Primary Maker: Thomas Cole
Title: The Course of Empire: Destruction
Date: 1836
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: Unframed: 39 1/4 × 63 1/2 in. (99.7 × 161.3 cm) Framed: 53 in. × 6 ft. 4 1/2 in. × 5 3/4 in. (134.6 × 194.3 × 14.6 cm)
Credit Line: Gift of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts
Object Number: 1858.4

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. This fourth and most dramatic of the images in the cycle depicts the ruin of Cole's civilization. On August 30, 1836 the artist wrote to his friend and fellow artist Asher B. Durand "I have been engaged in Sacking & Burning a city ever since I saw you & am well nigh tired of such horrid work." The vainglorious city that Cole depicted in The Consummation of Empire has fallen to a savage enemy, and the critic for the New-York Mirror lauded Cole's critique of imperial rule, agreeing with the artist's depiction that "[s]uch is the merited downfall of all the empires which the earth has heretofore known." Instead of the statue of Minerva, goddess of wisdom, that kept watch over The Consummation of Empire, a headless colossal figure taken from the Louvre's Borghese Warrior witnesses the rapacious acts of the invading army. Cole was likely influenced by the English painter John Martin's panoramic scenes of apocalyptic disaster, and he no doubt knew that his depiction would bring to mind the terror and destruction wrought in New York by the Great Fire of 1835. Unlike the other paintings, here Cole's signature is audaciously large and carved in slashing letters, almost like an act of vandalism, on the pedestal of the ruined statue at the right.

Physical Description:
Depicts the destruction of a once glorious empire by battling armies and the volatile forces of nature including ominous thunderclouds, a storm-tossed sea, and raging fires. The bridge at center collapses under the weight of clashing armies.

Signed: Signed and dated lower right: "T. Cole / 1836"
Related Objects: