

DOMINI

CROSSINGS – PONTI SULL'ATLANTICO

Testi in ricordo di Regina Soria

a cura di
Frederick Mario Fales

Liguori Editore

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THOMAS COLE'S VIEW OF THE PROTESTANT BURYING GROUND, ROME (1832-1833) AT OLANA

Christina Huemer (†)

This study is dedicated to the memory of Regina Soria, whose pioneering work on American artists in the Protestant Cemetery revealed the extraordinary significance of ordinary monuments.¹

I am grateful to Evelyn Trebilcock (Olana), Alan Wallach (College of William and Mary), and Kenneth Myers (Detroit Institute of Arts) for their assistance.

Considered the founder of the Hudson River School of painting and one of the earliest and greatest interpreters of the American landscape, Thomas Cole (1801-1848) is less well known for his Italian subjects. Like many other nineteenth-century American artists, however, Cole was drawn to Italy through his study of the old masters and the lure of the classical past. He made two trips to Italy, filling his sketchbooks with studies for future oil paintings. One of these, a *View of the Protestant Burying Ground, Rome* (Fig. 19), now hangs at Olana, the historic home of Cole's first pupil, Frederic E. Church. This subject had a special significance for Cole and his contemporaries and retains its evocative power today.

On his first artistic pilgrimage to Europe, Cole left New York in 1829 and went first to England, where he had been born. After two years there he traveled south through France to Italy, stopping in Paris and Genoa on the way to Florence, where he stayed for seven months. On February 3,

¹ Regina Soria, "Gli artisti americani al Cimitero del Testaccio", *Studi romani* XXVIII, no. 2 (aprile-giugno 1980), pp. 201-211; reprinted, with English translation, in: C. Huemer (ed.), *Spellbound by Rome: the Anglo-American Community in Rome (1890-1914) and the Founding of the Keats-Shelley House*, Roma: Palombi, 2005, pp. 65-77.

1832, Cole set out for Rome with Francis Alexander, a portrait painter, and John H. W. Lane, a young man from Boston. They arrived in Rome on February 8, 1832. «Mother of Dead Empires!» Cole wrote in his sketchbook that night, quoting Byron.² He soon had ample opportunity to compare the poet's words with the reality of ancient and modern Rome. He and Alexander shared lodgings at Via del Tritone 108 and worked in a studio known as the *Tempietto*, located on the corner of Via Gregoriana and Trinità dei Monti and said to have been used by Claude Lorrain. From this exalted spot, they ventured out to see the ancient ruins (Cole was especially impressed with the Colosseum) and the great art collections of Rome and the Vatican. As the weather got warmer, they spent more and more time in the Roman Campagna and took a trip to Naples, Pompeii and Paestum before returning to Florence in June.

The Protestant Cemetery, located in a sparsely settled area on the outskirts of Rome, was not on the usual tourist itineraries, but it was a favorite view of artists and was gaining fame at this time as the burial place of the English Romantic poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Four Americans had been buried there by the time of Cole's visit in April 1832.³ One of them was John Hone, Jr., a New York merchant and patron of the arts, who had died on April 9, 1829, and whose funeral was described by Rembrandt Peale in his *Notes on Italy* (1831).⁴ Thomas Cole thus had a special reason for visiting the cemetery, as he counted several members of the Hone family among his friends and patrons. Philip Hone, a former mayor of New York, was an early admirer of Cole's work, and his nephew John Hone, Jr., was active in the affairs of the American Academy of Fine Arts and had owned two landscapes by Cole.⁵ It also cannot have escaped the artist that the younger Hone had been about the same age when he died, 31 years old, as Cole was at the time of his visit.⁶

² *Childe Harold*, canto IV, stanza 79. Cole's description of his arrival in Rome is in a sketchbook now in Detroit, 39.564 (Archives of American Art, microfilm reel D39, frame 607).

³ Cole's visit may be dated to April by the position of his drawings of the Cemetery in a sketchbook dated March-April 1832 (Detroit Institute of Arts 39.565).

⁴ Rembrandt Peale, *Notes on Italy*, Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1831, p. 173.

⁵ Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, *American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art - Union Exhibition Record 1816-1852*, New York: New-York Historical Society, 1953, v. 2, p. 80: 1827, nos. 118 and 120.

⁶ John Hone's tombstone, which still exists, states that he was 31 years old at the time of death. But Hone was actually born on August 30, 1796 and thus was 32 when he died. His wife, the former Maria Antoinette Kane, and his sister Joanna Howland were with him in Rome. The cause of death seems to have been tuberculosis: the diary of his uncle Philip Hone reports a hemorrhage from the lungs.

For his painting, Cole chose a long, high view from the top of Monte Testaccio (an artificial hill originally formed from discarded Roman potsherds), so that he could include the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, the ancient Aurelian walls and fortified gate (Porta San Paolo), and the Alban Hills in the distance. The foreground of the painting is imaginary and conventional in the Claudian tradition, with tall cypresses and a seated white-clad Carthusian monk on the right, while the middle ground showing the cemetery is accurately observed. A glowing sky at twilight, with a rising moon, completes the picturesque effect.

Two drawings of this subject, a rough sketch and a more careful preparatory drawing, are in a sketchbook now in the Detroit Institute of Arts (cat. 39.565.12 and 39.565.13). Cole also made a small oil sketch of the scene, now in a private collection.⁷ He painted the final, full-size version of the scene in 1833, after his return to New York.⁸

On November 27, 1833, Cole wrote to Isaac S. Hone, John's brother, offering him two pictures in response to his "commission of last spring." The first was an American landscape that he was sure Hone would like.

The other picture, he wrote, I offer with hesitation – It is a view of the Protestant Burying Ground [in] Rome from Monte Testaccio – A spot full of interest to the traveler, from its picturesque situation under the crumbling walls of Bellisarius [*sic*] to the massive Mausoleum of Caius Cestius – & also from containing the remains of two gifted but unfortunate poets Keats & Shelley. But to your family it has a still deeper & more mournful interest & although the circumstances to which I allude was the cause of this choice of subject, I fear that where I would wish to afford a pleasure I may be reviving a grief. If so, I hope you will judge me by my intention.

As Cole feared, Hone took the first painting but not the second. The *View of the Protestant Burial Ground* was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in the spring of 1834, where it was listed as "for sale." It is not known when it was sold, but at the time of Cole's death in 1848 it was in

⁷ Illustrated in Elwood C. Parry III, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination*, Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988, p. 122, fig. 93. The owner is not identified.

⁸ This picture was not in the exhibition of Italian works he organized in New York shortly after his return to America in November 1832, but it is included in a «List of Pictures made by me», undated but ca. 1834, in the category entitled «Painted since my return from Italy» and the owner is listed as «Myself» (Archives of American Art, Thomas Cole papers, roll ALC 3, no frame number, in the "Miscellaneous" section.).

the collection of H. Westervelt.⁹ In 1888, the painting was purchased from a Boston art dealer by Frederic E. Church.¹⁰ It hangs in the sitting room of Church's beautiful home, Olana, across the Hudson River from Cole's own home in later life.

To historians of the Protestant Cemetery, now known as the Non-Catholic Cemetery of Rome, this painting is of considerable interest. Unlike other early views, which focus on the original burial ground (the "Parte Antica"), with its haphazard, picturesque layout, Cole's view shows the newer, planned cemetery laid out in rows after 1822. In that year, a protective wall was built and new burials were forbidden in the "Parte Antica". As a result, the ashes of Percy Bysshe Shelley, who died in 1822, could not be buried in the "Parte Antica" next to his young son William, who had died in 1819. Shelley's tomb is near the ancient wall in what is now known as the "Zona Vecchia," the part of the Cemetery used from 1822 to ca. 1870. Hone's gravestone (Fig. 20) is not far away in the same section.¹¹ Cole's painting shows only a scattering of graves in this area, ten years after it was laid out. He also shows the change of level between the Parte Antica and the "Zona Vecchia" as more pronounced than it is today. In the transition from preliminary drawings to final painting, he changed the position of a church in the background and added what looks like a wall in front of the "Parte Antica", which was not enclosed at the time. (A protective moat, dug around the "Parte Antica" in 1824, was not filled in until 1950.)

