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## Nineteenth Century American Landscapes

Jon Nelson

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln Art Galleries*

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Scene over the Hudson, from  
above Sing Sing

see sketch of  
Sing Sing for



Tappan

Song Sing

Cover:

3. Bartlett, William H. (1809-1854)  
*VIEW AT SING SING, NEW YORK*  
Sepia, 7 x 11 1/4 inches (actual size)  
F. M. Hall Collection

# *NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN LANDSCAPES*

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Catalogue of an exhibition of Nineteenth Century American Landscapes  
presented under the auspices of The Nebraska Art Association,  
The University of Nebraska Art Galleries,  
and the Nebraska Public Library Commission

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their help in making this exhibition possible:

DR. JOHN M. AND ELIZABETH B. CHRISTLIEB /  
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NORTHERN NATURAL GAS COMPANY COLLECTION,  
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM / OMAHA

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM / OMAHA

INTRODUCTION: “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and up-lifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes . . . . I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the universal Being circulate through me. I am part or parcel of God.”

These words of Ralph Waldo Emerson from his essay *On Nature* express the sentiments of the early nineteenth century American landscapists, known as the Hudson River School. The term, originally intended as an insult, was meant to characterize this group of painters as presumptuous provincials. The painters were not presumptuous provincials, apeing European models; they were genuinely affected by the American landscape. “Never need an American,” said Washington Irving, “look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery.” The Hudson River Valley, the Catskill Mountains, and the White Mountains were beautiful. A boat trip up the Hudson River was considered by European travelers, such as Fanny Kemble, equal to, if not better than, a trip down the Rhine. The landscapes were wild, uncultivated, untouched by human civilization. The Hudson reminded the sentimental traveler of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s noble savages, and the theory that life in nature was pure and simple. The traveler became, for a time, Paul or Virginia, Atala or René. The special

distinction of the American painters, unlike their European counterparts, was that they were able to paint from nature that was truly wild. The United States was still largely the land of the forest, primitive and unspoiled by civilization.

The first Hudson River School painters worked primarily in New York State. Thomas Doughty (1793-1856), the oldest, was by trade a leather-tanner and merchant who in 1820 quit his profession in favor of painting. He was self-taught, but by no means naive. His compositions are conventional; a repoussoir of trees on either side of the canvas which, like wings on a stage, focus the viewer's attention on the middle ground. However, Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was the first American to bring a personal vision and style to the art of landscape painting. Born in England, he immigrated with his family to Ohio, where he worked with his father as a wall-paper designer and manufacturer. When that business failed, Cole set out on his own as an unsuccessful painter of portraits who could not please his clients. He then turned to landscape, painting scenes along the Hudson and in the White Mountains, painting scenes known for their minute profusion of detail, filled with light and dark contrast which emphasized the mysterious wonders of nature.

Two painters who form a second generation of the Hudson River School are Jasper Cropsey

(1823-1900) and John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872). Cropsey is primarily admired for the hazy quality of his paintings, their sombre autumn tones, and idyllic atmosphere that verges on melancholy. Kensett was, in his time, the most beloved of the landscapists. His work, too, is bucolic, but more robust. He began as an engraver, but during a seven-year visit to England, he broke with the trade and returned to America in 1847, where he found the landscape to be entirely different from European scenery and adjusted his technique and color values accordingly. Kensett was no admirer of brilliant sunrises and gaudy sunsets; he preferred a medium light which does not show the contrasts of nature's colors but the infinite, subtle, variations of tones.

Interest in American scenery was not confined exclusively to the United States. In 1837 an English engraver, William H. Bartlett (1809-1854), was sent on commission by a London publisher to make preliminary drawings for a large illustrated book *American Scenery*. The finished book, the first and largest portfolio of American views ever published, furnished Europeans with the most comprehensive picture of the northeastern states. Another European who traveled to this country was Karl Bodmer (1809-1893), who came as the official artist of the German naturalist Prince Maximillian of Wied. The Prince, interested in the American Indian, traveled up the Missouri River in 1833, and Bodmer was brought along to make accurate



renderings of the scenery and Indian costumes, which, thanks to his neo-classic academic training, he was more than able to do. However, it was not only Europeans who sent scientific expeditions to the West to study the geography and the customs of the Indians. The United States government sent several such expeditions, each with its artist. An artist was necessary, because, it must be remembered, the camera was not in wide use, and out of these expeditions grew a second American school of landscape, the Rocky Mountain School. The artists, Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874), Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910), Thomas Moran (1837-1926), and William de la Montagne Cary (1840-1922) were fascinated by the scenery, the rugged peaks, the towering waterfalls, the spectacular sunsets, and crystal lakes. "The most favorable time," wrote Miller, "to view these lakes was early in the morning or towards sunset,—at times one side or the other would be thrown into deep purple masses, throwing broad shadows with sharp light glittering on the extreme top,—while opposite mountains received its fullest complement of warm, mellow and subdued light;—thus forming a *clair obscure* and contrast most essential to the picturesque in color."

Not all landscapists were drawn to America. Some were oriented toward Europe, especially France,

where a new school, the Barbizon School, was being formed and developed. Barbizon painting was distinguished not by panoramic views of towering mountains, and spreading valleys, but rather by intimate views of openings in woods, scenes of meadows, depictions of peasant huts and farm yards. George Inness (1825-1894), did not begin his career under the influence of France, he began as an engraver and painter in the Hudson River manner. The style did not satisfy his own poetic interests, so under the influence of Corot, he spent several years in Italy painting scenes of the Roman and Tuscan hills, scenes of delicate tones and sombre melancholy. Another expatriate Homer Martin (1836-1897), settled in Normandy and painted in a style that was both realistic and poetic. The colors, brown, tan, and grey, cast a feeling of gloom and brooding, which demonstrated his own austere temperament.

Another development in French painting which stemmed from the Barbizon group, and was to have a profound effect on American painting, was Impressionism. Simply stated, Impressionism is an attempt to capture in paint on canvas the shimmering and constantly changing effects of sunlight on the landscape. In order to accomplish this the artist worked out-of-doors, painting directly from nature. This practice was considered eccentric by older artists who had always made charcoal or pen or water color sketches out-of-doors, but painted

their finished oils in their north lighted studios. Some of the American practitioners of the style were John Henry Twachtman (1853-1902), Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928), Morton Livingston Schamberg (1882-1918), and Childe Hassam (1859-1935). Twachtman, born in Cincinnati, studied in Munich, where he acquired his broad technique and dark, warm colors. He was essentially a poetic painter who admired the fluid aspects of nature, water, snow, and misty mornings. Childe Hassam, the most French of the Impressionists, was trained in Paris where he was influenced by Claude Monet. He, consequently, habitually painted with a broad palette, in broken tones.

Arthur Davies and Morton Schamberg on the other hand were less conventional Impressionists. They were more dominated by the Post Impressionists who were influential from the 1880's to the beginning years of this century. Their object, in part, was to return a sense of structure to painting. They felt that the Impressionists in their attempts to capture the effects of sunlight had failed to keep a sense of design and balance in their compositions. This sense of design and balance is most apparent in the Schamberg exhibited, the painting also shows other Post Impressionist characteristics, broad, loose brush-strokes and brilliant colors.

The remaining artists, Ralph Albert Blakelock

(1847-1919) and Louis M. Eilshemius (1864-1941), two artists born into conventional middle-class professional families, bring us almost back full cycle to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Like Doughty and Cole, they were more or less self-taught but not naive. Their vision, highly poetic, was purely personal and in some respect quite close to Emerson's view of nature. "The laws of the art of painting," Blakelock said, "are the laws of the creator, as to expression, color, form, unity, harmony, height, depth, tone; when the knowledge is obtained, then we may trust our emotional nature or spirit to create, and then, upon comparison, we find them like nature."

JON NELSON,  
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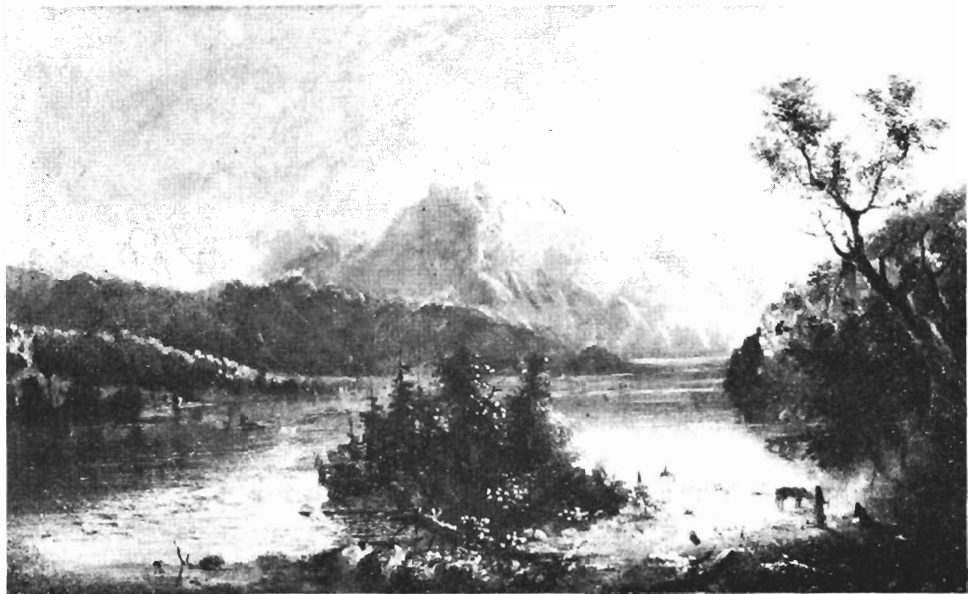
*CATALOGUE:*

1. Doughty, Thomas (1793-1856)  
*HUDSON RIVER*  
Oil, 14 1/8 x 17 inches  
Nebraska Art Association,  
Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection



2. Cole, Thomas (1801-1848)  
*CATSKILL MOUNTAINS LANDSCAPE*  
Oil on panel, 15 7/8 x 21 7/8 inches  
University Collection,  
Gift of A. B. Sheldon
3. Bartlett, William H. (1809-1854)  
*VIEW AT SING SING, NEW YORK*  
Sepia, 7 x 11 1/4 inches  
F. M. Hall Collection
4. Bodmer, Karl (1809-1893)  
*VIEW OF THE BEAR'S PAW MOUNTAIN,  
TAKEN FROM THE HILLS BEHIND FORT  
MCKENZIE, 1833*  
Water color, 11 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches  
Northern Natural Gas Company Collection,  
Joslyn Art Museum / Omaha

5. Miller, Alfred Jacob (1810-1874)  
*WIND RIVER MOUNTAINS*  
Oil, 8 x 13 1/8 inches  
Joslyn Art Museum / Omaha





6. Kensett, John Frederick (1816-1872)  
*SILVER PLUME WATERFALL*, 1855  
Oil, 22 x 18 1/4 inches  
Nebraska Art Association,  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Woods,  
In memory of Nelia Cochrane Quick
7. Whittredge, Worthington (1820-1910)  
*LONG'S PEAK*, 1866  
Oil, 7 1/2 x 21 inches  
Joslyn Art Museum / Omaha
8. Cropsey, Jasper Francis (1823-1900)  
*DOUNE CASTLE*, 1848  
Oil, 14 x 21 inches  
Nebraska Art Association,  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frank H. Woods,  
In memory of Nelia Cochrane Quick
9. Inness, George (1825-1894)  
*ITALIAN LANDSCAPE*  
Oil, 11 3/4 x 17 1/4 inches  
F. M. Hall Collection
10. Innes, George (1825-1894)  
*SUNSET NEAR MONTCLAIR*, 1859  
Oil, 23 x 33 inches  
Joslyn Art Museum / Omaha

11. Bierstadt, Albert (1830-1902)  
*VALLEY OF THE YOSEMITE*  
Oil, 13 3/8 x 18 1/2 inches  
Joslyn Art Museum / Omaha
12. Martin, Homer (1836-1897)  
*CLAM DIGGERS*  
Oil, 14 1/2 x 24 inches  
F. M. Hall Collection
13. Moran, Thomas (1837-1926)  
*LAGUNA PUEBLO*, 1905  
Oil, 20 x 30 inches  
Dr. John M. and Elizabeth B. Christlieb / Bellevue
14. Cary, William de la Montagne (1840-1922)  
*CHIMNEY ROCK ON NORTH PLATTE RIVER  
IN WESTERN NEBRASKA-OGALILLA* (sic)  
Oil, 10 x 15 inches  
Dr. John M. and Elizabeth B. Christlieb / Bellevue

15. Blakelock, Ralph Albert (1847-1919)  
*A MOUNTAIN STREAM*  
Oil, 12 x 10 inches  
Joslyn Art Museum / Omaha
16. Blakelock, Ralph Albert (1847-1919)  
*HEAVY WOODS – MOONLIGHT*  
Oil, 6 1/8 x 9 3/4 inches  
Mrs. A. B. Sheldon / Lexington



17. Twachtman, John Henry (1853-1902)  
*VIEW OF THE SEINE, NEUILLY*  
Oil on panel, 13 1/4 x 15 7/16 inches  
University Collection,  
Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection
18. Hassam, Childe (1859-1935)  
*APRIL SHOWERS, CHAMPS ELYSSEES*, 1888  
Oil, 12 x 16 inches  
Joslyn Art Museum / Omaha
19. Davies, Arthur B. (1862-1928)  
*LANDSCAPE*, 1887  
Oil, 8 x 12 inches  
University Collection,  
Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection
20. Eilshemius, Louis M. (1864-1941)  
*EVENING LIGHT, ELLENVILLE, N. Y.*, 1901  
Oil, 19 7/8 x 30 inches  
Nebraska Art Association,  
Thomas C. Woods Collection

21. Schamberg, Morton Livingston (1882-1918)  
*THE REGATTA*, 1907  
Oil, 10 x 15 inches  
F. M. Hall Collection



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The present exhibit, *NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN LANDSCAPES*, presents a very definite contrast with the three earlier exhibits on *TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ART*. The message, concerning a different

era and way of life, is presented in terms of the period through color, subject and techniques. "Both national pride and response to the marvelous welcomed pictures in which the wonders of nature were celebrated, while writers reminded one that a pushing civilization had not yet destroyed those wonders . . . (this was) a generation whose authors had sharpened their enjoyment of natural beauty for its own sensuous sake. The lyricism of Bryant and Wordsworth found an echo in the Morse landscapes . . . " \*

A written interpretation of the period is available through Washington Irving (the *Sketch Book*, 1819-1820, for its evocation of the scenery, folkways, superstitions and local characters and legends of the Hudson Valley) ; James Fenimore Cooper; Edgar Allan Poe; William Cullen Bryant; Henry David Thoreau; Francis Parkman (the *Oregon Trail*, 1849, for an absorbing picture of life along the trail and of a sojourn among the Sioux) ; and many others.

The paintings presented here, then, are to be considered as yet another valid dimension in the library for the study and appreciation of an era, a people, and a growing country.

\*Larkin, Oliver W. *Art and Life In America*  
(Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York) 1960

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