



From the desk of Pierre Beaudry

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**THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL,  
THE SLEEPING GIANT  
OF AN AMERICAN RENAISSANCE**

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by Pierre Beaudry, 3/22/2008

INTRODUCTION: THE ART OF JAMES FENIMORE COOPER.

The Hudson River School of painting was composed of a very diversified grouping of artists that reflected, in different degrees of advancement, the coming to maturity of cultural American exceptionalism, which was to define, by the creation of a typical American culture, a new and more advanced form of Western Civilization than was reflected in Europe at that time. The purpose of this movement as a whole was aimed at not only establishing on these shores a culture of progress in human development, but, also, to strike a definite blow to the dominating form of European oligarchical counterculture of entertainment and pessimism that was infecting the world during that period. However, the movement was sabotaged by a combination of British and French imperial operations and the Hudson River School project was destroyed by the middle of the 1870's only to be replaced by the cowboy counterculture. America has not, to this day, recovered from that humiliating abasement.

It is important, here, to identify the historical specificity of the Hudson River School within the larger context of the American experiment. The fact that a significant number of the artists of this movement came from Mid-Western and New England families, which were reared in rural America with direct ancestry of puritan optimism, represents a major aspect of the cultural characteristic of this movement and of the

American character in general. The most exemplary of the first period was represented by Thomas Cole with his early *Landscape Scene from "The Last of the Mohicans"* (1827) and in his allegory of *The Voyage of Life* (1842) series both of which attempted to express, in different ways, the uplifting ideas of James Fenimore Cooper and the dimension of the moral purpose of artistic composition with respect to the American landscape. Art historian, Louise Minsk noted quite simply and beautifully, the scope of this art movement with respect to Cooper. She wrote: "In a nation still yearning for an artistic identity of its own, the years 1825 to 1875, defining the Hudson River School, were a period of powerful nationalism in a young America. The earliest, dramatic and uniquely American landscapes of Thomas Cole prompted immediate response from a people restless to discover and claim its own greatness. These sentiments reached their pinnacle in the monumental and inspirational canvases of Frederic Church's *Niagara* and Albert Bierstadt's *Yellowstone Falls*." (Louise Minsk, *The Hudson River School*, Barnes and Noble, New York, 2006, p. 7.)



Figure 1. James Fenimore Cooper by Mathew Brady.

Without identifying it explicitly, Minsk implied, in that statement, the existence of a continuity of intention between those three artists, Cole, Bierstadt, and Church, which was most remarkable and which was expressed by the fact that all three reflected an axiomatic change that they had created in the domain of classical artistic composition. This axiomatic change was located in the relationship that those three artists had with Fenimore Cooper, and in their execution of the two profoundly different axiomatic steps

that represented the transformation of the entire American cultural experiment during that period of fifty years. The two axiomatic steps represented respectively two different ways of expressing the moral intent and mission of the difference between man and animal, that is, the idea of man created in the image of God. The first could be identified as the *puritan step* (Thomas Cole, Robert Duncanson, William Sonntag, and Sanford Gifford), and the other as the *revolutionary step* (Worthington Whittredge, Frederic Church, and Albert Bierstadt). These bookends historical markers establish a time frame spanning a period of about fifty years, going from 1825 to 1876. The period opened in 1825, the year of Manifest Destiny, when John Quincy Adams became elected President of the United States, and closed in 1876, with the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, which represented the high point of the influence of the American system worldwide. And, then came the destruction of the Cooper inspired Hudson River School by British Pre-Raphaelite Ruskinians and the French Barbizon luminists and impressionists.

1. THE PURITAN OUTLOOK OF THOMAS COLE.

The early period of the Hudson River School, mainly represented by Thomas Cole, projected on the general public an allegorical, romantic, and spiritual view of nature and of man such that he was idealized as being in a union with nature, not as the good savage of J. J. Rousseau, but in an elevated form in which nature was conspiring to uplift him by using its own landscape capabilities as a holy and sacred receptacle. With Cole, the American landscape became the chalice of nature. In this way, American landscape was given more a religious connotation established by providence as sometimes represented by the Puritan conception of Manifest Destiny. In a sense, Thomas Cole was attempting to create an American form of art that would be essentially didactic, moralizing, but ultimately almost Kantian in character, in affinity with the Puritan outlook of the early settlers of New England. This is an important aspect that has to be understood about American art as well as about the American character more generally, because it still largely permeates American society, today.



Figure 2. Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Youth*, 1842.

Cole treated the American scenery as an earthly paradise-like location that is explicitly made not to resemble any particular existing landscape that one could recognize as being familiar, because the viewer is invited to enter into an imaginary sacred place, a shrine made for the contemplation of God's creation and to give thanks to God for America. From that vantage point, every one of Cole's paintings idealizes America as a holy place of Providence where one comes to pray for forgiveness of the failures of the past, but also to pray for a second chance in the future. Nature had thus been turned into a temple of worship. As Cole illustrates in this scene from the series of the *Voyage of Life*, youth is sent out by an angel upstream onto the river of life to fulfill its dreams and responsibilities of Manifest Destiny. Such was the first step in the fulfillment of the historical task of the Hudson River School. Thus, man's destiny became an idealized form of the future, the contemplation of a United-States of America in communion with the symbolic home temple of God in the heavens. However, that future was not real and not secured until it went against the pricks and pulled the willing while dragging the unwilling.

For Cole, as well as for his friend and intellectual mentor, poet William Cullen Bryant, the purpose of the American painter was to illustrate the relationship between man and the wilderness, but by avoiding the paradoxical contest between the one and the

other. As a reminder of this fact, Bryant had written a short poem dedicated as a warning to Cole, as he was about to leave for Europe.

“To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe.”

“Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest – fair
But different – everywhere the trace of men, ...
Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight,
But keep that earlier, wilder image bright.”

Thus, Cole saw his role as co-opting the wilder state of nature for the benefit of civilization by showing the pathway away from savagery toward progress. This is why Cole painted the two series of *The Course of Empire* and *The Voyage of Life*, which represented his most important and revealing paintings. There, Cole depicted human progress and civilization not by having man taming nature’s savagery, but by turning nature’s savagery into a spiritual state. In such a manner, Cole had discovered a way to avoid the paradox of civilizing the wilderness at the same time that he avoided the European oligarchical alternative generally represented in landscapes by the notorious difference between the French and the English gardens.

The flaw of Cole is best understood in his contemplative treatment of the viewer. His purpose was not to change the spectator but to please and comfort him. In 1835, Cole gave a lecture entitled “*Essay on American Scenery*,” in which he warned of the dangers of excessive economic development moving westward across the United States. Cole did not understand that artistic progress was an integral part of economic and scientific development. So, he urged his audience to turn inward and take care of “the oasis in us.” The following exhortation, reported by art historian Louise Minks, makes the point of the Cole method. Cole wrote: “The pleasures of the imagination, among which the love of scenery holds a conspicuous place, will alone temper the harshness of such a state; and, like the atmosphere that softens the most rugged forms of the landscape, cast a veil of tender beauty over the asperities of life.” (Louise Minks, *The Hudson River School*, Barns & Noble Publishing, New York, 2000, p. 11.) This approach to art became like a “luminist” beacon for some of the future artists of the Hudson River School, such as Sanford Gifford. “Casting a veil over the asperities of life” was a way to avoid the paradox, not a way to solve it. This showed Cooper that artistic composition had not yet come to maturity in America.

On the other hand, James Fenimore Cooper did not see nature and man as a contest between two opposite forces that were out to subdue one another. Both were expressions of the same array of universal physical principles of change. Cooper saw man as someone who could and had the responsibility to improve on nature by creating “inroads of civilization.” Rather than avoiding paradoxes, Cooper encouraged the landscape artist to discover in the wilderness a continuum of unresolved paradoxes and was teaching him how to go against the pricks by forcing such ironies on the observer, in order to change and improve him, as opposed to entertaining him or giving him a way out by offering him some tender comfort zone. The viewer had to be provoked by an

anomaly or be made perplexed before a strange interaction that occurred between man, nature, and God. But, the expression of such an anomaly had to be done artistically with such perfection that art had to appear to have created a natural effect almost irresponsibly, as if by accident. “The colors of the war paint had blended in dark confusion about his fierce countenance, and rendered his swarthy lineaments still more savage and repulsive than if art had attempted an effect, which had been produced by chance.” (James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*. P. 20.) Here you have, in a single and nearly invisible angular brush stroke, the dramatic and masterful Cooper method of Classical Artistic Composition, the Cooperesque blending of art and nature creating the historical and cultural stage before which the American spectator naturally becomes a better human being.

2. THE POLEMICAL GENIUS OF RICHARD S. DUNCANSON:

The Hudson River School, had an extensive following across the United States, especially along the East Coast and throughout the Mid-West region of Cincinnati, where Worthington Whittredge, William Sonntag, and Robert Duncanson all started their landscape careers. The impact of the influence of Cole, Whittredge, and Church was especially remarkable in the case of the Cincinnati landscape artist Robert S. Duncanson.

In 1861, after the exhibition of Church’s *Heart of the Andes* at the Opera House in Cincinnati, art historian Joseph D. Ketner reported that the Church masterpiece had a similar impact in all of the major cities of America. The monitoring of artistic reactions from across the nation has not yet been reported, except for the extraordinary case of the population of Cincinnati that I will now report on.

“The Cincinnati response echoed the tremendous praise the painting had received in the other cities. Church’s mountainous, tropical landscape was expansive in conception and panoramic in size, containing a broad range of geological formation and exotic fauna. The painting was indicative of a shift among some artists toward exploring new territories and attempting to portray the vast extent of the sublime wilderness that Americans assumed was their domain through Manifest Destiny. Duncanson certainly saw Church’s great picture and, like the rest of the country, was overwhelmed by it. The painting reenergized him, and almost immediately he began painting a tropical landscape similar in size and conception. Inspired, Duncanson sought a historical theme in English Romantic literature. Again, he chose a paradisiacal subject, Alfred Lord Tennyson’s 1832 poem “The Lotos Eaters.” These twin sources laid the foundation for the largest and most elaborate painting of his career.” (Joseph D. Ketner, *The Emergence of the African-American Artist, Robert S. Duncanson (1821-1872)*, University of Missouri Press, 1994, p. 90.)

Robert Duncanson had adopted the Leonardo da Vinci Code of conduct. He had tacked on the wall of his Cincinnati studio a flyer with his Leonardesque guiding principle written on it. It said: “The mere imitation of the form and colors of nature is not art, however perfect the resemblance. True art is the development of the sentiments and principles of the human soul – natural objects being the medium of illustration.” Duncanson demonstrated this point of method beautifully on the question of slavery.



Figure 3. Frederic E. Church, *Heart of the Andes*, 1859.



Figure 4. Robert S. Duncanson, *The Land of the Lotus Eaters*, 1861.

In choosing this axiomatic subject of change for his painting, *Land of the Lotus Eaters*, Duncanson, addressed the slavery question in an extraordinarily subtle and ironic manner. Ketner made the point quite adequately, when he wrote: “As an African-American living on the border of slavery, Duncanson was consumed with the current political dilemma. In response, he returned to a historical subject and commented on the current civic strife with the creation of his most ambitious historical landscape, *Land of the Lotus Eaters* (1861).” (Joseph Ketner, Op. Cit., p. 84).

After viewing Church’s *Heart of the Andes*, Duncanson stated: “I have made up my mind to paint a great picture.” This declaration had true Promethean substance to it. Because throughout the 1850’s American artists such as Cole, Church, and Bierstadt had successfully gone beyond European history painters with their polemical Socratic method. Granted. But they had never gone where Duncanson was about to go. They had created a unique form of American Art whose purpose was to involve the spectator into the creative process of change, and this meant that involving the viewer was risky because it implied going against public opinion. As Schiller warned his students in his lectures on Universal History, a true artist always has to choose between doing “studies for bread” or “doing studies for truth.” So, since universal change itself had become the creative motivation of the Hudson River School, Duncanson chose to take that risk. Moreover, Duncanson’s situation was even more dangerous because of his social status. Therefore, he had to muster doubled the courage. As Ketner put it: “It was bold for an African-American artist to aspire to such a high stature in the white art world. And he did so with determination.” (Ketner, Op. Cit., p. 112.) And I might add, he did so, with a masterful understanding of the Cooper method.

Thomas Cole had inspired Duncanson in his early period, but his predecessor’s didactic form of Puritan moralizing through allegories did not suit him. Duncanson had to reach for a higher principle of expression by reinventing the process of metaphor through which he could use a moment of past history that could effectively reflect in the minds of his contemporary observer the truth of what had to be presently changed, in order to have a better future. Therefore, his generosity was not pulled, but yanked, by the future. This meant that he had to go against the pricks in a most extraordinary way, because this was an excruciatingly difficult subject to address socially and politically. And Duncanson could not even discuss this matter with his closest friends. For Duncanson, 1860 was the year where leadership had become a very lonely place to live in.

As Ketner reported: “After the period of intense creativity and productivity, from 1857 through 1859, Duncanson must have confronted an impasse of unknown dimensions, perhaps due to personal social, or political problems. Indicative of this difficulty is the fact that no major landscape paintings can be dated from the year 1860. Duncanson’s latent artistic energy was not reignited until, in November, Frederic Edwin Church opened an elaborate display of his huge South American masterpiece *Heart of the Andes* (1859) at the Pike’s Opera House in Cincinnati.” (Ketner, Op. Cit., p. 89.) This was the critical moment when Duncanson discovered how to address the future of mankind. It was the polemical method of Church, with respect to the spectator and the universal quality of enthusiasm of his *Heart of the Andes*, that pulled him out of the rut

and provided him with the necessary inspiration to successfully fulfill his mission. Duncanson had applied the principle of universal history that Frederick Schiller had advocated in his Iena lectures. For Schiller, universal history is not about the past, but about how the future uses the past in order to change the present. Universal history is what LaRouche had identified as the causal function of time reversal.

