The Oxbow by Thomas Cole: Iconography of an American Landscape Painting

OSWALDO RODRIGUEZ ROQUE

Associate Curator, Department of American Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

THOMAS COLE'S PAINTING of the oxbow-shaped bend formed by the Connecticut River just south of Northampton, Massachusetts, has long been recognized as one of the outstanding works in the American landscape tradition (Figure 1).[1] Yet its seminal role in the history of that tradition has gone largely unnoticed. Only recently have the formal qualities of this painting been characterized as paradigmatic of "Hudson River School solutions."[2] Still unexplored, however, is its very significant iconographical content. That this should be so, however, is hardly surprising, since the surviving documents relating to the genesis of this picture would tend to persuade us that the work was at best a happy accident, at worst a potboiler.

During the fall and winter of 1835 and the early months of 1836, Thomas Cole was at work on *The Course of Empire*, now at the New-York Historical Society, a series of paintings commissioned by the prominent New York merchant and patron Luman Reed.[3] From the time of their first meeting in the winter of 1832, Reed and Cole maintained a friendship largely sustained by Reed's generosity in purchasing Cole's works. For the painter, Reed's latest commission for a sequence of no fewer than five history paintings was a prized opportunity to fulfill longstanding aspirations.[4] Yet towards the end of 1835 Cole began to have doubts about the success of this project. Work progressed slowly and not to his satisfaction. He encountered great difficulties in painting the figures. He felt lonely and depressed.[5]

In view of his friend's state of mind, Reed suggested in January or early February 1836 that Cole suspend work on *The Course of Empire* and paint something in his "accustomed manner" for the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition opening in April of that year.[6] In a letter dated February 19, 1836, Cole responded to Reed's suggestion:

1. See A. T. Gardner and S. P. Feld, *American Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 1965) I, p. 229. Purchased at the 1836 National Academy of Design exhibition by George H. Talbot of New York for $500, it was shown in 1838 at the Dunlap Benefit exhibition at the Stuyvesant Institute. In 1848 it figured as no. 48 in the Cole Memorial exhibition at the American Art Union. In 1862 it was included in the third annual exhibition of the Artists' Fund Society. After coming to the Metropolitan Museum in 1908, the painting has been shown in many major exhibitions.

2. Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1969) p. 80; for *The Oxbow* see pp. 75–77. Novak notes: "Light, atmosphere, space—attributes generally captured more in on-the-spot views than in the studio—and an awareness of the subtleties of climate and weather, make their appearance by the mid-1830's in *The Oxbow*."

3. See L. L. Noble, *The Course of Empire, Voyage of Life and Other Pictures of Thomas Cole, N. A.* (New York, 1853) pp. 175–179. *The Course of Empire* comprises: 1) *The Savage State*, 2) *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, 3) *The Consummation of Empire*, 4) *Destruction*, and 5) *Desolation*. The largest of these paintings is *The Consummation of Empire* (51 × 76 in.). All the others are of equal, smaller size (36 × 63 in., with slight variations).

4. In a letter to Reed of Sept. 18, 1833, describing the proposed series Cole stated: "My desire [is] to undertake a work on which I may hope to establish a lasting reputation" (see Noble, *Course of Empire*, p. 178).

5. Ibid., pp. 214–217.

6. The quoted phrase is from a letter of Feb. 26, 1836. See note 8 below.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1984
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL 17

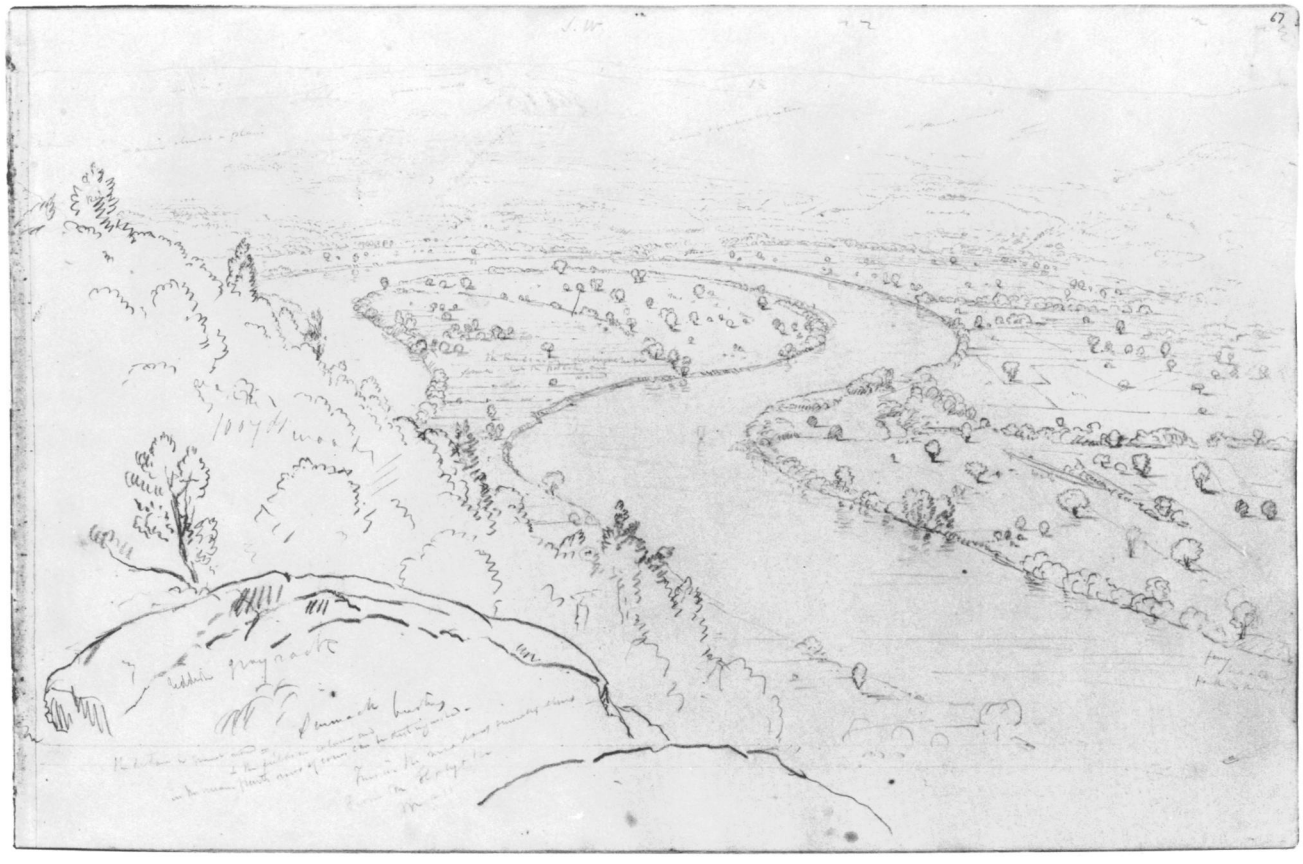
The Metropolitan Museum of Art is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve, and extend access to *Metropolitan Museum Journal* www.jstor.org

1. Thomas Cole (1801–48), *The Oxbow (The Connecticut River near Northampton)*, signed and dated: *T. Cole / 1836*. Oil on canvas, 51½ × 76 in. (130.8 × 193 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 08.228.

I have been thinking of your obliging proposition of painting some Picture for Exhibition and leaving yours for a short term, but I dislike to do so—one reason is that I feel uneasy about it on account of having received so much money for them from you & I feel bound, I may say conscientiously, to execute the pictures as soon & as well as I can—and your repeated generosity makes stronger the obligation. One thing I have thought I might do—if it meets your approbation, that is, paint the last picture in the series. I have already made a drawing on the canvass—and I feel confident it will not take me long to execute it—this picture I would send to Exhibition with the title of "The Ruins of an Ancient City." But I would have to prevail on our Council to break their rules in admitting it again when the whole series is exhibited. I might paint this picture & even find time to paint one for Mr. C. King before exhibition—you will perhaps ask why I choose to paint the last of the series now. It is because it will take less time & I don't know why except it is I am tired of the gaud and glitter of the large picture & not quite in the humour for the tumult of the fourth—I want to work a while on something quiet and somber.[7]

Reed felt unable to approve Cole's plan. He did not think the council of the National Academy of Design should be prevailed upon to make an exception, and furthermore he feared that the "grand effect" to be achieved by the unveiling of the completed series would be spoiled by a previous showing of one of its component pictures. Instead, Reed advised Cole to

7. Cole MSS, New York State Library (NYSL), Albany, New York.



2. Cole, Sketch for *The Oxbow*, from sketchbook no. 8, p. 67. Pencil, 8⅞ × 13¾ in. (22.5 × 34.9 cm.). The Detroit Institute of Arts, William H. Murphy Fund, 39.566 (photo: Detroit Institute of Arts)

In this drawing executed at the site, Cole, as was his habit, noted in words aspects of the scene that he could not visually capture in a pencil sketch. In the left foreground are the following notations: "reddish gray rock"; "Sumack bushes"; "the distance in general around = / & the fields in colour / in the main parts rows of corn can be distinguished."; "Trees in the meadows generally elms." Below the last comment the entire scene is identified as "From M Holyoke / Mass."

