

# THOMAS COLE AND EMPIRE:

How does “progress” affect our environment?



**Duration:** 45 minutes

**Grade Level:** 6-12

## **Learning Objectives:**

- Identify the relationships and patterns of continuity and change to larger historical processes and themes.
- Identify and analyze how environments affect human activities and how human activities affect physical environments.
- Identify contemporary issues with a global focus in which social actions are required and suggest solutions.

## **Materials:**

- Smartboard or projector to project paintings

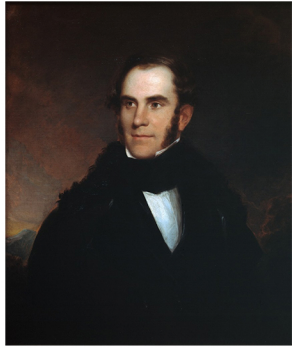
## **Description of Lesson Plan:**

Educator will lead students in a discussion of empire in the 19th century, Thomas Cole, and the effects of expansion and empire-building on the environment. Students will then discuss Cole's series *The Course of Empire*, and have an opportunity to build upon their established understanding of the formation of empires and nation states, while considering the effects of progress on society and the environment. Finally, students make their own five-panel "Course of Empire" examining a contemporary issue or technology, either as a group or independently.

## Who was Thomas Cole?

### Artist, Writer, and Early Environmentalist

Thomas Cole was a British-born American artist, writer, and early environmentalist who lived from 1801 to 1848. When America was still a new nation just forming its own identity and traditions, Thomas Cole invented a new style of art, the Hudson River School – a style that Americans could call their own. He painted and wrote extensively about the American landscape, arguing that it was among the most beautiful in the

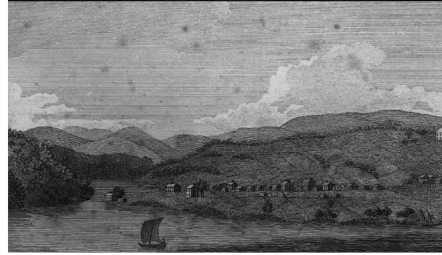


Portrait of Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand. 1837.

world and that it should be protected and preserved, not developed for profit. Cole is important to us today not just because he was the founder of American art, but because he was one of the first people to urge for the preservation of the natural environment in America.

### Bolton, England to Catskill, New York

Thomas Cole became famous for being the founder of American art, but he was, in fact, an immigrant to the United States. Cole was born in Bolton, England in 1801, during a time of heavy industrialization. In 1818,



*The Village of Catskill around 1797.* Woodcut after a drawing by A. P. Fecit, Frontispiece of the New York Magazine, September 1797.

at age 17, Cole came to the United States with his family, and spent a period of time moving around the country before coming to Catskill,

New York in 1825. While living in Catskill from 1836 to 1848, Cole began to express strong views concerning the impact of industrial development and its negative consequences for the wild beauty of the Catskills landscape that were such a source of inspiration to his work.

## Discussion questions for the classroom:

- Why is it important that we study empires and the formation of nation states today?
- Has society's definition of progress changed over time?

## What was Empire in the Early 1800s?

At the time of Thomas Cole's creation of his famous five-painting series *The Course of Empire*, the idea that empires progress and ultimately decline was not just an abstract concept but one that was playing out in real time. The Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolution underscored for Cole the notion that history is cyclical and that greed and want of power are the undoing of all great civilizations. The political environment in which Cole grew up would have been steeped in conversations about empire—particularly in the wake of Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to and subsequent fall from power within the short span of the years 1803-1815. On creating his series, Cole wrote, "The philosophy of my subject is drawn from the history of the past, wherein we see how nations have risen from the Savage state to that of Power & Glory & then fallen & become extinct..."

Cole feared that what was happening in Europe would, in turn, repeat itself in the United States. Just as Napoleon had endeavored to conquer the people of Europe just years before, Andrew Jackson was advocating for the systematic removal of Native Americans from the physical and cultural American landscape. Jackson's term came to be much concerned with empire building, as he oversaw the expansion of the United States' territory, often at the expense of the environment and the people who first occupied it.



*Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, Jacques-Louis David. 1801. Photo (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée des châteaux de Malmaison et de Bois-Préau)



# THE SAVAGE STATE

First Painting. Oil on Canvas. 1834.

Lead students in a discussion of the painting using guiding questions. Go to [explorethomascole.org](http://explorethomascole.org) to find paintings and zoom in.

