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Hudson River School Paintings from the Grey Collection

by Katherine Manthorne

Nineteenth-century Americans were increasingly alarmed over the impact of civilization on their landscape. They charged visual artists with the obligation to defend what remained of their magnificent forests, mountains and riverways before it was too late. To record the landscape became a patriotic duty and a sacred calling. Today we might question how a picturesque painting was conceived as an instrument of power in the face of technological and commercial development, but there is ample testimony confirming that art played this role.

From the Greek, Arcadia refers to that pastoral vision of natural harmony. All the world resembled this ideal before humankind altered it to suit its own needs and desires. John F. Kensett's jewel-like *Arcadia* updates this Edenic vision with modern picnickers gathered in the clearing by a tranquil lake. Perhaps it's a Sunday or holiday when they have the perfect weather and location to enjoy time away from their daily cares. Painting the figures tiny and indistinct, Kensett shows the women and men completely integrated into the fabric of nature. Undoubtedly inspired by the American countryside, the artist keeps the identity of the place deliberately vague to

Transitional Nature: Hudson River School Paintings from the David and Laura Grey Collection is on view through May 17, 2020, at the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, Modesto Maidique Campus, 10975 SW 17th Street, Miami, Florida, 33199, 305-348-2890, www.frost.fiu.edu.

suggest the timelessness and universality of this earthly paradise.

While Kensett fashioned an imaginary prospect, William Hart based his *Autumn by the Lake in the Mountains* on the actual scenery of the White Mountains but shaped it to conform to the ideal landscape. First





All illustrated images are from the David and Laura Grey Collection unless otherwise stated.

ABOVE: Francis Silva, *Evening*, 1881, o/c, 20 x 36.

RIGHT: Asher B. Durand, *A Summer Afternoon*, 1849, o/c.

LEFT: William Hart, *Autumn by the Lake in the Mountains*, 1864, o/c, 39 1/2 x 54 1/4.

established by Claude Lorrain in the seventeenth century, those conventions required a composition with a mountain in the central distance, a body of water in the foreground for reflection and trees and other framing devices right and left for balance. Small figures appeared on a path admiring the view with livestock for variety. Adhering to these guidelines Hart creates what were called by the leading critic of his day "gems of quiet yet salient beauty."

American painters in the 1840s and 1850s were keen to study the continent's "virgin charms" in detail, drawing rocks and trees and observing clouds and weather, all to celebrate the bounties of the increasingly prosperous nation. During these formative years, artists expressed optimism through their peaceful scenes where the sun was always shining over the verdant terrain and the pure, untroubled waters of the Hudson could be glimpsed in the distance.



Asher B. Durand painted *A Summer Afternoon* just as he assumed leadership of the American painters known as the Hudson River School. A few years later he wrote a series of "Letters on Landscape Painting" that influenced how his fellow artists and countrymen looked at nature. The public was already flocking to spectacular wonders like Niagara Falls, but his words and pictures guided them toward

the unassuming corners of nature. The artist's seductive presentation of a leafy grove with cows and sheep gathered near the water's edge motivated people to appreciate and protect these modest places central to American life.

Jasper Cropsey's *Summer* perfectly captures a lazy summer day when families and cattle alike sought relief from the heat lounging by a pool of water under the



ABOVE: Samuel Colman, *Barges on the Hudson*, 1867, o/c, 15 x 30.

LEFT: Thomas Hill, *View of Yosemite*, c. 1887, 16 1/2 x 22, o/c.

RIGHT: Albert Bierstadt, *Western Landscape—Deer Wading*, c. 1870s, o/c, 11 1/4 x 15 1/2.

BELOW RIGHT: John F. Kensett, *Arcadia*, c. 1850s, o/c, 12 x 18.

shade trees. Prior to electricity or air conditioning trees played the essential role of sheltering and cooling human and animal life. A contemporary critic noted the lesson of Cropsey's artworks: "The ax of civilization is busy with our forests...even the old primordial hills, once bristling with shaggy pine and hemlock...are being shorn of their locks, and left to blister in cold nakedness in the sun." A seemingly innocent view carried a stern warning to preserve these woods.

