

**FOR THE COLLECTION OF EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN ART
POUR LA COLLECTION D'ART EUROPÉEN ET AMÉRICAIN**



Thomas Cole (Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, 1801 – Catskill, New York, 1848)

The Tomb of General Brock, Queenston Heights, Ontario

oil on canvas

29 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 75.5 x 113 centimeters

1830

Provenance: Florence Cole Vincent (1876-1961, the artist's grand-daughter); bought (?) at an unknown date by the Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, NY; sold Christie's, NY, May 31st, 1985, lot 34; private collection, Studio City, CA.

Exhibitions: Royal Academy Exhibition, London, 1830, #324, "The tomb of General Brock, near Queenston, Lake Ontario, Upper Canada"; LACMA, CA, March-May 1996, American Paintings in Southern California Collections.

Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River school, was among the most important American painters of the first half of the nineteenth century.¹ After a period of neglect, his work has come to play an increasingly important role in North American art history. Cole and his followers offered an image of the Americas that quickly became part of popular imagination. For a country that was already undergoing rapid change, he shows us a

somewhat mythical alternative, in these sublime and timeless landscapes that are often markedly devoid of any human presence.²

Cole's success was hard won, and achieved through an anxious process of personal invention in a period of tremendous social, political and aesthetic upheaval. A key phase in this development was the time he spent in England in 1829-31. The work under consideration is one of the few identified and securely-documented paintings from this period.

Largely self-taught as a painter, Cole's ambition required him to confront both his English contemporaries and the Old Masters.³ Cole had been born and raised in England, but had learnt to paint only in America, and he self-identified as a painter of the American landscape. Cole was well aware that first-hand exposure to the European art world could be both a chance to expand and a risk to his identity.⁴ Shortly before embarking he made a point of visiting Niagara for the first time. "I cannot think," he writes to a patron "of going to Europe without having seen [Niagara Falls]. I wish to take a 'last, lingering look' at our wild scenery. I shall endeavour to impress its features so strongly on my mind that, in the midst of the fine scenery of other countries, their grand and beautiful peculiarities shall not be erased ..."⁵ As was his practice, Cole's memory was aided by delicate outline sketches of the site, complete with annotations naming topographic features and indicating distances, to serve as a repository for paintings to be made in his studio.⁶ A sketchbook in the Detroit Institute of Arts records his visit, and includes a number of sketches of Queenston Heights that doubtless served as sources for the finished painting. Cole's journal for May 12, 1829 praises the site: "Gen Brocks Monument which is a noble one built in the form of a gigantic column—the top commands a fine prospect."⁷ Another album in the same collection includes a finished sketch showing the same composition but with changes including with an additional strip along the bottom.⁸ Comparison with the on-site sketches in the Detroit Institute of Arts reveals that Cole has exaggerated the steepness of the cliff face below the tomb. This compression leads to a more dramatic effect, and frees space for the distant view of Lake Ontario, perhaps taken from a different vantage point.

After the fact, Cole described his two years in London as a deeply alienating experience. Such complaints need to be understood in the context of his highly successful self-mythologizing, in which our hero struggles to maintain his identity in the face of changing fate and fashion. An 1834 biographer already quotes Cole as calling J.M.W. Turner the "prince of evil spirits" for the apparent rejection, in his late works, of truth to nature in favour of wilful artistic effect. Such denouncements helped validate Cole's own less flamboyant style, which was nonetheless indebted to the work of English painters including Constable.⁹

An impressive number of Cole's paintings were accepted for exhibition in England, though he was hardly satisfied with the results.¹⁰ He later maintained that in all but one instance the hanging committees conspired to place his paintings in unflattering locations, while privileging the works of far less accomplished artists.¹¹ He attributed this apparent prejudice to the fact that "[t]he subjects of my paintings were generally American—the

very worst that could be chosen in London."¹² His complaint may be disingenuous; if anything, the novelty of authentically American scenes would likely have improved his success at gaining entry to these exhibitions in the first place.¹³ An American correspondent for the *New-York Mirror* in March 1831 was no doubt correct in claiming that Cole "scarcely ... estimate[s] highly enough the vantage ground on which he stands, in being able to handle American subjects. A bold, daring view, strikingly characteristic of the scenery of the new world, would from its novelty, attract far more attention than an English landscape of equal merit."¹⁴

Cole's summation of his landscapes as "generally American" underscores the remarkable distinctiveness of the *Tomb of Brock*, which seems to pander to anti-American political sentiments. Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, captor of Detroit and "Hero of Upper Canada" (1769-1812), was buried near where he fell leading a charge of British regulars and Canadian militia up Queenston Heights, in an effort to reclaim ground lost to the invading Americans.¹⁵ The year after his death Brock was commemorated by a relief, commissioned from Richard Westmacott at public expense, and placed in the south transept of St. Paul's Cathedral alongside the bodies of Nelson and Wellington. That monument distills the essence of West's *Death of Wolfe*, in its combination of Christ-like martyr, supporting soldier and a mourning First Nations warrior, who would have evoked for some viewers the Shawnee chieftain Tecumseh—an ally of Brock in the fight against the Americans.¹⁶ Westmacott also submitted a design for a monument at Queenston Heights to the Upper Canada legislature, who eventually commissioned a monument designed by Francis Hall. Completed sometime after 1827,

Brock's first monument was 135 feet tall and comprised a Tuscan column on a lofty base with a winding wooden staircase in its core that allowed visitors to ascend to an observation platform just below the summit. Unprecedented in North America, the monument became a "must-see" for travelers.¹⁷

Cole's depiction of the monument is no mere topographic record: the tiny figures below the monument exaggerate its gigantism; the dramatic lighting and the steepened cliff increase the grandeur of the setting; and there is a marked allusion to Brock's heroism in the pathetic fallacy of the storm clouds being pierced by a rainbow. On the sunlit horizon one sees the settled shores of Lake Ontario, secured by the General's sacrifice.¹⁸

While it is not easy to gauge Cole's personal perspective on the American invasion, we can safely say, on the basis of the present work, that during the English sojourn he was not publicly positioning himself as an American nationalist. Recent historians have questioned the myth of the all-American Cole by emphasizing his evident unease toward Jacksonian democracy, including the claims of Manifest Destiny that began to be fully articulated in the 1830s, when Cole produced his cautionary *Course of Empire*.¹⁹ That series is so generalized that it could as easily apply to Britain as to America, whereas the glamorized depiction of Brock's tomb—albeit from the American shore—is more conspicuously sympathetic to the British cause.

Cole's work has been on display at the Gallery since 2003, filling a vital role in the collection. The Gallery has an outstanding collection of European topographic views and purely imaginary landscapes, including works by many of the painters who were Cole's chief models, rivals, and antitheses—Poussin, Claude, Richard Wilson, Constable, Turner. The distinctively American contribution to landscape painting is however missing from our galleries: indeed, nineteenth-century American painting is poorly represented in Canadian collections.²⁰ During the nineteenth century Cole and his followers, such as Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt, had a broad public appeal and a decisive impact on the course of landscape representation throughout North America. *The Tomb of General Brock* will be the first painting by Cole, and the first important Hudson River School painting, to enter any Canadian collection. As with West's *Death of Wolfe*—a Canadian subject painted in England by an American émigré—the present work could hardly be more perfect for the collection of European and American art in the National Gallery of Canada.

The painting is in generally good condition, and bears ample testimony to Cole's spirited and varied handling of details.²¹

Graham Larkin
February 2009

¹ The primary sources for Cole are: William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*. 3 vols. (New York, 1965 facsimile reprint of New York, 1834) and Louis L. Noble, *The Course of Empire, Voyage of Life, and Other Pictures of Thomas Cole, N.A. with Selections from his Letters and Miscellaneous Writings*. (Ann Arbor, 1980 facsimile reprint of New York, 1853). Both quote extensively from Cole's writings. Ellwood C. Parry III remains his most important modern scholar; see in particular *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination*. (Newark, DE, 1988).

² William H. Truettner & Alan Wallach, eds., *Thomas Cole: Landscape into History* (New Haven, 1999). The virgin or "savage" landscapes from Cole's early career are sometimes populated by animals or indigenous peoples, as in the *Scene from The Last of the Mohicans* (New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown) or in the first of his monumental series, the *Course of Empire*, "The Savage State" (The New-York Historical Society, New York).

³ On Cole's first trip to Europe see Noble 1980, chaps.iii-xviii, to be corrected with reference to Parry 1988, chap.3. He remained twenty-two months in England before travelling to France and Italy.

