

AMERICAN ART TO 1900

A Documentary History | Sarah Burns and John Davis

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In so far as we have arrived at any understanding of the term Idealism and Realism, there does not appear any definite line of distinction between them, or at best, these terms are inexpressive, if intended to describe separate departments of Art power; nor can I discern wherein the imaginative faculty exercises an influence independent of the perfect ideal of representative truth, but only in extending its meaning to the utmost limit, spiritualizing, as it were, the images of inanimate objects, and appealing through them to the inmost susceptibility of the mind and heart, thus becoming the highest attribute of the great Artist in developing the true ideal. Hence its legitimate action is not seen as creating an imaginary world, as some suppose; but in revealing the deep meaning of the real creation around and within us . . .

It is not my purpose, however, to discuss the nature of the imaginative faculty, nor the subtle abstractions of idealism. It is sufficient if we have arrived safely at the conclusion, that all the elements with which the imagination deals, and on which idealism is based, exist visibly in Nature, and are, therefore, not separate creations of Art, my chief object being to guard against the false notion that High Landscape Art disregards all restrictions imposed by the law of truthful representation of nature . . .

Let us . . . be thankful in the assurance that it is by reverent attention to the realized forms of Nature alone, that Art is enabled by its delegated power to reproduce some measure of the profound and elevated emotions which the contemplation of the visible works of God awaken. Could the picture do more by means of whatsoever Art-license or departure from the truth?

Imitation of Nature is indeed servile, and every way unworthy, when it discards the necessity of selection, and indiscriminately accepts all things as of equal value, not only bestowing the same care on the wild thistle of the field as on the rose and on the passion-flower, but without discerning the two-fold commendations of superior beauty and significance, as indicated in the perfume and in the symbolism which invest the latter with higher claims to a place in the Art-conservatory.

THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL IN PUBLIC

By the 1850s, landscape painting had emerged as prime vehicle for the expression of national identity, its practitioners well represented at the important New York exhibitions (see also "Too Many Landscapes," chapter 7). Putnam's Monthly views this new school of new men with approval, contrasting the reverence for nature evident in Asher B. Durand's landscapes with the stilted artificiality of Thomas Cole's Voyage of Life, now hopelessly outmoded. The writer for the Illustrated Magazine of Art states unequivocally that only in landscape painting may American art win renown among nations, and only in landscape may our practical civilization find true expression. Placing Durand at the head of the American landscape school, the writer admires his truthfulness; even his trees, genuine "patriarchs" of the forest, are individual. Expressive of his pure and simple devotion to nature, Durand's paintings are models for a genuinely American school of art. In a similar vein, Literary World observes that landscapes constitute almost half the total number of works on display at the National Academy of Design. Among them, Durand is obviously the leader. In this show he exhibits his characteristic out-of-door studies, which the reviewer appreciates for their quiet, pastoral poetry. Durand also shows his ambitious allegory Progress (1853), which contrasts wilderness with civilization. Complementing Durand, the subjects chosen by the other artists (including Jasper Cropsey and Frederic E. Church) make up a roster

of celebrated American sites, more than a match for the two European views included among Cropsey's offerings.

"The National Academy of Design," Putnam's Monthly 5 (May 1855).

On the walls of the Academy we have followed Cole through his progress, and seen Durand, year after year, working out his problem of originality, and Cropsey, Kensett, Church, and their brethren of the younger generation, growing up into notice and excellence. Each exhibition has shown an increase of numbers in the artistic ranks, and a higher attainment of technical ability than the previous one manifested . . .

. . . We do not forget Allston, Vanderlyn, Trumbull, and their cotemporaries; but in their day Art was an exotic transplanted here, and refused to maintain its existence under the circumstances in which it found itself. The last leaves which fell from it were Vanderlyn and Cole. They were products of the old system, that of nutriment and treatment rather than of positive knowledge. They had their triumphs, but they were rather those which consisted in creditably rivaling their masters, than in developing new and peculiar features of artistic wisdom. Their faces were like all their earlier confreres, turned backward, and they dreamed in the past—in the Art of Claude and Titian—rather than lived in earnest, looking forward to unexplored fields. They were not new men—not American, therefore—but from the influence of that unreal art there originated one of positive vitality. Its professors were Durand, Inman, Mount, Edmonds, Huntington and others, painters, to a greater or less extent, of things real, and of which they knew.

