

Freemasonry, Thomas Cole and Nineteenth-Century American Landscape Painting

David Bjelajac¹

Department of Fine Arts and Art History
George Washington University
USA
Email: bjelajac@gwu.edu

ABSTRACT

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, freemasonry's network of grand and local lodges facilitated the development and popular dissemination of American art, attracting artists, critics and patrons alike. Freemasonry's symbolism of nature and architecture particularly influenced the imagery of American landscape painting. The Hudson River School landscapist and freemason Thomas Cole (1801–1848) especially composed sublime mountainous views that drew upon masonry's rich visual arsenal of hieroglyphic emblems. First publicized in New York newspapers by William Dunlap, a brother mason, Cole's paintings captured the patronage of the Empire State's masonic elite. Cole viewed the American wilderness as a sacred, architectural space revelatory of God's Word. Inspired by Hudson River and Catskill Mountain views, Cole's landscapes allude to the Herculean building of the Erie Canal, an engineering project that contemporary freemasons also likened to the building of Noah's Ark.

Keywords: freemasonry, American landscape, fraternalism, American art

In a variety of ways that scholars have yet to explore, freemasonry played a crucial role in the birth and development of American landscape painting. Surviving local and state lodge records, histories, memoirs and periodicals document masonic affiliations not only of artists such as Thomas Cole (1801–1848), founding father of the Hudson River School of landscape painting, but also of supportive art patrons and critics. Cole's paintings captured the patronage of the Empire State's social elite,

1. David Bjelajac is Professor of Art and American Studies at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. He is the author of several books and articles on American art and religious, masonic, hermetic traditions.

including such leading freemasons as Stephen Van Rensselaer III (1764–1839), a Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of New York (1825–1830), New York City mayor Philip Hone (1780–1851), a 33rd degree freemason, and Peter G. Stuyvesant (1778–1847), wealthy scion of one of New York's oldest families and Master of Albion Lodge No. 107.²

Freemasons organized the new republic's first art academies. Together with his brother Edward Livingston (1764–1836), a Deputy Grand Master (1801–1803), New York State's Chancellor Robert R. Livingston (1746–1813), long-time Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of New York (1784–1800), led Van Rensselaer, Hone, DeWitt Clinton (1769–1828) and other prominent freemasons in founding (1802) and directing the American Academy of the Fine Arts.³ The membership of New York's Holland Lodge No. 8 comprised academicians, authors and painters, including landscapists John Rubens Smith (1775–1849), Gerlando Marsiglia (1792–1850) and Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902).⁴

Similarly, in Philadelphia, many of the original founders and directors of the Pennsylvania Academy of Art (established 1805) belonged to the masonic order.⁵ Studying at the Pennsylvania Academy during the early 1820s, Cole became familiar with the marine paintings of Thomas Birch (1779–1851) and the imaginative landscapes of Thomas Doughty (1793–1856).⁶ Like Cole, both Birch and Doughty found homes within freemasonry: Birch, in 1815, joined Onondaga Lodge No. 98 in Onondaga County, New York, while Doughty, by 1825, was affiliated with Trinity Lodge No. 39.⁷

2. On Van Rensselaer, see Ossian Lang, *History of Freemasonry in the State of New York* (New York: Grand Lodge, 1922), 104–107, 126–27. On Hone, see Robert B. Folger, *Robert B. Folger's Recollections of a Masonic Veteran* ed. Stephen Brent Morris (Bloomington, IL: Masonic Book Club, 1995), 19, 33. On Stuyvesant, see 'Lodges in the City of New York', *American Masonic Record and Albany Saturday Magazine* 1, no. 30 (25 August 1827), 233–34. On Cole's patrons, see Alan Wallach, 'Thomas Cole: Landscape and the Course of American Empire', in William H. Truettner and Alan Wallach (eds), *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, 1994), 23, 36–37, 98, 106, note 85.

3. Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790–1860* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 90–102; Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 58–62; Lang, *History of Freemasonry*, 72–95, 126–32, 210–11.

4. Holland Lodge, No. 8, *Sesquicentennial Commemorative Volume of Holland Lodge No. 8 of the Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (New York: Holland Lodge, 1938), 40–45, 99, 101, 105, 109.

5. Lee Schreiber, 'The Philadelphia Elite in the Development of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts'. (PhD dissertation, Temple University, 1977), 225–31.

6. Wallach, 'Thomas Cole', 26.

7. For local lodge returns or membership lists, see Grand Lodge of New York,

Freemasonry and Thomas Cole's Early Career

Arriving initially in Philadelphia from his native Lancashire, England, in 1818, Thomas Cole, son of a failed, small-scale textile manufacturer, became a freemason while traveling the new National Road through Pennsylvania and Ohio. During the summer of 1822, he joined the Lodge of Amity No. 5 in Zanesville, Ohio. Needy itinerant artists depended on the welcoming handshakes of lodge brothers as they traveled from one unfamiliar town to the next. Lodge members could be expected to commission paintings, lend money and assistance, and provide references to brother masons in nearby communities. Within a few weeks, Cole advanced through all three of freemasonry's craft degrees.⁸

In the first major history of American art, William Dunlap (1766–1839), a Holland Lodge freemason, wrote of Cole's impoverishment in Zanesville. Depending upon information from Cole himself, Dunlap states that Cole finally had been 'relieved by several gentlemen combining and paying the debt, trusting, as well they might, to his countenance, manners, and assurances of reimbursement'.⁹ Masonic rituals that assessed character and inculcated moral virtues and brotherly loyalty all probably reassured Cole's creditors. Perhaps in lieu of initiation fees, Cole 'painted the first Masonic Carpet that adorned the Lodge room in Zanesville'.¹⁰ The tracing-board carpet was probably similar to a contemporary model for these teaching devices engraved by Connecticut artist-freemason Amos Doolittle (1754–1832) and published in Jeremy Cross's *True Masonic Chart* (fig. 1). Cole also would have known Doolittle's illustrations for scientific publications, including the *American Journal of Science*, or *Silliman's Journal*, an influential periodical for geology-minded landscapists published by natural philosopher Benjamin Silliman (1779–1864), brother-in-law of Cole's Connecticut patron Daniel Wadsworth (1771–1848).¹¹

'Grand Lodge Archives', vol. 80 for Birch's lodge, vol. 111 for Doughty's. Robert R. Livingston Masonic Library, New York City.

8. J. Hope Sutor, *History of the Lodge of Amity, No. 5, F. and A.M., Located at Zanesville, Ohio* (Zanesville, OH: C. Moorehead, 1879), 55–56, 104; Norris F. Schneider, *Lodge of Amity No. 5, F. and A. M., Zanesville, Ohio: 1805–1955* (Zanesville, OH: Lodge of Amity, 1955), 36, 95.

9. William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, vol. 2, part 2 (1834; reprinted. New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 356.

10. Sutor, *History of the Lodge of Amity, No. 5*, 56; Julie Hughey, 'Thomas Cole and the Language of Freemasonry' (MA Thesis, George Washington University, 2002), 20.

11. Donald O'Brien, *Amos Doolittle: Engraver of the New Republic* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2008), 21–53, 86–89; Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 18–29.

