

# The Bibliophile

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## *Thomas Cole: Artist as Architect*

Exhibition catalog by Annette Blaugrund with contributions by Franklin Kelly, Barbara Novak and Elizabeth Jacks. Monacelli Press, 2016. Exhibition organized by the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Catskill, N. Y.

On view May 1–October 30, 2016.

Travelling to the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, O. H., November 18, 2016–February 12, 2017.

To stand in the brand-new building where *Thomas Cole: Artist as Architect* is on view at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, New York is to take in the splendor of a soaring ceiling and rich red walls, replete with a visual feast of drawings, paintings, architectural renderings and books, all of which explore Cole's lifelong interest in architecture. It is rare that the building that houses an exhibition must also be considered an object within the exhibition, but such is the case here. This year the museum opened the faithful recreation of Thomas Cole's crowning architectural achievement—the 1846 studio he designed and executed for himself on the property at Cedar Grove—demolished more than forty years ago. Now that the replica building is complete, a monument to the artistic soul who originally created it has been reborn.

The result is that we cannot separate this small but elegant building from the exhibition housed within—it is the *raison d'être*, felt upon arrival, and the very bedrock of the whole enterprise. In the exhibition you are aware of being surrounded by examples of the impulses that led to the manifestation of the studio, both Cole's original and this present reconstruction. It is moving, especially for those who remember when long-term preservation of the ensemble of buildings and grounds that now constitute the museum was so tenuous. If experiencing these artworks within this architecture is a culmination, then longtime Cole House collaborator, exhibition curator and primary essayist, Dr. Annette Blaugrund's carefully-crafted catalogue about Cole's interest in and knowledge about architecture is the path which leads us there. She begins as every good scholar does, with a question: "Why would this renowned painter...advertise himself as an architect?"

Blaugrund proceeds to answer this question by carefully plotting Cole's enduring and serious interest in architectural practice through examination of his various artistic pursuits through lens of architecture. The essay accomplishes many things, at once breaking new ground through research and scholarship, while simultaneously synthesizing earlier explorations by other colleagues into a more cohesive discourse. Her inquiry and conclusions are arranged in a loose chronology of interdisciplinary topics; she shifts between Cole's representations of architecture in his paintings, his rigorous pursuit of knowledge about building theory, practice and historical modes through reading published sources of the period, and his ultimate foray into several architectural design projects including his concept for the Washington Monument. Throughout she conveys Cole's passion, as best expressed by his biographer Louis LeGrand Noble: "Architecture to him was also a very expressive language."

A great strength of the essay is that by alternating discussions between paintings and buildings, Blaugrund reminds the reader that they are not disparate—that for the

artist/designer the relationship between the arts is more interconnected. It is equally refreshing that Blaugrund does not restrict herself to building projects that were realized. We are equally enriched by her discussion of the villa Cole never executed and of St. Luke's Church in Catskill, which was completed in 1840. This writing approach shows artistic process as a flow of ideas—often as an equally compelling and joyful experience for the artist as the execution of those ideas.

Those of us who study Cole are aware of his varied artistic interests—he was also a poet and a musician—but Blaugrund makes it clear that architecture was more than a hobbyist pursuit. It is a daunting task to critically examine this beloved artist's merits in yet another artistic discipline, but the author has done so through thoughtful contemplation and rigorous research. She convincingly traces his ever-expanding comprehension of architectural modes throughout his career, identifying a seminal moments during his trips abroad. Her essay also places Cole's architectural ambitions within the contexts of larger narratives, giving us both art and architectural history lessons which include: the eclectic nature of architecture in America in the period; the rise of the professional architect; and Cole's intersection with leading architects of his era, whom he encountered, in part, as he mentored his nephew, William H. Bayless, an aspiring architect.

She further illustrates his deep knowledge by deconstructing several major paintings, including *The Architect's Dream*, and two series: *The Course of Empire* and *The Voyage of Life*. By doing so she demonstrates Cole's lifelong study of buildings, and introduces these well-known paintings to the reader in new ways. And through a detailed discussion of Cole's prolonged engagement with his most ambitious endeavor, the competition for the Ohio State House, with all its complex twists and turns, Blaugrund deftly reminds the reader of the politics of patronage and business of making art, which conflate in the reality of building projects.

Interwoven throughout, the author liberally uses Cole's own words from letters and diaries, even pulling from his *Treatise on Architecture*, allowing the reader to experience firsthand his passion and knowledge, while using these sources to securely underpin her own conclusions. Cole's words and Blaugrund's insights ultimately take us on a journey through the evolution of his architectural interests, finding resolution in his last built project—his studio at Cedar Grove.

