

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Voyage of Life: Childhood*  
Oil on canvas, 52 x 77 inches  
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York

## *The Painting*

- Spend some quiet time simply observing the intricacies of this painting.
- Tell me all you see. Describe the stream...the boat...the Infant...the Angel.
- Notice that the boat is immersing from a dark cave. What is the relationship of the Angel to the boat? What does this tell us about how Thomas Cole viewed the interrelationship between the visible and invisible worlds?
- Describe the abundance of flowers on the banks of the stream.
- How does the painter create a sense of the time of day in this scene?  
What color does he use to enlighten the mountain side?  
What is the significance of setting *The Voyage of Life: Childhood* in the morning?

## *The Purpose*

*The Voyage of Life* is an allegorical series comprised of four paintings: *Childhood*, *Youth*, *Manhood*, and *Old Age*. To more completely understand the meaning of this series we will allow Thomas Cole to give his own interpretation. This description originally accompanied his paintings as they were first exhibited in 1840 at the National Academy of Design.

“The dark cavern is emblematic of our earthly origin, and the mysterious Past. The Boat, composed of figures of the Hours, images the thought, that we are borne on the hours down the Stream of Life. The Boat identifies the subject in each picture. The rosy light of the morning, the luxuriant flowers and plants, are emblems of the joyousness of early life. The close banks, and the limited scope of the scene, indicate the narrow experience of Childhood, and the nature of its pleasures and desires. The Egyptian Lotus, in the foreground of the picture, is symbolical of human Life. Joyousness and wonder are the characteristic emotions of childhood.”

Description given by Thomas Cole, 1840 at the National Academy of Design

## *The Painter*

Thomas Cole considered it the artist's ultimate purpose to create works with moral meaning and to depict the uniqueness and destiny of man. It was Cole's desire to give that spiritual meaning to life that he himself had found. In his own words his desire was to picturesquely communicate that “There are many windings in the stream of life...Its course towards the Ocean of Eternity we all know to be certain, but not direct. Each picture I have wished to make a sort of antithesis to the other, thereby the more fully to illustrate the changeable tenor of our mortal existence.”

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Voyage of Life: Youth*

Oil on canvas, 52 x 76 inches

Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York

## *The Painting*

- As you are studying this second painting in the series, *The Voyage of Life*, consider having the first painting available as well. [See HST January/February 1994, *Understanding the Arts*]
- Describe the stream and landscape of *The Voyage of Life: Youth*. How has the landscape changed from the painting *Childhood to Youth*? What was Thomas Cole hoping to communicate by using a wider scope and more diversified landscape?
- Describe the Youth and the Guardian Angel.
- What is the relationship between the Guardian Angel and the Youth? Describe the expression of the Angel. How has this relationship changed?
- In what direction is the boat being stirred? What is the object of the youth's travel? Describe the cloud palace. What attitude about life is the youth displaying?
- Pay particular attention to the water of the stream. How would you describe it?
- Follow the course of the stream. Does it appear to be taking him to his destination?
- At the very end of what can be seen of the stream — out of view of the youth — the water seems to change. Describe this change.
- Now look at the detailed portion of the painting.  
As you study this series by Cole note the expression of the person in the boat...sand in the hourglass...the faces carved on the edge of the craft.  
Look for similarities and difference...look carefully for any changes.  
How has the face of the person changed? How has the hourglass changed from *Childhood to Youth*? What about the faces on the craft?
- What is Thomas Cole saying about youth? What leads you to this conclusion?

## *The Purpose*

"The scenery of the picture — its clear stream, its lofty trees, its towering mountains, its unbounded distance, and transparent atmosphere — figure forth the romantic beauty of youthful imaginings, when the mind elevates the Mean and Common into the Magnificent, before experience teaches what is the Real. The gorgeous cloud-built palace, whose glorious domes seem yet but half revealed to the eye, growing more and more lofty as we gaze, is emblematic of the daydreams of youth, its aspirations after glory and fame; and the dimly-seen path would intimate that Youth, in its impetuous career, is forgetful that it is embarked on the Stream of Life, and that its current sweeps along with resistless force, and increases in swiftness, as it descends toward the great ocean of Eternity."