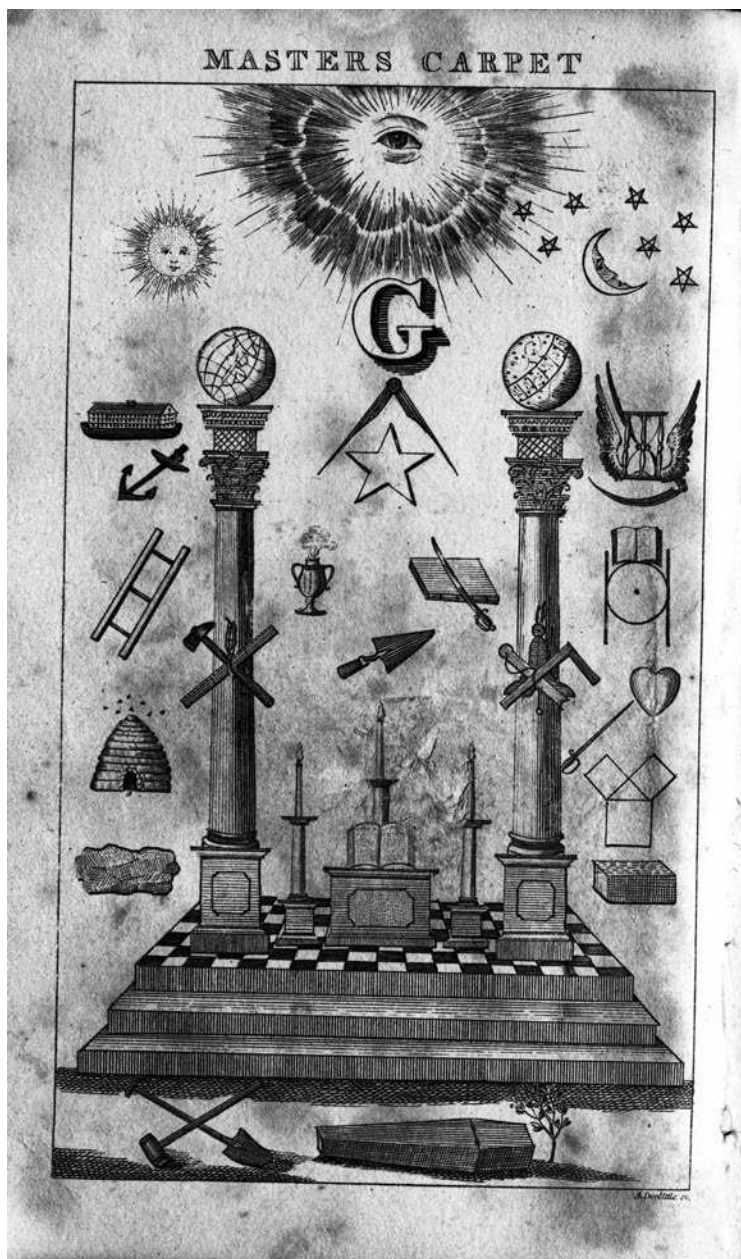


Figure 1. Frontispiece to Jeremy Cross's, *The True Masonic Chart and Masonic Monitor*, 1820. Amos Doolittle, engraver; John C. Gray, publisher, New Haven, Connecticut (RARE 14.1 .C951 1820a). Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Van Gorden-Williams Library and Archives, National Heritage Museum, Lexington, MA. Photo courtesy of John M. Miller.

When artist/freemason William Dunlap first publicized Thomas Cole's landscapes in the *New-York Evening Post* (November 22, 1825), there were over 80,000 freemasons in the United States with nearly 500 lodges spread throughout New York State alone.¹² Implicitly expressive of masonry's national expansion, Cole's *View of Fort Putnam* (1824–1825) memorializes Brigadier General Rufus Putnam (1738–1824), chief army engineer during the American Revolution, and beloved by Cole's Zanesville lodge for introducing freemasonry into Ohio.¹³ During the early republic, participation in freemasonry intensified, as enthusiastic brothers invested time, money and energy pursuing esoteric degrees beyond the craft degrees. Fueled by competition among rival lodge networks, the number of degrees multiplied and were bestowed by new masonic organizations, such as the chapters of Royal Arch Freemasonry and the encampments of Knights Templar Freemasons. Cole painted several landscapes for New York Grand Master Stephen Van Rensselaer III, a 'Prince of Jerusalem', who also promoted higher, knightly degrees through his leadership of Albany's Ineffable and Sublime Lodge of Perfection.¹⁴

Freemasonry contributed significantly to other early-republican fraternities. Upon arriving in New York City, Cole joined the Bread and Cheese Club, a cultural society organized by novelist James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). This elite club of writers, artists, merchants, lawyers and other professionals attracted freemasons, including art collector Philip Hone, poet Fitz-Greene Halleck (1790–1867), writer-lawyer Henry Brevoort (1782–1848) and Cole admirer William Dunlap, a founder of New York's earlier literary society, the Friendly Club.¹⁵ As we shall see, Cole helped found the Sketch Club, another, more lasting, cultural fraternity.

12. Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 187–88. See Dunlap's 1825 newspaper review of Cole in Elwood C. Parry III, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 25–26.

13. Sutor, *History of the Lodge of Amity*, 8–9. On Cole's *View of Fort Putnam*, see Linda S. Ferber, 'Asher B. Durand, American Landscape Painter', in Linda S. Ferber (ed.), *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007), 128, fig. 52.

14. Frederick W. Gebhard, *One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of Ineffable and Sublime Grand Lodge of Perfection of Albany, N.Y. December 20th, 1917* (Albany, NY: Ineffable and Sublime Lodge of Perfection, 1917), 4, 16.

15. Bender, *New York Intellect*, 58, 134–35. Holland Lodge No. 8, *Sesquicentennial Commemorative Volume*, 45, 99, 101, 103; Bryan Waterman, *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2007), 1–49, 243–48.

Kaaterskill Falls

Facilitating mountain tourism and encouraging landscape painting, freemasons played major roles in building resort accommodations such as Mount Holyoke House with its panoramic view of the Connecticut River, near Northampton, Massachusetts (see fig. 9).¹⁶ Closer to Cole's future home in the Catskills, Caleb Benton (1758–1825), Master of Catskill Lodge No. 302, was one of a handful of original company stockholders, who financed construction of Catskill roads and bridges and the Catskill Mountain House.¹⁷ In 1824, the writer-editor William Leete Stone (1792–1844), a Royal Arch and Knights Templar Freemason, promoted the new Catskill resort in a series of articles for the *New York Commercial Advertiser*.¹⁸

Cole's New York debut exhibition of three paintings at a book-and-art dealer's shop, included a view of Kaaterskill Falls. This Catskill landscape was purchased by painter-freemason Colonel John Trumbull (1756–1843), president of the American Academy of the Fine Arts. Trumbull soon sold *Kaaterskill Falls* to fellow freemason Philip Hone, who catalogued it as 'The Falls of the Kauters Kill—Catskill Mountain'.¹⁹

Though this original painting is now lost, Cole made a copy of the composition for Daniel Wadsworth, a wealthy amateur painter and geologist. *Kaaterskill Falls* (fig. 2) represents what Cole later described as a 'vast arched cave that extends beneath and behind the cataract'. Foaming water throws 'itself headlong over a fearful precipice into a deep gorge of the densely wooded mountains'.²⁰ Cole's stone arch looks backward in time toward a pristine American wilderness, untainted by modern tourism and industry. Autumnal leaves point to a tiny, lone Indian personifying the Catskill region's antiquity. The wilderness arch suggests a primeval stonemasonry that predates medieval Gothic architecture and

16. On Northampton's Jerusalem Lodge and Mount Holyoke tourism, see David Bjelajac, 'Thomas Cole's *Oxbow* and the American Zion Divided', *American Art* 20. 1 (Spring 2006), 64–65, 82, note 5.

17. J.B. Beers and Company, *History of Greene County, New York: Biographical Sketches of its Prominent Men* (1884; reprinted. Cornwallville, NY: Hope Farm Press, 1969), 44, 47, 78, 137.

18. Wallach, 'Thomas Cole', 31. William R. Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, vol. 4 (Trenton, NJ: Transactions of the Missouri Lodge of Research, 1961), s.v. Stone, William Leete; Alf Evers, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1982), 362–63.

19. Hone quoted in Dunlap, *History*, vol. 2, part 2, 463; Wallach, 'Thomas Cole', 106, note 85. Trumbull is listed as a member of New York City's Whitehall Social No. 145, effective 1 June 1815, in the Grand Lodge of New York, 'Grand Lodge Archives', vol. 122.

20. Cole, 'Essay on American Scenery' (1836), in Thomas Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed. Marshall Tymn (St. Paul, MN: John Colet Press, 1980), 12.



