Primary Maker: Thomas Cole
Title: Summer Twilight, A Recollection of a Scene in New England
Date: 1834
Medium: Oil on wood panel
Dimensions: Unframed: 14 × 19 1/2 in. (35.6 × 49.5 cm) Framed: 22 in. × 28 1/2 in. × 3 in. (55.9 × 72.4 × 7.6 cm)
Credit Line: Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts
Object Number: 1858.46

Object Name: Landscape
Classification: PAINTINGS

Curatorial Remarks:
Cole painted this and its pendant Autumn Twilight, View of Conway Peak, New Hampshire (1858.42) while he was in the early stages of creating his monumental five-painting series The Course of Empire (1858.1-5). That series traces the rise and fall of an imaginary civilization, and in this pair Cole prefigured the larger themes of the series, but he placed them in an unmistakably American context. The critic and painter William Dunlap recalled visiting Cole in his studio on November 15, 1834 and seeing "2 small jewells [sic] & 2 larger paintings being the first two of the sett [sic] of 5 for Luman Reed Esq." The two large works were The Savage State (1858.1) and The Arcadian or Pastoral State (1858.2), which begin The Course of Empire series. The two "small jewells" [sic] were these seasonal twilight scenes, which closely parallel the themes of their larger counterparts. Cole clearly intended them as a pair: they are the same size and retain their identical original frames. Cole exhibited them together at the National Academy of Design in 1834, perhaps as a preview of his series. By contrast, Summer Twilight glows with
a benign sunset. An ax-hewn stump at lower left signifies the coming of European "civilization," but here man and nature exist in pastoral harmony. The small homestead at the left and the log cabin on the shore at the right nestle comfortably into the scene, dwarfed by the magnificent expanse of water, mountains and sky. Sheep and cows graze, and the lone woodsman at the lower center pauses from his labors to appreciate the majesty of the sunset. This idealized vision is perfectly in keeping with Cole's The Arcadian or Pastoral State, which exalts the fleeting moment when man is in harmony with nature and has not yet overcome it - a moment that Cole saw passing from the American scene.

Related Objects: