Primary Maker: Thomas Cole
Title: The Course of Empire: Desolation
Date: 1836
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: Unframed: 39 1/4 × 63 1/4 in. (99.7 × 160.7 cm) Framed: 53 in. × 6 ft. 4 1/2 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: 1858.5

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. For this last episode Cole described how "violence and time have crumbled the works of man, and art is again resolving into elemental nature. The gorgeous pageant has passed, the roar of battle has ceased - the multitude has sunk into the dust - empire is extinct." Perhaps the most original and certainly the most poetic of the five canvases, Desolation captures the exquisite stillness of a world without mankind; Cole wrote to his friend Asher B. Durand that he intended for the picture to "express silence and solitude." The sun is setting and nature is again reclaiming the landscape: a lizard crawls up a grand column at left that once supported a palace or temple, and herons nest atop it. A buck and doe are poised to drink near the water by the remains of a temple. Cole may have drawn inspiration for these ruins from those he observed on his trip to Europe in 1829-32. In his concluding statement of this grand series Cole showed "art resolving into elemental nature," and he applied this state even to himself. His signature at lower right appears upside down and incised into a stone that is partially overgrown with vegetation. This placement suggests the artist's own mortality and his eventual reunion with nature in death - the "C" in his name has already disappeared under the growth, signaling to the viewer that all the works of man will eventually be reclaimed by nature.