At the top of the sheet, Cole indicates the direction of the view with the letters "S.W." The points farthest away he labels with the numeral 1, those closer to the artist but still far away are numbered 1½ and 2; still closer, the farthest stretch of the winding river is numbered 4. In the distant hills the notes "generally woods," "in general woods," "varied," and "woods" indicate the type of vegetation, while in the area just beyond the river, more topographic descriptions are written: to the left, "varied almost a plain"; in the center, "gradually rising" and "varied & gradually. . . ." In the center of the drawing, the area bounded by the meandering river is identified to the right as a "meadow"; in the lower part of the area the notation "the lines bearely [*sic*] distinguishable . . ." refers to the plowed furrows. On the right bank of the river the area where the bank commences is called a "sand bar"; farther upstream to the right the artist notes the presence of a "ferry / but a little / farther to the right." On top of the hill to the left one tree is marked "pine," while the area in general is identified as "100 yds woods" and termed "varied."

paint a canvas for sale like the already-completed second picture of the series. This work, entitled *The Pastoral State*, had been conceived by Cole as an arcadian scene in the manner of Claude Lorrain, and Reed thought that "no man ever produced a more pleasing landscape in a more pleasing season."[8]

Cole replied to Reed in a letter of March 2, 1836. It is here that the first mention of *The Oxbow* occurs:

I should take advantage of your kind advice (and Mr. Durand's) and paint a picture expressly for the exhibition and for sale. The only thing that I doubt in the matter is that I may be able to sell the picture.—I think I never sold but two pictures in Exhibition in my life.—It is running a risk of which I should think nothing if my circumstances did not require that everything I do now should be productive.—but you encourage me and I will do my best———I have revolved in my mind what subject to take & have found it difficult to select such as will be speedy of execution & popular—Fancy pictures seldom sell & they generally take more time than views so I have determined to paint one of the latter. I have already commenced a view from Mt. Holyoke—it is about the finest scene I have in my sketchbook & is well known—it will be novel and I think effective—I could not find a subject very similar to your second picture & time would not allow me to invent one. You will perhaps think I have acted injudiciously in painting the scene as large as the largest picture of the series on account of selling—but I had not altogether my choice for the only canvass I had was the one on which I made the first sketch of your large picture—To get another smaller frame made & to cut the canvass and stretch it would have taken some of the time of which I have none too much before Exhibition. This reason decided me on the size but inclination if not judgment urged me to paint the larger, for having but one picture in the exhibition, & that painted expressly for it & understanding there will be some dashing landscapes there, I thought I should do something that would tell a tale. The execution will scarcely take more time than in the smaller and as I shall run some risk it shall be to some purpose—but you must not be surprised if you find the picture hanging in my room next year.[9]

There appears to be little in this statement of purpose that expresses a serious artistic intent in the painting of *The Oxbow*. Cole's motives seem to be profit and easy work; he is in a hurry and cannot afford to produce something that will not please the public. Yet he refers to the size of the canvas as appropriate to his ends and avows that the painting is to "tell a tale."

The contradictory character of many of Cole's statements in this letter, however, is best understood if we assume that they were intended more for Reed's consumption than as a relation of the actual state of affairs.[10] Even if Reed had been the first to suggest that Cole suspend work on *The Course of Empire*, the painter, as previously indicated in his letter of February 19, wanted Reed to believe that he felt guilty about following Reed's advice. Accordingly, the artist attempted to convince his patron that *The Oxbow* was really a minor endeavor and not a project of consequence. At the same time, Cole could not prevent himself from expressing enthusiasm for the work in progress. Thus, he let Reed know that *The Oxbow* would measure up to the other "dashing landscapes" to be shown at the exhibition and, as a closing statement, hinted again that if the painting did not sell, Reed might perhaps buy it.

Cole's letter, then, appears to be a manipulative statement with somewhat ambivalent and contradictory goals; whatever impression regarding the genesis of *The Oxbow* we derive from it should be appropriately interpreted in the light of other events.

8. Reed to Cole, Feb. 26, 1836, Cole MSS, NYSL.

9. Cole MSS, NYSL. "Mr. Durand" is the painter Asher B. Durand. The contents of this letter have usually been taken at face value and have probably discouraged serious examination of the painting's history and meaning. Thus Novak (*American Painting*, p. 76) quotes the letter and concludes that "in this case, it was definitely a concession to public opinion that induced Cole to paint a view." Similarly, Howard Merritt (*Thomas Cole* [Rochester, 1969] p. 30, no. 31) confines his comments on *The Oxbow* to noting that the painting was undertaken "as a relief and change of pace from the series *The Course of Empire*."

10. Cole's letter, in fact, is full of contradictions and statements that strain credibility. For instance, "I should take advantage of your kind advice" followed by "I have already commenced a view"; or: "The execution will scarcely take more time than in the smaller"; or again: "I had not altogether my choice for the only canvass I had was the one on which I made the first sketch for your large picture." With regard to this last statement recent X-ray shadowgraphs have conclusively established that, if there is a sketch for *The Consummation of Empire* underneath *The Oxbow*, it can only be a chalk sketch. Not even the faintest trace of an oil sketch was revealed by the X-rays. Cole does mention a chalk sketch in a letter to Reed of Feb. 18, 1836, but this was not the "first sketch" for *The Consummation of Empire*, which he was working on at the time and which he completed. Rather, it was a "first sketch" for an *alternate* conception of the painting, which evidently did not advance very far. This letter was published in Noble, *Course of Empire*, p. 214.

Heretofore it has been assumed that Cole drew his inspiration for *The Oxbow* from a visit to the site and that the final appearance of the canvas was determined by what he saw, as recorded in a sketch, now in Detroit, done on the spot (Figure 2). This sketch, mentioned in Cole's letter to Reed of March 2, was probably executed in the summer of 1833, when Cole traveled to Boston to draw a view of that city for a painting commissioned by Joshua Bates, a Boston art dealer he had met in London.[11]

It now appears likely, however, that Cole's consideration of a view of the Connecticut River from Mount Holyoke as a subject for a painting antedates this sketch by some years. Another drawing, which was once taken to be a compositional sketch for *The Oxbow*, may be dated as far back as 1829, that is, to the time of Cole's stay in London on the first leg of his European tour of 1829–32.[12] Identified in Cole's hand as *Mount Holyoke*, this drawing is not an original creation by Cole but rather an exact tracing of a plate published in Captain Basil Hall's *Forty Etchings Made with the Camera Lucida in North America in 1827 and 1828* (Figures 3, 4). This book appeared in London in 1829 as a companion to Hall's *Travels in North America*, published the same year both in London and Philadelphia. Cole is likely to have traced Hall's view at that time.[13]

If this supposition is correct, then *The Oxbow* would have been in the making as long as *The Course of Empire*.[14] Furthermore, the association of *The Oxbow* with Hall's view would have presented Cole with momentous intellectual and aesthetic issues that the artist would sooner or later have had to confront.[15]

Though now a neglected chapter in the history of Anglo-American relations, the publication of Hall's book caused a major uproar. That Cole could have remained impervious to the storm unleashed on both sides of the Atlantic by the captain's *Travels* is inconceivable. No literate American at that time would have been ignorant of the Englishman Basil Hall or what his name stood for.

Had Hall not already attained a wide reputation as a seasoned traveler and raconteur before his appearance in America in 1827, his views might have passed unnoticed.[16] As it was, the captain's negative opinions regarding the American national character, the country's constitutional system, its leaders, and its educational establishment struck a painful blow to American self-esteem at a time when a truly national consciousness was both emergent and ascendant.

Outraged citizens blasted the captain in the pages of national magazines and journals. In its issue of October 1829, the *North American Review* published a painstaking dissection of Hall's book.[17] One month later, the *Southern Review* gave over forty-eight pages to a similar exercise in criticism.[18] In Philadelphia, the lengthy article published in *Littell's Museum of Foreign Literature* was followed by the publication in 1830 of Richard Biddle's *Captain Hall in America*, a book-size riposte which also appeared in London.[19] As late as

11. Bates was also Cole's agent in London. The sketchbook in which this drawing appears contains others executed in the same manner, including a view of Boston near Roxbury and one of Pontoosuck Lake near Pittsfield. The order of these drawings in the sketchbook suggests that Cole stopped at Northampton on the way *to* Boston.

12. This drawing, also in Detroit, is on architects' yellow tracing paper.

13. Hall himself described the view from Mount Holyoke as one of the most beautiful in America (*Forty Etchings*, commentary to pl. xi). Of course, there remains the possibility that the tracing was carried out *after* Cole made his detailed sketch or even the painting, although it would be difficult to apprehend his motives for doing so.

14. Howard Merritt believes that the themes of *The Course of Empire* were conceived by Cole no later than the fall of 1829 ("A Wild Scene: Genesis of a Painting," *Baltimore Museum Annual* 2 [1967] p. 25).

15. Merritt (*Thomas Cole*, p. 13) notes: "The close relationship of Cole's thoughts on art to those of Archibald Alison must be emphasized . . . there is no question that Cole, like most of his contemporaries, was deeply sympathetic with an aesthetic that linked so closely beauty and morality, that saw art as a vehicle for the expression of thought, imagination and sentiment, that placed primary emphasis on the association of ideas." For a fuller exposition of these ideas see Ralph N. Miller, "Thomas Cole and Alison's *Essay on Taste*," *New York History* 37 (1956) p. 281.

16. Hall had a distinguished career in the British Navy and had written an *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and the Great Loo-Choo Islands* (London, 1818), which went through several editions and established his reputation as a travel writer. His *Extracts from a Journal Written on the Coasts of Chili, Peru and Mexico in the Years 1820, 1821, 1822* (London, 1823), largely dealing with the revolutionary events in those countries, also had a remarkable success. For a short account of his life see *Dictionary of National Biography* (rev. ed. 1908) VIII, pp. 942–943.

17. *North American Review* 29 (1829) pp. 522ff.

18. *Southern Review* 4, no. 8 (1829) pp. 321ff.

19. *Littell's Museum of Foreign Literature* 16 (1829) p. 233. [Richard Biddle], *Captain Hall in America, by an American* (Philadelphia, 1830).

1833, Calvin Colton's book *The Americans, by an American in London* devoted 389 pages to an exhaustive examination of Hall's *Travels*, although now Colton was also compelled to deal with the hardly more acceptable Mrs. Trollope.[20]

Perhaps the best description of what the Hall affair involved was written by Mrs. Trollope herself. In her *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, she devoted an entire chapter to the "Reception of Captain Basil Hall's Book in the United States." She assures us that Hall's publication produced "a sort of moral earthquake . . . the vibration it occasioned through the nerves of the Republic, from one corner of the Union to the other, was by no means over when I left the country in July, 1831, a couple of years after the shock."[21]

It is almost a certainty, then, that Cole became aware of Hall's *Travels* and its companion volume of etchings about this time. As an American in London, he would, like Colton, have been called upon by friends and acquaintances to respond to Hall's assertions. Whether Cole shared the general sense of national outrage indicated by Mrs. Trollope is difficult to determine. For the most part, the captain directed his remarks to the American social and political system, criticisms that might have elicited an indifferent response from a struggling painter whose family circumstances had been ones of privation and hardship. On not infrequent occasions, however, Hall registered opinions on matters that had long preoccupied Cole as an artist. Thus Hall, who had remained unimpressed by American scenery in general, noted early in his account that:

All the world over, I suspect the great mass of people care mighty little about scenery, and visit such places merely for the sake of saying they have been there. I own, however, that I was at first rather taken in with respect to this matter in America; and really fancied, from the flaming descriptions we had given us of the beauties and wonders of the country, that the persons describing it were more than usually sensible to its charms. But we now began to suspect, most grievously, that our friends of whom we were striving with all our might to think well in every point, were like most folks elsewhere, nearly as insensible to the beauties of nature, as we had reason to fear, from their public exhibitions, they were to the graces of art.[22]

For a painter whose artistic goals in the years prior to his departure for Europe have been characterized by his biographer as to "seize the true character of our scenery and to identify his pencil with it,"[23] such a statement constituted both an affront and a challenge. For here Hall linked the American public's indifference to nature with its indifference to art and with the incompetence of American artists. Cole could perhaps be certain of the rightness of attempting to forge a national aesthetic based on the appreciation of nature, but he had experienced enough difficulties to be far less certain not only of his ultimate success, but also of his talent.[24] To be told by a foreign, and supposedly impartial, observer that Americans cared no more for nature than they did for his art required either capitulation or rebuttal.

3. Cole, *Mount Holyoke, Mass.* Pencil on tracing paper, sight: 4½ × 8⅜ in. (11.4 × 21.3 cm.). The Detroit Institute of Arts, William H. Murphy Fund, 39.70 (photo: Detroit Institute of Arts)

20. [Reverend Calvin Colton], *The Americans, by an American in London* (London, 1833). The book was also published in the United States.

