

A Monument Remembered

Major General Sir Isaac Brock died on 13 October 1812 while defending the heights of Queenston, Upper Canada, from the invading Americans. He was buried a few days later at Fort George, yet the dramatic site of his heroic charge lay unmarked until 1824, when his body was reinterred at Queenston Heights, and work began on a great viewing tower that was completed within a few years, damaged beyond repair in 1840 and replaced with the existing column in the 1850s. The first monument is known by way

of written accounts, drawings, prints, and this marvellous painting by Thomas Cole.

The founder of the celebrated Hudson River School of American landscape painters, Thomas Cole (1801–1848) began his career in 1815 as an engraver's assistant in his native England and immigrated to Philadelphia with his family in 1817. By 1825 he was living in New York teaching himself the art of landscape painting. Later that year a local collector purchased a few works,



Thomas Cole, *Tomb of General Brock, Queenston Heights, Ontario* (1830), 74,5 × 112,5 cm. NGC
Thomas Cole, *La tombe du général Brock, Queenston Heights, Ontario* (1830), 74,5 × 112,5 cm. MBAC

providing Cole with the funds for a formative sketching trip up the Hudson River. By 1827 he was exhibiting regularly and had many notable patrons including the Baltimore merchant Robert Gilmor, Jr.

Early in 1829 Cole appealed to Gilmor for a loan to finance a trip to Europe “for the purposes of studying the works of the Great Masters.” On 26 April, he informed his patron that “[n]ext Wednesday, I intend setting off for the Falls of Niagara. I cannot think of going to Europe without having seen them. I wish to take a ‘last, lingering look’ at our wild scenery. I shall endeavour to impress its features so strongly on my mind that, in the midst of the fine scenery of other countries, their grand and beautiful peculiarities shall not be erased.”

Cole carefully preserved his memories of the Niagara trip in the form of site sketches and detailed annotations of terrain, colour and light. These sketches and a journal entry record his 12 May visit to Brock’s monument, seen here from the American

side of the Niagara River with the settled shores of Lake Ontario in the distance.

In June Cole sailed for England, spending two years in London before visiting France and Italy. This painting was completed by spring 1830 in time for the Royal Academy exhibition. It failed to sell in England, and had no ready audience upon Cole’s return to his adopted country in 1832. The work eventually passed from his granddaughter to the Albany Institute of History and Art, New York, which sold it at auction in 1985. A private collector lent the work – and later sold it – to the National Gallery of Canada. Like Benjamin West’s *Death of General Wolfe* – a Canadian subject painted in England by an American émigré, and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1770 – this work could scarcely have found a more fitting resting place.

Graham Larkin
Curator of International Art, NGC