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Thomas Cole: Eden to Empire

Curated by: Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Tim Barringer

Exhibition schedule: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, January 30–May 13, 2018; National Gallery, London, June 11–October 7, 2018

Exhibition catalogue: Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser and Tim Barringer, with Dorothy Mahon, Christopher Riopelle, and Shannon Vittoria, *Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings*, exh. cat. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2018. 288 pp.; 254 color illus.; b/w illus. Hardcover \$65.00 (ISBN: 9781588396402)

Ed Ruscha: Course of Empire

Curated by: Christopher Riopelle

Exhibition schedule: National Gallery, London, June 11–October 7, 2018

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One of the highlights of teaching a survey of American Art is arriving at the point in the semester when the work by Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836; fig. 1), appears on the screen. Cole, indeed, excites students. It is Cole's sense of himself as a pedagogue that makes his work accessible and alluring. And it is the tireless promotion of his historical, religious, and artistic ideals that define the exhibition *Thomas Cole: Eden to Empire*, held first at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (under the title *Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings*), and then at the National Gallery, London. The London exhibition was comprised of fifty-eight works—organized by Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, Alice Pratt Brown Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Tim Barringer, Paul Mellon Professor in the History of Art at Yale University, with Christopher Riopelle, The Neil Westreich Curator of Post-1800 Painting at the National Gallery—includes not only works by Cole but also a variety of works by artists such as John Constable (1776–1837) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), who influenced Cole's oeuvre.



Fig. 1. Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 76 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908; © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photography by Juan Trujillo

By dividing the works by Cole and related artists into seven distinct themes that include Industrial England, American Wilderness, London, Italy, Course of Empire, Cole's Manifesto, and Cole's Legacy, the curators argue that Cole's oeuvre is a product of his biographical and artistic connection to Europe, especially England. Moreover, it is Cole's early contact with the tensions and controversies related to industrialization in England that defined his approach to art making. This becomes apparent in the artist's critique of industry's encroachment on the untainted American landscape, in which Cole became interested after immigrating to the United States in 1818. Following in the footsteps of several art historians who have written about Cole, such as Angela Miller and Alan Wallach, the curators contend that Cole was both suspicious of and angry about the ways in which political greed and industrial ambition intruded upon a once-innocent pastoral ideal.¹

The first section of the Cole exhibition, titled Industrial England, offers context for the world of factory production and industry that were integral to early nineteenth-century Britain and, by extension, Cole's eventual disillusionment with the ways in which industry impacted America. Born in 1801 in Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, Cole witnessed the changes that industrialism wrought as factories expanded and the population grew. The initial room of the National Gallery exhibition includes Turner's small watercolor of 1816 titled *Leeds* (fig. 2), representing the way in which factories, new forms of labor, and the destruction of the pastoral landscape could be found in a city that was only sixty miles from where Cole had lived when he was a boy. Cole's father had a difficult time with this unanticipated economic reality; he had hoped to make money as a textile manufacturer, but he was not successful, and the Coles were never far from poverty. The Coles were not alone in their precarious position. Because of these difficulties, Britain became a hotbed of debate in reaction to this unceasing cycle of "progress," as perhaps best exemplified by the rise of the Luddites. These infamous anti-technologists came to places like Bolton and destroyed machines and protested the spread of industry. The exhibition includes a hand-colored

etching by an unknown artist, *The Leader of the Luddites* (1812; fig. 3). This image depicts a giant representation of Ned Ludd, the figurehead whose putative destruction of machines, known as knitting frames, made him a folkloric leader of the Luddites. Behind Ludd, a factory burns, and men raise their armed hands in protest. This etching, which Luddites circulated near Bolton in 1812, sets the tone for the remainder of the show. The Luddite project is a symbolic touchstone for the curators, who claim that Cole's artistic protest against industrialization would rage for the remainder of his life.



