

Lowell Clare

On Thomas Cole and "see[ing] into the life of things."<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Working as a docent at Cedar Grove and seeing the same objects on a regular basis, at times through the lenses of visitors, certain micro-theses emerge. It is these small observations that have come over time that I will try to explain here. At first I mourned at our lack of original objects and then, over time, I became fascinated by the fact that we don't talk more about the ones we have. This paper is my exploration of some of those objects, ideally to show that they can tell us something, and that they are worth investigating. I came to this decision because I felt that in the long term a paper of this kind would be the most useful to other docents of Cedar Grove; one which encourages them to believe the small things they notice and hopefully weave them into their own personal tour outlines; therefore, I have rooted this paper in experience and observation. I feel that this approach lends itself to the nature of ideas represented, which are, to the best of my knowledge unique.

To that end this paper will proceed in three parts, the introduction, thesis, and conclusion. But before diving in a note on methodology...

This paper is a departure from my earlier scholastic endeavors in that it draws on personal experience and observation far more than the work of other

---

<sup>1</sup> Noble, Louis Legrand. *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*. Ed. Elliot S. Vesell. Black Dome Press Corp., Hensonville: 1997. p.53.

scholars. It would be germane here, to say that over the course of the summer this paper went through a process of evolution. First it was going to be an analysis of the entire house, then a step-by-step deconstruction of the old studio, and finally an analysis of Cole as collector; Susan Stewart writes extensively on the theme of collecting in her book *On Longing*, so my paper is a personal account bringing in Stewart where applicable. Hopefully my reading here will illuminate the idea that these objects are valuable resources that can teach us something: if not about Cole the artist, then certainly Cole the man.

### Thesis

Simply put, I have come to believe that Thomas Cole was a great collector, not necessarily of things, but spaces and places via things. I believe this manifests in the nature of his work, as well as some of the objects in our collection; or at least that the nature of Cole's work informed his ideology regarding the objectification of places and moments.

If one thinks about what a landscape painting is as an object, it is a rendering of an exterior place intended to be hung in an interior space; in doing so the monumentality of an exterior space becomes miniaturized. On a purely material level, this means that a place (real, imagined or embellished) becomes objectified, by the very process of being condensed onto a two-dimensional canvas and being bounded by frame. The issue of bordering is interesting to consider in this context, the controlled landscape portrayed by Cole is made still "safer" by bounding it with

a frame. The place he paints is magically transformed into a kind of modular structure which can be inserted anywhere that the owner deems fit.

Before moving farther ahead we must make note of his artistic process. His works were begun out of doors. He would hike out to a given spot and do a detailed sketch, in oils or pencil, then complete it in the studio. While the beginning outside is very important, so too is the time spent in the studio. It was important to his work that he took the time to forget everything unimportant and embellish everything picturesque. This means that his completed works are not just portrayals of places, but his memory of being there. When someone buys a Cole they aren't just getting an objective view, but his subjective recollection of experiencing that view; the entirety of which is contained in the final art object.

Perhaps the better way to embark on this issue of objectifying a place begins with the porch; entering from the side stairs, every single time I am struck by the mountains. And every time I think to myself, "It's like a Cole painting in motion." The columns, awning and front of the house make a near perfect architectural frame for those 'purple mountains majesty' loafing in the distance. That distance is key; for it makes the mountains in their totality appear as a miniature, in other words our eyes compress the space into a two-dimensional plane because of the distance. The transitional architecture of the porch perfectly frames/contains that view, capturing it as an object: in a sense the magic of the porch is that it transforms the mountains into an *image* of the mountains before our very eyes. So even though they are real,

and relatively quite close, they become a likeness of themselves, incorporated into the very fabric of Cedar Grove.

