

*From the desk of Pierre Beaudry  
The Hudson River School Series, Part VII.*



## THOMAS COLE AND THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN CLASSICAL ARTISTIC COMPOSITION.



by Pierre Beaudry, 9/20/2008

### 1- THE {*SUBLIME*} STRUGGLE FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF “DESIGN”.

“{*Art is the imitation of the creative power.*}”  
Thomas Cole, “Letter to Critics,” 1840.

Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was the first American landscape artist to have consciously and openly broken with the European oligarchy’s art tradition of entertainment, and was also the first, together with Samuel Finley Breeze Morse, to have restored the Italian renaissance method of classical artistic composition instituted by Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael de Sanzio. As the founding father of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole had reinvented, for American landscape painting, a *principle of design* in congruence with the spirit of Morse, when they created the National Academy of Design in 1920. That intention represented a complete axiomatic transformation of American Art with respect to the dominant European culture of the time, a crucial change reflecting a complete break from the European oligarchical idea of dilettante arts, represented in the United States at the time by the British agent artist, John Trumbull.

From that new American vantage point, Cole sought to orient the spectator toward the moral purpose of life. With that intention in mind, he gave the Hudson River School a revolutionary sense of purpose in composition and design, as well as a strong sense of providential destiny that was in great part contributed by his friends and mentors, James

Fenimore Cooper and William Cullen Bryant. It was in such a fashion that for Cole, for example, nature expressed the presence of God, and the role that the artist had to play in transforming nature into an allegorical receptacle that contained a moral purpose of transformation and change. This idea was represented primarily in his two series, *The Course of Empire* (1833-36) and *The Voyage of Life* (1839-42). It was Cole's idea that "{the language of art should have the subserviency of a vehicle.}" And, that vehicle had to carry the idea of change and progress of mankind.

Primarily, Thomas Cole represented the first American artist committed to the political purpose of John Quincy Adams's Manifest Destiny, and, later, his only student, Frederic Church, represented the same mission orientation. Since this new orientation was to become a true republican cultural mission, the difference between Europe and America had to be central to their work and could not simply be expressed by American untamed wilderness versus European gardens and ruins, as many art critics have foolishly reduced it to. The difference was not based on competitiveness, on doing better and greater, but based on a matter of principle. In other words, the distinction was not in the treatment of color, light and shadow, or glossy finish, but in the method by means of which the artists distinguished themselves as reflecting an authentic American culture in opposition to the oligarchical form of European culture: the most significant point being exemplified by the role and function that the spectator had to play in the creative process. The question of principle related to the nature of treating mankind: is the viewer submitted to some form of manipulative entertainment or is he being changed by the ongoing creative process of artistic composition? Is the viewer being treated as an animal or is he being treated as a creative human being? That is the fundamental issue of classical artistic composition.

Therefore, for Cole, the art of painting was never a form of entertainment or of catering to public opinion, but rather a moral enterprise that did not treat the landscape as a mere natural object, but rather as a vehicle of true-elevated thoughts. He believed that nature "was the visible hand of God" and that the function of the artist was to draw something beautiful out of that hand. Some of Cole's best landscape and history pictures, like *Catskills Kauterskill Falls* (1826), *The Clove* (1827), the series of *The Course of Empire* (1838), or *Prometheus* (1846), were always of an elevated character that displayed this high intellectual intention of educating the citizens of the republic.

Cole's reason for applying the allegorical format as a mode of treating nature came from his intention to use landscape as a genre that could be raised to the rank of a historical painting. As Friedrich Lessing demonstrated in his *Laocoön*, the limits of painting and poetry are very difficult to establish, and Cole went as far as admitting to his friend William Dunlap that he had doubts about being able to fulfill his intentions. In any event, this idea of Cole was to give landscape a "{design}" in the sense that Morse had intended it for the new Academy of Design that they had created together in 1820, and which was defined as a deliberate irony in direct opposition to the British idea of free trade entertainment that John Trumbull had established in a fallacious American Academy of Fine Arts. For Cole and Morse, an Academy of Design did not simply mean a school for teaching "drawing" or for making "models." It essentially meant a school

based on a universal physical principle, a school with an intention, a universal purpose, a school that was primarily aimed at developing creativity in a social environment exclusively dominated by artists only, independent of any form of patronage.

In memory of the fight that Samuel Morse waged against John Trumbull on this very issue in 1820, here is the gist of the distinction between American artists, and those that Britain claimed as her own stock value by the National Academy of Design historian, William Dunlap: (1)

*“{There are individuals in America who, without due reflection, or, from residing too long in England, or, perhaps, being foreigners, and not understanding the nature of our institutions, and the manner of thinking which those institutions induce, sometimes talk of patronage and protection; but, from the very first settlement of this country, the germs of republican equality were planted in our soil; they grew with the growth of the colonies, and were nursed into maturity by the blood of our fathers. The laws are here the only protectors. Industry, virtue, and talents, the only patrons. The ignorant, the afflicted, the weak, the unfortunate may want aid, instruction, protection, from the strong, and the rich, and the wise; but the artist – the man who possesses the genius, skill, and knowledge which entitles him to that name – will look to be honored and esteemed by his fellow-citizens; not seeking protection, from them; or acknowledging superiority, except in superior worth.*

*“{Happy! Thrice happy country! Where the lord, the prince, or the king, on touching your shores, becomes a man, if he possesses the requisites for one: or, falls below the level of the men who surrounds him; - where the man of virtue and talents is the only acknowledged superior, and where the man possessing those requisites of an artist, needs no protector and acknowledges no patron. The artist who feels the necessity of patronage, must do one of two things – abandon his high and responsible character, bow to the golden calf that he may partake of the bread and wine set before the idol, or abandon his profession – grasp the axe and the plough, instead of the crayon and pencil. The agriculturist, the mechanic, the sailor, the cartman, the sawyer, the chimney-sweeper, need no protectors. When they are wanted, they are sought for – so should it be with the artist; at least let him be as independent as the last.*

*“{The artists who visited the colonies found friends and employers; they did not need protectors. They exchanged the product of their skill and labor for the money of the rich, and received kindness and hospitality “in the bargain.” Our first visitors were probably all from Great Britain; and none stayed long. The pilgrims who sought refuge from oppression, and the other pioneers of colonization, had their thoughts sufficiently employed on the arts of necessity, and the means of subsistence and defence. Their followers brought wealth and pictures, and imported from home the articles of luxury, and the materials for ornamental architecture. As wealth increased, art and artists followed; and as the effects of that freedom which the colonist enjoyed was felt, native artists sprung*

*up, and excelled the visitors from the father land.}*” (William Dunlap, *A History of the Rise and Progress of The Arts of Design in the United States*, Dover Publications, Inc. Vol. I, New York, 1969, pp. 16-17)

Thus, the whole idea around the *principle of design* was to have a school of “*art for truth*” as opposed to “*art for bread*,” as Frederick Schiller put it. In that sense, the design of the school was to reflect the {*sublime*} struggle of the creative process itself. This is how Dunlap defined the historical specificity of the new American school as being essentially the “{*sublime*} *struggle of the artist*.” Speaking about the specific character of the young Thomas Cole, in particular, Dunlap wrote:

“{*To me the struggles of a virtuous man endeavoring to buffet fortune, steeped to every lips of poverty, yet never despairing, or a moment ceasing his exertions, and finally overcoming every obstacle, is one of the most {sublime} objects of contemplation, as well as the most instructive and encouraging that can be presented to the mind. Such a man is truly a hero, whether he sinks or swims.*}” (William Dunlap, Op. Cit., Vol. II, part 2, 358.)

Such was the “Design” of the Academy of Design of Cole, Morse, Dunlap, Durand, and many others. Thus, the Schiller idea of the {*sublime*} does not refer to the popularised and romantic notion of an awesome landscape like a beautiful sunset. The {*sublime*} refers to the highest state of moral tension that reflects a combination of “{*woefulness and joyfulness*.” This situation can be readily exemplified by the tragedy of Laocoön who, as Homer described in the *Eneides*, was punished by Priam for having told the truth about the danger of bringing the Trojan Horse inside of the city of Troy. The image of Laocoön is therefore quite appropriate for this National Academy of Design if one were to warn against the dangers of British free trade as the Trojan Horse brought inside of the creative soul of American Art.

Within that perspective, the creative purpose of Cole was to elevate the function of landscape painting to the level of historical painting. That was his stated purpose. His hypothesis was to apply this idea to a series of paintings that he discussed with Cooper when they were together in London in 1828. Cooper’s sense of history must have given Cole the idea that history was the key to the progress of civilization and that landscape painting could break the boundaries within which European landscapes had been mere idle backgrounds for historical events. Cole was not happy with that, and as a landscape artist, sought to correct the matter. The idea was not that nature had its own history to tell, but that it had to serve a higher purpose than mere decorative setting. Like man, nature had to be God-like. Cole was thinking of a more truthful American approach, in which landscape would itself play a similar role of vehicle of ironies as history painting did for Universal History. He gave an outline of what this design was when he returned from Italy and retired to the Catskill region in September of 1834. Dunlap reported Cole as saying:

“{*I have, since I came into the country, been engaged on a series, the subject of which I will trouble you with: it is to be the History of a Scene, as well*”

*as an Epitome of Man. – There will be five pictures: the same location will be preserved in each. The first will be the Savage state; the second, the Simple, when cultivation has commenced; the third, the state of Refinement and highest civilization; the fourth, the Vicious, or state of destruction; the fifth, the state of Desolation, when the works of art are again resolving into elemental nature.*

*“I would give you, (but that I am afraid I have tired you already) a fuller description of what I did intend to do, but unfortunately my intentions cannot be fulfilled. I have advanced far with the two first pictures, and find all my gold is turning to clay. I know my subject is a grand one, and I am dissatisfied at finding that my execution is not worthy of it. In the first picture I feel that I have entirely failed: in the second I am rather better pleased; but perhaps it is because there is so much unfinished. I have no doubt they will please some of my indulgent friends, but they are not what I want. } (Quoted by William Dunlap, Op. Cit., Vol II, Part 2. p. 366.)*

This “{*Epitome of Man*},” as he called it, did not only represent for Cole the abridged historical fight of all of mankind against the evil of imperialism from ancient to modern times, but also the struggle of the American system against the British Imperial system in particular, the fight between fair trade against free trade, the fight between the Academy of Design and the Academy of Fine Arts.



**Figure 1.** Thomas Cole

## **2. THE COURSE OF EMPIRE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST DILETTANTISM.**

*The Course of Empire* series by Thomas Cole is essentially a lesson in axiomatic change. The first form of change that was expressed by Cole was the change of political content of the artistic vehicle itself, the allegorical/historical, and the highest expression

of that design was established when Cole clearly delineated the difference between the British Empire and the American Republic. Though his father and grandfather had been born in America, Cole was born in England, and he was thoroughly disgusted with the artificiality of British art and of British politics in general. That is why he once told a friend that he regretted not having been born in America. “{*I would give my left hand to identify myself with this country, by being able to say I was born here.*}” (William Dunlap, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. II, Part 2, p. 351)

In 1828, Cole went back to England where James Fenimore Cooper received him in London. Cole reported extensively on his trip to Europe to his friend William Dunlap who pressed him to give him the “{*honest exhibition of truth*}” about his evaluation of European art. Cole gave a clear picture of why American artists had to refrain from following the English or French schools of painting. The significance of Cole’s extensive evaluation on this account is precious because it represents the only truthful and lucid assessment there is on the subject of the fundamental difference between European and American artistic design as a matter of culture. We are very thankful for Dunlap’s unique and truthful account by Thomas Cole.

*“{Although in many respects I was delighted with the English school of painting, yet, on the whole, I was disappointed: my natural eye was disgusted with its gaud and ostentation: to colour and chiaroscuro all else is sacrificed – design is forgotten; to catch the eye by some dazzling display, seems to be the grand aim. The English have a mania for what they call generalizing, which is nothing more or less than the idle art of making a little study go a great way, and their pictures are usually things “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” The mechanical genius of the people exhibits itself in the mechanism of the art – their dextrous management of glazing, scumbling, etc. Frequent and crowded exhibitions of recently painted pictures, and the gloom of the climate, account for the gaudy and glaring style in fashion. There are few exceptions among the artists of England to this meretricious style; even Wilkie and Leslie, in their late pictures, have become more washy and vapid than in their former productions.*”

*“Turner is the prince of the evil spirits. With imagination and a deep knowledge of the machinery of his art, he has produced some surprising specimens of effects. His earlier pictures are really beautiful and true, though rather misty; but in his late works, you see the most splendid combinations of colour and chiaro-scuro - gorgeous but altogether false – there is a visionary, unsubstantial look about them that, for some subjects, is admirably appropriate; but in pictures, representing scenes in this world, rocks should not look like sugar-candy, nor the ground like jelly.*”

*“These opinions of existing English art, I know may be considered heterodox; but I will venture them, because I believe them correct. The standard by which I form my judgment is – beautiful nature; and if I am astray, it is on a path which I have taken for that of truth.*”

*“In May, 1831, I left England for the Continent. When I arrived in Paris, I found, to my great disappointment, that the works of the old masters in the Louvre were covered by an exhibition of modern French works, and there was no expectation of a removal of them for some time. I left Paris on my way to Italy.*

*“Modern French painting pleased me even less than English. In landscape they are poor – in portrait, much inferior to the English; and in history, cold and affected. In design, they are much superior to the English; but in expression, false. – Their subjects are often horrid: and in the exhibition at the Louvre I saw more murderous and bloody scenes than I had ever seen before.*

*“The melancholy which I experienced in England continued with me for several months after I had arrived in Italy. I looked upon the beautiful scenery, and knew it to be beautiful, but did not feel it so. [...]*

*“The pictures of the great Italian masters gave the greatest delight, and I labored to make their principles my own; for these, which have stood best the criticism of ages, are produced on principles of truth, and on no abstract notion of the sublime or beautiful. The artists were gifted with a keen perception of the beautiful of nature, and imitated it in simplicity and single-heartedness. [...]*

*“Salvador Rosa’s is a great name – his pictures disappointed me – he is peculiar, energetic, but of limited capacity, comparatively. – Claude, to me, is the greatest of all landscape painters, and indeed I should rank him with Raphael or Michael Angelo. Poussin I delighted in; and Ruysdael, for his truth, which is equal to Claude, but not so choice*

*“Will you allow me here to say a word or two on landscape? It is usual to rank it as a lower branch of the art, below the historical. Why so? Is there a better reason, than that the vanity of man makes him delight most in his own image? In its difficulty (though perhaps it may come ill from me, although I have dabbled a little in history) it is equal at least to the historical. There are certainly fewer good landscape pictures in the world, in proportion to their number, than of historical. In landscape there is a greater variety of objects, textures, and phenomena to imitate. It has expression also; not of passion, to be sure, but of sentiment – whether it shall be tranquil or spirit-stirring. Its seasons – sunrise, sunset, the storm, the calm – various kinds of trees, herbage, waters, mountains, skies. And whatever scene is chosen, one spirit pervades the whole – light and darkness tremble in the atmosphere, and each change transmutes.*

*“This is perhaps all unnecessary to you; but I have so often been surprised at the almost universal ignorance of the subjects that I am induced to speak. I mean to say, that if the talent of Raphael had been applied to landscape, his productions would have been as great as those he really did produce.}” (Quoted by William Dunlap, Op. Cit., Vol. II, Part 2., p.362-65.)*



Thus, Cole's most enduring masterpieces expressing the highest form of American genius were the series of five 1833-36 historical representations of the rise and fall of imperialism that he called *The Course of Empire*. As James Fenimore Cooper put it: “{Not only do I consider {**The Course of Empire**} the work of the highest genius this country has ever produced, but I estimate it one of the noblest works of art that has ever been wrought.}” (Cooper letter to Noble, January 6, 1849, quoted by Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque, *The Exaltation of American Landscape Painting*, in *American Paradise, The World of the Hudson River School*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1987, p. 30.)