Figure 2. Thomas Cole, *Kaaterskill Falls*, 1826, oil on canvas. Bequest of Daniel Wadsworth, 1848.15. Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Photo courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

echoes the arch symbolism of Royal Arch Freemasonry. In Royal Arch certificates (fig. 3), emblematic excavation tools, comprising a pickaxe, shovel and crowbar allude to the Hebrew patriarch Enoch, reputed builder of an underground, cavernous temple that survived the biblical Flood and preserved the hermetic secrets of the Supreme Architect. By Royal Arch legend, Enoch's subterranean temple was rediscovered by excavators digging the foundations for Solomon's Temple.²¹

Masonic journal editors publicized mysterious cave sites as tourist attractions. Albany's *American Masonic Register* reported that Wier's Cave in Augusta County, Virginia, warranted interest due to its labyrinthine arrangement of spaces, beginning with the cave's rock-vaulted chamber named 'Solomon's Temple'.²² In 1793, Holland Lodge Master DeWitt Clinton, New York's future governor, wrote that misunderstood, persecuted freemasons, often had been 'forced to take shelter in the caverns of the earth, and to shroud themselves in the shades of night, in order

21. Giles F. Yates, 'Knight of the Ninth Arch', *American Masonic Register, and Ladies' and Gentlemen's Magazine* 2.6 (March 1823), 202–203; John Hamilton, *Material Culture of the American Freemasons* (Lexington, MA: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1994), 84–85, fig. 3.48; 193, fig. 5.26.

22. Calvin Jones, 'Wier's Cave', *The American Masonic Register, and Ladies' and Gentlemen's Magazine*, 2.4 (December 1822), 141.



Figure 3. John Ritto Penniman (1783–1841), Royal Arch Certificate, line engraving on paper, engraved by William B. Annin (fl.1813–1839) and George Girdler Smith (1795–1878), Boston, c.1820–1825 (MA006). Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Van Gorden-Williams Library and Archives. National Heritage Museum, Lexington, MA. Photo courtesy of David Bohl.

to cultivate the duties of Masonry'.²³ Cole himself later imagined the 'semi-circular cavern' beneath Kaaterskill Falls as a vast meeting place, or 'arched gallery', where 'thousands of men might stand', if only 'the ground were level'.²⁴

23. DeWitt Clinton, *An Address Delivered before Holland Lodge, December 24, 1793* (New York: Francis Childs and John Swaine, 1794), 6.

24. Thomas Cole, 'The Falls of Catskill in Winter', March 1843, in Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, ed. Elliot S. Vesell (1964; reprinted. Hensonsville, NY: Black Dome Press 1997), 259.

While the cave's mouth mimics a 'cyclopean eye', Cole's stonemasonry arch also invites the ear's participation.²⁵ According to Cole, the 'stupendous canopy, over which the cataract shoots' was an ideal auditorium. The roaring cataract itself constituted the 'voice of the landscape', sonically playing upon the architecture of God's creation. Cole viewed the American wilderness as a sacred space revelatory of God's Word.²⁶ In the wake of the anti-masonic movement, Philip Hone, the painting's owner, and other embattled freemasons may have imagined Cole's cavernous space as a natural Royal Arch or welcoming wilderness refuge.

The Subsiding of the Waters of the Deluge

Cole soon recast the format of *Kaaterskill Falls* in biblical terms to represent *The Subsiding of the Waters of the Deluge* (fig. 4). This picture moves outward from a dark arched cave, marked below by a human skull, toward a distant Noah's ark floating amidst towering rocks on receding, sun-drenched floodwaters. Purchased by New York botanist David Hosack (1769–1835), Cole's *Deluge* perhaps served as a funereal tribute to New York Governor De Witt Clinton. Prior to his death in 1828, Clinton, a former Grand Master of New York's Grand Lodge, had earned national masonic stature as founding General Grand High Priest of Royal Arch Masons and Grand Master of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar.²⁷

In a *Memoir of De Witt Clinton* (1829), published the same year he acquired Cole's painting, Hosack defended freemasonry against a rising tide of anti-masonic political agitation. For Hosack, Clinton was one of America's and freemasonry's most 'illustrious names'. He reassured critics that freemasonry's 'religious tendency' and 'benign influence throughout the civilized world' had attracted 'the most highly respected dignitaries of the church, as well as clergy of different denominations'.²⁸

Hosack would have been inclined to see Cole's pictorial tribute to Noah in relation to Clinton. Freemasons revered Noah's craft wisdom in building the flood-proof ark that had preserved nature's chain of being. Building upon this tradition, Clinton's Noachian identity was strengthened by the governor's writings on American botany, zoology

25. Michael Gaudio, 'At the Mouth of the Cave: Listening to Thomas Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls*', *Art History* 33. 3 (June 2010), 456.

26. Cole, 'The Falls of Catskill in Winter', in Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, 259; Cole, 'Essay on American Scenery' (1836) in *The Collected Essays*, 11.

27. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 240.

28. David Hosack, *Memoir of De Witt Clinton* (New York: L. Seymour, 1829), 33.



Figure 4. Thomas Cole, *The Subsiding of the Waters of the Deluge*, 1829, oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Katie Dean in memory of Minnibel S. and James Wallace Dean and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program (1983.40). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

and natural history. More importantly, Clinton had fathered the Erie Canal, the engineering miracle that connected New York's Hudson River and Atlantic seaport with the Midwestern Great Lakes.²⁹

The tiny, surviving vessel in *The Subsiding of the Waters* resembles masonic, tracing-board emblems of Noah's ark and the Master-mason's coffin of Hiram Abiff (see fig. 1). Cole's ark also may have evoked associations with Erie canal cargo and passenger boats. A 'Noah's Ark' from Buffalo, New York, had appeared at the Erie Canal's 1825 grand opening 'literally stored with birds, beasts and "creeping things"', all symbols of the tamed wilderness.³⁰ One Buffalo Freemason celebrated the 1825 canal opening by placing an emblematic Noah's Ark at the center of his apron.³¹

The Titan's Goblet

Assisted by portraitist Ezra Ames (1768–1836), Governor Clinton led freemasons in celebrating the Erie Canal. In 1823, a masonic capstone ceremony marked completion of the Albany lock at the canal's eastern, Hudson-River terminus. Royal Arch freemasons spanned and surrounded the lock with ceremonial columns and arches constructed from tree trunks, evergreens and autumn foliage.³² Ames, Grand High Priest for the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, consecrated the capstone with corn, wine and oil. He then led a 'procession three times round the lock under the arches'.³³

Freemasons' rituals, emblems and Erie Canal celebrations may have inspired Cole's enigmatic fantasy landscape *The Titan's Goblet* (fig. 5).³⁴ This small, sun-lit painting is dominated by a titanic, lake-filled goblet,

29. Jonathan Harris, 'DeWitt Clinton as Naturalist', *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 56 (October 1972), 265–84.

30. William L. Stone, *Narrative of the Festivities observed in Honor of the Completion of the Erie Canal* (1825) in 'Opening of the Erie Canal', in Roland Van Zandt (ed.), *Chronicles of the Hudson: Three Centuries of Travellers' Accounts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 177.

31. Hamilton, *Material Culture*, 111, 268, fig. 4.17.

32. Craig Hanyan and Mary L. Hanyan, *DeWitt Clinton and the Rise of the People's Men* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1996), 111.

33. *The Albany Argus* (10 October 1823) cited in Theodore Bolton and Irwin F. Cortelyou, *Ezra Ames of Albany: Portrait Painter, Craftsman, Royal Arch Mason, Banker: 1768–1836* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1955), 103.

34. Earlier interpretations include John Caldwell and Oswaldo Rogriguez Roque, *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 1: *A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born by 1815*, ed. Kathleen Luhrs (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 465–68; Parry III, *Art of Thomas Cole*, 138–40; Weinberg, 'An American Grail: An Iconographic Study of Thomas Cole's *Titan's Goblet*', *Prospects: The Annual of American Cultural Studies* 8 (1983), 261–80.



Figure 5. Thomas Cole, *The Titan's Goblet*, 1833, oil on canvas. Gift of Samuel P. Avery, Jr., 1904 (04.29.2). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.

its mossy rim lined with miniature buildings. Streams of water falling from the goblet lead our eye to a sea-harbor settlement situated beneath rocky promontories and primordial, mountainous terrain broken by valleys and waterways.

Cole's fantastic goblet suggests creation mythology: A hovering sun bestows a mirror-like radiance upon the goblet's circular 'little sea', connoting the elemental union of fire and water.³⁵ The goblet's reflective, crystalline surface pictorially echoes Cole's 1825 ode 'To the Moon',

35. Louis L. Noble 1886 pamphlet on *The Titan's Goblet* quoted in Parry III, *Art of Thomas Cole*, 139, fig. 107.

which praises the comforting 'cheer' of lunar light, 'when in the Ocean's breast/The wearied sun hath plunged his golden crest'. Homeric myth describes how the Titan sun god, Helios, following his daily westward chariot ride across the sky, then voyages backward upon an oceanic goblet toward his diurnal dawn rising in the East. Cole's poem specifies the Atlantic Ocean's 'undulating breast', from which the sun will rise again over eastern American shores.³⁶ A later Cole poem recalls when 'the world was young', and 'mighty Titans', built mountains with 'precipitous steeps' amidst terrain 'o'erwhelmed' by 'the Flood'.³⁷

In more human terms, the myths of Hercules' twelve labors and of Prometheus, the Titan thief of fire, better explain the symbolic import of *The Titan's Goblet*. New York's canal-building entrepreneurs admired Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626), the English empiricist, whose moral and religious writings describe how the hero Hercules crossed the waters of the Titan god Oceanus via the voyaging cup of Helios, the Titan-Sun. Becoming identified with the sun god, Hercules navigated this magical, sailing goblet to a mountain in the Caucasus, where he unbound Prometheus and killed the liver-eating eagle or vulture sent daily by Zeus as punishment for the theft of fire. For Bacon, Prometheus personified aspiring humanity, which required the intercession of a Christ-like Hercules to overcome adversity.³⁸

Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), which celebrated 'Salomon's House', a utopian brotherhood of scientific wisdom seekers, also hailed Hercules for sailing beyond the Mediterranean Sea through the Straits of Gibraltar, or 'Pillars of Hercules'. For Bacon and later antiquarians seeking the origins of freemasonry, the Pillars of Hercules symbolized human progress and the expanding limits of knowledge. Traveling uncharted waters to Hesperia, or 'western countries' at the end of the world, Hercules gathered immortalizing golden apples from a dragon-guarded garden.³⁹ Americans regarded Hercules' westward voyage as a

36. 'To the Moon', in Thomas Cole, *Thomas Cole's Poetry*, ed. Marshall B. Tymn (York, PA: Liberty Cap Books, 1972), 36–37. Jeannie Carlier, 'Helios', in Yves Bonnefoy, ed., *Greek and Egyptian Mythologies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 178.

37. Cole, 'The Lament of the Forest', (1838) in *Thomas Cole's Poetry*, 107.

38. Francis Bacon, 'Of Adversity', in Brian Vickers (ed.), *Essays; or, Counsels Civil and Moral* (1625) in *Francis Bacon: The Major Works* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002): 348–49; Bacon, *Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609) in *The Works of Francis Bacon: The Wisdom of the Ancients and Other Essays* (New York: Black's Reader Service Company, 1932), 285, 295. On Bacon's influence in America, see George H. Daniels, *American Science in the Age of Jackson* (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 63–85; Vivian C. Hopkins, 'The Empire State—DeWitt Clinton's Laboratory', *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 59 (1975), 7–44.

39. Bacon, *New Atlantis* in *Francis Bacon*, ed. Vickers, 467, 471; John Fellows, *An*

heroic, seafaring type for the discoveries of Christopher Columbus and other explorers and visionaries. Artists and authors of the new republic often referred to 'the American Hercules', in admonishing citizens to choose Virtue over Vice, or masculine strength over feminine weakness. For *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (1861–1862), a panoramic mural of Rocky Mountain pioneers in the United States Capitol, the artist-freemason Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868) painted marginalia, comprising a scene of Hercules voyaging through the Straits of Gibraltar, to symbolize America's westward expansion.⁴⁰

In anticipation of this movement westward, Cole's *Titan's Goblet* allegorically celebrates the Erie Canal as a Herculean feat promising to free Promethean humankind from the restrictive bonds of nature. During his mythic labors, Hercules had transformed landscapes by draining swamps, flooding plains, altering river courses and building canals. The Straits of Gibraltar became Hercules's most famous canal in separating the European and African continents for shipping beyond the Mediterranean.⁴¹ The Erie Canal's extensive system of locks, aqueducts, and harbor basins, similarly constituted an aquatic goblet of the sun for an American Hercules daily voyaging east and west between the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Lakes. Cadwallader Colden, New York's Grand Lodge Secretary and the Canal Commission's official historian, imagined canal building as a 'Herculean...task'. He envisioned an ever-expanding transportation system that would follow the sun's cycles connecting New York and the Great Lakes with western continental rivers and waterways and with nations across both Atlantic and Pacific oceans.⁴²

Exposition of the Mysteries, or Religious Dogmas and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians, Pythagoreans, and Druids. Also: An Inquiry into the Origin, History, and Purport of Freemasonry (New York: Gould, Banks and Co., 1835), 46; David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590–1710* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 148.

40. 'Report of the Committee of Merchants and Others of Boston, on the Tariff', *The North-American Review* 12.30 (January 1821), 86; Thomas J. Schlereth, 'Columbia, Columbus, and Columbianism', *The Journal of American History* 79.3 (December 1992), 941, 945; Jochen Wierich, 'Struggling through History: Emanuel Leutze, Hegel, and Empire', *American Art* 15.2 (Summer 2001), 66–68, fig.11. On Leutze's Masonic funeral, see Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journal, 1828–1870*, eds. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), 573.

41. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 124, 133.

42. Colden, *Memoir, Prepared at the Request of a Committee of the Common Council of New York, and Presented to the Mayor of the City, at the Celebration of the Completion of the New York Canals* (New York: Corporation of New York, 1825), 25, 74–75.

During Clinton's tenure as Grand Master, New York Grand Lodge certificates included the representation of Hercules (fig. 6). Attired in animal skins, Hercules's presence implicitly proclaimed the wilderness tamed. Several months prior to the Erie Canal opening, a group of New York merchants presented Governor Clinton with two large silver urns decorated in low relief with mythological figures that included Hercules. Following Clinton's death in 1828, the presentation vases



Figure 6. William Rollinson (1762–1842), Master Mason Certificate, Grand Lodge of New York, 1819, copperplate engraving on paper, New York, NY (MA007). Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Van Gorden-Williams Library and Archives. National Heritage Museum, Lexington, MA. Photo courtesy of David Bohl.

were purchased at auction by a masonic lodge in the Erie Canal town of Troy, New York. Honoring their former Grand Master, Troy masons donated the vases to the Clinton family.⁴³

Freemasons traditionally honored Hercules, Minerva and Venus as personifications of strength, wisdom and beauty, respectively corresponding with the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian architectural orders. Moreover, standard masonic representations of Solomon's Temple (see fig. 1), featured Jachin and Boaz, two columns named in I Kings 7:21, which also became identified with the Pillars of Hercules.⁴⁴ Modern freemasonry's founding *Constitutions* states that after completing the temple in Jerusalem, King Solomon's stonemasons traveled to 'Hercules Pillars on the West' to disseminate 'the High Taste of Architecture'.⁴⁵ Influenced by London freemason and archaeologist William Stukeley (1687–1765) and earlier antiquarians, the English masonic mythologist William Hutchinson (1732–1814) claimed that Hercules, navigating from the Phoenician city of Tyre, had transmitted the mysteries of Hebrew and Egyptian religion and architecture to ancient Britons, builders of megalithic temples at Stonehenge and elsewhere. Appearing in numerous editions well into the nineteenth century, Hutchinson's *Spirit of Masonry* (1775) identified 'Tyrian Hercules' as a sun god and claimed that Hercules' twelve labors corresponded with the twelve signs of the zodiac marking the sun's annual celestial course.⁴⁶

Cole's solar, water-channeling chalice seems an apt metaphor for the Herculean qualities Americans attributed to the Erie Canal: Monumental in height as well as length, the canal's western end lies 541 feet above the Hudson River eastern terminus, while hilly terrain required the raising and lowering of boats a total of 675 feet through 83 locks and over 18 aqueducts.⁴⁷ Not firmly attached to the rocky cliff over which it hovers, Cole's circular cup suggests cosmic motion and earthly transport.

