

From the desk of Pierre Beaudry



**WORTHINGTON WHITTREDGE
AND
EMMANUEL LEUTZE:**

THE ART OF CIVILIZING NATURE

by Pierre Beaudry, March 3, 2008.



“So, rather than being the victim of our own ignorant blind faith in the literal readings of our senses, we treat those senses and the added instrumentalities we devise to similar purpose, as merely instruments, not the content of knowledge. Our primary obligation is to be recognized in our nature as human, as the gardener who responds not only to the demands of the existing garden, but to designing those innovations which will improve it. To be in the image of the Creator, is to create.”
(Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. *On Monadology*, EIR, February 22, 2008.)

INTRODUCTION: THE AMERICAN ART OF FENIMORE COOPER.

There is no doubt that nature has produced on the American soil some of the most exalted and grandiose sceneries never to be found anywhere else in the world; there is also no doubt that the divine spirit, in whose likeness man has been fashioned, had provided for Americans a destiny on this soil to elevate mankind to the sublime

proportions of such natural offerings; however, the blueprints of that intercourse were not provided for by some pre-established harmony or star from above, nor were the pathways of its opportunities traced in the landscape below; a plan had to be thought through for a new experiment of discovery to be established whereby the civilized nature of man and the untamed wilderness of nature might progress together within a mutually agreeable expanse and form the culture of the new American Republic. James Fenimore Cooper was the one who pondered that question the most, and the Hudson River School of painting was the school that provided the best means of illustrating it. Thus: "A passing glimpse, even though it be in a work of fiction, of what that vast region so lately was, may help to make up the sum of knowledge by which alone a just appreciation can be formed of the wonderful means by which Providence is clearing the way for the advancement of civilization across the whole American continent." (James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pathfinder*, The New American Library, Inc., 1980, p.viii.)

With the impulse of Fenimore Cooper, America had not only reached an intellectual and cultural maturity that was able to stand on its own merit with respect to European culture, but that it was also stood to increase and further nourish the already powerful heritage of Western European Civilization by creating a unique American culture. The primary contrast that Cooper brought against the backdrop of, especially English empiricism that was dominating the Royal Societies of Europe, during the nineteenth century, was to bring the American scenery to bloom in accordance with a new means of expression which would rely heavily upon how the most important instrument of sense perception, vision, would serve as a means to show the invisible domain of the human soul. It was Fenimore Cooper that made Americans cross this cultural Delaware.

The Hudson River School of painting represented the most distinctive form of such an American form of art by bringing civilization to the wilderness in the context of John Quincy Adams's strategy of Manifest Destiny. This was most highly represented, particularly, by the mature American students of the Academy of Dusseldorf in Germany, most notably, Emmanuel Leutze (1816-1868), Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910), Frederick Church (1826-1900), Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902). As Cooper had recommended, the discipline of the Dusseldorf Academy was remarkable for its classically organized and intentioned artistic composition, its accurate drawing of natural forms, and its luminous and elaborate finish. But a good brush technique and a unique landscape were not sufficient ingredients to create an authentic American landscape artist. The American intention had to be branded on their works with the markings of a lasting Promethean fire!

The best of the Dusseldorf American students also had the overriding purpose of educating the spectator as a universal republican patriot by inciting him to seek the intention behind their landscapes, like they had been thought to do by their German teachers, A. Achenbach (1827-1905), and Charles Frederick Lessing (1808-1880), the nephew of the great Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781). For example, it was the head of the Dusseldorf Academy, Andreas Achenbach, who had the idea of putting into Leutze's "*Washington Crossing the Delaware*," the only star in the Eastern sky that was

fading away in the historical Christmas morning of that decisive battle of the American Revolution. That was a typical American form of remembrance of the Star of Bethlehem.

