

A White Atlantic? The Idea of American Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Tim Barringer

My opening contention is that ‘American art’ is a powerful retrospective construction, rooted in the institutional practices of art history and museology. The pervasive myth of a singular American art, with a particular, inherent character and a coherent narrative arc, masks the complex and dynamic interrelationship that existed between the United States and Europe, and specifically with Great Britain, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I will focus on the visual sphere, but my argument would apply just as well to almost any aspect of intellectual or commercial culture during the ante-bellum period. The existence of an autonomous national school of art expressive of the unique political and geographical character of the United States undoubtedly remains an article of faith among many American scholars, curators and collectors to this day, and one with significance for the broader field of art history. At many American museums, narratives and curatorial strategies, even today, tend to articulate an exceptionalism that sequesters the national product. One of its most distinguished monuments, the Metropolitan Museum’s American Wing, a self-contained structure within the Museum, is currently closed for a physical (and perhaps also intellectual?) overhaul.¹ There was some degree of symbolism surrounding the fact that from its opening in 1924 until the 1970s the American Wing was housed in a separate building. And to this day, the nineteenth-century façade of the Branch Bank of the United States, saved from destruction by being incorporated into the museum’s structure, seems to offer a strategic barrier between American art and its European and non-Western others. The façade of an American bank might, in the immediate aftermath of the ‘credit crunch’ of 2008-9, seem a less solid edifice than might previously have been imagined, though victims of the New York banking crisis of 1837 would have found little to surprise them in the recent news from Wall Street.

Behind the façade of the American Wing, the dominant image is of an America that begins south of Canada and ends not only north of Mexico, but north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The Puritan heritage of New England is celebrated, hitherto largely to the exclusion of native American cultures and African American art, let alone the vibrant, often hybrid art forms of the Americas – Latin America, the Caribbean and even Canada. Exhibitions



Fig. 1 Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), oil on canvas, held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

celebrating this view of American art have included the Yankee blockbusters that bookended the Reagan era – ‘American Light’ (1980) at the National Gallery in Washington DC, and ‘American Paradise’ (1987) at the Metropolitan Museum. America is in this view a largely unproblematic territory; one (white) nation under God. The issue of slavery and the Black Atlantic remains invisible throughout and the Civil War is allotted only a minor role in the nation's art history.

One does not have to be an unquestioning avatar of Homi Bhabha to acknowledge that ‘nation and narration’ are profoundly intertwined; national identity and nations themselves are invented and articulated through the propagation of myths.² The role of images in this act of construction has been under-examined, and perhaps the centrality of image making to the process of nation-building explains the fierceness with which national identity is employed as a taxonomic strategy for art and in art history. Enshrined at the heart of the Metropolitan Museum’s American wing, for example, is *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (see **fig. 1**) by Emanuel Leutze, the pre-eminent history painter of the immediate ante-bellum period. (Paradoxically, he was born and trained in Germany). This heroic image has reverberated through popular culture ever since.

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Fig. 2 John Gast, *American Progress* (1872), oil on canvas, held in private collection.

In some cases the naked ideological ambition of an image can outstrip its technical and aesthetic prowess, with unintentionally comic effects – as in John Gast’s wondrously shameless allegory of manifest destiny *American Progress* (see **fig. 2**). Despite such bombastic assertions of

national wholeness, imagined communities are of course fragile and contingent structures, and each national story is constantly contested; as groups and interests within the demos jostle for power, fissures become apparent along the lines of class, gender, religion and region; boundaries are challenged, edges and limits become porous. To note only one of the multiple obvious problems with this ethnically exclusive view of American art, native Americans play in it only the role of picturesque staff in the sublime wilderness (as in Albert Bierstadt’s [Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie](#), 1866), more the savage ‘other’ than a ‘first nation’. Genre paintings such as William Sidney Mount’s [The Power of Music](#) (1847) hint at the existence of alternative traditions such as African American culture, but the painting’s compositional geometry provides a vivid metaphor for a social architecture which precludes racial interaction and equality. The free African-American labourer is located beyond the threshold with the emblems of his work, as his white counterparts play music in the barn. While the painting’s title is *The Power of Music* its major theme is the boundaries and restrictions of more political and ideological forms of power. It emblematises a black American population located beyond the pale of ‘American art’.

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It is worth briefly noting here an important museological departure at the Metropolitan Museum. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2006, the contemporary American artist Kara Walker whose disturbing, combative work explores issues of race, gender and sexuality through the nineteenth-century medium of cut-paper silhouettes was invited to juxtapose a variety of objects from the Museum's collection (such as Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream*, 1899) with her own work. The exhibition was, significantly, supported by an extensive internet presence.³

The notion of 'American art' was only incipient in the ante-bellum years, and as Alan Wallach has observed, the consistent failure of attempts to found a National Gallery in the United States in the years after the Civil War reveals deep fractures in the American polity, most importantly over the profoundly divisive issue of slavery.⁴ William Wilson Corcoran planned in the 1850s to create an 'American Louvre' dedicated to the 'promotion of the national genius'. A slaveholder, it is intriguing that his most cherished work of sculpture was a version of Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave* (see fig. 3), a work satirized in *Punch* as the 'Virginia Slave' on its appearance in the Great Exhibition in London in 1851.⁵ Corcoran's plans had not reached fulfillment before the Civil War and in 1861, a supporter of the Confederacy, he shipped his fortune overseas and went into exile. On his return, the 'American Louvre' had been transformed into a Union army clothing depot. The failure to create a national gallery of American art before 1865 perhaps reveals the post-colonial condition of a nation still tacitly accepting that the

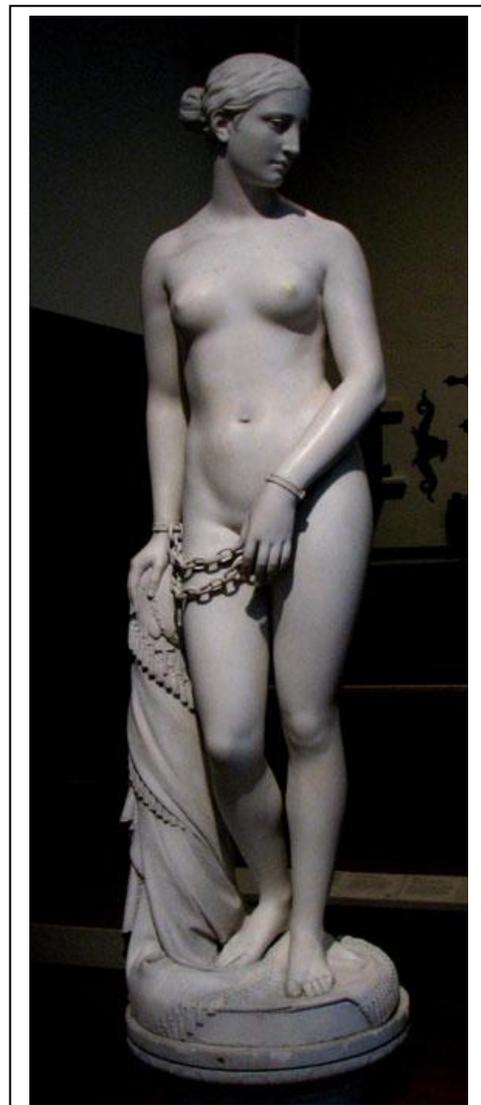


Fig. 3 Hiram Powers, *Greek Slave* (original c.1847), photograph of 1851 copy held at Yale University Art Gallery.