43. Donald L. Fennimore and Ann K. Wagner, *Silversmiths to the Nation: Thomas Fletcher and Sidney Gardiner, 1808–1842* (Winterthur, DL and Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: The Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum and Antique Collectors' Club, 2007), 171–72.

44. James Stevens Curl, *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1995), 53; Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 148.

45. James Anderson, *The New Book of Constitutions of the Antient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (1738; reprinted. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing's Rare Mystical Reprints, n.d.), 16.

46. William Hutchinson, *The Spirit of Masonry* (1775; reprinted. Masonic Classics Series, ed. John Hamill (Wellingborough, England: Aquarian Press, 1987), 57–58, 71; David Boyd Haycock, *William Stukeley: Science, Religion and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, England: The Boydell Press, 2002), 164–68.

47. Peter L. Bernstein, *Wedding of the Waters: The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 26, 194.

Situated off-center with its rim nearly touching the painting's right edge, the passenger-populated goblet appears to have broken through a mountain range, leaving in its wake a furrowed plateau streaked from left to right with bright impasto pigment. Cascading water and mist curve leftward to further enhance an impression of the goblet's movement and the marriage of falling waters with those of the harbor below.

The classical, Mediterranean character of the miniature buildings along the chalice rim and harbor below bespeaks western New York's canal boom towns bearing the names Syracuse, Utica and Rome. Meanwhile, the vertiginous rock upon which the goblet rests bears resemblance to the Rock of Gibraltar, famously identified with the Pillars of Hercules, passageway between the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Just prior to painting *Titan's Goblet*, Cole had passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on his return voyage from a three-year tour of Europe, including the Italian peninsula, where he painted *Aqueduct near Rome* (1832) representing an ancient prototype for Erie Canal architecture.⁴⁸

Cole's sluice-punctured water chalice recalls the quasi-masonic 'wedding of the waters' ritual conducted on 4 November 1825, climaxing the Erie Canal opening celebration.⁴⁹ After a ten-day procession along the canal route, an aquatic flotilla of canal steamboats, barges and ships bore DeWitt Clinton and other dignitaries from New York City's harbor to Sandy Hook, a barrier peninsula on the Atlantic Ocean just below Manhattan. Clinton there poured Lake Erie water into the Atlantic from one of two wooden kegs. Geologist and Grand Lodge freemason Samuel Latham Mitchill (1764–1831) then emptied bottled water from the Pacific and Indian Oceans and from the great rivers of Asia, Africa, Europe and North and South America.⁵⁰ Mitchill proclaimed that 'man delights in types and symbols', as demonstrated by the ancients, who deified rivers and 'constructed temples near their sources'.⁵¹ Cole's goblet metaphorically alludes both to the sun-kissed libations of Royal Arch capstone ceremonies and to the riparian, oceanic and lake-fresh wedding of waters at Sandy Hook, as streams from the goblet's basin commingle with the earth's hydraulics.

Titan's Goblet was purchased by chemist-journalist James J. Mapes (1806–1866), whose father, Major-general Jonas Mapes, helped organize

48. Parry III, *Art of Thomas Cole*, 125–27, 128–29, pl. 8.

49. On the 'wedding of the waters' at Albany in 1823, see Colden, *Memoir*, 61.

50. Stone, *Narrative of the Festivities* (1825) in *Chronicles of the Hudson*, ed. Van Zandt, 190; Mitchill belonged to Clinton Lodge No. 453 in Brooklyn and became a Grand Steward of the New York Grand Lodge in 1807. See Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, vol. 3, 211.

51. Samuel Mitchill's 'Address' at Sandy Hook quoted in Colden, *Memoir*, 274.

the Canal celebration.⁵² By 1833, Mapes had become Master of New York's Independent Royal Arch Lodge No.2 and a 'Sir Knight' of the Morton Commandery No.4, Knights Templars.⁵³ Cole's goblet would have appealed to Templar Freemasons, who revered 'the bitter cup' of the crucified Christ and identified themselves with medieval crusading knighthood.⁵⁴ The picture's Herculean theme invites a Christian gloss: Francis Bacon earlier had proposed that Hercules sailing in a cup in order to set Prometheus free constituted a Christological image of God's Word made flesh for the redemption of fallen humanity.⁵⁵

The Course of Empire

Cole painted *The Titan's Goblet* just prior to *The Course of Empire*, a series of five large historical landscapes tracing an unnamed empire's rise and fall from the *Savage State* to the *Arcadian or Pastoral State* (fig. 7), both representing the beginnings of empire, followed by urban civilization's morally lax, luxuriant *Consummation*, and catastrophic descent into *Destruction* and *Desolation* (fig. 8). Painted for Luman Reed (1784–1836), a leading American art collector, the series may have been Cole's warning that American democracy was subject to corruption, mob violence and radical political tendencies.⁵⁶ Reed and other New York conservatives thus opposed the anti-slavery movement, fearing that abolitionist agitation would cause 'disunion' with 'our Southern brethren'.⁵⁷

Cole valued art for generating feelings of brotherhood. Responding to Luman Reed's sudden death prior to *Course of Empire's* completion, Cole composed a memorial poem dedicated to 'friendship', which 'hath the power to lift the soul/Above the common flight of worldly thought'.⁵⁸ Exhibited initially at Clinton Hall, an exhibition space built to

52. Colden, *Memoir*, 160.

53. William J. Duncan, *History of Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2 F. & A. M. of the State of New York* (New York: Charles F. Bloom 1904), 116, 260; William L. Gardner, *Historical Reminiscences of Morton Commandery, No. 4, Knights Templars, Stationed at New York City, from Its Organization in 1823 to the Present Time, 1891* (New York: John W. Keeler 1891), 11, 25.

54. Samuel Cole, *The Freemason's Library and General Ahiman Rezon* (Baltimore, MD: Benjamin Edes, 1817), vii.

55. Bacon, *Wisdom of the Ancients in The Works of Francis Bacon*, 295.

56. Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 22–39.

57. Reprint of an article from *The Journal of Commerce*, 28 August 1835, in 'Great Meeting in the Park', *Connecticut Courant* 71 no. 3684 (31 August 1835), 2 [America's Historical Newspapers, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>].

58. Thomas Cole, 'Lines Occasioned By the Death of Mr. Luman Reed', in *Thomas Cole's Poetry*, 83.



Figure 7. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, 1833–36, oil on canvas, accession no. 1858.2. New York Historical Society, New York, NY.



Figure 8. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Desolation*, 1836, oil on canvas, accession no. 1858.5. New York Historical Society, New York, NY.

commemorate DeWitt Clinton, Cole's Course of Empire series ultimately was destined for the third-floor picture gallery of Reed's neoclassical mansion at 13 Greenwich Street, a meeting place in lower Manhattan for the Sketch Club.

