

Thomas Cole's Voyages: Italy and the Metaphor of Maturation

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For the American landscapist Thomas Cole (1801-1848) and a generation of artists in the early nineteenth century, embarking on a study tour of Italy was a journey toward both professional and personal maturation. Alongside the overly-scripted program of aesthetic stimulæ, this international flock of ambitious young painters sought a sensation of spiritual and emotional rebirth like that recounted by Goethe and other forerunners on the well-trod road to Rome, a rebirth complicated by the expanded set of erotic possibilities available in the Mediterranean metropolis. The sensual beauty of classical and Renaissance art accentuated Rome's status as a modern-day center of sexual license, initiating a second adolescence for visitors as they studied these works and refashioned themselves in the image of famous artistic predecessors.

In this light, the spiritual and bodily transformation which forms the subject of Cole's iconic quartet *The Voyage of Life* (1839-40) is more than a Christian allegory of faith, temptation, and perseverance (as originally publicized). The Edenic/Italianate setting of the second canvas, *Youth*, presents its Everyman hero as a handsome, idealistic boy with flowing golden hair, and viewers look with him into the future while admiring and desiring him as an emblem of innocence, beauty, and artistic promise. Through a comparison of Cole's series with related works from the 1830s by Rome-based colleagues like the Swiss painter Léopold Robert and the Dane Ditlev Blunck, this talk will identify Italy's central position along the Voyage of Life narrative and elaborate the ways in which this thematic program contends with the sensual temptations intrinsic to the experience of artistic education through travel.