It may seem strange that we should draw such a dividing line between Durand and Cole, yet, such is the relation of their minds that the latter must be classed as a sentimentalist, and inclined both by feeling and study to the masters of the last phase of landscape; while the former in all respects conforms to the modern spirit, based on reality, and admitting no sentiment which is not entirely drawn from Nature. Cole was, it is true, in many cases forced into a partial recognition of the natural, but generally he seems to have regarded the forms of Nature only as characters, by means of which he impresses on us his story, and thus his pictures, though they may be poetical, are certainly not picturesque. For instance, in the "Youth," there is not an individual object in the picture which ever had its prototype in the natural world—not a tree, shrub or mountain form is there, which is not palpably a creation of the artist's imaginative brain. With Durand, on the contrary, there are no objects, with the exception occasionally of his cloud forms, which are not actual, real. This makes the distinction between the old school and the new—with that, things were types, and so long as they were understood it matters not how imperfectly they were expressed; with this, they are individualities, with the rights of the individual, and its influence in the general result.

With this new school we shall have to do at present, as far as it appears on the walls of the Academy's exhibition, Wherever our artists have given themselves to the admiration and following of European masters, we shall leave them to the kind of appreciation they have sought for, that which finds its enjoyment in merely technical qualities, without regard to the thought or extent of knowledge possessed by the artist. This is a species of Art which our people can never amply sympathize with, because it is an idle thing, aimless, and without root or permanence. The Art which they will have, and in which, therefore, they will be benefited, is that which arises from a genuine feeling for the things with which the people have sympathy. It hardly matters whether or no the materialism of the times is an error. So long as it is the spirit of the age, Art, to be in any way successful, must carry it out. Rhapsodies, dreams, and studio vagaries will

not satisfy a public sentiment accustomed to find in all other things some substantial, positive truth, something which the mind, grasping, holds ever after. If artists prefer to follow what they consider an ideal, and withdraw themselves from the appreciation of the men of their time, they may certainly do so . . . But if they seek encouragement, they must deal in wares the age has need of; and, to be immortalized, they must give their works vitality, that they may perpetuate their kind.

"American Art: The Need and Nature of Its History," Illustrated Magazine of Art 3 (April 1854).

The landscape that lies in beauty or grandeur, veiled in the illusive autumn-like haze of distance, may feed imagination, but cannot carry its distinctive meaning to the heart and reproduce there its own sentiment. The enchantment of distance must be dissolved by a nearer approach. It is so with AMERICAN ART, the outlines of which have already been given. We have looked upon it as an energy coming up out of conflict with the spirit of the people, the genius of a proud democracy, and indicating no uncertain future for itself. We wish now to mark its growth, and in it, feel its unfolding individuality . . .

. . . Portrait-painting is unduly prominent, and up to the present time has presented the only certain resource to young artists for subsistence . . .

Historical painting has been cultivated with considerable success, but with uncertain aim . . .

Landscape painting, the only department in which we can hope to form a school, has been cultivated with true devotion. Here we may gain a proud eminence among the nations, and here alone. The character of our civilisation is too earnest and practical to foster imaginative tastes: the nearness of our past denies to the artist the mellowness and deep perspective of distance. But "the hills rock-ribbed," the course of noble rivers, the repose of lakes, and a climate peculiarly our own, these things, as they appear in the Katskill and Addirondek, the Hudson, Lake George, and Schroon, and especially in our autumn loveliness, furnish rich materials for landscape composition.

Our prominent artists have not failed to notice them, and devote themselves to their study. Among those who have succeeded and gained for themselves a name in this department, no one stands so deservedly high as Asher B. Durand, the President of the National Academy of Design, as much on account of the purity and simplicity of his devotion to American landscape as his eminence and skill in his art. The individuality of his trees, true patriarchs of the woods, the charm of his autumn haze, and his quiet, philosophic contemplativeness, give to his works that place in painting which the "Elegy" of Gray, the "Excursion" of Wordsworth, and the "Thanatopsis" of Bryant, occupy in poetry. They are entirely American, and are destined, in our judgment, to become the models after which existing and future artists are to build up a distinctive school of American art in painting—a school whose fame is to be co-extensive with that of our industry. We have artists capable of this great work. They only wait the development of our civilisation to seize upon its different stages and spirit, and record them in colours and marble.