⁴The sentiment is expressed in a letter from Robert Gilmour, a patron based in Baltimore, to Cole, 5th December 1827, "By studying the works of the English artists, particularly Turner, you will be able to improve your style, though I should be sorry [if] you should depart from expressing nature in the manner you do, which is without manner at present, and consequently pleases more generally than a regular habitual way of rendering objects" [his emphasis]; Parry 1988, p.96. Cole in a memo of 1829 returned to this theme, citing Hogarth's opinion that "the most original mind, if habituated to these exercises [copying] becomes inoculated with the style of others, and loses the power of stamping a spirit of its own on the canvass [sic]." Noble 1980, pp.115-6. See also Parry 1988, pp.111-3 on Cole's ambivalence towards copying.

⁵ Letter to Robert Gilmour of Baltimore, April 26th 1829. Quoted in Noble 1980, p.104.

⁶ The majority of Cole's drawings and sketchbooks are divided between the Albany Institute of History and Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts. On this material see the essays published in the *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*. vol.66 (no.1, 1990), an issue devoted to Cole's drawings, in particular E. Parry, "Thomas Cole's Early Drawings: In Search of a Signature Style", pp.7-18.

⁷ Detroit Institute of Arts inv nos 39.560.94 and 39.560.116 (sketches) and 39.560.143-5 (journal entry). There is also a view looking down the Niagara River to Lake Ontario which may have been sketched from atop Queenston Heights (39.560.97 & 39.560.108). See also the closely related sketches 39.560.97 and 39.560.108. Also relevant is 39.560.132, showing the Niagara River looking towards Lake Ontario, which may have formed the basis for the right side of the painting. I have only seen these sketches in the form of digital images, at <<http://www.dia.org>>.

⁸ Detroit Institute of Arts 39.559.37, inscribed "General Brock's Monument, near Queenston, Canada, with Ontario in the distance and Niagara in the foreground." It slightly varies from the painting, and cannot be a record of the finished work, as has been claimed.

⁹ Cole to William Dunlap, 1834, quoted in Parry 1998, p.99. See also the material assembled in Noble 1980, chap.3. For Cole's comments on Cole's relationship to contemporary English artists and critics, see Parry 1988, chap.3 and in particular pp.99-100.

¹⁰ In 1830 he exhibits *Elijah at the Mouth of the Cave* and *Falls of Niagara* [both unlocated] to the "British Gallery", i.e. British Institution, the latter subsequently shown in Royal Birmingham Society of Arts the same year. *A View in New Hampshire* [Olana State Historic Site] and *The Tomb of General Brock* at the RA exhibition. Sends *View of Lake Windermere* [unlocated] to New York for exhibition at National Academy of Design; sends *Curse of Chocorua* to Boston. (The *View of Lake Windermere* depicts the English Lake district, an attempt to signal his British trip to his compatriots in New York; the *Curse of Chocorua* had been painted in the States.) In 1831, *A Lake in New Hampshire, USA*, *A View in the United States of America - Autumn* and *Newstead Abbey - Sunrise* [unlocated] are shown at the British Institution and *A View in the United States of America - Autumn* is shown at the RA. The same year two pictures, including *A Tornado in the Wilderness* are sent to the Gallery of British Artists, i.e. Society of Artists' Gallery, and five pictures (a mix of old & new work, including the *View of Lake Windermere*) are exhibited in New York at the National Academy. The list is derived from Parry 1988, chap.3 and his entry for *The Tomb of Brock* in Sotheby's, New York, December 1st, 1999, lot#127. The absence of a catalogue raisonn  makes the precise identification of the works impossible.