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cultural ‘center’ lay elsewhere. The founding of the Metropolitan Museum in 1870 was a significant act of redoubled national confidence in the reconstruction era. It was not, however, until 1941 that a National Gallery opened in Washington DC, and despite an impressive programme of acquisitions of the native product, its greatest strengths lie in the old masters and Impressionism rather than in American art. The National Gallery explicitly avoids the role of custodianship of the local tradition. (The United Kingdom's pragmatic if ungrammatical solution to this problem is ‘Tate Britain’, which is awkwardly contrasted with ‘Tate Modern’, as if British Modernity were impossible. Britain's National Gallery, furthermore, contains relatively few British paintings and completely eschews Victorian art). The private Whitney Museum of American Art founded in 1931 focuses exclusively on the twentieth century, and only in 1968 was a federal collection, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, finally opened to the public. It is now housed, appropriately, in the building created by the architect James Renwick for Corcoran’s failed national gallery of American art in 1859.

Lurking not too far beneath this formal structure is the Hegelian idea of an abstract national spirit or *Volksgeist* manifesting itself in art. The notion of national ‘school’ can all too easily imply a collective project emanating from a culturally and ethnically pure population group; in its crudest formulation, it glorifies conformity to a ‘national style’ and exiles that which dissents from it, the transient, hybrid or miscegenated. The sidelining of Southern, Western and African-American art and native American art through most of the twentieth century would conform to this pattern. Consonant with the notion of a national school is the Hegelian (and also Ruskinian) belief that from works of art and architecture can be read the emergence, fruition and decline of a national spirit. And one only has to look at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to find traces of this – a compelling account of the triumph of American painting in the 1940s through to Pop and Minimalism gives way to a much shakier grip on the contemporary globalised moment in artistic production. MoMA’s narrative has uncanny and unspoken parallels with Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* (1851-53), its parable seeming to offer a narrative of inexorable rise and fall. But even art historians who reject this essentialist and explicitly deterministic account of the relationship between national identity and artistic production routinely employ categories of art-historical understanding

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deeply conditioned by conceptions of national identity. Most major American university departments of Art History have an ‘Americanist’ who is expected to range over a broad chronological span (c.1700-1960), but stick to the local product, and a ‘Nineteenth Century’ specialist. The latter almost invariably teaches only a small corpus of French art. Much, then, rides upon the idea of ‘American art’.

It is hardly a radical move to assert that the United States in the nineteenth century was a heterogeneous culture and not the homogeneous monolith suggested by museum displays and art historical narratives. In this exploratory article, I would like to move a little further and to mobilize an alternative model to counter the exceptionalist account of American art. That is, I’d like to argue that the United States in its first century of existence was a post-colonial construction, with its deep and enduring, although contested, cultural ties to Britain and the British Empire. If we follow the crucial work of historians of African-American culture and place all of American artistic production from the moment of colonization until at least the Civil War in a broad circum-Atlantic context, the narrative becomes one of compromise, syncretism and hybridity, rather than one of uniqueness, purity and difference from the European norm. In recent writings Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach have opened up the ‘Black Atlantic’ as a space of cultural and performative exchange, arguing that a single cultural zone brought together London and New Orleans, Kingston, Jamaica and the ports of the Ivory coast. My recent work has been on Jamaica as a nexus of Atlantic culture, and I would like to propose a view of America which reads it as in some sense a part of the Caribbean – as a hybrid culture born of empire, peopled by multiple waves of migration and immigration, and built at a fundamental level upon slavery.⁶ Such a model could certainly be applied to the culture of the dominant population of the United States, producing an account of American national identity, seen as a fluid entity within a global commerce of images, objects and people – which we might perhaps call the White Atlantic. To see the USA as one node within the flux of an Atlantic world better accounts for the complex allegiances and rich multiethnic heritage of the present population of the USA as well as the vibrant presence of European cultural forms in the USA – and of American literary, artistic and technological innovation within European culture too. While the term ‘post-colonial’ has emerged from the study of twentieth-century history, there is much to be

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gained by speculatively placing the USA in the same analytic framework. There is every reason to suppose that there was no single idea of American art in nineteenth-century Britain, and that there was no Manichean separation of British from American art work; certainly this was not the case until the Civil War, which provides an historical watershed in this as so many ways. I shall argue that the understanding of particular works of American origin was shaped by their familiarity; by a sense of belonging to what one might call an Anglophone Atlantic visual culture. This was the art of the white Atlantic – rather than an American art marked by its alterity from European traditions, as art history has presented it. In offering an initial exploration of this thesis I will examine two case studies. The first concerns the response in London to expatriate American artists domiciled there around 1800. The second, closer to my own main research interests, engages with American landscape paintings and painters in mid-nineteenth century Britain.

I

Americans in London c.1800

John Singleton Copley cannot be described in any way as post-colonial. He was colonist, born a subject of the British Empire in Boston in 1738. His portrait of *Paul Revere* (see **fig. 4**) has become an icon not only of American art, but of America itself, widely reproduced, and often considered to enshrine the plain, homespun virtues of the revolutionary hero, and an embodiment of the Protestant work ethic, portrayed with a degree of realism impossible in the frivolous and decadent aristocratic culture of Britain. The problem with Copley is that this

