

Exhibition review: Thomas Cole: Eden to Empire at the National Gallery, WC2

Thomas Cole was the first artist to capture the vastness of the States

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River in the Catskills by Thomas Cole, 1843
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

★★★★★

“Can there be a country in the world better calculated than ours to exercise and to exalt the imagination . . .” asked De Witt Clinton in 1816. In America, declared the soon-to-be governor of the state of New York: “Nature has conducted her operations on a magnificent scale . . .” But how to paint it? That was the problem. How could any picture capture such awesome immensity?

To the continent's first settlers, the American wilderness would have felt more like a challenge to be physically conquered than a sight to exalt the soul. It was a world of woods to be chopped, plains to be grazed, pastures to be ploughed and wild animals to be killed. But by the 19th century, American cities were expanding and the landscape, in contrast, was being increasingly romanticised.



The Consummation of Empire, 1835-6, from Thomas Cole's The Course of Empire series
COLLECTION OF THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NEW YORK

Artists looked to Europe for a precedent. They turned to the idea of the sublime as it had been defined, in 1757, by Edmund Burke. The American landscape threw proportion out of kilter. It was too wide and too big and too wild to fit beauty's conventional model. But, as Burke had written: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain or danger . . . is a source of the sublime."

Thomas Cole was the first artist in the States to set off in search of this transcendent quality. Following the Hudson River valley up into the Catskill mountains, he set about capturing unsullied immensities in paint. He wanted his work to speak of some extraordinary spirit of transcendence to be found in wild nature. And his voice was heard. A whole school of artists followed behind him, scrambling the peaks and the promontories that he believed to be the "undefiled works" of God. They cast the mind "into contemplation of eternal things", he said.



Life Study for the Prostrate Shepherd in the Angel Appearing to the Shepherds, 1831–2
JOHN BIGELOW TAYLOR LLC

It is the story of this pioneer that a ravishing National Gallery exhibition now tells. *Thomas Cole: Eden to Empire* may not be a full retrospective but, including some 35 works by this founding father of America's visual traditions, it includes a dozen or more of his best-loved images. Here is your chance to gaze at the falls at Niagara. To goggle at the breathtaking drama as, inspired by James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cole stages its climactic moment (when the young Cora pleads with the Native American chief for her life and that of her half-sister) on a mountain-ringed plateau. To stare over the panorama of *The Oxbow*. Here, looking down from a God's-eye height, we see the vast curl of the Connecticut River as it carves its glimmering question mark into cultivated flood plains. Above, a wild storm churns the skies. Which do you choose? Cole poses a question with this painting. Do you take the wilderness that, however threatening, is nonetheless teeming with savage life; or the tamed flatlands, so fertile, so placid, so apparently vacant?

At the heart of this show lies Cole's landmark series of five paintings, *The Course of Empire*. This is the masterwork that secured his career and reputation. It hasn't been lent to this country before. Each canvas depicts the same landscape, but as you progress it changes. Charting first the rise then the fall of a mythical civilisation, Cole chronicles a succession of eras. A series that begins with primeval hunter-gatherers in wild, wind-lashed forests moves through the idyll of a pastoral Arcadia and on to a great marble city, glittering in the light. Fiery destruction follows. As you reach the final canvas, you find a lone column presiding over smashed colonnades. The wild vegetation reclaims the scene. And from the far distance the man in the moon gives a wink.

This exhibition, however, does more than just bring us some remarkable paintings. It follows the story of a self-taught painter from his birth in 1801 in Bolton, Lancashire, at the height of the industrial revolution, through his emigration to America at the age of 17 (living first in

Philadelphia then in New York), his return a decade later to Europe for a Grand Tour-style trip, to the last all-too-brief period of success that he was to enjoy in the States before his death at the age of 47.



The Titan's Goblet, 1833
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

Curators look at Cole's work first in the context of the European artists whom he imitated and learnt from; then as he sets a precedent for his followers in the Hudson River School. Claude's luminous *Seaport with the Embarkation of Saint Ursula*, Turner's apocalyptic *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* and Constable's *Hadleigh Castle* are just a few of the splendours that the exhibition can offer as you watch Cole borrowing and adapting, translating and modifying not just the styles and motifs, but the symbols and philosophies of his British contemporaries and his European forebears. The representative handful of canvases from his

followers are no less dramatic. Make sure you don't miss the burning sunsets of Frederic Edwin Church.



Home in the Woods, c 1847

It doesn't matter if you have never even heard of Cole. Get along to this show; it's a ravishing treat. Cole's works are about more than just capturing nature's histrionics. The boy who had grown up in a smoke-tainted town, who had borne witness to industrial despoilation, had a message to impart. His paintings pose questions. Do we desire wealth over wilderness, they wonder. Is our greed more important than the creation of God? Must human ambition remain so overweening that, blind to the precedents of past civilisations, we continue on our path to eventual doom? The artist who first taught America how to look at its landscapes can still teach us how to look at our world today.

***Thomas Cole: Eden to Empire* is at the National Gallery, London WC2 (020 7747 2885), June 11 to October 7**

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exhibition-review-thomas-cole-eden-to-empire-at-the-national-gallery-wc2-20oct7975z>