

# Thomas Cole's The Titan's Goblet: A Reinterpretation

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THE TITAN'S GOBLET (Figure 1) is by far the most unusual of Thomas Cole's imaginary landscape compositions. The obvious change in scale between the goblet and the landscape is so abrupt, so startling in effect, that this small painting was naturally included in the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at The Museum of Modern Art in 1936—the only American pre-twentieth-century painting to be honored in this way.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Cole also made fantastic drawings of the surface of the moon, as well as views from space looking back toward the earth, but he never repeated these subjects in oil paint for public display.<sup>2</sup> Within his entire career, *The Titan's Goblet* remains a *singular* work, extraordinary and unique.

At first sight, the size of Cole's goblet may remind one of other immense stone objects left by an earlier race of beings according to Greek mythology.<sup>3</sup> Cer-

tainly, the title chosen for the picture was meant to evoke a sense of great distance in time between the making of this gigantic drinking vessel and the present age when the earth is inhabited only by men. The mood of retrospection, solemn reverie, or even melancholy is enhanced by the setting sun, a further romantic symbol for the passage of time. In addition to its poetry, however, the image of this mythical goblet, isolated against the distant landscape, is presented with such inescapable force that it becomes emblematic. The painting as a whole seems to invite a cosmological interpretation.

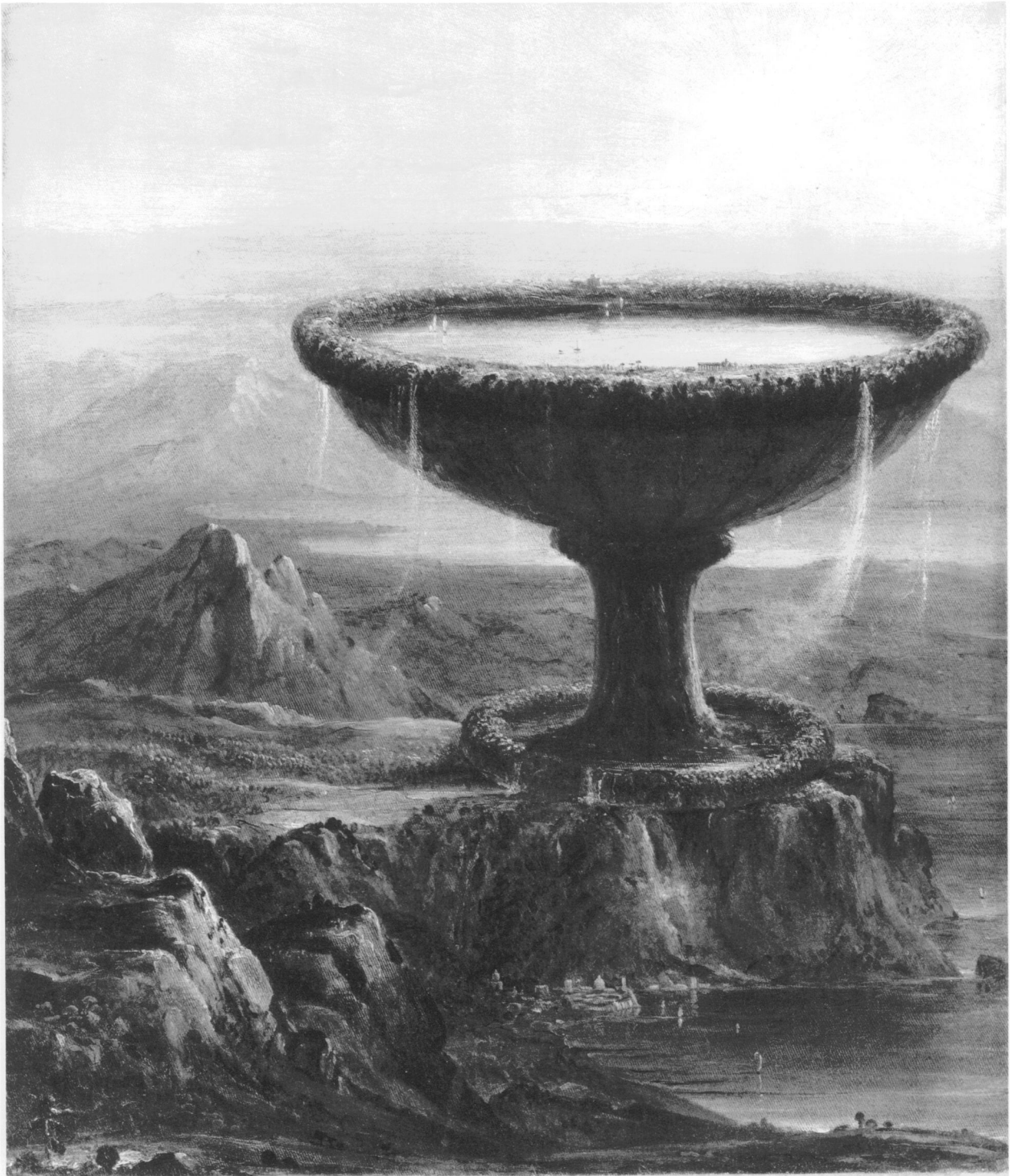
On one hand, *The Titan's Goblet* might possibly be compared to the painting in grisaille by Hieronymus Bosch (Figure 2) that appears on the exterior of the wings of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych in Madrid; the scene represents the creation of the world,

1. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, exhibition catalogue (New York, 1936) no. 105.

2. A pen-and-wash drawing by Cole, inscribed "View in the Moon," is reproduced on p. 112 of Howard S. Merritt, *Thomas Cole*, exhibition catalogue (Rochester, 1969) no. 71 (dated c. 1828). A sketchbook drawing (c. 1827–1829) of a "Man Observing the Sun and the Earth from Space" is reproduced as pl. 18 in my dissertation, "Thomas Cole's 'The Course of Empire': A Study in Serial Imagery" (Yale University, March 1970). The interpretation of *The Titan's Goblet* that is presented in this study was first outlined in chap. 1 of my dissertation.

3. In the curatorial files of the Department of American Paint-

ings and Sculpture at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a letter of July 1, 1963, from the late Erwin Panofsky concerning *The Titan's Goblet*. After explaining that he knew and admired Cole's picture, Professor Panofsky concluded that it had, in his opinion, "little to do with the Nordic Tree of Life which is described in an entirely different way." Instead, he suggested a general connection with the stone objects thought by the Greeks to have been made by giants. For a discussion of giants in Greek mythology, their use of huge trees and rocks as weapons, and their war with the gods, see Francis Vian, *La Guerre des Géants: Le Mythe avant l'Époque Hellénistique* (Paris, 1952) pp. 185–191.



**FIGURE 1**

The Titan's Goblet, by Thomas Cole, 1833. Oil on canvas, 19  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 16  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Samuel P. Avery, Jr., 04.29.2

