

ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

AR 310 AMERICAN ART I

THOMAS COLE AND THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE  
OF THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

Submitted by

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Fall, 1982

When Moses led the Children of Israel to the edge of the land of Canaan he sent spies to bring reports of the land and its people. Once inside Canaan, the spies cut a cluster of grapes that was so large that two men carried it between them on a staff. The spies brought back reports of a land that flowed with milk and honey. It was the Promised Land. America's first settlers had similar expectations of this land. America had been billed as a welcoming, fruitful land of promise; not only for its natural wealth but its spiritual possibilities as well. To the Puritans, America was seen as the last chance to escape the "dark clouds of popery"<sup>1</sup> and finally establish true Christianity. When arriving in America their inflated expectations encountered a harsh reality that forced them to spend their energy working out their survival rather than establishing the kingdom of God on earth. The ideal paradise was actually a mysterious and threatening reality.

Eventually, the new inhabitants of the New World became more established and managed to exercise some control over their natural environment. The harshness of Puritanism was tempered by the influence of the age of reason, which caused men to rely more on their rational ability and less on the whims of an inscrutable God. With the influx of reason into religion came a more reasonable and

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<sup>1</sup>Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis and H. P. Warren, ed., American Literature: The Makers and the Making, (New York: St. Martins, 1973), I, p. 18.

sympathetic version of God. There also became a small amount of leisure time in which men could think, cultivate the arts, and take stock of their situation.

In an early nineteenth century reaction to this new dependence on reason was Transcendentalism. A loosely organized group of New England writers, social reformers, and clergy made up the Transcendental Club of Boston which, though small, was very influential. Transcendentalism was a belief in a higher reality than that found through sense experience or human reason. It was a belief in the ability, through revelation and intuition, to transcend the world of superficial appearances to a realm of absolutes, ideals, and spirit.

Transcendentalism was both a philosophical and theological movement with romantic attitudes and emphasis. Theologically, it was a reaction to the cold rational nature of contemporary Protestantism. Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson perceived rational theology as denying religious ecstasy and the possible depths of spiritual and emotional experience.<sup>2</sup> In an address given to the Harvard Divinity School, Emerson accused theologians not only of discounting revelation, but also of eliminating its source. "Men have come to speak of revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead."<sup>3</sup> As a reaction to dependence on rational thought, Transcendentalism was a movement that emphasized faith instead of understanding, mysticism instead of rationalism, a trust in intuition

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<sup>2</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, American Literature: The Makers and the Making, ed. Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis and R. P. Warren (New York: St. Martin's, 1973), I, p. 678.

<sup>3</sup>Brooks, p. 678.

and conscience over allegiance to institutions, and revelation instead of reason.<sup>4</sup> Revelation was especially important because it was through revelation that God communicated with the soul of man. It was through revelation that men were given absolute answers and brief glimpses of the ideal. One of the best ways to receive revelation was through sensitive interaction with nature. A person could tell when revelation had actually occurred because the manifestations were always attended by the emotion of the sublime.

The sublime was thought to be the strongest emotion man was capable of feeling. Other emotions associated with the sublime were those of terror, awe, and exaltation. On the effect of the sublime, Edmund Burke wrote:

The greatest effect of the sublime is astonishment; the suspense of the soul in some degree of horror. The mind is filled and cannot reason . . . lesser effects are admiration, reverence, and respect . . .<sup>5</sup>

In a Transcendental context this special emotion was usually triggered by contemplation of nature in its purest and most majestic forms.

John Ruskin said:

Anything which elevates the mind is sublime, and elevation of mind is produced by the contemplation of greatness of any kind; but chiefly, of course, by the greatness of the noblest things . . . Greatness of matter, space, power, virtue or beauty, are thus all sublime . . .<sup>6</sup>

In America, nature was noble and great and its sublimity represented the power of God.

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<sup>4</sup>Brooks, p. 338.

<sup>5</sup>Edmund Burke, The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 74.

<sup>6</sup>John Ruskin, The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 77.

Nature was regarded as the evidence of God or as God himself. A result of this regard was a period of nature worship by important philosophers, writers, and artists on the time. American wilderness was especially worthy of worship because it was seen as the remains of paradise; the natural condition of the world unspoiled by cultivation and exploitation. God was present in the biblical paradise so it followed that his presence could also be discovered in its American remnant. Emerson said that ". . . 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 . . ." <sup>7</sup> and that nature was the ally of religion in that it lent itself to religious sentiment and that every natural process was a moral function as well. <sup>8</sup>

God in, or revealed through, nature was accessible to everyone because everyone was capable of "communing" with nature and partaking of the divine. In his "Essay on American Scenery" of 1835, Thomas Cole stated, "Prophets of old retired into the solitude of nature to wait the inspiration of heaven . . . the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God." <sup>9</sup>

Along with a belief in the innate divinity of nature, these practitioners of nature worship had a knowledge of the destructive effect of man on the wilderness and had a concern for nature's

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<sup>7</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Barbara Novak, "American Landscape: The Nationalist Garden and the Holy Book," Art in America, (January-February, 1972), p. 50.