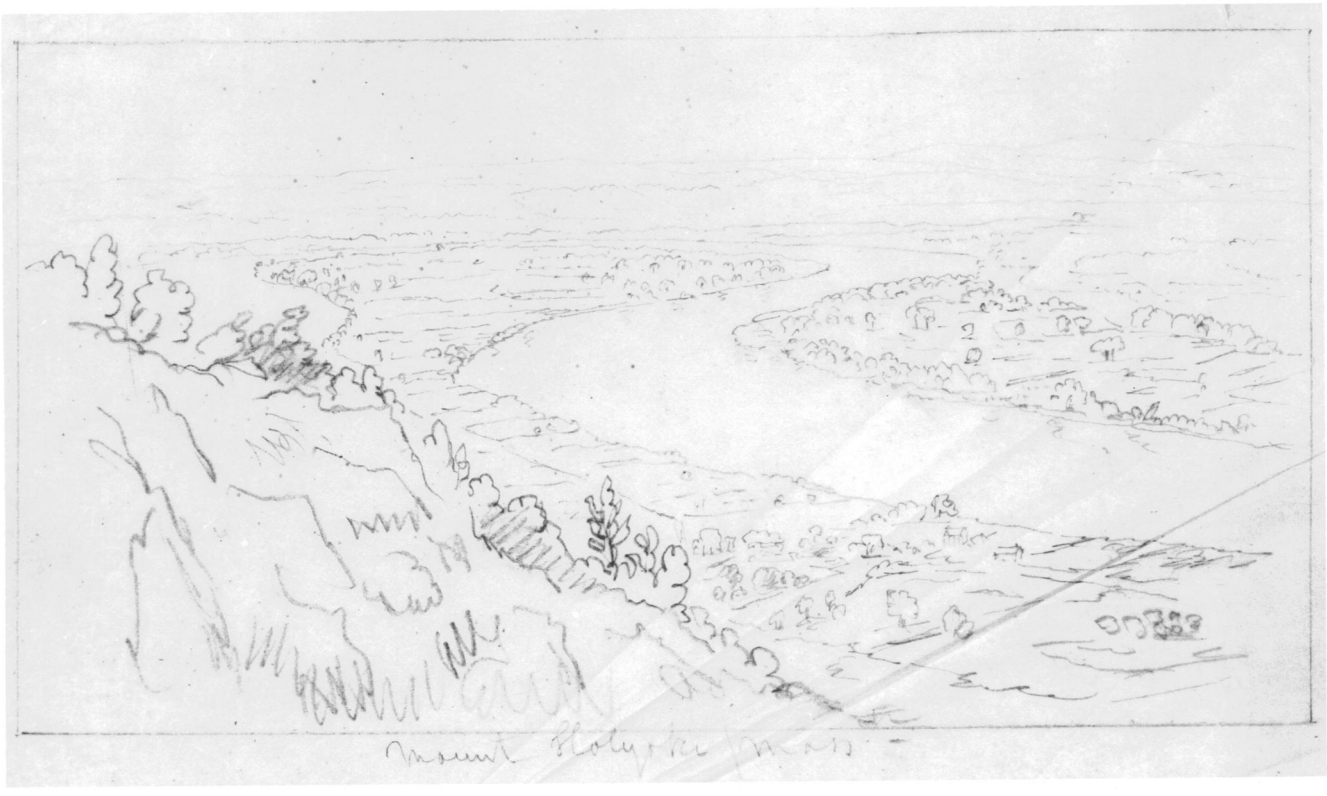
21. Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; reprint London, 1927) p. 313. Mrs. Trollope recounts the following revealing incident (ibid.): "I was in Cincinnati when these volumes came out, but it was not till July, 1830, that I procured a copy of them. One bookseller to whom I applied, told me that he had had a few copies before he understood the nature of the work, but that after becoming acquainted with it, nothing should induce him to sell another. Other persons of his profession must, however, have been less scrupulous, for the book was read in city, town, village, and hamlet, steam-boat, and stage-coach, and a sort of war-whoop was sent forth perfectly unprecedented in my recollection upon any occasion whatever."

22. Hall, *Travels*, I, p. 68.

23. Noble, *Course of Empire*, p. 86.

24. Cole's partner in this cultural enterprise was the poet William Cullen Bryant. See Charles L. Sanford, "The Concept of the Sublime in the Works of Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant," *American Literature* 28 (1957) p. 434. On p. 435 Sanford states: "American poets and painters turned to the sublime for emotional intensification of American scenery both to assert their personal freedom as romantic artists and to assert their cultural independence of Europe as Americans."

4. Basil Hall, *View from Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts*, from *Forty Etchings Made with the Camera Lucida in North America . . .*, London, 1829, pl. XI. Etching, 4½ × 8⅜ in. (11.4 × 21.3 cm.). New Haven, Yale University, Sterling Memorial Library (photo: Sterling Memorial Library)



Later in the *Travels*, commenting upon a visit to Lake George, Hall repeated his assertion that American indifference to scenery was the result of indifference to art:

> It is difficult, I must confess, to discover precisely what people feel with respect to scenery, and I may be wrong in supposing so many of my transatlantic friends insensible to its influence. But certainly, during our stay in the country, while we heard many spots lauded to the utmost length that words could go, we had often occasion to fancy there was no genuine sentiment at the bottom of all this praise. At the time I speak of, this was a great puzzle to me; and I could not understand the apparent indifference shown to the scenery of this beautiful lake by most of our companions. Subsequent experience, however, led me to see, that where the fine arts are not steadily cultivated, where in fact there is little taste for that description of excellence and not very much is known about it, there cannot possibly be much hearty admiration of the beauties of nature.[25]

If Cole did indeed come upon Hall's books shortly after their publication in 1829, this particular contention would have proved especially troubling. On the eve of his departure for Europe, the painter had attempted to raise adequate funds by raffling off two of his pictures.[26] Failing in that enterprise, he wrote to his patron Robert Gilmor: "When I know that not one Landscape painter in New York has received from a gentleman of New York a single commission for the past two years, I am inclined to attribute my want of success in this instance to that apathy which certainly exists in this wholly commercial city."[27]