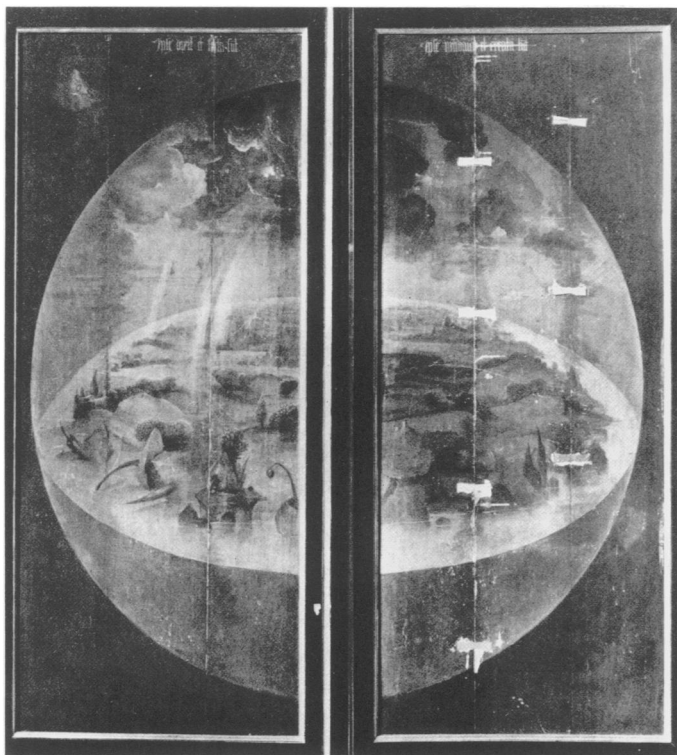


FIGURE 2  
The Garden of Earthly Delights triptych (wings closed), by Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1500. Museo del Prado, Madrid

or perhaps the world after the Flood as recently suggested by E. H. Gombrich.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, there is a separate “world” contained in the bowl of Cole’s goblet, but this cup has less than half the symbolic shape of Bosch’s transparent sphere, and the relative roles of earth and water have been reversed. Furthermore, Cole’s painting contains no image of God the Father in one corner to give it an explicit religious significance, and it bears no inscription save for the signature and date, “T. Cole 1833,” to the lower right and “The Titan’s Goblet / T. Cole / 1833” on the back (on pa-

4. A basic summary of the literature on this painting can be found in Charles De Tolnay, *Hieronymus Bosch* (New York, 1966) pp. 360–363. For the recent reinterpretation of this entire triptych, which might better be renamed “Sicut erat in Diebus Noe” or simply “The Lesson of the Flood,” see E. H. Gombrich, “Bosch’s ‘Garden of Earthly Delights’: A Progress Report,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969) pp. 162–170.

5. There are two important catalogue entries for this painting: Albert TenEyck Gardner and Stuart P. Feld, *American Paintings:*

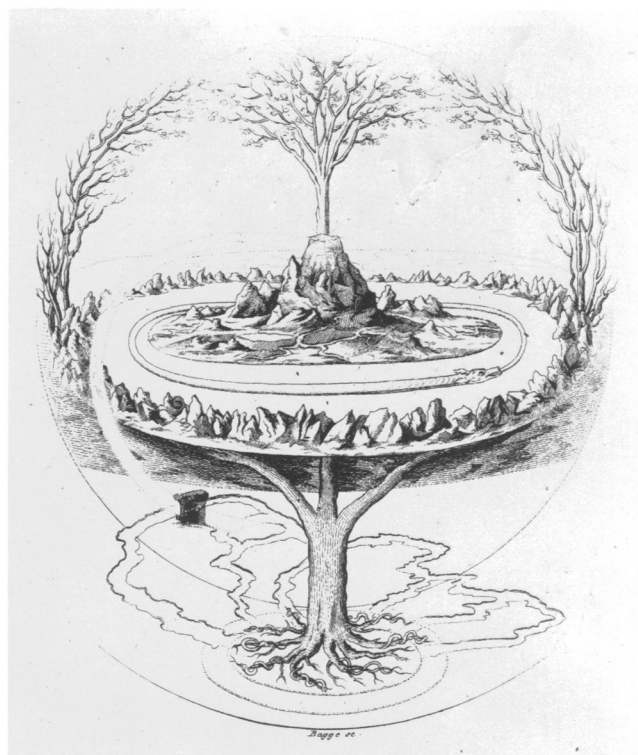


FIGURE 3  
Yggdrasil, The Norse World Tree. Illustration for Finnur Magnússon, *Eddalaeren*, volume III, Copenhagen, 1825

per).<sup>5</sup> Even though Cole often furnished a literary passage to go with his most important compositions, no quotation that might provide some printed clue as to the artist’s intentions was ever associated with *The Titan’s Goblet*.<sup>6</sup>

In 1885, on the other hand, it was suggested by Theophilus Stringfellow, Jr., of Milwaukee, “that this drinking vessel of the Titans is really meant for a tree, . . . supporting a world of life, and is in fact, a subtle reproduction of the world-tree of Scandinavian mythology and implies all that that wonderful tree involves

*A Catalogue of the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, I (New York, 1965) pp. 226–227; and Howard S. Merritt, *Thomas Cole*, no. 27, pp. 29–30.

6. No quotation was supplied when the painting was shown at the National Academy of Design in 1834 (no. 41), and no explanation appeared in the catalogue for the *Dunlap Benefit Exhibition* at the Stuyvesant Institute in 1838 (no. 37), when the painting was displayed again. For a full list of exhibitions, see Gardner and Feld, *American Paintings* (note 5 above).

in its meaning, and far more.”<sup>7</sup> This same interpretation was repeated when the painting was offered for sale through Anderson Auction Company, New York, in 1904. The author of the sale catalogue referred to it as a “remarkable symbolic painting” that was “influenced by the Norse legend of the Tree of Life”:

The spiritual idea in the centre of the painting, conveying the beautiful Norse theory that life and the world is but a tree with ramifying branches, is carefully carried out by the painter, the stem of the goblet being a massive tree-trunk, the branches of which spread out and hold between them an ocean dotted with sails, surrounded by dense forests and plains, in which appear Greek ruins and a modern Italian building, typical of Ancient and Modern Civilization.<sup>8</sup>

It has been shown that a representation of the Yggdrasil myth (Figure 3) was published eight years before Cole painted *The Titan’s Goblet*; it appeared as one of three diagrammatic illustrations at the end of Volume III of Finnur Magnússon’s *Eddalaeren* (Copenhagen, 1825).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the first mention of this World Tree concept in reference to Cole’s painting occurred in 1885, a fact that suggests a far more common knowledge of Scandinavian mythology at the end of the nineteenth century than at the beginning. Moreover, when this landscape was exhibited for the first time at the National Academy of Design in 1834, the reviewer for the *American Monthly Magazine*, who admired Cole’s style in general, while disapproving of his more imaginative works, was totally mystified by the subject. No connection with the Norse Yggdrasil myth occurred to him:

We were in truth somewhat puzzled at the name of this picture, and confess ourselves to be much more puzzled, now that we have seen it. It is well painted—

the mountains in the back ground, particularly so—but the conception we do not at all admire; it is merely, and gratuitously, fantastical.<sup>10</sup>

Still more revealing is the fact that the Reverend Louis L. Noble made no reference to the Yggdrasil either in his description of *The Titan’s Goblet*. As Cole’s friend and biographer, Noble would be expected to have known what the artist had in mind, but to him the vessel or vase was a perfect “picture within a picture”:

There it stands, rather reposes upon its shaft, a tower-like mossy structure, light as a bubble, and yet a section of a substantial globe. As the eye circles its wide rolling brim, a circumference of many miles, it finds itself in fairy land; in accordance though with nature on her broadest scale. . . . Tourists might travel in the countries of this imperial ring, and trace their fancies on many a romantic page. Here steeped in the golden splendors of a summer sunset, is a little sea from Greece, or Holy Land, with Greek and Syrian life, Greek and Syrian nature looking out upon its quiet waters.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the similarity between Cole’s gigantic goblet and the Yggdrasil, pointed out long after the artist’s death, rests on nothing more substantial than the resemblance of the goblet’s stem (in stone) to the trunk of a huge tree. In all other details the idea of the World Tree is definitely not “carefully carried out by the painter.” Cole shows neither the branches spreading out to support the sky nor the three roots extending to the three important regions of the universe—the mountain of the gods (Heaven), the Earth, and the Underworld.<sup>12</sup> What is more, the decorative rings on the goblet’s stem—a large one around the base and a smaller one at the top of the shaft where it joins the bowl—are carved ornaments, not natural parts of a

7. This quotation appears in a pamphlet entitled *The Titan’s Goblet*, which was published in 1886 by John M. Falconer, Brooklyn, New York, then the owner of the painting. Pp. 2–5 of this pamphlet comprise a long quotation from Theophilus Stringfellow, Jr., which is dated September 30, 1885.

8. Anderson Auction Company, *Catalogue of the Interesting and Valuable Collection of Oil Paintings, Water-colors and Engravings Formed by the late John M. Falconer, Brooklyn, N.Y.* (New York, 1904) no. 407, p. 41.

9. All credit goes to Howard S. Merritt for this discovery (see note 5 above), which was accomplished through the intermediate of an illustration in Mrs. J. H. Philpot, *The Sacred Tree; or, The Tree in Religion and Myth* (London, 1897) p. 115. Figure 3 in this article

was taken from a copy of the Magnússon text in The New York Public Library.

10. *American Monthly Magazine* 3 (1834) p. 210.

11. This passage is part of a longer quotation from Noble, not included in his biography of Cole, which appears in Falconer’s pamphlet on *The Titan’s Goblet* (see note 7 above).

12. The Yggdrasil myth is described at length in Rasmus Bjorn Anderson, *Norse Mythology; or, The Religion of Our Forefathers, containing all the Myths of the Eddas, systematized and interpreted*, 6th ed. (Chicago, 1898) part 1, chap. 2, pp. 188–191. Earlier editions of this work predate Mrs. Philpot’s book on *The Sacred Tree* as well as the Theophilus Stringfellow suggestion of an influence on Cole in 1885.

tree. The goblet is simply a stone object being reclaimed through time by Nature: only stone could hold an “ocean dotted with sails” so convincingly, while supporting buildings and vegetation along its “wide rolling brim.”

It becomes clear that Cole had no intention of making a specific cosmological statement in *The Titan's Goblet*. The giant vessel exists, not in an abstract setting, but in a continuous, earthly landscape that reaches from the foreground rocks and trees to the distant high horizon. In addition the goblet is placed well to the right of center within the picture frame, and this deliberate asymmetry serves as a final denial of any emblematic meaning. This is not to say that the painting is without iconographic significance, however. On the contrary, it involves several pictorial themes, both public and private. To understand the evolution of this image in Cole's mind it is necessary to retrace the young artist's steps on his first European tour (1829–1832), for the concepts expressed in this work of 1833 are related to the Mediterranean, rather than Nordic, ideas accumulated on that journey.

Cole had been advised by Washington Allston (1779–1843)—the advice received indirectly through Henry Pickering—to begin his tour of Europe by visiting England in order to study the present English school, especially the work of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851). In Allston's opinion there was “no modern school of landscape equally capable with the English,” and Turner stood at the head of this department with “no superior of any age.”<sup>13</sup>

Almost immediately after his arrival in London on June 27, 1829, Cole began his study of contemporary

British painting by visiting the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy. He went with great expectations and some fear, as he wrote to his parents, but he found most of the landscapes to be “far from perfection in the art,” though he did confess his admiration for “many excellent ones by Turner, Calcot [*sic*] and others.”<sup>14</sup> Of Turner's four oil paintings in the exhibition, Cole must have been profoundly impressed by the *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus*; Homer's *Odyssey* (Figure 4), now in the National Gallery, London. Although he failed to mention this picture by name, he did make two drawings after it in one of his London sketchbooks: the first recorded the arrangement of the brilliant colors, if in a rather shorthand manner (Figure 5); while the second, more carefully drawn, traced the major outlines of the composition and the areas of light and shade (Figure 6). The existence of these two drawings, each marked “Turner,” seems to be an acknowledgment on Cole's part that one sketch would have been far from enough to capture the success of “this wonderful display of Mr. Turner's power.”<sup>15</sup>

Such an intimate study of Turner's work raises a key issue for Cole's own career. He explained in a letter to his family in New York that as he was about to visit the Royal Academy for the first time, about “to see the works of painters highly estimated,” he almost trembled for fear that he should find his own littleness.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, his self-image as an artist was at stake. He had come to Europe to learn from older artists, not to be overwhelmed by their achievements. The important thing was to grow, to find his own mature style, and perhaps to keep something of that “wilder image bright” from his successful early career in New York (1825–1829).<sup>17</sup>

13. Jared B. Flagg, *The Life and Letters of Washington Allston* (New York, 1892) pp. 203–204. Allston's letter to Pickering, with advice for a young landscape painter on the eve of his departure for Europe, was dated November 23, 1827.

14. This letter is reprinted in Louis L. Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, ed. Elliot S. Vesell (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964) p. 78.

15. *The Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle*, no. 81, May 13, 1829, p. 300. This review found some fault with Turner's coloring as being too violent, but it concluded that “the poetical feeling which pervades the whole composition, the ease and boldness with which the effects are produced, the hardihood which dared make the attempt,—extort out wonder and applause.” For similar reviews in praise of Turner's originality, see *The Gentleman's Magazine, and Historical Chronicle* 99 (1829) p. 537; *The New Monthly Magazine and*

*Literary Journal*, part 3, Historical Register, June 1, 1829, p. 253.

16. See note 14 above.

17. Cole was exhorted to “keep that earlier, wilder image bright” in a poem by William Cullen Bryant, “To Cole, The Painter, Departing for Europe,” but Bryant later approved of the new style Cole developed abroad. In his *Funeral Oration, Occasioned by the Death of Thomas Cole* (New York, 1848) p. 21, Bryant praised the fact that “while in Italy, the manner of Cole underwent a considerable change; a certain timid softness of manner . . . was laid aside for that free and robust boldness in imitating the effects of nature, which has ever since characterized his works.” Something of this new boldness is visible in the extreme thinness of the paint that allows the texture of the canvas to show through in *The Titan's Goblet*.



FIGURE 4

Ulysses deriding Polyphemus; Homer's *Odyssey*, by J. M. W. Turner, 1829. Oil on canvas, 52 ¼ x 80 ½ in. National Gallery, London (Turner Bequest), no. 508

Considering the natural hesitancy with which he began to measure himself against the English artists with established reputations, and considering the problems he must have experienced as an outsider in the London art world,<sup>18</sup> it is not surprising to discover that Cole's written statements are not always a true indication of what he studied closely and what he dismissed among contemporary works. His remarks on Turner are an important case in point.

Whereas the two drawings after the Ulysses deriding Polyphemus speak of unguarded enthusiasm, Cole's

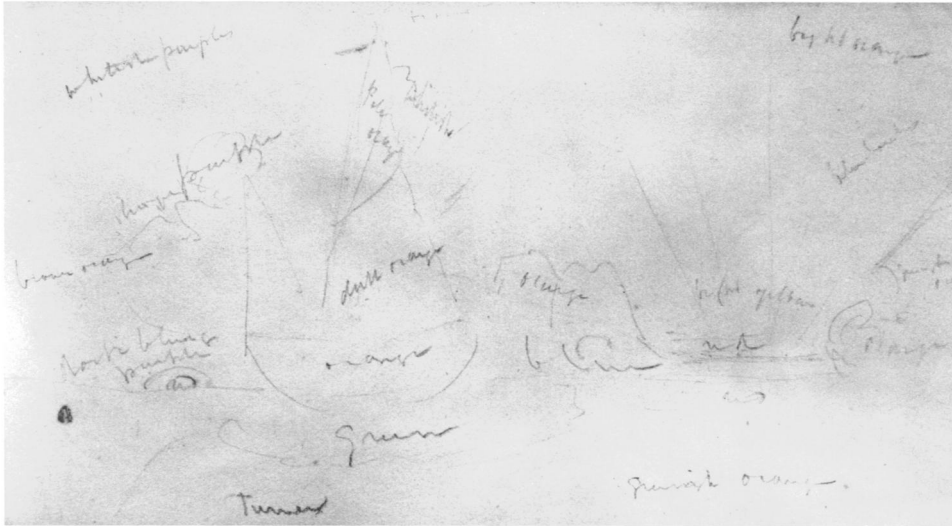
description of his personal visit to Turner's gallery on December 12, 1829, offers no more than a mixed review of the man and his paintings:

I had expected to see an older looking man with a countenance pale with thought, but I was entirely mistaken. He has a common form and common countenance, and there is nothing in his appearance or conversation indicative of genius. He looks like a seafaring man, a mate of a coasting vessel, and his manners were in accordance with his appearance. . . . I can scarcely reconcile my mind to the idea that he painted those

18. For Cole's complaint that no one visited his rooms except Americans, see William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of*

*the Arts of Design in the United States*, II (New York, 1834) pp. 361–362. Most of the artists in London Cole found “cold and selfish.”





