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The Unknown Blakelock

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THE UNKNOWN BLAKELOCK

ORGANIZED BY SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY
LINCOLN, NEBRASKA



Figure 2. *Indian Encampment*, undated, oil on canvas, 91/2 X 13 1/2 inches, Gift of Mr. C.R. Smith, Permanent Collection, Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame

Understanding the work of nineteenth-century American painter Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919) has proven elusive despite several exhibitions and publications about his life and art. As Sheldon Director Emeritus, author, and founder of the Nebraska Blakelock Inventory Project Norman Geske observes, “Essentially self-taught, Blakelock proceeded with an imagination that was singularly free of any allegiance to established procedures, allowing him ...to address subjects as diverse as Jamaica, upper Manhattan Island, and the ocean shore – to find new solutions to differing pictorial problems. In some instances, it is clear he was cognizant of stylistic innovations in the higher artistic community. At other times it seems his solutions were strikingly in advance of the standard practice of the time.” Blakelock’s tragic mental illness and the numerous forgeries produced in his style have further obscured the broader artistic accomplishments his critics have largely overlooked.

The Unknown Blakelock expands our view of the

artist’s achievement and confirms his modernist vision by identifying specific examples that enlarge our sense of the breadth and variety of his life’s work. While the exhibition includes his signature moonlight scenes and Indian encampments, its focus is on lesser-known subjects that may have motivated Blakelock to venture beyond traditional norms and experiment with original methods of painting.

Born in New York City in 1847, the only child of a well-to-do family, Blakelock attended the Free Academy of New York (now City College) in 1864 to prepare for a career in medicine, but grew disillusioned with his course work and left before completing his degree. He found a mentor in his uncle, James A. Johnson, a self-taught artist and friend of Hudson River School painter Frederic Edwin Church. In 1865 he joined Johnson at

Figure 3. *St. Gabriel's Grotto, Isle of Jamaica*, about 1872, oil on canvas, 36 X 24 inches, the James M. Cowan Collection of American Art, The Parthenon Museum, Nashville, Tennessee

Yet another departure from his signature works is found in his seascapes. *The Sun Serene Sinks into the Slumbrous Sea* is one of three seascapes of superior quality known to exist. Geske describes it as “a veritable fantasia of colored atmosphere”; it is sometimes regarded as Impressionistic because of its light palette, loose and tactile brushstrokes, and its immediacy and out-of-doors feel. As Vincent points out, “But if the paintings Blakelock made in the 1890s prove anything, it is that he was first and foremost an experimentalist, and like some modernists he could switch-hit from naturalism to abstraction from one day to the next.” The painting’s title, moreover, hints at Blakelock’s attachment to music and literature.

Blakelock’s literary interests are more apparent in his fantasy paintings, which Geske considers to be later works because of their extraordinary character in terms of composition and handling. *Pegasus* (fig. 6) portrays the mythological white horse and rider leaping and dissolving into an abstract landscape of textures and colors. Vincent believes that in his allegorical and literary compositions Blakelock mixed the ideal with the real, abstraction with realism. When comparing Blakelock’s *Pegasus* to his contemporary Albert Pinkham Ryder’s painting of the same title, Mark Mitchell considers Blakelock’s piece to be more abstract in texture and color, its white figures rising “to a symbolic or spiritual level.”

Both “critically and tragically” ahead of his time, Blakelock, in Geske’s view, embodies the dilemma of a “lifelong effort to accommodate himself” while “constantly at war with his inclinations and his abilities.” Despite this warfare, perhaps in some sense, even because of it, the works in *The Unknown Blakelock* reveal the artist’s expressive uniqueness and vision.



Sources

Primary sources used in this gallery guide include: *Beyond Madness: The Art of Ralph Blakelock, 1847-1919* (2007) by Norman Geske; *The Unknown Night: The Genius and Madness of R. A. Blakelock, An American Painter* (2002) by Glyn Vincent; and Mark Mitchell and Norman Geske’s essays in the exhibition catalog, *The Unknown Blakelock* (2007).

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his uncle's new summer home in Vermont for intensive study. Blakelock's diligence led to his being included in an 1867 exhibition at the National Academy of Design – the first of seven successive acceptances. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not tour or study in Europe. Exposure to European art and, according to Geske, interest in the French Barbizon School came to him secondhand. Blakelock chose to explore the American west instead. Numerous drawings and sketches attest to the excitement and sense of adventure he found there, undergoing experiences that would influence much of his later work. In 1875 Blakelock married Cora Rebecca Bailey and soon after fell into financial difficulties. They had nine children together, one of whom died in infancy. Shortly after his youngest child's birth in 1899, Blakelock was hospitalized for what is believed to have been late onset schizophrenia. Although continuing to paint, he was institutionalized for much of the rest of his life.

In the 1860s, still early in his career, Blakelock's style reflected the Hudson River School painters in its attention to detail, naturalistic color, and gradual atmospheric recession. About his work in this vein, Geske notes that, after proving that he could do it, it was “an accomplishment that did not take.” By the 1870s a more personal approach emerged, as can be seen in the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery's painting titled *Moonlight*, dated in the 1880s (fig. 1). The painting embodies characteristics of his other famous night pieces but with a difference. “The image is reduced to near abstraction,” Geske notes, “a wholly subjective transformation of experience. The subject is subsumed within the medium. Oil paint is made to speak for itself.” Venturing into an increasingly individual expressive realm, he nonetheless continued to be included in the more conventional exhibitions of the National Academy, indicating his ability to produce work that met the aesthetic norms he often chose not to follow.

Another example of Blakelock's characteristic subject matter is *Indian Encampment* (fig. 2), a scene depicting a single tepee, humans and horses harmoniously placed within their natural surrounding. Though Blakelock's western sojourns between 1869 and 1872 yielded a group of Indian encampment paintings, a comparison of these works with the objective depictions of George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Seth Eastman, for example, makes clear that the West did not transform him into a western artist intent on documenting the landscape or



Figure 5. *Violets*, undated, oil on canvas, 10 X 8 inches, Private collection

the Native peoples living there. In *Indian Encampment*, attention is drawn away from the human dimensions to the brilliant sky and texture-filled land surrounding the camp. As Geske notes, “The heavy painting of the sky color into the trees creates an imprecise, ‘impressionistic’ sense of form dissolved in atmosphere.”

Blakelock returned from his travels West on a Pacific Mail steamship bound for Panama and New York via the Isthmus. Geske points out, the artist found something new, “not only in a different subject matter, but a new way of seeing... the enveloping luxuriance of the tropics...” Blakelock seemed comfortable with these digressions in subject and style, Geske writes, digressions that demonstrate a spontaneous creativity in imagery and medium that reach beyond his moonlight and

Indian encampment scenes. Geske notes, for instance, that Blakelock's Jamaican tropical settings tended to be "sensuous and atmospheric"; *St. Gabriel's Grotto* (fig. 3), depicting a tropical woodland, large rock formation, and native people, is rendered as "a freely brushed screen of varying shades of green that barely suggests the actuality of trees or foliage." Unusual in Blakelock's career, the Jamaican scenes are equally out of the ordinary among American paintings of the time.

Also unique are Blakelock's shanty drawings and paintings, the outgrowth of excursions in the late 1860s or early '70s to sketch in the undeveloped portion of Manhattan north of the upper 50s. These may be among the first attempts to depict the urban poor in a manner that eschewed the picturesque. In *Shanties, Seventh Avenue and 55th Street* (fig. 4) Blakelock emphasizes texture, bright pigments, and spontaneous brushwork, while at the same time conserving the sense of impoverished reality. According to author Glyn Vincent, Blakelock in these works, "distances himself from the shanty and reduces the squatters' activity to a lone solitary figure..." Rather than romanticizing his subject, he transforms

the scene into a generalized commentary on nature and mortality.

Blakelock's bold use of color in his shanty paintings appears as well in his occasional still lifes, most of them depicting flowers. During the 1870s Blakelock's choice of subjects and themes, according to curator Mark Mitchell, offer an "indication of his early restlessness with artistic conventions and categories." While retaining a degree of realism, some of his still lifes display a higher sense of contrast and oversaturation of color aligning them more closely with his European contemporaries than with his American colleagues. These works have also been called metaphorical, alluding to their "mystery, romance and loneliness." *Violets* (fig. 5) depicts a small white vase of flowers placed in a dark setting, the flowers executed with a light touch and a sense of delicacy and grace. Geske describes the paintings as "empathetic," disclosing Blakelock's personal approach to art.

Figure 4. *Shanties, Seventh Avenue at 55th Street*, undated, oil on canvas, 16 1/4 X 24 3/16 inches, Collection of Al and Lisa Schmitt, Los Angeles, California



FRONT: Figure 1. *Moonlight*, about 1880s, oil on canvas, 22 X 27 inches, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, NAA-Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial

CREDITS

The Unknown Blakelock was organized by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The exhibition will travel to the National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts in New York City, where it will be on view from September 25, 2008 through January 4, 2009.

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Figure 6. *Pegasus*, before 1913, oil on board, 9 X 13 inches, Denver Art Museum, the Edward and Tullah Hanley Memorial Gift to the People of Denver and the Area
