

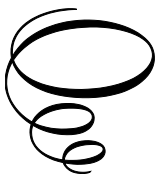
Thomas Cole's Americas

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By

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and Hermione de Almeida

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For William Carl Gilpin and Hermione Estella Gilpin, and their grandparents—George and Billie Gilpin, and Olivia Estella and Felix Joseph de Almeida—who would be proud of them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	viii
Foreword	xii
Chapter One..... In Britain	1
Chapter Two..... To the Americas	32
Chapter Three..... In New York; Scenes of America	68
Chapter Four..... Landscape Portraits “In My Mind’s Eye”	91
Chapter Five..... Exemplary Britain and Europe	135
Chapter Six..... The Course of Empires	175
Chapter Seven..... Voyages of Life; Afterlives of Sicily	204
Chapter Eight..... In Cole’s Studio	233
Afterword	249
Select Bibliography	256
Index.....	259

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Colour Plates

- Plate 1. William Birch, *The City & Port of Philadelphia, on the River Delaware from Kensington*, 1800. [Commonly known as “Penn’s Elm Tree,” the signing site of Penn’s Treaty with the Lenape.]
- Plate 2. *View of Statia*, painting, 1759.
- Plate 3. Thomas Cole, *Lake with Dead Trees (Catskill)*, 1825.
- Plate 4. Thomas Cole, *View of Fort Putnam*, 1825.
- Plate 5. Thomas Cole, *Kaaterskill Falls [Interior]*, 1825-26.
- Plate 6. Thomas Cole, *The Clove, Catskills*, 1827.
- Plate 7. Thomas Cole, *Col. Boon Sitting at the Door of His Cabin [on the Great Osage Lake]*, 1826.
- Plate 8. Thomas Cole, *The Falls of Kaaterskill as Seen from Below*, 1826.
- Plate 9. Thomas Cole, *Landscape, Scene from “The Last of the Mohicans,”* 1827.
- Plate 10. Thomas Cole, *Scene from “The Last of the Mohicans,” Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund*, 1827.
- Plate 11. Thomas Cole, *Autumn Landscape (View of Mount Cocorua)*, 1828.
- Plate 12. Thomas Cole, *Landscape Composition, St. John in the Wilderness*, 1827.
- Plate 13. Thomas Cole, *The Garden of Eden*, 1828.
- Plate 14. Thomas Cole, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1828.
- Plate 15. Thomas Cole, *Distant View of Niagara Falls*, 1830.
- Plate 16. Thomas Cole, *Tornado in an American Forest*, 1831.
- Plate 17. Thomas Cole, *Scene from Byron’s “Manfred,”* 1833.
- Plate 18. Thomas Cole, *View of the Protestant Burying Ground, Rome*, 1834.
- Plate 19. Thomas Cole, *A View Near Tivoli (Morning)*, 1832.
- Plate 20. Thomas Cole, *Italian Scene Composition*, 1833.
- Plate 21. Thomas Cole, *Interior of the Colosseum, Rome*, 1832.
- Plate 22. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Savage State*, 1834.
- Plate 23. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Pastoral or Arcadian State*, 1834.

- Plate 24. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire*, 1835-36.
- Plate 25. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, 1836.
- Plate 26. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Desolation*, 1836.
- Plate 27. Thomas Cole, *The Titan's Goblet*, 1833.
- Plate 28. Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836.
- Plate 29. Thomas Cole, *Dream of Arcadia*, 1838.
- Plate 30. Thomas Cole, *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)*, 1839.
- Plate 31. Thomas Cole, *The Return*, 1838.
- Plate 32. Thomas Cole, *The Architect's Dream*, 1840.
- Plate 33. Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Childhood*, 1842.
- Plate 34. Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Youth*, 1842.
- Plate 35. Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Manhood*, 1842.
- Plate 36. Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Old Age*, 1842.
- Plate 37. Thomas Cole, *Mount Etna from Taormina*, 1843.
- Plate 38. Thomas Cole, *An Evening in Arcady*, 1843.
- Plate 39. Thomas Cole, *View from Frenchman's Bay, from Mt. Desert Island, Maine, after a Squall*, 1845.
- Plate 40. Thomas Cole, *The Pic-Nic*, 1846.
- Plate 41. Thomas Cole, *Prometheus Bound*, 1847.
- Plate 42. Thomas Cole, *The Cross and the World: The Pilgrim of the Cross at the End of his Journey*, c. 1846-48.
- Plate 43. Frederic Church, *Sketch for Cole memorial painting*, 1848.
- Plate 44. Frederic Church, *To the Memory of Cole*, 1848.

Black / White Figures

- Figure 1. William Dugdale, *The King's School, Chester / St. Werburgh Abbey*, 1717.
- Figure 2. T. Allom, *View from the Walls of Chester—Looking into Wales*, 1795.
- Figure 3. Thomas Pennant, *A Plan of the City of Chester*, 1782
- Figure 4. John Bird, *Street Scene in Chorley*, c. 1795.
- Figure 5. *Map of Indonesia showing Mount Tambora on Island of Sabawa*.
- Figure 6. E. Polehampton, *Interior View of the Peak [Cavern] of Derbyshire*, 1821.
- Figure 7. John Swire, *Liverpool*, 1823-24. Inserts: *View of Liverpool in the year 1650* (left) and *Plan of Liverpool in the Year 1729* (right).
- Figure 8. *A Perspective View of Liverpool, in Lancashire*, 1785.

- Figure 9. *Plan of the Slave Ship named Brookes*, 1789.
- Figure 10. John Lewis Krimmel, *Fourth of July in Centre Square*, 1812.
- Figure 11. John Lewis Krimmel, *View of Centre Square on the Fourth of July*, 1819.
- Figure 12. William Birch, *Plan of the City of Philadelphia*, 1800.
- Figure 13. F. Drayton, *Plan of the City of Philadelphia . . . from Actual Surveys*, 1824.
- Figure 14. Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822.
- Figure 15. Charles Willson Peale, *The Exhuming of the First American Mastodon*, 1806.
- Figure 16. [Thomas Cole], *Prince Emmanuel's Triumphant Entry in the Town of Mansoul*, in McCarty & Davis, *John Bunyan's Holy War* (1818).
- Figure 17. *Drawing of St. Eustatius*, 1770.
- Figure 18. *Map of the Island of St. Eustatius (Statia)*, 1999. Insert: *Location in the Leewards of the Lesser Antilles*.
- Figure 19. J. Bergmüller, *St. Eustache [St. Eustatius] During the War Between Holland and England, in 1781*, c. 1785.
- Figure 20. William Faden, *The Island of St Eustatius, corruptly* [known as] *St. Eustatia*, c. 1795 [showing plats and sections].
- Figure 21. Thomas Cole, *Sketch of Tree from Nature*, 1823; John Martin, *Drawing of Tree from Character of Trees* (1817).
- Figure 22. Thomas Cole, *Cattle and Distant Mountains*, 1822.
- Figure 23. Thomas Cole, *Landscape*, 1825.
- Figure 24. Thomas Doughty, *Kaaterskill Falls*, Frontispiece to Theodore Dwight, *The Northern Traveller, and Northern Tour*, 1825.
- Figure 25. Thomas Cole, *A View of the Two Lakes and Mountain House, Catskill Mountains, Morning*, 1844.
- Figure 26. Thomas Cole, *Sketch for Kaaterskill Falls [Interior]*, 1825.
- Figure 27. Thomas Cole, *Evening in the White Mountains*, c. 1827.
- Figure 28. Samuel F. B. Morse, *Chief Petalasharo*, Detail, *The House of Representatives*, 1822-23.
- Figure 29. Thomas Cole, detail, *Colonel Boon Sitting at the Door of His Cabin*, 1826.
- Figure 30. Thomas Cole, *Sketch for Colonel Boon*, 1825-26.
- Figure 31. Thomas Cole, detail, *The Falls of Kaaterskill as Seen from Below*, 1826.
- Figure 32. Thomas Cole, *Scene from "Last of the Mohicans," Cora Kneeling at the Feet of Tamenund*, 1827. ["Replica" for Mr. Gilmor.]
- Figure 33. *Chocorua's Curse*, engraving of the lost 1829 painting by Cole; George W. Hatch for *The Token* (1830).

- Figure 34. Thomas Cole, detail, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1828.
- Figure 35. Thomas Cole, *Subsiding of the Waters of the Deluge*, 1829.
- Figure 36. *King Andrew the First, Born to Command*, 1832.
- Figure 37. Gustave de Beaumont, *Choctaw Tribe Boarding a Steamboat for Removal West, Across the Mississippi River*, 1831.
- Figure 38. Thomas Cole, *New England Scenery*, 1839.
- Figure 39. John Constable, *Opening of Waterloo Bridge*, 1832.
- Figure 40. J. M. W. Turner, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage—Italy*, 1832.
- Figure 41. Thomas Cole, *A Solitary Lake in New Hampshire*, 1830.
- Figure 42. Samuel F. B. Morse, detail, *Gallery of the Louvre*, 1833.
- Figure 43. Thomas Cole, *A Wild Scene*, 1831-32.
- Figure 44. Washington Allston, *Landscape, American Scenery. Time, Afternoon, with a Southwest Haze* (1835).
- Figure 45. Thomas Cole, detail, *The Course of Empire: Consummation*, 1836.
- Figure 46. Thomas Cole, Installation Diagram for *The Course of Empire*, 1833.
- Figure 47. Thomas Cole, *Autumn Twilight: a View of Corway [Chocorua] Peak*, 1834.
- Figure 48. Thomas Cole, *River in the Catskills*, 1843.
- Figure 49. *The Colossus of Mount Athos, Macedonia* (1721), engraving in textbook on Vitruvius, rpt. 1826.
- Figure 50. Thomas Cole, detail, *The Oxbow*, 1836.
- Figure 51. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Mortlake Terrace: Early Summer Morning*, 1826.
- Figure 52. Thomas Cole, *The Gardens of the Van Rensselaer Manor House*, 1841.
- Figure 53. Thomas Cole, *The Temple of Segesta with the Artist Sketching*, c. 1842.
- Figure 54. Thomas Cole, *Il Penseroso (View of the Lago di Nemi, near Rome)*, 1844.
- Figure 55. Thomas Cole, *Angels Ministering to Christ in the Wilderness*, 1843.
- Figure 56. Thomas Cole, *The Cross in the Wilderness*, 1845-46.
- Figure 57. Thomas Cole, *The Hunter's Return*, 1845.
- Figure 58. Thomas Cole, *Home in the Woods*, 1847.
- Figure 59. Thomas Cole, *Catskill Mountain House*, c. 1845,
- Figure 60. Frederic Church, *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636*, 1846.
- Figure 61. Thomas Cole, *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, 1836-48.
- Figure 62. Thomas Cole, detail, *The Pic-Nic*, 1846.
- Figure 63. Asher B. Durand, detail, *Kindred Spirits*, 1846.

FOREWORD

"I am not a mere leaf painter."

—Thomas Cole, 1838

"I thought I would do something that would tell a tale . . .," Thomas Cole, America's first recognized landscape artist, said in 1836. This book is the story of that tale as told in paintings by the artist known as the founder of the Hudson River School, and as the teacher and mentor of its most famous artist, Frederic Edwin Church. Cole was twenty-four years old when he sold his first three paintings of scenes set in the Catskill Mountains that he had displayed at a picture shop in Greenwich Village, and priced at \$25 each. They were purchased almost immediately in October 1825 by the well-known American artists John Trumbull, Asher Durand, and William Dunlap. "This youth has done at once, and without instruction, what I [still] cannot do," Trumbull said of Cole's natural skill and visual acuity; he noted that the picture he had just bought was worth far more than its price, and that he would not part with it for any price. Durand, astonished at Cole's talent, felt immediate kinship between his own art and that of the landscape that he had just purchased. Daniel Wadsworth, an artist and collector married to Trumbull's niece, saw Cole's painting of Kaaterskill Falls in Trumbull's studio and, struck by the authenticity of the scene, promptly commissioned a replica of the painting for \$50, paid in advance. Wadsworth and Durand in time would become lifelong friends of Cole. Dunlap, writing under the pseudonym "An American" in the *New York Evening Post* of November 22, 1825, gave an enthusiastic account of Trumbull's gracious praise of Cole, to which he appended his own estimate of Cole's pending success. Viewers of Cole's paintings, Dunlap predicted, would soon be astonished to see "that an American boy . . . has equaled those works [of the Old Masters] which have been the boast of Europe and the admiration of the ages." One month later, Dunlap published a condensed version of his review in the *New York Literary Gazette* titled "Another American Genius." In subsequent conversations with patrons of the arts, and in his 1834 *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts*, Dunlap would reiterate his fond theory of Cole as the epitome of youthful American genius—he was young and untutored; he was a refugee from the values of Britain and the scenes of Europe; his latent abilities were nurtured and brought forth by American

democracy; and his natural, effortless art was testament to the passage of genius from the Old World to continental America. Dunlap's promotion of Cole had patriotic appeal and a certain verity to wealthy viewers and business persons: it evoked the prevailing and fervent belief in American exceptionalism in government and industry—and extended this to Cole's exceptionalism in art.

Dunlap's characterization of Cole as an exemplar of youthful American genius continues to underlie popular assumptions of the nature and subjects of Cole's art. In muted form, Dunlap's characterization also continues to undermine contemporary discussions of the cultural influences and intellectual underpinning of Cole's paintings, limiting these to the accessible period that began when Cole settled in Philadelphia and took art classes at the city's new Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. We cannot know what Cole thought of the earnest and patriotic promotion of his work. He did intuit, early, that the second-hand appeal of scenic beauty would at once characterize and cloud the actual impetus of his paintings—which was to hold visually and preserve the spirit of pristine places in the American wilderness. He soon foresaw that any focus on the symbolic meanings of his paintings and their topics would narrow to just their usefulness in support of patriotic imperatives and the advance of American commerce and industry. As early as July 1832 when writing from Italy near the end of his tour of Europe's art, Cole confessed to Wadsworth, who had advised him on places to see and sketch in the high Catskills and White Mountains of New Hampshire, that he was underwhelmed by the "treasures" and "present richness of Italy," saying, "nothing has touched my heart like those wild scenes of America from which the hand of Nature has never been lifted." As late as mid-May 1838, after he had exhibited a raft of paintings including his five-part epic on *The Course of Empire*, after he had lectured to Lyceum Society members in New York on the vital significance to human society and civilization of those places of "wild nature" that had not yet disappeared from known wildernesses in the Americas, and after he had become a United States citizen and moved to a secluded farm in the Catskills, Cole wrote in his *Journal* of his miscast, purported purpose and of his alienation from the prevailing values of his new country. "—I do feel that I am not a mere leaf painter, that I have loftier conceptions than any mere combination of inanimate & uninformed Nature. But I am out of place; everything around, except delightful Nature herself, is conflicting with my feelings; there are few persons of real taste, & no opportunity for the artist of Genius to develop his powers; the utilitarian tide sets against fine Arts."

Thomas Cole, by the end of his eighteenth year, had crossed the Atlantic Ocean, had set foot on two hemispheres of the globe, and had lived

on three continents—Europe and the two Americas. By the time he showed his three paintings at Coleman’s New York shop in 1825, he had spent a total of almost five years on both American continents. He had worked as an engraver, explored the city built by William Penn, and lived in the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence and the location of the Republic’s first museums of natural history and American art. He had sailed from the port of Philadelphia on a small sailboat south, through the lower Atlantic and into the Caribbean Sea, had seen British colonial territories in the Caribbean archipelago and then lived for five months on the island of St. Eustatia in the Lesser Antilles. He had taken a solitary walking trip through the Ohio Valley where he encountered and sketched old growth forests inland and early Indigenous campsites along the river banks; he had also made (and perhaps sold) a few portrait sketches of settlers in the small towns near Steubenville. On his way to Pittsburgh to join his family, Cole had ample opportunities to tour the fabled Monongahela Valley sites of the British and French settlers’ wars against one another—over lands that were the birthright of their armies’ Indigenous conscripts. Cole returned to Philadelphia and enrolled in art classes at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1823, a decision prompted by the school’s initial offering of classes in the new category of landscape painting inaugurated by British artists like Richard Wilson and John Constable. He was fully resolved that he would paint meaningful landscapes, not scenes or “leaf” paintings that were “mere combinations” or illustrations of recognizable places, but symbolic landscapes that embodied intuitive insight or comprehending “conceptions”—natural landscapes that spoke moral truth to human histories. Cole contributed a single painting to the Pennsylvania Academy show the year he completed his coursework. It was a pastoral composition titled, simply, *Landscape*.

There are no records of Cole’s life in the English Midlands; and, except for two loose-leaf sketchbooks from his walking tour of Pennsylvania and Ohio, nothing survives of his early years in America. There are no biographies of Cole. An 1853 memoir by Louis Legrand Noble, who became Cole’s friend in 1844 when he was appointed Rector of the Episcopal Church in Catskill, endures as the only source for Cole’s life before he was “discovered” as an artist in New York City. Noble’s 1853 *The Life, Character and Genius of Thomas Cole*, issued in several reprints and annotated by Elliot Vesell in 1964, provides brief details of Cole’s years in England based on Noble’s remembered conversations with the artist. Excerpts and paraphrased statements from Cole’s unpublished papers are then evoked by Noble to frame his commentary on Cole’s genius that favors a revisionary Christian reading of the late paintings. Ellwood Parry’s learned 1988 book on the histories of art that presage Cole’s achieved body

of work remains the most thorough study of Cole's work. It begins in 1825 with the reception of Cole's first paintings in New York; it then follows the chronology of his works. Cole was intimidatingly prolific during the twenty-odd years of his professional life: his paintings, ever-increasingly complex and symbolic, were often completed in a single day or, if on large canvas, in a few days or a single week; series of several large canvases on a connected subject were finished in the concentrated time of a few weeks. His meditative panorama of Mount Aetna, an extreme example, was done in 1843 in *one week*. A photographic intensity of his "mind's eye" made this possible: as he said, "by looking intently on an object for twenty minutes I can go to my room & paint it with much more truth, than I could if I employed several hours on the spot." The size and extent of Cole's opus has encouraged important studies to be limited, justifiably, to specific time periods or theoretical topics. *Atlantic Crossings*, an exhibition mounted in London and New York in 2018, stands as a significant reminder of Cole's dual, early origins and his implicit country-based influences, and of the "crossings" that must underlie the very origins of his art. Commentary in the published catalogue to this exhibition is, unfortunately but perhaps necessarily, bounded by national sources and disciplinary patterns of discussion.

The tale that Cole would tell though his paintings would have to include the life experienced in youth, with its observations and lessons learned, as well as the life of the creative mind in maturity that would generate the paintings. Coleridge, when speaking of the "workings" of the creative mind in an 1812 essay in *The Friend*, said that such a mind had to include "all the cement of thought as well as of style, all the connections and . . . *all the hooks-and-eyes of the memory*." If the connective links of early memory are not remembered, or forgotten by choice, Coleridge added, then the absence of continuity by way of the "underpinnings of memory" would trivialize the manifested creativity and "dwarf" the very reception of the work of art. *Thomas Cole's Americas* is intended as a comprehensive, accessible, integrated introduction to Cole's life and art—to the full tale told though his paintings. Our book invokes early experiential and cultural sources in Cole's life that inform his later choices of topic and message, so as to highlight the connecting life of the creative mind behind the paintings. Verifiable experiences in Cole's early life, from the time well before 1825 and his recognition as an artist of significance in America, are the factual hooks-and-eyes behind his earliest memories; when connected and consciously integrated in adulthood, they become part of the intellectual underpinnings of his paintings. As a child's memories from before the adult experiences that followed in the Americas, they can be sensed, sometimes

strongly, through all the stages of Cole's artwork. They exist as unbroken tracings that join, with meaning, all the major paintings. *Thomas Cole's Americas* deliberately begins with the unknown but significant aspects of Cole's life in the English Midlands. It concludes with Cole's sad realization that he has known many, perhaps too many, Americas.

Bolton, where Cole was born, and Chorley where Cole apprenticed as a wood-block engraver of fabric designs, were not simply satellite factory towns of Greater Manchester, or part of its reputation as an industrial juggernaut known for the mistreatment of its workers, Corn Laws, bread riots, Luddite revolts, and the Peterloo Massacre. In Bolton, Cole learned from his parents, and their community of Dissenting Protestants, the values of independence and personal faith, of the "Inward Light" given to all human beings as a guarantee of dignity, equality, and freedom; he also learned from the bleak but living beauty of the moorlands that carried the measures of spiritual joy in nature. In Chorley, Cole learned not just the rudiments of mixing colours and varying designs for fabrics but of the powerful potential of visual patterns for symbolic teaching; his evening hours provided time for exploring nearby ruins of early Briton communities; walks along the edges of the Peak District and, on holidays, access to the geological wonders of the central caverns and high peaks of the region. In Chester Cole, as a scholarship boarder, attended the King's School housed in the original St. Werburgh Abbey; he completed the standard grammar school course of study (in four years) of ancient and modern history, Latin language and literature, astronomy and mathematics, as well as basic architectural drawing, world geography, geology, and accounting—all subjects that would train him for work in Britain's colonial enterprise. Grammar school established Cole's lifelong habit of reading. He read adventure stories, old travel narratives, journal accounts by explorers from Mungo Park to Alexander von Humboldt, contemporary sentimental novels, and radical poetry by Shelley and Byron. (After Turner, Cole was the artist most inspired by the scenes described in Byron's poems.) Cole was spoilt for choice in regards to wilted landscapes; A seaport from the time of the Romans, with sizable ruins of their fort, aqueduct, and amphitheater still standing, and Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance buildings provided him with ample places to explore. Chester in the seventeenth century was renowned for shipbuilding; its vessels specifically served the European, and especially Dutch, colonial trade. By the eighteenth century, Chester's fame in shipbuilding had passed to Liverpool.

If Chester was a history lesson in Britain's illustrious past, Liverpool presented as the power and energy of Britain's imperial future. The Cole family spent over a year in Liverpool awaiting ship's passage to Philadelphia.

Cole, working as an assistant at a printing business, encountered a city that was worldly and astonishingly new. Liverpool's twelve deep-water docks teemed with workers serving thousands of large, ocean-going vessels and their cargoes. Wealth from its trading businesses supported Palladian-style Custom and Exchange Houses, museums of foreign curiosities like Bullock's (which later moved to Egyptian Hall in London), traders' mansions high above the Mersey, churches, libraries, and *four* newspapers. Liverpool's monied fame began at the start of 1700 when the city merchants agreed to join the lucrative European slave trade with the launch of two bespoke slave ships. In the early 1700s there were 53 Liverpool slavers operating in the triangle passage and, by the late 1700s, there were over 130 slave ships carrying goods from Midlands' industries to be used in barter for West African captives destined for use on British Caribbean islands or to be sold to plantation owners on the adjacent American continents. To the ever-observant Cole there was much to learn and remember in Liverpool. The "hooks-and-eyes" of these and earlier memories would be connected later—and put to real, narrative use in his art.

Passages across the Atlantic Ocean in midsummer was the preferred time as the westerlies blew less vigorously—but for the Cole family and others on the *Andrew*, the month-long journey in 1818 was never calm, the ship rolled from storms almost every day, and the steerage berths were never dry. For the seventeen-year-old Cole, the experience was literally breathtaking: he saw an ocean vaster than the moors he knew, lightning storms that far exceeded those he had witnessed over the landmass of the Peaks, and a skyscape at night teeming with stars and recognizable constellations. Cole's trip to the Caribbean island of St. Eustatia shortly after his eighteenth birthday intensified this experience of a nature beyond human scope: the stars were brighter and seemingly larger in the clear air of the southern ocean, the storms were closer when experienced on a twelve-person boat, the long calms that followed revealed a Caribbean Sea brimming with exotic life (what Humboldt had called "a liquid edible banquet"), and an archipelago of islands composed of cratered volcanic peaks, and coastal lowlands covered with fruit and flowers. The scene, especially at sunrise and in the minutes before sunset, reminded Cole of chapel-school stories of a Paradise not destroyed as in *Genesis*, but moved to an unknown tropical place. The long view from the Atlantic of the entire Caribbean archipelago brought awareness to the imaginative Cole, who loved geology, of the partly submerged spine of mountains that had once connected the two Americas, and of the relatively recent events of an active universe that had created the Antilles and their calm sea.

Small St. Eustatia, located in the Leewards at the midpoint between the Greater and Lesser Antilles, was at the central entrance to the Caribbean Sea. It had eight natural, deep-water harbours, and a ship's roadway to the southern Atlantic. The island was a much sought-after trading hub for European merchant ships as early as the seventeenth century. It soon became a center for portage and currency exchange for the region—and, as such, was occupied in succession by Dutch, Spanish, French, and British colonial interests. In 1784 the island, known as “The Golden Rock” and described by William Burke as “an emporium of all the world,” was made part of British territories in the Caribbean. The merchants of ports like Liverpool and London were well pleased, as were the sugar planters and the industrialists who husbanded the kingdom's wealth in Parliament. In 1596 St. Eustatia had the unhappy privilege of being one of two Caribbean islands (the other was Curaçao) to which the Dutch brought their first two slave transport ships and human cargo for sale to plantations in the Americas. Cole's experience of St. Eustatia was not that of an untouched, simple island without a history. The hooks-and-eyes of his memories of St. Eustatia would compound with those of his early memories of Britain—and with the memories of his experiences in North America, in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York State, New Hampshire, Maine, and with the landscapes there that had been the home of the original Lenape-Wabanaki people. In time these memories would connect, in varying and original ways, as distinct underpinnings of his paintings. When Cole returned to Philadelphia from the Caribbean in the fall of 1819 to set out on his walk west, he received news of the Peterloo Massacre, and of the imminent signing in Washington, D. C. of the Indian Civilization Fund Act to promote the “naturalization” of America's first inhabitants.

Cole's landscapes often refer to simple, folkloric legends, or historical myths associated with the location of the places pictured. Implicit, passing references to the *genius loci* of a specific natural place, broad evocations of the serpentine form of the Great Spirit common to Indigenous myths in the cultures of both continents, layered and contemporized depictions of figures from Biblical narratives, all form part of Cole's sense of the nature of human memory, especially when placed in isolation within a natural setting. Cole wrote poetry and, at times, he would think like a poet, using symbols and intimations to advance meaning. His paintings of what he called his “two Edens” evoke a tropical garden always in fruit and flower, and still extant *after* the Fall, derive from his visualized childhood faith in an ever-present inward paradise—as well as his fervent belief as an adult that nature, preserved and left unstressed, would continue to nurture and inspire mortal humanity. His Biblical figures of Adam and Eve, the prophet

Elijah, Hagar, John the Baptist, or Jesus as a Promethean figure not crucified but chained to a rock in the Caucasus, are all minute figures, miniature portraits placed in scale within natural immensities. They are significant *because* they are part of an immensity of nature. Landscapes by Cole that are bereft of human presence carry, nevertheless, reminders of human features and psychic energies: forbidding mountain passes echo with sounds of past avalanches and related human tragedies; eerie locations in nature sport boulders with human facial features that bear witness to human actions long past; and tornadoes sweeping across wildernesses or cities are seemingly neutral energies organized around a living central eye; extinct volcanoes speak in warning during times of environmental stress. Human and natural entities co-exist in an active, spiritual universe. The cyclical mythologies of Cole's paintings set in historical Italy and Sicily, and his telescopic, exegetical sense of human and natural histories in the multi-series *The Course of Empire*, *The Voyage of Life*, and *The Cross and the World*, visually reverberate with illustrations of the central tenet of his work: natural entities share an ecology and are vitally integrated. They share a sacred temporal and spiritual bond. In Cole's understanding of creation in Eden, human beings were created last, not first. The loss or destruction of the first foreshadows the end, both actual and spiritual, of the last.

When writing to Trumbull in late February 1826, Cole marveled at the energized and nurturing network of the forest in Duanesburg, New York—even in winter. He described the hemlock tree stretching its arms over the forest “like a patriarch blessing his children,” mature “trees intertwining their branches . . . as though in affection,” and saplings “support the aged”. “There is more effect, more [life] force . . . more action” in the wintry forest that he could “almost imagine that [the trees] have conscious life.” On a tour of the White Mountains in October 1828 Cole noted in his sketchbook that the leafless trees in autumn have an “expression of affection” and seem to “assimilate with each other in form & character.” When writing to his patron Luman Reed in 1833, Cole explained that his series on human empires would “illustrate the History of a natural scene . . . showing the natural changes of Landscape & those [changes] affected by Man” upon it over several “Ages” in human “Civilization.” In 1835, when lecturing on the values of the American landscape, Cole asserted exuberantly that “the most distinctive, and perhaps most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness,” its *primaeval* forests,” its “solitudes” of lake and mountain, and its pristine, integrated natures not yet defiled by human histories. By 1841, Cole felt compelled to add a note of dismay and warning for what had become of the hallowed ecological relations of natural and human life, and to the living environment he thought he knew: “Much

of the beauty of our landscape is quickly passing away; the ravages of the axe are daily increasing, and the most noble scenes are often laid desolate with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a people who call themselves civilized." "If trees are like men," in Cole's America are no longer like trees; they own nothing of the vital reciprocity of nature. Sheltered "spots rife with beauty" are the particular mark of merciless "meagre utilitarianism," their instinctively composed "beauty is gone, & and that which a century cannot restore is cut down; what remains? . . . Where once was beauty, there is now barrenness." Cole's landscapes reflect the disjunctions between the natural and the human in the passage of time between 1826 and the 1840s. His landscapes become increasingly symbolic, homocentric, and exhortatory of the environmental consequences of human presence and its perceived exceptionalism. Cole recognized, increasingly, that the metaphorical "rich & delightful banquet [of natural entities] spread before us" in the American continents encouraged not just use but waste, and the despoliation of pristine natures in the interest of national progress. His sense of the American landscape as vulnerable, "quickly passing away" and unrecoverable grew ever more intense and urgent in his last years. "We are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly." His plea, characteristic for him, is also Wordsworth's at the end of his 1798 poem "Nutting," on a childhood memory of his wilful destruction of a favored and unspoiled woodland spot: "with gentle hand / Touch—for there is a spirit in the woods."

Emerson and John Muir are customarily taken to be the earliest environmental champions of the American wilderness. With a visual eloquence that far exceeded Emerson's deliberate exhortations, Cole championed the essential interdependence of nature and man, and the vital reciprocity inherent in the natural environment that they were required to share. "In looking over the UNCULTIVATED scene, the mind may travel far into futurity," Cole, late in 1841, spoke of the artistic prospects and philosophical advances that could be prompted by viewing "the yet pathless wildernesses" of the Americas. John Muir, after he had given voice to the living beauty of Yosemite and the Pacific Coast, and after his thousand-mile solitary walk from Kentucky to the Cedar Keys in Florida, said as much when he noted that "the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness." Far ahead of his time, Cole's prescient, telescopic vision still faces forward.

—George H. Gilpin and Hermione de Almeida

Cedar Key and Venice (Florida),
New Harbor (Maine)

CHAPTER ONE

IN BRITAIN

Thomas Cole was born on February 1, 1801, in Bolton-le-Moors, a rural town some ten miles from Manchester in the English Midlands. He was the second youngest in a family of eight children, and the only boy. His parents, textile artisans and devout Protestant Dissenters to the Anglican Church, named Thomas after an earlier son born in 1799 who had died in infancy; they believed that he was, in the Biblical sense of the *Second Book of Kings* (II, 2:9), “twice blessed.” They had been blessed, moreover, with a child of the new millennium. Cole was christened “Thomas” simply and with no middle name, at Duke’s Alley Independent Chapel, one of over a dozen Dissenter chapels in a town as well-known—since Oliver Cromwell and his Parliament of Saints—for the religious independence of its townfolk, as for the quality of its skilled workers and their cottage industry in textile weaving and design.

1801 was an auspicious year, of sorts, in the vast world beyond Bolton. The year marked the Act of Union of Britain and (a largely unwilling) Ireland—as well as the return of workers’ riots protesting food scarcities in the West Midlands and Wales. One month before Cole’s birthday, Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated as President of the United States of America. In March, one month after Cole was born, Alexander von Humboldt, on his voyage to explore the New World of the Americas, sailed west from the Caribbean seaport of Cumanã (in New Andalusia), by way of Curaçao to Bogota (Colombia), on the northwestern edge of the southern continent, so that he could climb through the double spine of the Andes, see the multiple volcanoes including Chimborazo, and view the legendary Giants’ fossils strewn about the High Valley (or Boneyard) of the Gods in Quito. The year that followed Cole’s birth saw the signing of the Peace treaty of Amiens in Europe; the Parliamentary Act for the Health and Morals of Apprentices that purported to “regulate” child labor in manufacturing centers; Britain’s passing return of the Caribbean Island of St. Eustatia (per the Treaty of Amiens) to the Dutch—and her recovery of “her” island months later as a permanent addition to Crown territories in the Caribbean Sea. 1802 also saw the installation of Napoleon as First

Consul for Life of a once-Revolutionary France, the Emperor's savage suppression of rebelling slaves in Saint-Domingue led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, and the reclamation of the colony and death of L'Ouverture in a Paris jail. 1802 also saw the construction of two of the new and expansive West India docks, the design being previously modelled for security on the prime deep-water bays of islands like St. Eustatia, on the man-made Isle of Dogs, London. The following years 1803-04 brought more explorations abroad, more colonial expansion in the Americas, and more wars. Britain and France renewed their contest for world empire; President Jefferson acquired, from a weakened France, Louisiana and all of the territory between the Gulf of Mexico and the northwest; and Lewis and Clark set out to explore not just the territory of the Louisiana Purchase but the remote regions, inhabited by Indigenous people of North America, from west of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Jefferson and his Congress needed the useful statistical and geographic information that the Lewis and Clark expedition could provide; the two explorers, meanwhile, sought the adventures of their journey and hoped to find undisturbed and whole fossil specimens of mastodons that would rival the mastodon with missing bones that Charles Willson Peale had dug up in upper New York State in 1802. They hoped the spectacular bones would exceed those of the Giants that Humboldt had seen on the high plain of Quito in Ecuador. Humboldt wrote to say that he shared the two explorers' aspiration, and hoped that their expedition would find not just the fossilized bones but the mastodon giants themselves, extant somewhere in the unexplored regions west of the North American states.