The Civil War marked the beginning of modern America. In the succeeding decades the agrarian basis of American life gave way to urbanization and industrialization. Forests were cleared for lumber needed for construction without thought of replanting or conservation. Growing populations required new food sources. Pollution rose alongside the explosive economic growth of cities. As close observers of the country's natural resources, artists registered the devastating effects these transfor-

mations wrought on the environment. The Hudson River became a vehicle for expressing nostalgia for simpler times, disgust over the disregard for nature's welfare and a call to action.

The immediate foreground of Lemuel Wiles' *Cove Near West Point* is occupied by an inlet with a hyper-still surface that bars the viewer's entrance to the scene. The band of water paralleling the land is tinged with a burgundy-wine color while the adjacent strip reflects the blue-grey of the sky. Completed in 1867 in the vicinity of the nation's military academy West Point, its references to the Civil War are inescapable, reinforced by the fact that the figures in the boat and on the shore have been identified as African American. Staining the river with the ghostly presence of blood, Wiles makes the landscape the vehicle to convey suffering and loss.

Frank Anderson carefully selected his vantage point to avoid the density of homes and industries located along this stretch of the Hudson River in *Breakneck*



Mountain, Hudson Highlands. Late afternoon sunlight turns the the jetty of land at near left and the opposite exposed rock surface of Breakneck Mountain a golden yellow. Sloops and schooners with their sails full hug the far bank and head for home while a man rowing a red dinghy moves slowly across the width of the water. Each compositional choice was made to avoid the present and create a picturesque vista constituting a nostalgic nod to the pre-industrial past.

Before launching his artistic career, Francis Silva served as a captain in the Union Army during the Civil War. Painted in 1881, the sailboats in *Evening* float peacefully on the river, uninterpreted against the background of war and post-war industrialization. Certainly, American waterways by this time were crowded thoroughfares of commerce filled with noisy, dirty barges, steamboats, freighters and dredgers. Yet he has sanitized the scene,



performing an artistic clean-up by eliminating the ugly truths. Far from being an accurate depiction, *Evening* is a throwback to

quieter times when the riverbanks were lined with homes and churches rather than factories and their waters were clean.



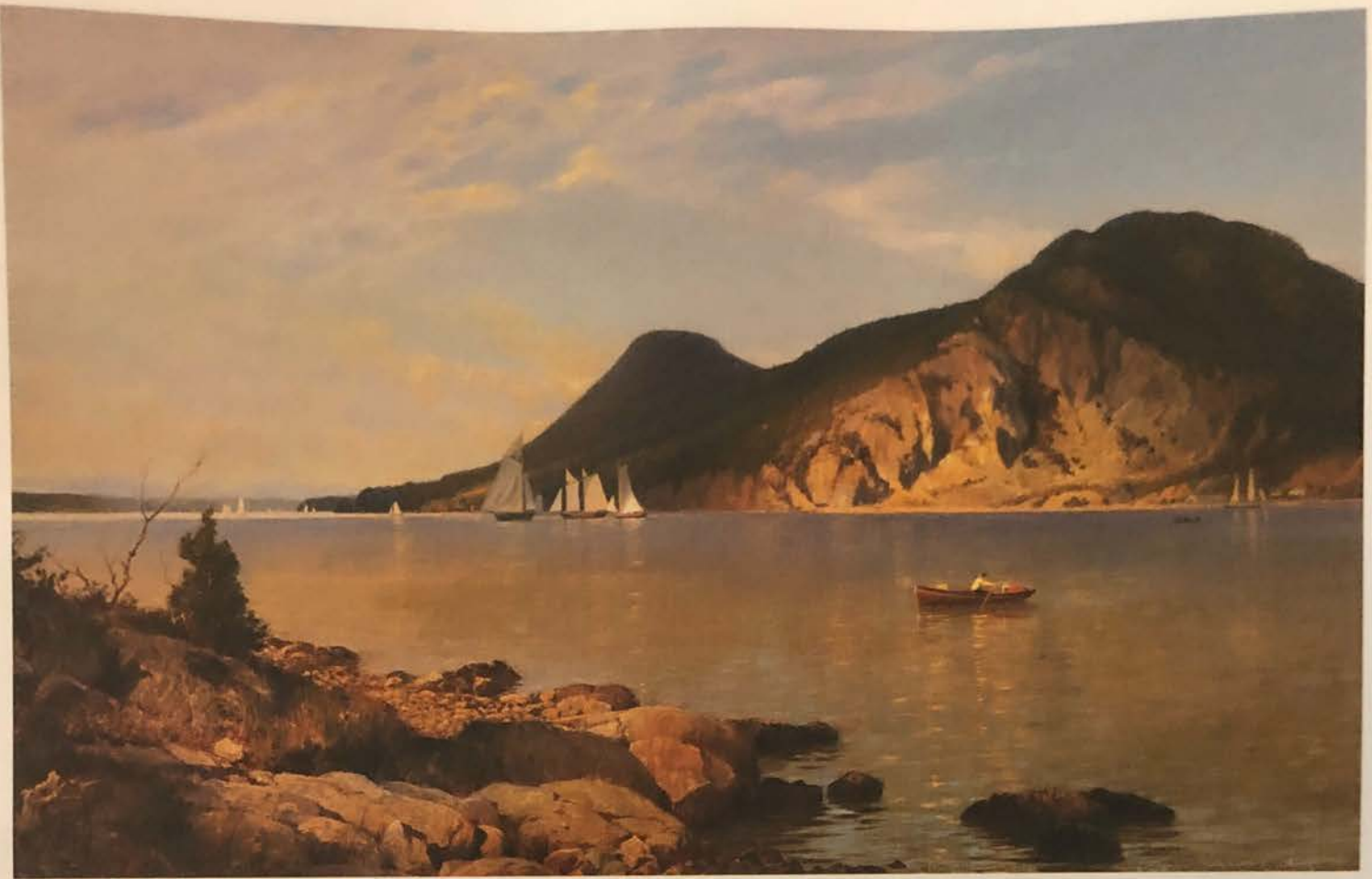
In contrast to Anderson and Silva, Samuel Colman faces the realities of the post-war in *Barges on the Hudson*. The river was a transportation route for people and goods: steamboats brought immigrants, workers and tourists upriver and materials