Cole suggests the beginning of a hunter-gatherer society, in which humans have banded together for mutual necessities of protection and sustenance.

The mountain peak, representing an ever-present state of nature, remains visible throughout the series.

The forces of creation can be seen in the violent storm sweeping over the mountain. The time of day is dawn, or sunrise, and the season is early spring.



A hunter clad in animal skins has just shot an arrow at the deer, center right.

A few canoes in the inlet shows a society with primitive forms of transport, but one that is nonetheless beginning to expand its territory.

An encampment with figures performing a ritual dance around a fire may mean that this is a society beginning to form religious practices.

## QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What is the time of day?

What is the state of nature?

What impact do humans have on their environment?



# THE PASTORAL STATE

Second Painting. Oil on Canvas. 1834.

Lead students in a discussion of the painting using guiding questions

Nomadic dwellings have been replaced with permanent settlements. Canoes have been replaced with sail ships; trade and commerce are beginning.

Early religion is represented by the stone temple in the foreground.

The hour and season have progressed to early morning and early summer. Skies have cleared; we begin to see a more cultivated landscape.



A man draws geometric shapes in the dirt—society is beginning to develop math, music, art, and higher culture.

A hunter-gatherer society has shifted to an agrarian one, with domesticated animals and farmland.

A favorite image of Cole's, the cut-down tree, represents an increased human impact on the environment.

## QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What is the time of day?

What is the state of nature?

What impact are humans having on their environment?



# CONSUMMATION

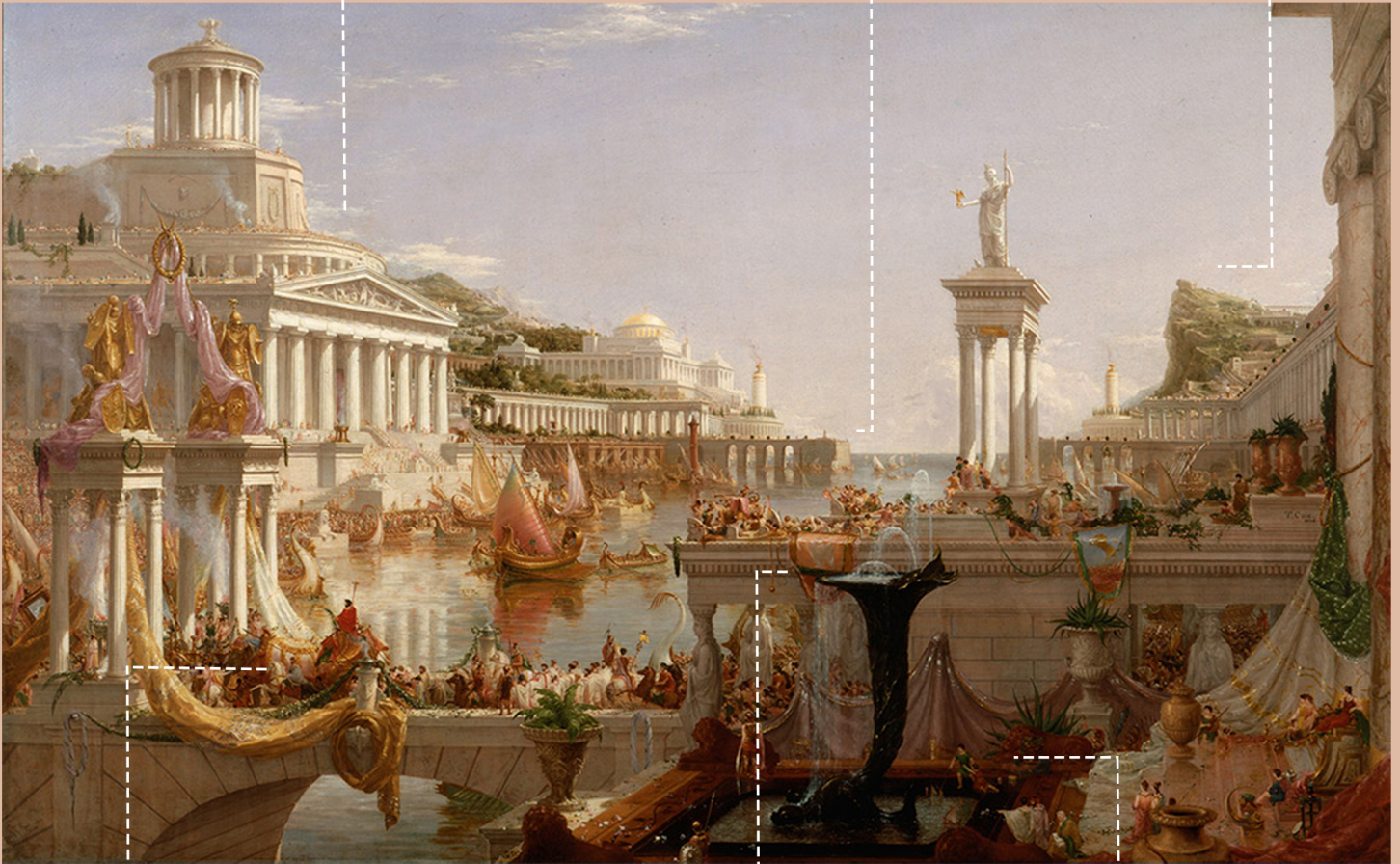
Third Painting. Oil on Canvas. 1835-1836.

