

Was Cole's warning about environmental damage, or was he warning us about something else?

There was a time, and in some countries it yet exists, where multitudes unable to read have been taught by pictures the great incidents in the life of Christ and his Apostles. These times are in great measure past, but not so the necessity for the aids of Art. The Artist of true genius can resent the glorious events, I have mentioned, in nobler forms and hues than the mass of mankind can conceive and his burning thoughts can be made the common property and heritage of his fellow men. Evil times have fallen upon Art. Confounded with evil things she has been struck down by men forgetful that Art is the servant, not the master, serving with good or evil as may be demanded of her. Feeble and sickly she has lingered on until our day and it is only of late that Protestant Nations have discovered that society is a great loser by degrading the services of such a handmaid.

What was Cole imploring us, American citizens, to do?

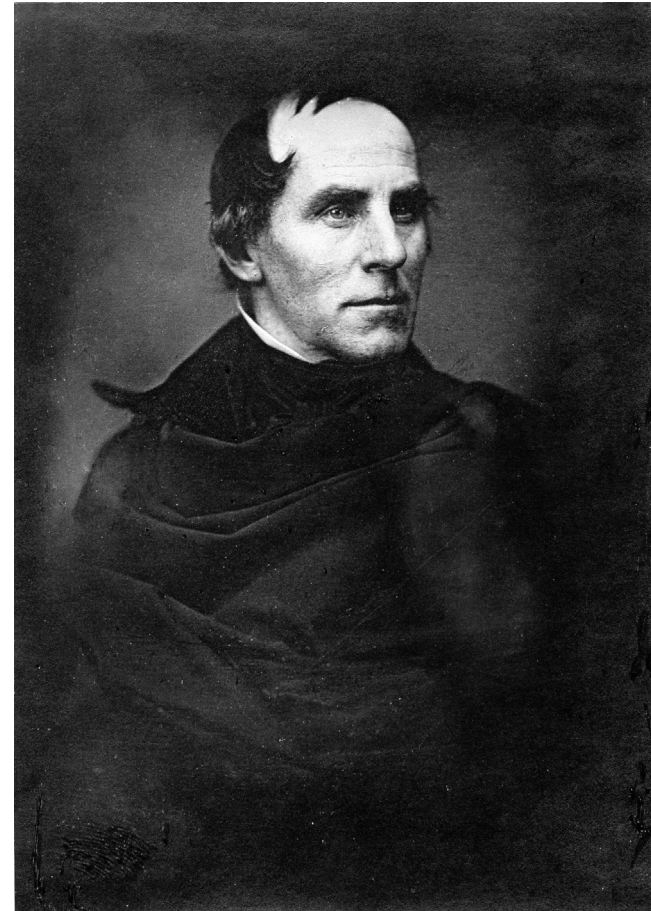
And so in later times was Art nurtured in the Arms of Freedom. In Italian Republics she grew to gigantic Stature. A Cimabue, a Giotto, a Donatello preceded a Michel Angelo and a Raphael and the Magnificent Lorenzo di Medici like Pericles moved amidst a Constellation of Contemporary Artists, and like as of him policy as well as taste demanded patronage. Have we not good reason to rejoice in the thought that Free Institutions furnish a generous soil for the growth of the Fine Arts and let it kindle within us that desire which shall be the earnest of accomplishment.

But not by the mere imitation of what has been before done, nor the subservient copying of Art in her Ancient forms can a great Era of Art be attained by us, but by working under the great principles which governed Greek and Italian Art, and as new requirements, new moral and religious aspects in Society present themselves, apply those principles. The Orb of Art as it revolves will take new phases and reflect forms before unknown. For as Nature and Society are ever changing in mutation, so Art, changing but never lost, may shine in this land in exceeding beauty. And what shall prevent? The Ages past have bequeathed to us their inestimable treasures and deep esthetic lessons. Knowledge flows in; Science facilitates and makes us acquainted with the material of Art and it requires no prophetic Spirit to predict a day of Art brighter than man has ever yet seen. Let us endeavor then to lift up the prostrate standard of Art and make a stand against this headlong Utilitarianism which prevails. Let us try to convince our fellow Citizens that the pursuit of the beautiful is as essential to our well being as that of Gain. Gold can purchase food, raiment, property, but Taste is that Gentle and refined Spirit which bestows on life its serenest pleasures and most exquisite delights. Without Art Man would scarce be human; with it he rises above the brute and takes a diviner nature.



SCAN TO VIEW
The Course of Empire

SIX QUESTIONS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THOMAS COLE



THOMAS COLE

FEBRUARY 1, 1801 ~ FEBRUARY 11, 1848

First Three Questions are answered with passages from
ESSAY ON AMERICAN SCENERY, THOMAS COLE 1836

Last Three Questions are answered with passages from
LECTURE ON ART, THOMAS COLE 1845

Was Cole afraid of development and industry?