<sup>8</sup>Barbara Novak and A. Blaugrund, ed. Next to Nature, (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1980), p. 74.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Cole, in John Wilmerding, et al., American Light, (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1980), p. 69.

preservation. There is little doubt that the reverence for nature was enhanced by the realization that it could be lost. Thomas Cole commenting on the problem said:

. . . there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness must pas away; for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God, the Creator; they are his undefined works and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.<sup>10</sup>

American expansion was seen as violating the holiness of nature. Since the landscape was of God, lovers of nature were more moral and civilized than lovers of "civilization." Quoting Thomas Cole again:

. . . I cannot but express my worrow 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.<sup>11</sup>

As the destruction of the wilderness increased so did the popularity of landscape painting. Landscape painting was depicting the natural manifestations of God. This helped change the puritanical idea of art as a useless luxury. Painting was now a morally uplifting product that brought a new version of the word of God into the home, and therefore served a religious as well as decorative purpose. This broader patronage helped to make landscape a valid and profitable form.

Thomas Cole began his career as a landscape painter in America in the 1820's. He understood both the spiritual significance of the

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas Cole, in Earl A. Powell, "Thomas Cole and the American Landscape Tradition: Associationism," Arts Magazine, (April 1978), p. 116.

<sup>11</sup>Powell, p. 116.

wilderness, its ability to evoke the emotion of the sublime, and the spiritual and moral aspects and obligations of landscape painting. Cole combined landscape elements to express religious ideas. He preferred synthesizing aspects of observed landscape to transcribing single views. This preference was based on a belief that such an approach was what made painting creative rather than merely imitative. "If the imagination is shackled, and nothing is described but what we see, seldom will anything truly great be produced in painting or poetry."<sup>12</sup> Cole also believed that free use of the imagination kept painting safe from the new threat of photography.<sup>13</sup> As a guard against being only imitative, Cole seldom did more than sketch from nature. He claimed that physical and temporal distance from a scene was important so that superficial and unessential details did not interfere with the beautiful and sublime features of a landscape. The most desirable quality in a work of art was that it be, in some way, sublime. Some of Cole's paintings can be viewed as catalogues of sublime images, or those natural phenomena that evoke a response of terror, awe or admiration, such as thunderstorms, waterfalls, majestic mountains, windblasted trees, dramatic effects of light and shadow, and the more traditionally romantic motif of architectural ruins. Ruins were used not only to create nostalgia for times past, but as sermons on human vanity. Such works show nature and civilization operating on two different clocks. The paintings show the fugitive nature of man's achievement when compared to the persistence of nature. The

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<sup>12</sup>McShine, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas Cole, Artists on Art, Robert Goldwater and M. Treves, ed., 3rd ed., (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 282.

eventual ruin and decay of such achievements are symbols of God's judgement on people who have taken pride in their advancement and abandoned him.

Though at times he did execute "pure" landscapes, Cole resented the time and energy spent on them. His allegorical paintings were generally well received, but enormous works such as the Course of Empire series required an unusually large exhibition space and commission. The size and expense of such works rendered them somewhat inaccessible. Cole's topographical works were more intimate, affordable and in great demand, but Cole didn't care for the attitude of those who desired such paintings. "Those who purchase pictures are, many of them, like those who purchase merchandise: They want quantity, material--something to show, something palpable--things not thoughts."<sup>14</sup> On another occasion when faced with painting such salable works, he said:

I long for the time when I can paint whatever my imagination would dictate without fear of running pecuniary difficulties. This painting for money, and to please the many, is sadly repulsive to me . . .<sup>15</sup>

However, even the most topographical of Cole's paintings can be read as paradigms of his philosophical and religious beliefs. There is the contrast between imperfect reality and the ideal, illustrative of the platonic and transcendental concept of levels of reality. There is evidence of the eternal quality of nature as opposed to the transient constructs of human reason. Almost all of his paintings contain elements that suggest life, death, and regeneration.

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<sup>14</sup>Goldwater, p. 282.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Cole, in Clara Endicott Sears, Highlights Among the Hudson River Artists, (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1947), p. 94.



Believed painting to be a sacred trust Cole could not, in good conscience, paint a picture free from the inclusion of moral values. To Cole, art was a divine force; a small scale imitation of God's creative power.<sup>16</sup> The artist's purpose was to contribute to the moral well being of humanity.

The art of paintings is not merely a thing for amusement . . . it forms, on the principles of eternal nature, a world of its own. Its influence on man, morally and intellectually, has been and is far more extensive than many of you have ever dreamed of . . . In ages past, it has made moral and religious impressions on the mind and character of nations . . . It is an engine capable of great good, or great evil. It speaks a language intelligible to all nations.<sup>17</sup>

Cole believed that it was more important for a painting to affect the soul than to please the eye. The visual form of a painting was not an end in itself but a vehicle by which important ideas were communicated. Although today his topographical works are considered more successful than his overtly diadactic works, his commitment and seriousness of purpose was appreciated in his own time. On the occasion of Cole's death, his friend William Cullen Bryant said that Cole " . . . revered his profession as the instrument of good to mankind . . ." and that his paintings "are of that nature that it hardly transcends the proper use of language to call them acts of religion."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Novak, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup>Wilmerding, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup>William Cullen Bryant, in John Canaday, The Lives of the Painters, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), III, p. 1040.

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