

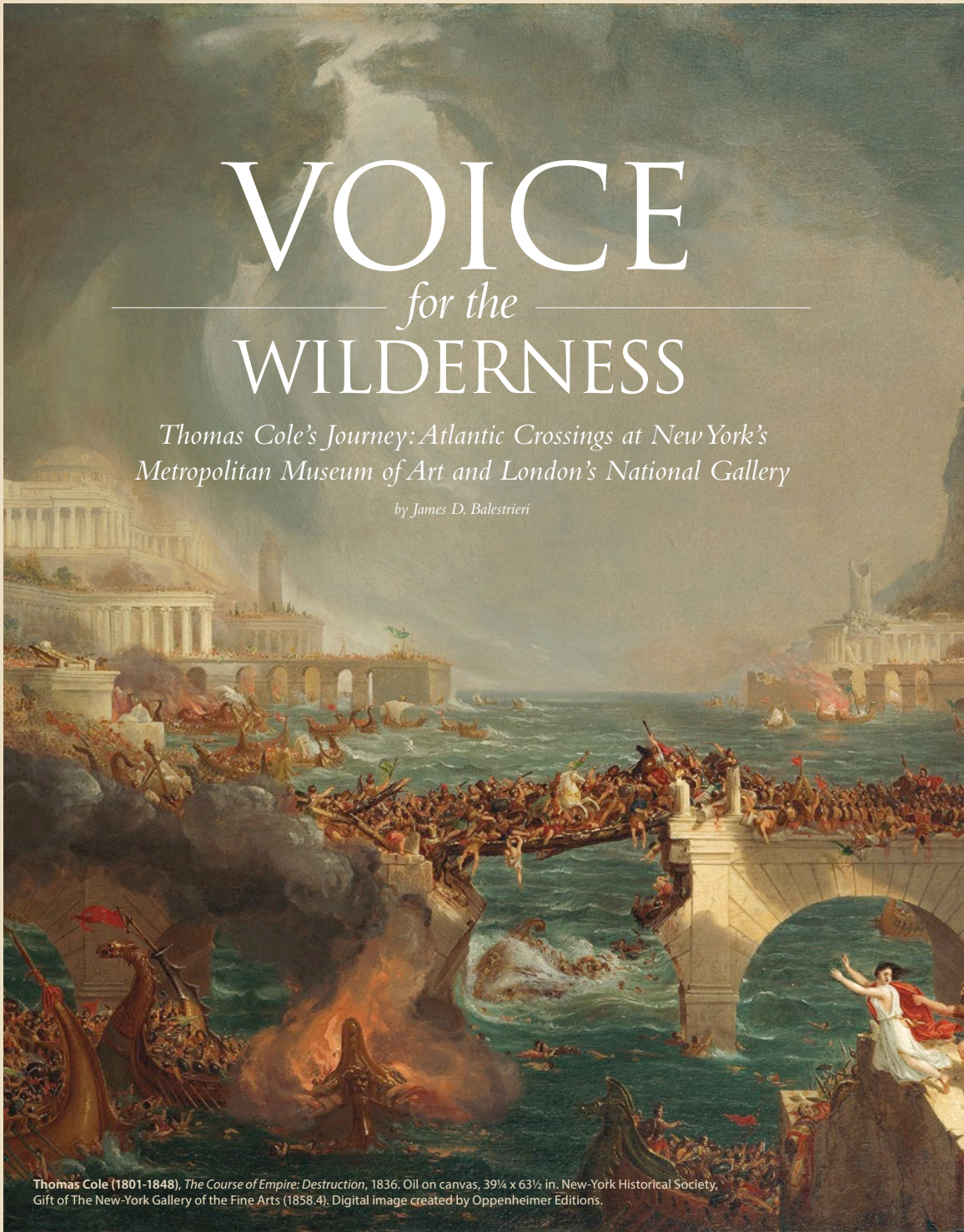
VOICE

— for the —

WILDERNESS

*Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings at New York's
Metropolitan Museum of Art and London's National Gallery*

by James D. Balestrieri



Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 39¼ x 63½ in. New-York Historical Society, Gift of The New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts (1858.4). Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.



I spent my last birthday at Thomas Cole's house and studio in Catskill, New York. The house, doubling as it did as his showroom—galleries as we know them did not exist in the United States much before the Civil War, and artists' associations such as the National Academy of Design (which Cole had helped to found) only held annual exhibitions—was an architectural marvel in its humble way. The studios—one in the house, one a separate building designed with windows to catch soft northern light—were filled with replicas of classical casts, miniature horses and figures, collections of seashells and rocks, pigments, and a giant color wheel of Cole's own devising. His poems were there, hymns to nature mostly, and his musical instruments—Cole often played the recorder as he rambled through the mountainside forests in search of subjects to draw and paint. Then there were his letters on art, not only on the how of art, but on the why, and why art was crucial to the American project, and then there was his *Essay on American Scenery*, an inspired defense of the American wilderness as a subject for the painter that quickly becomes something else entirely, a manifesto against the excesses of industrialism, a plea for restraint and preservation, and a caution against unbridled exploitation



Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 51½ x 76 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908 (08.228). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

of the natural world as timely today as it was novel then. Listen to Cole: “And to this cultivated state our western world is fast approaching; but nature is still predominant, and there are those who regret that with the improvements of cultivation the sublimity of the wilderness should pass away: for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a 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 undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.”