Once that idea had taken hold of him, then, Duncanson looked for something in the past that would be suitable for the necessary cultural change he was attempting to realize. He found the perfect target: Tennyson's 1823 poem, *The Lotos-Eaters*, in which was described the scene where, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses' men had been seduced into artificial bliss and made captive of an imaginary and artificial paradise. That was the polemical Tennyson metaphor Duncanson was looking for. The key section of the poem reads as follows:

The Lotos- Eaters

[...] "A land of streams! Some, like a downward smoke,
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn did go;
And some thro' wavering lights and shadows broke,
Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.
They saw the gleaming river seaward flow
From the inner land; far off, three mountaintops,
Three silent pinnacles of aged snow,
Stood sunset flushed; and dewed with showery drops,
Up-clomb the shadowy pine above the woven copse."

The charmed sunset lingered low adown
In the red West; through mountain clefs the dale
Was seen far inland, and the yellow down
Bordered with palm, and many a winding vale
And meadow, set with slender galingale.
A land where all things always seemed the same!
And round about the keel with faces pale,
Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came." [...]

Duncanson projected this narrative onto his contemporary political situation in the United States. The scene depicted Ulysses being welcomed by the native bearing their narcotic lotus flowers. When the Greek sailors ate those blissful plants, they all became intoxicated and never wanted to leave such a paradise to resume their voyage back home. They had cut themselves from their future. Ten days after their victory in the Trojan War, the patriotic soldiers had become forgetful about their purpose for returning to Greece. Thus, by representing this paradisiacal landscape as a false escape from the reality of patriotic duty, Duncanson was intervening in the political complacency that the South was in, just prior to the Civil War.

The choice of soft light and late afternoon shadows created a dreamy series of monochromatic reddish slow moving rhythms, replicating the sleepy mood of Tennyson's verse across the canvas, and resonating much like the onomatopoeic series of "s" and "f" sounds, in order to sedate the victim by "rolling a slumberous sheet of foam," over his eyes. However, is that really what Duncanson was doing to his observer? No! This is not Aristotelian *mimesis*; this is Socratic *gnōti seōton*. Here, Duncanson showed his total disagreement with Cole's "...veil of tender beauty over the asperities of life."

Ketner identified Duncanson's moment of keen observation in its full historical specificity. "Begun in December of 1860, when the Civil War seemed imminent, and completed in May 1861, after the commencement of the hostilities, the painting depicts white soldiers resting on the banks of a river in a tropical landscape while being served by a train of dark-complexioned natives. The tropical landscape can be equated with the South, where slaves wait on their masters, the soldiers. The narcotic-induced apathy of Ulysses' soldiers reflects a contemporary criticism that the South had grown complacent and dependent on slave labor to support its economy and luxurious standard of living. Behind the veil of the romantic charm of exotic paradisiacal scenery, Duncanson decried the life-style of the slaveholding society and predicted a decade of war and a decade of recovery for the nation at a crossroad." (Ketner, Op. Cit., p. 91.) Just to show how an infinitesimal angle makes a difference, consider that while American patriots viewed this painting as a powerful statement in the spirit of unification of Manifest Destiny, the British aristocracy viewed it as a romantic yearning for an American earthly paradise and the right of ownership of slaves.



Figure 5. Robert S. Duncanson, 1864.

In its advertisement for the exhibition of the painting, the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* wrote that *Land of the Lotus Eaters* was “one of the finest pictures that R. S. Duncanson, the artist, has yet produced” and that it was “beyond question a chef d’oeuvre of art.” The Duncanson painting was displayed at the same Pike’s Opera House where Church’s *Heart of the Andes* had been displayed, a year earlier. The impact of both Church and Duncanson, had successively had on Cincinnati art lovers was a landmark in this American Cultural Revolution. There was extensive positive coverage in all of the Cincinnati newspapers, the most significant being the *Daily Cincinnati Gazette*, which reported: “Mr. Duncanson has long enjoyed the enviable reputation of being the best landscape painter in the West, and his latest effort cannot fail to raise him still higher in the estimation of the art loving public. He has not only wooed, but won his favorite muse, and now finds ample repayment for the labor of a lifetime, in the achievement of a more brilliant success than has attended most of his compeers.” (Ketner, p. 92) The *Gazette* added: “It did not escape the notice of the public that *Land of the Lotus Eaters* was drawn directly from Church’s *Heart of the Andes*, which had taken the city by storm only a year earlier.” And the *Enquirer*, relating to the *Heart of the Andes*, exhorted the public to come back, because ‘Duncanson’s *Land of the Lotus-Eaters*’ should not be allowed to leave the city without an inspection by those who were so enthusiastic in their praise of the former picture.” (Ketner, p. 92.)

