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Nature, Nation, and Conflict: Thomas Cole's *View Across Frenchman's Bay from Mt. Desert Island, After a Squall* (1845)

“The whole coast along here is iron bound – threatening crags, and dark caverns in which the sea thunders. The view of Frenchman’s Bay and islands is truly fine. Some of the islands, called porcupines, . . . glitter in the setting sun.” Quoted from Thomas Cole on Sept. 3, 1844, in his journal, his painting *View Across Frenchman's Bay from Mt. Desert Island, After a Squall* is composed from sketches off the Maine coast in 1844. Importantly, this work is not an accurate depiction of the scenery as he rearranged the islands in his final paintings to create “a more effective composition,” according to the Cincinnati Art Museum Collections Highlights. Mt. Desert Island is in Hancock County, southeastern Maine, U.S., in Frenchman Bay of the Atlantic Ocean. It is now the home of Acadia National Park, and was originally named after French Explorer Samuel de Champlain who coined it “Ile de Monts Deserts,” or “island of the bare mountains.” Art historian Pamela Belanger explains that this work was one of 16 completed in his New York studio, one year after his visit to paint the Islands scenery, inspired by artists Thomas Doughty and Alvan Fisher, for new content for his northeastern audiences in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. Cole’s work prompted other artists like his student Frederic Edwin Church to work there as well.

Landscape painting in the 19th century flourished when the United States was in significant stages of development, both culturally and politically. Art historians Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer explain that this age of progress had driven development throughout the states, and the antebellum period was characterized by conflict and division. Tensions were building, particularly between the North and the South over slave ownership. Additionally, society became concerned with Jacksonian democracy when emphasis was placed on the

individual or “common” person. Art historian Elliot Davis explains that artists sought individuality and began to portray America as a “New World” in contrast to Europe as the “Old World.” Thomas Cole’s *View Across Frenchman’s Bay from Mt. Desert Island, After a Squall*, 1845 is an exemplary depiction of American nationalism in the antebellum period.

My discussion centers on a formal, iconographical, and iconological analysis of this painting, as well as on the historical context of landscape painting surrounding Cole. I argue that Cole’s tableau *View Across Frenchman’s Bay from Mt. Desert Island, After a Squall* depicts humanity’s relationship with nature as God’s creation, in the lens of American nationalism.

The scene features a squall dissipating over a turbulent sea and a small ship weathering the storm. The canvas is divided into thirds, the sky making up two-thirds of the composition and the land and sea below as the remaining third. On the left are the fading storm and protruding cliffs. The aftermath of the tempest is on the right and in the foreground is landmass. The middle ground depicts the sea and ship, and the background features ancient cliffs and mountains.

In the upper half, the squall begins to clear as sunlit clouds billow in from the right. The upper left depicts the fading storm, gradually shifting from dark to light. In the upper right, peaceful clouds drift after the heaviest storms. Cole painted the pillowy, full, and fluffy clouds in muted pinks with darker shades on the left and peachy tints on the right. Fierce winds blow the storm away with intense emotion.

According to Charles Sanford, the fading squall represents not only the clash of good and evil but also a manifestation of the divine. As in many of Cole’s paintings, nature is a symbol of conflict, emphasizing the raging storm followed by calm tranquility. Poet William Cullen Bryant often worked with Cole, particularly with his allegorical themes of humanity and the sublime in landscapes. Charles Sanford quotes Bryant’s poem “After a Tempest” and explains that for

Bryant and Cole, storms are “the clash of arms and pools of blood,” against which “the earth has stood aghast.” Sanford continues, “The calms which followed storms ... were emblematic of their desire for peace after centuries of Old World strife.”