Description given by Thomas Cole, 1840 at the National Academy of Design

## *The Painter*

Creativity is the gift of God. Although not all gifted people apply their talent to glorify God, this was the aim of Thomas Cole. "Every great artist works to God forgetful of the caprices, the prejudices, and even the desires of men;" writes Cole "he labours to gratify his soul's devotion to the beautiful and true which are centred in God. When artists descend to labour merely as a means of obtaining reputation and emolument, they abandon the path that leads to the highest excellence, and are found forever grovelling with the sordid spirits of this world."

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Voyage of Life: Manhood*

Oil on canvas, 52 x 79 inches

Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York

## *The Painting*

- As you are studying this third painting in the series, *The Voyage of Life*, consider having the first two paintings open as well. [See HST January/February, March/April 1994, Understanding the Arts]
- Take the time to closely examine this painting.
- Describe the landscape....the lighting....the stream. Compare the changes from the first two paintings. How has the landscape changed? What about the quiet, clear stream in the first two paintings?
- Look at the detailed section of the boat. Notice that the helm is gone and the boat is heading toward 'white waters.' Describe the man in the boat.
- Describe the changes in attitude of the person in the boat from *YOUTH* to *MANHOOD*.
- Describe the relationship of the Guardian Angel to the man in the boat. How has the position of the Guardian Angel and the man changed from *CHILDHOOD*, to *YOUTH*, to *MANHOOD*?
- Thomas Cole is making a statement about what happens to a person when he takes control of his own life as he pursues his own dreams. How would you describe what he is saying?
- Find examples from the Bible that would show this same principle.

## *The Purpose*

"Trouble is characteristic of the period of Manhood. In childhood there is no carking [anxious or worrying] care: in youth, no despairing thought. It is only when experience has taught us the realities of the world, that we lift from our eyes the golden veil of early life; that we feel deep and abiding sorrow; and in the Picture, the gloomy-eclipse-like tone, the conflicting elements, the trees driven by tempest, are the allegory; and the Ocean, dimly seen figures the end of life, which the Voyager is now approaching. The demon forms are Suicide, Intemperance and Murder; which are the temptations that beset men in their direst trouble. The upward and imploring look of the Voyager shows his dependence on a Superior Power; and that faith saves him from the destruction that seems inevitable."

Description given by Thomas Cole, 1840 at the National Academy of Design

## *The Painter - Some Other Works*

*The Course of Empire* 1833 - 36

*The Savage State, The Pastoral State, The Consummation of Empire, Destruction, and Desolation.*

A series of five paintings depicting the rise and fall of a culture. These paintings are part of The New-York Historical Society collection.

*Landscape (Moonlight).* 1833-34

*Sunset, View on the Catskill.* 1833

*Italian Scene.* 1833

*Autumn Twilight.* 1834

*Summer Twilight.* 1834

*The Oxbow.* 1836

*Mr. Luman Reed's Picture Gallery* is a reference book showing several of these paintings (published by Abrams).

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Voyage of Life: Old Age*

Oil on canvas, 52 x 77 inches

Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York

## *The Painting*

- This is the fourth and final painting in the series, *The Voyage of Life*. Consider having the other paintings open to observe as well. [See HST January/February, March/April, May/June 1994, Understanding the Arts]
- Describe the clouds.
- Observe the boat. What changes have occurred in this craft?
- Describe the man. Follow the growth of the man through the four paintings. What changes do you see in him?
- What is the relationship of the Guardian Angel to the old man? How is this different from all the previous paintings?
- How does Thomas Cole create a sense of majesty in this last painting?
- The stream is now emptying into the ocean. What was Thomas Cole saying about old age?

## *The Purpose*

“The stream of life has now reached the Ocean to which all life is tending. The world to Old Age is destitute of interest. There is no longer any green thing upon it. The broken and drooping figures of the Boat show that time is nearly ended. The chains of corporeal existence are falling away; and already the mind has glimpses of Immortal Life. The angelic Being, of whose presence, until now, the Voyager has been unconscious, is revealed to him; and, with a countenance beaming with joy, shows to his wondering gaze scenes such as the eye of mortal man has never beheld.”

Description given by Thomas Cole, 1840 at the National Academy of Design

## *The Perspective*

We began this series stating that Cole considered it the artist's ultimate purpose to create works with moral meaning and to depict the uniqueness and destiny of man. These four paintings from *The Voyage of Life* have certainly achieved this high ideal. The story is told of a middle-aged man in the exhibition room early one morning. He was standing seemingly lost deep in thought before *The Voyage of Life*. “Sir,” said he, addressing the artist, “I am a stranger in this city, and in great trouble of mind. But the sight of these pictures has done me great good. They have given me comfort. I go away from this place quieted, and much strengthened to do my duty.”

In the book, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, Louis Noble describes the significance of Thomas Cole with these words.

“A history of the hopes, and fears, and joys, with which, in those weeks, he was stirred, would fill a volume. As he glided down the Hudson, the glory of autumn was kindling on its romantic banks. Bright pictures, for years waking only his own heart, beaming with brilliancy only to his own mind, had passed out of his imagination and now existed in a visible form on the canvass. And they were with him on their first voyage to the world. Many eyes were waiting — many voices would soon say whether or not what had been so long moving him had in them the beauty, power, and pathos to move them. How much the loveliness of nature's colouring helped to beguile many probable anxieties, there is no record.”



# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Course of Empire: The Savage State*  
Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 63 1/4 inches  
New York Historic Society, New York City

## *The Painting*

- This is the first of a sequence of five paintings in the series, *The Course of Empire*, by Thomas Cole.
- \*Take a few moments to view the whole painting.
- What is the most prominent feature of the painting?
- Turn the painting over and tell me all that you saw.
- Look again at the painting. Study it more closely.
- Describe the clouds...the light...the landscape...the water...the terrain.
- Notice the direction of the light from the sun. What time of day do you think it is?
- Can you tell the season? Do you think it may be spring, summer, fall, or winter?
- Are there any people in the painting? What are they like and what are they doing?
- Mr. Cole calls this painting *The Savage State*. What did he mean by that title? Do you think he captured that idea in this work? How did he create this wild, untamed effect?

## *The Perspective*

Thomas Cole considered it the artist's ultimate purpose to create works with moral meaning and to depict the uniqueness and destiny of man and civilization. *The Course of Empire* presents a universal panorama of the rise and decline of civilizations. This series stands as a constant reminder of previous civilizations and as a warning to our own culture. *The Savage State* represents the birth of a civilization.

The following is a description of Thomas Cole, by his friend and biographer, as he surveyed the site of the Roman ruins on a visit to Europe several years before commencing this monumental work.

Returning, once, from a long walk with a few friends, [Thomas Cole] seated himself on the fragments of a column to enjoy the sunset. As its splendors faded into the twilight, all lapsed into a stillness suited to the solemn repose peculiar, at that time, to a scene of ruin...After some minutes of silent, mournful pleasure, [he]... was the first to speak...The subject was that of the future Course of Empire. In his own brief and simple way, he passed from point to point in the series, making, by many a clear and vivid outline, the liveliest impression upon the mind of his listener, until he closed with a picture that found its parallel in the melancholy desolation by which, at that moment, they were surrounded. (Louis L. Noble)

The impact of the death of the Roman Empire was certainly influential in the development of his thoughts. He was very aware of history, literature, poetry, and art. Lord Byron's poem, *Childe Harold* (1812) was also influential in shaping the thoughts of Cole:

There is the moral of all human tales;  
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past.  
First Freedom and then Glory — when that fails,

Wealth, vice, corruption, — barbarism at last.  
And History, with all her volumes vast,  
Hath but one page.

