

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
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After last week's melancholic musings, it might be worth pointing out that I actually enjoy writing what was originally meant as an occasional sign of life when the pandemic created a standstill in the spring of last year. The *Abwechslungen* quickly morphed into something very much of their own and have by now settled somewhere between a "proper" description of a print or drawing as it can be found on our website or in our (hard-copy as well as online) catalogues and a more casual posting on Instagram. Follow me @cg\_boerner and you might find the occasional display of mushrooms or heirloom tomatoes on a green market stand popping up between Harlemons and yes, also some artworks. My hope is to continue with these missives even now that a certain normalcy is about to return to our daily lives. Road trips are possible again, and a brief one up the Hudson last week allowed a revisit, after many years, of Thomas Cole's house in Catskill, New York.



I encountered the painter Thomas Cole (1801–1848) for the first time in 1994 when reviewing a retrospective of his work at the National Museum of American Art in Washington D.C. for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. As a European, one tends to be far more familiar with the grandiose visions of Cole's pupil Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) or even more so with the dramatic views of the German-born Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902).



Frederic Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes*, 1859 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)



Albert Bierstadt, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 1865  
(Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama)

With the sweeping vistas of those later American landscapists in mind, I have to confess that Cole's paintings left me puzzled. I wrote about his "apparently naïve" landscapes and their "qualitative weaknesses." To this day, his art is very little known in Europe. A dear German friend, whom I told about my recent trip, was far more generous and sensitive in her judgment after checking out Cole's work on the internet: "What a strange, visionary art," she checked me back. "Somewhere between Fuseli and Friedrich. Is this the American fear of loneliness? Or did he overcome it already in his paintings?"



Thomas Cole, *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains*, 1827 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

In the States back in the 1990s, the rediscovery of Cole as one of the founding spirits of environmentalism was already in full swing. Here is one of several similar passages from his astonishingly prescient *Essay on American Scenery* (first delivered in 1835 and published in revised form six years later): "I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes is quickly passing away; the ravages of the axe are daily increasing, and the most noble scenes are often laid desolate with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a people who call themselves civilized. The way-side is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, bleak and bare." Written a full 130 years before the Club of Rome published its *Limits of Growth* in 1972, Cole's concerns only continue to gain relevance every day.

Why is it, therefore, that it is still not easy to feel the same urgency that Cole expressed in his writing to be present in his paintings? I hope to have learned a bit since my unpublished review 25 years ago and would like to focus a bit more on this apparent disconnect between the Romantic idylls depicted in his paintings and Cole's stark words about "the copper-hearted barbarians [who] are cutting all the trees down" in an age of "meager utilitarianism" which is about to crush "the bright and tender flowers of the imagination . . . beneath its iron tramp." After all, looking at our world today, one can only call Cole a clear-eyed realist! And our or, rather, my failing to see this, was foremost a question of perception.



Thomas Cole, *River in the Catskills*, 1834 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

It is true that, in his early landscapes, Cole took great care to eliminate all signs of the cultivation and industrialization of the land that had gained considerable momentum during Andrew Jackson's presidency (1829–1837) and its efforts to push the frontier westward. In upstate New York, the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, followed by the Delaware Hudson Canal in 1828. Only three years later, in 1831, the Mohawk & Hudson Railroad, the first to be built in the state, began its service, linking the Mohawk River at Schenectady with the Hudson River at Albany, thirty miles north from the small town of Catskill where Cole moved in 1836.

At first sight, Cole's 1843 view of a *River in the Catskills* appears to be untouched by these developments. Looking closer, however, one discovers a steam locomotive chugging through the idyllic scenery, making this the earliest American painting to depict a train.



This can hardly just be a picturesque detail, especially when seen in the context of Cole's writings. Being alerted, one begins to recognize other motifs that don't quite fit in. The plume of smoke rising from the far horizon has to be quite large given its distance. And the man in the bright red jacket in the foreground is also not the type of wanderer who quietly contemplates nature in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich.



Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, 1836  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

His arm rests on an axe, making him more likely one of those "copper-hearted barbarians" who had already cut a considerable amount of the valley's trees down. The more careful one looks, the more the tranquil view of nature reveals itself as an "antipastoral" (Alan Wallach).



Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm*, 1836  
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

Seen in this light, one might even make out a certain ambivalence of meaning in one of Cole's most celebrated landscape paintings, *The Oxbow* of 1836. The scene depicts a prominent meander in the Connecticut River seen from Mount Holyoke near Northampton in Massachusetts; the composition is clearly divided between the wilderness on the slope of the mountain on the left and the cultivated farmland in the river valley. The tiny self-portrait of the artist is located within the wilder part of the mountainside.



Here, both aspects of the landscape, the primeval forest and the farmland, are nonetheless still able to coexist. Cole seems to advocate less a radical preservation and more a moderate cultivation, one that needs to be aware of the ecological cost that comes with any unchecked development of the land. In his *American Scenery* essay, he was a plea "that beauty should be of some value among us; that where it is not necessary to destroy a tree or a grove, the hand of the woodman should be checked, and even the consideration, which alas, weighs too heavily with us, of a few paltry dollars, should be held as naught in comparison with the pure and lasting pleasure that we enjoy, or ought to enjoy, in the objects which are among the most beautiful creations of the Almighty." If only someone had listened!



Robert Adams, *Clatsop County, Oregon*, 1999–2003

To answer my friend's question: if Cole did fear loneliness, then it was one caused by the destruction of Man's unity with nature—and many of his paintings were his way to hold on to it, at least in the realm of art.