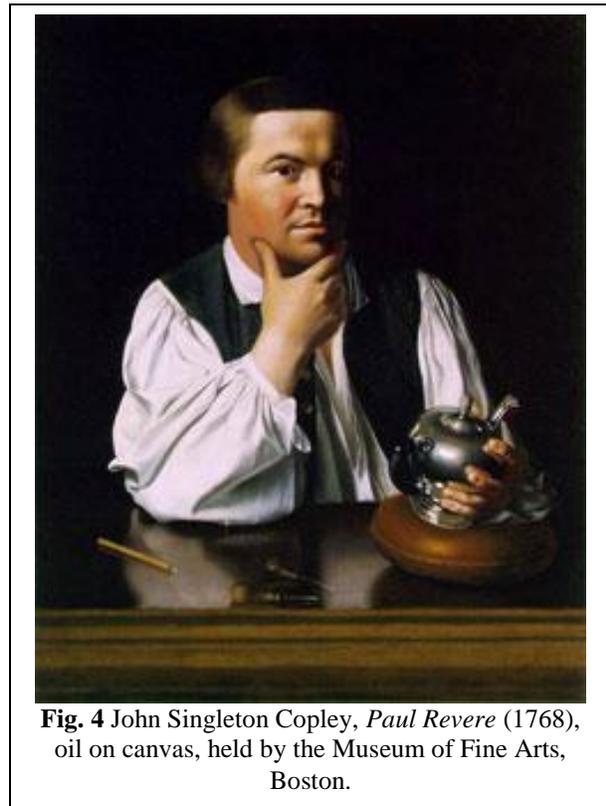


Fig. 4 John Singleton Copley, *Paul Revere* (1768), oil on canvas, held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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account contradicts his own often stated belief that cultural ‘improvement’ was only possible at the metropolitan centre, in London, and that the colonies were ‘intirely destitute of all just Ideas of the arts [...] We Americans seem not half-removed from a state of nature’.⁷ Despite his links with the likes of Paul Revere, Copley was on the losing side politically. Ambitious and supremely talented, as his self-portrait of 1776-80, now in the National Gallery in Washington, reveals, Copley enjoyed extensive family connections with loyalists and was directly connected through his father in law Richard Clarke with the merchants whose stocks were thrown into the Boston harbour in the famous tea party of 1769.

Copley’s aspirations, as early as 1766, had been focused on London, and in that year he shipped a portrait of his younger brother, entitled *Boy with a Squirrel* (see **fig. 5**) to the Society of Artists’ exhibition, where it became the first American painting to be exhibited abroad. Its success won him membership of the Society. In a brilliant recent reading of this work, Jennifer Roberts tracks its circuitous transatlantic journey via shipping agents and middlemen, and its eventual arrival at Sir Joshua Reynolds’s studio, where it was understood to be the work on one ‘William Copley’.⁸

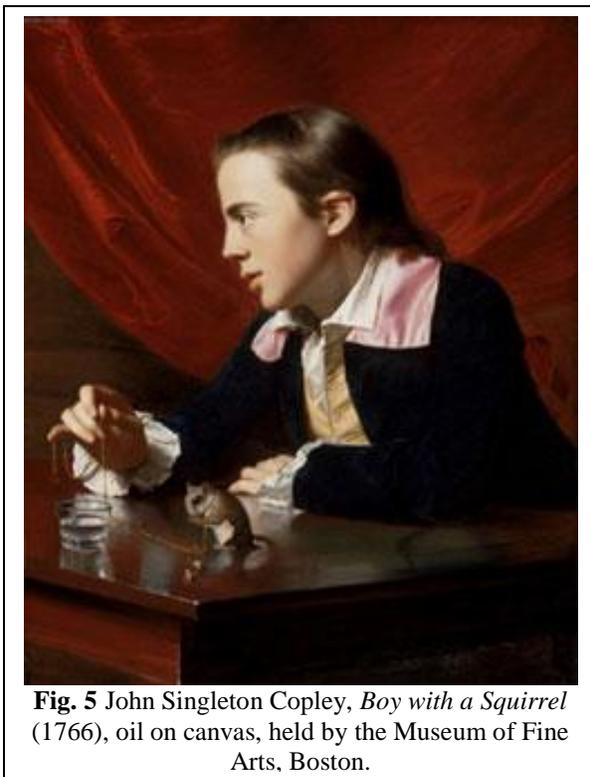


Fig. 5 John Singleton Copley, *Boy with a Squirrel* (1766), oil on canvas, held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

As Roberts notes, like so many transatlantic commodities – such as the prized otter skins that travelled from the colonies to the center – paintings at this moment stood the risk of damage, or of being misunderstood or undervalued at their destination, when they were thrown into a global marketplace of which their American producers had only an imperfect knowledge. Copley’s painting – with its curious intensity of vision but evident ignorance of established painterly technique or the aesthetics of the grand manner – signified in London as something of a colonial curiosity. In this

regard it resembled the works of provincial painters such as the young Joseph Wright of Derby (whose work it was thought to be by critics at the time), as revealing an unschooled though significant talent. Reynolds found it ‘a very wonderful performance’ despite ‘an over minuteness’.⁹ The prominent inclusion of the flying squirrel, a uniquely American species (as can be seen by comparison with a plate by the American natural historian Mark Catesby), played up this colonial exoticism, but also emphasized Copley’s plainspoken empiricism – both of them problematic as Copley aspired to gain metropolitan recognition. Writing in the *New York Review of Books* in 2008, the late John Updike noted that: ‘This picture’s transatlantic intentions give it a schizophrenic quality: the mahogany table top, the water glass, the gold chain, and the tiny pet flying squirrel all have a dry minuteness, but the subject’s face, unlike that of Copley’s usual hard-faced colonials, is creamy, dreamy and Romantic in profile.’¹⁰

Updike attempted to identify what is, and what is not, authentically American within a single work. His perceptions mirror those of contemporary viewers in London, though they coded what Updike saw as wholesomely ‘American’ as being merely naïve and uncultured. Receiving the good tidings of his success only months after his dispatch of *Boy with a Squirrel*, Copley followed it with *Young Lady with a Bird and Dog* (see fig. 6), which elicited a less positive response. Copley’s eminent compatriot Benjamin West, long domiciled in London and never to return to Philadelphia, explained, in a letter from London, that ‘Each Part being [...] Equell in Strength of Coulering and finishing, Each Making too much a Picture of its silf, without that Due Subordanation to the Principle parts, viz they head and hands’.¹¹ In a telling phrase, West encouraged Copley, who

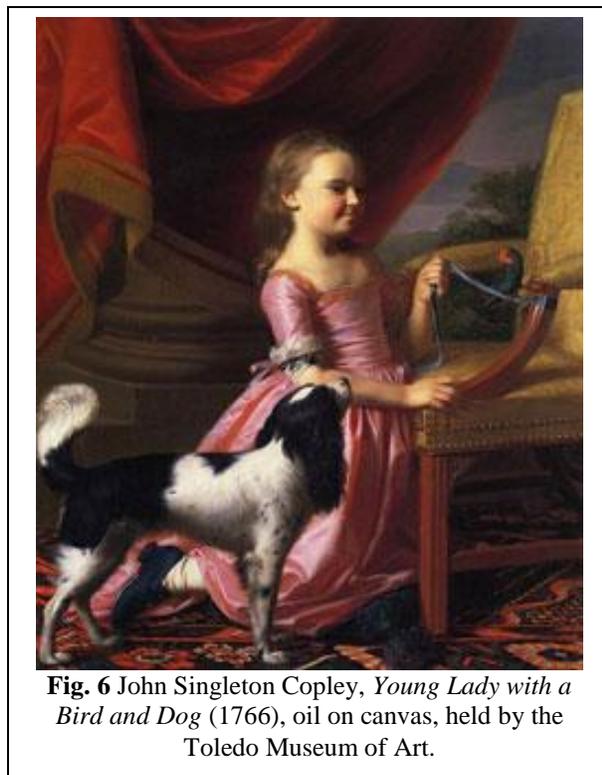


Fig. 6 John Singleton Copley, *Young Lady with a Bird and Dog* (1766), oil on canvas, held by the Toledo Museum of Art.

had never been to England, to come ‘home’ to London ‘before your Manner and Taste were corrupted or fixed by working in your little way in Boston’ and ‘it may be too late for much Improvement’.¹² West’s self portrait, seated in the President’s throne at the Royal Academy shows him ‘at home’, surrounded by emblems of his deep links to European culture, a cast of the Belvedere Torso – one of the Vatican’s greatest treasures of antiquity – lurking emblematically to the right.