In the case of the porch view, the distance is physical, in the case of Cole's work, that distance is physical and emotional. In both cases the distance results in a process of miniaturization, which Susan Stewart says, transforms locations so that they can be "appropriated within the privatized view of the individual subject," and that this process is a part of what characterizes a souvenir.<sup>2</sup>In this light, despite the material reality of the mountains before us, on the porch, they become an owned image and thus, a souvenir to themselves. It is this metamorphosis from place to image/souvenir, in addition to all the compositional similarities, that makes that view so like a Hudson River School painting to me. It should be said here that such an example could be considered tenuous in relation to the topic at hand, as Cole did not design the house himself. I would argue that Cole chose the house as it was, because he liked it, perhaps in part for the view; this could be supported by the fact that that very same view appears in his bedroom.

I often find myself saying things on tours like, "This was Thomas Cole's view," because somehow he, and the Thompson/Bartow family, owned that specific view. The ownership of that view is possible, at least in part, because the view (bounded by architecture) is distinct from the actual place. The view inspires a

---

<sup>2</sup> "The souvenir reduces the public, monumental, and three-dimensional onto the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body, or into two-dimensional representation, that which can be appropriated within the privatized view of the individual subject" Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1984.137.

longing to go to those mountains, or nostalgia for time spent there in the past.<sup>3</sup>It's status as an image, and therefore an object, means that it can be owned. From such a distance any blemishes are made invisible and the mountains become, perhaps, more beautiful than they are.<sup>4</sup>This functions in much the same way as (the majority of) Thomas Cole's work, captured views of other places, making them controllable via miniaturization (and objectification) and selling them to buyers, making them (the paintings and views of places they represent) the property of others. In other words, if I buy a Cole painting of a lake and put it in my house I own that view of that lake. It exists for my viewing pleasure. So, Thomas Cole's artistic practice is built on the objectifying of places, in much the same manner as the porch view, often for the purpose of economic exchange. The ownership of the objectified view changes hands.

If his artistic career is built upon the objectifying of locals, then it is entirely within the realm of possibility that he personally indulged in a similar practice. It is my belief that whether or not Cole was thinking about his work in these terms, they are unavoidable and in some small way must have affected his ideas regarding bringing the exterior world inside: where it can be enjoyed and pondered precisely because it can be controlled by the process of its objectification.

---

<sup>3</sup> "The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of a need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia" (Stewart 135).

<sup>4</sup> Much like when Jonathan Swift (via Gulliver) describes the Lilliputians as beautiful because of their small size (which makes them look like walking miniatures) while the Laputians are rendered hideous by their enormous size, which makes every blemish glaringly obvious. Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Norton & Company: New York, 1970.

This brings me to Cole's specimen collection, which sits today on the second floor below a pair of Sarah Cole landscapes. The collection itself is not large; it resides today in a small glass case, about the size of a small briefcase, inside of another glass case.<sup>5</sup>When I first saw it I thought it was an interesting thing to have (in its totality as a collection) and it was only over time I came to have a greater appreciation of its abilities to tell us more about Thomas Cole as a person. On tours I would talk about how the existence of such a collection speaks to his interest in detail, veracity, and geology. I looked at that collection for weeks before I finally saw it. I noticed that only a few of the specimens were labeled, not with the type of rock, but the place of origin. One of them is labeled "Mosaics from Mosque of St. Sophie Constantinople," another, I. Reading Abbey, England.<sup>6</sup>

It then occurred to me that on one level Cole's mineral collection is made of things, but on another, the places they came from; he collected the sites via small portable objects. It is key that he visited those places and took a specimen from the site.<sup>7</sup>To me, this is related, although not the same, as hanging a landscape painting and possessing the view. The object is linked to a memory of experiencing the place and thus the collection becomes a manifestation of memories and moments in specific places; the condensation of an entire moment/location into an object makes

---

<sup>5</sup> "The delicate and hermetic world of the souvenir is a world of nature idealized; nature removed from the domain of struggle into the domestic sphere of the individual and the interior" (Stewart 145).

<sup>6</sup> The 'mosaics' Cole refers to from Constantinople are small stones used to make mosaics that today we call tesserae.

<sup>7</sup> "First, the object is metonymic to the scene of its original appropriation in the sense that it is a sample...Second, the souvenir must remain impoverished and partial so that it can be supplanted by a narrative discourse, a which articulates the play of desire." Stewart, 136.

that object metonymic of the place. This small clue facilitates another transformation; that in a way the objects become fetishes. Freud's concept of the fetish object as filtered through Stewart says precisely this, that the part becomes the whole.<sup>8</sup>

Again, I claim no one to one ratio regarding rocks and landscape painting, but there are unavoidable similarities in this specific case. A place, but also the experience of being there, is distilled into a single thing that can be bought, sold, owned and lived with. When visitors talk to me about what draws them to Thomas Cole's work, it is not just the graphic representation of a place, but the eloquent portrayal of a mood at a specific moment (sunrise, sunset etc). Such images amount to the communication of an experience, which he makes digestible to a larger viewing audience by incorporating sentiment into "objectness."

This impulse to incorporate other places into the fabric of Cedar Grove is also present in the studio. I see it most clearly in the plaster casts, which today sit on the mantle in the Old Studio looking out at the easels. In my early tours I often spoke about them as being interesting, in that Cole probably wasn't using them to see how a scapula related to a clavicle. I would say that he was getting something else entirely from them, alluding to the fact that he was undoubtedly thinking about the nature of art in complicated ways. Again, it took weeks, not to realize that one of

---

<sup>8</sup> Here we find the structure of Freud's description of the genesis of the fetish: a part of the body is substituted for the whole, or an object is substituted for the part, until finally, and inversely, the whole body can become object, substituting for the whole." Stewart, 135.

those casts is a bust of Shakespeare and the other of The Apollo Belvedere, but to comprehend them *in situ*: giving me a sense of that “something else” he could have been getting from them.

Based on earlier academic work I have done on Sir John Soane (1753-1837), a relative contemporary working as an architect in London, I knew that Apollo Belvedere was considered the most perfect example of antique sculpture available from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onward. The original sculpture (on view today in the Vatican complex) was discovered in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy and belonged to Pope Julius II (Guiliano della Rovere). John Soane installed a full figure cast in his house as a way to evoke the majesty of a temporally ambiguous hybrid of Renaissance and Ancient Rome.<sup>9</sup> Further, Apollo is the God of inspiration, master of the muses, and in John Soane’s home he dominates over visitors and reminds them that this is where we go to feel inspired.

I believe that in Cole’s studio he serves a similar function, looking down on the artist while he painted, governing the chamber of inspiration, while simultaneously bringing the history and cultivation of Rome to his studio in Catskill.<sup>10</sup> The existence of the sketch of Belvedere (which according to the studio report was actually there at the time of Cole’s death) speaks to the fact that Cole was

---

<sup>9</sup> It is beyond the scope of the paper to go into too much detail. That said, Soane designed his home as a museum and sketching sight for young artists and architects. The central chamber of the museum is dominated by full figure cast of the original Apollo Belvedere and characterizes the space as being governed by inspiration, light and rationality. As mentioned in the paper he also serves to bring a temporally ambiguous Rome into his home, a place to be inspired.

<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Letter to Mr. Ver Bryck. Sent from Rome, and dated January 31, 1842 Cole says, “This Rome, this ‘city of the soul,’ is indeed a place that holds a man’s heart like Mahomet’s coffin suspended between earth and heaven. It is, indeed, the Mecca of the artist; and I am grieved that the most devout may not always be numbered among the pilgrims” (Noble 234).

actively thinking about Apollo. I believe that here he stands in for Rome but also Europe as a whole, as Shakespeare also looks down on where the artist would have hypothetically painted, were those casts in the Old Studio.<sup>11</sup>

It merits saying that a bust is not a rock and is not a landscape. But again the bust objectifies an experience of a time a place. Perhaps a moment when Cole saw the original Apollo Belvedere in Rome?<sup>12</sup> Or perhaps the bust, as the head of arguably the most important antique work of art at the time, stood in for the entire experience of the city. In any event the head of Apollo becomes the part that stands in for the whole. Likewise, the head of Shakespeare does much the same thing, as a souvenir it contains Cole's personal experience in Europe, not as a native, but a visitor.<sup>13</sup>

I believe that the significance of these items in the studio cannot be understated. In the tour we talk about how studio space gave Cole a retreat from the hectic life of the house. Studio space implies the generative force of inspiration,

---

<sup>11</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the casts in the Old Studio today were in the New Studio. It is known they were there and that Cole had also done a drawing of the Belvedere. The conflation of the two studios is an interesting thing to consider in its own right, but beyond the scope of this paper. Racette, Frank. *Thomas Cole's Old Studio: Catskill New York 1839-1846*. n.p.; n.d. This item is in the collection of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Catskill, New York. P 2.