In art historian Barbara Novak’s study of the American landscape, she argues that the sky itself is meant to convey the idea of renewal and continuous purity with “the colors of hope and desire, heavenly reflections of earthly nostalgias.” Cole indicated the presence of divinity in the fading squall with soft pinks and blues. A previous painting that also indicates Cole’s attempt to do this is *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1828 (Fig. 3). Here, Earl Powell asserts that Cole’s ambition was “to create a higher style of landscape that expressed moral or religious meanings” and show how the American wilderness “embodied a state of divine grace.” The colors are similar to those in *View Across Frenchman’s Bay*, with a baby pink contrasting both the bright blue in the sky and the landscape’s dark greens and earth tones. The painting allegorized contrasts between Paradise on the right with a dark world on the left. This is a religious work that highlights the American wilderness as a “body of divine grace,” according to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In the bottom third of *View Across Frenchman’s Bay*, the tumultuous sea conveys a strong sense of power and strength with its crashing waves. The sea fills the middle ground as well as the center and right side of the foreground. White-capped waves pound against the cliffside and the jagged outcrop of rock in the foreground. The waves are painted with short, visible strokes to imply the strength of the sea, in analogous colors of blue, teal, green, and seafoam. Some large areas appear more golden-green, highlighted by the sun peeking through the clouds over the horizon. Much like in the sky, a powerful sense of motion is conveyed through the rolling,

rushing, and wild waves. However, in contrast to the tumultuous waves in the foreground, tranquility reigns in the right background, where the water is calm and smooth.

A small storm-battered ship in the middle of the sea highlights the overwhelming vulnerability of humans in the face of nature. The ship's tiny scale in contrast to the force of the sea diminishes its power. Scrutiny reveals a brown hull, bright white sails, and red flags above the masts. Cole included this lone ship in the distance as an allegory about people in the natural world, as well as a reference to the naval history of Frenchman Bay as Belanger explains that Frenchman Bay was a site of colonial naval conflict, and brigs were often in the waters from the mid-eighteenth century until the 1850s. Belanger and art historian J. Gray Sweeney affirm that "... always concerned about representing man's place in the natural world, ... [the] distant vessel affirm[s] human scale and presence amidst the sublime power of the sea." Additionally, both Belanger and art historian Arne Neset suggest that the vessel may act as an allegory for the voyage of life as "the image of the human soul" respectively, similar to his physical depiction of a ship in his *Voyage of Life* series that imparts moral and religious values. Through this, Cole places the immense power of nature within the context of humanity.

Further, the landmass provides a stubborn contrast to the wild raging of the sea. Dull browns, along with sunlit grass and shrubs, frame the edge at left. The aged craggy rocks and cliffs reveal the relentless beating they have endured. In the far distance, purplish-gray mountains have minimal detail. Hills in the middle ground feature green grass on the top and tan cliff faces.

In the foreground, a precipice extends over the sea, with small bushes and leaves dotting the top of the flat surface nestled between cracks, while the rocky plateau shows the edge of a forest. Bright white trunks, perhaps of birch trees, are intermingled with yellow and green leaves. Each tree is battered by the wind, billowing in motion. The birch trees are a native species of

northern America and Canada. They represent nature's resistance to civilization's progress, which Charles Sanford argues that Cole primarily uses as a portrayal of what humans will inevitably industrialize. Near the horizon at the right, a small island with pine trees is balanced by a small rock cropping barely peeking out of the ocean in the center.

An eagle is perched on a small rock in the bottom left, perhaps about to take flight, with shoulders hunched as it looks down at the sea. There are also three seagulls surrounding the rock jutting from the water. Art historian John Wilmerding says, "One biographer has speculated that the eagle may have had symbolic associations with nationalist ideas of destiny and progress, visually reinforced by the seagoing vessel setting forth in the bay." However, other historians do not believe that the eagle has a symbolic purpose in this painting. Some, like Pamela Belanger in her study on artists at Mt. Desert Island, believe it to simply have been a representation of Cole's growing fascination with natural science. Art historian Ellwood Parry concurs, stating that "... this prominent detail seems more like a signal of Cole's awareness of another new branch of the natural sciences in the United States, ornithology." Eagles were seen in Maine frequently, as were a variety of other birds including "... hawks, sea pigeons, gulls, snipe, ducks, etc.," and Cole may have seen one when he sketched this scene on the spot.