I stood where Cole often stood on his covered porch, and looked out toward the Catskill Mountains, still beautiful in their shades of deep green and misted lavenders. From this spot, Cole watched as sailboats became steamboats, and as the great forests were felled to make way for farms and for the railroad and to provide lumber to build factories and fuel to stoke their fires.

Two things came to mind. One was that Cole, had he been standing next to me, would have been amazed that anything of the world he knew had survived (in no small measure due to his vision of places set aside and apart from development). But he would surely have abhorred the rest of it—the cars and roads and ugly utilitarian architecture, the manicured fields and gardens, the wires bisecting the sky overhead. If I had told him that the Hudson River was polluted, that the trout streams of the Catskills had been invaded by carpets of rock snot but that we were working to restore these waters, he would have been appalled that we had ruined it in the first place. And Cole would have looked to religious metaphors and planned new



Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1836-37. Oil on canvas, 54½ x 78½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift in memory of Jonathan Sturges by his children, 1895 (95.13.3). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *The Course of the Empire: The Consummation of Empire*, 1835-36. Oil on canvas, 51¼ x 76 in. New-York Historical Society, Gift of The New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts (1858.3). Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions.

canvases in response to the notion of global warming.

My second thought was that if Cole had been a European rather than an American artist, he would be as revered as Goethe or Turner. Schools and art institutes and public parks and spaces would be named for him. But we generally name these after politicians and captains of industry—purveyors of power and money who develop a conscience late in life or need a shot of positive PR—rather than after artists, writers and other visionaries who pursue the paths of dreams and beauty early on. Happily, this is changing, but it is a change long past due.

Thomas Cole's Atlantic Crossings, opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and moving to London's National Gallery is a revelation, a necessary corrective that recasts this important American artist as a global culture hero.

Cole was born in 1801 in Bolton-le-Moors in Lancashire, England (keep Bolton in mind as we go). Bolton burgeoned with textile mills. The air was foul, the water filthy. The alleyways where the millworkers lived, if you could call it living, were densely crowded. The fires of the mills burned round the clock.

Bolton typifies the Industrial Revolution at its earliest and worst.

When he was 11, Cole and his family bore witness a violent reaction to conditions in Bolton. Led by Ned Ludd, these “Luddites,” who were hand weavers, took to the streets against the mechanized looms that rendered them obsolete. The Luddites’ violence was met by even greater violence. These scenes, played out against the infernal mills, surely impressed themselves on Cole’s mind.

After apprenticing himself to an engraver in Liverpool, Cole accompanied his family to Philadelphia in 1818.

Something in his environs, in what he would come to call American scenery, caused Cole to take up the brush, watercolors first, then oils. When his family moved to Pittsburgh and back to Philadelphia in 1823 and 1824, Cole filled sketchbooks with drawings, principally of trees, rendering them in anthropomorphic shapes that profoundly shaped not only his art, but American visual culture. You can see the influence of Cole’s trees in artists as varied as Blakelock and Burchfield, Dixon and Disney.

In 1825, Cole moved to New York City, a thriving mercantile metropolis

connected to the entire world. Later that year, Cole made his first journey up the Hudson to paint. When one of the paintings from this trip was purchased by John Trumbull—painter of *Declaration of Independence* and other monumental scenes of the American Revolution, and now president of the American Academy of the Fine Arts—and Trumbull anointed Cole as the painter who would interpret the American landscape as it was meant to be seen in art, the young artist was on his way.

Just four years later, in 1829, Cole, at the urging of fellow artists like Washington Allston, sailed back to Europe to study and to try to build on his early success.

Cole’s meetings with J.M.W. Turner and other important British painters in their studios as well as his trips to museums to take in collections of Old Masters—Claude Lorrain in particular—were formative experiences. The dreamscapes of classical port cities from history and myth that Turner and Lorrain favored would provide Cole with inspiration for some of his most ambitious work. Formal classes in figure drawing he took in Florence—Cole proved to be a quick study in figurative work—rounded out his education. One



Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans," Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamemund, 1827.* Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 35 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, Bequest of Alfred Smith (1868.3). Photo: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum.

thing he did not do—something that was expected of all young artists on the Grand Tour—was to copy masterpieces. Instead, Cole learned to make oil sketches of ruins and landscapes in plein air, a skill that would serve him extremely well throughout his career. Extant sketches, painted to suggest color schemes and the shapes and disposition of elements in the picture plane that he would later expand upon in the studio, demonstrate Cole's passion and the power of his ideas.