True to form, Duncanson’s panoramic view captured the same spatial expanse as Church’s “great picture” with snow-caped mountains in the background, a river slowly cascading down to a tropical middle-ground, and into a calm basin in the foreground, but his treatment of the Greek classical irony, through the prism of Tennyson’s poem, was a very unique metaphor refracting the political crisis of the time in a slightly off centered manner, and thus, pointed to, by a different mean, the same universal physical principle that Church had captured with respect to the Cosmos of Humboldt, but in a different dimensionality. Thus, the sublime quality of Manifest Destiny was reflected in both paintings and that was the reason why Duncanson wanted to further follow Church in his footsteps and have his painting tour the United States, Canada and England, just as Church had circulated *Heart of the Andes* for the past year and a half in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

Duncanson’s plan was to have *Land of the Lotus Eaters* be accompanied on this tour by another of his “great pictures”, *Western Tornado*, (1861), which provided a dramatic contrast to the first. Duncanson’s idea was to shock the viewer out of his complacency into recognizing the two contrasting views of the Civil War conflict, the paradox of the slave-owner gentile southern gentry and the violence of war. However, for reasons that have not been made public, the intention of Duncanson appears to have failed to be properly recognized. Ketner noted: “As opposed to the paradisiacal prophecy of *Lotus Eaters*, *Western Tornado* was painted during the heat of the war and represents the mass destruction that accompanies war. Unfortunately, the critics and press did not recognize the political significance of this pair of paintings, missing the African-American’s veiled commentary on the brutality of slavery and war.” (Ketner, Op. Cit., p. 93) On the other hand, it is possible that the critics did see the significance of

Duncanson's revolutionary treatment only too well and chose not to acknowledge its significance.

Be that as it may, *Western Tornado* remained hidden and unknown to this day, and even though there appears to be no recorded evidence, at this time, that may suggest foul play, I do smell a rat. Why? After exhibiting the two "great pictures" in Cincinnati during June of 1861, Duncanson then brought his two "great pictures" to Toronto, and exhibited them in a downtown studio where, like Bierstadt and Church had done in their New York City studio, he charged 25 cents for admission. Even though Toronto may not be the art capital of Canada, there should have been enough cultural interest, there, to make the exhibition a success among the Canadian population. This was for Duncanson an opportunity to test his newly created polemical method on a foreign audience and to evaluate their "cultural appreciation." However, Ketner reported something about an "accidental circumstance," which he did not identify, and which resulted in the fact that not a single review appeared in the Toronto newspapers inviting the public to the exhibition. Why not? Why did the Toronto media ignore Duncanson?

This writer does not know what the "accidental circumstance" was, but he can hypothesize what may have caused it to happen. The political intervention of Duncanson on British territory may have been too much of a sting for the British oligarchy that controlled Canada at that time. Besides, Toronto was also a choice place to conduct anti-Union activities from during the American Civil War. Then again, the oligarchs may have rejected Duncanson's keen interpretation of Tennyson's "mild-eyed melancholy." Duncanson's irony may have been just too much for the British to accept!

The more profound irony of *Land of the Lotus Eaters*, possibly discovered by the British in Toronto, was that Duncanson had turned Tennyson's poem completely on its head. Lord Tennyson had been very serious and pompous racist when he wrote:

"And round about the keel with faces pale,
Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came."

There was nothing melancholic about Duncanson's polemical approach. Indeed, it probably did not escape anyone among the British aristocracy of Toronto that Tennyson's poem was totally racist and pro-slavery. Witness the following admonition, a few verses below:

And sweet it was to dream of fatherland,
Of child, and wife, and slave; but evermore
Most weary seemed the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.
Then some one said, 'We will return no more';
And all at once they sang, "Our island home";

It was Lord Tennyson's British-run slave trade that was the source of the tragic American situation, and every top Canadian leader knew that quite well. Duncanson had chosen Tennyson precisely for that provocative reason. And that was also the reason why he wanted to travel to Canada and to England with his "great pictures." Duncanson had, literally, turned Tennyson's racist poem to his advantage and to the advantage of the American people, if they were wise enough to recognize it. As a matter of fact, a number of Cincinnati abolitionists such as Professor Richard Sutton Rust I, and Congressman, Nicholas Longworth, of whom Duncanson made portraits, were financially supporting Duncanson's courageous international itinerary and polemical artistic revolution. This was a rare occurrence where *art for bread* and *art for truth* coincided.