In what has been said, I have in general alluded to wild and uncultivated scenery; but the cultivated must not be forgotten, for it is still more important to man in his social capacity; it encompasses our homes, and though devoid of the stern sublimity of the wild, its quieter spirit steals tenderly into our bosoms, mingled with a thousand domestic affections and heart-touching associations human hands have wrought and human deeds hallowed all around. And it is here that taste, which is the perception of the beautiful and the knowledge of the principles on which nature works, can be applied and our dwelling places made fitting for refined and intellectual beings.

If, then, it is indeed true that the contemplation of scenery can be so abundant a source of delight and improvement, a taste for it is certainly worthy of particular cultivation; for the capacity for enjoyment will assuredly increase with study and knowledge.

In this age, when a meagre utilitarianism seems ready to absorb every feeling and sentiment, and what is called improvement, in its march, makes us fear that the bright and tender flowers of the imagination will be crushed beneath its iron tramp, it would be well to cultivate the oasis that yet remains to us, and to cherish the impressions that nature is ever ready to give, as an antidote to the sordid tendencies of modern civilization. The spirit of our society is to contrive and not to enjoy—toiling to produce more toil-accumulating in order to aggrandize.

Why did Cole valorize American scenery?

There are those who through ignorance or prejudice strive to maintain that American scenery possesses little that is interesting or truly beautiful—that it is rude without picturesqueness, and monotonous without sublimity—that being destitute of those vestiges of antiquity, whose associations so strongly affect the mind, it may not be compared with European scenery. But from whom do these opinions come? From those who have read of European scenery, of Grecian mountains, and Italian skies, and never troubled themselves to look at their own; and from those travelled ones whose eyes were never opened to the beauties of nature until they beheld foreign lands, and when those lands faded from the sight were again closed and forever; disdaining to destroy their trans-atlantic impressions by the observation of the less fashionable and unfamed American scenery. Let such persons shut themselves up in their narrow shell of prejudice. I hope they are few, and the community increasing in intelligence, will know better how to appreciate the treasures of their own country.

I am by no means desirous of lessening in your estimation the glorious scenes of the old world—that ground which has been the great theater of human events—those mountains, woods, and streams, made sacred in our minds by heroic deeds and immortal song—over which time and genius have suspended an imperishable halo. No! But I would have it remembered that nature has shed over this land beauty and magnificence, and although the character of its scenery may differ from the old world's, yet inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe.

Did Cole want to prevent any development in favor of “preservation” of the Hudson River Valley?

The river scenery of the United States is a rich and boundless theme. The Hudson for natural magnificence is unsurpassed. What can be more beautiful than the lake-like expanses of Tappan and Haverstraw, as seen from the rich orchards of the surrounding hills? hills that have a legend, which has been so sweetly and admirably told that it shall not perish but with the language of the land. What can be more imposing than the precipitous Highlands; whose dark foundations have been rent to make a passage for the deep-flowing river? And, ascending still, where can be found scenes more enchanting? The lofty Catskills stand afar off—the green hills gently rising from the flood, recede like steps by which we may ascend to a great temple, whose pillars are those everlasting hills, and whose dome is the blue boundless vault of heaven.

The Rhine has its castled crags, its vine-clad hills, and ancient villages; the Hudson has its wooded mountains, its rugged precipices, its green undulating shores—a natural majesty, and an unbounded capacity for improvement by art. Its shores are not besprinkled with venerated ruins, or the palaces of princes; but there are flourishing towns, and neat villas, and the hand of taste has already been at work. Without any great stretch of the imagination we may anticipate the time when the ample waters shall reflect temple, and tower, and dome, in every variety of picturesqueness and magnificence.

Was Cole a conservative, averse to change, or afraid of the future?

Art is so various in its aspect and so multiform in its expression that to treat satisfactorily, even of one of its branches, would be the works of many hours, and I trust you will indulge me if I attempt a less Herculean labor. In the remarks I propose to make I have no intention of dwelling on any particular Art in detail, but in a desultory manner to call your attention to the “Arts of Design” as they are commonly called, and more especially to that of painting—to treat of such Art in its influences, objects and requirements, and while placing it before you in the aspects it has assumed in ages past, to lead to the consideration of American Art and to suggest what appears to be incumbent on us as a community if we desire to sow seed in the fields of the Beautiful which for ourselves and the coming generations shall grow and ripen into abundant harvests. Pregnant with life the air we breath surrounds the natural world and softens into harmony its rugged forms. So Art—the Atmosphere which encircles the sphere of our humanity—kindles the dead soul and raises it above the dullness of mere animal existence to intellectual acquirement.

*For through the morning-gate of beauty goes
The pathway to the land of knowledge!*

(Freidrich von Schiller, *The Artists*, 1789)