Succeeding the Bread and Cheese Club, Cole and other members of New York's National Academy of Design, by 1827, had founded the Sketch Club as a cultural fraternity open to artists, writers, merchants and urban professionals. Cole's home at 2 Greene Street was an early meeting place for this society, which eventually evolved into the Century Association, one of New York City's most exclusive clubs. In the spirit of fraternalism, Cole wrote that art possessed the healing power to make friends of former enemies. Valuing ancient ruins, which he poignantly represented in *Course of Empire: Desolation*, Cole viewed art as an 'imperishable' trans-historical 'chain that binds' modern man to the 'elder brothers' of Antiquity.⁵⁹

Throughout the Course of Empire series, a Gibraltar-like mountain appears as an immutable, Herculean presence amidst the flux of history's transient states and nature's diurnal and seasonal cycles. Cole's *Course of Empire: The Pastoral or Arcadian State* serenely represents an early summer's morning following humankind's emergence from the savage wilderness. This scene of an agrarian, seafaring economy would have appealed to Reed, a grocer and dry-goods merchant. The Gibraltar-like mountain, a Pillar of Hercules, signifies virtue, while an open-air, megalithic temple resembling Stonehenge recalls the contention of freemasons and earlier antiquarians that a Tyrian or Phoenician Hercules had transmitted architectural knowledge to the British Isles. An occasional architect and a painter of architectural fantasies, Cole studied the ancient origins of architecture and probably knew of British theories, stemming from Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723), that Solomon's Temple had been built according to a 'Tyrian' architectural order, 'as gross at least as the Dorick'. The Tyrian stones' 'incredible Bulk' constituted a prototype for the Herculean Doric order.⁶⁰

59. Thomas Cole, 'A Lecture on Art' in Thomas Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, 105–106. On Cole and the Sketch Club, see Parry III, *Art of Thomas Cole*, 55, 93–94, 307, 318, 327.

60. Christopher Wren, 'Tract V, "Discourse on Architecture"' (beginning in the mid-1670s), in Christopher Wren, *Wren's 'Tracts' on Architecture and Other Writings*, ed. Lydia M. Soo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 191. See also Vaughan Hart, *Nicholas Hawksmoor: Rebuilding Ancient Wonders*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 91–92; Hutchinson, *The Spirit of Masonry*, 57–58, 71; Haycock, *William Stukeley*, 164–68. On Cole's *The Architect's Dream* (1844) and interest in architecture's origins, see Patricia Dawes Pierce, 'Deciphering Egypt: Four Studies in the American Sublime' (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1980), 6–31.

Cole's Gibraltar-like mountain is surmounted by an 'erratic boulder'. For Cole's geologist friend Benjamin Silliman of Yale College, these 'rocking stones', were deposited ages earlier by receding waters, proving the historicity of the biblical Flood.⁶¹ Cole's deposited boulder functions as the capital for a Herculean pillar. The mountainous pillar crowned by a globular capital implies a divine Architect and suggests the temple columns of Master Mason carpets, where Jachin and Boaz are capped by celestial and terrestrial globes (see fig.1). Cole's *Course of Empire* contrasts terrestrial and celestial spheres: Each panel's Gibraltar-shaped mountain functions as a Herculean bridge beyond the mutability of earthly life. Cole's Gibraltar horizon invites virtuous, imaginative voyaging beyond its limits, recalling, perhaps, Sir Francis Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* (1620), its title page bearing the Pillars of Hercules and a biblical verse that urged humankind's search for wisdom: 'Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased' (Daniel 12:4).⁶²

At the end of Cole's series, a lone foreground column in *Course of Empire: Desolation* echoes the 'pillars of knowledge', which freemasons often conflated with Solomon's temple columns, Jachin and Boaz, and the Pillars of Hercules.⁶³ One of brick, the other of stone, these earlier sacred pillars, according to various ancient and apocryphal sources, were constructed prior to the biblical Flood by the children of Adam's son Seth, or, alternatively, by Enoch, the temple-building, patriarch-hero of Royal Arch Masonry, who later was translated into heaven alive (Genesis 5:24). Inscribed with the antediluvian wisdom of the terrestrial and celestial spheres, only the stone pillar survived in 'the land of Siriad', though some late medieval accounts, informed by Pythagorean and Hermetic wisdom traditions, claimed the survival of both pillars.⁶⁴ The *Constitutions of Freemasonry* cites Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (1st c. CE) to assert that of Enoch's two pillars, only 'the Stone-Pillar still remain'd in Syria', its engraved inscription bearing 'the Abridgement of the Arts and Sciences, particularly Geometry and Masonry'.⁶⁵

The lone pillar standing in the foreground of *Course of Empire: Desolation* resonates with verbal images of Enoch's pillar of wisdom. Preaching a masonic St. John the Baptist Day sermon, the Reverend

61. Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature*, 28–36.

62. Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626–1660* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 21–27.

63. David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 146–49.

64. On Seth's sons as the pillars' designers in Siriad, or Syria, see William Whiston's (1667–1752) English translation of *The Antiquities of Jews* (1737) by Flavius Josephus (1st century CE) in *Josephus: Complete Works*, Book I, chapter II (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1974), 27; Curl, *Art and Architecture of Freemasonry*, 28–29.

65. James Anderson, *Constitutions*, 3.

Amos Stoddard (1762–1813), a New England freemason, recounted that after the ravages of the Flood, ‘all the monuments of art and skill were lost in the general confusion, save one lonely pillar of Enoch in the land of Siriad—on which was inscribed the mysteries of the craft—a faithful transcript of the tressel-board of Eden’. Stoddard continued that this Syrian ‘marble column, the handy-craft of masterly genius, long braved the injuries of time—stood as a pillar of light in the East, and pointed out the footsteps of ancient masonic wisdom’.⁶⁶

Cole isolated the column of *Course of Empire: Desolation* against an eastern horizon: ‘the moon ascends the twilight sky over the ocean, near where the sun rose in the first picture’.⁶⁷ A nesting heron atop the pillar alludes to the biblical Flood’s aftermath. The heron, a long-legged wading bird, indicates receding flood waters. An 1835 history of freemasonry’s Egyptian origins, published in New York, reported that herons traditionally symbolized the ‘south wind’ and the ebbing of the Nile River’s annual flooding. This foreshadowed the resurrection of the Egyptian sun god, Osiris, who, like Hercules, was a pagan type for Christ.⁶⁸ Renowned as vigilant hunters of serpents, herons, storks and cranes allied themselves with the snake-strangling, dragon-slaying Hercules. More traditionally, they personified the ibis-headed Thoth, Egyptian god of the moon, time and writing, whose identity became conflated during Late Antiquity with the Egyptian magus Hermes Trismegistus, interpreter of Enoch’s pillar(s), and with the Greek travel and messenger god Hermes (or Mercury in Roman mythology).⁶⁹

Distant companions for the heron, two barely visible deer, one an antlered stag, stand at the water’s edge in front of a Herculean ‘Doric temple’, in the picture’s left background.⁷⁰ Like herons and storks, deer

66. Amos Stoddard, *A Masonic Address Delivered before the Worshipful Master, Officers and Brethren of the Kennebeck Lodge, in the New Meeting House, Hallowell, Massachusetts; June 24th, Anno Lucis, 5797* (Hallowell, ME: Howard S. Robinson, 1797), 8, 10–11.

67. Cole quoted in Parry III, *Art of Thomas Cole*, 184, fig. 153.

68. John Fellows, *An Exposition of the Mysteries, or Religious Dogmas and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians, Pythagoreans, and Druids. Also an Inquiry into the Origin, History, and Purport of Freemasonry* (New York: Gould, Banks and Co., 1835), 15. On the equation of Christ with Hercules and Osiris, see the *Origine de tous les cultes* (1798) by Charles François Dupuis (1742–1809), an influential treatise later translated into English: Charles François Dupuis, *The Origin of All Religious Worship* (1872; reprinted. New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 217.

69. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Penguin Books, 1996): 503; James Stevens Curl, *The Art and Architecture of Freemasonry*, 28–29; Manfred Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 121; Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2, 90–91.