There was a good reason for Cooper to express such enthusiasm about Cole's *The Course of Empire*. Cole's political intention was to establish a truly new form of American art that would ironize out all British imperialist tendencies, especially, the British aristocratic form of “{idle art}” that had been officially sanctioned by the Dilettanti Society since 1734. (2) Like Cooper's writings had the mission to do, Cole wanted to restore morality and reason to the domain of artistic composition. *The Course of Empire*, therefore, represented a strong universal statement of principle about Cole's outright rejection of any European form of oligarchical dilettantism. At first glance, the making of an empire may have appeared to some as a sort of fatalistic progression upward from the savage state of freedom, to the pastoral state of happiness, and from there to highest form of cultural glory, then, downward to corruption, to destruction, and to destitution, but this naive liberal impression is deceptively wrong. The series of *The Course of Empire* is not continuous, but discontinuous. It is a series of discontinuities, of axiomatic ironies aimed at shocking the viewer out of his complacency and at educating him about the evils of the European model of empire that Great Britain had inherited from the Venetians. With this series, Cole had launched a war against what Saint Paul had identified as the Principalities and Powers of the Whore of Babylon.





**Figure 2.** Thomas Cole, *The Savage State*, 1833-36

A close look at *The Savage State* shows that *The Course of Empire* begins in a state of savagery that is represented as the economic form of hunting and gathering by American Indians, therefore, as a primitive society struggling for survival in a state that is brutal, overbearing, and which, in itself, reflects no hope of progress. This was the typical genocidal view of President Andrew Jackson that Cole was criticizing as a barbaric imperial idea of the struggle of the fittest of the American Indian population within an overpowering and untamed nature. This scene was meant to reflect on the cruelty of Indian genocide that went on during the presidency of Jackson (1828-1836), and under his refusal to integrate the Indian People into American Society. Suddenly, there is a total break from this initial state to the second state, showing that there is no progression from one picture to the next, but only a deliberate shocking discontinuity that Cole intended as a wake up call to the spectator.



**Figure 3.** Thomas Cole, *The Pastoral State*, 1833-36.

*The Pastoral State* is no longer in America, but is located in the fictitious ancient Greek mountains of Arcadia that the ancient poets had celebrated as a domain of blissful innocence and happiness, in the serenity of which nothing bad can ever happen to you. This is the old Olympian imperialist dream of an idyllic earthly paradise for the beautiful people, which stands in direct contrast, and opposition to, *The Savage State* in which everything bad can, and will, happen to the rest of humanity. It is with this second state in the course of Empire that the spectator begins to realize that Cole was not depicting human progress as viewed by the American Revolution, but was confronting the viewer

with different imperial fantasy states, as viewed by a leader of the British East India Company.

At this point, the spectator is shocked by the false paradoxical contrasts between those two unreal imperial dreams: an untamed oligarchical American hunting and looting ground or a tamed oligarchical insipidity of Old Europe. The choice is between two fantasies: bestial struggles of the fittest or idle-bucolic imbecility; both of which were invented by an imperialist perverted mind to avoid the truthful necessity of creating “inroads of civilization” into the real world, as James Fenimore Cooper had called for in his novels. Cole was giving the views of the Empire, the choice between two opposite world tragic states: savagery or false-innocence. The irony is that neither of them is actually human, both of them are bestial.



**Figure 4.** Thomas Cole, *The Consummation of the Empire*, 1833-36.

The third state, *The Consummation of the Empire*, is represented as a celebration of the epicurean good life of the Roman Empire in a state of pleasure and entertainment with endless festivities; the sort of debauchery that Boccaccio described in his *Decameron*. The three Greek architecture orders, Doric, Ionian, and Corinthian are represented with the added feature of the Paris Napoleonic Pont St-Michel in the foreground, which is flanked by a balcony buttressed by human figures as a substitute for columns. Such a use of human beings as columns is made to reflect the highpoint of Imperial Rome. However, the wonderful beauty of such a temple is an illusion that hides the stain of ugliness demonstrating that Roman imperial power was built on the sands of slavery.

In ancient times, such human column figures were called Atlantes as in the Theater of Dionysus (4<sup>th</sup> century) in Athens. They were also called telamon or Persians

and designated human bondage gotten from military victories, such as the vanquished Persians forming the Persian peristyles of Athens, in celebration of the victories of Marathon (490 BC) and of Salamine (480 BC). After the Persian wars, such male figures were replaced by female ones called caryatides, who were slave virgins of the cult of Artemis Caryatis that had been abducted from the town of Caryia, near Sparta. The original idea came from Egypt, originally representing gigantic god-figures holding the temple, but which later came to demonstrate how it was foreign bounty that held the empire together.

Thus, beauty of form becomes mixed with the ugliness of human slavery. From that standpoint, the title of “Consummation” is well chosen, because it represents the irony whereby slavery represents the highest point that imperial power can achieve, by spoiling itself uselessly. Such an achievement celebrates the self-consummation of an imperial society, spending itself in self-degrading corruption, and ending up consuming its own self after it had consumed others. Thus, Cole gave us the shocking ugly-beauty of the Whore of Babylon that dissipated its illusory existence in celebrating its termination.



**Figure 5.** Thomas Cole, *Destruction*, 1833-36.

Then, comes the state of *Destruction* of the empire. This is like the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah, except it is self-imposed doom. Imperialists never understand why their empire must self-destruct. They never seem to realize that they follow the irrefutable law of tragedy. They don't understand heavy ideas like: the more they attempt to save their empire, the more they accelerate its demise. They don't see what is inevitable and incontrovertible about that self-destructive process and why. The Nordic type of invading ships represented by Cole reminds the spectator that the Roman Empire had been destroyed less by the German invasions than by an alliance between the Nordic



commerce of inland river developments that Charlemagne and Haroun Al-Raschid had promoted with Russia by shifting the economic axis of the world away from the Mediterranean and other seas towards the interior of the Eurasian continent.

This great historical painting is like a forecasting of the end of the current collapsing of the Anglo-Dutch financial system that is to be replaced by the tectonic alliance of continents involving the United States, Russia, China, and India. As the inevitable result of its denial of natural law; that is to say, because it has been exclusively based on looting all the regions of the world and bestializing the whole of mankind while doing it, the Empire becomes, therefore, doomed to be destroyed by its own internal contradictions and ends up cannibalizing itself. The Empire is like a giant parasite which, when it runs out of victims to prey on and suck dry, ends up drowning in its own blood. Thus, the Roman Empire had created a self-feeding infernal whirlstorm of atmospheric vortex generating all-consuming fires that brought the Empire's own corruption to a predictable end.



**Figure 6.** Thomas Cole, *Desolation*, 1833-36.

Finally, *Desolation* demonstrates not only the uselessness of the oligarchical model of empire, but also its utter corrupting nature. A close look shows that the ruins of its past glory are not being cleansed by a new growth of a greater enduring nature, but are being completely ravaged by their own cancerous disease. Both the water and the soil have been infected to such a degree, by the passing of imperialism, that nature, itself, has been infected and degraded by its very presence. This is not a return to an original savage state of nature; this is the state of such a great affliction that only cancerous outgrowth

remains as apparent vegetation. Nothing, not even life, could be rebuilt on such a desolated place which only breathes death. It is as if the same cycle could not be expected to be repeated again, and again, but would leave only the hope that civilization could be rebuilt, somewhere else, over the ocean, westward, as far away as possible from the stench of this European oligarchical swamp.

Only then, could some Promethean individual, intervene to secure new Western Civilization shores from such an infernal course of human slaughter and devastation, and develop self-government for its people and by its people. This fact did not escape the attention of Cole, and this is why, in closing this series of *The Course of Empire*, he left the spectator with a series of questions rather than with answers: is America also going to be subjected to such a tragic fate as Europe and Asia have? Can the American hemisphere develop a new type of integrated creative culture that will be capable of protecting itself and its future generations against this form of British imperial disease? Can America unite itself under the Quincy Adams policy of the Monroe Doctrine and reach out to Russia and China by going westward beyond the Pacific? This is where the question of truthfulness in artistic composition rises to the fore and is forced out into the open field of American artistic composition.

This series of paintings shocked the American public, but art critics did not dare address the axiomatic features of the differences between the British and American systems that Cole was touching on. It must have been too hot to handle. No one dared criticize Cole's works because they were so perfectly crafted and not too ostentatiously anti-British. His close friends and patrons knew what he was up to, and some of them attempted to dissuade him from being so imaginative and so polemical. For example, Robert Gilmor, a rich patron from Baltimore, criticized Cole for his failure to be an easily comprehensible realist and that he should stick to nature qua nature.

Cole had the courage to go against the pricks and responded to Gilmor that he was wrong in asking him to paint “{*originals of nature*}” and not “{*compositions of ideals*}.” Cole wrote to Gilmor: “{*If I am not misinformed, the finest pictures which have been produced, both Historical and Landscape, have been compositions. Raphael's pictures, and those of all the great painters, are something more than imitation of Nature as they found it [...] A departure from nature is not a necessary consequence in the painting of composition: on the contrary, the most lovely and perfect parts of Nature may be brought together, and combined in a whole that shall surpass in beauty and effect any picture painted from a single view. I believe with you that it is of the greatest importance for a painter always to have his mind upon nature, as the star by which he is to steer to excellence in his art. He who would paint compositions, and not be false, must sit down amidst his sketches, make selections, and combine them, and so have nature for every object that he paints.*}” (Cole letter to Gilmor, December 25, 1826.)

This response to Gilmor later became established as the moral code of conduct of most of the artists of the Hudson River School; the basic landscape philosophy of the school Cole was founding was to compose from nature in such a manner as to impart to it one's own moral truthfulness. Therefore, for Cole, a landscape was no longer simply the

pictorial rendition of an object, but a state of mind aimed at telling the truth. Cole said: “{ *Chiaroscuro, color, form, should always be subservient to the subject, and never be raised to the dignity of an end.* }” This is how the scenes for *The Course of Empire* series were conceived by Cole before his return from Italy in 1833. However, the issue of Empire did not come to an end with the close of the exhibit of his five pictures in 1836. Cole was not satisfied because he was still searching for a way to bring the issue of truthfulness in art to the core of the matter: that was the issue of Prometheus.



**Figure 7.** Thomas Cole, *Prometheus*, 1846-47. **Figure 8.** *The Savage State*, detail.

With *Prometheus*, Cole makes another breakthrough. We don't know, at this moment in time, and we may never know, why Cole waited ten years before openly bringing the question of Prometheus to bear on the question of Empire, but a historical marker in English poetry helps to elucidate that question. Percy B. Shelley published his first edition of *Prometheus Unbound* in 1838, and every serious art group was reading and discussing the poem during their meetings. The observer should also note that the reason why the rock is so big while the Prometheus so small is aimed at forcing the spectator to ask himself: “Where have I seen that rock formation before.” Thus, the educated spectator is forced to make a considerable, but necessary, leap back to the *Savage State* of *The Course of Empire* of 1836, via the Shelley Prometheus of 1839 and connect with *Prometheus*, 1846. Once that connection is made, then, the historical specificity of the Promethean intervention becomes clear.

Cole seemed to be telling us that even as the different phases of such human tragedies come and go during *The Course of Empire*, there is something that never changes. Thus, looking in the direction of America from the Mediterranean shore of Gibraltar, Cole represented the rise and fall of decrepit European oligarchical empires that could only be replaced by some Promethean American action beyond the awful oceanic horizon. This reminds us of Heraclites's paradox of change: *παντα ρεί* (everything flows). In *The Course of Empire* series, everything changed five times, except for one thing that was a constant feature in all of the different states: the rocky peak!

With this geographical metaphor, Cole raised the issue of the British Imperial Zeus and of the American Prometheus, bringing the spectator to bear on the issue of

truthfulness in classical artistic composition as the basis for American culture. Even the storm battered tree on the left foreground of the two paintings seems to be there as a call for attention to this expressed intention. Furthermore, the recurrence of the same cliff on which Prometheus is chained also calls the attention to the Rock of Gibraltar. Cole seemed to have identified this rocky peak with the proud emblem of British imperialism, which had control of the entire commercial traffic of the entire Mediterranean Sea, since 1704, and which nearly lost it during the American revolutionary war, when France and Spain were allied with the United States. Thus, as a representation of the rise and fall of the British Empire, Cole created an imaginary extension of the British city of Gibraltar, including an idealized commercial and military port. The presence of the Rock in all five pictures not only reminds the observer of the enduring British imperial control over the world since the creation of the British East India Company at the Treaty of Paris of 1763, but also the more recent second attempt of the British Empire to retake America in the War of 1812, an event that was still fresh in American memories, at the time of Cole's painting.

At length, there is also an afterthought about Cole's connecting the Rock of Gibraltar with the Rock of Prometheus, ten years later, and that is, that the classical Greek character of Prometheus stealing the fire from the Olympian Zeus has always been established as an appropriate role model for American citizens ever since Benjamin Franklin demonstrated the scientific knowledge of mastering the thunderbolt. So, be it expressed through Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Cole, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, or Lyndon LaRouche, Prometheus is the appropriate role model for any American who dares go against the pricks of public opinion and defy any Imperial Zeus wherever he might attempt to keep mankind in either a state of savagery or a state of bucolic imbecility. That was the true founding character of the Hudson River School throughout the fifty year course of which those metaphorical connections were unmistakable for every artist that joined: what never changed in the evil and vicious cycle of Empire was the fight that Prometheus has to wage against the Olympian Zeus and nothing was more truthful than to equate this Promethean task to the American mission of the school: the pursuit of Western Civilization's Manifest Destiny.

### **3- ASHER B. DURAND'S {KINDRED SPIRITS} AND COOPER'S PARADOX OF FREEDOM AND NECESSITY.**

However, there was a major disagreement between Cole and Dunlop on the question of limitation between landscape and history painting which brings us to our next point. Dunlap disagreed with Cole on the equivalence between a landscape and a historical portrait, and he has left us with an interesting remark to ponder. He wrote:

*“{The reader may remember, (or may see) that Leslie places his particular branch (as Cole does his) on a level with history painting. It is very natural that he should do so; but until I am convinced that it requires as great variety and amount of knowledge to represent a landscape, or a scene of familiar*



*life, as it does a great historic event; or that a landscape, or domestic scene, can fill the mind, like the contemplation of a picture, representing an event on which the destinies of mankind depended, - an event which will influence those destinies to all eternity - I must continue to differ from my two amiable and enlightened friends.}*" (William Dunlap, Op. Cit., Vol. II, Part 2., p. 367.)