“THOMAS COLE. FOUNDER OF AMERICA'S FIRST ART MOVEMENT, KNOWN AS THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL.” The signage at Catskill Village Cemetery, the painter's final resting place, makes clear that Cole's patrimonial identity is American: he is touted as the founder of America's *First* art movement, one identified with the landscape of the Hudson River in New York. Cole, however, may not have seen himself in terms as presumptive or nationalistic. Cole dated his aspiration to be a professional artist to a period in 1820 when his favorite pastime since childhood, free-hand drawing, coalesced into a vocational wish that led him to take lessons in oil-painting from an itinerant portrait painter in Ohio: “in my imagination,” he said in later years, “I pictured the glory of being a great painter.”¹ These lessons were Cole's first formal training in art. At the time of his vocational resolve Cole was nineteen years old; he had been in North America for less than two years, and he had spent five months of those two years on a journey to the now fully British Leeward Islands in the Caribbean.

The seventeen years spent growing up in the English Midlands feature as an important backdrop to Cole's genius and the art of his maturity. Those years serve as his cultural and spiritual patrimony, a heritage of values connected with his youthful life, the beliefs and traditions of his family and their ancestors, and his own excitement—and distress—at the changes to life in the Midlands wrought by manufacturing centers like Manchester and shipping ports like Liverpool. Brief retrospections in his unpublished letters and journals, and third-person reminiscences of conversations with him are the only sources we have for these vital years. With informed indirection it is possible, nevertheless, to reconstruct, in fact and in circumstance, elements of the natural, cultural and political environments that Cole experienced growing up in Britain, and the lessons he would have learned from these environments. These defining elements include: the communal values of fellowship and compassion typical of the Dissenting spiritual heritage learned as a young child in Duke's Alley Chapel lessons; the substance of his formal education at grammar school in the ancient cathedral city of Chester; the extent of his pastime reading at school but also when he was an apprentice in calico-design engraving in Chorley; the ever-increasing range of his lifelong fondness for walks of exploration—in the low hills surrounding Bolton, of the Roman ruins while at school, of well-known pre-historic sites like the Stone Circle of Cheatham Close, of Peak District caves in Derbyshire accessible from Chorley, of satellite towns and the throbbing manufacturing center of Manchester, of the Liverpool docks and crowded seaport streets and curiosity shops that were reminiscent of Britain's slave trade and her burgeoning empire. Environmental knowledge of the young Cole's life and influences in Britain, and of his first year of experiences on the mainland of North America and of Caribbean island life, will greatly energize a large sense of the multiple meanings and philosophical depth in Thomas Cole's entire body of paintings—even as it counters the common assumption that he was simply a skilled, Romantic painter of North American landscapes.

Cole's birthplace was known for its hand-loomed woven fabric from the time when fourteenth-century Flemish weavers of woolen cloth first settled there, to be joined in the sixteenth century by Huguenot weavers of flax and cotton who were fleeing religious persecution. By the time of the English Civil War, Bolton was proudly (and vulnerably) Puritan, independent, and diversely Protestant in the forms of its faith. Generations of the Cole family in Bolton made their modest but adequate living in small cooperatives that produced simple fabrics in gray and white with an occasional vein of colour. Over the eighteenth century, work

groups like these were pre-empted by popular desire for fine-spun fabric and bright calico muslin from India. Family groups like the Coles in the late century, now working-class and fully undermined by the growth of large coal-powered mills and factories, and by the centralized employment of workers in manufacturing, survived as close-knit but stressed communities held together by their religious faith. Duke's Chapel, where Cole was baptized, was "Independent" and welcomed all Protestant denominations, but it had been founded on the evangelical Methodist principles of the Wesley brothers and, to a lesser extent, the Calvinist theology of George Whitfield. Teaching and worship at chapels like Duke's followed the Methodist formulae: the presence of "Inward Light," a focus on personal testaments to the presence of the Divine in human forms, on human kinship across all seeming barriers, on the necessity of compassion for every creature in nature—and on a repudiation of human enslavement and exploitation for worldly gain, ideas first expressed at length in John Wesley's 1774 "Thoughts on Slavery." Services in worship included sermons preaching salvation through conduct, and prophetic warnings on profane and selfish desires. To temper this, there was congregational participation in joyous hymns (often those composed by Charles Wesley) sung as spontaneous and unmediated expressions of faith, without the artifice of instrumental music except, perhaps, that of a flute. In Duke's Chapel School, reed flutes, as inexpensive homemade items, were commonly played in teaching the rhythms of hymns and psalms—and to leaven Bible histories and New Testament parables.²

Both Wesley brothers played the flute, as did Thomas Cole. Solitary flute playing was a solace and recourse for Cole through the duration of his life. Late paintings of his often show a single, and clearly recognizable, flute somewhere in the composition—a symbol, perhaps, of the painter's belief in the compositional and strategic connections of music, poetry, and visual art. In his childhood upbringing and faith, Cole shares aspects with two other artists, William Blake and John Martin. They were each born to working-class dissenting families. Perhaps following the forms of personal testament and prophetic utterance in worship learned as children, all three artists would create an artistic style was that intensely original and, increasingly, visionary: Blake expressed his personal mythology in illustrated "prophetic" books; Martin composed apocalyptic pictures of Divine energy and wrath for an imminent and sinful future; Cole, in time, would compose moral allegorical paintings that illustrated the fearful possibilities of a purely secular human life.

"My school opportunities were very small," Cole wrote to his friend William Dunlap in 1834, speaking perhaps of the limited nature of

his chapel school in Bolton. Cole said he was a solitary child, “fond of drawing” from infancy, with “reading and music” added as “recreations” of older childhood in Chester and Chorley.³ For an observant child left to entertain himself in an industrializing town teeming with overworked inhabitants, there was much to observe and remember. Bolton was fast becoming an extension of Manchester, just eight miles to the east. The town had factories and processing plants—an iron foundry just behind Duke’s Chapel, timber yards, and a sawmill converted from water to the new steam power just yards away from Derby Street—where the Cole’s lived in cramped, rented quarters. Multiple textile businesses dotted the banks of the River Croal which bisected the town to join the Bolton and Bury Canal, newly built to ferry goods and coal to Manchester and thence to Liverpool by way of the Mersey River; across the River Croal from the town proper, coal-sorting warehouses and processing factories for bleaching and dyeing fabrics flushed waste products: chlorine bleach, Caribbean indigo, Indian cochineal and saffron—a rainbow of spent substance mixed with coal dust and used machine oil—into the river.