Cole's sweeping view does not show individual monuments in detail. But he saw the poet's tombs and knew these words from *Adonais*, Shelley's

⁹ The painting was not included in the "Exhibition of the paintings of the late Thomas Cole at the gallery of the American Art-Union" held in New York in 1848, but in the same year it was lent by the "Estate of H. Westervelt" to an exhibition at the American Art-Union in New York. See *Bulletin of the American Art Union, Containing the Plan of the Institution, List of Its Officers, and Catalogue of Paintings and Other Works of Art* (New York: 1848), no. 267, accompanied by a quotation about the Cemetery from Charles Dickens' *Pictures from Italy* (Archives of American Art, reel D6, frame 988). Westervelt also owned Cole's *View of Boston from Roxbury*. He was probably Harmanus Westervelt (1791-1840), a lawyer in New York City and partner with Judge John Irving, brother of Washington Irving, the author (cf. Walter Tallman Westervelt, *Genealogy of the Westervelt Family*, New York: 1905, no. 374, pp. 68-69).

¹⁰ This information is based on a document in the Church archives in Olana: OL.1980.1916, a bill from Williams & Everett of Boston, dated Dec. 22, 1888, for "painting by Thos. Cole" for \$375. In her historic site description for Olana, Karen Zukowski identified the painting as that of the Protestant Burial Ground.

¹¹ Assuming it was erected shortly after his death, Hone's tombstone is the earliest American stone with a portrait relief and one of the earliest portraits in the Cemetery. The sculptor is not known.

famous elegy to Keats:

Go thou to Rome, – at once the Paradise,
 The grave, the city, and the wilderness;
 And where its wrecks like shattered mountains rise,
 And flowering weeds, and fragrant copses dress
 The bones of Desolation's nakedness
 Pass, till the spirit of the spot shall lead
 Thy footsteps to a slope of green access
 Where, like an infant's smile, over the dead
 A light of laughing flowers along the grass is spread;

And grey walls moulder round, on which dull Time
 Feeds, like slow fire upon a hoary brand;
 And one keen pyramid with wedge sublime,
 Pavilioning the dust of him who planned
 This refuge for his memory, doth stand
 Like flame transformed to marble...

Cole contemplated this scene during the period in which he was developing his plans for a series of five allegorical paintings depicting *The Course of Empire*, now in the New York Historical Society. Conceived as early as 1828 and described in detail in a letter from Florence, dated January 29, 1832, just five days before Cole left for Rome, it was a grandiose representation of the rise, flourishing, and decline of civilization as a single city in a dramatic landscape. At that point, Cole's vision was influenced more by his reading of the Romantic poets than by his actual experience of classical ruins. But his three months in Rome and Southern Italy exposed him to the real thing and provided the visual material necessary to express his ideas.

Painted for Luman Reed, a pioneering New York collector, this first major landscape cycle was not completed until 1836. On November 18 of that year, Philip Hone wrote in his diary:

The series of five pictures by Cole, which he calls the *Course of Empire*, I have seen in their progress, but the pleasure of seeing them finished was reserved for me until this morning. I went with my wife to the Gallery of the National Academy [of Design], where they are exhibited. My expectation... has been more than realized. The conception is sublime and the execution admirable. Cole has immortalized himself...

Cole's genius, like that of his beloved Claude, lay in the fusion of two traditional genres, landscape painting and history painting, into a single dramatic means of communication. Nurtured by reading and visits to galleries,

this fusion came to full maturity in the open air of Italy. Cole's *View of the Protestant Burying Ground, Rome* may be seen as one step in that process. Begun with a specific commemorative purpose, it took on added meaning, depicting «the Paradise, the grave, the city, and the wilderness» that Cole found in Rome.

Sources

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Fig. 18. Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Annunciation*, 1898; oil on canvas, 57 × 71¼ ins. Philadelphia Museum of Art. The W.P. Wiltach Collection.



Fig. 19. Thomas Cole, *View of the Protestant Burying Ground, Rome* (1832-1833). Oil on canvas (reproduced with permission from Otana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, recreation and Historic Preservation).



Fig. 20. Tombstone of John Hone, Jr. (1796-1829), Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome (photo by Serena Galliani, 2009, reproduced with permission).