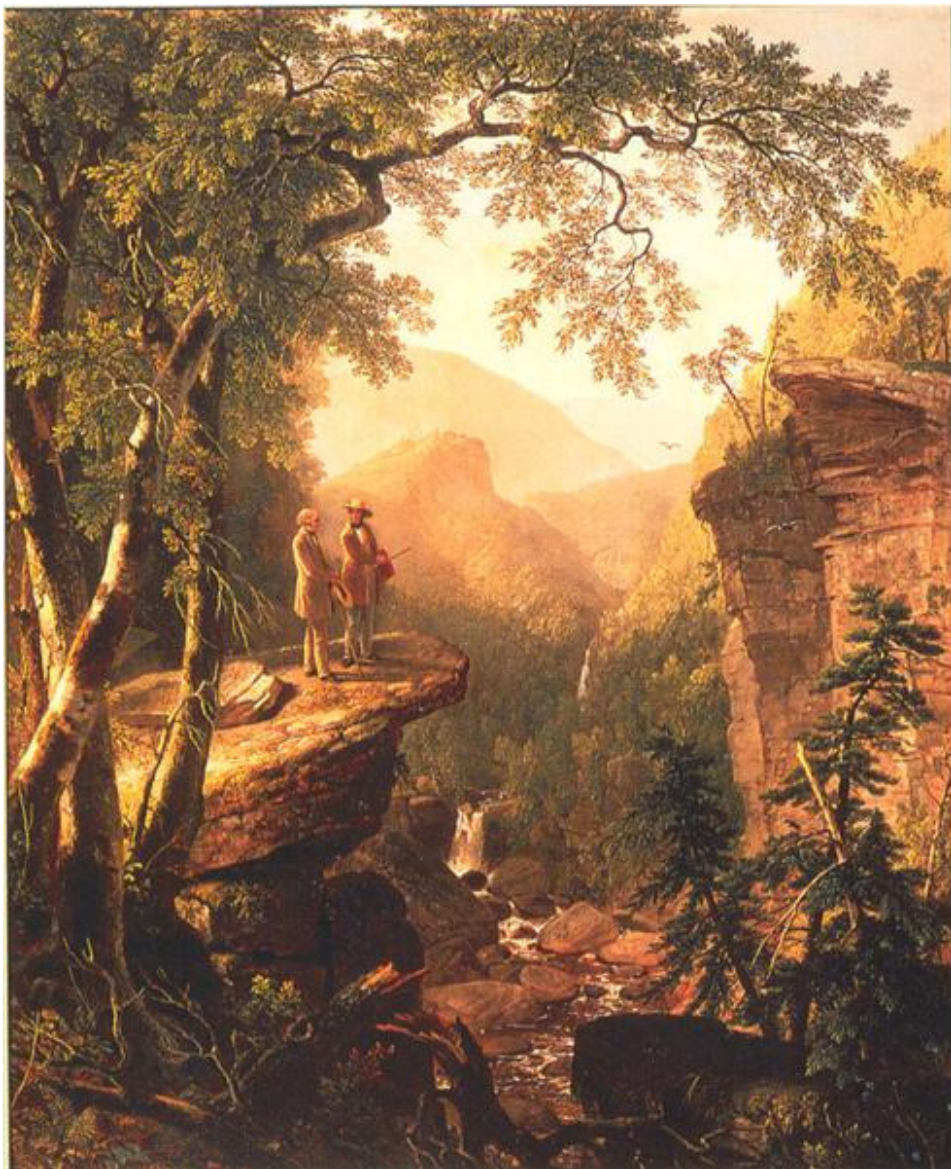
Here, the point is well taken because Dunlap raised a very legitimate question that required painting a scene “{*representing an event on which the destinies of mankind depended.* }” Lessing had also raised that issue in his *Laocoön*, and that is what represents, for Cole, the boundary conditions and limitations between landscape painting and history painting? (3) The Italian Renaissance had established a genuine limitation, for example, in Leonardo’s rendering of the {*sublime*} in {*The Virgin of the Rocks*}, and in Raphael’s treatment of the principle of {*simultaneity of eternity*,} as Lyn identified it, in *The School of Athens*; that is, the idea of bringing several thousand years of civilization, simultaneously, within a single space and time. From Leonardo and Raphael’s vantage point, the arts of design are no longer limited to a single moment and to a single point of view. The artist is, from that moment on, able to extend time and space to a universal truth and select a moment and a point of view which is sufficiently pregnant with universal change as to allow the {*sublime*} and the {*simultaneity of eternity*} to express the highest state of excitement of the human soul. However, other limitations were also requisite that reflected {*immortality*}. For instance, extract the following idea of limitation from the depth of your own mind.

If one were to give his whole time and talent to historical painting, as Benjamin West did, for example, one would have to forget the need for imitation and likeness required in individual portraits and apply one’s talent only to expressing the highest form of likeness pertaining to the universal characteristic of truthfulness in a historical event, and with respect to mankind as a whole. That likeness pertains to the {*likeness to God*}. From that new vantage point, such a painting would also have to represent a human drama that has to be conveyed by means of special effects drawn from Universal History. Thus, the key to a historical painting of this type would no longer be based on the likeness of individuals or things, but on the composition of the universal likeness to a crisis, to a paradox, or to an act of extraordinary courage that gets reflected on the spectator as a participant, and is aimed at creating an impact to change society.

Such a likeness would have to express a truthful and universal aspect of the {*sublime*} and, therefore, be valid for anyone, anywhere, and at any moment of history, regardless of the specific context of his or her society. For example, the precise moment when Prometheus gave life to man by ravishing the fire from heaven; the instant when Haroun Al Rashid gave the Jews priority over the Muslims in establishing commerce throughout the kingdom of Baghdad and the Eurasian continent; the moment when Confucius called for the ruler of China to reign based on the mandate from heavens; or again, the moment when Christ looked at Peter after his third denial. In all such cases, the captured instant should reflect a universal quality of {*immortality*}, because that instant would always be a true metaphor of the {*sublime*}, expressing an ecumenical victory over mortality that every human being has the opportunity to express at some unique

moment in his life. Such is the meaningfulness of a historical painting with regards to Universal History. The question is: can a landscape express the same quality of the {*sublime*}?

This may or may not satisfy the historical requisite that Dunlap was alluding to, because the question that he raised implicitly was: could a landscape contain the same amount of information as a historical painting does? However, the broader question is: can the boundary conditions of a landscape subtend the dramatic force of an irony as if it were presented on the stage of a universal historical setting? In other words, can a landscape and a historical picture be the vehicle of the same discovery of principle? The treatment of Asher B. Durand gave to his now famous *Kindred Spirits* gives us a window into those questions.



**Figure 9.** Asher B. Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, 1849.

Examine closely the painting of Asher Brown Durand (1796-1886), *Kindred Spirits*, 1849. The individuals represented are identified as Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant meeting somewhere in the Catskills. That is the self-evident part of the scene. The not so obvious part of the scene, however, is the design underlying the scenery of Kauterskill Clove and, more specifically, the significance of Kauterskill Falls.

That more complete scene is represented by the role of James Fenimore Cooper's expression of the paradox of freedom and necessity and the principle of creativity that it involves. Indeed, the subject of Kauterskill Falls has been, for several Hudson River School artists, James Fenimore Cooper's choice of metaphor for illustrating the process of creativity; the {*swim or sink principle*}, as Dunlap put it earlier about the sublimity of Cole. As Cooper wrote in *The Last of the Mohicans*, waterfalls are like the headstrong artist or poet who wage a fight against the obstacles of public opinion and against the lust for money, but who are also able to find a way to discover the course of the foreordained purpose of their destiny. For example, read this beautifully disconcerting "*design of the river*" from *The Last of the Mohicans* with the *Kindred Spirits* in mind. Cooper wrote:

“{Aye! There are the falls on two sides of us, and the river above and below. If you had daylight, it would be worth the trouble to step up on the height of this rock and look at the perversity of the water. It falls by no rule at all; sometimes it leaps sometimes it tumbles; there, it skips; here, it shoots; in one place 'tis white as snow, and in another 'tis green as grass; hereabouts, it pitches into deep hollows, that rumble and quake the 'arth; and thereaway, it ripples and sings like a brook, fashioning whirlpools and gulleys in the old stone, as if 'it was no harder than trodden clay. The whole design of the river seems disconcerted. First it runs smoothly, as if meaning to go down the descent as things were ordered; then it angles about and faces the shores; nor are there paces wanting where it looks backward, as if unwilling to leave the wilderness, to mingle with the salt! Aye! lady, the fine cobweb-looking cloth you wear at your throat, is coarse, and like a fishnet, two little spots I can show you, where the river fabricates all sorts of images, as if, having broke loose from order, it would try its hand at everything. And yet what does it amount to! After the water has been suffered to have its will, for a time, like a headstrong man, it is gathered together by the hand that made it, and a few rods below you may see it all, flowing on steadily toward the sea, as was foreordained from the first foundation of the arth!}” (Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, New Modern Library, 1962, p. 64.)

