Ever had a dream in which everything seems bigger and grander than life? Thomas Cole (1801–1848), one of the greatest American painters of the 19th century, captures this dreamlike quality in his ambitious architectural fantasy, *The Architect’s Dream*. Cole painted it for an American architect who designed buildings in historical revival styles. It should have been a dream painting for such an architect—but in fact, he rejected it.

Read on to discover the remarkable story of this famous painting.

**THE DREAM**

Though Cole based the buildings in the painting on real structures, he modified and altered them, arranging them so that they illustrate a progression of 4,000 years of some of Western civilization’s greatest architectural achievements. In addition, he uses scale and especially light to convey ideas about the cultures that created these monuments. For example, the ordered, rational architecture of ancient Greece is bathed in light, while the cathedral is shrouded in shadow, suggestive of the mysteries of medieval faith.

Towering impossibly high in the distance, the Old Kingdom (2665 B.C. to 2155 B.C.) Egyptian pyramid is the oldest structure in the painting.

Packed with immense papyrus-capital columns, the Egyptian temple dates from New Kingdom Egypt (1550–1080 B.C.).

Dwarfed by the Egyptian temple, a small Greek temple of the Doric order represents the dawn of classical architecture and the harmonious perfection of monuments like the Parthenon (5th century B.C.).

A graceful Ionic Greek temple, with its pediment sculpture of Athena, goddess of wisdom and battle, looms behind the dreaming architect.

Inspired by Greek architecture, a long wall with attached rectangular pillars links the two Greek temples.

The domed Roman temple with Corinthian style capitals rests on top of the Greek wall, showing literally and figuratively that Greece was the foundation for Roman civilization.

Behind the Roman temple is a Roman aqueduct—a long series of rounded arches that carried water in channels across long distances.

The 13th-century Gothic cathedral represents the highest architectural—and spiritual—achievement of the Middle Ages.
THE DREAMER

The dreamer—framed by a massive arch with curtains pulled back to reveal the fantastic dreamscape—reclines on the top of a gigantic column, holding the plan of a Greek temple. He’s resting, eyes closed, on enormous folios of architectural designs, with the tools of his trade strewn around him: pencil, ruler, triangle, and calipers. He may represent an architect or perhaps the very idea and practice of Architecture. “Carved” into the stone block below him (the abacus) is the inscription: “PAINTED BY T. COLE / FOR I. TOWN ARCHT, / 1840.”

THE ARCHITECT

“I. Town Archt” was renowned New Haven, Connecticut-based architect Ithiel Town (1784–1844), who helped popularize the Greek and Gothic revival styles in America. Among the Greek Revival buildings he designed are the U.S. Patent Office in Washington (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) and the New York Custom House (now Federal Hall) on Wall Street.

THE PAINTER

Born in England in 1801, Cole came to America with his family in 1819. An encounter with an itinerant portrait painter set Cole on the road to becoming an artist. He moved to Philadelphia to study art in 1823, then set up a studio in his parents’ house in New York in 1825. After early successes selling his Hudson River Valley landscapes (he would become one of the leading figures in the group of New York landscape painters later known as the Hudson River School), Cole left in 1829 for three years of study in the museums and history-steeped towns of Europe.

THE PAINTER AS ARCHITECT

Cole was not only interested in painting architecture, he occasionally designed it. In 1838 he entered a competition to design a new Ohio Statehouse, and was awarded third place. Unable to agree on a final design, the organizing committee hired Alexander Jackson Davis (former architectural partner to Ithiel Town; see his Gothic Revival dining table in this gallery) to come up with a composite of the three winning designs. The finished Statehouse was largely based on Cole’s entry.

THE REJECTION

In 1839, Ithiel Town commissioned Thomas Cole to paint a view of the city of Athens—either the ancient or modern city. Having never been to Athens, Cole felt uncomfortable with the subject. Instead, he constructed an architectural fantasy that featured historical styles that Town himself had used in his designs. When Town saw the finished painting in 1840, he refused to accept it. Town wrote to Cole:

“Your picture is a fine Architectural painting—you are aware however, that my friend Cole is very celebrated for painting rich Landscapes, with Architecture, History, etc., intermixed. I was therefore desirous of such a Landscape from your brush. […] I wish the landscape to predominate—the Architecture, History, etc., to be various and subservient….”

Cole was “surprised and mortified exceedingly” by Town’s reaction to the painting. He replied:

“The picture I have painted is one of the best I have ever painted, it has been as much admired as any single picture of mine….[…]Whatever hope I may have that you will yet view the picture more favorably, I will not trouble you with any further defense of it or myself and will conclude by saying that I have seldom experienced so great a disappointment….”

Town never did “view the picture more favorably” and Cole never painted another painting for Town. The Architect’s Dream, still inscribed to “I. Town”, remained in Cole’s family, unsold, until it was acquired by the Toledo Museum of Art in 1949. Today, it is one of his most famous and admired paintings and a highlight of TMA’s collection.