It was as much the dangers presented by his loyalist affiliations as his aspirations to succeed in the metropole that led Copley to head for England in 1774, never to return. In 1775 he wrote from London ‘It is a pleasing reflection that I shall stand amongst the finest artists that shall have led that country [America] to the knowledge and cultivation of the fine arts’.¹³ This act of national betrayal has become a structuring trope in the historiography of American art. As early as 1834, in *The History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, William Dunlap claimed that ‘Copley was, when removed to England, no longer an American painter in feeling’.¹⁴ In a concluding chapter entitled ‘The Early American Tradition’ in his *History of American Painting, vol. 1 (The Flowers of Our Wilderness)*, the influential mid-twentieth century art historian James Thomas Flexner added, picturesquely, ‘as Copley walks up the gangplank of a square-rigged ship during June 1774, our curtain falls behind him, bringing an end to the first act of American art’.¹⁵ In the 1990s, two rival exhibitions were held, called ‘Copley in America’ and ‘Copley in England’ – but they might as well have been subtitled ‘good Copley’ and ‘bad Copley’.¹⁶ The Metropolitan Museum chose to show only the American Copley. A review of Jules Prown’s path-breaking 1966 study of the artist made plain that ‘no matter how good Copley was as an Englishman, he was far more interesting as an American’.¹⁷ The concept of American identity was also a keynote of Prown’s argument, though he presented a far more sophisticated case than the many forthright exceptionalists among his contemporaries at the height of the Cold War:

The essential character and strength of American art is not the result of independence from the Western artistic heritage; rather it results from the intense, almost greedy, drive on the part of American artists to absorb as much of that heritage as possible while at the same time, with enterprise and ingenuity, transmuting it into artistic statements that are distinctively, if not always consciously, American. A peculiarly American art has gained in vigour and definition over several centuries until in our own time [1966] it has become a primary cultural force.¹⁸

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Fig. 7 John Singleton Copley, *The Copley Family* (1776/7), oil on canvas, held by the US National Gallery of Art.

In this account, a plucky and enterprising Copley takes his place in, and perhaps even makes possible, a teleological history that surely culminates with the indisputably vigorous Jackson Pollock and even perhaps even with the ‘cultural force’ that was Andy Warhol.

With his tour-de-force *The Copley Family* (see **fig. 7**), strongly influenced by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the leading British artist of the day, and exhibited to great acclaim at the Royal Academy of 1777, we get a first glimpse of British responses to Copley, and thus the first flickers of attention drawn by American art in the British press.

Evidently Copley had not moved far enough towards the grand manner, since in an echo of West’s warning to the Boston artist, the *Morning Chronicle* in 1777 admired *The Copley Family* but found the landscape ‘so glaring’ that it was ‘difficult for a beholder to guess which object the painter meant to make his main subject’.¹⁹ In the year after the

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American Revolution, the nascent field of art criticism in London utterly ignored Copley's American background, one columnist merely noting that the work made him (as he thought) 'conspicuous in the Croud'.²⁰ The *Morning Chronicle* did admit that 'Mr Copley, from the sheer size of his family piece, is likely to be as much the subject of observation in the rooms as any artist who has exhibited'.²¹ As a colonist, he was merely one Englishman among many.

Copley's great rival was Benjamin West, whose life, since the Scottish novelist John Galt's biography of 1816, has likewise been divided into halves.²² In the first volume, Galt relayed tales of the instinctive American genius born of an old Quaker family Springfield, Pennsylvania, associated with anti-slavery campaigns. He made his first paintbrush by stealing hairs from the family cat Grimalkin, an episode which entered modern popular culture as the subject of a classic 1947 children's book by Marguerite Henry.²³ The untutored West in Galt's account created untutored portraits of local worthies, was taught by American Indians to prepare colours, astonished Roman society by comparing the Apollo Belvedere to a Mohawk warrior, and tactfully used the same pose for his portrait of the less physically imposing figure of the British general *Sir Robert Monckton* (1764, private collection).

The second half of Galt's biography makes relatively little of West's American-ness, and sees him becoming one of the very few painters to receive extensive Royal patronage. I have encountered no suggestion in contemporary sources to suggest that a work like the [*The Institution of the Order of the Garter*](#) (1787) painted for Windsor Castle was a work of 'American art', or that such a category could even be imagined. Even West's most radical creation, the modern-dress history painting [*The Death of General Wolfe*](#) (1770) was controversial for aesthetic reasons rather than because of its imperial politics, the presence of an American Indian indicating the success of the British colonial operation rather than a distinctive aesthetic for the colony. Wolfe's status as an imperial martyr in the battle of Quebec is emphasized through an iconographic connection with Christ, despite the modern dress. When he discussed the American War of Independence with George III, 'his Majesty knowing the Artist's connection with that country', he was 'able to supply the King with some more circumstantial information'.²⁴ Despite his local knowledge of the soon-to-be-former colony, West was surely perceived by this moment as being English – an identity

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confirmed by his assumption of Reynolds's position as president of the Royal Academy, the most senior role open to an English artist.

II

Transatlantic Landscape

History painting and portraiture were the dominant pictorial genres that bound together the white Atlantic in 1800, the former strongly inscribed with elements of imperial ideology, and the latter a confident assertion of familial and mercantile ties within in a transatlantic elite. But landscape was the idiom in which the centripetal and centrifugal forces of America's post-colonial relationship to Britain would be most forcibly felt during the mid-nineteenth century. West and Copley generally avoided the genre at the moment of its emergence in Britain as the key medium for the definition of national and imperial terrain. Galt's biography of West specifically rules out the American landscape as a worthy subject: in contrast to the Alps or Greece, 'in the unstoried solitudes of America, the traveler meets with nothing to awaken the sympathy of his recollective feelings.'²⁵ Washington Allston, the South Carolina planter's son who was educated at Harvard, and became the first American to fashion himself as a Romantic painter, created some powerful essays in landscape while in Europe in 1802-8 and 1811-18, but never turned his attention to the American landscape itself. He did however write a letter of advice to a young American painter emphasizing that 'I find no modern school of landscape painting equally capable with the English', and particularly emphasizing Turner, who 'take him all in all has no equal in any age'.²⁶

Indeed, with the brilliant success of J.M.W. Turner in the first decade of the nineteenth century landscape unexpectedly became the most prominent genre in transatlantic art in the Anglophone world. An American tourist recalled meeting Turner in the 1830s in France, and the ageing artist had remarked that he was:

Curious about American scenery, and especially the autumn tints of our foliage. He thought it was in vain to paint it [though] he subsequently admitted that he had seen one or two very beautiful pictures from America, of this kind of scenery, and had long entertained the idea of going to see it for himself.²⁷

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These were perhaps those exhibited by Thomas Cole at the Royal Academy and the British Institution in 1830. Here, again, the White Atlantic features as an interstitial space with multiple crossings. Cole was born in Bolton-le-Moors, Lancashire, England, in 1801, the son of a textile manufacturer belonging to a community of Dissenting Protestants in the early years of the industrial revolution. He worked as an engraver in a calico factory in 1815 and became an engraver's apprentice in Liverpool in 1817, where through the engravings inevitably present in a printmaker's shop, he must have absorbed the main tropes and effects of British landscape art and especially of Turner, its leader. Cole followed his family across the Atlantic in 1818, and more than any other artist, has been positioned as the font of a distinctively American art: so, for example, in Henry H. Tuckerman in *American Artist Life* of 1847: 'To [Cole] might be directly traced the primal success of landscape painting as a national art in the New World; his truth and feeling excited enthusiasm.'²⁸ Although his status as an immigrant was typical rather than exceptional, Cole's biographers felt the need not only to establish his American identity, but also to dissociate him from his British origins. William Cullen Bryant made the following demonstrably untrue claim in his funeral oration for Cole:

He regarded himself [...] as an American, and claimed the United States as the country of his relatives. His father passed his youth here, and his grandfather, I have heard him say, lived the greater part of his life in the United States.²⁹

The key text here is *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, by the painter, playwright and journalist William Dunlap, which was first published in 1834 during Cole's lifetime and with the artist's active support. The paradigmatic episode in Dunlap's account is Cole's visit to the Hudson Highlands and the Catskill mountains – a direct confrontation with the wilderness which transformed him into an American genius. It was only four years later, and only a decade after he had left England, however, that Cole decided to visit Europe, wanting in particular, he wrote to a friend 'to be in London in time to see the Exhibition at Somerset House'.³⁰ Here he saw Constable's *Hadleigh Castle* (1829) and Turner's [*Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus*](#) (1829), of which he made careful drawings. Cole visited Turner's studio on 12 December 1829 and saw [*Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*](#) (1812), 'a sublime picture with a powerful effect of Chiaro scuro'.³¹

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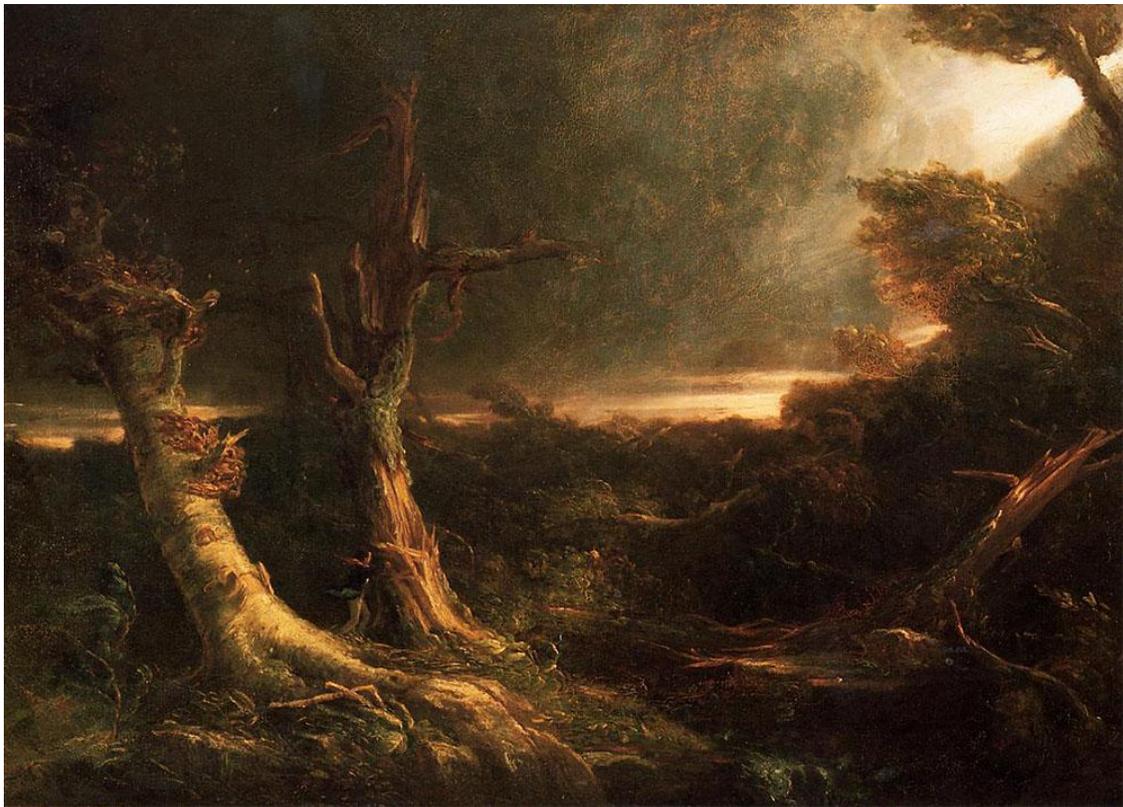


Fig. 8 Thomas Cole, *A Tornado in the Wilderness* (1830), oil on canvas, held by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Fig. 9 Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Savage State* (1834), oil on canvas, held in the Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

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With high hopes, Cole himself sent a painting of *The Falls of Niagara* (now lost) – an unmistakable emblem of American difference – to the British Institution, where it did not meet with the heroic welcome he was hoping for. He wrote: ‘Imagine the mortification of finding it, as well as another picture of mine, hung so that it cannot be seen.’³² The press completely ignored the canvas. Hoping for better, he sent to the so-called ‘landscape Academy,’ the Society of British Artists at Suffolk Street, what he described as ‘the grandest picture I have painted’, *A Tornado in the Wilderness* (see fig. 8). Cole wrote to Dunlap that ‘it was praised exceedingly in several of the most fashionable papers’.³³ Some hours in the British Library and the latest on-line reference tools fail to unearth any of these references, suggesting that Cole may have been embroidering the stark reality of London's indifference to his work.

If Cole's attempt to persuade the British press and public of the merits of American painting resulted in very few sales and virtually no press coverage, his own responses to the trip, I suggest, laid the groundwork for his series *The Course of Empire*, conceived in 1831 and completed in 1836, a key work of the white Atlantic inter-culture.³⁴ Following an imaginary country through the stages of historical development, from the Savage State through a Pastoral or Arcadian era, it moves on to demonstrate the dangers of overweening luxury in *Consummation of Empire* through canvases depicting *Destruction* and *Desolation* (see figs. 9-11). It has conventionally been understood as an allegory of American progress and the dangers of Jacksonian expansionism. I have suggested elsewhere, however (to the incredulity of American colleagues), that Cole was alluding to the overweening ambitions of the empire at whose heart he grew up, and whose crisis and ultimate military victory in the Napoleonic Wars he experienced during his adolescence – that of Britain. *Consummation of Empire* reads smoothly as a satiric view of Imperial London, with commercial and government buildings astride a fantastic depiction of the River Thames in the decadent, but opulent, regency and personal reign of George IV.