"The Fine Arts: The Exhibition of the Academy," Literary World, April 30, 1853.

There are "good years" for pictures as for other crops, and this is not one of them; but whatever the accidental circumstances may be, the unfailling successes of the President, Mr. Durand, are sufficient to illuminate the walls at every point. You cannot turn in any direction without alighting upon one of his quiet, natural, sensitive, but-of-door studies, where a genuine love of nature harmonizes every condition of the landscape. His pictures are such as Izaak Walton

would have loved to contemplate. There is the amiable poetry of feeling about them which characterizes that good man's "Angler" and sainted "Lives." Walton would have called for his song and ale in these noontide shades, would have delighted in the summer luxury of the cattle, as he sauntered down one of these smooth arcades, or cast his fly in the wimpling current; and he would have hurried home before that "coming storm," throwing a backward glance, as the waters darken in the foreground, at its fast speeding magnificence.

Durand's most elaborate painting is entitled "Progress" in the catalogue. Its aim is to contrast the ruggedness of primeval nature with the culture and forces of our present civilization. A party of Indians looks out from a rocky height, amidst thick forest trees, upon a composition of water and mountain scenery, the general features of which seem taken from the waters of the Hudson, bordered by the Catskills. A sweet sylvan expanse lies in the distance. On a promontory rises a city where a steamboat has just landed; the canal and the railway wind along the banks. The foreground is filled with the activities of rural life, wagoners and groups of cattle. How sweetly the sunlight reposes in the different portions of the picture, whether in the distant atmosphere, or the summer river, or the illuminated earth-bank, spotted by patches of shade.

In the same room hangs a large painting by Kensett, a stern, barren foreground of "the foodless rock," with soft hazy water and mountain scenery beyond. The rock predominates in the composition at the expense, we think, of some of this artist's finer qualities. Mr. Kensett exhibits only two other pictures, a small lake scene at the Franconia notch, and a "glimpse" of the Berkshire Bash Bish.

Church is in full force with Mount Ktadn, a New England sunset, with an orange flecked sky, mountains in shade and water, and factory seat in the foreground, passing into the cool darkness. The last radiance of the sun still illuminates the horizon, broken by the mountains. Grand Manan Island, Bay of Fundy is another of Church's forcible skies and sunsets. You can scarcely look at the level rays across the water without winking. Church also gives us the Valley of the Madawasca, a companion to the Ktadn, and the Natural Bridge of Virginia, the colors of which we now for the first time appreciate.

Cropsey has a Niagara, the Second Beach at Newport, the Sybil's Temple at Tivoli, similar to the large one exhibited by him some few years since; Vermont Scenery, and a sketch of Melrose Abbey.

Of the other landscape painters, Inness exhibits several elaborate compositions in his manner, so strong a contrast to Durand's delicate open air sketches; Gignoux has a blue, warm sunny snow scene in broken rocky scenery, with a rich variety of sunlight and moisture; Richards has a Southern river scene of a dark steely quality in the shade and waters, with a massive gnarled tree on the bank dripping with moss; Casilear has but two pictures, but marked by his faithful qualities; one a sketch, the property of Mr. Kensett; Talbot, in his large open way, has painted Indian Hunting Grounds, an Eastern Caravan Encampment, a Coast Scene at Newport.

FACING NATURE: JASPER CROPSEY AND SANFORD GIFFORD

Originally trained as an architect, Jasper Cropsey had a short-lived practice in New York before turning to full-time landscape painting in the mid-1840s. Although he devoted himself to the celebration of the American landscape, he spent several years abroad, thus ignoring one of Asher B. Durand's cardinal principles. Nonetheless, he was a devoted student of nature. Published in The Crayon, his essay on clouds combines

meteorological precision with ecstatic romanticism. Cropsey's allusion to Ruskin offers clear proof of the latter's importance to Americans developing their own landscape aesthetic.

Sanford Gifford like Jasper Cropsey was associated with the second generation of Hudson River school painters. Although George W. Sheldon's article on Gifford dates from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when an eclectic array of new styles jostled in the marketplace, this piece provides a detailed picture of characteristic mid-century methods. It is clear that, despite repeated visits to the site, and no matter how thick the portfolio with on-the-spot studies, the finished painting is an elaborate and laboriously fabricated studio production. Of particular interest is the information on Gifford's method of varnishing to achieve the veiled, luminous atmospheric effects for which he was known. Committed to the reverent study and imitation of nature, Gifford, well into the 1870s, remains loyal to the original tenets of The Crayon.

Jasper Cropsey, "Up among the Clouds," Crayon 2 (August 8, 1855).

Of all the gifts of the Creator, few are more beautiful, and less heeded, than the sky. Men go to and from their daily cares, but seem never to regard for a moment these alternate patches of blue and cloud that glisten from among the chimney-tops, and around the corners of our aspiring brick and stone mansions. The husband-man rising with the sun, will turn the sod from morn till night—cast his seed, and leave it with a beneficent Providence to water and bring it forward in its due time; and yet never look to that dome of treasure, the store-house from which shall descend the rains, the sunshine and shadow that shall mature his labors to an abundant harvest. So too—we all pursue our way, attentive to but the one object of our life, seeing not the flowers we crush beneath our tread, nor the beauty that encircles us like a halo from above. It is only to know which way the wind may blow—to say, "it is cloudy," "it is clear," or "it looks like rain," that we look up. Even the artist—a part of whose great mission it should be to give the delicate and evanescent beauty; that every hour in the day presents itself in the sky, and thus make man happier by the purity and beauty he breathes on his canvas—seldom seems to heed its lessons, or its truth . . .

Go to the far-off-looking hill-side, and there, in the cool shade of some wide-spreading tree—look up through the sturdy branches, scored and mossed by many a winter's storm, and summer's sun, now richly studded with verdure, and looking up through those trembling leaves in which the sun dances from one to the other, making them alternately gold and emerald in their joy—look through these leafy loop-holes into the blue sky and cloud above, and if there is music in your soul, you must feel a beauty, heavenly and indescribable, in the sky and cloud, thus gleaming from above, through the checkered, leafy, branch-ribbed bower.

But, these little joyous glimpses are not enough; they are novelties; look out on the wide-spread horizon, and study some of its phenomena and laws. Here we have, first of all, the canopy of blue; not opaque, hard, and flat, as many artists conceive it, and picture patrons accept it; but a luminous, palpitating air, in which the eye can penetrate infinitely deep, and yet find depth: nor is it always the same monotonous blue; it is constantly varied, being more deep, cool, warm or grey—moist or dry—passing by the most imperceptible gradations from the zenith to the horizon—clear and blue through the clouds after rain—soft and hazy when the air is filled with heat, dust, and gaseous exhalations—golden, rosy, or green when the twilight gathers over the landscape; thus ever presenting new phases for our admiration at each change of light or circumstance . . .

... If the cirrus is distinguished for its delicate fleecy, fibrous wave-ribbed character, the region of the cumulus is not less so for its grand masses of dreamy forms floating by each other, sometimes looking like magic palaces, rising higher and higher, and then topling over in deep valleys, to rise again in ridges like snowy mountains, with lights and shadows playing amid them, as though it were a spirit world of its own: again floating in compact masses up against the light, silvering edge after edge as each rounded form climbs above the other. In boyhood, we have often watched this dream-world, and peopled it with angels; in manhood, from the cares of life we have turned, and been refreshed by the glimpses of its "silver lining." ...

While we are looking from our hill-side, we will stay yet a while to give a passing glance at the nimbus, the region of the rain-cloud, and the lowest of the sky regions. Of these clouds Ruskin remarks, "they differ not so much in their real nature from those of the central and uppermost regions, as in appearance, owing to their greater nearness." All those heavy, inky-looking skies of rainy days belong to this region. Although, in many respects, it is not beautiful, yet to it we are indebted for all those beautiful dreamy effects of the breaking up of mists and fogs, from over lakes and valleys, and creeping vapors that climb the mountain sides. It must have large claim upon our ideas of beauty, on account of its being the cloud in which the rainbow appears. And in a higher region of it, parted and drifting, spraylike, over the blue, with the sunbeams flickering through it, there is often presented a sky more pictorial than all others.

Add to this its influence upon the landscape, by its deep and gloomy parts obstructing the sun's rays, and burying in mystery the distant mountains, or sending its shadow fleeting fugitive-like over hill and valley; and again, in breaking disagreeable outlines of hills and mountains, by obscuring them in its curtain folds—by its drifting masses crowning their storm-riven heads, or hovering like winged spirits about their rock-ribbed sides, and moving in grandeur down their dark, pineclad ravines. It is perhaps in its grandest moods more impressive than all the other cloud regions—awakening the deepest emotions of gloom, dread, and fear; or sending thrilling sensations of joy and gladness through our being. Those of us who have watched the coming-up storm; or those who go down to the sea in ships for the first time, can remember their feelings when looking over the boundless waters toward the dark clouds of this storm-region as they were spreading over the sky, gathering and blackening; and when the fierce flashes of lightning parted in twain for a moment, their dark sides, followed by the solemn voice of thunder, how his thoughts have woke into more living inspiration of hope and praise.

If the cirrus and cumulus regions awaken soothing and poetical thoughts of serenest beauty, the rain region can certainly stir the heart as much, even though it appeal to the coarser elements of our nature.

It is this class of sky, owing to its nearness, and stronger grade of color, and the more powerful impressions it is capable of producing, that is susceptible of the highest and noblest results in Art. Owing to its nearness, it is generally of a warmer, brownish tint—often in the light portions of a brickish red, while in its dark and gloomy parts, as in the approach of rain or heavy wind, it has a heavy, inky, and black look; but to describe any particular color, is impossible, because it is susceptible of all the modifications of color arising from reflections, changes of form, dust and vapors from the earth, atmospheric distances and sunlight.

Its impressiveness and gloom have led artists to choose it in compositions, involving great and powerful emotions; but too often they have thought only of its blackness, omitting the beautiful handiwork of its form. Ruskin says: "We have multitudes of painters who can throw a light bit of straggling vapor across the sky, or leave it in delicate and tender passages of breaking light; but this is a very different thing from taking up each of those bits or passages, and giving

it structure and parts, and solidity." Because the people in their blissful ignorance should cry "bravo" to some such clever sweeps of the brush, there is no reason why an artist should do the same agreeable sky over and over again. But if with no other object than the glory of his art, and the honor due to himself as an intelligent mind, he should be led to strive for the noblest truth and beauty.

George W. Sheldon, "How One Landscape Painter Paints," *Art Journal* 3 (1877).

To one who knows Mr. Sandford R. Gifford well, his success as an artist seems natural enough. Like every other success in Art, it has come from insight and from perseverance. In his opinion—and the opinion is correct—an artist is simply a poet. Each works from the same principles, and each aims at the same results. The only difference between them lies in the materials they use. Both the painter and the poet strive to reproduce the impressions which they have received from beautiful things in Nature. If these impressions can be reproduced by words, it is the business of the poet to reproduce them. If they are subtle and elude the grasp of words, it is the business of the painter to reproduce them . . .

. . . Mr. Gifford's method is this: When he sees anything which vividly impresses him, and which he therefore wishes to reproduce, he makes a little sketch of it in pencil on a card about as large as an ordinary visiting-card. It takes him, say, half a minute to make this sketch; but there is the idea of the future picture fixed as firmly if not as fully as in the completed work itself. I have seen some of these simple card-sketches, and they do not seem to amount to much. They enable the artist, however, to keep clear in his memory the scenes that have impressed him, even though he should delay further work for months or for years. While travelling, he can in this way lay up a good stock of material for future use. The next step is to make a larger sketch, this time in oil, where what has already been done in black-and-white is repeated in colour. To this sketch, which is about twelve inches by eight, he devotes an hour or two. It serves the purpose of defining to him just what he wants to do, and of fixing it in enduring material. Sometimes the sketch is not successful, and is thrown aside to make room for another. It helps him, also, to decide what he does not want to do. He experiments with it; puts in or leaves out, according as he finds that he can increase or perfect his idea. When satisfactorily finished, it is a model in miniature of what he proposes to do.