In view of this, it is not surprising that during his three-and-a-half years in Europe from 1829 to 1832, and later in America up to 1834, Cole devoted the larger share of his efforts to European scenery and to representations of biblical themes and literary allegories.[28] Yet the realities of the New York art market would not, of themselves, have pushed Cole to what, on the surface, appears as a rejection of American landscape painting during those years. Two additional motives must be taken into account: Cole wished to put all the drawings and sketches of European scenery he had gathered to profitable use and, more important, he desperately aspired to the status of history painter.[29]

Still, to view this shift in Cole's career as an abandonment of his previous commitment to the American land and landscape would be a serious error. If he produced few paintings of American scenery after his return from Europe, this does not mean that he gave no thought to the nature of American landscape painting, or that the issues raised by Hall had not been turned over in his mind. On the contrary, subsequent events in the painter's career suggest not only that Cole was profoundly aware of those issues, but also that this awareness was an integral part of the singular pictorial statement that is *The Oxbow*.

Cole's continued allegiance to the cause of American landscape painting and his answer to the criticisms voiced by Hall and others were clearly spelled out in his *Essay on American Scenery*, delivered as a lecture before the New York Lyceum on May 16, 1835, and published in pamphlet form the same year.[30] According to Cole, many had unfavorably compared the sublimity of the Catskills with that of the Swiss Alps, or the picturesqueness of the Hudson with that of the Roman Campagna. His argument, however, did not proceed along such lines. He declared at the outset that native scenery ought to have a surpassing interest for every American, for "it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity—all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!"[31]

25. Hall, *Travels*, I, p. 220.

26. Cole to Robert Gilmor, Apr. 20, 1829. See Howard Merritt, ed., "Correspondence Between Thomas Cole and Robert Gilmor, Jr.," *Baltimore Museum Annual* 2 (1967) p. 65.

27. Ibid.

28. Sometime around 1834 Cole compiled a "list of pictures painted by me" since his arrival in New York in 1825 (Cole MSS, NYSL). Of 35 pictures painted before his departure for Europe, all but 4 featured subjects drawn from American scenery. Of the 15 executed between his return and the time of the list's compilation, 6 were Italian views, 5 depicted religious themes or allegorical subjects taken from literature, and 4 featured American scenery. At the 1835 National Academy of Design exhibition Cole was represented by 4 American subjects: *View of Sleepy Hollow*, *View on the Catskill* (in an engraving by James Smillie), *Summer Twilight*, and *Autumn Twilight*. The last two were purchased by Luman Reed and are now part of the Reed Collection at the New-York Historical Society.

29. Thus Novak (*American Painting*, p. 65) rightly refers to Cole as a "Reynoldsian disciple in landscape toga." Later on, Cole would complain about the market's inflexible demand for American views, which would prevent him from undertaking historical series like *The Course of Empire*.

30. Reprinted in John McCoubrey, *American Art: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965) pp. 98–110.

31. Ibid., p. 98.

Cole took due notice of the common criticisms leveled against the American landscape:

> 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. . . . 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.[32]

Thus, to the indifference of many Americans Cole opposed the interest of "that community increasing in intelligence" of which he and his circle were part, and to the criticisms based on concepts of the picturesque and the sublime, he opposed his own characterization of the American land.

So Cole examined the different features of American scenery—mountains, water, skies—and discovered the uniqueness of certain spots where "there is a union of the picturesque, the sublime and the magnificent," where "the traveller . . . cannot but acknowledge that although in some regions of the globe nature has wrought on a more stupendous scale, yet she has nowhere so completely married together *grandeur* and *loveliness*"; where the observer sees "the sublime melting into the beautiful, the savage tempered by the magnificent."[33]

According to Cole, then, the singularity of the American landscape resides in its ability to vary and combine the established typology of late eighteenth-century aesthetic theory: Niagara possesses "both the sublime and the beautiful in an indissoluble chain," American skies display "the blue, unsearchable depths of the northern sky, the upheaped thunderclouds of the Torrid Zone, the silver haze of England, the golden atmosphere of Italy."[34] The wilderness exists side by side with fledgling arcadian settlements. "The wild Salvator Rosa" takes his place alongside "the aerial Claude Lorrain."

Having thus defined the distinctive character of the American landscape, Cole turned his attention to answering another common criticism—"the want of associations such as arise amid the scenes of the old world."[35] What had often been considered a grand defect in American scenery Cole countered with an innovative argument. American views, he concluded, did not reveal the hand of the past but the hope of the future. He visualized this inspirational message by means of the following image:

> Seated on a pleasant knoll, look down into the bosom of that secluded valley, begirt with wooded hills through enamelled meadows and wide waving fields of grain; a silver stream winds lingeringly along—here seeking the green shade of trees—there glancing in the sunshine; on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers—from yonder dark mass of foliage the village spire beams like a star. You see no ruined tower to tell of outrage—no gorgeous temple to speak of ostentation; but freedom's offspring—peace, security and happiness dwell there, the spirits of the scene. . . . And in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity—mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil.[36]