However, as a result of this probable British-Canadian oligarchical intervention, Duncanson was forced to cancel his trip to England, left his two "great pictures" in Canada, where they remained for a decade. Duncanson's *Land of the Lotus Eaters* later became featured in Montreal with Church's *Heart of the Andes* in the photographic portfolio of the Canadian artist, William Notman. However, Duncanson was not going to abandon the fight that easily. Back in his Cincinnati studio, he started to work on a third "great picture" *Prairie Fire* (1862), which he was planning to tour Europe with, but which had also disappeared and has remained unknown to this day.

It is worth noting that Duncanson enjoyed intervening against British aristocracy, including the duchess of Sutherland, who had a painting of Duncanson, and who had gone as far as disguising herself as an anti-slavery activist. Compared with Toronto, Montreal art lovers gave Duncanson a tremendous reception, so much so that he decided to live there for a period of two years, during which time, his influence was so strong that he was able to assist in the creation of a Canadian landscape school, with followers such as the two Canadian artists, C. J. Way and John A. Fraser. In 1865, Duncanson finally departed for England, as per his original plans, and traveled in the company of the two Canadian artists, Allan Edson and C. J. Way.

He first toured *Lotus Eaters*, *Western Tornado*, and the *Ottawa Chaudieres Falls*, in Dublin, then in Glasgow. In early 1866, he presented his "great pictures" to the London population, where the critics gave it an excellent review. One London review stated "America has long maintained supremacy in landscape art; perhaps, indeed, its landscape artists surpass those of England: certainly we have no painter who can equal the works of Church; and we are not exaggerating if we affirm that the production under notice may compete with any of the modern British school. Certainly... this painting (*Land of the Lotus Eaters*) may rank among the most delicious that Art has ever given us, but is also wrought with the skill of a master in all of its details." (Art Journal, (London), 1865, and 1868.) Finally, Duncanson had succeeded in realizing his most-cherished dream, that is, to have his replication of the Church polemical method of Classical Artistic Composition recognized in England, in Canada, as well as in the United States.

Moreover, to put the icing on the cake, so to speak, while in England, Duncanson succeeded, through the good services of his Canadian photographer friend, William Notman, in arranging a visit with Alfred, Lord Tennyson at his home on the Isle of

Wright. Addressing Duncanson as “one of his Canadian kinsmen,” Tennyson welcomed him with a stiff upper lip and said of his painting: “Come whence it may, your landscape is delightful; and though not quite my lotus land, is a land in which one loves to wander and linger.” (*Montreal Herald*, February 8, 1864.) A Cincinnati abolitionist, Moncure D. Conway who was with Duncanson in London at the time, wrote an article for the *Cincinnati Weekly Gazette* on November 24, 1865, in which he reported about Duncanson’s audience with Tennyson. He said: “Think of a Negro sitting at the table of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Tennyson, Lord and Lady of the Manor, and Mirror of Aristocracy, and so forth...” Humm! Humm!

Ketner concluded his report of the Duncanson tour of England by noting that all of his “great pictures” have disappeared into private European collections and are no longer accessible to the public at large. “Only one of the “great pictures” that the artist took with him to England from Canada is currently known to reside in a European collection, *Land of the Lotus Eaters*. *Western Forest* was also discovered in a European collection, and today has returned to its city of origin, having been acquired by a private collector in Cincinnati. The other seven-foot paintings – *Western Tornado* (1862), *Prairie Fire* (1863), *Niagara* (1863), and *Oenone* (1863) – remain unlocated and may still be extant, hidden in the private collections of Europe.” (Ketner, Op. Cit., p. 155.)

3. HOW THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL GOT DESTROYED: THE TRAGIC ENDING OF WORTHINGTON WHITTREDGE

By the late 1850’s, most of the leading artists of the Hudson River School had taken to heart that they were consciously developing a true American artistic culture in the spirit of Fenimore Cooper and Alexander Humboldt; and they were also bringing back from the Dusseldorf Academy of Westphalia the best European heritage of the Schiller tradition.

This was also a great moment for Schiller in America, because there were extraordinary celebrations of the Centennial Birthday Anniversary of Frederick Schiller in New York City, for example, on the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th of November 1859. Similarly there were Schiller Jubilee celebrations in Philadelphia, addressed before the Haverford Loganian Society by Thomas Chase; a festival at the Academy of Music and Twelve *Tableaux Vivants* from different works of Schiller, including *Wallenstein’s Camp* in New York City; and an Oration delivered at the Schiller festivities on the 10th of November 1859 in the Boston Music Hall by Rev. Frederick Hedge D.D. Needless to say that the spirit of Frederick Schiller was very much present and well represented in America at that time.

