Primary Maker: Thomas Cole
Title: The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State
Date: ca. 1834
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: Unframed: 39 1/4 × 63 1/4 in. (99.7 × 160.7 cm) Framed: 53 in. × 6 ft. 4 1/4 in. × 5 3/4 in. (134.6 × 193.7 × 14.6 cm)
Credit Line: Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts
Object Number: 1858.2

Object Name: History
Classification: PAINTINGS

Curatorial Remarks:
In the late 1820s the young Thomas Cole quickly built a successful career as a painter of Hudson River landscapes, but he harbored ambitions of turning the landscape form to a larger purpose. As early as 1827 he conceived a cycle of paintings that would illustrate the rise and fall of a civilization, and a few years later he began sketching and developing his ideas. The artist attempted unsuccessfully to persuade Robert Gilmor, a Baltimore patron, to commission the series, and in 1833 he secured a commission from New York merchant Luman Reed to paint a cycle of five paintings for the art gallery in his home. In the resulting series, The Course of Empire, Cole presented a cyclical view of history in which a civilization appears, matures, and collapses. The artist's distinctly pessimistic vision differed from that of many of his peers; in the early years of the United States' history, its future was considered limitless. Cole drew from a number of literary sources, such as Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of...
the Roman Empire and Byron's epic Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. The motto he attached to the series was taken from Byron's popular poem: "First freedom, then glory; when that fails, wealth, vice, corruption." The artist finally settled on a title in 1835, taken from Bishop George Berkeley's 1729 poem, "Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," which begins "Westward the Course of Empire takes its way." Cole also drew upon paintings he had seen on his recent trip to Europe (1829-32), including the work of J.M.W. Turner and Claude Lorrain. The five paintings follow a dramatic narrative arc, anchored by the imperturbable mountain in the background, and expounded with rich and complex symbolic systems that illustrate this imaginary world's history, including the course of the sun across the sky, the changing relation of man to nature, the role of animals, the arts, and the military, and even the placement and character of his own signature. Luman Reed, Cole's generous patron, did not live to see the completion of the series. He died in June of 1836, but Reed's family encouraged Cole to complete the work. The series was exhibited to great acclaim in New York later that year. The Course of Empire, along with the rest of Reed's collection, became the core of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts. That group of works was donated to the New-York Historical Society in 1858, forming the foundation of its acclaimed collection of American landscape painting. In this second painting in the series Cole imagined a society in a state of ideal balance between man and nature. In an earlier conception of the series the artist described this stage as the epitome of human development, calling it simply "Civilization." Appropriately, he turned to the famed seventeenth-century landscape painter Claude Lorrain's pastoral idylls for inspiration in this harmoniously ordered scene. Cole wrote his patron Luman Reed of his intentions for the picture: "[It] must be the pastoral state -- the day further advanced . . . the scene partly cultivated-a rude village near the bay. . . groups of peasants either pursuing their labours in the field . . . or engaged in some simple amusement." In this morning scene the arts of civilization are flowering: animals are being domesticated at center, dancers pirouette to the music of a flute at right, and smoke emits from a Stonehenge-like temple in a rudimentary form of worship. At the lower left a man draws a geometric form on the ground suggesting the birth of mathematics. The viewer's eye is irresistibly drawn to a boy bathed in light on the footbridge at lower center, whose drawing of a stick figure points to the visual arts. Cole identified himself with this early vision of the arts by placing his initials on the bridge below the boy. He also introduced a disquieting harbinger of this society's future in the man in military garb just emerging from a cleft in the hills near nearby.

Physical Description:
A cultivated pastoral landscape set in early summer bearing signs of advancing human civilization including a harbor town with rudimentary frame buildings under construction, sailing vessels in the inlet, cultivated fields tended by a farmer and shepherd, and figures establishing the creation of mathematics, drawing and painting, the domestic arts, music, and dance.

Signed: Signed at lower right center: "T.C."
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