He is now ready to paint the picture itself. All that he asks for is a favourable day on which to begin. To Mr. Gifford this first day is the great day. He waits for it; he prepares for it. He wishes to be in the best possible physical condition. He is careful about his food; he is careful to husband his resources. When the day comes, he begins work just after sunrise, and continues work until just before sunset. Ten, eleven, twelve consecutive hours, according to the season of the year, are occupied in the first great effort to put the scene on the canvas. He feels fresh and eager. His studio-door is locked. Nothing is allowed to interrupt him. His luncheon, taken in his studio, consists of a cup of coffee and a piece of bread. His inspiration is at fever-heat; every faculty is stretched to its utmost; his brush moves rapidly, almost carelessly. He does not stop to criticise his work. The "divine afflatus" is within him, and he does unquestioningly whatever it tells him to do, while his pigments are wet and in moveable condition. No day is ever long enough for his first day's work; and very often, at the end of it, the picture looks finished, even to the eye of an artist.

First of all, on this first day, he removes the glaring white of his canvas by staining it with a solution of turpentine and burnt sienna; the reason being that a surface of pure white causes the colours laid upon it to look at first more brilliant than when the canvas is entirely covered

with colours. You deceive yourself when you paint upon a white background. Then he takes a white-chalk crayon and makes a drawing of the picture he expects to paint. After that is done, he "sets" his palette, placing little piles of white, cadmium, vermilion, madder-lake, raw sienna, burnt sienna, caledonia brown, and permanent blue, one after another along the upper rim, in the order in which I have enumerated them. These are all the manufactured pigments that he uses; they consist of the fundamental red, yellow, and brown, with their lights and darks. Just below this row of pigments he puts another row, consisting of three or four tints of mixed white and cadmium, three or four tints of orange (obtained by mixing the former tints with red), and three or four tints of green (if foliage is to be painted). Along the lower rim of the palette he puts, one after another, several tints of blue. The palette is then ready. The workshop—the battleground, if we please—is in the centre, between these tints of blue and the tints of orange. Here are created all the thousand special tints which the spectator is soon to see in the picture.

The first thing that Mr. Gifford paints, when handling a landscape, is the horizon of the sky; and his reason for doing so is, that in landscape-painting the colour of the sky is the key-note of the picture—that is to say, it governs the impression, determining whether the impression shall be gay or grave, lively or severe; so much so, indeed, that landscape-painting may be called (what we have already said Mr. Gifford calls it) air-painting. Different conditions of the air produce different impressions upon the mind, making us feel sad, or glad, or awed, or what not. Hence the condition—that is, the colour—of the air is the one essential thing to be attended to in landscape-painting. If the painter misses that, he misses everything. Now, the colour of the sky at the horizon is the key-note of the colour of the air. Mr. Gifford, therefore, begins with the horizon.

When the long day is finished, and the picture is produced, the work of criticism, of correction, of completion, is in place. Mr. Gifford does this work slowly. He likes to keep his picture in his studio as long as possible. He believes in the Horatian maxim of the seven years' fixing of a poem. Sometimes he does not touch the canvas for months after his first criticisms have been executed. Then, suddenly, he sees something that will help it along. I remember hearing him say one day, in his studio: "I thought that picture was done half a dozen times. It certainly might have been called finished six months ago. I was working at it all day yesterday." . . .

Mr. Gifford varnishes the finished picture so many times with boiled oil, or some other semi-transparent or translucent substance, that a veil is made between the canvas and the spectator's eye—a veil which corresponds to the natural veil of the atmosphere. The farther off an object is in Nature, the denser is the veil through which we see it; so that the object itself is of secondary importance. The really important thing is the veil or medium through which we see it. And this veil is different at different times. One day we go out in the morning, and, looking up and down the street, take no note of the sight. We are not impressed. Another day there is a slight change in the density or the clarity of the atmosphere, and lo! what before was a commonplace view has become exquisitely beautiful. It was the change in the air that made the change in the object; and especially when finishing his picture does the artist bear in mind this fact.