*The Course of Empire* is a pictorial expression of the entire drama of civilization from birth to death, the lifetime of a civilization. It seems to represent the parallels between many great civilizations as they rise to greatness and then subsequently fall to desolation.

What is the proper state of a civilization? What is the proper balance between man and the environment? Does the 'savage state' represent the proper place of people in nature? Rousseau, standing in the flow of history, encouraged his followers to 'return back to nature' in order to find themselves. "Man was born free," says Rousseau, "but everywhere he is in chains." How does this notion compare with the Biblical idea of having dominion over nature, or tending and keeping the creation? The European culture, having been built upon the Biblical world view, was considered by Rousseau as confining.

The Biblical world view says that we are now living in an abnormal world. The fall of man caused several separations. Of course, the first and foremost separation is man from God. A consequence of this separation was that man became separated from nature. According to Paul in the Book of Romans (Chapter 8), even the creation awaits the return of Christ to free it from its bondage.

## *The Painter*

Thomas Cole, born 1801 in Lancashire, England, moved to the United States in 1818. He used his talent to illustrate symbolic stories with moral themes. He was the leader of a new group of painters. They would become known as the Hudson River School. Unlike the European landscape painters, they showed the untamed grandeur of the American geography.

\* This was the beginning of a time of Nationalism. Artists and composers were placing the heritage of their homeland into their works. Thomas Cole was certainly doing so in his works. If available, listen to Anton Dvorak's *New World Symphony* as you observe this work.

## *A Parallel Study*

*The Course of Empire* also by Thomas Cole. The five paintings in the series are: *The Savage State*, *The Pastoral State*, *The Consummation of Empire*, *Destruction*, and *Desolation*. The Course of Empire can be seen at the New York Historic Society in New York City. In our study we will trace the development, destruction, and desolation of the civilization as depicted by Thomas Cole. History, according to the Biblical world view, is a meaningful sequence of events having a beginning and an end. History is not cyclic as some suggest. However, there are parallels among different civilizations that provide insight and warnings to the present generation.

As a high school study you may wish to trace the development of several different civilizations. Some possible examples could include:

The Egyptian Civilization

The Greek Civilization

The Roman Civilization

Jewish Civilization

Follow the growth and influence of each civilization. When did the civilization begin?...At what time in history did it reach its height? What thoughts and ideas did the people of the culture accept as truth? When did the civilization end? What caused its collapse?

Describe the Western Civilization from the fall of Rome to the 20th Century. Where are we in the development of the panorama of civilizations?

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Course of Empire: The Pastoral State*  
Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 63 1/4 inches  
New York Historic Society, New York City

## *The Painting*

- This is the second of a sequence of five paintings in the series, *The Course of Empire*, by Thomas Cole.
- Take a few moments to observe *The Pastoral State*. If you have Edvard Grieg's *Morning* or Ludwig von Beethoven's *Symphony Number Six*, play them while observing this second work.
- Look for people in the painting. What are they like and what are they doing? You may wish to use a magnifying glass to observe the many fine details of this work.
- Describe the clouds....the light....the landscape...the water....the terrain.
- Notice the direction of the light from the sun. What time of day do you think it is?
- Can you tell the season? Do you think it may be spring, summer, fall, or winter?
- If you have the last issue of HOMESCHOOLING TODAY set *The Savage State* above *The Pastoral State*.
- Compare and contrast the two paintings. Do these paintings represent the same geographic location? What evidence would you give to support your answer?
- Look for similarities and differences in the clouds....the light....the landscape...the water....the terrain of the two paintings. What do these similarities and differences suggest?
- Is the light from the sun the same or different in each painting. Has the time of day changed from the first to the second painting? Do you think the seasons have also changed? Why would Thomas Cole change the time of day and the seasons for each picture? Keep in mind that he is representing the growth and development of a civilization from infancy to old age.
- Mr. Cole calls this second painting *The Pastoral State*. What did he mean by that title? Do you think he captured that idea in this work? Do you think *The Savage State* or *The Pastoral State* reflects the Biblical idea of tending and having dominion over the earth?
- Turn the two paintings over. Tell how *The Pastoral State* is similar and different from *The Savage State*.
- Look again at the two paintings.
- Describe *The Pastoral State* to a friend.
- Write a descriptive paragraph of *The Pastoral State*.