Figs. 2, 3. Left: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Leeds*, 1816. Watercolor, scraping out and pen and black ink on medium, slightly textured, cream wove paper, 11 1/2 x 17 in. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Paul Mellon Collection; © Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. Right: Unknown artist, *The Leader of the Luddites*, 1812. Hand-colored etching, 12 3/4 x 8 7/8 in. British Museum, London, Purchased from Andrew Edmunds; © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved

It was in America where Cole's knowledge of influential European artists was formed, where he had moved in 1818 at a young age. For instance, the British artist John Martin (1789–1854), well known for his religious painting, was an important influence on Cole. In fact, Cole's career in New York suffered after critics accused him of plagiarizing Martin's work. Seeing Martin's *The Deluge* (1834; Yale Center for British Art, New Haven), a 1828 mezzotint of which would have circulated in New York, in the same room as Cole's *The Garden of Eden* of the same year, reveals close visual connections between the artists' thematic choices and interest in Biblical subject matter. Other Cole paintings in the second section of the show, titled American Wilderness, especially his 1827 *View of the Round-top in the Catskill Mountains (Sunny Morning on the Hudson)* (fig. 4), highlight the artist's passion for the mythical essence of the American Eden, in which misty clouds, blasted tree trunks, and an ominous perspective convey a raw and sublime sense of nature, devoid of human presence. When he included figures in these works, Cole accentuated the history of the landscape before European conquest, as seen in his *Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans," Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund* (1827; fig. 5). Turning to the popular writing of James Fenimore Cooper's (1789–1851) second installment from his Leatherstocking series, Cole offers an elevated perspective related to a captivity scene, as a young white woman begs a chief of the Delaware for her own life as well as that of her half-sister. Beyond this interest in capturing Cooper's narrative, Cole also devoted attention to the geological specifics that interested him, especially as they offered, from Cole's

perspective, evidence about the presence of the divine.² Cole became intrigued with the idea that a Godly plan devised the awe-inspiring beauty found in the American landscape. He developed these ideas while studying the beliefs of the English Dissenters, a tradition that traced its roots to a break from the Church of England prior to the nineteenth century.



Figs. 4, 5. Left: Thomas Cole, *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains (Sunny Morning on the Hudson)*, 1827. Oil on panel, 18 5/8 x 25 3/8 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865; © 2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Right: Thomas Cole, *Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans," Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund*, 1827. Oil on canvas, 25 3/8 x 35 1/8 in. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, Bequest of Alfred Smith; © Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum

While these early paintings of the wilderness offer a clear connection to European painters Cole admired, it was during his return to Europe in the late 1820s and early 1830s, when he spent time in England and Italy, that his fascination with European precedent became more pronounced. The third and fourth sections of the show, London and Italy, convincingly emphasize Cole's obvious study of Turner, Claude Lorrain (1604/5–1682), and John Constable. Seeing Turner's *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (exhibited 1812; fig. 6) in the same exhibition as Cole's *The Oxbow* (1836; fig. 1) makes it evident that the time Cole spent in Turner's well-respected private gallery in 1829 created an obvious impression, in terms of the raw power of nature that Turner captured as well as



Fig.6. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps*, exhibited 1812. Oil on canvas, 57 1/2 x 93 1/2 in. Tate Britain, London, Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856; © Tate, London 2017

Turner's interest in using landscape to impart a specific historical message. Other Turner paintings, such as his *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus—Homer's Odyssey* (1829; National Gallery, London), moved Cole to sketch what the exhibition catalogue argues was the American artist's "first chance . . . to see landscape painting of such ambition and originality."³ But it was the time in Italy, starting in 1831, that solidified Cole's professional trajectory, as he embarked on the Grand Tour, taking in the ruins and historic aspects of the European landscape. Again, in keeping with the transatlantic theme of the exhibition, it is clear that Turner's images of Italy (think of Turner's

Florence from the Chiesa al Monte, c. 1818; private collection) influenced Cole's representations of Italy. However, it is the desolate and visually evocative ruins found in Cole's paintings, such as his *Interior of the Colosseum, Rome* (c. 1832; Albany Institute of History and Art, New York) and *Aqueduct Near Rome* (1832; fig. 7), that explain how these haunting landscapes from the ancient world began to inform his artistic vision regarding the arc of empire and history.