Moreover, as the spectator looks through this veil of varnish, the light is reflected and refracted just as it is through the atmosphere—reflections and refractions which, though unseen, are nevertheless felt. The surface of the picture, therefore, ceases to be opaque; it becomes transparent, and we look through it upon and into the scene beyond. In a word, the process of the artist is the process of Nature . . .

Mr. Gifford's industry often leads him to make a dozen sketches of the same scene. The first

sketch, indeed, contains the essence, but day after day he visits the place, corrects the first sketch, qualifies it, establishes the relations of one part to another, and fixes the varied gradations of colour. His portfolios are heavy with studies of rocks, of trees, of fallen leaves, of streams, of ocean-waves. Some painters think that, if they reproduce such objects exactly, they lose some of the poetry of natural facts. Mr. Gifford does not think so. He believes in Nature, and is not ashamed laboriously to imitate her. An artist like Corot offends him by slovenliness. To him one of Corot's finished landscapes is scarcely more than a sketch. He gets from it nothing more than he would get from a drawing.

THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN REPOSE: JOHN FREDERICK KENSETT

Like his friend and mentor Asher B. Durand, John Frederick Kensett formulated a landscape style that married sharp local specificity and meticulous description with an enveloping mood of tranquility and even sweetness, as Henry Tuckerman puts it in his fulsome appreciation of the painter. Tuckerman praises Kensett's ability to seize upon the most characteristic features of lake, beach, and mountain scenery and then to combine them with his own signature tact and delicacy. Kensett's quiet, atmospheric landscapes offered welcome respite from the troubled and often tumultuous times during which he practiced his vocation. Tuckerman suggests as much in noting how vividly Kensett's imagery recalls "our summer wanderings."

Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1867).

Kensett . . . Upon his return to his native land . . . commenced a series of careful studies of our mountain, lake, forest, and coast landscape; and in his delineation of rocks, trees, and water, attained a wide and permanent celebrity. Year after year he studiously explored and faithfully painted the mountains of New England and New York, the lakes and rivers of the Middle States, and the Eastern sea-coast, selecting with much judgment or combining with rare tact the most characteristic features and phases of each . . . His best pictures exhibit a rare purity of feeling, an accuracy and delicacy, and especially a harmonious treatment, perfectly adapted to the subject. Here it may be an elm-tree, full of grace and beauty, crowning a scene of rural peace, which steals, like nature's own balm, upon the heart of the spectator; there a "Reminiscence of Lake George" is wrought up to the highest degree of truth from the autumn mist to the lucent water and gracefully-looming mountains; now it is the dark umbrage, and now the shelving glen; here a ridge of stone and there a stormy mountain-cloud, or exquisite beach with greenly-curving and snowy-fringed billows—and all seem so instinct, both as to form and hue, tone and impression, with nature's truth, that they win and warm, calm or cheer, the heart of her votary, like the voice of one beloved, or the responsive glance of a kindred soul.

An able critic, in describing his "Lake George," has well said of this artist:—

"The most unaggressive and loved of the leaders of the American school of painting has at length produced a picture of size sufficient to call forth his best strength, and of importance enough in subject-matter, if successfully treated, to confirm his position as one of the three foremost men of our landscape art. Mr. Kensett has long been accepted as a most consummate master in the treatment of subjects full of repose and sweetness, and been honored by critics and painters for the simple and unpretending character of his works—works remarkable for tenderness and refinement of feeling, exquisite quality of color, and a free and individual method of painting certain facts of nature. Not great or extended in his range, not a colorist in the ab-

solute sense of the term, but with an unflinching feeling for harmony, and of a judicious and liberal mind, noticeable for taste, Mr. Kensett has painted some of the most exquisite pictures that illustrate our art . . . and if at times devoid of strength, in his best estate he fairly won for himself the honor of being called the lyrical poet of American landscape art."

The subdued tone of the autumnal atmosphere and foliage in this picture is tender and true; its effect is singularly harmonious; how exquisite the clouds, warm the atmosphere, and effective the large oak in the foreground; and, above all, what sublime repose! Kensett does not merely imitate, or emphasize, or reflect nature—he interprets her—which we take to be the legitimate and holy task of the scenic limner . . .