Blaugrund is complemented by a shorter essay by Franklin Kelly, Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the National Gallery (Washington, D.C.) and noted Hudson River School painting scholar. He picks up where she leaves off, at the death of Cole and the paintings which remained in the studio. Kelly examines these serial works which often reflect the passage of

time through related narrative canvases. Blaugrund's earlier discussions showed that Cole's faithfully-depicted panorama of Florence proved his capability for accuracy in architectural perspective and topographical rendering. Her critical examinations provide substance to Kelly's own assertions that Cole's later paintings, which Kelly deems "imaginative," were a creative act of choice, and not due to inabilities for pure transcription. Both authors also discuss what Blaugrund identifies as a tension in Cole's works: "Yet the inclusion of architecture also revealed Cole's concerns for the preservation of nature versus the intrusion of civilization."

The catalogue reads easily, but does assume some fundamental knowledge of Cole and the Hudson River School. It includes fifty-seven full-color images woven throughout the various essays. Discussion of the works on exhibition is comprehensive and indeed goes well beyond them. The publication concludes with both an illustration and full transcription of a letter written by Cole devotee Jasper Cropsey in July 1850, writing home to his wife from Cedar Grove several years after Cole's death. This poignant primary-source document poetically describes the studio and its contents in great detail, a goldmine of material for scholars. More importantly it provides a touchstone back to the legacy of Cole's home and studio as an enduring place of pilgrimage, and directly to the importance of having recreated the building on the campus of the museum for future generations of Cole-lovers to engage with—the inaugural exhibition marking the exciting start of those efforts.

The catalogue covers great deal of new ground in a reasonable amount of text, and likewise the exhibition successfully includes a lot of work in a compact space—for all its soaring height the footprint of the studio/gallery is not large. The exhibition, like the catalogue, includes a variety of works from different disciplines. There are Cole landscape paintings, architectural drawings, and models as well as books which Cole would have consulted. There are also three depictions of Cedar Grove by other artists, executed after Cole's death; these informed the rebuilding. There is even portrait of Thomas Cole by his friend and fellow painter Asher B. Durand. It reminds us that all that surrounds us was the brainchild of Cole, coming together in this arresting physical space.

Blaugrund and the organizing staff at the Cole House, Director Elizabeth Jacks and Curator Kate Menconeri, are to be commended for the breadth of impressive loans obtained for this show including works from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Albany Institute of History & Art, the Berkshire Museum, and nearby Olana. The tour de force in the gallery is *The Architect's Dream*, 1840 (on loan from the Toledo Museum of Art), Cole's sweeping homage to man's continuous fascination with his built environment. It is

stirring to stand in front of this large painting, the magnum opus expressing Cole's lifelong interest in architecture, while being physically enveloped by the space which is a faithful replica of his crowning achievement in architectural practice. With this energetic joint display—painting and building—one feels that both have come full-circle, back to the site of their creation and where they long remained (the painting was not sold until 1949 and the studio survived, in a dilapidated state, until the 1970s). The sense of history and locus geni is palpable and achieved without resorting to a recreated vignette of Cole's studio as he left it at his death in 1848. The studio is reinvigorated; an intellectual nod back to the Cole's legacy coupled with a strong assertion of what vibrant presentations are possible in the future within this space. Above all it is celebratory: of Cole; of what the site has achieved as a public museum; and of its current ethos as an active place for creative expression and intellectual conversation.

As a curator at Olana, the home of Cole's student Frederic Church, I am deeply aware of the prolonged impact Cole's tutelage had on Church's painting and his personal life. Yet, this catalogue and exhibition have made me reexamine the mentor's influence in unexpected ways. While studying with Cole in the mid-1840s, it was a teenage Church who would have been surrounded by the books, plans, and paintings referenced here. He would have been privy to Cole's exuberant discourse on architecture and enthusiastic desires to design and build. I now recognize that Church's fearlessness regarding his ability to build his own deeply-personal environment was likely instilled by those informative years under Cole. Through Cole, the initial seed would have been planted that these projects were indeed possible for the painter to dream, and within his grasp to realize. In some measure, the result of that seed is the greatest and most personal artistic masterpiece of Church's own life—Olana. This singular realization reinforces insightful declarations made by Barbara Novak in her foreword; that the scholarly discourse brought forth in both exhibition and catalogue paves the way for deeper inquiry into Cole, a complex artist and man, who we all feel we know, but about whom we have so much more to discover.

After its close at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site on October 30, 2016, the exhibition will travel to the Columbus Museum of Art, the state linked both to Cole's boyhood and his most ambitious architectural exercise, his submission for the Ohio Statehouse. The Columbus venue will offer seven additional drawings and renderings and will remain open through February 12, 2017.

*Reviewed by Valerie A. Balint*

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## *Women's Views: The Narrative Stereograph in Nineteenth-Century America*

Melody Davis. University of New Hampshire Press, 2015.

The stereoscope, a forerunner of the baby-boomer's View-Master and the millennial generation's virtual-reality headset, was the premier parlor accoutrement of the Victorian home. Between 1870 and 1900 nearly every home had one. Just like

the verbose language of a Victorian novel with its detailed description, the stereoscope card with its lavish "story pictures" required patient reading. Moreover, stereoscope companies referred to themselves as publishers, and the picture cards