<sup>12</sup> On April 2, 1842 Cole wrote to Maria that, "Last night I went to the Vatican to see the statues by torch-light. The effect was perfectly magical; each column and statue starting, as it were, from the mysterious darkness around. The life-like effect of those great works of art-the Apollo [Belvedere], the Laocoon, and others-was almost startling. The whole seems to me like a vivid dream of the most beautiful things that can be conceived" (Noble 240).

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that in a letter to Maria written from London on September 22, 1841; Cole mentions his visit to the birthplace of Shakespeare, he says, "The house in which Shakspeare [sic] was born is much more humble than I expected. I made a sketch from his bust in the church, which is different from the pictures we have" (Noble 225). This excerpt suggests that he spent time thinking about Shakespeare and the bust as object being tied to the idea of Shakespeare, to have a wrong image of the bust is to have a lackluster understanding of the bard.

where one goes to create.<sup>14</sup> In Cole's case an important part of his process was rooted in going to actual locations, but just as important was that he gave himself time to forget the ugly and embellish the romantic. It speaks volumes to me that despite his choice to paint contemporary scenes, rather than ancient history, he chose to have the legitimizing force (at least in terms of academy) of that history looking down on him. Further, his works contain not just the reality of a place, but his feelings being there. The souvenirs above did much the same thing, albeit in different media. And this brings us full circle; the nature of his work manifests an attitude regarding the objectification of locations and the human experience of being there. This same attitude is evident in items in the house and studio.

Here we have my three examples culled from months of giving and receiving tours. I believe they work in tandem to tell the story of a man who thought in polyvalent ways about bringing other times and places into the here and now. His obsession with landscape, but more specifically its portrayal, the specimen collection and casts articulate his love of Cedar Grove, as well as his respect for other places he had been; to the point where he appropriated them in object form and absorbed them into his day to day life at Cedar Grove.

---

<sup>14</sup> "Did you know that I have got into a new painting room? Mr. Thompson has lately erected a sort of store-house, and has let me have a part of it for a temporary painting room. It answers pretty well...and being removed from the noise and bustle of the house, is really charming. What I shall be able to produce in it heaven knows. The walls are of unplastered brick, with the beams and timbers seen in every hand: not a bad colour this pale brick and mortar, I am engaged on my great series." *Thomas Cole to Asher B. Durand, 1839*. Old Studio: Cedar Grove Tour Outline Quotes 2008.

## Conclusion

As stated in the introduction these are my opinions gleaned over time. Now, at the end of my tenure at Cedar Grove I have begun incorporating some of these ideas in my tours and visitors seem to really enjoy them. It excites them to know that I continue to be thinking about the Cole house and hopefully it will encourage them to do the same long after they leave. Letting them in on my thoughts helps them to see that scholarship is not a static thing, that we can constantly see old things with fresh ideas and that this process can take us to new places. If anyone who reads this likes the ideas and wants to incorporate them or test them, please do. But as I said before the purpose of this paper is to encourage future docents to go beyond the tour outline: to trust what they see and feel, and to talk about it with other docents and interested visitors. Everyone has the power to make unique connections and we should all explore them, even if we find later that we were wrong, the process and presence of discourse among docents would richen the life of Cedar Grove.

I believe that it is of the utmost importance for the future that we as docents contribute to a climate of ongoing thought about Cole and the Hudson River School; true many books have been written about it by knowledgeable scholars, but we are "in the field" observing and talking about Cole on such a regular basis that our own opinions are bound to emerge. It is my opinion that that is a good thing. As docents we have the power to inform a larger discourse within our institution about the Hudson River School, it's relevance, Thomas Cole and his legacy.