This almost literal description of the iconography of *The Oxbow* was Cole's response to the beauties of American scenery. Whatever doubts and uncertainties Hall's description of American indifference to the beauty of the land may have evoked in the past were here swept away in a moving affirmation of the land's significance. The captain's devastating assertion that "take it all in all, a more unpicturesque country is hardly to be found anywhere" was here laid to rest.[37]

This new formulation of the virtues of American landscape appears to have gained general acceptance. Writing five years after Cole's *Essay*, Nathaniel Parker Willis could confidently announce to a foreign audience that America possessed a "lavish and large-featured sublimity, quite dissimilar to the picturesque of all other countries."[38] Furthermore, Willis would emphasize how "the objects and habits of reflection in both traveller and artist undergo in America a direct revolution. He who journeys here . . . must feed his imagination on the *future*. The American does so."[39]

32. Ibid., p. 101.
33. Ibid., p. 103.
34. Ibid., p. 108.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.: "But American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and future."
37. Hall, *Travels*, I, p. 134.
38. N. P. Willis and W. H. Bartlett, *American Scenery* (London/Paris, 1840) p. iii.
39. Ibid., p. 2.

5. Cole, *The Oxbow*, detail of Figure 1

It comes as no surprise, then, that *The Oxbow*, Cole's first American landscape executed after the delivery of his *Essay on American Scenery*, embodies in paint the themes, ideas, and images that the artist had previously put into words. The painting, as one reviewer of the National Academy of Design exhibition in 1836 put it, "wants to be studied."[40]

The division of *The Oxbow* into two clearly discernible areas, the left featuring elements of Salvator Rosa's romantic sublime and the right emphasizing the Claudian beautiful, is strictly in keeping with the tenets of Cole's new synthesis. The contorted tree trunks, the receding storm, and the wild mountains are effectively juxtaposed with the "silver stream that winds lingeringly along," on whose banks are "rural dwellings shaded by elms." The different topographic features and atmospheric conditions—mountains, plains, wild forests, cultivated farmlands, a dark storm opposed to a translucent sky, shadow contrasted with light—are all part of the variety Cole identified with American scenery.

In his *Essay*, Cole redefined that scenery not with limiting conditions but with all-inclusive ones. Moreover, with this synthesis of the individual features of foreign scenery, Cole associated the future prospects of the American nation. The size of the canvas, which "inclination if not judgment" decided him upon, reflects these concerns, as does the deployment of the landscape features in a manner that creates the illusion of infinite recession and allows the eye to roam over vast vistas.

This arrangement of the landscape features is not a strictly topographical one, as was Hall's view executed with the aid of the camera lucida. In a compar-

40. *Knickerbocker Magazine* 8 (1836) pp. 112–115: "This is really a fine landscape, although at first it does not appear so. It wants to be studied."

ison of the two works, it should be immediately apparent that if Cole relied on Hall's precedent in the painting of *The Oxbow*, it was only in the most elementary way, that, in fact, what the American painter did was transform a commonplace piece of topographic journalism into a boldly composed, vividly colored, and heroically conceived picture that "transcends the mere view to become art."[41] Thus, *The Oxbow* is not a derivation but a counterstatement.

To call attention unequivocally to the nature of his painting, Cole included the figure of an artist at work, recording the vast panorama stretching before him. Alone with nature, the artist bears perpetual witness to the picture-worthiness of the scenery and relays this vital message to the viewer. That Cole chose to sign the canvas in the artist's satchel, its position signaled by the protruding umbrella, suggests that we are here dealing with a self-portrait (Figure 5).[42] In response to Basil Hall and to other critics of American scenery, Cole has put himself forward as an American producing American art in communion with American scenery for an appreciative American audience.

We now perceive in *The Oxbow* a conceptual and metaphorical approach to the representation of landscape features. Though overall, general faithfulness to the scenery represented is maintained, the picture is fundamentally the product of Cole's transforming vision. Here land, water, and sky, lovingly depicted, become the voices of philosophy and feeling. This expansion of the language of landscape painting to embrace so much more than topographic realism, while simultaneously remaining true to nature, was Cole's legacy to his followers of the Hudson River School. In the painter's own career, it was *The Oxbow* that first achieved this masterful synthesis.

41. Novak, *American Painting*, p. 77.

42. The figure of the painter bears a striking resemblance to Cole himself. With regard to the umbrella, the following note from George H. Talbot, the first purchaser of *The Oxbow*, is of interest. Dated July 11, 1836, it reads: "I would be pleased to have you call at 41 Bleecker Street and alter the painting as regards the umbrella—when it is convenient for you to do so" (Cole MSS, NYSL). Recent X-rays confirm that Cole never obliged him. The panoramic qualities of *The Oxbow* are noted in Lee Parry, "Landscape Theater in America," *Art in America* 59, 6 (1971) p. 58.