## *The Perspective*

"To begin," writes James Fenimore Cooper, "I pronounce the *Course of Empire* a grand epic poem, with a nation for its hero, and a series of national actions and events for his achievements." The *Course of Empire* presents a universal panorama of the rise and decline of civilizations.

Relate these first two paintings to the United States of America. *The Savage State* would be what period in our history? What about *The Pastoral State*? For those familiar with Greek or Roman culture, what time periods would



these two paintings represent?

While *The Savage State* represents the birth of a civilization, in *The Pastoral State*

we look in upon the empire in its youth. In the lapse of years, we are carried forward to the period when the supremacy, at first asserted, becomes a living vigorous reality. Hopes now begin to be realized, promises made good, prophecies fulfilled. The aboriginal canoe and hut are exchanged for the busy village by the water-side, and the bolder craft that can wing the seas. The savage is transformed into civilized man, rising from grosser superstitions into higher forms of natural religion, progressing in science and the arts, abandoning the chase for the sober toils of agriculture, and forgetting scenes of barbarous mirth in the gentler pastimes of the peasant. Time has tamed and tempered man, man has tempered and softened the wilderness. The footsteps of empires are heavy upon the earth and fleet upon the main. They wear the mountains, imprint the solid rocks, and cleave the billows. The State in its morning, was our first view: we now behold, at least, the dawn of its grandeur. Again the season, the hour, and the quality of the scenery, all harmonize with the general story. The landscape, now seen from a point of view different from that first occupied by the beholder, has a milder aspect: the sun, advancing in the sky, shines freely and pleasantly abroad. Light clouds play around the mountains, It is summer; the last luxuriant days of June. [James Fenimore Cooper, from *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, by Louis Legrand Noble.]

### *The Painter's Viewpoint*

Thomas Cole, writing to Luman Reed, describes *The Pastoral State* before being painted in these words

THE SECOND PICTURE must be the pastoral state, - the day further advanced - light clouds playing about the mountains - the scene partly cultivated - a rude village near the bay - small vessels in the harbour - groups of peasants either pursuing their labours in the field, watching their flocks, or engaged in some simple amusement. The chiaroscuro must be of a milder character than in the previous scene, but yet have a fresh and breezy effect.

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire*

Oil on canvas, 51 3/4 x 76 inches

New York Historic Society, New York City

## *The Painting*

- This is the third work in the series of five paintings, *The Course of Empire*, by Thomas Cole.
- Carefully study *The Consummation of Empire*. Play the *Egmont Overture* and *Symphony Number 3* by Ludwig van Beethoven while observing it.

Describe the city ... the architecture ... the bridge ... the bay ... the procession ... the people.

What words would you use to describe the empire at this moment in history?

- What does consummation mean? Why would Thomas Cole use this word to describe the empire. Do you think he has captured the essence of the empire at its consummation in this work?
- Think about the great empires of history. Though this is not a particular city, which cities come to your mind as you observe this work? Use tourist books to see the great cities of all times.

Research Option: Look at the architecture of the major capital cities of the world. Are they similar to what Thomas Cole has depicted? Research the buildings at Washington, DC and your individual state capital. Are there any similarities to the buildings in this work?

All five paintings were to be placed in this order on the wall:



If you have the previous issues of Homeschooling Today, set *The Course of Empire* as indicated above.

- As you look at *The Savage State* play Anton Dvorak's *New World Symphony*. As you talk about *The Pastoral State* play *Morning* by Edvard Grieg or Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony Number Six*, and finally as you consider *The Consummation of Empire* listen to Beethoven's *Egmont Overture* and his *Symphony Number 3*.
- How can you tell that these paintings are of one location as seen over a period of time?
- What landscape features are similar in each of the paintings?
- How has the civilization changed from painting to painting?
- Look at the people in each of the paintings. What are they like? What are they doing?

Research Option: Trace a civilization (such as, Rome) from its beginning to its zenith.

- Notice the direction of the light from the sun in each painting. Has the time of day changed from the first to the third painting? What is the significance of this observation? Why would Thomas Cole change the time of day for each picture?
- There are five paintings in this series *The Course of Empire*. What do you think paintings four and five will be like? Describe and possibly sketch paintings four and five.

## *The Perspective*

The third picture opens the Empire in its manhood. Time, necessary for the fulfillment of all of which the past may have been prophetic, has rolled away. The dawn of national grandeur is now succeeded by the full blaze. The nation has carried itself forward to the summit-level of its long ascending career. The village, that once little company of buildings down on the shore, now expands into the vast capital, and crowds the scene. Himself in the skirts of the great city, the beholder sees it embracing the bay, its foundations in the waves, its crest in the heavens - there, climbing in piles of imposing architecture around the crag-crowned height - here, spanning the waters in successive arches - and yonder, ascending to the horizon a huge assemblage of temples, palaces, colonnades and domes. A fleet sweeps the harbour - war-galleys and barks of costly sails. Multitudes witness the progress of a conqueror enjoying the honours of a triumph. Earth and the waves are mantled with the proud accomplishments of man, and heavy with the gorgeous embroidery of human achievement.

To a vision so replete with earthly glory nature herself, as if in astonishment, gives her countenance and sympathy. Hushed and breathless, she comes in the plenitude of ripening September, and wraps the scene with noon-day effulgence.

In all this sumptuous pageant, smiting the sight, steeping sense in splendour, there is a silent revelation of "things which must shortly come to pass.:" There takes hold of one unconsciously, a recognition of those strange and overwhelming doings which God reserves to himself in the final affairs of nations, "to the intent that the living may know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men." One feels, even among richest fancies, the presence of thoughts dark and ominous, like those which, at this stage of the work, began to hasten up in flights, as it were from the future, upon the painter's mind. Behind this glory, of such depth to the outward eye, of such veil-like thinness to the piercing, prophetic eye of the soul, rise in shadowy outline awful presses, breathing wrathful premonition: "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

[James Fenimore Cooper, from *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, by Louis Legrand Noble.]

## *The Painter's Viewpoint*

Thomas Cole, writing to Luman Reed, describes *The Consummation of Empire* before being painted:

THE THIRD must be a noonday, — a great city girding the bay, gorgeous piles of architecture, bridge, aqueducts, temples — the port crowded with vessels — splendid processions, &c. — all that can be combined to show the fullness of prosperity: the chiaroscuro broad.

Inscribed, signed, and dated on a paper label attached to the wood packing panel were these words by Thomas Cole:

This picture with four others constitute a /Series called The Course of Empire - they were / painted for Mr. Luman Reed of N. York; but / I had to lament his death before the work was / completed - In him I lost a noble friend & the / Fine Arts a true lover & liberal patron - / Thomas Cole / Cedar Grove / near Catskill / Sept. 29th 1836.

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Course of Empire: Destruction*  
Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 63 1/2 inches  
New York Historic Society, New York City

## *The Painting*

- *Destruction* is the fourth work in the series of five paintings, *The Course of Empire*, by Thomas Cole.
- If you have the last three issues of HOMESCHOOLING TODAY, set the other paintings from this series on your table in order from left to right:  
*The Savage State ... The Pastoral State ... The Consummation of Empire ... Destruction.*
- Describe the changes in the Empire from its beginning to its destruction.
- Look at the lower right section of *The Consummation of Empire*. Two boys are fighting over a toy ship. Why did Thomas Cole include these boys in an argument? What was he suggesting by including this scene?
- Now carefully study *Destruction*. Play *Ride of the Valkyries* by Richard Wagner while observing this painting.
- Describe the city ... the people ... the clouds ... the bay.
- What words would you use to describe the empire at this moment in history?
- How does Cole's depiction of the force of nature reinforce the painting?

## *The Perspective*

The fourth picture exhibits the Empire in its fall. The moment chosen for the spectator is that, when, at the end of its rapid downward run, all is in awful motion on the very bend of ruin — that narrow tract of frantic, shivering, fierce foam, just before the vast current slides into the polished green of the cataract. The shades of the now declining day will fall, and the sear leaves of autumn drop, into the abyss that swallows it. Weakened and debased by luxury, “brimstone sprinkled upon its habitations” by the hand of vice, “the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it.” In a word, the once proud capital, sacked by a barbarous enemy, reddens with conflagration and carnage. All appetite for conquest lost in long satiety, there is now, in its effeminacy, not even the power to resist. Enemies, begotten by ambition and nurtured by tyranny, take those once far-reaching, deeply-beaten, but now grass-grown paths of victory, and follow them in —rush in to their revenge. The vanquished recoil upon the conqueror; the trampled come to trample in their turn, and snatch back, in one terrible hour, all the gorgeous triumphs of the past. The wrongs of ages make a general return. They revel at a festival of blood. The golden head, the jewelled crown of the empire, is fired to light and cheer the revelry.

To complete the tremendous tragedy, nature appears upon the scene, a terrific actor. Clouds and smoke commingled darken the heavens. The sweep of the gale is swift as the spirit of battle. Surge and flame work ruin in the crowded port. The very light is fierce, flashing along the wide gloom, darting upon the sullen shadows. For every wave of mortal wrath and passion, there is a swell of fury in the elements. All palpitates and rushes, swaying to and fro in masses, heaving, rolling, thundering in the surf of wild destruction. The season and the hour still keep pace, and work in harmony. It is, as intimated above, drawing on to the close of one of “the melancholy days, the saddest of the year.”

[James Fenimore Cooper, from *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, by Louis Legrand Noble.]

Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788) said that the following five attributes marked Rome at its end:

First — a mounting love of show and luxury (that is, affluence)

Second — a widening gap between the very rich and the very poor....

Third — an obsession with sex.

Fourth — freakishness in the arts, masquerading as originality and enthusiasms pretending to be creativity.

Fifth — an increased desire to live off the state.

[from *How Should We Then Live? Our Society* by Dr. Francis Schaeffer.]

## *The Painter's Viewpoint*

Thomas Cole, writing to Luman Reed, describes *Destruction* before being painted:

THE FOURTH should be a tempest, — a battle, and the burning of the city — towers falling, arches broken, vessels wrecking in the harbour. In this scene there should be a fierce chiaroscuro, masses and groups swaying about like stormy waves. This is the scene of destruction or vicious state.

On a visit to ancient Rome and Greece Cole writes in his diary:

May 31st. — I did not go to church to-day. I should have spent my time more profitably if I had. I read a little, wrote, and walked, and looked at the landscape. In the evening I took a walk on the road to the village of Athens, which, for half a mile from Mr. Alexander Thompson's, is my favourite morning and evening walk. The south wind blew strongly, and dark masses of cloud moved across the twilight sky, the heralds of approaching storm. A leaden hue overspread the vale, the woods, and the distant mountains. How contagious is gloom! A flow of melancholy thoughts and feelings overwhelmed me for a time. I thought of the uncertainty of life; its bootless toil and brevity. The south wind, I thought, would still continue to blow, and bring up its dark clouds for ages after my works, and all the reputation I might gain had faded away, and become as though they had never been, — swept by the wing of time into oblivion's gulf. And shall it be? Shall the spirit, that mysterious principle, unknown even to itself, that vivifies this earth, and generates these thoughts, sink also into the gloomy gulf of non-existence, nor feel again created Beauty, nor see the Nature that it loved so much? It cannot be. The Great Originator, the Mighty One, the Unspeakable, hath not created for purposes vain and useless this power of conceiving, — this wish and "longing after immortality," — this hope, — this faith which gives an energy to virtue, and raised in the breast these lofty aspirations, — this fear of sinning, of deception and delusion. No! There are no fallacies with God. To prove that, if not to disprove all existence, would be to render all things doubtful. [from *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, by Louis Legrand Noble.]