Its creamy fantasy architecture has as much in common with the theatrical stucco of John Nash's Cumberland Terrace (1826) in Regent's Park, as with Trajan's Rome. Explicit compositional and conceptual debts to Turner and Constable add to these overtones and place the work firmly in the context of British Art. Constable's grandiose *Opening of Waterloo*

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Fig. 10 Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire* (1836), oil on canvas, held in the Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

Bridge (1831) was in his studio when Cole visited in 1829. Turner's [*Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*](#) (1812), which Cole had admired in Turner's studio was surely a decisive influence on *Destruction*. These works are true white Atlantic hybrids – allegorizing both the rise of the USA and the fall of the British empire, they announce the arrival of an American art which is nonetheless formally and technically virtually indistinguishable from its British counterpart. *Desolation* is neither more nor less than a New World re-working of *Hadleigh Castle*, Constable's apocalyptic vision of an England ruined by modernity and reform.

Cole's *Course of Empire* was at the heart of a vigorous, though unsuccessful, attempt to found a National Gallery in New York in 1850, and the paintings were not seen in London until 2002 when they were included in the exhibition Andrew Wilton and I curated – ironically, or perhaps appropriately, at Tate Britain. A century and three quarters after Cole's bruising encounter with the London critics, their successors caught on to the idea of nineteenth-century American Art, but perhaps inevitably that entirely insular phenomenon,

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Brian Sewell, of the *Evening Standard*, described *The Course of Empire* pictures as ‘nincompoop absurdities’.

An interlude in the history of the reception of American art in Britain can be found in the visit of the pioneering western explorer and ethnographer George Catlin to London in 1839, along with 310 portraits of north American Indians, 197 scenes of Indian life in oils, a 25-foot high Crow Lodge and crate loads of curiosities including craftwork, clothes and weaponry, and finally two grizzly bears.³⁵ The show at the Egyptian Hall, which opened in 1840, was a popular if not a commercial success: ‘the English grudge a shilling,’ wrote Mrs Catlin, ‘more than the Americans do 50 cents’.³⁶ Catlin provided lavish ethnographic interpretation to accompany his show, following the precedent of single-painting exhibitions by Copley and others. In the end, Catlin took to wearing Indian dress himself and at one point he is thought to have hired poor Cockney boys from the East End to perform in a kind of blackface as Indians, allowing John Leech in *Punch* to execute a visual pun linking the American savages with those of the East End of London. Paintings were only one element in



Fig. 11 Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Desolation* (1836), oil on canvas, held in the Collection of The New-York Historical Society.

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the show and when Catlin was presented to Queen Victoria in 1843 it was as ‘the celebrated North American traveler’ not an artist.³⁷ But while Catlin’s landscapes are somewhat schematic, his portraits of Indian figures have a striking grandeur which owes little to European precedent. Here one does sense an art emerging from the unique circumstances of North America. A monumental installation of Catlin's Indian Gallery can now be seen in the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

A culminating work in the inter-culture of Anglo-American landscape painting from before the Civil War is [*Autumn on the Hudson River*](#) by Jasper Francis Cropsey, begun in London in 1858 during the artist’s five-year residence in Kensington. When the picture was exhibited in 1860, Cropsey prepared an accompanying pamphlet, noting that the work represented the view from hills ‘on the west bank of the Hudson looking towards its mouth, about sixty miles from New York, between Newburgh and West Point. The time of year is the month of October’. The painter's stated aim was to convey ‘the vastness and magnitude of the American landscape, the clearness and beauty of the atmosphere, and the richness and variety of colour in the foliage during the ‘Indian Summer’ period of the year’.³⁸ The work was shown in Cropsey's studio, and then in a public gallery in Pall Mall. The *Art Journal* noted:



Fig. 12 Frederic Church, *The Heart of the Andes* (1859), oil on canvas, held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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‘At first, we are well-nigh startled at the red and golden gorgeousness of those trees of slender and perhaps somewhat wayward growth which rise on each hand, and range away in the middle distance towards the lake-like river.’ The ‘remarkable vegetation’ was the subject of some disbelief, and an oft-repeated anecdote has Queen Victoria questioning Cropsey’s admittedly garish colours, only to be confounded weeks later by the arrival of a specimen of American foliage sent over by Cropsey’s family in New York state. As Andrew Wilton notes, the *Art Journal* likened Cropsey’s work to Turner’s: ‘And by this we mean specially that the composition – the arrangement, the proportion, the shape of the masses – is unusually elegant and beautiful; and that there is a refined feeling for aerial tenderness, and light, and repose throughout.’ Refinement and repose sound more like old world epithets than new, and the most immediately proximate of Turner’s works is, significantly, titled [*England: Richmond Hill on the Prince Regent’s Birthday*](#) (1819). To appropriate the composition of so profoundly nationalistic a work for an American landscape whose central claim seems to be the blessings of divine providence on the Republic was bold, particularly since Cropsey’s work was painted, exhibited and sold in London. This work brilliantly appropriated the tradition of English landscape painting for the United States but it still acknowledged London as the centre of the Anglo-Saxon art world. In 1862 the picture appeared at the second ‘Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations’. It remained in Britain until 1951.

By 1862, however, the Manchester merchants whose work had been the backbone of the 1851 Great Exhibition were in the hands of the cotton famine, and the Civil War was underway. The artist whose work best epitomizes this moment in American art is perhaps Frederic Church, already known to London exhibition goers because his [*Niagara*](#) (1857) and *Heart of the Andes* (see **fig. 12**) had been shown in London prior to being engraved, garnering considerable attention. Church’s early works explicitly link nation and narration, such as *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636* (1846). *Niagara* admired in London in 1857, has become a national icon, enshrined at the heart of Museum of Modern Art’s bicentennial exhibition of 1976, ‘The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950’. John Wilmerding, writing in the catalogue, couldn’t resist the parallels between this work and the triumphant works of his own day:

On one level the literal or implied panoramic scale of canvases from both periods surely recalls the continuing American association of the vast landscape with the

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national identity. The pulsing surges of energy, seemingly uncontainable within the picture's framing edges, characterize equally the view of nature described in Frederick Church's *Niagara Falls* of 1857 and embodied in Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* of almost a century later. The latter, of course, is no landscape, but it is very much an American environment.³⁹

