

Thomas Cole:
The Course of Empire

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Thomas Cole's series of five paintings entitled, *Course of Empire*, is an allegorical cautionary tale about the progress of human civilization within the powerful realm of nature. (see fig. 1 - 5) It is not only an embodiment of Cole's personal philosophy of the spiritual quality of nature and its power over man and civilization, but also reflects predominant religious, artistic, scientific and socio-political ideas within American culture during the 1830's. This powerful series of paintings reflects ideas found in Transcendentalism, Associationism, Uniformitarianism and a conservative vision of the socio-political order shared by other elite artists, writers and philosophers of the time.

With an interest in the history of art, I wanted to explore through Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire*, the American cultural themes that appear in his work. A vast amount of scholarship exists on Thomas Cole and the *Course of Empire*, from descriptive narratives written by Cole himself, to reviews by his contemporaries to current doctoral dissertations. Given the constraints of time, after a brief description of some of the most significant images within the paintings, I will focus my discussion on the religious, artistic and scientific theories expressed through 'The Course of Empire', its connection to the framework of the American myth of the garden and the American art culture of the time.

The Course of Empire' now resides at the New York Historical Society and is currently on view with other works from the Hudson River School, closing February 19, 2006. The series is hung on the opposite wall to the second floor gallery entrance, in the configuration in which it was originally designed. This placement allows the series to be framed by the entrance opening, so that it is the first work encountered when entering the exhibition, in a place of prominence. A fitting location since Thomas Cole is considered the father of the Hudson River School and the initiator of a national art presence. The beauty, power and reverence for nature expressed in the painting draws one immediately into the work. The tremendous concern and respect for nature and the effect of civilization upon the landscape is apparent as its theme. Upon deeper inspection, theoretical ideas and political commentary become evident.

Working alternately in New York City and in the Catskills of the Hudson River valley, Cole was a member of the community of Romantic writers, philosophers and artists that included William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Trumbull, among others, who defined the American culture of the 1830's and provided a significant influence on Cole's works. Cole's work also looked back across the Atlantic to European artistic influences and precedents while simultaneously focusing on American landscape to establish the American Hudson River School of painting. His works provided an inspiration and impetus to a generation of artists of the Hudson River School,

which included Asher B. Durand, Albert Bierstadt, Jasper Cropsey and Frederick E. Church, among others.

The five paintings of 'The Course of Empire' work as a series and need to be seen together, in the arrangement for which they were conceived. A sketch by Cole illustrates the intended arrangement of the paintings in Lumen Reed's gallery. (Parry, 146) (fig. 6). Commenting on the biological nature of history, Cole depicted the evolution of an empire from its birth to its demise. Starting with 'The Savage State', the series proceeds to 'The Pastoral or Arcadian State' followed by the central and largest painting 'The Consummation of the Empire' which is subsequently followed by 'Destruction' and ending in "Desolation'. In these paintings the same scene is portrayed as the effects of time, man and nature interact. Note the unique, pointed rock promontory on the bay in the middle distance as the identifying feature. Moving within the series from left to right, note the progression of daylight; from the dawn in the Savage state in upper left to the evening scene found in the last panel of Desolation. The middle painting, 'The Consummation of Empire' is portrayed in the clear, warm, even light found just after noon, representing the time at the turning point of the pinnacle of civilization. A similar progression can be seen in the progression of seasons from spring through summer to autumn. Cole also uses the symbol of fire and smoke in the paintings to represent man's harnessing of the fire element.

Savage State

Beginning with 'The Savage State,' the world portrayed at the dawn of civilization, one can observe the sublime powerful forces of nature within the landscape. The clouds swirl with movement, mist rises between the mountains, the dramatic light moves from the bright light of dawn on the horizon of the bay to the dark shadows in the rocky foreground. In the foreground a hunter engages in the chase of a stag, as man pursues nature in an effort to subdue it for his own survival and benefit. In the middle ground, on a plateau on the shores of the bay, the beginnings of society and civilization are found in the community of teepees, with the rising, wisps of smoke indicative of harnessed fire. The relationship between nature and man is shown in man's struggle to survive, with nature clearly the most powerful force.

