

Thomas Cole: ravishing — and still resonant

A New York show of works by the artist is poignant and politically charged



Thomas Cole's 'The Oxbow' (1836)

Don't be fooled by the ancient rivers and cloud-swathed peaks: Thomas Cole's American landscapes are no more timeless than an "I'm With Her" button. He painted his visionary protests during the Andrew Jackson administration in the 1830s, and if they resonate with renewed vigour today, that's partly because Jackson's 21st-century admirer-in-chief inhabits the White House.

A political undertow runs through the Metropolitan Museum's perfect exhibition, Thomas Cole's Journey: Atlantic Crossings, which traces how an artistic celebrity and national icon came to despair over his country's future. The show's installation is thoughtful, its content ravishing and its timing poignant, opening even as the US government delivers vast stretches of once-protected wilderness to mining and drilling interests, precisely the future that worried Cole most.

After his early death in 1848, Cole was lauded as the father of the Hudson River School and founder of a distinctly American landscape tradition that sought the sublime through strict observation of nature. He has been revered as a visual transcendentalist who painted the experience of vibrating in harmony with creation's indwelling grace. Out in the woods, Emerson wrote, "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." Cole expressed similar feelings in views such as "The Oxbow" (1836), where the Connecticut River curls into an existential question mark as a baleful storm churns past sunlit hills.

But, as *Atlantic Crossings* argues in persuasive detail, the bard of America's forest primeval was, in today's terms, a city kid, an immigrant, proto-environmentalist, coastal elitist, anti-populist and internationalist who reserved a special loathing for industry and the obsessive pursuit of wealth. Though the curators — Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, Tim Barringer, and Chris Riopelle — stay focused on scholarship and history, they are nevertheless trolling Donald Trump.

In some ways, Cole was really an English painter. Born in 1801 in the overcrowded Lancashire town of Bolton-le-Moors, he was a bystander to industry's violent march. He saw at first hand the way factories and mills stained the sky, gouged hills and fouled rivers. He witnessed the bloody revenge of handloom operators on the machines that displaced them. He also encountered art's resistance to that despoliation. As an engraver's apprentice, he studied prints of some of the era's great landscapes.

After he arrived in Philadelphia at 17 and taught himself to paint, Old and New World terrains competed for his imagination. An 1825 trip to the Hudson River Valley and the Catskill Mountains yielded a breakthrough: a reverie of dark hill, altar-like stone and tormented tree that was received as distinctly American. But he also reverted to English models: his "Expulsion from Eden", set amid the New World's titanic wilderness, owed an obvious debt to John Martin's mannered mood piece, "The Expulsion of Adam and Eve From Paradise". One critic even accused Cole of plagiarism.

Though he had some early success in New York, Cole returned to Europe a decade after he left, a precocious talent in search of mastery and technique. In London he met Constable, visited Turner's studio, and explored the new National Gallery, where he came face to face with the paintings of Claude Lorraine.

Cole loathed London. The city, he wrote, reduced him to "a nameless, noteless individual in the midst of an immense, selfish multitude". And yet the art he saw there shaped his own. The Met has assembled some of the pictures that made a lasting impact on him, so we understand what he meant when he remarked enthusiastically on the "sky and distance of a pearly cool tone" in Claude's pellucid "Seaport with the Embarkation of St Ursula". We get to see Turner's "Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus", which Cole lovingly sketched, and "Snowstorm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps", which he praised for its "powerful effects of chiaroscuro" and later adapted for "The Oxbow".



Cole's 'View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains' (1827)

Turner's and Claude's sublime theatricality infused Cole's work. His storm clouds became more sinister, his waterfalls steeper, his panoramas grander. The English Romantics also taught him to insert human drama into epic vistas, simultaneously ennobling and miniaturising the actors by accentuating their puny mortality and the vastness all around.

Cole's kinship with Constable was more complex, and a richer source of references for the show's implicit political critique. Cole was bowled over by Constable's "Hadleigh Castle, the Mouth of the Thames" (1829). The tumbling ruin, a relic of aristocratic rule, spoke to him of grand, inexorable decline. Cole reused it years later as a beacon of dread in "The Course of Empire", his ambitious five-part chronicle of a mythical civilisation. The series opens with a landscape in its untamed state, a massif where half-naked hunters stalk deer and dance. The same patch of earth evolves into a pastoral idyll, then a city at its zenith — a phalanx of gleaming white buildings, paid for by the spoils of war. Fiery destruction follows. In the final canvas, a cracked column — Constable's Hadleigh Castle in apocalyptic disguise — looms over the foreground, sinking back into vegetation. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.



'The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire' (1835-36)

The two artists shared more than a generalised nostalgia or a depressive outlook. Both were hostile to urban life, suspicious of Catholicism, averse to empire-building, scornful of commerce, and afraid that spiritual and ethical values were being devoured by money lust. Constable was more explicitly anti-democratic. The Reform Bill of 1832 would, he thundered, “give the government into the hands of the rabble and dregs of the people, and the devil’s agents on earth — the agitators . . . and the slimy marshes of Chelsea and Paddington and St Pancras”. Cole applied those sentiments to an American context, ruing the populism that brought Andrew Jackson to power and painting allegorical visions of America’s certain fall.

Constable was not the only source of his pessimism: a visit to Rome, where he spent days sketching among imperial ruins, gave him a life-long theme. Cole believed that America, too, was marching from Eden to empire, and that the end point of that trajectory was foregone. An advertisement for “The Course of Empire” cited Byron’s glum prophecy: “There is the moral of all human tales; /’Tis but the same rehearsal of the past./ First freedom and then Glory — when that fails, /Wealth, vice, corruption — barbarism at last.”

Barringer ends his catalogue essay with a touch of hopefulness, reframing Cole’s prediction as a mournful question: “Is it possible to balance the pursuit of wealth with the preservation of God-given wilderness? . . . Must the accumulation of wealth always entail overweening greed, leading to imperial exploitation and violence, and thus inevitably causing environmental and social ruin; or can America be an exception?” We’re about to find out.

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