

THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL AND MANIFEST DESTINY

Hi Debbie,

I have been most excited in perusing your book on The Hudson River School of painting and I wanted to thank you for lending it to me. Irene just bought us our own copy on line. I had never seen the grandiose spaces of America painted like this before. I was fascinated especially with the extraordinary rendition of the Rocky Mountains by Albert Bierstadt, *Looking up the Yosemite Valley* and his *A storm in the Rocky Mountains – Mount Rosalie*.



Albert Bierstadt, *Looking up the Yosemite Valley*, 1865-67. A Rembrandt-like insight into the American civilizing mission of Manifest Destiny.

To me, the principle is clear: “*go west young man, move westward, go to the Pacific, keep moving civilization westward!*” Bierstadt’s work is comparable with the great civilizing work of the European cathedral movement. He elevates your mind to the challenge of the highest mountain, to the difficult path that draws you into the light of the Sun, and makes you want to always go beyond. Since man is man, it has always been his idea to go beyond the next boundary, the next frontier. This insightful call of Bierstadt is very moving: “*Come, surprise your intelligence, the future of mankind lies just beyond*

the Yosemite pass.” That is the most beautiful rendering of Manifest Destiny that I have ever seen. I regret not having used this illustration in my report on Canada.

Bierstadt’s mastery of the field perspective of light and darkness is so powerful that it would not be an exaggeration to identify him as the Rembrandt of America. His paintings show that he is also definitely a student of Leonardo. The sublime rendering of the magnitude of the Rockies is truly elevated to the high purpose of Manifest Destiny. His mastery of shadows reflect such a degree of perfection that the willing mind of the spectator is moved, as if by destiny itself, step by step, to a higher level of resolution of difficulty in participating in his creative process of tempering and mastering the grandiose harshness of the wilderness. I can see how young Americans would be fascinated by Bierstadt’s paintings in a New York exhibition, and would be filled with the desire to go west. The message of Bierstadt is clear: all of the natural elements of his landscapes are made proportional to the purpose of bringing civilization to the Pacific.

For me, the far-reaching and elevated purpose of *Mount Rosalie* is the best example of this civilizing process. And by civilizing, I don’t mean the taming and colonizing so-called savage Indians; I mean acknowledging that the Indian tribes of that land had self-ennobled themselves by these great and passionate heights as deployed by the mountains and the western skies of America. It took a genius like James Fennimore Cooper to recognize that historical fact and to have made us see how such nobility of character of the scenery blends with the nobility of the Indian people. The Bierstadt’s paintings are quite proportionate to this elevated purpose of Cooper’s writings.

For instance, reflect on the great leaps that your mind must venture to make in examining *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains – Mount Rosalie*. The spectator can only become transformed before such a spectacle of ironical successions of stormy shadows. The painting itself is almost live size, 83 X 142 ¼ inches. Then, you must raise your sight still higher to discover the anomaly: Is it a cloud? Is it a hope? Is it destiny? The spectator’s heart is pounding. The sudden chill in the air overwhelms him with the spirit that protects the Indian tribe living peacefully in the valley below, buried among a few telltale shadows. The echo of the mountain-thunder reaches the spectator a few moments after the lightning has struck the foot of **Mount Rosalie**:

“Look up,” rumbles the mountain, “elevate your sight, and notice my aged covered thought, pointing beyond the wilderness, to the Pacific. You cannot see all the dangers that circumvent you from below. The pass is difficult and treacherous. After leading your civilizing enthusiasm through and beyond this region, you will have conquered your sovereignty and you will no longer have to fear the bruises of injustice coming from the selfish imperials of the other continent.”

This Bierstadt masterpiece reflects the deepest echoes of the retired voice of Cooper that resonate through the darken air of his century, the mid-summer mellowed rays of the sun, limbering up the cliffs in a brief glimmer of respite before another storm thunders the valley. Note that Bierstadt painted his masterpiece, the year following the Lincoln assassination.



Albert Bierstadt, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains – Mount Rosalie*, 1866.

In my estimation, Bierstadt is probably the most illustrative representation of the American genius in painting. It is worth, however, doing an extensive and an in depth study of that whole movement, especially in the context of James Fennimore Cooper and Manifest Destiny. I really think you should do a report on this school. That would be quite challenging and exciting.

I found that the leading proponent of the early school, however, is very close to the French painter, Nicolas Poussin, and does not reflect the powerful heritage of the American Republican system as exemplified by Bierstadt. Thus, simultaneously, I see the Hudson River School as reflecting an ironic mixture of seeking a romantic artificial paradise on the new continent and also of seeking truthful insights into what Cooper called “the inroads of civilization.” The soaring nature of Cole is romantic like Poussin. This is not the elevating spirit of Bierstadt!



Nicolas Poussin, Hagar and the Angel, 1660

Compare the allegories of Cole with those of Poussin and you will see what I mean. Although the authors are two centuries apart, they are remarkably similar in their thinking and artistic execution. They both indulge in what I would call biblical fallacies of composition. They are true believers, not knowledge seekers.



Thomas Cole, Voyage of Life: Old Age, 1842.