Pastoral or Arcadian state

Here the scene is portrayed in late morning, under a calm sky and atmosphere. The lighting is even and warm in an idyllic setting. The figures in the fore and middle grounds are engaged in the development of civilized activities of knowledge and the arts, from mathematics to drawing, to dancing. In the middle ground can also be found examples of husbandry, community and architecture. A reference to religious worship within nature is seen in the representation of a primitive temple in the style of Stonehenge, but in rectangular form. A sacrificial

smoke rises into the air from the center of the structure. In this painting harmony between nature and civilization is portrayed.

The Consummation of Empire

Bathed in a warm, clear, calm light, the scene of this painting represents the highest attainment of human achievement and empire. Here man, through governmental organization and power, has harnessed nature to his own design for the benefit of fellow citizens. The natural landscape surrounding the bay has become controlled with the constructions of civilization. Transportation and commerce are evident with the various boats and ships in the bay. Many classically inspired buildings populate the bay. On the left of the bay is a temple, reminiscent of the classical Greek Parthenon, with Doric columns supporting an entablature and sculptured pediment. A flight of steps proceed from the bay directly to the temple. A multi leveled circular structure supported on Corinthian columns and a gold domed structure in the distance can also be seen.

Examples of Roman arched bridges, aqueducts and columned pedestals abound. The statue of Minerva, goddess of wisdom and the arts of civilization, can be seen with the winged Victory in her hand. Smoke, offertory in nature, rises from several braziers, altars and beacons within the scene. A triumphal procession, for all the citizens to view, is taking place in the foreground, with a purple robed emperor riding in a triumphal car being pulled by an elephant about to pass through a triumphal arch, in a victory celebration, followed by the conquered captives, his army and the spoils. No longer does nature exist in

harmony with man. Not only has man subdued nature to his own cause, but, man has subdued man. Knowledge, industry and civilization are at their zenith or perhaps at the tipping point. Luxury and opulence, the characteristics of the leisured lifestyle of the empire, are clearly visible in the right foreground figure group.

Destruction

In the dark, late afternoon light, the scene in the third painting of series marks the downfall and destruction of the empire. Here the empire is being invaded and conquered, figures attempt to flee their conquerors. Dark powerful clouds swirl in the sky. Fire consumes the buildings and the ships. Destruction, death and dying are seen everywhere. The head of the warrior sculpture has been destroyed. Dark grey clouds of smoke from the destructive fires fill the air. Movement, force and agitation are visible everywhere. A man holding a lighted torch is exiting the painting in the lower right corner. The empire is being destroyed.

Desolation

In the quiet autumnal evening, the empire in ruins, nature has survived and triumphed over the activities of man. Man is extinguished. The ruins of man's civilization are being absorbed back into nature. There is a calm, peacefulness to the scene. Man is gone but nature survives, animals such as the nesting bird on the column, are returning. The lighted torch carried from the previous

painting is seen upside down in the lower right corner, next to the broken sarcophagus with water trickling out.

Theme of 'Course of Empire': Myth of the land

Thomas Cole painted the series 'Course of Empire' between 1833 and 1836. It can be read as a cautionary tale about the progress of civilization and the power of nature to survive the destructive characteristics of man. In advertising this work for an exhibition, Cole borrowed two lines from Byron's *Childe Harold* as the general motto of the series, "First freedom, and then Glory; when that fails, Wealth, vice, corruption." (Parry, 143) The theme of the painting incorporates the tension between the power of the land and the power of man, reflecting a version of the myth of the land, which we have seen portrayed in the writings from William Bradford through James Fennimore Cooper, Emerson and Thoreau to Henry Nash Smith. Man's relation to the land has been and remains a powerful image in the minds of Americans. Although the common theme of the myth of the land is discussed, the views of the various writers and artist differ. Briefly, in the 'Course of Empire', Cole views the changing relation of man to nature as he progresses through time and different stages of civilization, not tied to a specific location. Smith's view of the myth of the land focuses on the western movement and the cultivation of the land for agrarian purposes or the Wild West frontier. Bradford in his "History of Plymouth Plantation" of 1650 viewed the American nature as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men..." (Bradford, 17), the opposite of Cole's spiritual commune

with nature. Cole's paintings focus on the characteristics of the inhabitants, collectively, as a civilization, whereas Smith focuses on the individual yeoman farmer. In Cole's painting the inhabitants are mostly of one class, while in Smith the issue of class is strong. Smith writes, "...for Americans of the period there were two quite distinct Wests: the commonplace domesticated area with the agricultural frontier, and the Wild West beyond it. The agricultural West was tedious; its inhabitants belonged to a despised social class. The Wild West was by contrast an exhilarating region of adventure and comradeship in the open air." (Smith, 52) In Smith's myth of the Wild West, man is in an adventure. In Cole's myth of landscape, man is in communion with god through nature. In Cole's *Course of Empire* the inhabitants are more members of a society, living either in harmony with nature, controlling nature or destroying and being destroyed by nature. Cole's ideas of nature are spiritual views, which are similar to those found in the writings of Emerson. Emerson writes in his essay *Nature*, "...The noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it." They both represent the Transcendental understanding of nature where "god in or revealed through nature is accessible to every man, and every man can commune with nature and partake in the divine." (Novak, 15).

Rise and Fall of Civilization: Garden of Eden

Writing in 1835, at the same time that he was working on "The Consummation of Empire", Cole expresses clearly his view of man's blindness to his own flaws,

where he states, “Nature has spread for us a rich and delightful banquet. Shall we turn from it? We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly.” (Cole, 1836, 12) The garden that Cole is referring to is one of Eden, found in the wilderness, in harmony with nature, unspoiled by human corruption. This is a very different garden than the garden that Henry Nash Smith refers to in “Virgin Land” which is an agrarian garden, carved out of the wilderness by the axe and cultivated by the plough. Cole’s passion for nature is more in line with the nature writings of Emerson and Thoreau. Seen in its totality, the ‘Course of Empire’ symbolizes the rise and fall of civilization. In the series, man is his own worst enemy. At the pinnacle of civilization expressing his dominance over nature and others, man, through his inattention to nature and his pursuit of luxury, opulence and power, initiates his own downfall.

Transcendentalism

The garden that Cole describes is imbued with spirituality. Cole views the wilderness of nature, as opposed to the cultivated nature, as a spiritual experience. In 1835 he writes, “—the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak to God.” (Cole, 1836, 2) This belief is in harmony with the Transcendentalist’s emphasis on the unity of all creation, emphasis on higher laws, and the supremacy of insights and experience over logic to the revelation of the deepest truths. Emerson, expressing the Transcendental perspective, writes in his essay, Nature, “In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God a

decorum and sanctity reign, I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.” (Emerson 9-10) He continues, “The universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own shines through it.” (Emerson, 19) Three of the paintings in the ‘Course of the Empire’ depict progressive variations of the garden of Eden, imbued with the spirit of the nature-God, ‘The Savage State,’ ‘The Pastoral or Arcadian State’ and even the final painting, ‘Desolation’, which although a dark comment on the folly of man, is filled with the quiet restorative, peacefulness of nature, even the animals are returning as the bird nests on the column in the foreground and nature continues to live. For Cole, both nature and art have healing properties. The power of the arts Cole writes, “...carry with them the power to mend our hearts. Poetry and painting sublime and purify thought, by grasping the past, the present and the future – they give the mind a foretaste of its immortality... And rural nature is full of the same quickening spirit...an unending fountain of intellectual enjoyment, where all may drink, and be awakened to a deeper feeling of the works of genius, and a keener perception of the beauty of our existence.” (Cole, 1836, 1-2)

Associationism

Cole also subscribed to the spiritual theory of the existence of the presence of God in the landscape held by the Associationists of the 19th Century. Archibald Alison in 1790 published “Essays on the nature and principles of taste” which defined the philosophy of the Associationists and indicated that the symbolic

presence of God could be seen and experienced particularly in the American landscape because of its untamed and uncivilized character. "By contemplating a picturesque landscape, one could develop a series of associations that would lead to a form of spiritual union with the Almighty." (Powell, 39) Cole's 'Course of Empire' portrays the spirituality of nature and the detrimental effects of civilization on nature as man moves out of harmony with nature into a relationship that conquers, tames and civilizes nature. Through viewing the painting, which represents the spirituality of nature, man by association can experience the communion with god.