Fig. 7. Thomas Cole, *Aqueduct near Rome*, 1832. Oil on canvas, 45 x 68 1/8 in. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, University purchase, Bixby Fund, by exchange, 1987; © Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis

It is in the fifth section of this exhibition, which focuses on the five-part cycle *The Course of Empire* (1833–36; New-York Historical Society, New York), where the curators home in on their central argument about Cole's disillusionment with the American political scene and its concomitant disregard for what had been an Edenic landscape. After returning to the United States in November of 1832, Cole received a commission from New York entrepreneur Luman Reed (1787–1836) to complete these five works. The wall text for this section notes, "*The Course of Empire* is a moral fable in which progress and civilization are undermined by man's greed and innate aggression. Human progress is inevitably self-destructive, and the natural world eventually prevails. Cole was issuing a clear warning to modern America." *The Course of Empire* offers a lucid narrative, as our eyes move through the cycle, watching the rise and fall of civilization from a nineteenth-century perspective.



Fig. 8. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire*, 1835–36. Oil on canvas, 51 1/4 x 76 in. New-York Historical Society, Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts; © Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York/Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions

Cole grounds our sight with a rock formation that stays consistent in each composition, but the figures and visual tropes change. The population goes from uncivilized to idyllic to sybaritic to decimated to vanished in five spectacular beats. The wall text for each of the five paintings, which include *The Savage State*, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, *The Consummation of Empire* (fig. 8), *Destruction* (fig. 9), and *Desolation*, furthers the contention that Cole abhorred the direction of American civilization and used these paintings as a didactic tale about unchecked progress and Jacksonian expansion. As the wall text for *Destruction* contends, “As a result of its own moral failings, the empire is falling. Beneath an enormous Roman gladiator, the innocent are being butchered, and the achievements of civilisation destroyed.” Cole renders the violence that led to the ruins he celebrated in his Italian paintings of the early 1830s. By placing this section of the exhibition after the Italy portion, the curators help the visitor make visual connections between actual ruins and Cole’s contention about the cycle of history.



Fig. 3. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 63 1/2 in. New-York Historical Society, Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts; © Collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York/Digital image created by Oppenheimer Editions

Cole’s role as a cultural critic becomes even more pronounced in the penultimate section of the show, aptly titled Cole’s Manifesto. Here all of the artist’s hand wringing and upset comes to a head in what many view as his masterpiece, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (1836; fig. 1). In this painting, Cole divides his composition in half: on the left is untouched nature where Cole positions himself as an artist at work, looking over the other half of the view that represents a turn in the Connecticut River (the Oxbow). This painting renders the sentiment Cole explored in the same year in his famous “Essay on American Scenery,” where he remarked, “We are still in Eden”; yet he also noted, “the ravages of the axe are daily increasing,” and Americans should no longer abide by the destruction that many refer to as “improvement.”⁴

Even though Cole’s language is direct, there are other scholarly ideas about Cole’s representations that do not always support the artist’s supposed pessimism. In a recent issue of the journal *American Art*, David Peters Corbett contends, in an article that focuses on George Caleb Bingham, that Cole’s *The Oxbow* “provides the painting’s audience with an image of aspiration toward a developed and transmuted landscape, in which ‘wilderness’

becomes settled and ordered ‘civilization.’”⁵ Corbett’s theory about “futurity,” or what he sees as Cole’s embrace of the landscape’s future that is before his viewer and himself (remember he places himself in the image), posits another perspective about the artist’s oeuvre that *Eden to Empire* does not consider. Some discussion of other possible readings of these potentially ambiguous landscapes would have been a welcome addition to this exhibition.

The final gallery is Cole’s Legacy, which emphasizes the landscapes of Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) and Frederic Church (1826–1900) that pay homage to Cole. The curatorial text that opens this seventh section explains, “Artists increasingly championed the theory that nationalist expansion was a God-given right—the very antithesis of Cole’s beliefs.” While works such as Durand’s *Kindred Spirits* (1849; fig. 10) and Church’s *Above the Clouds at Sunrise* (1849; fig. 11) clearly reference Cole, either by placing him in the work, which Durand does, or by including a cross in a landscape that metaphorically references Cole’s passing, as in Church’s painting, it is the inclusion of less celebrated artists that makes this section stand out. It was especially enlightening to learn about Thomas Charles Farrer’s (1839–1891) *View of Northampton from the Dome of the Hospital* (1865; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA), which returns us to the site of Cole’s *The Oxbow* yet stylistically departs from Cole by including exacting details of nature in a manner more akin to the American Pre-Raphaelite movement Farrer founded. Moreover, there is a more celebratory tone of progress in these works by Cole’s followers, who do not seem as intent on questioning progress.



Figs. 10, 11. Left: Asher Brown Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 44 x 36 in. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; © Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art/ Photography by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Right: Frederic Edwin Church, *Above the Clouds at Sunrise*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 27 1/4 x 40 1/4 in. Private collection; © Private collection

Yet beyond the nineteenth century, the National Gallery pushes Cole’s legacy into the realm of the contemporary in a location the museum calls “Room 1,” a space some distance from the Cole show, yet right next to the Trafalgar Square entrance to the museum. Here visitors can view the Edward Ruscha (b. 1937) exhibition, *Ed Ruscha: Course of Empire*, an artistic and curatorial response to the Cole exhibition. Room 1 includes ten paintings by Ruscha, five black-and-white works from 1992 and five colorful paintings from 2003 and later of the

same sites represented in the black-and-white canvases. In 2005, Ruscha exhibited this series at the Venice Biennale with the Cole-influenced title *Course of Empire*. Like many of his works, Ruscha's *Course of Empire* represents Los Angeles in a cool, distant, and yet documentary-like fashion. In the black-and-white paintings, he renders industrial sites, including four geometrically rigid buildings and one telephone booth. The later paintings are of the same locations, but, over the course of a decade or more, the structures have changed. Either the architecture has been transformed, as is the case with *Blue Collar Tires* (1992; fig. 12) and *Expansion of the Old Tires Building* (2005; fig. 13), or it has become absent, as is the case with *Blue Collar Telephone* (1992; Museumsstiftung Post und Telekommunikation, Bonn, Germany) and *Site of a Former Telephone Booth* (2005; Collection of Joan and Irwin Jacobs)—or the writing on the building signals a change in ownership, as is the case with *Blue Collar Tool & Die* (1992; fig. 14) and *The Old Tool & Die Building* (2004; fig. 15). Each painting is quite large and rectangular; the smallest is 52 by 116 inches in length, making their impact similar to Cole's large canvases.



Figs. 12, 13. Top: Ed Ruscha, *Blue Collar Tires*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 120 in. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; © Ed Ruscha/Photography by Paul Ruscha. Bottom: Ed Ruscha, *Expansion of the Old Tires Building*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 54 x 120 in. Collection of Donald B. Marron, New York; © Ed Ruscha/Photography Paul Ruscha

The before-and-after sensibility that Ruscha evokes through his homage to Cole is highlighted in the way that the paintings are hung, where each canvas from the aughts is below its antecedent. Within the small space, it is possible to take in the entire experience of Ruscha's aesthetic, as the perspective of the before-and-after images remains consistent, yet the architecture that Ruscha captures has changed over time. Unlike Cole's *Course of*

Empire, which makes an obvious reference to the buildup, culmination, and eventual end of civilization, Ruscha's imagery permits us to project our own ideas about the elusive nature of progress onto these canvases. We know there is a message here. Alternating between the black-and-white and color paintings seems to evoke the idea of a previous time; the nostalgic time of the 1990s contrasts with the colorful, obviously contemporary paintings from the 2000s. Yet the symbolism is subtle, and there is an ambiguous stance toward the industrial landscape rendered. Ruscha has replaced the pedantic timbre of Cole with an insinuation that is reserved and uncertain. In the catalogue, Daniel Herrmann quotes Ruscha as noting that his images of "deterioration," where the landscape changes over time, could be understood as negative, but "it's kind of awesome to [. . .] visualize everything that it might encompass and to know that nothing lasts."⁶



Figs. 14, 15. Top: Ed Ruscha, *Blue Collar Tool & Die*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 116 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, Purchase, with funds from The American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President; © Ed Ruscha/Photography Paul Ruscha. Bottom: Ed Ruscha, *The Old Tool & Die Building*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 52 1/8 x 116 1/8 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of The American Contemporary Art Foundation, Leonard A. Lauder, President; © Ed Ruscha/Photography Paul Ruscha

In April of 2018, Ruscha commented further on the ambiguity of these images during an event linked to the Cole exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Toward the end of the discussion with the novelist Tom McCarthy and curator Elizabeth Kornhauser, an audience member asked Ruscha to assess his paintings that reference Cole in relation to their "American mindset." In his response, Ruscha contended that Americanness cannot be divorced from the ideal of the landscape and the concept of preservation. He described Cole as a Luddite and claimed that he too is "nervous" about the ways in which places such as the

national park system have been under attack. McCarthy pushed Ruscha and asked why these images also seem to represent a sense of beauty in the artificial landscape that defines Los Angeles. Ruscha responded, “Well, yes. And it’s got pictorial vitality to it that you don’t ordinarily see. In many respects, it is like nature, it *is* nature, and I do respond to these things. But the nature has to come back to me in the form of something worth looking at.”⁷ Therefore, Ruscha’s embrace of the changing industrial landscape is different from Cole’s project in its apparent desire to see beauty in the context of artifice; yet, like Cole, “pictorial vitality” drives his image making, even in the face of ominous change. When presented together, Ruscha’s ten canvases do alert us to transformations unfolding in America, yet Ruscha seems more invested in the allure and evolving beauty of the industrial surroundings rather than the dystopian and bleak future Cole envisioned. Both artists signal that we must be suspicious of innovation, but the inclusion of Ruscha’s ten paintings in London makes the museum audience aware that artists approach the American landscape with very different agendas.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representations and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) and Alan Wallach, “Luxury and the Downfall of Civilization in Thomas Cole’s *Course of Empire*,” in *Global Trade and Visual Arts in Federal New England*, ed. Patricia Johnston and Caroline Frank (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014), 304–18.

² Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser in *Thomas Cole’s Journey* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum, 2018), 137.

³ Tim Barringer in *Thomas Cole’s Journey*, 163.

⁴ Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *American Monthly Magazine* 1 (January 1836): 12.

⁵ David Peters Corbett, “Facingness in George Caleb Bingham’s River Paintings,” *American Art* 32 (Summer 2018): 11.

⁶ Ruscha quoted in Daniel Herrmann, “Westward,” in *Ed Ruscha: Course of Empire*, ed. Christopher Riopelle (London: National Gallery, 2018), 39.

⁷ Transcript of talk titled “Artists Respond to Thomas Cole: Ed Ruscha in Conversation with Tom McCarthy,” held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 8, 2018, published online as “‘Raw Nature is Getting Thinner These Days’: Ed Ruscha and Tom McCarthy on Thomas Cole,” May 10, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2018/ed-ruscha-tom-mccarthy-thomas-cole-course-of-empire>, accessed on July 24, 2018.