labor, he wrote that he had "rubbed out enough for five pictures." *Destruction* also gave him trouble. "I have been engaged in sacking and burning a city," he wrote to his friend Asher Durand, "and am well tired of such horrible work." However, the final painting of the series, entitled *Desolation*, was quickly dashed off. One of Cole's most powerful creations, it shows the sun setting over ivy-covered ruins, untouched by living human presence. The mood of the painting is bittersweet; one senses that Cole was relieved to see the follies of man overwhelmed by nature.



Same mountain is unchanged in three works from Cole's allegorical "Course of Empire" series (1834-36). At center is *Consummation*; details at left and right depict earlier pastoral state and later destruction.

The novelist James Fenimore Cooper considered this series Cole's finest achievement (although he slightly scrambled its title). Shortly after Cole's death, he wrote, "Not only do I consider the *March of Empire* the work of the highest genius this country has ever produced, but I esteem it as one of the noblest works of art that has ever been wrought. . . ."



In *Manhood*, the third of four large paintings in the *Voyage of Life* series, a pilgrim prays as his tiny craft is swept into wild water.

Cole's other major series, *The Voyage of Life*, is also tragic in its progression. The first two paintings, *Childhood* and *Youth*, are optimistic, with sunny, cheerful settings and a soap-bubble palace in the sky luring the voyager onward. *Manhood* and *Old Age*, however, are considerably darker in feeling. In *Manhood*, for example, the protagonist is rushed through terrifying rapids, while the demon forms of Suicide, Intemperance and Murder emerge from the mist (left).

Both "The Course of Empire" and "The Voyage of Life" were great successes; they sold for large sums and were greeted with popular acclaim. And yet, Cole grew increasingly touchy and pessimistic as the

years went on. Though he labeled critical voices the "buzz of dirt flies," any attack on his work depressed his spirits. "Had fortune favored me a little more," he once wrote, "I would have followed out the principles of beauty and sublimity in my work that have been cast aside because they were not marketable.... I am not the painter I would have been had taste been higher."

His last trip to Europe did not, as he hoped, have the effect of "renovating my artistic feeling." Instead, he found himself overwhelmed by a sense of his own unworthiness in contrast to the Old Masters. "I began too late in life," he lamented, "but I will do my best." In July 1842 he returned to the United States, where he produced both Italian landscapes and American scenes, some recognizable, others imaginary, and started a third ambitious series, "The Cross and the World." In February 1848 he suddenly fell ill and died, leaving this project on his easel, still incomplete.

He left a legacy of paintings in which landscape, for the first time, served as the expression of American destiny. America had a brief history, Cole had noted, and thus had no temples, cathedrals, castles or other monuments of the grandeur of the past. Instead, the "most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive characteristic of American scenery, is its wildness." This did not mean, however, that American scenery lacked historical interest, since it served as an open playing field for the future march of progress. As Cole noted, in the somewhat purple language of the time: "In looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower—mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil."

Cole's great contribution was to discover a visual language to express this attitude—that is, to find a way of using landscape painting to express a conception of history. In fact, like a text, Cole's paintings form a tightly organized symbolic structure, in which every element carries narrative significance, inviting moral and historical reflections.

To achieve this feat, Cole adopted existing theories of art and esthetics and used them in original ways. Of particular significance were the concepts of the "sublime," the "beautiful" and the "picturesque." Ideas of the sublime and the beautiful were based on a famous essay by English philosopher Edmund Burke. The sublime was seen as ominous and terrifying, things that excite us by awakening our sense of danger—storm clouds, precipices, thundering waterfalls. The beautiful included those images that are gratifying to the senses and give us pleasure to look at—golden sunsets, flowers, gently flowing water. Later, this construct was expanded to include the idea of the picturesque. Essentially this was a combination of the beautiful and the sublime in a kind of dialogue with each other, to create landscapes that swayed the emotions back and forth as the eye wound its way through them.



Cole put himself (center foreground) in *The Oxbow*, a dramatic 1836 landscape of Northampton, Massachusetts.

Cole's landscapes tend to be visually organized according to these categories. Many of his early landscapes of American scenery are essentially sublime, filled with such elements as mountains, jagged rocks, dead trees and seemingly limitless expanses of forest, with no sign of human habitation. Interestingly, it is more difficult to compose a painting that is entirely beautiful, according to the terms that Burke defined, since it would be largely lacking in dramatic interest. But Cole did occasionally produce paintings filled with beautiful elements, such as *Old Mill at Sunset*, which shows children picking flowers against a peaceful lake with a glowing sunset.

Most of his landscapes, however, are neither purely sublime nor purely beautiful, but are divided to create a kind of movement from one to the other. One of the most dramatic instances of this is *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (page 1), which depicts Adam and Eve being ejected from paradise by the angel with the flaming sword. The left side of the composition is filled with elements that are sublime, from the fierce storm to the wolf on a foreground ledge, devouring a

stag. Much of the center is a black void. At the right is a glimpse into paradise, a lush landscape suffused with golden light—the beautiful.

Somewhat similar in overall design is Cole's famous American landscape *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, popularly known as *The Oxbow* (above), which shows the Connecticut River where it makes a dramatic bend. Again, the left side of the composition is devoted to the sublime, with its turbulent weather, while the greater part of the painting is devoted to beautiful elements.

By creating divided landscapes, and hence movement between the beautiful and the sublime, Cole constructed narratives of either secular or sacred history. In addition, both religious and secular history offered two basic kinds of narrative—optimistic and pessimistic. As we have seen, Cole dealt with the fall of man in *Expulsion from the Garden*, while he dealt with the coming of grace in such paintings as *Saint John in the Wilderness* and his unfinished cycle, *The Cross and the World*, which showed the Christian pilgrim achieving a state of heavenly grace by following the sign of the Cross through a desolate landscape.

Secular history also offered the possibility both of ascent and progress and of decline and fall. Paintings such as *The Oxbow* seem to show the skies clearing to reveal the American land as a new Garden of Eden. Others, like the *Course of Empire* series, move from a state of unspoiled nature to final overthrow and ruin.

The drama of Cole's paintings depends not only on these powerful contrasts, but on the ambiguity of the lessons we are asked to draw from them. For example, in *Course of Empire* it is unclear whether Cole regarded this cycle of decline and fall as inevitable, or whether he hoped that by studying the example of the past, Americans might be encouraged to be virtuous, avoiding the ruin that overcame their predecessors. What is clear is that Cole's landscapes struck a deep chord in the American psyche.

And yet, during his final years, Cole was increasingly troubled by an issue that is of importance today: the devastation inflicted on our land in the name of progress. Especially in his writings, Cole was deeply concerned about this issue, which brings it another rich perspective from which to view the evolution of his paintings in the exhibition.

On the one hand, Cole often celebrated the advances of civilization and its conquest of the savagery of nature. When he sought to evoke a new Garden of Eden, as he did in *The Oxbow*, he showed carefully cultivated fields glowing in the sunlight. On the other hand, in his later paintings, Cole began to portray the encroachment of people and industry on the natural world. A rather modest painting of 1843, *River in the Catskills*, has been singled out by scholars as the "first painting by a major American artist in which the railroad is found."

In his writings, Cole expressed himself more forcefully on this issue. In one of his essays on American scenery, published in 1841, he deplored the "ravages of the axe," complaining that the beautiful trees surrounding the town of Catskill had been shorn away. "That which a century cannot restore is cut down," he wrote. "Where once was beauty, there is now barrenness." Rather than in cultivated fields, he now proposed Eden should be found instead in the unspoiled beauty of nature. "We are still in Eden," he declared. "The wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly." He expressed these feelings even more forcefully in a remarkable poem, published in 1841, that takes the form of trees lamenting their imminent destruction. "Our doom is near," the trees declare. "...We feed ten thousand fires: in our short day/The woodland growth of centuries is consumed."

But Cole's most bitter complaints against the destruction of natural beauty occurred in his letters to his patron, Luman Reed. "The copper-hearted barbarians are cutting all the trees down in the beautiful valley on which I have looked so often with a loving eye, he wrote. Later, with singular pessimism, he concluded: "If I live to be old enough I may sit down under some bush the last left in the utilitarian world and feel thankful that intellect in its march has spared one vestige of the ancient forest for me to die by."

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