Cole returned to New York at the end of 1832 and settled in Catskill, New York, the following year. He immediately embarked on what would be his greatest work, the centerpiece of the Met exhibition, *The Course of Empire*, five large canvases depicting the rise of a single imperial capital city from *The Savage State*, through *The Arcadian*, or *Pastoral State*, to its unwittingly decadent pinnacle at *The Consummation of Empire*, and then documenting the fall in canvases depicting *Destruction* and a return to unpeopled nature in the ruins of *Desolation*.

The notion of rise and fall was very much on the minds of a generation that had seen its share of revolutions and uprisings. It seemed a sign that Edward Gibbon's monumental work *The Rise*

and *Fall of the Roman Empire* should have been published in 1776, the very year that the American Colonies broke with Britain. Turner himself had produced diptychs—the rise and fall of Carthage, for example.

What Cole saw in the pitiless, wholesale destruction of the natural world in his beloved Catskills seemed to presage and ensure a reckoning. In a dialectic that would have done Hegel proud, the seeds of the downfall

of the American project spring from the ambition and industriousness that were making the young nation grow ever more powerful. To Cole, leveling the great forests indiscriminately was a sin against a divine dispensation—the unspoiled wilderness that made America a new Eden. Humankind, in Cole's vision, is itself the serpent in this garden; the desire for gold in the New World displaces the desire for knowledge in Genesis. The



Frederic E. Church (1826-1900), *Above the Clouds at Sunrise, 1849.* Oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Private collection.

tree of knowledge transforms and multiplies, becoming the American forest. Composed of anthropomorphic trees, which Cole thought of as “like men, differing widely in character,” Cole’s imagery suggests human beings cutting down other human beings; the war to tame nature is a war against humankind’s own better nature. Think of the giant treelike Ents in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, assaulting Isengard to stop the clearcutting of their brethren, whose limbs feed the evil wizard Saruman’s furnaces of war, and you will have some idea of just how far ahead of his time Cole’s art and outlook truly is.

As art, the five paintings in Cole’s *The Course of Empire* rank—or ought to—with William Blake’s fever dreams of human fallibility, Goya’s meditations on war, and Picasso’s *Guernica*. The canvases cover an epoch: hundreds of years, perhaps, but important elements, such as the peak at center right, let us know that these are views of the same spot over time. And that, in the end, is what these paintings are about: time. Innocence to experience. Birth to death. Growth to decay. Dawn to dusk. Indeed, even as Cole shows us an empire, it all happens in a day. Dawn breaks on *The Savage State*; the moon rises over *Desolation*. What is to us the labor of lifetimes is less than a single day in the eye of God and in the life of the Earth.

Motifs move back and forth through the paintings. The pose of the hunter in *The Savage State* mirrors the pose of the headless statue of a gladiator in *Destruction*. The storm in *The Savage State*, a natural phenomenon, finds its analog in the swirling smoke of the man-made fires in *Destruction*. The triumphal procession over the bridge in *The Consummation of Empire* devolves to a chaotic, violent flight in *Destruction*. This same bridge is all but gone, nothing more than a tree and vine covered arch, in the final painting, *Desolation*.

Another of Cole’s masterpieces, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, painted as a break from, and an antidote to, *The Course of Empire*, contains many of the same oppositions in a single work.



Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *From Nature*, 1823. Ink on paper, 9½ x 7¼ in. Albany Institute of History & Art, Gift of Edith Cole (Mrs. Howard) Silberstein (1965.68.1). Photography provided by the Albany Institute of History & Art.

Wilderness and cultivation vie for mastery. The savage competes with the pastoral. Cole himself peeks out at lower center, looking at us as the great, weird bend in the river inscribes a colossal question mark. What will we do? The painting, like nature itself, mutely asks.

Given a choice between Edmund Burke’s “sublime” and “beautiful,” Cole came down firmly on the side of the sublime, on the side of the grandeur and mystery of nature, on the side of the Ents and the beasts of the field.

On my birthday, after leaving the Thomas Cole House, my family took me to Kaaterskill Falls, a landmark of the Hudson River School and site of one of Cole’s successful early works. Tourists then and now still marvel as the falls make their two vertical drops. Had he seen the number of hikers trekking up the treacherous path that day, he might have despaired. Or it might have given him renewed faith in our ability to see and treasure nature’s splendor.

Let me leave you with this. Another famous American artist—Thomas Moran—was born in Bolton, England. Fleeing mechanization, he came to America with his family, to

Philadelphia, in fact; and made his way into American art history. Moran—who, it must be said, revered Turner even more than Cole did—traveled through the American West with the Hayden Geological Survey in 1871, documenting the Yellowstone region in watercolors that captivated the nation. A year later, Congress named Yellowstone the first of our first national parks.

Bolton sits in a valley near the West Pennine Moors, a destination for lovers of the outdoors. There ought to be a small monument commemorating the two Thomases—Cole and Moran—who embarked on similar journeys from one of the dark hearts of the Industrial Revolution. ■

January 30-May 13
Thomas Cole’s Journey:
Atlantic Crossings

Metropolitan Museum of Art
1000 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10028
t: (212) 535-7710
www.metmuseum.org