Lead students in a discussion of the painting using guiding questions

Architecture plays a prominent role in this painting; this is a society that has developed fine art and craft.

The inlet is now an enclosed harbor, with merchant ships passing in and out.

As foretold by the tree stump in the previous painting, nature is being erased. The once wild and ominous mountain peak is now developed.



Cole suggests a society that has a social hierarchy and order but also one that is beginning to have conflict; pictured on the bridge is a king or leader returning home victorious from war.

Nature is harnessed for fountains and gardens; humans exert control over nature.

Hinting that perhaps not all is in balance in *Consummation*, Cole gives us a glimpse of two boys playing, with the older of the two sinking the younger boy's ship.

## QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What is the time of day?

What is the state of nature?

What does “progress” mean for this society?



# DESTRUCTION

Fourth Painting. Oil on Canvas. 1836.

Lead students in a discussion of the painting using guiding questions

With human destruction comes the reappearance of nature—ominous thunderclouds, a storm-tossed harbor, raging fires.

Storm clouds visible at the dawn of civilization have reappeared.



An empire that had achieved glory by warring with other civilizations is now warring with itself. The bridge that once held a victorious army is now collapsing under the weight of conflict.

## QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What is the time of day?

What is the state of nature?

What impact is the environment having on humans?



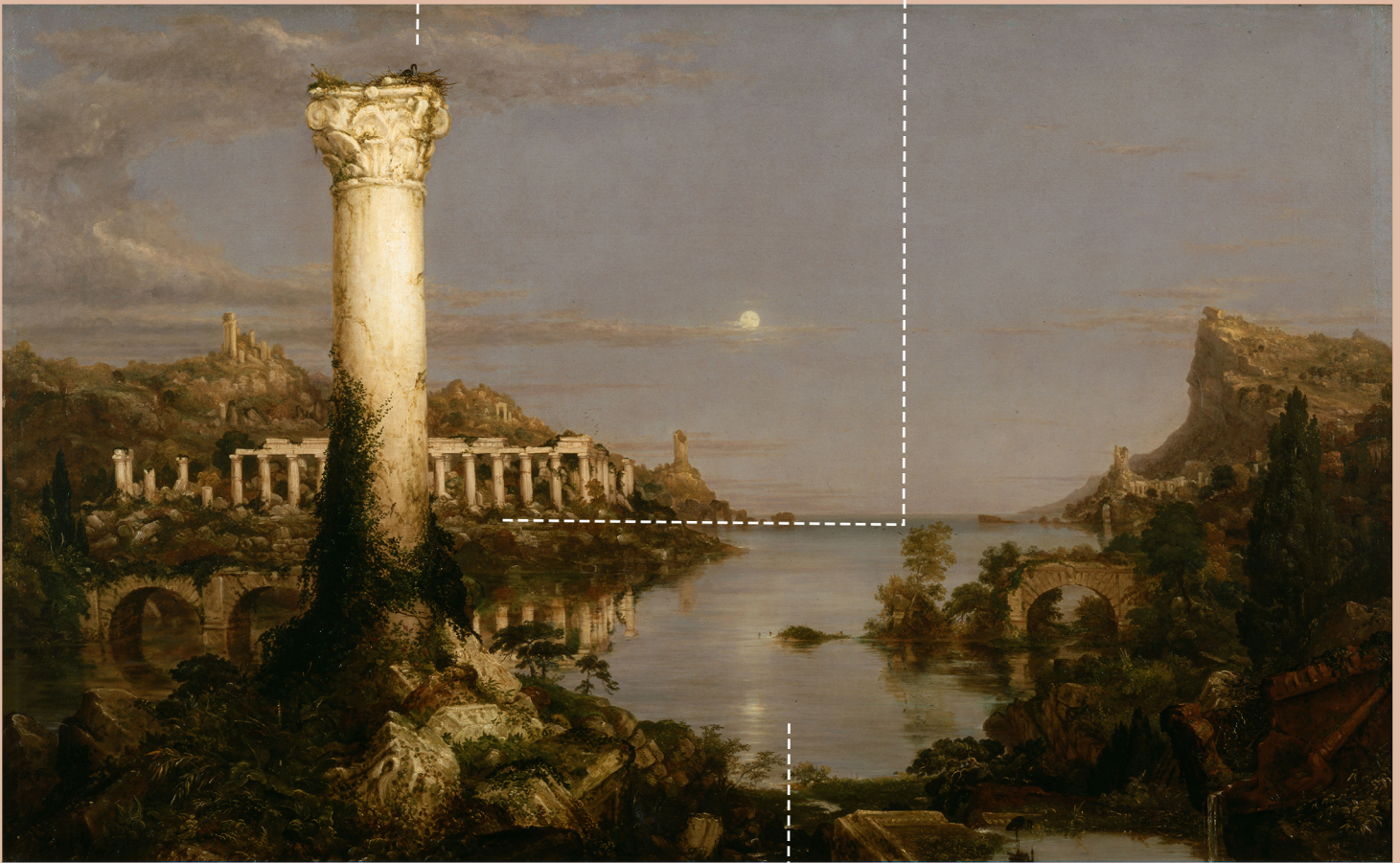
# DESOLATION

Fifth Painting. Oil on canvas. 1836.

Lead students in a discussion of the painting using guiding questions

A heron nests at the top of a pillar; Cole believed that nature is ultimately triumphant over humans.

Details of wildlife in symbiosis with ruins abound in the painting; a lizard crawls up the pillar, a doe and fawn forage by the water.



Remnants of temples, bridges, lighthouses, and other ruins of the once-great empire are seen reclaimed by nature.

## QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING:

What is the time of day?

What is the state of nature?

What is Cole telling us in this final painting? How do your views on empire and progress compare with Cole's?





## ART/WRITING:

Using the attached brainstorming PDF, have students make their own *Course of Empire* examining a contemporary technology or environmental issue. Students may choose to write and illustrate the course of weaponry, renewable or nonrenewable energy, genetically modified food, fast fashion, public transportation, smartphones, computers, artificial intelligence, or any other technology or issue of their choosing. Students may use the brainstorming sheet to begin a longer art and writing project over several class periods, or simply as a fifteen-minute exercise to brainstorm and discuss these ideas in groups and report back.