In his mature masterpieces such as *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860), figuration is excluded in favour of meticulous observation of natural detail. I have argued elsewhere that *Twilight* was a response to Church's readings of John Ruskin's description in *Modern Painters, vol. 1* (1843) of a work Church had never seen, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (see **fig. 13**) in which the critic unforgettably ties the blood-red of the clouds and the 'guilty ship' to the subject of slavery.⁴⁰ The next of Church's paintings to come to London was a massive canvas depicting icebergs off the Labrador Coast.⁴¹ The emblematic presence of a wrecked ship suggested both the futility of human endeavour and the dangers posed by the Civil War, a theme made more prominent when Church changed the title to *The North*. A critic wrote in 1861: 'It is a thought of which an American can be proud, that a native artist, without even the sight of a "great master" has proved to all the world that genius dwells in our young country, as well as in old crowded effete Europe.'⁴² Yet Church was unable to find a buyer for it in the USA. He exhibited the work at the German Gallery, New Bond St, in 1863, reverting (perhaps because of British support for the confederacy) to the original title *Icebergs*. A superb chromolithograph was made in 1864-5 by Charles Ridson of Day & Company. The critics were in awe. 'I have never seen anything like the singularly truthful and delicate painting of the prismatic effect on these monstrous masses of opaque ice; and indeed, no such painting has ever been seen', noted the *Manchester Guardian*, continuing with the admonition: 'Let all your readers who love art, and visit London, take care to see this picture.'⁴³ John Ruskin, however, insistent on the picturesque virtues of association, was unconvinced by what he saw as Church's soulless essays in naturalism: 'There are crude efforts at landscape painting, made continually upon the most splendid physical phenomena, in America, and other countries without any history. It is not of the slightest use.' Ruskin saw all Church's works on their exhibition in London but in 1871 told his Oxford students: 'Niagara, or the North Pole, or Aurora Borealis, won't make a landscape; but a ditch at Iffley

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will, if you have humanity enough in you to interpret the feelings of hedgers and ditchers, and frogs'.⁴⁴

Icebergs was purchased by the Manchester railway engineer Sir Edward Watkin and hung in his mansion, Rose Hill, at Northenden, until 1901. When the house became a remand home for delinquent boys, the painting, too large to move, was nailed up behind a wall. Its discovery in 1979 and sale in London for \$2.5 million – then the highest price paid for any painting – announced, once again, the idea of nineteenth-century American art to a stunned British and European audience. *Icebergs* now hangs in the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, in a frame made for it in London for the ‘American Sublime’ exhibition in 2002 – a nice emblem of the continuing hybridity of old and new worlds in the fabrication and interpretation of the work. What might be the painting's final transit across the Atlantic for that loan exhibition – a ‘coming home’ of the sort Benjamin West recommended to John Singleton Copley – can

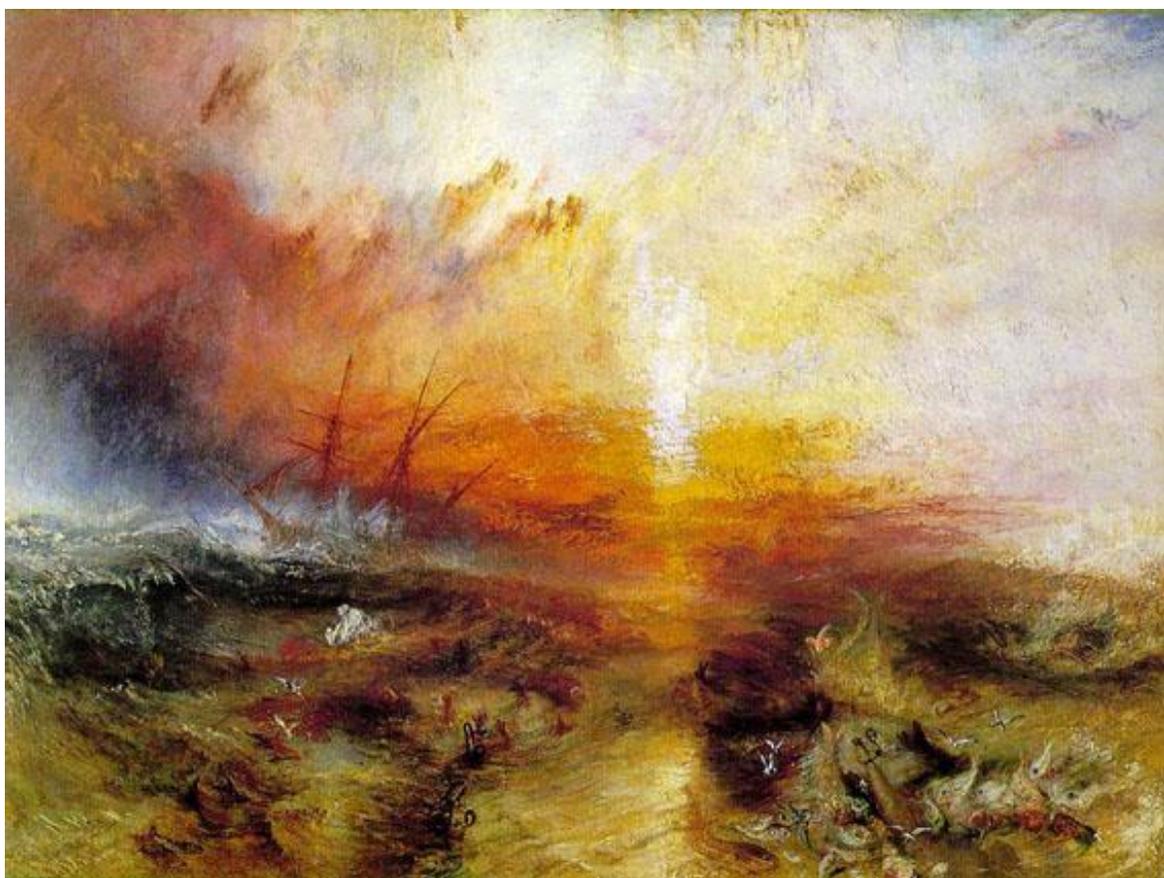


Fig. 13 J.M.W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840) held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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stand as an emblem of the Atlantic inter-culture of the white Atlantic within which *The Icebergs* was originally produced.

As will, I hope, be obvious, this essay's title – deliberately facetious – is precisely not a call for the segregation of Atlantic studies by means of a racially-determined binary. The issue of slavery is as inevitably present across the whole of north American cultural production in the nineteenth century as that of empire is in European art and literature. Following Jennifer Roberts's insight in her groundbreaking work on Copley, this essay simply argues for the deployment in relation to the traditional, canonical centre-ground of American art some of the same liberating methodological moves firmly established in the study of the Atlantic inter-culture in African-American studies. Within that broader project, by looking at the idea of American art in nineteenth-century England, a topic rich with research possibilities, we might be able to unbalance or problematize the essentialist narrative which has isolated the history of American art and closed down so many avenues of interpretative enquiry. If we widen our frame of reference to incorporate all points in Copley's and West's life-journeys, all possible viewers of the chromolithograph of Church's *Icebergs*, we might arrive at a fuller appreciation of an enlarged canon of American art. In such an expanded context, American art might be understood not as the unique emanation of a national spirit, but as a key aspect of a vibrant Atlantic inter-culture.