Uniformitarianism

Cole was a prolific reader, with many interests, including science. According to Parry, Cole probably read the work, Principles of Geology by Sir Charles Lyell which defends the prevailing concept of Uniformitarianism which argues that phenomena which are found in rocks were created by geological processes that continue to operate today as they did in the past. (Parry, 144) By looking at rocks one can determine what the past environment was like and what happen to the environment through time. The past is the key to the future. The theory of Uniformitarianism is in contrast to the prior prevailing theory of catastrophism, which argued that the earth had originated through supernatural means and had been affected by catastrophic events such as the biblical flood. The concept of Uniformitarianism plays out in the Course of Empire on two different levels. On one level, Cole records the effects of time at a uniform place, just as Lyell

observed the effects of water upon a column over time. In the painting we see the rise and fall of the empire from roughly the same location over time. Before settling on the title, *Course of Empire*, Cole toyed with the idea of using the phrase the 'Effects of Time' in the title. From a longer, more historical perspective, Cole comments on the cyclical nature of history over time, based on a biological model of birth, maturation and death, another application of the principle of Uniformitarianism. The biological model of civilization describes the birth, maturation and death of all civilizations.

Course of Empire theme found in other works

Many artists and writers have explored the theme of the rise and fall of civilizations. Bishop Berkeley in 'Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,' writes, "Westward the course of empire takes its way." According to Alan Wallach, "'Childe Harold' maybe the literary source for the *Course of Empire* because of the strong parallels between Cole's painted images and Lord Byron's melancholy evocations of the ruins of the Roman Empire" (Parry, 141) The theme is also found in Edward Gibbon's *History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776-1788. About twenty-two years after Cole's *Course of Empire*, James Ives published a lithograph after Frances F. Palmer's *Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire*, (fig. 11) with a Manifest Destiny interpretation. Even today, economist, Johann Galtung, of Norway and an advocate of non-violent solutions to resolving conflicts, recently presented a talk, aired on WAMC radio entitled 'The Decline and Fall of the American Empire'

where among many political and economic ideas he refers to America's Manifest Destiny and the myth of the garden as influential factors in the actions of the American empire.

Classical Civilization or America?

In the scenes of 'The Consummation' and 'Destruction', is Cole referring to the Classical civilizations or American society? Is this merely a look back at the civilizations of the past, as expressed the Edward Gibbon's History of the decline and fall of the Roman empire written 1776-1788, or is this an allegorical cautionary tale applicable to America? Depending on the views and philosophy of the viewer, one can read the paintings either way. However, with Cole's strong beliefs in the spiritual power of nature represented in Transcendentalism, along with his interest in Uniformitarianism and his passionate appreciation for the American landscape, Cole is clearly presenting a cautionary tale for America. If America does not control its wanton destruction of the wilderness, its imperial actions and its industrial expansion, then it can look forward to the decline and destruction of its civilization as portrayed in 'The Destruction' painting. Cole writes, "Yet I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away – the ravages of the axe are daily increasing – the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation..." (Cole, 1836, 12) Applying the principles argued in Uniformitarianism, all civilizations should experience the cyclical nature of history, including America. According to Parry, however, not

everyone had such a negative interpretation of the Course of Empire. Many held “a firm belief in continuous upward progress, ...that produced a compelling vision of their new nation as the next, and perhaps final, seat of knowledge, art, and civilization.” (Parry, 142) Here those who viewed America as chosen by God to fulfill the Manifest Destiny see this series solely in the historical light of previous civilizations.

Political climate

Looking at some of the political events from the decades surrounding the Course of Empire helps define the context of the painting and its reception by society. Rapid expansion and industrialization were the order of the day in the 1830's. 1825 saw the opening of the Erie Canal. 1825 also saw the first all women riots in New York City, reflecting the struggles of the working class.

An in-depth discussion of the political climate of the era of Course of Empire can be found in the essay, “Thomas Cole and Jacksonian America”, by Angela Miller. Briefly, she finds that America of the Jacksonian era saw accelerated economic and industrial growth, extremes of wealth and society with social and political turmoil. The conservative Whig party, of which Cole was in sympathy, viewed the Jacksonian Democrats as destroying the traditional social authority and the political and economic climate. The Jacksonian Democrats supported the extension of individual liberties. From a political perspective, Angela Miller describes the central scene of the triumphant war procession of the emperor with

his war captives in the Consummation of Empire as depicting, an “unsympathetic interpretation that Whigs placed on the political behavior of Jackson’s supporters, ...Cole’s robbed and crowned emperor embodies Whig visions of imperial leadership, a form of political behavior starkly contrasted to the republican model of government implied in the preceding canvas.” (Miller, 71) Miller goes on to say that ‘Consummation’ represents an 18th Century view of the decline of the republic through the accumulation of wealth and the loss of public virtue. In Cole’s time, Jackson was equated with the imperial character of Caesar, willing to use the citizens for his own self-serving ends. Many would have read the emperor in Consummation as a veiled reference to Jackson. Cole did not address any of the social issues of slavery, immigration or class. His world was solely in the elite circle of artists, writers and philosophers, often looking back across the Atlantic for artistic inspiration to couple with American landscape to preserve the domain of the American elite.

Sublime, beautiful and picturesque

Although the Course of Empire series was painted between 1834 and 1836, its theme was conceived much earlier during Cole’s European tour from 1829 – 1832. From Cole’s notebooks and sketchbooks of his tour we know that Cole came into contact with and studied the works of many of the then current and historical, European artists. In London he met with John Constable and J.M.W. Turner, where he viewed their landscapes, which reflected the philosophical ideals of the picturesque, the sublime and the beautiful. Specifically, Cole

viewed Turner's 'Dido building Carthage' work of 1815. (fig. 7) In London, Cole also viewed the works of Claude Lorrain, a 17th Century French landscape painter known for his ideal landscapes, whom he much admired. It is likely that Cole saw Claude's 'Seaport with the embarkation of St. Ursula' in London (fig. 8). Similarly, during his passage through Paris, Cole found inspiration in the history paintings of Salvatore Rosa, the 17th Century Italian history painter, whose works he saw at the Louvre. It is during this time in Europe that Cole initially conceived of the idea of portraying the history of civilizations.

The "Course of Empire" effectively integrated the philosophical and artistic concepts of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque. Edmund Burke writing in 1757 in England, defined the concepts of the beautiful and sublime in "A philosophical Inquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful", which became widely adopted by artists, architects and writers. According to Burke, the sublime refers to the spiritual uplift that exists beyond the rational that comes from the inspiration of wild, untamed nature and its forces, such as storms, floods, and waterfalls. The beautiful, on the other hand, is defined by a smooth nature that led to a meditative state. Thomas Cole applied the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful to the American landscape in his "Essay on American Scenery" which he delivered in 1835 to the American Lyceum in New York. He writes,

And Niagara! That wonder of the world! – where the sublime and beautiful are bound together in an indissoluble chain. In gazing on it we feel as

though a great void had been filled in our minds – our conceptions expand – we become a part of what we behold! At our feet the floods of a thousand rivers are poured out – the contents of vast inland seas. In its volume we conceive immensity; in its course, everlasting duration; in its impetuosity, uncontrollable power. These are the elements of its sublimity. Its beauty is garlanded around in the varied hues of the water, in the spray that ascends the sky, and in that unrivalled bow which forms a complete cincture round the unresting floods. (Cole, 8).

A single scene can have elements of the sublime and the beautiful at the same time. The elements of the sublime and the beautiful are found in the ‘Course of Empire.’ In the ‘Savage State’ the uncontrollable power of the swirling clouds, the dramatic variation of light and shadow, and the vastness of the view reflect the characteristics of the sublime. Similarly, in the ‘Destruction’ painting the grey, ominous wild movement of the clouds, the uncontrollable power of the destruction, the uncontrollable burning of the buildings also exemplifies the characteristics of the sublime. An example of the sublime most likely seen by Cole during his travels in Europe is the sublime paintings of Turner, such as ‘Carthage’ (fig. 9)

The characteristics of smoothness that lead to a meditative state can be seen in “Consummation of Empire”. Here the smooth glassy water, the quiet, calm sky, the smooth, stones of the classical buildings, in harmonious proportions

represent elements of the beautiful. Also, in the final painting of 'Desolation' can be seen elements of the beautiful, a calm, smooth body of water, and a calm, quiet sky. However, elements of the picturesque are also found. These elements consist of variety, roughness, and irregularity.

The term picturesque was in common use in England prior to Burke's definitions of the beautiful and the sublime, and simply referred to 'picture-like'. However the Rev. William Gillpin, in 1768 observing visual qualities that did not fit either of Burke's definitions, specified the concept of picturesque beauty as "the satisfaction of viewing the complexity and continuous change of nature." (Platt, 1992,82) Uvedale Price, writing in 1794 in his "Essay on the Picturesque" states "the two opposite qualities of roughness, and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity, are the most efficient causes of the picturesque." In his "Essay on American Scenery" Cole described the picturesque qualities of the forest scenery of the American landscape when he wrote, "In the American forest we find trees in every stage of vegetable life and decay....These circumstances productive of great variety and picturesqueness – green umbrageous – lofty and scathed trunks – contorted branches thrust athwart the sky – the mouldering dead below, shrouded in moss of every hue and texture, for richer combinations than can be found in the trimmed and planted grove."

(Cole, 9)

The picturesque views produced by John Constable such as his 1829 'Hadleigh Castle: The mouth of the Thames – morning after a stormy night' (fig. 10) shown at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1829, which Cole attended, would have provided Cole with an example that makes use of the picturesque, with its rough textures in land and clouds, irregularity, and ruins. In 'The Pastoral or Arcadian State' Cole combined the elements of the beautiful and the picturesque in the idyllic landscape. The smooth, quiet sky and water, with the gentle mist surrounding the mountaintop speak of the qualities of the beautiful. The contrasting trees, rough rocks in the foreground and variety of figures in various activities speak of the picturesque. Elements of the beautiful idyllic scenes of the 17th Century painter Claude Lorrain can also be seen.

The American art culture

Thomas Cole shares an interesting characteristic with Alexis De Tocqueville, he views America from an outsiders perspective. Although Cole comes to be known as the father of the Hudson River School, he is born in Lancashire England in 1801, the seventh of eight siblings and the only son. With the increase in industrialization in Lancashire, his father, a muslin manufacturer, sought to improve his financial situation and moves the family to America in 1818.

Early in his career, Thomas Cole focused his art on landscape painting that captured the qualities of the local landscape with an unparalleled sensitivity, such as the View of the White Mountains painted in 1827 in the collection of the

Wadsworth Athenaeum. (fig. 12) Landscape was a genre of painting that was not held in high regard in early 19th Century America. At this time, American art culture was defined by portrait and historical paintings by such artists as John Trumbull and Benjamin West. The landscape tradition at this time in America focused on limner topographical renderings, such as John William Hill's Erie Canal, (fig. 13) or idealized landscapes in the service of history painting, such as those by Benjamin West.

In 1825, the year that the Erie Canal opens, Cole's landscapes come to attention of John Trumbull in New York City. John Trumbull, Asher B. Durant and William Dunlap, three of the most influential figures on the American art scene, purchase three of Cole's landscapes for \$25 each. These purchases secure the career and reputation of Cole as the foremost landscape painter in America.

At this time American art culture was in its infancy, there were no public art museums in New York. The American Academy of Fine Art, founded in 1802 as the New York Academy Arts, and subsequently led by John Trumbull from 1817 – 1835, mounted several exhibitions of history paintings and religious sculpture, focusing their collection and exhibits on established "old master" works. It did not exhibit contemporary artists of the time. The New York Historical Society had only recently been formed in 1804 to "rescue from the dust and obscurity of private repositories such important documents, as are liable to be lost or

destroyed...” as described in the New-York Herald of February 13, 1805. Again, focusing on historical rather than contemporary works.

During the early 19th Century in America, contemporary artists did not have many venues to exhibit their works. In 1826 the National Academy of Design was established. Cole was elected a founding member. It was “dedicated to promoting artistic design in America, it limited its membership to artists and exhibited the work of living artists exclusively.” (Jackson 799) The NAD became the center of contemporary art exhibitions and culture in 19th Century New York and is the historic root of today’s art school and gallery. The NAD provided the opportunity for the interchange of ideas and the exhibition of works for the artists of the 1830’s, including Thomas Cole. In 1839 the Apollo Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in the United States, subsequently to be called the American Art-Union (AAU), was formed with the intention to promote fine art in America. A quote from their Transactions, Apollo Assn. 1842-43 describes the conditions of American art culture, “We have no public galleries; our high-ways are ornamented with neither monuments nor statues; the men of wealth and taste among us, who possess works of art shut them up within the walls of their homes, where they are as much lost to the world as though they had never existed...Our churches are now the last places where an artist would look for encouragement, and the state hardly acknowledges the existence of Art among us.” The AAU purchased art from artists of the time and distributed it, by a lottery system, throughout the country. It ceased operations in 1853 due to legal