# THOMAS COLE

1801 - 1848

*The Course of Empire: Desolation*  
Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 63 1/4 inches  
New York Historic Society, New York City

## *The Painting*

- *Destruction* is the fifth and final painting in the series *The Course of Empire*, by Thomas Cole.
- Begin this study by playing *Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Barber.
- Show your children the painting *Desolation*.
- Listen to the music and quietly observe the painting.
- Describe the city ... the people ... the animals ... the clouds ... the bay.
- What remnants of this once great empire are now visible?
- If you have the last four issues of HOMESCHOOLING TODAY, set the paintings from this series on your table in order from left to right:  
*The Savage State ... The Pastoral State ... The Consummation of Empire ... Destruction ... Desolation.*
- Describe the rise and fall of the civilization as depicted in this series. Listen to the recommended music for each painting at the same time.
- Describe the empire at each moment of history?
- Describe your emotions as you observe *Desolation*.

## *The Perspective*

Thomas Cole's motto to this series was:

*"First freedom, and then glory; when that fails,  
Wealth, vice, corruption."*

"In the first three pictures, to look back a moment, the nation-hero, as I have chosen to speak, occupies the scene, running from extremes of activity to those of rest — Shouting aloud, in the first: See! I come, as if from crude chaotic nature, all life, all motion, wildly bounding into being — Speaking with milder voice, though not less emphatic, in the second: I go forward, forward still with life, but with repose beginning to wrestle with activity — Sounding it with trumpets in the third: Behold the Empire! Lo, what I have done! — and activity is prostrate under the noiseless wheels of repose. But in the fourth and fifth, an avenging Providence occupies the scene, passing also from extremes of terrible activity to those of awful repose — Saying, first, amid commotions and convulsive throes of going out of being: Lo, I come! — then whispering through silent desolation (which utterance shuts up the scene): "It is done!" "And after the fire a still small voice," saying, "It is done." Such is the expression of the solemn twilight, the motionless autumnal foliage, the quiet footsteps of encroaching waters, the solitary heron and her nest upon the crumbling column. By the beams of the moon, now rising over the tranquil ocean, and by the last gleams of day, the poet lights the beholder to the tomb of Empire, and gives him voiceless solitude, in which to hear, from mournful ruins and triumphant nature, "the moral of the strain."

[James Fenimore Cooper, from *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, by Louis Legrand Noble.]

## *The Painter's Viewpoint*

Thomas Cole, writing to Luman Reed, describes *Desolation* before being painted:

The FIFTH must be a sunset, — the mountains riven — the city a desolate ruin — columns standing isolated amid the encroaching waters — ruined temples, broken bridges, fountains, — no human figure — a solitary bird perhaps; a calm and silent effect. This picture must be as the funeral knell of departed greatness, and may be called the state of desolation.

## *The Painter*

“Thomas Cole was the founder of the American school of landscape painting. During his entire career, he remained inspired by the beauty of his new country, its vast spaces, virgin forests, rocks, streams and rivers which in his best works he rendered with deep insight, dramatic power and consummate skill.

“However, Cole was a child of his time which regarded landscape painting inferior to allegorical and historical scenes. Thus he considered it the artist’s ultimate purpose to create works with ethical meaning and to depict the development and destiny of man. He achieved this aim in two allegorical cycles, *The Course of Empire* (1836) and *The Voyage of Life* (1841). . . .”

[from *Thomas Cole: Paintings by an American Romanticist*, reprint of the mimeographed handlist of the Exhibition held at The Baltimore Museum of Art January 26 - February 28, 1965.]

This study regarding the paintings, *The Course of Empire* and *The Voyage of Life* by Thomas Cole, was written by David Quine. These studies first appeared in Home Schooling Today Magazine. David has developed additional studies in Adventures in Art published by Cornerstone Curriculum.