Endnotes

I am grateful to Ruth Livesey and Ella Dzelzainis for the opportunity to participate in the stimulating symposium from which these papers derive. The text presented here has been only minimally edited from the version delivered verbally, as will be clear from its style. Some of the ideas explored here are laid out in more detail in my essay 'Unmistakably American? National myths and the historiography of landscape painting in the USA' in Christiana Payne and William Vaughan, eds., *English Accents: Interactions with British Art, c.1776-1855* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.226-246.

¹ See 'The Met Offers a New Look at Americana', *New York Times*, 5 May 2008, p. C1. See also the Museum's website: <http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/american_decorative_arts/american_wing_2009.aspx> [accessed 10 May 2009].

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² Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

³ http://www.metmuseum.org/special/se_event.asp?OccurrenceId={E4F51062-8A08-4593-8273-8807B8201F95} [accessed 10 May 2009]

⁴ What follows relies on Alan Wallach's penetrating account in 'William Wilson Corcoran's Failed National Gallery' in Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 22-37.

⁵ See Joy Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), pp. 69-72.

⁶ See Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester and Barbaro Martinez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and his Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press/Yale Center for British Art, 2007).

⁷ John Singleton Copley to unknown recipient, probably Captain R.G. Bruce, 1767, quoted *Letters and Papers of John Singleton Copley and Henry Pelham*, ed. by Guernsey Jones, (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1914), p.64.

⁸ See Jennifer Roberts, 'Copley's Cargo: Boy with a Squirrel and the Dilemma of Transit', *American Art*, 21: 2 (2007), 21-41. Roberts's article represents an analytical breakthrough in this field, and the arguments expressed here are strongly influenced by her scholarship. Her forthcoming book, *Transporting Visions*, is eagerly awaited.

⁹ Quoted Roberts, p. 21.

¹⁰ *New York Review of Books*, 28 June 2008.

¹¹ Quoted Carrie Reborá and Paul Staiti et. al, *John Singleton Copley in America* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), p. 238.

¹² Benjamin West to John Singleton Copley, 4 August 1766, in Jones, *Letters and Papers of John Singleton Copley*, pp. 41-42.

¹³ John Singleton Copley to Henry Pelham, 1771, in Jones, p. 301.

¹⁴ William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* vol.1, (New York: George P. Scott and Co., Printers, 1834), p. 117.

¹⁵ John Flexner, *The History of American Painting*, vol. I, *First Flowers of Our Wilderness: The Colonial Period* (1947; New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. 244.

¹⁶ See Reborá and Staiti; and Emily Ballew Neff, *John Singleton Copley in England* (London: Merrell Holberton; Houston, Texas: Museum of Fine Arts, 1995).

¹⁷ 'The Artist who lived twice', *The Artist*, 1 May 1966, cutting in the Frick Library, New York.

¹⁸ Jules Prown, *John Singleton Copley: In America, 1738-1774*, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), vol. 1, p. 2.

¹⁹ *The Morning Chronicle*, 26 April 1777, quoted Neff, p. 94.

²⁰ Jones, p. 241.

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- ²¹ *The Morning Chronicle*, 26 April 1777, quoted Neff, *John Singleton Copley in England*, p. 94
- ²² John Galt, *The Life and Studies of Benjamin West, Esq., President of the Royal Academy of London, Prior to his Arrival in England* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1816).
- ²³ Marguerite Henry and Wesley Dennis, *Benjamin West and his Cat Grimalkin* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1947).
- ²⁴ Galt, pp. 70-71.
- ²⁵ Galt, p.79.
- ²⁶ Washington Allston to Henry Pickering, 23 November 1827, in *The Correspondence of Washington Allston*, ed. by Nathalia Wright, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), p. 245.
- ²⁷ Robert K. Wallace, 'Reminiscences of Turner, from *The Crayon*, 1855', *Turner Studies*, Summer 1988, 8:1, 46-7, quotation from p.46. The article is reprinted from *The Crayon*, vol.1, p.108.
- ²⁸ Henry H. Tuckerman. *American Artist Life comprising biographical and critical sketches of American artists, preceded by an historical account of the rise and progress of art in America*, (second edition, New York: G.P.Putnam & Son, 1867), p. 28.
- ²⁹ William Cullen Bryant, *A Funeral Oration occasioned by the Death of Thomas Cole, delivered before the National Academy of Design, 4 May 1848* (New York: National Academy, 1848), p.6
- ³⁰ Thomas Cole to Thomas Perkins, 4 April 1829, quoted Ellwood C. Parry III, *The Art of Thomas Cole: Ambition and Imagination* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988), p. 94.
- ³¹ Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, ed. by Eliot S. Vessell (Cambridge: Bellknap Press of Harvard University, 1964), p. 81.
- ³² Thomas Cole to Robert Gilmor, 1 March 1830, quoted Parry, *The Art of Thomas Cole*, p. 101.
- ³³ Noble, p. 80.
- ³⁴ For a fuller commentary on *The Course of Empire* see Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880* (London: Tate, 2002), pp. 51-4 and 95-108; and Tim Barringer, 'From Source to Sea', in Mark Dorrian and Gillian Rose, eds, *Deterritorialisations: Rethinking Landscape and Politics* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2003), pp. 24-39.
- ³⁵ On Catlin see George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman, *George Catlin and his Indian Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2002); Brian W. Dippie, *Catlin and his contemporaries; the politics of patronage* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
- ³⁶ Quoted in Gurney and Heyman, p.66.
- ³⁷ Gurney and Heyman, p.72.
- ³⁸ All the reviews of this work cited here derived from Andrew Wilton's catalogue essay in Wilton and Barringer, p. 137-8.

³⁹ John Wilmerding 'Fire and Ice in American Art: Polarities from Luminism to Abstract Expressionism' in Kinaston McShine, ed., *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 42.

⁴⁰ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol.1, *The Works of John Ruskin* (ed. E. Cook and A. Wedderburn, London: George Allen, 1903-1915) vol. III, pp. 571-2.

⁴¹ All subsequent scholarship on this painting, including the account given here, relies on Gerald L.Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: The Icebergs* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1980). See also Wilton and Barringer, pp. 224-7, and Eleanor Jones Harvey, with contributions from Gerald Carr, *The voyage of the Icebergs: Frederic Church's Arctic masterpiece* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, c2002).

⁴² Unidentified newspaper review from Church's cutting book, of which a photocopy survives at Olana. Quoted Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: The Icebergs*, p. 22.

⁴³ *Manchester Guardian* 19 June 1863, quoted Gerald Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: The Icebergs*, p. 90.

⁴⁴ John Ruskin, *Lectures on Landscape delivered at Oxford in the Lent Term, 1871, The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. By E. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1915) vol. XXII, p.16.