actions brought against its lotteries. Both the National Academy of Design and the American Art-Union organized to promote an American art culture for the benefit of the artists and society, reflecting Emerson's thoughts on the duties of the scholar in his 'American Scholar' essay, when he writes, "He is to find consolation in exercising the highest functions of human nature. He is one who raises himself from private considerations and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts. He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. He is to resist the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history. " (Emerson, 1837, 56)

Art, or high art, as Cole work is considered, was solely the domain of the elite. Artists often created works for the elite patrons. Cole's most significant patron was Lumen Cole, who commissioned the Course of Empire for the art gallery he created in his new home on Greenwich Street in New York City, just around the corner from Cole's New York City studio on the corner of Wall St. and Broadway. Because of the lack of museums and galleries in New York, Reed's art gallery was open to visitors by invitation or introduction one day a week. The specific arrangement of paintings in the Cole series was designed to occupy the specific place of prominence surrounding the fireplace in Lumen Reed's art gallery. It is through Reed's patronage and encouragement from around 1833 until his sudden death in 1836, that supports Cole's creation of Course of Empire along with other works. Reed's untimely death before the Course of Empire was

complete was a shock to Cole, but inspired him to finish the work in record time. The family encouraged Cole to finish the work as planned; for which Cole received a \$5,000 commission. Prior to the installation of the works in the Reed Gallery on Greenwich Street, Cole, needing to secure financial resources, held a privately sponsored exhibition of the series in the Clinton Gallery space he rented at the National Academy of Design. Cole advertised the exhibition in amusement sections of the newspapers and created a pamphlet, using the previously cited quotation, "First freedom, and then Glory; when that fails, Wealth, vice, corruption." from Byron's *Childe Harold*, and for which he wrote a narrative for each canvas, to promote the exhibition. The show ran for nine weeks, beginning on October 15, 1836, closing just before Christmas. Cole charged an admittance fee of 50 cents or \$1 for the season. Considered a 'block-buster' by the standards of the day, the exhibition was the most financially successful exhibit in America up to this time. It was even more successful in regard to Cole's reputation as an artist. The response, recorded in *The American Monthly Magazine* of November 1836, is indicative of the reception, "These pictures, as we have heard it observed by a distinguished artist, will hereafter mark a new era in the history of painting. They constitute a grand moral epic; each picture of the series being as perfect in itself as a single book or a finished poem; and the whole together comprising a system which, for completeness and grandeur of conception, may be classed with the nobles works of imagination."

The art in Reed's Gallery became the seminal collection of the New-York Gallery of Fine Arts in 1844, which was the first permanent collection in the city. (Jackson 851). The gallery closed for financial reasons in 1858 when the collection, including the 'Course of Empire' was donated to the New York Historical Society, where it has remained, although it does travel on loan to various sites for inclusion in exhibitions. The collection of the American Academy of Art, which John Trumbull led, closed in 1842 and the painting collection was sold to Daniel Wadsworth.

Thomas Cole became the foremost landscape painter in America in the 1830's. He moved landscape painting beyond a mere record of a scene and elevated it to the level of history painting. As a member of the elite Romantic circle of artists, writers and thinkers, Trumbull, Cooper, Emerson, and the like, Cole's work 'Course of Empire' embodies many of the philosophical, religious, literary and political ideas of the day especially regarding nature, progress of civilization and spirituality found in Transcendentalism, Associationism, Uniformitarianism and anti-Jacksonianism. Cole also artistically looked back across the Atlantic to the theoretical and technical artistic precedents, of the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque, which he incorporated in his work to elevate it to a level of national recognition and to allow it to stand on an equal foot with international artists. This combination of influences and characteristics produced a seminal work of art of 19th Century American art culture and the Hudson River School.

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