like bricks, lumber and stone downriver. In the foreground he portrays a man pulling his small rowboat onto a spit of land just before the storm is about to break. Further back he painted both small sailboats and larger steam-powered tourist launches and

freight boats. Visualizing the transition from rowing and sail to steam, he acknowledges the technical progress of the modern age while anticipating the environmental damage it will bring in its wake. New York Harbor became America's busiest port, serving ships from all over the globe.

The vessels in Mauritz Frederik De Haas's *New York City by Moonlight* could be carrying unrefined sugar from the Caribbean, cotton from the American South or paper from northern New England. To process these raw materials, the harbor was lined with sugar refineries, garment manufacturing and printing houses, all of which dumped waste into the water and atmosphere. De Haas captures their tall chimneys lining the harborside, belching clouds of grey, toxic smoke into the sky. He strategically compares them to the elegant sailing ship and full moon, highlighting the industrial present against the romantic past.

"Go West, young man!" Horace Greeley advised in the era of Manifest Destiny.



ABOVE: Frank Anderson, *Breakneck Mountain, Hudson Highlands*, 1878, o/c, 10 x 163/8.

RIGHT: Arthur Parton, *Pool in the Au Sable*, 1879, o/c, 363/4 x 311/16.

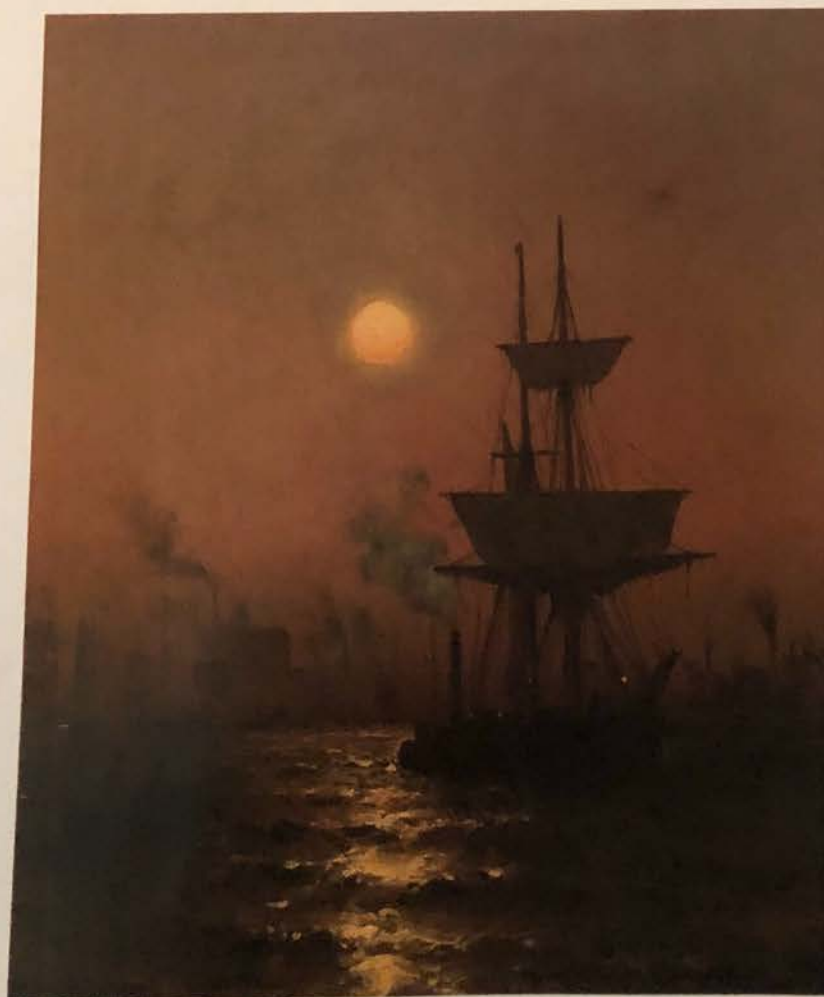
ABOVE LEFT: Herman Herzog, *View in the Rockies*, c. 1872, o/c, 14 x 193/4.

LEFT: Lemuel Wiles, *Cove Near West Point*, 1867, o/c, 22 x 36.

The US acquired California and the Southwest after the war with Mexico (1846-1848), extending national borders from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Expeditions were launched to survey the new territories and the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869, facilitating migration of Euro-Americans.

Artists too headed west to record the changing terrain. A raging deluge diagonally bisects the rugged terrain in Herman Herzog's *View in the Rockies*. On the near shore stands a rustic homestead with a young woman leading a cow back to the barn before the storm breaks. On the opposite side is a sawmill where logs that have been felled in the nearby forest are cut into lumber. Dwelling and mill are perched precariously on the otherwise undeveloped site, signs of the arrival of settlers and lumbermen who have made initial inroads into an otherwise untouched





ABOVE: Jervis McEntee, *Autumn Reverie*, 1880, 20 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{7}{8}$, o/c.

LEFT: Mauritz Frederik De Haas, *New York City by Moonlight*, c. 1880, o/c, 13 x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$, Robert Grey Collection.

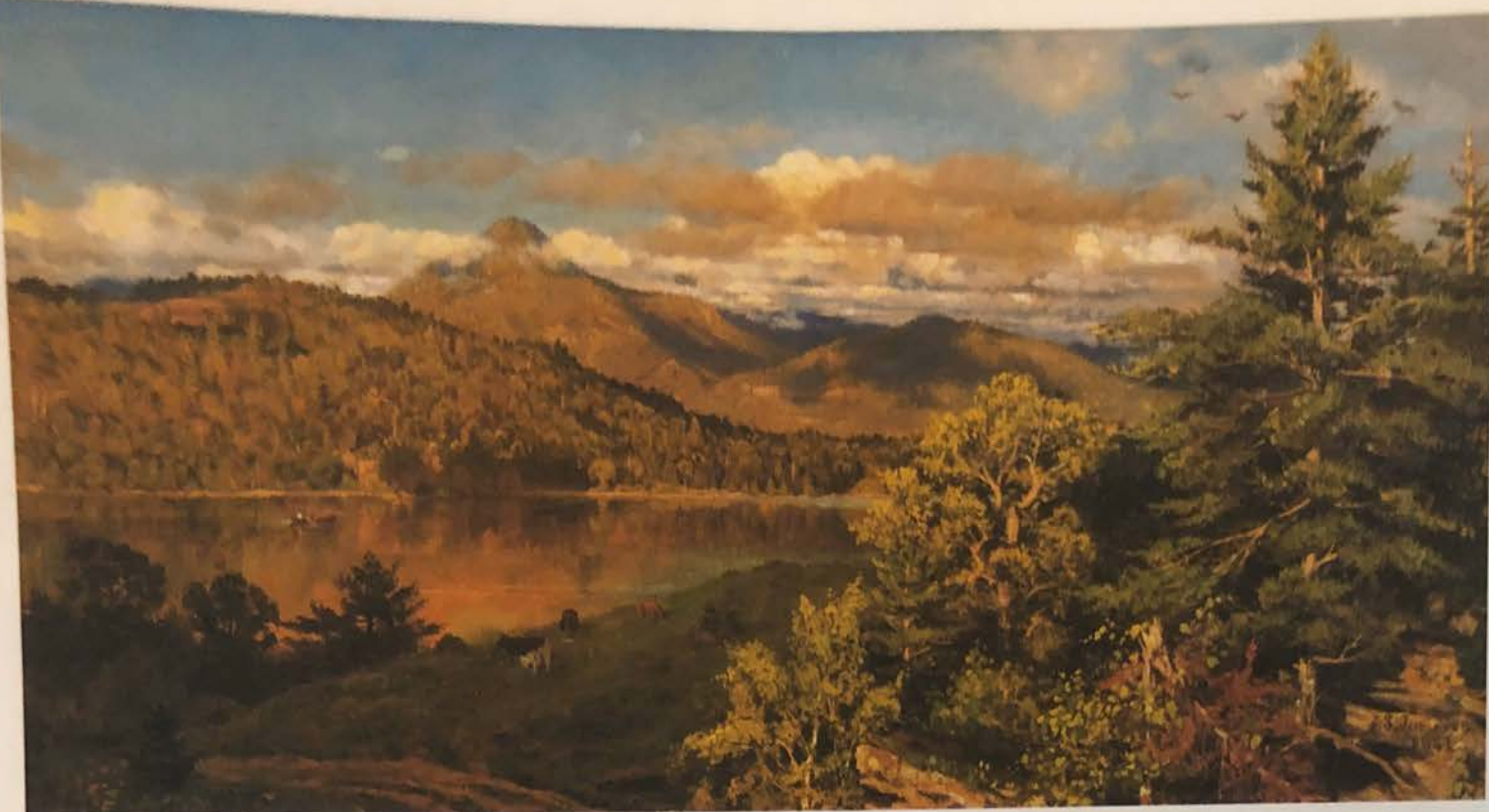
ABOVE RIGHT: John S. Jameson, *Saranac Lake*, 1861, o/c, 14 x 26.

RIGHT: Jasper Cropsey, *Summer*, 1853, o/c, 10 (d).

wilderness. The threatening storm clouds, trees bending in the strong winds and frothing torrent suggest that nature is fighting back, rejecting humankind's exploitation of its resources.

Famous for large-scale pictures of wild Rocky Mountain terrain, Albert Bierstadt created an intimate scene in *Western Landscape—Deer Wading*. Here he painted the shore of this quiet waterway touching the edge of the canvas, encouraging us the viewers to step into the scene. This device was understood in the nineteenth century as a symbolic invitation to go west, access this terrain and settle it. These lands, however, had been occupied for centuries by Native peoples who were now being driven off their land to make way for colonization by Euro-Americans. The deer wading here, like buffalo in other pictures, stood for soon to be lost wild nature.

Thomas Hill—like Bierstadt—captured in



paint Yosemite and other spectacular sites for the enjoyment of audiences who had never seen the West. Pictures were even brought before Congress to help convince officials to preserve these lands for public use, and the strategy worked. In 1864 President Lincoln signed a law granting Yosemite Valley to the state of California for protection and in 1890 the federal government made it a National Park. Yosemite became a popular tourist destination with guided excursions and comfortable resorts like the Wawona Hotel, where Hill built a studio (still standing) and became the resident artist selling pictures like *View of Yosemite* as souvenirs.

The Adirondack Park was born thanks to a major milestone in conservation legislation. In 1892 the State of New York set aside six million acres to protect it from uncontrolled forest clearing that was common during the nineteenth century. It is the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States, greater in size than Yellowstone, Glacier, Grand Canyon and Everglades National Park combined. The law stipulated that it "shall be kept forever as wild forest lands," ensuring that the lands are rich in recreational opportunity and ecological significance. John S. Jameson was a teenager when he painted *Saranac Lake* in the Adirondacks. He was a



child prodigy who could skillfully combine sweeping landscape panoramas with incredibly sharp detail that reveals subtleties

in vegetation, cloud formations and watery reflections. After completing this picture, *(continued on 126)*