Thus, for Cooper and the artists of the Hudson River School, water was not just water. Water is the metaphor of the creative process expressing the principle of change in nature and in the human soul. It is the flow of ideas that shape the shores of things to come and direct the uncharted course of history. Therefore, in all of its physical manifestations of effect, whether rushing, splashing, or foaming like in *Niagara* by Church, or stirring dark, deep, and turbid like the ever-moving stillness of *Desolation* by Cole, water always represents the unconquered powers of the mind and the deep undercurrent of the creative soul. For the artist, the *water is the secret voice of nature!*

And the light of reason applied to artistic composition can sometimes just as well penetrate its most intimate recess as it can merely be reflected on its surface!

In a way, a waterfall represents the impetuous principle of the human soul, as it does as a natural flow of nature. *Kindred Spirits*, therefore, represented more a state of mind than the banal relationship that art critics attributed to the relationship between the artist and the poet. It represented the interconnectedness between man and nature, the social process of creativity with the meanderings of which poets and artists weave their designs, as if the flow of the fall had followed its own foreordained natural constraints.

Thus, the proportionality between history and the relationship between artists Durand and Cole, and between nature and the poets Bryant and Cooper. Thus, from that standpoint, the relationship between landscape and history is not decided on the requisite amount of information, as demanded by Dunlap. It is based on the requisite of the same universal physical principle for artistic composition and for the science of nature; that is, the principle of truthfulness in irony coming out of both God's universe and the mind of the creative individual. Remember *The Old Hunting Grounds* by Worthington Whittredge. The abandoned birchen-bark-canoe represented the metaphorical memory of a powerful historical drama that recalled the tragedy of the extinction of the American Indian culture. Whittredge had shown that the power of the landscape could also become the dramatic stage for a universal physical principle.

Durand's *Kindred Spirits* featured Thomas Cole and William Bryant standing on a rocky platform and investigating the narrow passage of *freedom and necessity* tumbling in the distance through the Kaaterskill Clove before rushing under their feet below. Art, Poetry, and Nature may speak different languages, but they all flow from the same principled source. The portrait by Durand was done in commemoration of Cole who died in February of 1848, at the young age of 47. The picture has become the emblematic metaphor of the Hudson River School, ever since.





**Figure 10.** Thomas Cole, *Falls of Kaaterskill*, 1826.

In his earlier days, Cole had also painted landscapes of the same Cove, especially the very playful autumnal scenes of the *Falls of Kaaterskill* (1826) and *The Clove, Catskills*, (1827) in the spirit of Cooper's *Leather-Stocking Tales* and especially, *The Last of the Mohicans*. The theme of the waterfalls is also, front and center, coordinated with the presence of a lone Indian (Chingachgook), whose mountains reflect his unique purpose, everywhere, as the last of his kind. Cole had made the point to his patron Gilmore that it was not always necessary to portray people in a landscape in order to note the presence of man; but when Gilmore disagreed with him, Cole resolved to represent the true freedom of the painter with respect to critics and patrons by inserting the discrete presence of an almost invisible Indian in the geometric center of his painting.

Looking at the American wilderness through the eyes of Cooper, Cole had reintroduced the metaphor of the creative process with the treatment of the elusive Indian and cascading waterfall as the American spirit. Note the views of the Indian from the front in the geometric center of *Falls of Kaaterskill*, but viewed from the back in *The Clove, Catskills*. It is as if Cole had painted merely the memory of a presence having been there, near the fall which, itself, became barely visible in *The Clove, Catskills*. This

painting could have been entitled “*The Spirit of America.*” Follow the contour of the ghost-line profile of the Indian standing alone on the Rock, in the center foreground, and looking at the threatening eastern clouds into the deep recess of the clove toward the valley and the Berkshire Mountains, in the distance. Look for the invisible principle. The features of that Indian are difficult to see, because they were made to blend perfectly with the background of the dark forest, as if nature, itself, had designed it by accident.



**Figure 11.** Thomas Cole, *The Clove, Catskills*, ca. 1827.

Cole made the point that he did not see nature and man as a contest between two opposite forces that were out to subdue one another; he saw in them two expressions of an agreement, blending together with the same destiny of natural law, with the same temperamental and emotional creative characters; much in the same way that Cooper had conceived of predestination, not as a object of faith but as the ability of supplying both man and nature with a purposeful sense of self-sufficiency and self-determination. The proportion is: as the destination of one, so is the purpose of the other. Both nature and man are subjected to the same array of universal physical principles of change, and especially the same principle of “design,” but nature has to be directed by man, not man directed by nature. For Cole, American landscape painting has never been an environmentalist dream.

So, both Cole and Cooper had taken up the question of religious belief much in the same way, one religiously, the other naturally. I recall for the reader the same idea that Cooper had expressed in the disagreement between David and Hawk-eye on the subject of predestination in *The Last of the Mohicans*. What was the argument about?

David saw in Hawk-eye's action the Christian dogma, and therefore: "{*He that is to be saved will be saved and he that is predestined to be damned will be damned.*}" In other words, as the fundamentalists of today say: "{*No need to worry, God is in charge!*}"

On the other hand, Hawk-eye replied: "{*Doctrine or no doctrine, said the sturdy woodsman, 'tis the belief of knaves, and the curse of an honest man. I can credit that yonder Huron was to fall by my hand, for with my own eyes I have seen it; but nothing short of being a witness will cause me to think he has met with any reward, or that Chingachgook, there, will be condemned at the final day.*}" (Cooper, Op. Cit., p. 137)

Hawk-eye may not have had the Holy Book to argue from, but he had "seen" in his mind's eye the fate of what was to happen to the Huron, as it was intended to be the result of his own making. From that standpoint, Cooper saw the artist as someone who could and had the responsibility to make his own destiny by necessity, that is, with hard work, by improving on nature in creating "inroads of civilization." In a similar manner, rather than avoiding paradoxes, Cooper encouraged the landscape artist to discover in the wilderness a discontinuous series of such unresolved paradoxes. He was teaching Cole how to go against the pricks of popular opinion by forcing such ironies on the reader-viewer, in order to change and improve him, as opposed to entertaining him, or giving him a way out, by offering him some tender comfort zone, as other artists and writers generally do.

Therefore, as in the case of religious belief, the viewer had to be provoked by an anomaly or be made perplexed before a strange series of interactions that occurred between man, nature, and God. But, the expression of such anomalies had to be artistically construed and crafted with such perfection and beauty that art had to appear to have been created by nature itself, as if she had produced a natural effect by accident. For example, apply the following crafting method of Cooper to the ghostly presence of the Indian in *The Clove, Catskills*: "*The colors of the war paint had blended in dark confusion about his fierce countenance, and rendered his swarthy lineaments still more savage and repulsive than if art had attempted an effect, which had been produced by chance.*" (James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*. p. 20.) Here you have, in a single brush stroke, the dramatic and masterful Cooper method of chiaroscuro for classical artistic composition. This is the Cooperesque method of blending together man, nature, and universal physical principle, thus creating a drama on the historical and cultural American stage through the discovered anomaly of which the spectator naturally became a better human being after solving it. From that vantage point, Cooper and Cole both reflected the excellence of Greek poets! Because, they were both able to answer the question that Moses Mendelssohn posed: "{*What do the beauties of nature and of art have in common, what relation do they have to the human soul, such that they are pleasing to it?*}" (Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 171) Thus, classical beauty becomes this congruence between nature and the human soul.