¹¹ "[T]he pictures I sent, two seasons both to the Royal Academy and to the British Gallery, were, without exception, hung in the worst places, so that my acquaintances had a difficulty in knowing them. I was mortified, not that they had been so disposed of, but because the vilest daubs, caricatures, and washy imitations were placed in excellent situations. The last time I sent pictures to be exhibited, I expected a little different treatment; for one of the hanging committee of the Royal Academy had led me to expect something better. I was disappointed. At the British Gallery [i.e. British Institution] I had hopes also; [the poet Samuel] Rogers had promised to intercede for me. But, unfortunately, he was called out of town ... and my pictures had to stand on their own merits, which, in the eyes of the hangmen, amounted to nothing. On the varnishing day I found them in the most *exalted* situations. At the Gallery of British Artists [i.e. Society of Artists' Gallery] I exhibited once, and was better treated. My picture of a Tornado in an American forest was placed in a good situation, and was praised exceedingly in several of the most fashionable papers..." From an undated letter to William Dunlap, quoted in Noble 1980, pp.112-3; interpolations [] mine. The *Tornado* is now in the Corcoran Gallery, Washington DC. It is difficult to exactly reconstruct the hang of any of these exhibitions. However, the catalogue of the 1830 Royal Academy exhibition shows Cole in good company, near works by prominent artists. On the Royal Academy exhibitions see David H. Solkin, ed., *Art on the Line: the Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House*. (New Haven, 2001).

¹² Letter to Dunlap, as in note #10 above, quoted in Noble 1980, p.113. In the same passage he also notes his social isolation, caught between two worlds: "I have said that I found the artists in London cold and

selfish ... I passed weeks in my room without a single artist entering, except Americans.” The language is precise, placing Cole in relationship to the English (“London artists”) and his compatriots (“Americans”), but if he is alienated from the former, he nowhere fully identifies himself with the latter.

¹³ Acceptance was not automatic, and Cole as a foreigner – albeit one with influential friends in London and connections to the London art world – was lucky to have his works accepted. He does not note any rejected canvases, and if this is the case then his success rate was remarkable.

¹⁴ William Cox, *New-York Mirror*, 12 March 1831, p.284. Quoted in Parry 1988, p.106 who notes that Cox likely visited Cole in late Fall or early Winter of 1830-1.

¹⁵ Following another unsuccessful charge led by Brock’s *aide-de-campe* Lieutenant-Colonel John Macdonell (in turn mortally wounded), the combined British, Canadian, and First Nations forces were eventually victorious.

¹⁶ The latter figure holds an outsized tomahawk, inverted in the manner of funeral torches in ancient monuments. See the reproduction in Robert Malcomson, *A Very Brilliant Affair: the Battle of Queenston Heights, 1812* (Annapolis, Md. : Naval Institute Press, 2003), p.216. For Tecumseh, see John Sugden, *Tecumseh: A Life*, New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1998.

¹⁷ Malcomson p. 216. The monument was irreversibly damaged in 1840, and ultimately replaced by a second one.

¹⁸ The monumentalism of the site itself was not lost on Cole’s contemporaries. In an 1824 mini-epic eulogizing the Shawnee chieftain Tecumseh, the poet George Longmore notes that at Queenston “yet, no stone marks where the warrior [Brock] fell,/Nor marble-storied column graven there,” but that in “the warm fancy of the traveller’s gaze” the sublime landscape becomes a “mighty monument” *Tecumseh*, III:1-2, 24-25; first published in the *Canadian Review and Literary and Historical Journal*, Montreal, December 1824.

¹⁹ See the essays in Truettner & Wallach 1994, in particular C. Stansell & S. Wilentz, “Cole’s America.”, pp.3-22. A powerfully vague notion, Manifest Destiny viewed the American government as naturally (hence divinely) destined to establish uninterrupted political authority across the entire North American continent.

²⁰ CHIN (Artefacts Canada) lists nothing by Cole or Frederic Church. Albert Bierstadt is represented by a handful of works on paper here (including a view of *Niagara Falls* #16629) and at the AGO.

²¹ Stephen Gritt indicates that “[t]he painting is in generally good condition. At some point fairly early on in its life it seems to have suffered some structural neglect and bears evidence of minor impacts from behind, and possibly some water damage which has left horizontal disruptions across the surface just above the horizon. These areas have been restored well, and require no further work, and are not critically disruptive. One legacy of this was likely a relatively early and fair lining, which prevented the painting from developing the mechanical crack network, bars marks and associated cupping that would be typical of a painting of this type. This lining is stable and sound, and causing no problems. On the plus side, the paint is in very good condition in terms of damage caused by cleaning; this is relatively minor and all the glazing, scumbling and rubbing employed by Cole to achieve his evocative effects are intact and evident, which is often not the case with paintings of this age. There is absolutely no issue with this painting as a viable candidate for acquisition.” (Email to Graham Larkin, Feb 2, 2009).