When landscape painting reached the mass public in the United States in the early 19th century, it was first met with criticism. Art historian John Howat explains that it was introduced when the art world was in a general decline according to *The Knickerbocker*, a leading New York magazine in the early and mid-1830s. Initial lack of enthusiasm for landscape painting occurred at a time when the American economy was on a decline, especially in the state of New York after the Great Fire in December of 1835. Citizens were still enamored with portraiture. When artists started depicting the American landscape, the general public and critics were not wholly

receptive. History painting was the highest-regarded genre, meant to be educational and provide a moral purpose to the viewer. Cole wanted his landscapes to be held as highly as history paintings. Therefore, he often depicted “epic, dramatic, and historical themes,” as in *The Course of Empire* and *Voyage of Life* series, to avoid criticism of his landscapes, argues art historian Rebecca Bedell. However, Cole’s paper “Essay on American Scenery” argued in favor of and encouraged, American landscape painting. After the publication of his essay in the January 1836 issue of *American Monthly* magazine, artists began flocking to him and the genre gained popularity.

Art historian Judith O’Toole states that landscape painting eventually became a means “for expressing philosophical concepts,” as well as a physical indicator of God and biblical themes. Landscapes depicted much more than just the physical world, as they also addressed prevalent moral and social concerns, namely expansionism and the divide between the Old and New World.

The most influential movement for landscape painting during this time was the Hudson River School, founded by Cole. The school did not physically exist and instead was a name for a group of artists who primarily lived and painted in the Hudson River Valley of New York. According to art historian Linda Ferber, the mission of this school was to create an “American landscape vision and literary voice based on the exploration of Nature – the natural world defined as a resource for spiritual renewal and as an expression of cultural and national identity.” A critic intended the term to sound old-fashioned and provincial, but artists embraced the appellation and explored the concept of the loss of nature in the face of a developing civilization. Today, the Hudson River School is regarded as one of the most influential schools of painting in

the United States. Cole himself inspired other famous artists such as Frederic Edwin Church, Asher Brown Durand, and Thomas Doughty to continue works similar to his.

Cole's leadership in landscape painting was pivotal. Highly educated, Cole was aware of compositional theorists like William Gilpin (1813 - 1894), and well-versed in Edmund Burke's ideas and the Sublime. He also was aware of geology and the natural sciences. Elizabeth Kornhauser argues that Cole's paintings were warnings about "material progress, unlimited democracy, and expansionism, which he believed to be rampant in the Jacksonian era." These themes often shone through in his paintings such as his five-part Course of Empire series, 1833-1836, and *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836 a commentary on the environmental impacts of westward expansion, shown in the contrast of stormy wilderness and peaceful cultivation. His empire series depicted the creation of civilization, the peak of humanity, and civilization's inevitable destruction.

To attain the sublime, a theory developed by Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, in his tempestuous depiction of Mt. Desert Island, Cole depicted the fading squall, stormy waters, and rocky cliffs of the eastern U.S. coast. As described by Elizabeth Kornhauser, "The thrill of the sublime scenery, which offered the viewer a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power..." was soon to become a symbol of the potential of America, as well as its history. Artists, tourists, and explorers alike saw the potential for America to become as civilized as the already-developed continents from which they traveled. Therefore, Cole's depiction of Mt. Desert in Maine came to represent the prospects of America's future, as well as an homage to the past. Additionally, this painting showed the "independence of the American spirit" and

communicated philosophical ideas and religious ideals. Cole intended to “imitate the creative powers of God” with his depiction of the landscape, according to art historian Barbara Novak.

Cole’s allegorical painting of Mt. Desert Island emphasizes humanity’s relationship with nature as God’s creation and expresses symbols of American nationalism. The landscape as a whole expresses the sublime and it serves as a reminder of civilization’s role in history and the future potential of America, while the storm in the sky references a connection with divinity and morality. Cole also provides a direct symbol of nationalism with a ship bearing through the sea. The context of this period reveals that 19th-century American landscape painting emerged at a time of immense transformation. As the United States underwent rapid expansion and faced political and social conflict leading to the Civil War, artists like Cole sought to capture the newfound American identity and the country's relationship with the natural world. Despite the criticism that landscape painting faced initially from the public, it eventually gained acceptance through the Hudson River School and became a means to explore the evolving American identity.