Remember that Sanford Gifford treated the same subject 45 years later, but with a completely different design in mind. His rendition of *Kauterskill Falls*, 1871, may have



been his saving grace. See my report, {*HOW BRITISH FREE-TRADE AND FRENCH BARBIZON DESTROYED THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL*}, *Sanford Gifford: Barbizon versus Cooper in the Catskills*, 7/30/2008.}



**Figure 12.** Sanford Gifford, *Kauterskill Falls*, 1871.

#### **4- IN GUISE OF A CONCLUSION: LESSING’S ANOMALY OF LAOCOÖN AND THE BOUNDARY CONDITION OF CLASSICAL ARTISTIC COMPOSITION.**

I am ending this series of reports on the Hudson River School with the founder of the school, Thomas Cole, because it was essential to see everything that he had influenced on so many other artists, before I could deal honestly with his seminal contribution. It is a good thing that I proceeded by way of this inversion, because my understanding of Cole has considerably improved since I began this project six months ago, because it was Cole that had provided the {*sublime*} finishing unity of the school from the very beginning. However, finishing does not mean making the last correction and putting the last dot on a completed product. This question of finishing was an irony that circulated internally throughout the Hudson River School, during the entire 50 years of its existence. The anecdote of this irony related to the young 20 year old Samuel Finley Breeze Morse meeting for the first time, the great American history artist,

Benjamin West, in his London studio, in August of 1811. I give it to you as it was uniquely reported by Dunlap:

*{Morse, anxious to appear in the most favorable light before West, had occupied himself for two weeks in making a finished drawing from a small cast of the Farnese Hercules. Mr. West, after strict scrutiny for some minutes, and giving the young artist many commendations, handed it again to him, saying, "Very well, sir, very well, go on and finish it." "It is finished," replied Morse. "Oh no," said Mr. West, "look here, and here, and here," pointing to many unfinished places which had escaped the untutored eye of the young student. No sooner were they pointed out, however, than they were felt, and a week longer was devoted to a more careful finishing of the drawing, until full of confidence, he again presented it to the critical eye of West. Still more encouraging and flattering expressions were lavished upon the drawing, but on returning it, the advice was again given, "Very well indeed, sir, go on and finish it." "Is it not finished?" asked Morse, almost discouraged. "Not yet," replied West, "see you have not marked that muscle, not the articulation of the finger joints." Determined not to be answered by the constant "go on and finish it" of Mr. West, Morse again diligently spent three or four days retouching and reviewing his drawing, resolved if possible to elicit from his severe critic an acknowledgment that it was at length finished. He was not, however, more successful than before; the drawing was acknowledged to be exceedingly good, "very clever indeed;" but all its praises were closed by the repetition of the advice, "Well, sir, go on and finish it." "I cannot finish it," said Morse almost in despair. "Well," answered West, "I have tried you long enough; now, sir, you have learned more by this drawing than you would have accomplished in double the time by a dozen half finished beginnings. It is not numerous drawings, but the **character of one**, which makes a thorough draughtsman. Finish one picture, sir, and you are a painter." (William Dunlap, Op. Cit., Vol. II, Part 2. p. 309-10)}*

When the artist applied this principle of unity of completion, such as Leonardo da Vinci had done for the Renaissance artistic composition, or as Leibniz had developed it for scientific discoveries, or as LaRouche is implementing it for economic science, then, the question of boundary conditions and limitations between art and science, and between different art forms becomes axiomatically crucial to understand and to locate. As Gotthold Ephraim Lessing showed in his *Laocoön, an Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, the difference between painting and poetry is fundamentally based on the limiting and unifying *{character of one.}*

Such a *{character of one}* is expressed in the following quote by the nineteenth century art historian and archeologist, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, which Lessing transcribed in its entirety in the opening page of Chapter One of his *Laocoön*:



**Figure 13.** Agesander and his sons, Athenedoros and Polydorus, *The Laocoön Group*, circa 400 B.C., Vatican Museum.

*“{As the depths of the sea always remain calm, however much the surface may be agitated, so does the expression of the Greeks reveal a great and composed soul in the midst of passions. Such a soul is depicted in Laocoön’s face – and not only in his face – under the most violent suffering. The pain is revealed in every muscle and sinew of his body, and one can almost feel it oneself in the painful contraction of the abdomen without looking at the face or other parts of the body at all. However, this pain expresses itself without any sign of rage either in his face or in his posture. He does not raise his voice in a terrible scream, which Virgil describes his Laocoön is doing; the way in which his mouth is open does not permit it. Rather he emits the anxious and subdued sigh described by Sadolet. The pain of body and the nobility of soul are distributed and weighed out, as it were, over the entire figure with equal intensity. Laocoön suffers, but he suffers like the Philoctetes of Sophocles; his anguish pierces our very soul, but at the same time, we wish that we were able to endure our suffering as well as this great man does.*

*“Expressing so noble a soul goes far beyond the formation of a beautiful body. This artist must have felt within himself that strength of spirit which he imparted to his marble. In Greece artists and philosophers were united in one person, and there was more than one Metrodorus. Philosophy extended its hand to art and breathed into its figures more than common souls...” (Quoted by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön, an Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1984, p. 7.)*

For Winkelmann, *The Laocoön Group* was generated from an understanding of Schiller's *principle of the {sublime}*. It was with the same living principle of the *{sublime}* that Winkelmann attempted to touch the reader poetically and philosophically, when he wrote this description. This quality of emotion can only be transmitted by means of rising above the ordinarily tragic "feelings of men." This is, for Winkelmann, the reason why the face of Laocoön does not express a scream that would normally be expected under such torment. Therefore, he concluded, the *{sublime}* can only exist when the physical pain is elevated to the heights of a mortal distress that a soul is capable of enduring with serenity and without rage. Thus, a limit of artistic composition is reached when the pain of the body is made to reflect, in an art form, the highest pain of the soul, as was also illustrated in Leonardo's two versions of the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

However, what is most surprising is the fact that Lessing was not in agreement with Winkelmann's view of Laocoön, and his objection to the idea of Winkelmann is expressed in the following statement:

*"{There is even a Laocoön among the lost plays of Sophocles. If only fate had saved this one for us! From the slight references of some of the ancient grammarians we cannot determine how the poet treated his subject. But of this much I am certain: he did not portray Laocoön as more stoical than Philoctetes and Hercules. Stoicism is not dramatic, and our sympathy is in direct proportion to the suffering of the object of interest. If we see him bearing his misery with nobility of soul, he will, to be sure, excite our admiration; but admiration is only a cold sentiment whose barren wonderment excludes not only every warmer passion but every other clear conception as well. I come now to my conclusion: if according to the ancient Greeks, crying aloud when in physical pain is compatible with nobility of soul, then the desire to express such nobility could not have prevented the artist from representing the scream in his marble. There must be another reason why he differs on this point from his rival the poet, who expresses this scream with deliberate intention.}"* (Lessing, Op. Cit., p. 11)

For Lessing, the reason why the face of Laocoön does not replicate the scream that should normally be expected of him in such a terrifying experience is based on the esthetical consideration that the grimace he would have to have made would have to reflect deformity of the body such that ugliness would destroy the artistic beauty of the sculpture.

*"{If we apply this now to the Laocoön, the principle which I am seeking becomes apparent. The master strove to attain the highest beauty possible under the given condition of physical pain. The demands of beauty could not be reconciled with the pain in all its disfiguring violence, so it had to be reduced. The scream had to be softened to a sigh, not because screaming betrays an ignoble soul, but because it distorts the features in a disgusting manner. Simply imagine Laocoön's mouth forced wide open, and then judge! Imagine him screaming, and then look! From a form which inspired pity because it possessed beauty and pain at the same time, it has now become an ugly, repulsive figure*

*from which we gladly turn away. For the sight of pain provokes distress; however, the distress should be transformed, through beauty, into the tender feeling of pity.}*” (Lessing, Op. Cit., p. 17)

Thus, Lessing raised a fascinating problem with respect to the emotional boundary condition of both the artist and the observer of classical artistic composition. The boundary condition could be expressed by the following anomaly: Is the representation of Laocoön’s face surmounting those painful feelings because it reflects the state of a {*sublime*} golden soul or, is his face holding the pain back, because he is a cold-hearted stoic who stifles human emotions for the sake of a beautiful perception? In other words, because stoicism is unacceptable as a dramatic emotion, should the distress of the observer be transformed into pity as opposed to a {*sublime*} admiration? How do these two emotional boundary conditions, pity and the {*sublime*}, affect the spectator? Do they entertain him or do they change him?

Now, compare this question of emotion with Cole’s rendition of Prometheus and ask yourself: does the suffering of such an individual, chained to the rock of torment for the duration of eternity, reflect the {*sublime*} or pity? What is the characteristic beauty of Cole’s *Prometheus*? The answer is not simple if one is to scrutinize clinically the differences between truthfulness and sincerity in human emotions, as well as the underlying assumptions between an American form of art and an oligarchical form of art.

