Primary Maker: Thomas Cole
Title: Landscape (Moonlight)
Date: ca. 1833-1834
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: Unframed: 24 5/8 × 31 3/4 in. (62.5 × 80.6 cm) Framed: 33 1/2 × 41 1/2 × 3 1/2 in. (85.1 × 105.4 × 8.9 cm)
Credit Line: Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts
Object Number: 1858.31

Object Name: Landscape
Classification: PAINTINGS

Curatorial Remarks:
Cole painted this work in about 1833-34 for his patron Luman Reed, using sketches from his first European tour (from 1829 to 1832) to compose a pastoral night scene. The scene is based in part on Lord Byron's 1816 poem entitled "Parasina," which recounts the incestuous love of the eponymous queen for her stepson, who was beheaded when their affair was uncovered. When Cole exhibited the painting at the National Academy of Design in 1834 it was accompanied with verses from the opening of the poem: It is the hour when from the boughs The nightingale's high note is heard; It is the hour when lovers' vows Seem sweet in every whisper'd word; And gentle
winds, and waters near, Make music to the lonely ear. Each flower the dews have lightly wet, And in the sky the
stars are met, And on the wave is deeper blue, And on the leaf a browner hue, And in the heaven that clear
obscure, So softly dark, and darkly pure, Which follows the decline of day, As twilight melts beneath the moon
away. Cole was fascinated by Byron's works in the early 1830s, taking them as subjects for his paintings The Fountain of Egeria (unlocated) and Manfred (Yale University Art Gallery). However, the artist carefully avoided direct references to the shocking story, and seems to have used it to set a romantic mood for his moonlit setting. Cole chose not to include Byron's introductory note explaining the origins of the story. Instead he quoted only the opening lines, which describe the lovely night scene that he depicted, with the moon and stars dramatically illuminating the landscape below. At the lower left a man dressed in a medieval costume plays the lute for a woman, bringing to mind the troubadour tradition of singing narrative poems - perhaps he is relating the story that Byron related in his poem. The tower at right is illuminated with lurid red torchlight, and two men are entering on the lower level as light streams out of the narrow window higher up. The scene suggests that the lovers are about to be discovered, though no such incident takes place in Byron's poem. Rather than directly illustrating an episode from a literary work, as he had done in his series of scenes from James Fenimore Cooper's The Last of the Mohicans in the late 1820s (see the N-YHS painting Romantic Landscape (Last of the Mohicans), 1947.417), Cole used Byron's work as he had his European sketches, as a point of departure to create a narrative of his own imagining.

Related Objects: