

Glass of the Titans: Thomas Cole's *The Titan's Goblet* as a Religious Painting

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ABSTRACT

The 1833 painting *The Titan's Goblet* by Thomas Cole stands out as an oddity from his portfolio; its subject matter is strange, and many different historical attempts have been made to understand its meaning. However, most of them have been utterly debunked by the art history academic community. By looking at Cole's personal views and comparing with much of his portfolio, the monumental glass depicted in this odd painting may be more clearly interpreted as a signifier of the lasting power of the Christian God over pagan gods of the past. This recognition can further help us understand the use of symbols in the works of Cole as well as his contemporaries.

Among the artists which formed the early artistic identity of the United States, few figures loom larger than Thomas Cole. Born in England in 1818, he moved to the United States at age 17, where he began teaching himself art by observation of art as well as through replication from books and prints¹. While the majority of his works are landscape paintings, *The Titan's Goblet*, seen in Figure 1, was painted in 1833 at the end of several years of travel through Europe in his career as a painter and stands out as a mystery within his portfolio.

The painting's subject matter is certainly curious: perched on a rocky coast on a monumental scale stands an enormous earthen goblet, overgrown with greenery and brimming with a lake of shining water which pours from it into several windswept waterfalls. Illuminated by a late-day sun, the scene shows evidence of civilization not only on the coast itself, but also atop the goblet's rim and lake. This oddity of a piece has even been recognized and exhibited as an early surrealist painting—quite a departure from the rest of Cole's work, which generally takes the form of realistic landscapes which convey allegorical messages².

Interpretations of the piece have varied widely over the years; unlike the majority of Cole's works, the artist provided no explanation of meaning for the



Fig 1. Thomas Cole, *The Titan's Goblet*, 1833, oil on canvas, 19 3/8 x 16 1/8 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10499>.

piece. The only information given lies in the title, inscribed on the back by Cole³. The first truly prevalent theory concerning the painting's meaning arose in the late 19th century and associated the monumental goblet with the Norse mythological concept of Yggdrasil, the immense tree around which all worlds revolve.

A New York auction catalog accepted and carried forward the theory, writing, "the spiritual idea in the centre of the painting, conveying the beautiful Norse theory that life and the world is but a tree with ramifying branches, is carefully carried out by the painter"⁴. However, scholars have cast doubt on this interpretation, as the likelihood of Cole being familiar with Yggdrasil is relatively low, with the first modern accounts of the tree only being widely published in 1824, and not in English⁵; not only this, but prior descriptions of the piece do not include the idea, instead concluding that the work was "merely, and gratuitously, fantastical," making no connection to Yggdrasil or any similar themes⁶. Therefore, as the Yggdrasil interpretation was only first drawn over fifty years after the creation of the painting, after many prior exhibitions, it is very unlikely as an explanation.

One more recent theory on the nature of the painting comes from Ellwood C. Parry III, a forefront Cole scholar; he proposes that the inspiration for the scene comes from two main places. Within the writings of Roman architect Vitruvius Pollio is a narrative describing a monumental statue holding "a huge cup, into which shall be collected all the streams of the mountain, which shall thence be poured into the sea"⁷. In addition, Cole's sketchbooks from his time traveling Italy include many drawings of large basins rimmed with plant growth (in the manner of the *Goblet*). Parry suggests that Cole combined these concepts to create the work⁸. This amalgamation of ideas which Parry claims Cole assembled is certainly one which the artist has written on, stating that if artists only seek to imitate what can be found exactly in nature, "seldom will anything truly great be produced [in art]"⁹.

While many such theories are viable, I would posit that they are too out of line with the rest of Cole's body of work. Parry's theory as to the inspiration for the piece is logical but does not speak particularly to a "meaning" for the piece, which Cole's works always included. Taking into consideration the stylistic choices in the painting as well as the themes found across his work, I would suggest the subject of *The Titan's Goblet* is more religious in nature than generally believed.

Cole's own faith cannot be questioned even based on a passing glance at his portfolio. He was raised in a Christian household, and he became involved with the Episcopal church following his marriage¹⁰. He maintained a close relationship with St. Luke's Episcopal Church in his home of the Catskills, even designing their new building and painting within it. He was involved in various church committees raising money for church improvements, attended several conventions of the Episcopal Diocese in New York, and otherwise made lifelong friends within his church community. Cole's spirituality was very much entwined with his artistic practice, with biographers even stating that he always prayed before he began painting¹¹.

It is then clear that Cole's worldview, as well as his artistic philosophy, was heavily influenced by his religion. Some scholars feel that Cole's work demonstrated an inner conflict within himself—that he had a split religious "allegiance" between the Christian God and the power of nature, which resulted in the great stylistic differences between his different painting subjects¹². However, the artist's own writings contradicts this; he wrote on the intersection of God and nature: "prophets of old retired into the solitudes of nature to wait the inspiration of heaven ... [God's] voice is YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert; — the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God"¹³. He writes on the power and eternity that can be found in wild nature that has yet been unaltered by humanity. Therefore, we can understand that in Cole's mind, nature and its forces are merely a demonstration of God's power.

Cole's portfolio of completed oil paintings is mostly comprised of landscapes, as well as several more fantastically allegorical or religious works; a small number of his works take their inspiration from works of literature, such as *Scene from Byron's "Manfred"*¹⁴. His only overtly mythological painting is *Prometheus Bound*, an 1846 work depicting the mythical Greek figure chained in his eternal punishment for defying the Olympian gods¹⁵. During his sojourn in Italy, he was greatly influenced by the ancient remnants of Rome still standing there and featured them in several of his pieces across the following years. In general, his pieces can be categorized into landscapes and allegorical works.

Cole's different subject matters are also differentiated in their artistic style. *The Pilgrim of the Cross at the End of His Journey* in Figure 2, for example, is characterized by very visible brushstrokes and a decent amount of impasto, or visually textured painting, achieved thereby. Part of



Fig 2. Thomas Cole, *The Pilgrim of the Cross at the End of His Journey*, c. 1846-1848, oil, 12 x 18 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/pilgrim-cross-end-his-journey-study-series-cross-and-world-5078>

this may be due to the small size of the painting, but in general, Cole's religious paintings feature more conspicuous brushstrokes in a non-figural application, another example being *The Dead Abel* (Figure 3), where such techniques in the landscape are used to highlight the devastation of Abel's corpse, which is rendered in detail. *The Titan's Goblet* similarly employs more painterly brushstrokes in the execution of the sun's rays, the vegetation, and details along the surface of the sea below. Not all of Cole's religious works include these painterly brushstrokes, but it can be found frequently enough to be notable. Therefore, the painting most likely holds some kind of religious meaning. If this stylistic analysis is accurate, then the question remains: what

is the religious implication of the *Goblet*?

Very little of the painting's meaning can be gleaned from any of Cole's own records — the title of the painting is inscribed on its back, but otherwise we have no external context for its meaning. Therefore, the name of the painting is particularly important as we look at it through a religious lens. The Titans of Ancient Greece and Rome were the primordial precursors to the Olympian gods, born to the Earth and the Sky — Oceanus, Coeus, Crius, Hyperion, Iapetus, Theia, Rhea, Themis, Mnemosyne, Phoebe, Tethys, and Cronos¹⁶. In an imprecise context, as referring to any being or object as being enormous in size or reputation, the word was first recorded in



Fig 3. Thomas Cole, *The Dead Abel*, 1832, oil on paper mounted on panel, 17 x 28 1/2 in., Albany Institute of History & Art, <https://www.albanyinstitute.org/collection/details/the-dead-abel>

1828¹⁷. Therefore, Cole could have titled this piece in this way, meaning the goblet belonged to an unspecified large individual/entity. However, the inclusion of classical structures, complete with columns and domes in the miniscule settlements along the Goblet's rim and the coast, implies a Greek or Roman setting, which therefore suggests the eponymous "Titan" to refer to the associated mythos.

The fact that Cole chose this monumental object to belong to the Titans is notable; the entities are an interesting contradiction of power and impotence. They are godly figures, commanding the elements as well as concepts of memory, law, and brilliance of wealth, and yet they no longer rule the Earth. After being overthrown by the Olympian gods, led by Zeus, they no longer were seen as the primary forces commanding nature and took their place in the succession myth that forms a great amount of Greek mythological narrative. Cole chose to specify that the goblet belonged to a race of entities which, once having great power, were supplanted by a consequent, superior group. To then consider these deposed deities in the context of Cole's own Christian faith evokes a strong theme of former religious figures being overpowered and defeated by a more "true" figure, in this case, by the Christian God. As depicted in Paul Gustave Doré's circa 1868 painting *The Triumph of Christianity Over Paganism* (seen in Figure 4), the concept of Christianity battling pagan (polytheistic or ethnic religions other than Judaism) entities is a common metaphor when it comes to Christianization. The "death" of paganism to Christianity is generally accepted to have been fulfilled in the 14th century with the Christianization of Lithuania¹⁸. The means of conversion were various—military conquest, persecution, natural religious shifts, and peaceful conversion. In Cole's own time, the conversion of Native Americans was an instance of the many ways in which conversions occurred. Whether through enslavement and forced baptism, enrollment in residential schools meant to stamp out traditional culture and religion, or through more natural intermixing and religious exchange, Christianity played a vital role in the early interactions between Native Americans and Europeans¹⁹. Militaristic aspects of religious expansion are often noted as one of the most important to the earlier spread of Christianity; it can be seen in many different contexts, such as the wars between the Christian Poles and the pagan Pomeranians in the 11th century. As one of the last pagan regions in Europe, Pomerania stood as a valuable target for those who wished to assert the dominance of Christianity, and the Poles resorted to military conquest in order to finalize the regional conversion. Military successes between the two opposing sides were viewed as "not

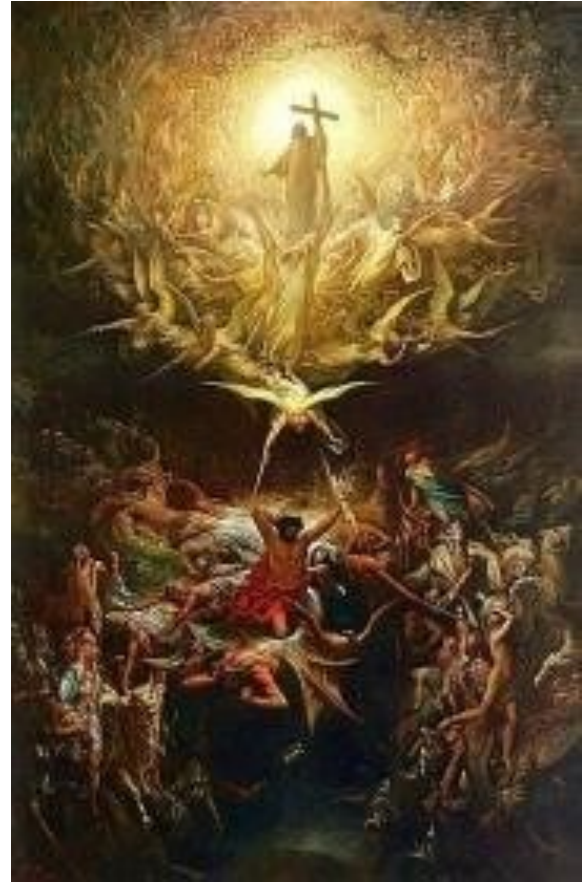


Fig 4. Gustave Doré, *The Triumph of Christianity over Paganism*, 1868, oil on canvas, 118 x 79 in., Art Gallery of Hamilton, <https://tms.artgalleryofhamilton.com/objects/8565/the-triumph-of-christianity-over-paganism?ctx=582e26bd23d518e927c1abcc76abad64379a36db&id=x=18>

of human but of divine hands," thereby further integrating the power of their deities into their conflict²⁰.

The theme within Christianity of the Christian God contending with opposing gods is not one of modern invention; several stories from the Bible pit their God against others. The book of Exodus recounts a confrontation between Moses and the magicians of the Pharaoh, in which the pagan magicians mimic Moses' miracles, but not as powerfully²¹. Similarly, the prophet Elijah was challenged by followers of Baal, a Canaanite god of fertility; Baal and the Christian God were both given an altar and asked for a sign of their power. When Elijah's deity responded to his prayer, the people not only began worshipping with him, but also killed the prophets of Baal who had not received an answer²².

Unlike these biblical and historical examples of inter-religious conflict, the competition depicted in the *Goblet* is not climactic. The victory of the Christian God, being synonymous with nature, is gradual and takes place over time. The goblet of the old gods is not destroyed by His power, but is simply left there, comparative to the abundant ruins of Rome in the Italian countryside, overgrown with nature. This motif throughout Cole's art can be seen in the many depictions of said verdant ruins in modern Italy which came from his travels in the region, such as that in Figure 5, his *Arch of Nero*.

Many such ruins of old Rome were "overtaken" by Christianity in a manner similar to the growth of nature over time. Many Roman buildings (religious or non), after the official Christianization of Rome, were converted into Christian ones; pagan symbols and objects were removed and replaced by symbols of Christ and saints. One notable example of this edificial Christianization lies with the Pantheon in Rome. Initially built as a temple to the twelve Olympian gods, it was converted in the seventh century into a Christian church and renamed the Basilica di Santa Maria ad Martyres²³. Across the empire, Roman basilicas were converted into churches as well, meaning that architectural features and styles originally associated with pagan religion were assimilated into the rising Christian church. In many early instances of later pagan conversions,



Fig 5. Thomas Cole, *The Arch of Nero*, 1846, oil on canvas, 60 1/4 × 48 1/4 in., Mint Museum.

pagan deities were integrated into daily Christian faith and practice with varying levels of success and long-term importance²⁴. Modern societies widely considered to be "fully Christian" still subscribe to many folk traditions and superstitions which have their roots in ancient paganism. In Ireland, for example, many people still warily avoid doing anything which may upset the mythical *sidhe*, fairy creatures which must be appeased with offerings or other customs²⁵. In this manner of slow assimilation maintaining traditional beliefs or ideas, Christianity mirrors not only the greenery depicted flourishing across the surface of the *Goblet*, but also the visual human settlements built on its rim. The cup no longer holds the significance it once held and has now simply become a part of the landscape itself, with life going on around its shape. Appreciation and reverence for classical culture was incredibly widespread in Cole's lifetime, being largely resurrected by the neoclassical movement in the 19th century. By leaving the goblet intact, Cole demonstrates that the many features of the classical world which were still celebrated in the modern one do not need to be fully destroyed in order to be "compatible" with Christianity. While Cole could have chosen to depict a violent and climactic deposition of the old gods, this manner of victory allows him to highlight the beauty of classical culture and claim that it still has a place in the modern world.

In summary of my argument, the painterly style seen in the *Goblet* creates a stylistic tie to the more religious pieces in Cole's portfolio; this departure from the more realistic style seen in his typical landscapes represents a more allegorical meaning. Cole's own strong faith meant that rarely were any of his allegorical pieces devoid of overt religious connotation. Based on the title, we can understand a connection to pagan myth and thereafter, examine the relationship which it had with Christianity and Cole's view of it. Like many of Cole's paintings featuring nature, this painting depicts the force as an eternal one which will eventually overpower all else: an understanding of how Cole saw this power of nature — as an extension of his God — combined with the declared titular association with Titans unveils the core meaning of the mysterious painting. However enigmatic as *The Titan's Goblet* may appear, an understanding of this context illuminates this probable meaning. The monumental overgrown goblet can be read as representing the old pagan gods and their power, and as time has passed, the power of the Christian God has overcome them, leaving only the relics of their empire littering the Earth like Roman ruins. This idea serves as a natural evolution of Cole's recognized artistic concepts concerning the power of nature in comparison with the transience of human civilization.