**FIGURE 5**  
 Drawing after Turner's Ulysses deriding Polyphemus (color notes), by Thomas Cole, 1829. Sketchbook No. 5, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 39.560a

**FIGURE 6**  
 Drawing after Turner's Ulysses deriding Polyphemus (chiaroscuro study), by Thomas Cole, 1829. Sketchbook No. 5, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 39.560a



grand pictures. The exterior so belies its inhabitant the soul.<sup>19</sup>

After particular praise for *The Building of Carthage*, a “splendid composition . . . full of poetry,” which “very much resembles some of Claude’s,” and for the *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, “a sublime picture with a powerful effect of *Chiaro Scuro*,” Cole concluded the entry in his sketchbook with the observation that, while he admired Turner’s later pictures, they had a “very artificial look” to his eye:

They are splendid combinations of colour when it is considered separately from the subject, but they are destitute of all appearance of solidity. Every object appears transparent or soft. They look as though they were made of confectionary’s Sugar Candy Jellies. This appearance is produced by an undue dislike to dullness or black. The pictures are made up of the richest, brightest colours in every part, both in light and shade. The most beautiful nature I ever beheld has dullness and darkness in its combination and above all solidity.<sup>20</sup>

Cole seized on these qualities—ample darkness and solidity—as the major concepts that separated his art and artistic intentions from Turner’s.<sup>21</sup> So sure was he of the correctness of this judgment that he used the same notes again as the basis for his discussion of Turner’s work in a letter of 1834 to William Dunlap, written after his return from Europe. Dunlap, in turn, published the following passage verbatim:

Turner is the prince of the evil spirits. With imagi-

19. Entry for December 12, 1829, in Cole’s *London 1829 Sketchbook*, New York State Library, Albany, New York.

20. *London 1829 Sketchbook*.

21. Fascinated, even overawed by some of Turner’s effects, Cole still resisted the Siren’s call. Knowing Charles Robert Leslie in London, and through Leslie, John Constable, Cole was actually allied with the opposing camp of artists who could admire and praise Turner’s genius, while decrying the existence of his many imitators. Cole, obviously, had no intention of being another imitator. For one example of Leslie’s opinion of Turner’s later work, see his letter to Robert W. Weir (August 18, 1845) in Irene Weir, *Robert W. Weir, Artist* (New York, 1947) pp. 54–55.

22. Dunlap, *History of the Arts of Design*, II, p. 363. Except for the frank admiration for a fellow artist’s technical mastery, the tone of Cole remarks matches some of the criticism of Turner’s later works in English periodicals. The reviewer for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (40 [1836] p. 551) described Turner’s *Juliet and her Nurse* (Royal Academy, 1836, no. 73) as being assembled “from models of different parts of Venice, thrown higgledy-piggledy together, streaked blue and pink, and thrown into a flour tub. Poor Juliet has been steeped in treacle to make her look

nation and a deep knowledge of the machinery of his art, he has produced some surprising specimens of effect. His earlier pictures are really beautiful and true, though rather misty; but in his late works you see the most splendid combinations of colour and *chiaro-scuro*—gorgeous but altogether false—there is a visionary, unsubstantial look about them that, for some subjects, is admirably appropriate; but in pictures representing scenes in this world, rocks should not look like sugar-candy, nor the ground like jelly.<sup>22</sup>

No matter how poetic Cole’s mind may have been by nature, he obviously preferred the solid corporeality of natural objects to the vaporous, dreamlike suggestion of their presence to be found in Turner. In the light of this fundamental predisposition, it is fascinating to see what the American artist thought of doing with the *Ulysses and Polyphemus* theme. As if in response to Turner’s image of the escape of *Ulysses* and his companions, Cole chose to illustrate the beginning of the *Polyphemus* episode from book 9 of *The Odyssey*. In a surviving pencil drawing (Figure 7) Cole pictured the cyclops resting on the edge of a cliff by the sea, while watching a small ship row into the bay below.<sup>23</sup> Although the challenge of Turner’s work was taken up in this drawing, the idea was never carried out as an oil painting. Thus, only these pencil outlines are left to give some indication of how much darker or more substantial—not to say prosaic by comparison with Turner’s masterpiece—the rocks, the cliffs, and even the figure of the cyclops might have been in Cole’s version.<sup>24</sup>

sweet, and we feel apprehensive lest the mealy architecture should stick to her petticoat, and flour it.” It was the intemperance of this particular review that prompted Ruskin’s first, passionate, but unpublished defense of Turner as a landscape poet (in opposition to the pupils of Sir George Beaumont)—see E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, III (London, 1903) pp. 635–640.

23. Howard Merritt has noted the existence of this drawing in connection with an undated entry in Cole’s list of “Subjects for Pictures”: “Scene from *The Odyssey*. When *Ulysses* approaches the Cyclopean coast and sees the cyclops cave—Book 19th, line 211 to 224—fine subject.” See Merritt, *Baltimore Annual II: Studies on Thomas Cole, An American Romanticist* [1968] appendix II, no. 98, p. 96.

24. Like Turner, Cole might have known prints after Poussin’s classical landscapes with giant figures, such as the *Landscape with Polyphemus*, 1649 (Hermitage Museum, Leningrad). However, his drawing of a cyclops on a cliff has a semiabstract quality that makes it a distant relative of the outline engravings by John Flaxman, which he could also have known.



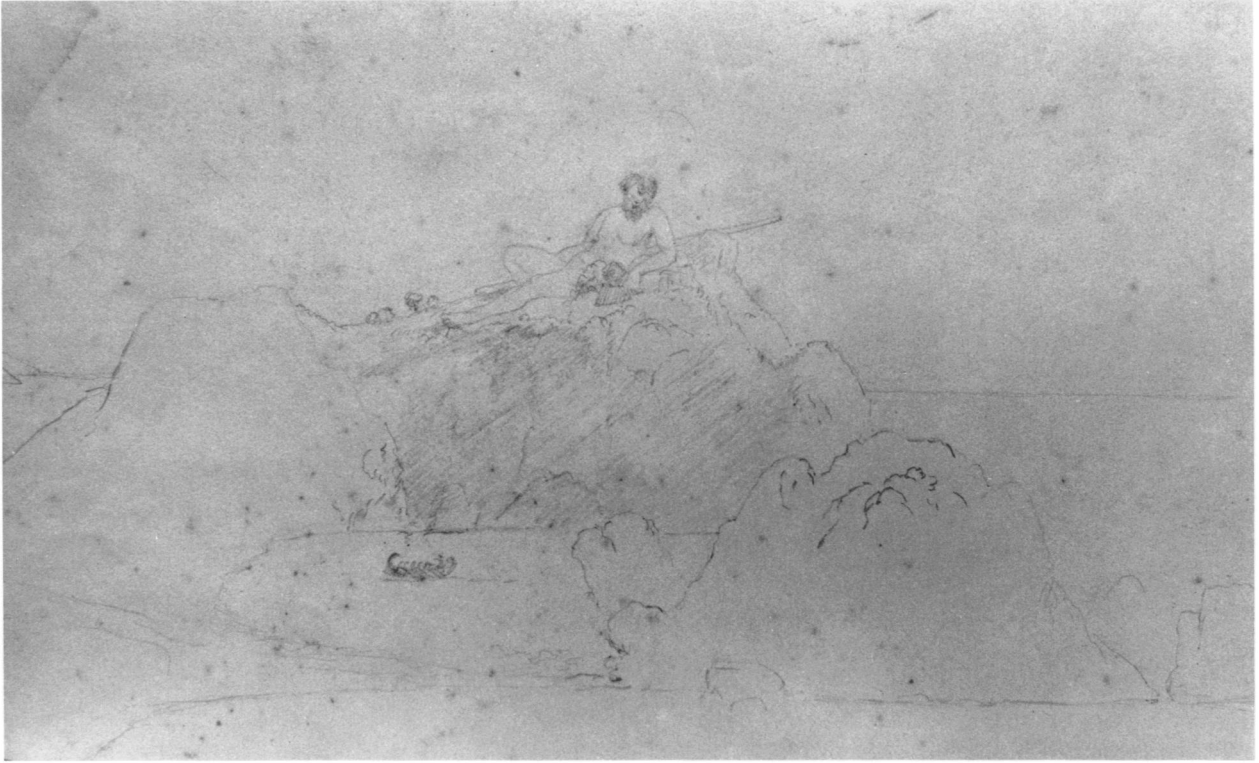


FIGURE 7

Ulysses and Companions arriving in the Bay near Polyphemus' Cave, by Thomas Cole, c. 1829–1830. Pencil drawing. The Detroit Institute of Arts, 39.353

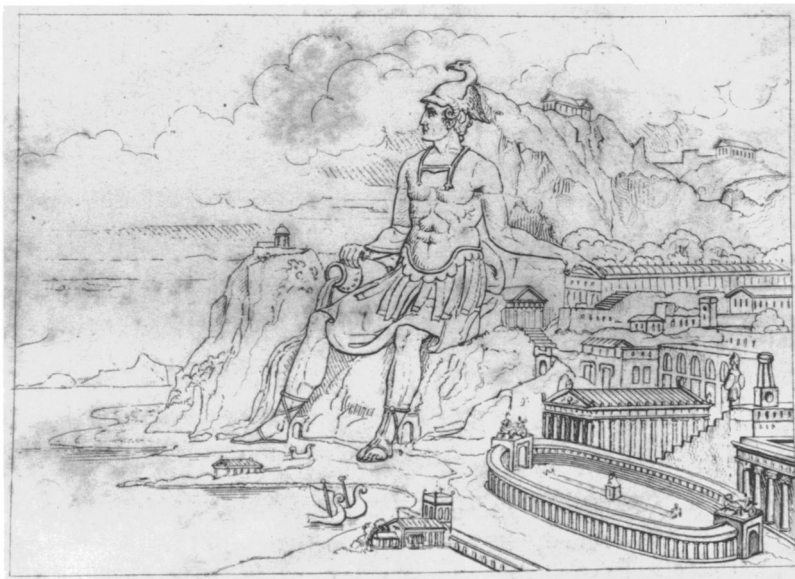
In any event, this drawing of a cyclops on a cliff demonstrates Cole's interest in the creative possibilities of such a Mediterranean scene. This is significant because, as he began collecting architectural ideas for *The Course of Empire* (The New-York Historical Society), his first major series, he would have encountered an important classical precedent for a similar composition. On looking into Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture* Cole would have discovered the story of Mount Athos.<sup>25</sup> As an introduction to the second book, deal-

ing with the origin of building, Vitruvius related the story of Dinocrates, the Macedonian architect, who suggested to Alexander that Mount Athos be formed into "the statue of a man holding a spacious city in his left hand, and in his right a huge cup, into which shall be collected all the streams of the mountain, which shall thence be poured into the sea."<sup>26</sup>

Illustrations of this legendary project were also available. Cole might have seen the engraving published in Joseph Gwilt's translation of Vitruvius (London, 1826)

25. Architectural projects involving Mount Athos are mentioned in several other places as well, although the name of the architect and the exact nature of the project vary greatly. See Bernadotte Perrin, trans., *Plutarch's Lives*, VII, "Alexander," 72 (London, 1949) pp. 425–427; Horace Leonard Jones, trans., *The Geography of Strabo*, VI, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960) 14. 23, pp. 227–229; and Leone Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. Cosimo Bartoli and James Leoni (London, 1955) book 6, chap. 4, p. 116.

26. Joseph Gwilt, trans., *The Architecture of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio in Ten Books* (London, 1826) p. 34. The idea of reshaping an entire mountain into a human form is a concept that has always appealed to artists. For a brief survey of the history of this fascinating theme from Alberti to the end of the eighteenth century (in terms of unrealized dreams, drawings, engravings, and garden sculpture), see Werner Körte, "Deinokrates und die Barocke Phantasie," *Die Antike* 12 (1937) pp. 289–312.



**FIGURE 8**  
 Der Macedonische Berg Athos in Gestalt eines Riesen. Plate xviii in part 1 of J. B. Fischer von Erlach, *Entwurf einer Historischen Architectur*, Vienna, 1721

**FIGURE 9**  
 Mount Athos as proposed to be sculpted by Dinocrates. Headpiece illustration for book 2 of *The Architecture of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio in Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Gwilt, London, 1826

(Figure 9); but more importantly, he might also have had access to the representation in Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurf einer Historischen Architectur* (Figure 8), a book that appeared first in Vienna in 1721 and then in an English translation (London, 1737).<sup>27</sup> In *The Titan's Goblet* the waters have been collected in a huge cup, but there is no Titan. As a landscape painter, untrained in rendering the human figure on a large scale, Cole can easily be excused for his far greater interest in depicting stone and water, light and air. The connection with Fischer von Erlach's plate is apparent once the waters spill out of the cup and are distributed "to the sea by great Precipices."<sup>28</sup> In both of these landscape images, there are buildings next to the water on an upper level, and in both the descending streams make one final plunge down a steep cliff into an arm of the sea where small boats are sailing and where a small city rises under a cliff.

The existence of two cities in Cole's painting—one at sea level and the other on the rim of the goblet with its own "ocean dotted with sails," creating, in effect, a landscape within a landscape—is not such a unique idea after all. The precedent of the Mount Athos tradition explains that these cities were not meant in themselves to represent the opposites of ancient versus modern civilization, as is often suggested. Instead, the gigantic structure of the goblet, created in ancient times, is inhabited on several levels simultaneously in the present. Moreover, if mere men had proposed to carve an entire mountain into the form of a man holding a city in one hand and a cup in the other, then it may have been human beings alone who carved this goblet out of the living rock. The precedent of a classical architectural fantasy on this scale supplies an alternative to the natural assumption that the Titan's goblet was actually made by a giant who simply left it behind, carelessly, as he wandered off and eventually vanished from the earth.

If part of Cole's inspiration came from contact with tradition, another part stemmed from the rich soil of his own imagination. The goblet itself is not a World Tree, but a fusion of several different ideas that are closely related; the vessel exists as part fountain, part vase, part vegetation, and part volcanic lake. Among the Cole drawings in *The Detroit Institute of Arts* are two, dating from his sojourn in Europe or just after his return, that reveal a deep fascination with fountains

and basins of incredible proportions. The first of these (Figure 11), enclosed within its own frame, shows a cornucopia-shaped fountain with its jet of water, supported by a giant leafy stalk. This magical form can be compared to similar fountains of equal vitality, such as the one visible in Piranesi's view of the Villa d'Este gardens, Tivoli (Figure 10), which must have delighted Cole during his tour of Italy (1831–1832). The number and variety of fountains he encountered in Florence, Rome, and Tivoli must have supplied the raw materials for this type of fantasy.

Interest in Italian fountains was shared by other early nineteenth-century artists, to be sure. One of the works by Sir Augustus Wall Callcott (1779–1884), for example, that Cole must have admired at the Royal Academy in 1829, was a painting entitled *The Fountain—Morning*. In a Claudian manner, according to contemporary reviews, it contained a fountain, a classical building, and arcadian figures in the foreground, with a prospect of the snowy summits of the Apennines in the distance—all in glowing color.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the scale employed in Cole's drawing (Figure 11) transforms the sense of pleasure, traditionally associated with Italian fountains, into a sense of awe. The gigantic basins to the right descend in a sublime series, one below the other, toward the sea. They differ from the catch basins of a typical Roman fountain (Figure 12) not only in terms of scale, but also in terms of surface qualities and relative position. Instead of smooth stone, they are fringed with dense forests of vegetation, and each body of water is held up separately to the sun, which is hovering above the sea in the distance.

If a sublime effect is produced by this first drawing, the opposite was intended in a related pencil sketch, which is inscribed "Design for Vase—Imitation of Moss" (Figure 13). Here, the small birds above the brim and the vine growing over the base suggest that the vase is but a garden ornament, and yet the connec-

27. For a discussion of Fischer von Erlach's text and of this plate in particular, see George Kunoth, *Die Historische Architektur Fischers von Erlach* (Düsseldorf, 1956) especially pp. 54–55. Also see Thomas Lediard, trans., *A Plan of Civil and Historical Architecture, in the Representation of the Most Noted Buildings of Foreign Nations, both Ancient and Modern*, 2nd ed. (London, 1737) pl. xviii.

28. Lediard, *A Plan of Civil and Historical Architecture*, p. 13.

29. *The Atheneum and Literary Chronicle*, no. 81, May 13, 1829, p. 300.

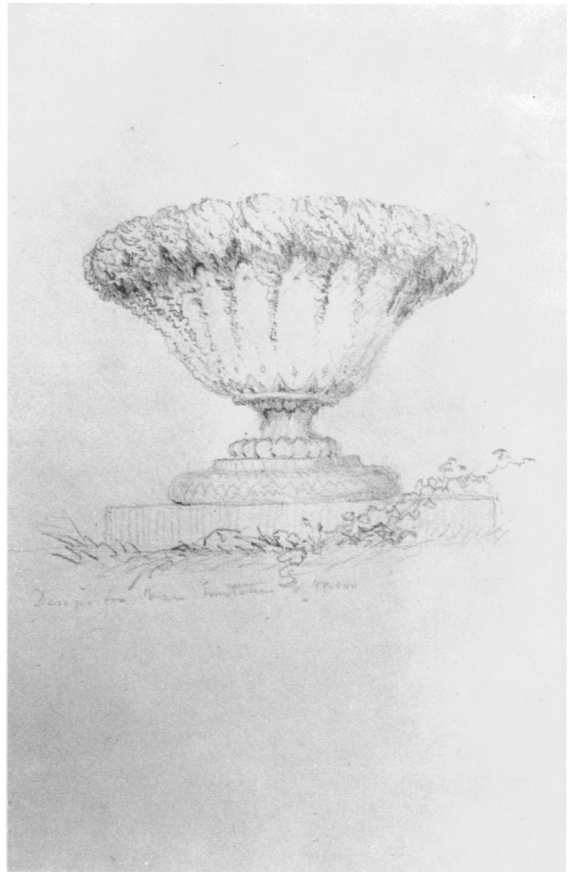
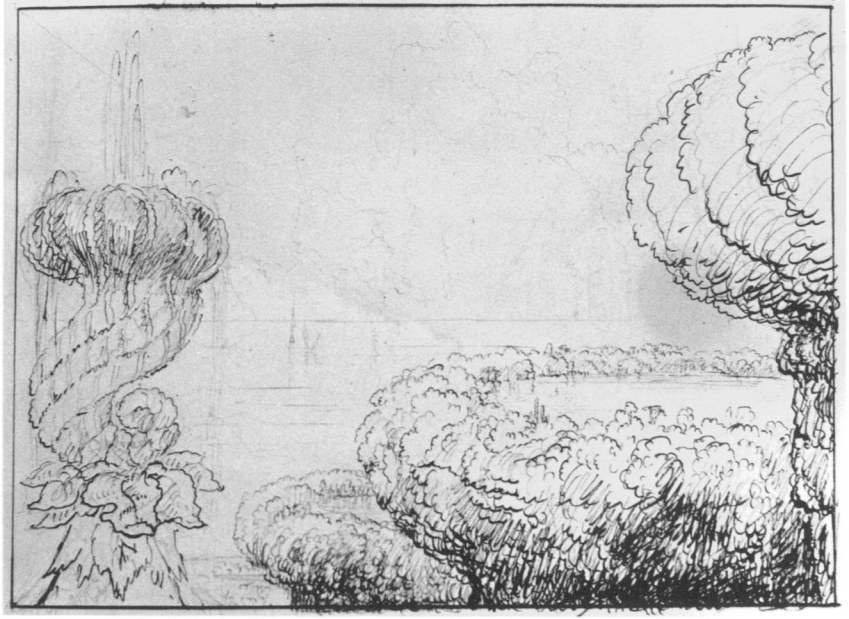


FIGURE 10  
Veduta della Villa Estnse in Tivoli (detail), by  
G. B. Piranesi, c. 1773. Etching for the *Vedute di  
Roma*

FIGURE 11  
Fantastic Fountain and Basins with a View of the  
Sea, by Thomas Cole, c. 1832–1833. Pen and  
pencil drawing. Sketchbook No. 2, The Detroit  
Institute of Arts, 39.559

tion with The Titan's Goblet is still evident. The fact that Louis L. Noble referred to the painted goblet as both a "vase" and a "towerlike mossy structure" makes perfect sense in the light of this drawing. The ground-level view gives the design a monumental quality far beyond its relative size, while the idea of decorative rings around the base, the treatment of the underside of the basin, and the curving mossy rim can be found in the final painting as well.

On a different level in the conception of The Titan's Goblet, it is possible that a basic visual analogy was at work in Cole's thoughts, an analogy between actual landscapes he had observed and the shape of the water vessels and basins he imagined. The volcanic origin (through subsidence, rather than eruption) of Lake Albano and Lake Nemi, which Cole visited in the spring of 1832, was well known. Speaking of Lake Albano in his *Description of Active and Extinct Volcanos* (1826), Charles Daubeny admitted that because of "the physical structure of the lake itself . . . its curved

FIGURE 12  
Fountain in the Piazza d'Ara Coeli, Rome.  
Photograph from Cesare d'Onofrio, *Le Fontane di  
Roma*, Rome, 1957

FIGURE 13  
Design for Vase—Imitation of Moss, by Thomas  
Cole, c. 1832–1833. Pencil drawing. Sketchbook  
No. 11, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 39.569

form, the absence of any *natural* outlet for its waters, and the volcanic materials surrounding it, [it] might at once be taken for the crater of a volcano."<sup>30</sup> The drawings of Lake Nemi and Lake Albano in Cole's 1832 sketchbook (Figures 15, 16) tend to stress the important structural properties of volcanic lakes—their circular form, the steep sides covered with trees and shrubs, and the absence of a natural outlet for the waters.<sup>31</sup>

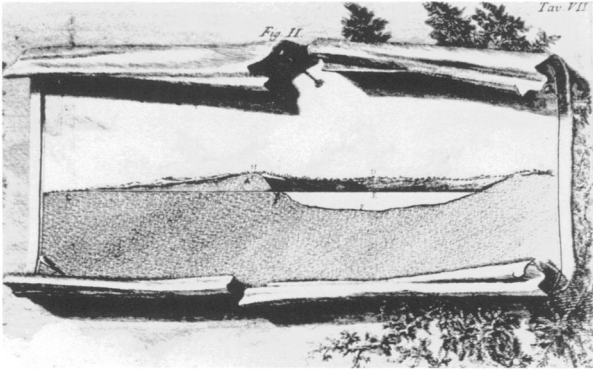
These same properties are apparent in Piranesi's views and schematic renderings of Lake Albano, c. 1762–1764—and it is worth noting that a set of Piranesi's works, given by Napoleon on the occasion of his election to honorary membership in the American Academy of Fine Arts, was available in New York through the 1830s.<sup>32</sup> In a key cross-section diagram (Figure 14) Piranesi pictured the lake as a curved basin, surrounded by a high bank that is covered with vegetation; through this bank the artificial outlet carved by the Romans (396 B.C.) is clearly indicated. Although similar drainage outlets can also be found in fountains (see Figure 12), the fact that they appear in