The Promethean idea of expanding Western Civilization westward through the United States was stamped very subtly on a significant number, but not all, of the Hudson River School paintings, and with such manifest ironies, that it attracted the patriotic spectator into seeking and discovering those thoughtful moments that only a unique American landscapes could make visible to an inquisitive mind. They were paintings of discovery, which meant bringing together a fitting correspondence between man and nature in a manner such that the classical development of one became also the civilizing improvement of the other. This art of civilizing the wilderness by means of paintings was explicitly inspired by the method of James Fenimore Cooper; that is to say, by his thoughtful way of producing ironies intentionally, but in all appearance unintended: *as if nature had created a specific effect, but with the appearance of having been produced by chance*. "Could nature really have done that," must be the question that the spectator asks of the painting?

1. WORTHINGTON WHITTREDGE'S *OLD HUNTING GROUNDS*.

So, in a way, the new American artist was looking for something that nature had produced, something out of the ordinary; but which was not noticeable merely for its own beauty, but also because her natural beauty could carry the human intention that enhanced her wilderness. So, nature had to accept to be used for that different purpose. And the artist had to know that such a purpose had to be made acceptable by nature. So, between nature and man a pact is formed whereby the artist can add to nature something, which comes into agreement with her own wilderness and cannot simply be forced upon her as if it were something foreign. In a unique way, what the artist brings, from the outside, has to belong there. It has to be in the form of an active participation with the scheme of natural universal physical principles, so much so, that it becomes unnoticeable to the untrained human eye. Something unusual is, therefore, created that does not appear to be intended. This is how the artist constructs an insight relating to some historical event, which has been witnessed and assimilated by nature and which, suddenly, silent nature is now able to reveal with the grace of her own beauty. It is as if the artist had made nature happier by adding to her charms. Thus, the drama unfolds naturally in a manner such that the secret, which nature was not equipped to divulge by herself alone, is now permitted to exhibit in its entire splendor with the welcome intervention of man: the appearance of the uncivilized becomes civilized! Wilderness, then, shows itself as an anomaly where the spectator has to say to himself: this cannot be! Nature is incapable of producing such a "natural effect," and yet she has, in such a manner that civilization was integrated in her by clinging to her charms. A good example of this Cooper method applied to a landscape is represented by The *Old Hunting Grounds* by Worthington Whittredge.

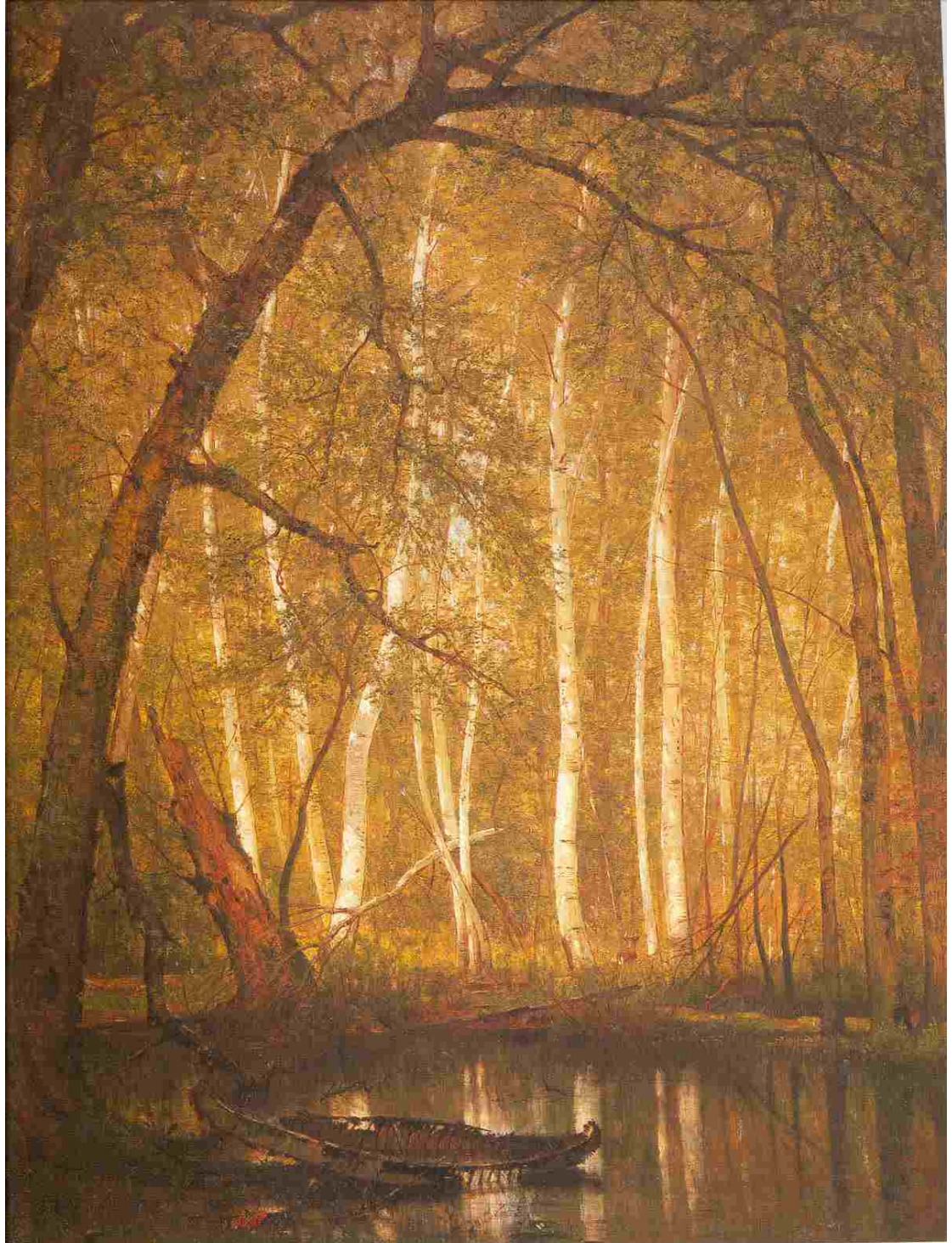


Figure 1. Worthington Whittredge, *The Old Hunting Grounds*, c.1864. The presence of two barely visible young female deers who are grazing undisturbed near the water hole, make this fleeting moment appear to be that much more unintended.

The dramatic and unique American landscapes, with the conscious idea of always looking into the direction of the sun or in its reflection, with the light source in the background, and the shadows in the foreground of the painting, exemplified by Whittredge's *The Old Hunting Grounds*, created such an extraordinary "natural effect" that the spectator who was pulled forward into this delightful scenery, could only agree to become captured by such a prearranged state of nature. Nature was staged in such a fashion that it was as if one were coming out of Plato's Cave. The spectator is attracted into the sunlight of truth but whose truthfulness can only be discovered in such intricate recesses of reflections and shadows that it creates some anomaly, some thoughtful disturbance.

Always reason is at home in nature when there is found proportionality between light and darkness, that is, in shadow contrasts. However, in *The Old Hunting Grounds*, there is no reason for the sun to light up the foot of the birch trees in a thicket where not even a portion of the blue sky is visible. In this case, either there must be an error or there must be another overriding reason, which must be made agreeable with nature and human reason. Thus, the spectator is disturbed, perplexed; but he cannot refrain himself from investigating the principle that produced such subtle crafting of light and darkness. Such was the secret that Whittredge had calculated he could introduce by civilizing this piece of the American wilderness. The dramatization of shadows and reflections mastered by Whittredge can only be compared favorably with ironies from the schools of Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt von Rijn.

The purpose of the Hudson River School was therefore to enlist the spectator to go beyond and transcend the subject of the landscape itself. This was also the main reproach of the critics against that school. This is what sends the British furious. Here, Whittredge very consciously used the method of Leonardo whereby the painting must reflect the intention in the mind of the subject or of the author. He also used the method of Schiller, quite consciously, for whom nature represented greater interest to his morals than to his understanding. In fact, Whittredge noted how important Schiller was for his learning the German language. He wrote in his autobiography: "*Later I had a teacher of German and learned finally to speak quite fluently in the language and to read it with considerable pleasure, even to translate some of Heine's and Schiller's short poems.*" Whittredge, who was the teacher of Bierstadt in Dusseldorf, was also one of the most outstanding American patriotic artists to reflect the consciousness of Manifest Destiny, and I cannot help but seeing in that extraordinary painting a direct reference to James Fenimore Cooper and to the abandoned water hole where Hawkeye used to stop for a drink in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Thus, the treatment of a water hole is not to be taken at its face value. Its representation is meant to express a thought process or an emotional evocation that relates to the history of America, its cultural heritage, its trials and errors, reflecting as in a nutshell, the universal history of mankind. Some of those scenes were small formats, like this one by Whittredge, representing a simple and intimate scene with an intention. The scene is not treated as accessories, as in Grecian art, in which nature serves as a separated background for human action representing the central focus. The landscape

does not appear either as accessory to a religious or philosophical experience of the Renaissance, which constitutes the main subject. In American culture, nature herself, participates in the drama of man and is made to reflect man as he should become, but as if unintentionally, that is, naturally. At any rate, the general idea is to always use the sense of vision as the means of discovering the intention in the mind of the artist as opposed to simply representing the visual effect of the object or a subjective feeling of the moment. So, the question is: what was Whittredge's intention behind *The Old Hunting Grounds*?

Look at how Whittredge dramatized this intimate scene. All you see is a background with brightly lit birch trees and a water hole in the shadow of the foreground with an abandoned broken-down birchen bark canoe. This is not a natural light and shade setting. This is a Shakespearian setting! The brightly lit birch tree background cannot produce the shadow of the foreground. This is a dramatic anomaly! However, the reflection of the birch trees in the water tells the drama of the Indian people, only if the spectator is able to treat the dark water hole as the reflexive function of human memory inserted within nature! Note how the only parts of the abandoned canoe that no longer have any bark left are those parts that are being reflected in the water from the birch trees in the sun drenched background. The shadowed foreground therefore acts as a memory of something that is missing; but that is still being reflected. The background is the glorious past where Hawkeye and Chingachgook used to hunt and the foreground is nothing but a memory pool of what was once there, but which had captured a fleeting souvenir that could only be remembered again, if, by chance, someone comes to this very special place and puts himself in that unique position of the spectator to internalize and discover the truth of this historical amputation.



Figure 2. Detail of Worthington Whittredge, *The Old Hunting Grounds*.

Suddenly, the spectator sees in his mind's eye, the memory of what is being reflected: the sad amputation from the American heritage of the Indian culture. *It is as if what was reflected in the water, through the holes of the canoe's birchen bark that once was patched there, was like an old warrior's leg that a patriotic soldier had lost in battle, but which reflected the memory of it still being there.*

2. EMMANUEL LEUTZE'S WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE.

This living memory principle of civilization was also well represented in the Dusseldorf school by the most important American history artist, Emmanuel Leutze (1816-1868). To demonstrate this same principle differently, I bring to the attention of the reader an extraordinary anecdote from Whittredge relating his encounter with Leutze in Westphalia, Germany. In his autobiography, Whittredge has two extraordinary pages in which he tells the story of how Leutze carefully chose his models to paint the intended purpose underlying his great picture of "*Washington Crossing the Delaware.*" It is worth reporting those two pages in their entirety:

"I had not been in Dusseldorf an hour before he showed me a pencil sketch of this subject, about six by ten inches in size. This little sketch was substantially the same in its arrangement as the completed picture. A large canvas for it had been ordered that day. When it came, he set to work immediately drawing in the boat and the figures with charcoal, and without a model. All figures were carefully corrected from models when he came to paint them. But he found great difficulty in finding American types for the heads and figures, all the German models being either too small or too closely set in their limbs for his purpose. He caught every American that came along and pressed him into service. Mr. John Groesbeck of Cincinnati, a man over six feet, called to see me at Leutze's studio and was taken for one of the figures almost before he had time to ask me how I was getting along. My own arrival and that of my friend were a godsend to him. This friend, a thin sickly-looking man – in fact all his life a half-invalid – was seized, a bandage put around his head, a poor wounded fellow put in the boat with the rest, while I was seized and made to do service twice, once for the steersman with the oar in my hand and again for Washington himself. I stood two hours without moving, in order that the cloak of the Washington could be painted at a single setting, thus enabling Leutze to catch the folds of the cloak, as they were first arranged. Clad in Washington's full uniform, heavy chapeau and all, spy-glass in one hand and the other on my knee, I was nearly dead when the operation was over. They poured champagne down my throat and I lived through it. This was all because no German model could be found anywhere who could fill Washington's clothes, a perfect copy which Leutze, through the influence of Mr. Steward, had procured from the Patent Office in Washington. The head of Washington in this picture was painted from Hudon's bust, a profile being represented. It is a very dignified figure, looking intently but calmly through the cold mist to the opposite shore vaguely visible over fields of broken ice. One figure only in the boat was painted from any but an American, and he was a tall Norwegian, acquainted with ice and accustomed to a boat could be admitted. A large portion of the great canvas is occupied by the sky. Leutze mixed the colors for it overnight and invited Andreas Achenbach and myself to help him cover the canvas the next day, it being necessary to blend the colors easily, to cover it all over in one day. It was done; Achenbach thought of the star, and painted it, a lone almost invisible star, the last to fade in the morning light." (The Autobiography of Worthington Whittredge 1820-1910, Edited by John I. H. Baur, Arno Press, New York, 1969, p.22-23.)



Figure 3. Emmanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851).

Achenbach was not one to miss the moment of making a point of irony, in the American sky of Leutze's painting, about the fact that the German mercenary, still asleep on the east bank of the Delaware River, was soon to become the fading star of that historic Christmas Day surprise attack of 1776 by George Washington's Army. As for Leutze, don't think that he was choosing only American models because of their physical stature. What Leutze needed to reproduce was the mental characteristics that were capable of usurping the physical features of a revolutionary moment. It was the anti-oligarchical determination of the American spirit that Leutze wanted to reproduce in their physical stature rather than the romantic and propitiatory demeanor of Europeans.

Again, as in the case of Whittredge's *Old Hunting Grounds*, the viewer can notice that in Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, nature has been made to participate dramatically, as if unintentionally, in the process of this memorable historical moment. The dramatic sky nearly covering the fading star of the Hessians is bringing a storm from the western side of the Delaware in conspiracy with the warring party of Washington. The revolutionary drama of this historical usurpation is further enhanced by two apparently unintended historical errors. The first is the overwhelming presence of huge jagged pieces of ice, blocking the advance of the Washington war party, as if nature itself

had been emphasizing the hardship of such a difficult mission. Secondly, as if to bring a counterweight to nature's impossible accomplishment, Leutze added the Stars and Stripes, anticipating not only the victory that would have been won, before the fight had even begun, which should always be the state of mind of any patriotic soldier going to battle, but also the union of the thirteen colonies that would have already been sealed by such a moment. This is a beautiful landscape form of the subjunctive mode whereby, in the present past of its future, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* represents, in the simultaneity of eternity, and for all generations, past, present, and future, the unique artistic form of American culture. Leutze dared to express, in his own time, a past anticipation of the future that must be reflected in the intention of every American citizen; that is, what it will be important that he would have done by greatly extending his person, whenever America were in danger of losing its historical purpose.

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