Notes

¹ Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole, N.A.* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman and Company, 1856), 19.

² Ellwood C. Parry, "Thomas Cole's 'The Titan's Goblet': A Reinterpretation," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 4, no. 4 (1971): 123. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512618>.

³ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴ Anderson Auction Company, *Catalogue of the Interesting and Valuable Collection of Oil Paintings, Water-Colors and Engravings Formed by the Late John M. Falconer (Brooklyn N.Y.)* (New York: Anderson Auction Company, 1904), 41.

⁵ A set of illustrations of Yggdrasil with which the Goblet was compared were published as part of Finnur Magnusson's 1825 book *Eddalæren og dens Oprindelse* (trans. *The Eddic Lore and its Origin*), a compilation of Norse mythic tales; Parry, 126.

⁶ "Miscellaneous Notices," *The American Monthly Magazine*, no. 3 (May 1834): 210, accessed November 14, 2024. https://archive.org/details/sim_american-monthly-magazine-1833_the-american-monthly-mag_1834-05-01_3_3/mode/2up.

⁷ Vitruvius Pollio, *The Architecture of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio: In Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Gwilt (Lockwood, 1874), 30, <https://books.google.com/books?id=QEotAAAAIAAJ>.

⁸ Ellwood C. Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination* (Associated University Presses, Inc., 1988), 138-39.

⁹ Noble, 93.

¹⁰ Cole's actual induction into the church is unclear- he is thought to have been a member by at least 1839, but there is no record of his confirmation, leaving him potentially unconfirmed up until 1844; J. R. Wright, "Thomas Cole and the Episcopal Church," *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 83, no. 3 (2014): 295, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43049882>.

¹¹ Some accounts of Cole's everyday spirituality may be overstated as one of his primary biographers, Louis Legrand Noble, was himself from Cole's same congregation; *Ibid.*, 297.

¹² Carl Pfluger, "The Views and Visions of Thomas Cole," *The Hudson Review*, 47, no. 4 (1995): 629-35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3851729>.

¹³ Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery," *American Monthly Magazine*, no. 1 (January 1836): 2, accessed December 2, 2024. <https://thomascole.org/wp-content/uploads/Essay-on-American-Scenery.pdf>.

¹⁴ Thomas Cole, *Scene from Byron's "Manfred"*, 1833, oil on canvas, 50 × 38 in, Yale University Art Gallery, <https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/9082>.

¹⁵ Thomas Cole, *Prometheus Bound*, 1847, oil on canvas, 64 x 96 in, M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, <https://www.famsf.org/artworks/prometheus-bound>.

¹⁶ Hesiod, *The Works of Hesiod*, trans. Thomas Cooke, vol. 2, (London: AMS Press, 1728), 29.

¹⁷ Robert K Barnhart, *The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 817, <https://archive.org/details/barnhartconcised0000unse>.

¹⁸ Nerijus Pipiras, *Lithuania*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, Annemarie C. Mayer, and Todd M. Johnson, *Christianity in Western and Northern Europe* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 221, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/jj.9941188.23>.

¹⁹ Jessica Keating, *The Assimilation, Removal, and Elimination of Native Americans*, Teaching Human Dignity (McGrath Institute of Church Life, accessed December 10 2024).

²⁰ Bartlett Robert, "The Conversion of a Pagan Society in the Middle Ages," *History* 70, no. 229 (1985): 185-201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24416033>.

²¹ Exod. 7:10-12 (KJB)

²² 1 Kings 18:38-40 (KJB)

²³ "The History of the Pantheon in Rome," Basilica of Santa Maria Ad Martyres, accessed December 5 2024, <https://www.pantheonroma.com/pantheon-history/>.

²⁴ Bartlett Robert, "The Conversion of a Pagan Society in the Middle Ages," *History* 70, no. 229 (1985): 185–201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24416033>.

²⁵ Sharon Ní Chonchúir, "The Superstitious Minds of the Irish - Looking into Our Weird and Wonderful Beliefs," *The Irish Examiner*, September 4, 2014, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20284746.html>.

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