The variety and faithfulness of Kensett's studies of landscape may be learned at once by the sketches on the walls of his room. The traveller recognizes localities at a glance. One of the marked excellences of this artist is the truth and definite character of his outline; accordingly we behold a fragment of the Apennine range, an Alpine peak, and the more rounded swell of American mountains, in these artistic data for elaborate works. Careful observation is the source of Kensett's eminent success. He gives the form and superficial traits of land and water so exactly as to stamp on the most hasty sketch a local character indicative of similitude. His landscapes would charm even a man of science, so loyal to natural peculiarities are his touch and eye. Equally felicitous in the transfer of atmospheric effects to canvas, and with a genius for composition, scenery is illustrated by his fertile and well-disciplined pencil with rare correctness and beauty. Every material that goes to the formation of a landscape he appears to have carefully studied. We retrace, at ease, our summer wanderings, in his studio: there are the "Hanging-Rocks" which bound good Bishop Berkeley's old Rhode Island domain; here a bluff we beheld on the Upper Mississippi; and opposite, an angle in the gorge at Trenton, where we watched the amber flash of the cascade; how finely is reflected the morning and afternoon light of early autumn in America, in these two charming pictures; there is "Lake George" itself—the islands, the shore, the lucid water; how native is the hue of yon umbrageous notch; and what Flemish truth in the grain of that trap-rock; how rich the contrast between the glow of summer and the colorless snow on the summit of the Jungfrau; the trees in this more finished piece are daguerrotyped from a wood, with the fresh tint of the originals superadded.

There is one obstacle to impartiality in estimating Kensett, as an artist, to one who knows him well; and that is the personal confidence and sympathy he inspires. Of all our artists, he has the most thoroughly amiable disposition, is wholly superior to envy, and pursues his vocation in such a spirit of love and kindness, that a critic must be made of very hard material who can find it in his heart to say a severe, inconsiderate, or careless word about John F. Kensett. Perhaps some of our readers will think all this is quite irrelevant to the present object, which is to define Kensett's position in art, wherewith personal qualities, it may be argued, have nothing to do. But we are of a contrary opinion. The disposition or moral nature of an artist directly and absolutely influence his works. We constantly talk of a "feeling for color"—of a picture exhibiting a fine or a true "feeling," and thus instinctively recognize a transfusion of the natural sentiment and a tone of mind into and through the mechanical execution, design, and spirit of a pictorial work. In landscape-painting especially, this result is obvious; Salvator's wild woods and savage romance, Canaletti's literal correctness, Claude's vague, but poetic sentiment, characterize their paintings. The calm sweetness of Kensett's best efforts, the conscientiousness with which he preserves local diversities—the evenness of manner, the patience in detail, the harmonious tone—all are traceable to the artist's feeling and innate disposition, as well as to his skill. If we desired to carry abroad genuine memorials of native scenery—to keep

alive its impression in a foreign land—we should select half-a-dozen of Kensett's landscapes. Other artists may have produced single pictures of more genius; may be in certain instances superior; but, on the whole, for average success, Kensett's pictures are—we do not say always the most brilliant, effective, or original—but often the most satisfactory. So thought Lord Ellesmere, after visiting nearly all our native studios, and so think those who have most carefully studied American scenery. It is rarely that, to use a common phrase, we can *locate* a landscape so confidently as Kensett's; the vein of rock, perhaps, identifies the scene as in New Jersey,—the kind of cedar or grass assures us that it was taken on the Hudson,—and the tint of water or form of mountains suggests Lake George. There was a time when we feared Kensett, with all his merits, would become a mannerist,—so peculiar and stereotyped were some traits; but he soon outgrew this, by enlarging his experience—studying nature at the English lakes, as well as along the Erie Railway, and in the Adirondacks, not less than by the sea-coast; his pictures of the latter illustrate what we have said of his local truth; for they define the diversities of the New England coast. We all feel that Newport scenery—even that of the sea—so apparently monotonous, differs from that of Beverly and its vicinage, but it would be hard to point out the individualities of the two; Kensett does it with his faithful and genial pencil. He is as assiduous as he is tasteful.