In the non-judging eyes of a very young boy, the energy and industry of Bolton would be spellbinding—even as the crowded alleys housing tenements for workers would represent the close presence of reassuring human company. There would have been no comprehending sense in the child of the plight of the townsfolk who worked at large factories without independence and for wages set by manufacturing economies. Nor would there have been a larger sense of how regional work shortages and subsistent wages purportedly driven by industrial “hard times” would lead, in just a few years, to deprivation and angry protests that culminated in the Luddite Revolt of 1812, and the 1819 Peterloo Massacre in Manchester. All this came later, in retrospect, to Cole. Bolton’s polluted River Croal in Cole’s time did not quite run purple (as Charles Dickens, in *Hard Times*, imagined the river of a Midlands town proximate to Bolton). There were opportunities for a young child to explore the moorland streams draining into the River Croal in springtime to find scraps of crystal and shiny bituminous coal, or to search the sandstone banks and accessible cloughs of the river for exposed fossilized shells from extinct marine creatures. Once Sarah, Cole’s younger sister, was old enough and allowed to join him on his explorations, there were opportunities to walk beyond the geological basin of Bolton to the higher ground and low hills of the West Pennine Moors. Flute-playing, chapel school songs, and ballads taught to them by an old Scottish relative, were part of the rest stops on these excursions. The vast expanse of moorland was far too great to traverse but seen from its edges just outside town,

from secluded spots amid dry hillocks, were gritstone outcroppings and patches of green shrubs with the immensity safely behind them. It provided seeming isolation and distance from which the children could contemplate the place where their family lived and worked. Solitary walking, at ever-increasing distances, became Cole's lifelong pastime.

In 1810, when he was nine years old, Cole was sent by his parents to grammar school in Chester, Cheshire. Bolton had become increasingly hostile to the livelihoods of traditional textile-making families like the Coles. Economic depression across England occasioned by the ongoing wars with Napoleonic France had left satellite towns to large cities in particularly dire straits. Sporadic food shortages, decimated work hours at half wages at the large factories, unemployment from shuttered family textile shops, and military impressment of unemployed workers and boys to serve in foreign wars—all led to recurrent protests across the manufacturing Midland towns, including Bolton. The protests could include arson and the destruction of factory machinery and were put down harshly by a government that recalled fearfully the consequence of peoples' revolts in France and in the colonies of North America. As social conditions deteriorated in Bolton, the Coles decided, wisely, that their "twice-blessed" only son would be safe (and trained for a better life) at boarding school, while they moved to the small town of Chorley twelve miles northwest of Bolton and farther from Manchester. Cole's father hoped, idealistically, to open a small fine fabric business at Chorley that would combine handcrafting work with the use of spinning machinery. Chester, where Cole would attend the grammar school later known as "The King's School," was some thirty-five miles away.

Founded in 1541 by King Henry VIII, Cole's school was housed in the old Benedictine Refectory of the partly-destroyed St. Werburgh Abbey that later became the High Anglican Chester Cathedral. **[Fig. 1]** The King's School, one of several "King's Schools" established at the time, was a full-fledged grammar school intended for promising boys—usually one per family—of aspiring families who were not of the upper, moneyed classes. Students were recommended to the school and sponsored by established business figures of nearby cities. Their parents paid board for the four to six years of schooling, and the students were trained to serve in mediating professions between the old landed gentry and the new trade and manufacturing leaders. The term "free school" used to describe these schools referred largely to the useful but limited social-mobility between classes that the schools facilitated. The manager of the old foundry in Bolton, a relative of Cole's father, may have been the person who sponsored Cole's admission to the Chester school. No reliable

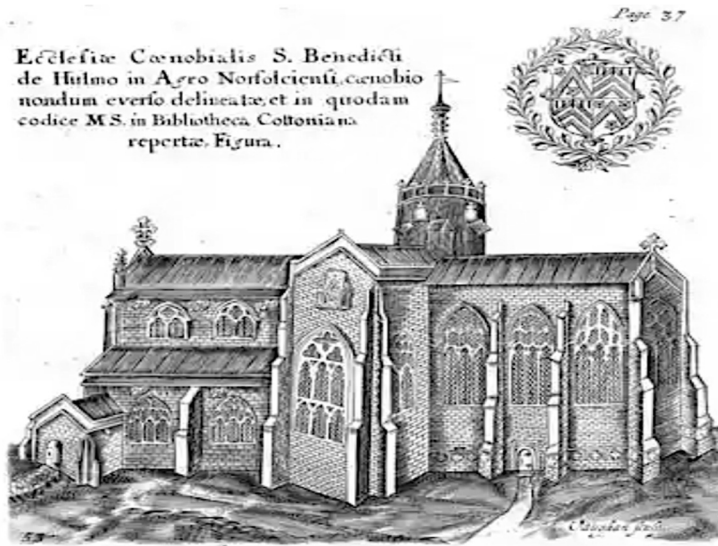


Figure 1. William Dugdale, *The King's School, Chester / St. Werburgh Abbey*, 1717.

accounts exist of Cole's four years at The King's School beyond a passing reported reference in Louis Legrand Noble's memoir declaring the experience to have been an unmemorable period of "harsh discipline, poor fare and sickness."²⁴ Formal classes at the Chester school matched the basic core of subjects taught at all grammar schools—classical literature and languages (at least some Latin), British and ancient Roman histories (in abridged texts by Goldsmith and in excerpts of Gibbon), astronomy, world geography, mathematics, grammar, composition, and formal writing.⁵ Other subjects, as practical training intended for students who would facilitate trade and industry in Britain and her nascent empire, would include accounting and stock charting, land surveying and trade geographies abroad, architectural drawing for factory and port facilities, commercial law, elemental chemistry, and a knowledge of geological substances and metals. Cole completed the required curriculum of his school in four full years. Given the intense curiosity, skillful prose, and broad knowledge manifested in his adult years, we can be certain that Cole's experience in Chester was not wasted. The library at the Chester school was extensive, and intended for studious and solitary youths; typical of the surviving book-lists of grammar schools of the period, it would have contained (beyond the more advanced texts on the standard

subjects) general and specialized encyclopedias, summaries of papers and letters read at the Royal Society, Parliamentary Act summaries, excerpts from scientific journals like *Nicholson's Journal of Natural Philosophy* and the *London Magazine of Natural History*, and minutes from the *Manchester Philosophical Society*. Narratives of travel and exploration, from Samuel Purchas' fabulous pilgrimages to reports of the travels of Captain Cook in the Pacific Islands, Mungo Park in Africa, and Lewis and Clark in the American West, joined descriptive books on the products and trade of Britain's colonies. Some contemporary and illustrated catalogues like Ackermann's *Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, etc.* would have been available for circulation among older students; common tables would have a few popular instructional novels and small books of contemporary poetry like Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, and Byron's early cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. All of these would have been powerful antidotes to the harsh discipline and poor diet that Cole purportedly remembered of his years at The King's School.