## WRITING:

Students may reflect on the themes within *The Course of Empire* and issues related to empire by responding through writing to the prompt, “What does progress mean? Have definitions and understandings of progress changed over time?”



## ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION:

Based on their brainstorming of a contemporary technology above, have students track their use of this technology or their engagement with this issue over a week. If they’ve chosen to examine plastic-wrapped or packaged foods for instance, have them track their plastic consumption for the week, writing down, saving, or taking a photo of every instance of use. Have students find a current news story that relates to how their technology is affecting the environment and report back to the class on both their reading and their experience of observing their own interaction with this issue. This can culminate in a paper or presentation to the class addressing the following questions.

- What impact did my use of this technology have on the environment?
- What impact did my use of this technology have on my everyday life?
- Did my paying close attention to my use of this technology change my feelings about it?



# THE COURSE OF

From 1833 to 1836, Thomas Cole (1801-1848) created *The Course of Empire*, a five-part series of paintings that illustrated the rise and fall of a civilization. Cole's work was often concerned with human impact on the environment, and *The Course of Empire* is no exception, showing a wild landscape developed by humans and ultimately reclaimed by nature.

In this activity, choose a contemporary technology or issue to examine and explore in a five-part series.

**1:** What were the early stages of this technology?  
What was life like before this technology was used?

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**2:** How did society begin to incorporate this technology into every day life? How did this technology begin to change the physical and cultural landscape?

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**3:** What are the benefits of this technology?  
Has this technology positively impacted our lives? If so, how?

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**4:** In what ways has this technology complicated life?  
Has this technology negatively impacted our lives and our environment? If so, how?

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**5:** What does the future look like for this technology and its relationship to our environment? Are there ways that technological or economic progress and environmental conservation can be balanced?

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