

# EXPULSION *from the* GARDEN *of* EDEN

*An ANALYSIS of the PAINTING by* THOMAS COLE  
*by Emma Jo* MANLEY

Thomas Cole was a painter of the Hudson River School during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He is known mostly for his sweeping American landscapes complete with perfected flora and fauna and small-scale figures that illustrate by comparison the power and vastness of nature. *Cole's Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* demonstrates the idyllic American Eden, not quite real but still a realistic rendering of what is conjured by the American imagination. This mindscape, for it surely cannot be a landscape, is a painting full of opposing forces and contrasts, some of them obvious, some of them not so obvious, and some of them physically impossible.

The most obvious opposition in Cole's painting is the perfect split of the composition, defining the darker (and sinister) left side sharply against the glistening (and virtuous) right side. Cole achieves this divide symbolically with his use of color and light, and practically with his placement of a whopping great chasm. The intense light in the middle of the composition appears to be powerful rather than warm, spreading like crystal protrusions from a source hidden by the stone archway at the edge of Eden, presumably God. This crystallized light is unearthly, illuminating only Adam and Eve and not the surrounding darkness; it glares out from the archway with selective intensity.

As the observer's eye is drawn from the highly detailed garden toward the darker realm, Cole's color scheme changes entirely. Eden is full of crisp blues, greens, and yellows, perfect for fine detail work and still managing a dewy finish. But the further left one looks, these crisp colors give way to deep reds and purples, achieving a warm, damp, lush, tropical feeling; a kind of dark glow with a pulse—it might even smell of decay. (Kind of a Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* feeling.) The monochromatic darkness leaves more room for implication and imagination than dewy Eden. It seems strange that Cole would leave the land outside of Eden to the audience's imagination when this realm is the reality that the audience faces everyday. It is stranger still that Cole meticulously

plans out an American Eden, a fantasy complete with typical North American flora and fauna, making it more real and conceivable than the land to which Adam and Eve have been banished.

In fact, Cole's treatment of the physicality of nature neatly sets up quite a few contrasts. On the purely symbolic level, Cole's miniature figures have made a giant mistake. But as a general theme in Cole's work, it is apparent that nature is so profound and compelling that the human being cannot compete. The mountains reaching skyward and the deep abyss carving the scene in two add to this feeling of nature's infinite power. And because of the exaggerated depth and height, Cole's figures find themselves on a limited path with darkness on either side. Unlike Milton, Cole gives his characters no room to wander. Instead, he contrasts the couple's position now with the intentionally spacious Eden, complete with partially hidden pathways, perfect for errantry, which cater to the curiosity of the observer. Adam and Eve are an interruption to the natural world. Earth and sky erupt as they cross the precipice, and a violent wind blows across the scene, nearly uprooting trees but leaving Eden untouched. The whole world is suddenly aware of a chaos-causing, human presence. The animals are aware of it, too. The wolf in the bottom left corner of the painting is about to kill a surrendering stag. But just as the wolf, surging with adrenaline and primed for the kill, is about to finish the task, it is caught off guard by the approaching humans and recoils in fear. If the wolf has never seen humans before, why should it fear them? How can the wolf see these tiny figures at such a distance in the dark? Here, Cole points out that humans already pose a threat to the natural world.

The *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* successfully portrays a natural world with some unnatural qualities. Cole demonstrates amazing control of the physical behavior of natural objects. He manipulates a very real scene, pulling themes and foreshadowings out of the natural realm he has created, so in the end, it is a strangely fanciful reality, a mindscape with opposing forces and contrasts which might only be conceivable on Cole's canvas.