70. Cole quoted in Parry III, *Art of Thomas Cole*, 184, fig. 153.

appear in emblem books as predators of snakes, their antlers symbolic of solar rays and spiritual regeneration.⁷¹ One of Hercules' Labors comprised the year-long chase of a horned roe or hind on behalf of the moon goddess Artemis.⁷² At the springtime dawn of civilization, a mortally wounded deer chased by a huntsman runs across the foreground of Cole's *Course of Empire: The Savage State*. At series end, in *Course of Empire: Desolation*, the waterside reappearance of deer during a winter's evening, beneath a lunar eye, promises the providential rejuvenation of life.

The prominent low-hanging moon in *Course of Empire: Desolation* recalls Cole's ode 'To the Moon' (1825). In both painting and poem, lunar 'silver light' appears as a heavenly 'emblem of mercy', a 'Queen of eve', reassuringly presiding over oceanic waters, allowing the 'wearied sun' to rest 'his golden crest' prior to another dawn.⁷³ Throughout its five panels, the *Course of Empire* series benefited from freemasonry's moral checkerboard of contrasting light/dark forces, its advocacy of Herculean virtue and strength for transcending the earthly sphere's transient states.

The Oxbow

Cole envisioned the American landscape in terms of temple architecture and sacred hieroglyphs. Finished during the same period he painted *The Course of Empire*, Cole's panoramic *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)* (fig. 9) represents the Connecticut River's looping oxbow, or elliptical river bend, as if it were a providential all-seeing eye. Hebraic lettering inscribed upon a hill just above the ocular oxbow spells 'Noah'. Cole's dramatic arc of multi-colored clouds brightening from left to right recalls the covenantal rainbow displayed to Noah following the Flood.⁷⁴

The Oxbow possesses biblical, masonic associations expressive of a divine Architect. The unusually abrupt juxtaposition of high/low, mountain/valley, wilderness/pastoral views metaphorically suggests the foundation of Solomon's Temple, which comprised both a humble oxen-powered threshing floor (I Chronicles 21:15–28) and Mount Moriah, a mountain known as an all-seeing 'Land of Vision'.⁷⁵ Oxen sometimes

71. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 920–23.

72. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 110–12.

73. Cole, 'To the Moon', in *Thomas Cole's Poetry*, 36–37.

74. Matthew Baigell and Allen Kaufman, 'Thomas Cole's "The Oxbow": A Critique of American Civilization', *Arts Magazine* 55 (January 1981), 136–39; Bjelajac, 'Thomas Cole's *Oxbow*', 60–83.

75. Written for the Grand Lodge of Ireland, Christopher Kelly appropriated without attribution the words of English Puritan Samuel Lee's *Orbis Miraculum*, or



Figure 9. Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*, 1836, oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908 (08.228). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource, NY.

stand low in the forecourt before grandiose, masonic-inspired representations of Solomon's Temple, its roofline heightened by lofty trees (fig. 10). During the late eighteenth century, the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Freemasons included the ox of St. Luke within its heraldic coat of arms, while the oxen-driven threshing floor became a masonic emblem for Solomon's Temple.⁷⁶ The Anglican clergyman and prolific masonic author George Oliver (1782–1867) promoted the early foundations of Solomon's Temple by listing King David's sacrificial offering of oxen on the threshing floor and Abraham's intended offering of Isaac upon Mount Moriah as two of the 'great events in the history of the world'. Seeking to ally freemasonry with Christianity, Oliver insisted that freemasons commemorated these Hebraic events for typologically foreshadowing Christ's sacrifice.⁷⁷

Joining an Episcopal church in Catskill, New York, in 1836, Cole similarly attempted to marry Christian and masonic emblems. Atop Mount Holyoke, an American type for Mount Moriah, Cole's *Oxbow* displays an arrangement of agonized, storm-blown trees that appear to mimic the Lamentation of Christ, as one conifer seems to cradle another dying tree in its arms. This arboreal reenactment of Christ's Passion expresses messianic fulfillment of the Old Testament signs and Hebraic, Noachian lettering inscribed within the landscape.

The Voyage of Life

Revisiting *The Course of Empire's* cautionary theme that imperial, commercial expansion threatened private and public virtue, Cole painted *The Voyage of Life*, a series of didactic, emblematic landscapes for the pious New York City banker Samuel Ward (1786–1839), president of New York City's Temperance Society. Ward intended the series for a private 'Meditation Room', paralleling 'philosophic' meditation chambers that freemasons utilized for instructing initiates.⁷⁸ Though

Ward soon died, his son, Samuel Ward Jr, (1814–1884), a Holland Lodge

The Temple of Solomon (1659) in *Solomon's Temple Spiritualized with an Account of its Destruction* (Dublin, Ireland: Brother William Folds, 1803), 41.

76. John D. Hamilton, *Material Culture of the American Freemasons*, 23, 127.

77. George Oliver, *The Star in the East, Shewing the Analogy which Exists between the Lectures of Freemasonry, the Mechanism of Initiation into its Mysteries, and the Christian Religion* (London: George B. Whittaker, 1825), 6–7.

78. For a detailed analysis of the series, see Hughey, 'Thomas Cole and the Language of Freemasonry', 128–57; Wallach, 'Thomas Cole', 42. On meditation chambers, see Rev. John West, 'Discourse', *Masonic Mirror: and Mechanics' Intelligencer* 3 (17 February 1827), 58.

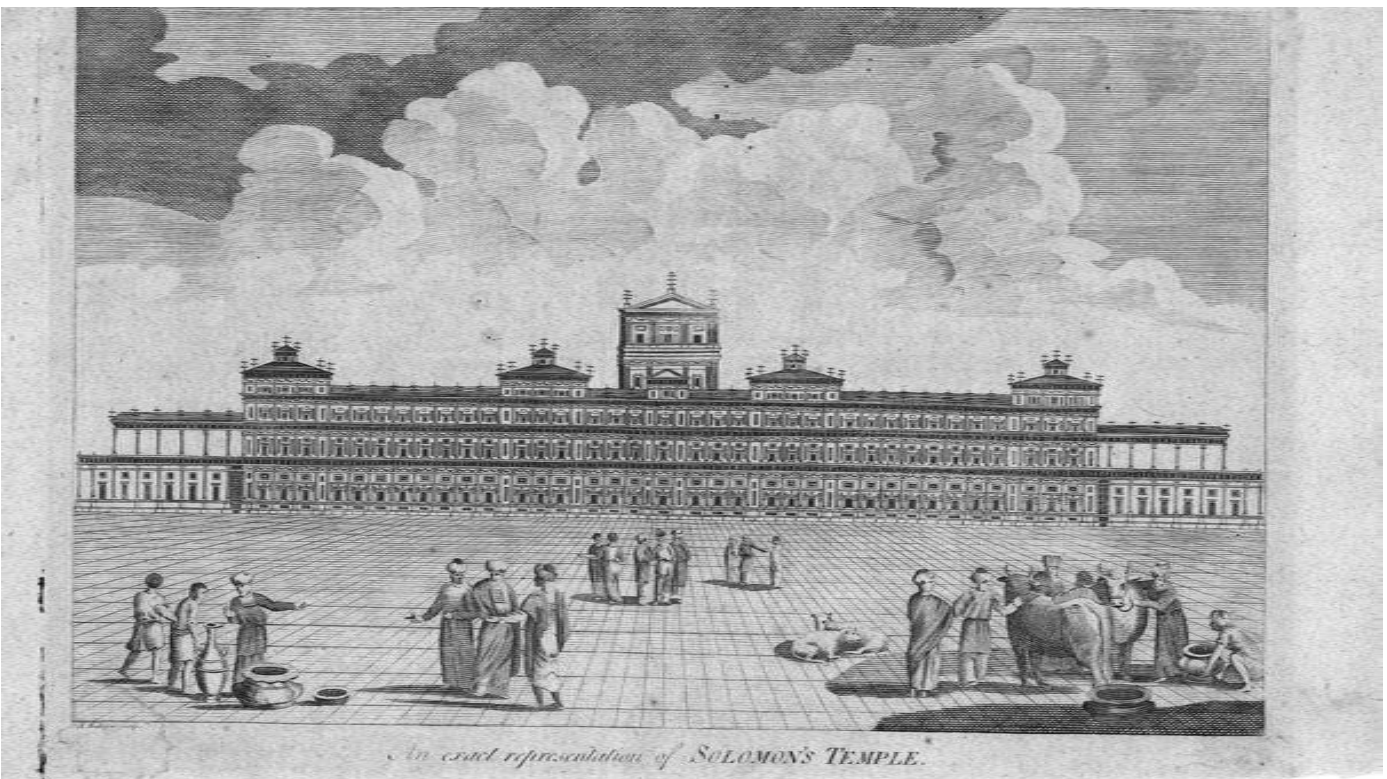


Figure 10. Alexander Anderson (1775–1870), *An Exact Representation of Solomon's Temple*, ca. 1800, engraving on paper, New York, NY. Gift of Armen Amerigian, 90.19.10.1. Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Lexington, MA.