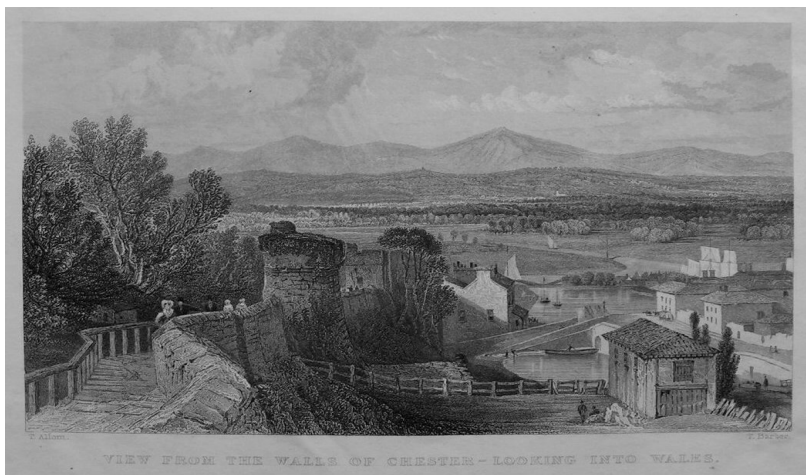


Figure 2. T. Allom, *View from the Walls of Chester—Looking into Wales*, 1795.

History mattered to the ancient city of Chester, especially in the early nineteenth century when it held prominent place among cities to know in northwest Britain. The city rose on the site of a Roman fort, *Deva Victrix*, one of the largest in Roman Britannia that dated to 79 A.D. and the reign of the Emperor Vespasian (who had built the Colosseum in 72 A.D.). [Fig. 2] Remains of the Roman presence survive to this day—stone

foundation perimeters of the lookout towers and military structures, the 10,000-person amphitheatre, the quarry, and an intact rock-cut statue of Minerva. Walls from the fortress were incorporated into the walled medieval city known as West Chester. Located on the coast and protected by the Welsh mountains to the west, the Pennine Moors to the east, and the curve of the River Dee to the south, Chester was a thriving seaport in the early eighteenth century known for the quantity of goods and raw materials from abroad that it distributed inland via its Middlewich canal system. The city was particularly known for its building of mid-sized, ocean-worthy sailing ships that served colonial trade and exploration; by the late century this reputation was ceded to Liverpool and its expertise in building large transatlantic vessels. On long walks through Chester and its environs, over a period of four years, there was much to see of human endeavor and history for the ever-observant student: the well-preserved Roman ruins; the medieval city's walls and their four towers that provided long views—of the Welsh mountains and the Pennine moorland stretching far east from Bolton, and Cole's first view of the English coastline, the Irish Sea and, beyond that, the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. Chester's century-old and still active dockland and shipping hub; the ornate Chester Cathedral built by the Tudors in monument to the Anglican Church; Chester Castle built in 1070 with views to the west of the Roman amphitheatre, the River Dee, and the Chester Weir built of sandstone in 1093 by William the Conqueror's 1st Earl of Chester to serve as an artificial headwater for the mills and crops of the Benedictine monks at St. Werburgh—were all places to explore and revisit. **[Fig. 3]** Cole's experience of history at Chester points forward to his recurrent focus in his paintings on human sites of civilization, the effects on landscapes of human passage, and the progress and fall of empires.

“My employment in my father's business was somewhat to my mind, but there was too little art and too much manual labour for one of an imaginative mind.”⁶ In 1815 Cole moved from Chester to Chorley, a cotton-milling and coal-mining town twelve miles from Manchester, where his father had set up a small family business in coloured fine-cotton fabrication. **[Fig. 4]** It was here that Cole, as an apprentice to an engraver of calico designs, had his first practical lessons in colour mixing and application on textured surfaces, and in the formal protocols of design and replicate variations. Calico took its name from Calicut in southwest India, which had invented the technique of applying two contrasting colours (usually red and black) in broad pattern to coarsely woven and unfinished “chaliyans” cotton. Over time, Indian calico fabric was refined and woven

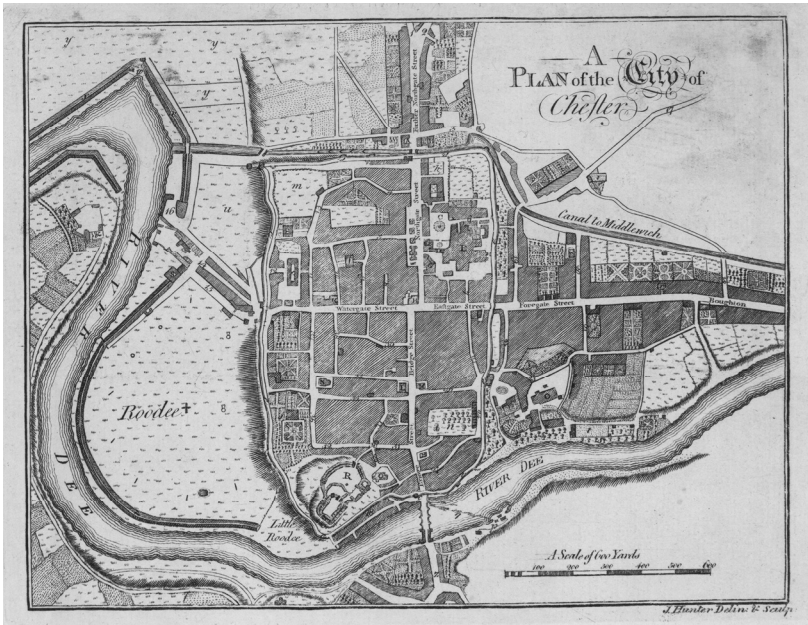


Figure 3. Thomas Pennant, *A Plan of the City of Chester*, 1782

more closely from winnowed cotton, and hand-decorated with several bright colours in elaborate patterns. Imported calico was coveted in late eighteenth-century Britain—for fashionable clothing and, as thickly-painted glazed calico, or chintz, for manor house furnishings. The fabric competed too well with traditional worsted wool and, given the increased availability of raw cotton from slave plantations in the British Caribbean and southern United States, calico imports were banned; the way was then paved for the factory towns of northwest England to mass-produce block-painted fabrics.⁷ Cole's apprenticeship in carving patterns into the wood blocks used to stamp inexpensive cotton fabric with appealing designs and variable colours had its place in support of his father's small business of finely-spun cotton—but it also finds aesthetic place, later, in the compositional variety and colours of his early American landscapes.