Lessing’s polemic, therefore, raised beautiful questions that become true tests of maturity for the development of both the spectator and the artist in the quest for the highest degree of truthfulness in classical artistic composition. However, a certain “{*hammering of your own personality,*}” as Lyn put it, must first be developed before such questions could be answered appropriately. It is only in fighting evil that a noble and {*sublime*} personality can be forged. Let us, therefore, hypothesize that, first and foremost, it was the *principle of design* of Samuel F. B. Morse against the aristocratic institution of the American Academy of Fine Arts of John Trumbull that established the basis for such questions to be raised and be solved.

Morse gave a public address in defense of such Promethean actions. On that day, Morse expressed the highest form of artistic beauty by reflecting the American principle of institutionalized self-government as a necessary constitutional principle for the domain of art. Thus, the Academy of Design was born. This is how Morse concluded his public historical address against Trumbull and brought down his fictitious American Academy of Fine Arts:

*“{ We believe that our climate is uncongenial to the growth of such an aristocratic plant; and that the public will not be long in deciding whether such an institution, or the National Academy, is most in harmony with the independent character of the country. I come now to speak of the fundamental cause of the collision between the two academies; collision which, it is to be feared will often recur, until this {cause} shall be removed. It lies in the {name of Academy of Arts}, given at its formation to the American Academy of Fine Arts. It was not an Academy of Arts, and could not be,*

*for it wanted the {essential quality} of an Academy of Arts, viz., {a body of artists to control its concerns}; and no provision is made in its constitution, to give it into the hands of artists at a future period. Every Academy of Art in the world is exclusively under the control of artists, who elect their own body, choose their own officers, and manage the entire concerns of the academy; subject only, in aristocratic and despotic countries, to the approval or disapproval of the king or emperor, and even in England the monarch, the {patron}, has yielded to the will of the artist.}*" (William Dunlap, Op. Cit., Vol II, Part 2 p. 344)

Indeed, as Schiller understood it, a Constitution is the greatest gift that a legislator can give to mankind. (4) Such was the highest form of Promethean moral beauty, that Morse offered publically before the court of history and that Thomas Cole established as a requirement for the creation of the new American mission of artistic composition. Thus, it was by breathing that quality of design of the American spirit in every one of his landscape paintings that Thomas Cole solved his conflict with history painting and founded the Hudson River School.

Visible beauty, therefore, was not a high enough characteristic to satisfy the requisite condition for the new American artistic form of composition. Perception had to make way to a non-visible universal physical principle. Suffice it to recall the beauty of the disappearing Indian looking down into the valley of his ancestors in Cole's *The Clove, Catskills*. Could there be a greater act of artistic {*sublime beauty*} than to have nature convey this kind of human truthfulness of the tragic end of Indian culture as disappearing in this ghostly appearance; that is to say, as if the veiled naturalness of nature had produced an effect that should merely seem to have been created by accident?

## FOOTNOTES

(1) William Dunlap defined the idea of "design" in a stricter sense and has found it necessary to reduce his history of the broad domain of « The Arts of Design » to painting only. He has, therefore, deliberately excluded the other forms that are also normally included in this family such as sculpture, engraving, and architecture, and he concentrated his work essentially on biographical notices, including the biography of many living artists of his time.

Dunlap also provided an extensive report (Vol. II, Part 2, pp. 333-46.) on the fight against the British free trade American Academy of Fine Arts that led to a victory of the American System by the artists and to the establishment of the National Academy of Design in 1825 by Morse. Dunlap's report includes the complete speeches for and against imperialist stockholder value respectively made by John Trumbull and S.F.B. Morse. (For the original texts and the significance of that debate, see my report on SAMUEL F. B. MORSE: THE LEONARDO OF AMERICA, 7/4/2008.)

(2) The founding father of American art was Benjamin West, who was not only a role model for several artists of the Hudson River School, but who had also become the royal painter of George III in 1769. West was the founder of the Royal Academy of Great Britain which replaced the decrepit Society of Incorporated Artists in 1770. Controlled by the Dilettanti Society founded in 1734, the Society of Incorporated Artists was a corrupt society of so-called gentlemen and aristocrats advocating openly the “idle” study of the ancient Roman and Greek style for the purpose of “correcting and purifying public taste.” Dilettantism was the founding principle of the British cultural ruling class.

The significance of Benjamin West’s American intervention in Britain during the American Revolution cannot be underestimated with respect to the outcome of the Revolutionary War and the pursuit of artistic composition in the United States during the first part of the nineteenth century. One interesting investigative lead in this regard is found in Benjamin West’s most famous history painting *The Death of Wolfe* (1770). There one finds the presence of an Indian who also seems to appear in West’s painting, *William Penn’s Treatise with the Indians*, (1871). At any rate, the creation of the Royal Academy by Benjamin West in Great Britain was the forerunner to the creation of the National Academy of Design by Samuel F. B. Morse in the United States. The actions of West in 1770 were the model for the actions of Morse in 1820. Dunlap made the relevant rapprochement by showing that, even in Britain, the monarch patron was made to yield to the will of the independent artist:

“{*Sir Thomas Lawrence’s death [in 1830] occasioned the vacancy of the presidential chair of the Royal Academy. –The king, [George IV.,] desirous of seeing the celebrated Wilkie elevated to the vacant seat, hinted his wishes, in a tone a little too dictatorial to the academicians. The academicians, feeling that their independence was attacked, and although Wilkie was a deserved favorite with them all, and but for the officiousness of the king would have been their choice, immediately elected Sir. M. A. Shee their president, who still fills the chair with honor to himself and to his academy.*” So strong was public opinion in favor of this act of independence, that the king ratified their choice.}” (Dunlap. Op. Cit., Vol II Part 2, footnote p. 344)

(3) The German Renaissance of Lessing and Mendelssohn had a direct influence on the American Hudson River School through the Lessing’s grandnephew, Charles Frederic Lessing (1808-1880), who headed the Dusseldorf Academy of Painting during the same period. The German classic influence is most notable in the cases of Whittredge, Leutze, Bierstadt, and Gifford.

(4) Frederick Schiller was critical of both Winkelmann and Lessing idea of beauty as the principle of Greek Art. In a letter From Iena, dated July 7, 1797, Schiller wrote to Goethe:

“{*Now were, it seems to me, just the right moment to review and throw light upon the Greek works of Art from the side of the characteristic: for the views of*



*Winkelmann and Lessing continue to prevail universally, and our latest aesthetic writers, as well on poetry as the plastic arts, do their utmost to free the Beautiful of the Greeks from all that is characteristic, and to make it the standard of the modern Beautiful. To me, it seems, that the latter analysts, in their endeavors to isolate the idea of the Beautiful and establish it in a certain purity, have almost hollowed it out and converted it into an empty sound; that they have gone much too far in contradistinguishing the Beautiful from the right and fitting, and that they have grossly exaggerated a separation which only the philosopher makes, and which is only admissible from one point of view.*

*“Many again fail, I find, in another way, in as much as they refer to the idea of the Beautiful far too much to the subject of a work of art instead of to the treatment, and so they cannot but be embarrassed when they have to comprehend, under a single idea of beauty, the Apollo of the Vatican, and other similar works, -which from their subject alone are beautiful forms, –with the Laokoön, with a Faun, and other painful and ignoble representations.*

*“It is, as you know, the same case with poetry. How have people ever worried themselves, and still worry themselves, to reconcile the coarse, often low and hateful natures in Homer and the tragic poets, with the notions they have formed for themselves of the Grecian Beautiful! Would that someone were bold enough to attempt to throw out of circulation the idea and even the word Beauty, to which all those false notions are inseparably tied, and in its stead to place, as it should be, Truth in its most comprehensive sense!” (Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe, from 1794 to 1805, Vol. I, New York and London, Wiley and Putnam, 1845, p. 281)*

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