freemason, purchased the first of Cole's two versions of the series.⁷⁹

Comprising four moral landscapes, *The Voyage of Life* traces the stages of human life from *Childhood* and *Youth* (fig. 11) to *Manhood* and *Old Age*, and draws upon the imagery of freemasonry's three craft degrees. According to Jeremy Cross's *True Masonic Chart* (see fig.1), the 'three steps' leading into Solomon's Temple signify 'the three principal stages of human life, viz. *youth, manhood, and age*'. In preparing to become an Entered Apprentice, young applicants need to leave behind childish confusion between the real and the imaginary. Youths ought to occupy their minds in 'the attainment of useful knowledge'.⁸⁰ Masonic authors and periodicals warned against youthful, fanciful 'castle building', claiming that conjured 'airy fabrics' render 'a man unfit either for the business or the pleasures of the world around him'.⁸¹

Cole's *Voyage of Life: Youth* draws upon these lessons of freemasonry's Entered Apprentice degree. The picture represents an overly imaginative young man on the river of life unwisely transfixed by an exotic, castle-shaped cloud in the sky. Having declared his independence from a nearby guardian angel, Cole's youth is oblivious to his immediate surroundings and fails to notice that the river he navigates takes a sharp right turn toward rocky rapids. The insubstantial, oriental-style castle is a poor spiritual substitute for the Herculean, Gibraltar-like guidepost in the *Course of Empire* series.

In the final two panels of *The Voyage of Life*, an aging voyager discovers internal, spiritual wisdom and finally ends life's journey before a vision of Jacob's heavenly staircase (Genesis 28), recalling the emblematic Jacob's Ladder appearing on Master Mason tracing boards (see fig. 1). After Cole's death in 1848, the American Art Union, a national arts organization pioneered by portraitist James Herring (1794–1867), longtime Grand Secretary for the Grand Lodge of New York (1829–1845), held a Memorial Exhibition of Cole's paintings. The Union purchased the *Voyage of Life*, then offered the series as a lottery prize and distributed thousands of engraved reproductions.⁸²

Conclusion

79. Holland Lodge, 1938, 45.

80. Jeremy L. Cross, *The True Masonic Chart or Hieroglyphic Monitor*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT: A. Doolittle, 1820), 42.

81. Scribe, 'Castle Building', *Masonic Mirror and Mechanics' Intelligencer* 2 (29 April 1826), 140.

82. Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism: The Encouragement of the Fine Arts in the United States, 1790–1860* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 160–72; Lang, *History of Freemasonry*, 126–27, 211; Wallach, 'Thomas Cole', 98–99.

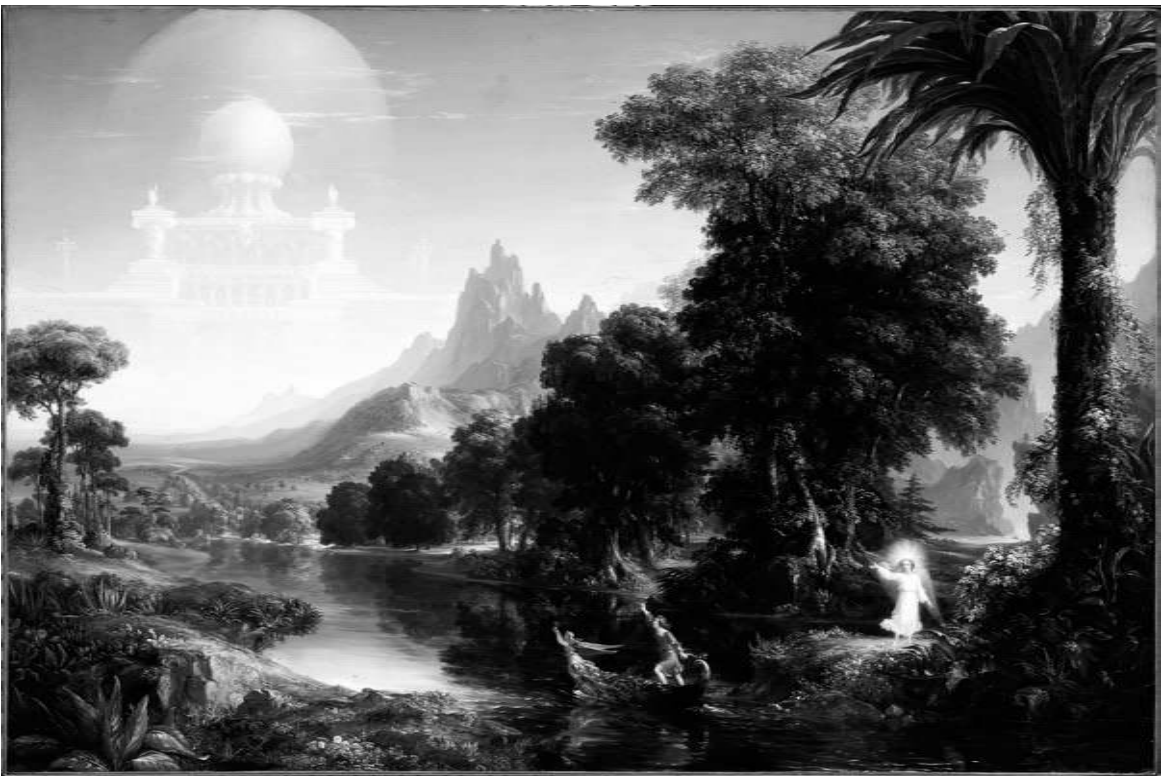


Figure 11. Thomas Cole, *Voyage of Life: Youth*, 1840, oil on canvas. Museum purchase 55.106. The Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY. Photo courtesy of The Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute/Art Resource, NY.

Cole's paintings may be interpreted in myriad ways. His landscapes invite, but do not demand, masonic readings. In his extant correspondence and writings, Cole remained silent on the subject of freemasonry and apparently was not active in New York lodges. Yet he saw the American landscape with a trained, esoteric eye, claiming that 'Nature has secrets known only to the initiated. To him she speaks in the most eloquent language'.⁸³

Cole's career as a Hudson River School landscapist was barely launched, when the anti-masonic movement swept the United States to force the closing of numerous lodges. Many prominent freemasons joined inter-denominational Christian voluntary societies, such as the Temperance Society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the American Bible Society. Yet populist anti-masons also attacked these organizations for being dominated by members of the landowning, corporate elite, many of them Cole patrons and civic-minded supporters of the arts.⁸⁴ Freemasonry's absence from the historiography of American landscape painting challenges scholars to investigate fraternalism's support for the visual arts in relation to art academies, culture clubs and moral and social reform associations that envisioned a unified, virtuous republic despite deepening class divisions, sectional strife, and imperial expansion westward.

83. Cole, 'Thoughts on Nature', quoted in Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, 41.

84. Bjelajac, 'Thomas Cole's *Oxbow*', 60–83.