The leadership of the British Empire was very much aware of that danger as well, and were orchestrating and funding a massive attack against the new American school by means of a counter-cultural offensive led by the Pre-Raphaelites of Ruskin and the French Barbizon school of Fontainebleau. The main targets representing the most

important generation of young and patriotic landscape artists were Worthington, Bierstadt, Church, Leutze, Duncanson, and Gifford.

The attacks came through the controlled press and private Tory clubs of New York and New England. The news outlet targeted their minds and the minds of the general population and the private clubs with their art dealers targeted their back pockets. As I will report below, a lot of paintings from The Hudson River School were bought by private collections only to have them pulled out of circulation and have them hidden from public view. For example, during the 1940's, William Sonntag of Cincinnati, a close collaborator of Duncanson and a follower of Cooper, Whittredge, and Cole, had painted four major works entitled *The Progress of Civilization*. The paintings identified the progression from American Indians, to pioneers, to village life, and to the modern city. However, all four paintings were bought and were never to be seen again. Like the *Great Paintings* of Duncanson, Sonntag's paintings are nowhere to be found today.

The moments when the Hudson River artists were targeted most viciously was around international exhibitions and most significantly at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, because this was the most important moment for the revolutionary new form of American art to be put before the world. This was also a unique opportunity for the artists to make sales and to have their works circulated internationally.

Take the cases of Whittredge and Gifford, for example. Other suffered similar outrage, but these two cases were decisive for the livelihood of the school as an institution. In 1874-75, Whittredge was elected president of the National Academy of Design where, for the first time, the opportunity arose to sell some important works from his associates and himself. However, Whittredge was in the middle of a personal depression. During those two years, he had to save the Academy, which was going bankrupt, and he spent more time fighting against private clubs than promoting the works of the Hudson River School. The fight against the private clubs was so nasty and unfair to American artists of the Hudson River School that by the end of 1876, it was Sanford Gifford who was forced to resign as president of the Academy.

Then, in May of 1876, the fight waged by the clubs against the Hudson River School reached a *punctum saliens*. Still in a depressed state, Whittredge was chosen to be on the committee of American Art for the Centennial celebrations in Philadelphia. As former president of the Academy, he was hoping to make his influence felt and he managed to get the works of most of his closest associates from the Hudson River School in the exhibit; however, with the virtual exclusion of the American Barbizon artists who had already infiltrated the school. This became a major bone of contention. The Centennial hanging committee was chosen with the explicit purpose of dividing the Hudson River School. It consisted of the New York artist, James David Smillie, Worthington Whittredge, James Sartain of Philadelphia, and William Perkins of Boston. On May 3, when the committee met to discuss the choice of works that would be the most representative of America, a virtual war broke out over the Barbizon American painters versus the Cooper movement of the Hudson River School. Everybody on the committee nearly resigned because Sartain would not compromise on his choice of the

Barbizon school. The advocates of the Cooper school were forced to take a back seat while the private clubs, their art dealers, and the press moved in for the kill with loads of money and propaganda to impose the Barbizon art faction on America at its own Centennial anniversary. Barbizon became the cultural smallpox of the Philadelphia Centennial.

As a result, the Centennial Year represented for Whittredge the second major crisis turning point of his life. The first crisis occurred just after the crash of “Black Friday” of September 19, 1873, when Whittredge’s distress then came to a high point. In fact Whittredge could already see his own personal tragedy coming when, in a letter he wrote to the infamous “art collector,” James Pinchot, on September 21, 1871, he manifested his desire to return to Europe in order to resolve the crisis he was in. He knew he was being attracted into a crisis through which the Hudson River School might not survive. He stated with amazing lucidity and frankness: “For all I care about Europe is its art and artists and what they are doing. I am forced to admire it while I don’t like it. I admire their knowledge *but* despise their *souls* if one can speak so.” As I will show below, Whittredge was actually confessing the state of his soul to the Devil.

A few years later, Pinchot received another letter dated February 15, 1874, in which Whittredge wrote: “Immense numbers of pictures however are imported and seem to find sale, some at enormous prices, while the Bierstadts, the Churches, the Giffords and Johnsons, are not sold or even wanted. Some better disposition must be shown by the public for at least our good artists, or art here and our art institutions must die out. It now became, I think, a little too much the custom to depreciate everything produced here, and over estimate everything brought from abroad.” This is as close as Whittredge came to discovering that it was Pinchot, himself, who was behind the operation to destroy his art institution.

Soon after the celebrations of the Centennial were finished, the disease of Barbizon took over the entire Hudson River School, as if a plague had hit the American school. Almost all were infected, including Whittredge and Gifford. Whittredge went into another deep depression because he felt personally responsible for the demise of the Hudson River School. Art historian, Anthony F. Janson, identified clearly the cause of the tragedy. “By the time he stepped down as its president, Whittredge had saved the Academy from ruin, but he could not restore its luster. Nor was he able to stem the tide of Barbizon that soon engulfed the Hudson River School and transformed his own work as well.” (Anthony F. Janson, *Worthington Whittredge*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1989, p. 153.)

Bierstadt will be even more frank, twenty years later, in his November 29, 1893 letter to the President Grover Cleveland complaining about the fraudulent top down control of the art market by the art dealers on both sides of the Atlantic. Bierstadt wrote: “The Artists both here and abroad wish to protect the liberal picture buyer and aid him in his desire to possess [sic] only the best pictures wether [sic] by foreign or native artists. It is well known that fully one half of the pictures imported are frauds. Free art would of course send us a ship load of these frauds, but this quantity would send the price down to

five dollars each and that is the present value of most of them. Every man would have a Corot or Diaz and a host of others, although dead they still work by proxy. Corot left 700 pictures and sketches, out of this number, twelve thousand [sic], according to a Paris paper, have been sold in the Hotel Druot and when we reflect that most of them came to this country, we are not happy.” (Letter of Bierstadt to President Cleveland, in Gordon Hendricks, *ALBERT BIERSTADT, Painter of the American West*, Published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974, p. 312.)

The art market was definitely rigged and even Whittredge’s Barbizon “friend,” Jervis McEntee, wrote to Pinchot on June 25, 1876: “It is perilous for us American artists to say anything now. The tide is against us. The dealers who largely form the popular judgment have no sympathy or interest in us. The press finds it profitable to keep in the good graces of the dealers, so that it is actually the case now that there is no place in New York where the leading American artists can send their pictures for sale with the hope of finding anything like fair treatment.” (Anthony F. Janson, Op. Cit., p.156.)

In 1872, records in his diary showed that Whittredge had frequent attacks of depression, which deepened with the death of his wife in 1878 and the passing of Gifford in 1880. This depression period coincided with his nomination as the president of the National Academy of Design, in 1874 and 75. By 1878, out of desperation and in the middle of the biggest crisis of his life, Whittredge had converted to the Barbizon school that he had fought against so desperately earlier on.

The Barbizon style of painting was introduced in the Hudson River School by George Inness and Jervis McEntee and was used to infect Whittredge, Gifford, and others. Barbizon is the name of the village in Fontainebleau, France, where the founders of the French school, Theodore Rousseau and Jean-Francois Millet were from. Their trademark and that of their followers was to use art for the purpose of expressing anti-industrial dreaminess and melancholy. In short, it was a British-French existentialist counter-cultural operation that was introduced in the United States with the purpose of stamping out the Cooper Cultural Revolution. Barbizon was also called “pre-impressionism” in France and the “luminist school” in the United States. The "luminist" style was invented by some nasty New York Art critics and historians in order to create tendencies among the Hudson River School painters and pin them against each other, as a divide and conquer type of tactical psychological warfare against the older and more mature members of the school.

As a painting style, "luminism" is nothing but a form of sophistry that became a mannerist fad expressing different existentialist moods, and its counter-cultural purpose was to literally induce the impression of dreaminess and melancholy in artists as well as in the general population. In some cases it was used systematically, like in the case of Turner, but also by the Barbizon French predecessors of impressionism such as Corot and Charles-Francois Daubigny, who became the role-model for the aging Whittredge. Its main counter-cultural function was aimed at destroying the rigor of the classical artistic composition that came out of the Dusseldorf School of the Westphalia region of Germany and of the Hudson River School by emphasizing sense perception as opposed to the

creative powers of the mind. The aim was to empty the true intention of a landscape and replace it by an overemphasis of sensuous luminist and impressionistic effects as the actual subject matter of landscape painting. Luminism and impressionism became the two most important fallacies of composition that ultimately took over the Hudson River School and destroyed it completely during the late 1870's.

In reality, luminism is merely a finishing technique, which helps hide brush strokes and eliminates strong delineation of objects. And that is all that it should be: a very useful device. Leonardo da Vinci called it "sfumato." Every landscape artist has to use some kind of finishing technique in order to give a more or less dense consistency to the atmosphere, smoothing over strong shadows in delineating the shape of objects, depending on the overriding intention of the subject. When it is used otherwise than a technique, it becomes a method of sophistry. The same thing happens when rhetoric replaces the intention in speaking language. However, if one abuses of this technique, it will ultimately erase the form of objects and all that will be left will be a light impression of what was once there. Witness the effect on this painting by Whittredge in 1890.



Figure 5. Worthington Whittredge. *An Artist at his Easel*, c.1890. The impressionism of this Whittredge painting is so accentuated that it could very well be mistaken for a Claude Monet, like *Meadows at Giverny*, 1888.

TO BE CONTINUED.