30. Daubeny, *Description of Active and Extinct Volcanos* (London, 1826) p. 131.

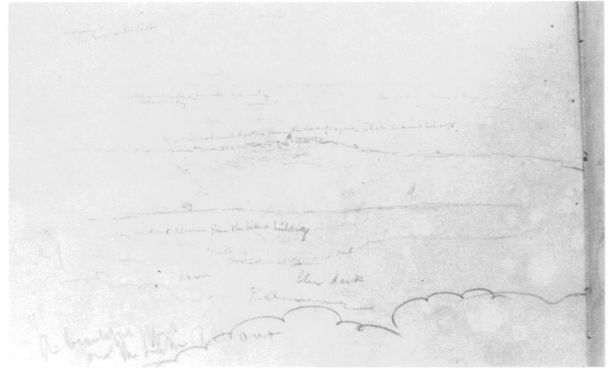
31. Although these drawings by themselves belong to a long history of traditional views of the Alban lakes, The Titan's Goblet might be considered in terms of more unusual volcanic scenes in which the viewer looks down on the complete crater from a great height—as in William Hodges's *A Crater in the Pacific, 1772–1775* (Art Gallery and Museum, Brighton, England). It may also be noted that Cole used his drawings of a shrine and a view of Lake Nemi, which appear on facing pages of his sketchbook (Figure 16), for a more conventional painting, called *View of Lago di Nemi, near Rome, or Il Penseroso* (unlocated), in 1845. Henry T. Tuckerman described this work in his *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (New York, 1867) p. 231: "The shores rise abruptly to a great height, and are covered with dense and shadowy foliage. A dash of Salvator's gloom broods over the scene, and an ancient shrine, before which a single peasant kneels, increases the religious solemnity of the landscape." Its companion picture, *L'Allegro, or Italian Sunset*, was recently with Hirschl and Adler Galleries, New York.

32. Napoleon's election was probably arranged through Robert R. Livingston, the first president of the American Academy, who became Minister to France. For specific mention of the "twenty-four volumes of the works of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the Italian etcher of ancient Rome," which were unfortunately consumed by fire in April 1839, see Winifried E. Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, With a Chapter on the Early Institutions of Art in New York* (New York, 1913) pp. 13, 34.





**FIGURE 14**  
 Cross-section of Lake Albano, by G. B. Piranesi. Plate VII, figure II (detail) from *Descrizione e disegno dell'Emissario del Lago Albano*, Rome, c. 1762-1764



**FIGURE 15**  
 A beautiful effect on the Lake Albano, by Thomas Cole, 1832. Pencil drawing. Sketchbook No. 7, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 39.565

**FIGURE 16**  
 A Shrine and a View of Lake Nemi, by Thomas Cole, 1832. Pen and pencil drawings (facing pages). Sketchbook no. 7, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 39.565





The Titan's Goblet seems to confirm the drinking vessel-volcanic lake analogy. Rather than allowing the water to spill over the top of his giant goblet (Figure 18), Cole has shown the waters escaping at only a few places on the outer edge of the rim, as if flowing through carefully planned *emissarii*, designed to keep the lake inside the goblet at a constant level.

Furthermore, there is still another way in which Cole's experience of Lake Albano can be related to the "landscape within a landscape" of The Titan's Goblet. To make the drawing, which is inscribed "A beautiful effect on the Lake Albano" (Figure 15), Cole must have climbed to a suitable height on Monte Albano in order to look down on the lake with its "reflection darker and clearer than the hill & buildings" in the morning light (as recorded on the drawing). From the same vantage point he could also see over the roofs of the buildings at Castel Gandolfo on the far rim. The Campagna and the sea are visible to the west. This is almost precisely the same geographical and topographical arrangement used in the final painting (Figure 18), although the time of day was altered for dramatic effect. From an extremely elevated position, facing the sunset, the viewer is able to look down onto the surface of the circular lake inside the goblet, but at the same time he can also see over the far rim to the high horizon.

The sense of Lake Albano's elevation (960 ft.) above the surrounding countryside, implied in the "beautiful effect" drawing by Cole, just as it is in a panoramic view by Piranesi (Figure 17), is carried to the point of total isolation in The Titan's Goblet, and yet the identity of the lake is never lost. Of the two buildings that are clearly visible on the rim of the goblet, the nearer one is a Grecian templelike structure, probably related to Cole's painting of the temples at Paestum.<sup>33</sup> There is no need to refer to Greece and Syria, instead of Italy alone, since the larger, blocklike structure on the dis-

tant rim reminds one instantly of the papal summer palace at Castel Gandolfo (see Figure 17). The presence of this landmark with its dark reflection in the water offers further proof that Cole was thinking primarily of Lake Albano.

Dated 1833, The Titan's Goblet was probably painted during the summer or early autumn of that year. At that time Cole had already received a commission from Luman Reed for a large Italian Scene, Composition (The New-York Historical Society), but he was also beginning to make arrangements with Reed to paint the series of The Course of Empire. Henry T. Tuckerman recorded that The Titan's Goblet originally belonged to Reed,<sup>34</sup> but it may have been that Cole simply sent it to his new patron on approval, as noted by Howard S. Merritt.<sup>35</sup> When Reed returned the painting, it soon found another owner in James J. Mapes, who allowed Cole to exhibit it at the National Academy of Design in 1834.

To the same exhibition, it is worth noting, Frederick S. Agate (1807-1844) sent The Old Oaken Bucket, a pastoral scene with a boy drinking from a bucket at a well. Attached to the title of this picture in the catalogue were the following lines: " 'How sweet from the green mossy brim to receive it, / As poised on the curb, it inclined to my lips; / Not a full, blushing goblet could tempt me to leave it, / Though fill'd with the nectar that Jupiter sips. . . ' — Woodworth."<sup>36</sup> This kind of reference to a classical goblet in contemporary poetry might have had a place in Cole's invention process, if only in terms of the picture's title; but it is even more important to realize that he must have known paintings of goblets as well.

The fact that Cole sent The Titan's Goblet to Luman Reed at a time when he was planning to paint many other canvases for the Reed Gallery may be highly significant. Among his collection of "Old Masters" Reed

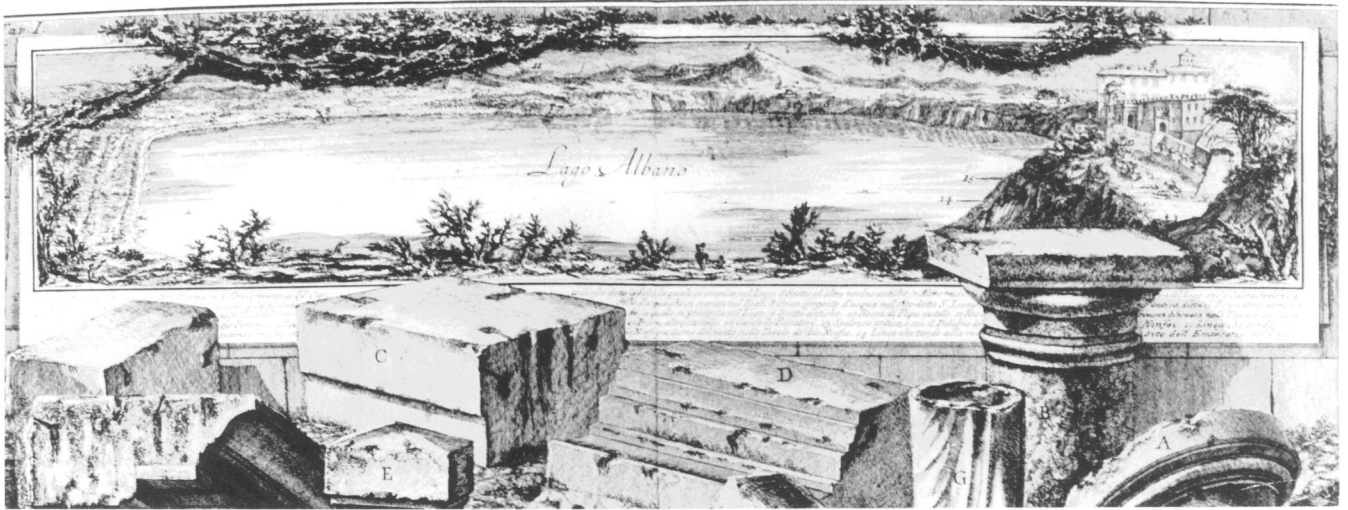
33. Cole's View of the Temples at Paestum, belonging to Miss H. Douglas, was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1833 (no. 141); this was undoubtedly the same work, showing the sun setting behind the "Temple of Poseidon" and identified as having been painted in Florence, 1832, that was with Vose Galleries, Boston, some years ago.

34. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists*, p. 228.

35. Merritt, *Thomas Cole*, p. 29, no. 27.

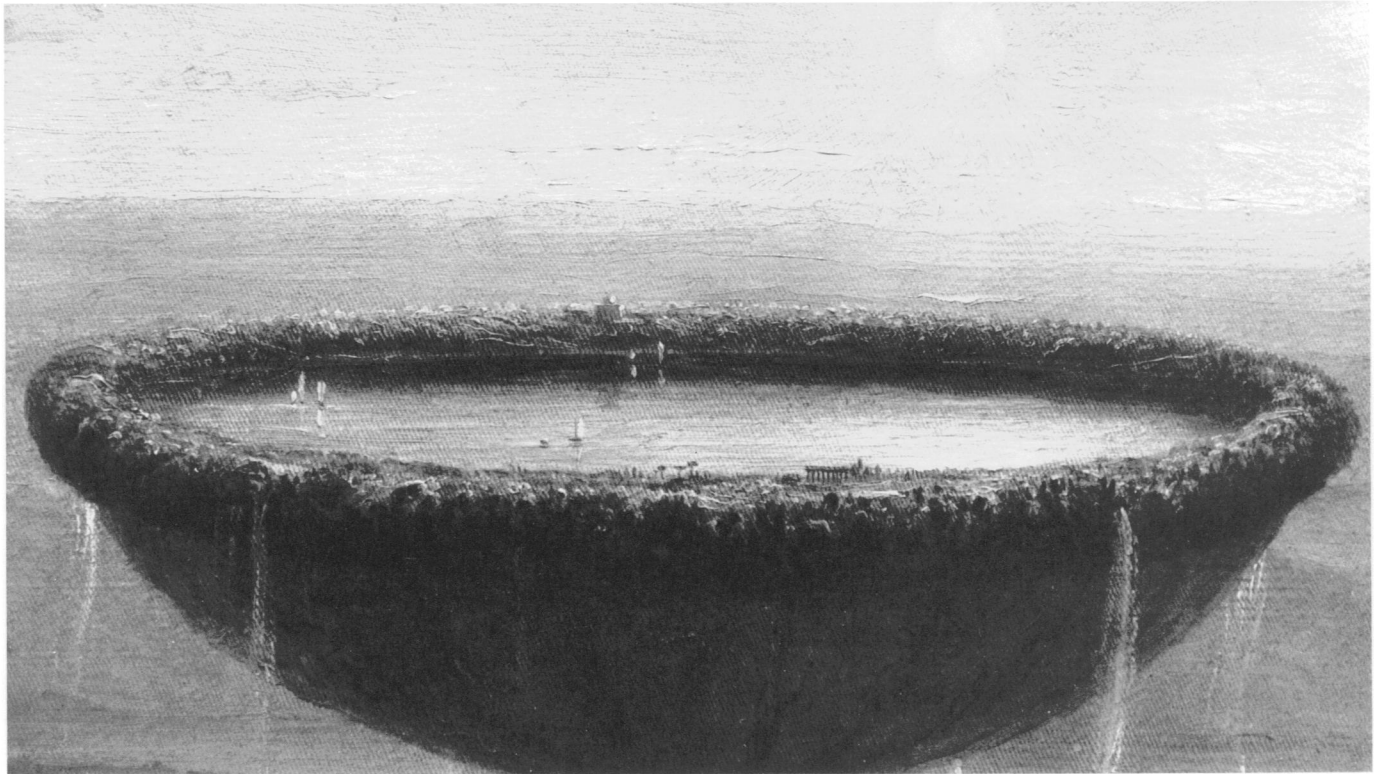
36. For the poem by Samuel Woodworth, see his *Melodies*,

*Duets, Trios, Songs, and Ballads; Pastoral, Amatory, Sentimental, Patriotic, Religious, and Miscellaneous*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1831) pp. 12-13. A review of Agate's picture from the *New-York Mirror* is reprinted in James T. Callow, *Kindred Spirits: Knickerbocker Writers and American Artists, 1807-1855* (Chapel Hill, 1967) p. 190. This review identified Agate's picture as an improvement upon the frontispiece illustration for Woodworth's first edition of the *Melodies*, 1826.



**FIGURE 17**  
Lago Albano, by G. B. Piranesi. Detail of Plate I, *Antichità d' Albano e di Castel Gandolfo*, Rome, 1764

**FIGURE 18**  
The Basin of The Titan's Goblet (detail of Figure 1)



owned a still-life painting by Willem van Aelst (Figure 19) in which a goblet, a bowl, and a lemon, along with other objects on the edge of a table, are sharply illuminated against the dark background.<sup>37</sup> The pres-

ence of this picture in Reed's home, where Cole was always a welcome visitor, suggests the unusual, but not impossible idea that *The Titan's Goblet* was meant to be a landscape painter's answer to this type of work in

37. Luman Reed's collection of "Old Masters" was acquired from the picture dealer Michael Paff, according to John Durand, *The Life and Times of A. B. Durand* (New York, 1894) pp. 106–107. When Reed lost confidence in his supplier and the quality of the "goods," he turned to contemporary American artists, extending

his patronage to Cole, Asher B. Durand, William Sidney Mount, and G. W. Flagg. For the titles and attributions of the fifty-five paintings owned by Reed, now in The New-York Historical Society, see its *Catalogue of the Gallery of Art* (New York, 1866) nos. 1–55.

**FIGURE 19**

Still-life with Goblet and Lemon, by Willem van Aelst, Dutch, xvii century. Oil on canvas, 32 x 27 in. The New-York Historical Society (Reed Collection), 1858.15



another genre. Although smaller in size, Cole's painting does have a similar vertical format. Within this frame, however, instead of showing the play of indoor light over various surfaces and textures, he chose to create a compelling sense of depth filled with radiant sunlight. Nevertheless, in spite of these differences in space and lighting, the deliberate off-center placement of the Titan's goblet on a flat table of land suggests that Cole had absorbed one of the fundamental formal devices of still-life painting, which he adapted successfully for his own use.

Ultimately, the generative force behind this visionary landscape, given the fact that it was painted without a commission, must have come from Cole's own imagination. He apparently asked only \$100 for the

painting, considerably less than the \$250 to \$500 prices for his full-scale landscapes at this time,<sup>38</sup> but the exact figure depended on the size of the canvas and the degree of finish, not on the artist's opinion of its other values. The small size of *The Titan's Goblet* and the thinness of the paint indicate that it was executed quickly, but even if it had been "dashed-off" in only a week or two, it was still the product of a long, involved, and highly inventive thought process. It is a tribute to Cole's pictorial imagination that, by means of overlapping ideas and sudden changes in scale, he was able to fuse several European landscape concepts into a single, coherent, and haunting image intended for his American public.

38. Howard Merritt found a sheet among Cole's miscellaneous papers (New York State Library, Albany) on which the artist apparently kept a record of his financial transactions with Luman Reed. Dated 1834, the list begins with the entry "To Goblet picture 100 By returned Goblet picture 100" and ends with the

notation "to Series of the Course of Empire 3500 . . . etc. / to total of \$3650." The large and highly finished *Italian Scene, Composition* (37½ × 54¼ in.), which Reed commissioned, cost \$500. See Dunlap, *History of the Arts of Design*, II, p. 367.