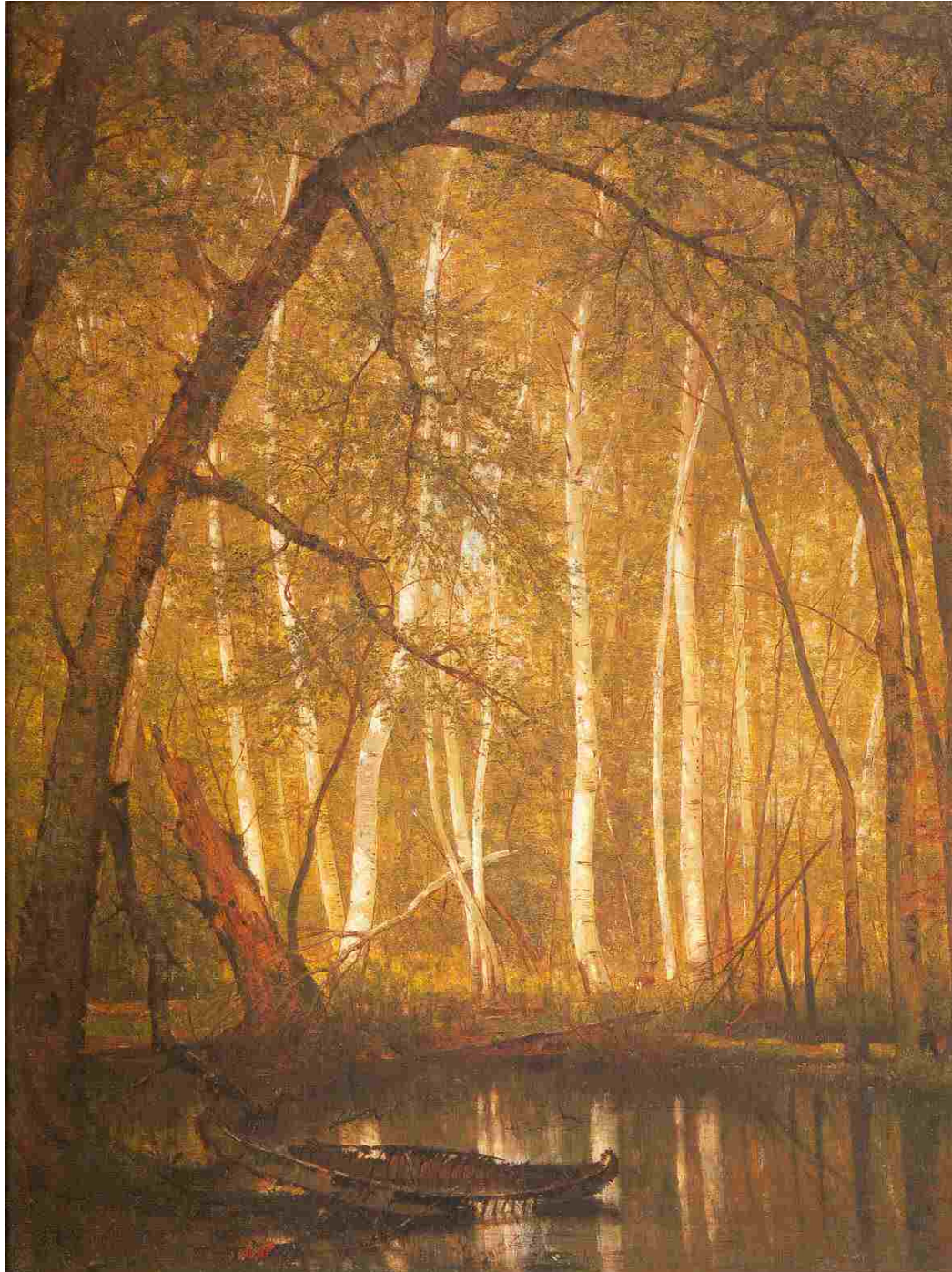
The irony of this flaw is best expressed by Thomas Cole himself who, as the leader of the early school, advocated, “tempering the harshness” of the wilderness by casting a “veil of tender beauty over the asperity of life.” This is precisely what is artificial in his paradise seeking process. Cole may have been diluting some unnatural substances in his oil mixture when he painted that. Who knows?

Another great artist of this school is Worthington Whittredge. I cannot say anything about the man because I am giving you my appraisal only from viewing a few of his paintings as an experiment that Gerry wanted me to do without the knowledge of who those artists were.

The point I wish to make about Whittredge is also in relationship with Cooper for whom the European heritage of America is a living being for the benefit of all of mankind. For him, such a heritage must be nourished and kept alive, as LaRouche does it, because the mission of true patriotic Americans is to carry the flame of Western European civilization on the shores of every continent in the world, and for the benefit of the other. However, there is a part of America that does not acknowledge that. That is the false Manifest Destiny of the likes of the genocidal President, Andrew Jackson, and his false flag, John L. O’Sullivan, who have committed a terrible ethnic cleansing against the Indian populations of America during that same period. I found that Whittredge had also noticed this terrible amputation of the American Indian cultural heritage.

As far as I can see, Whittredge is the one who best reflected that consciousness and represented this terrible deed with a very subtle but sublimely sad irony. I am speaking about his extraordinary rendering of *The Old Hunting Grounds*. I cannot help but seeing in that extraordinary painting a direct reference to Fennimore Cooper and to

the abandoned watering place where Hawk-eye used to stop for a drink in *The Last of the Mohicans*. The abandoned broken down birchen bark canoe captures, for me, the irony of the tragic lost of the Indian culture by reflecting, in the water, the birchen bark that was once patched there, just like the old warrior's leg, which he had lost in battle, sometimes reflected the memory of still being there.



Worthington Whittredge, *The Old Hunting Grounds*, c.1864.

Let's talk about all of this some more, OK? I would like to have more of your insights into this extraordinary school of painting.

Salut.

Pierre.

BIERSTADT, WHITTREDGE, AND COOPER

OR

THE ART OF PAYING ATTENTION TO THE INTENTION

by Pierre Beaudry, 12/5/2007

“There was one man, however, who, by his countenance and actions, formed a marked exception to those who composed the latter class of spectators, being neither idle, nor seemingly ignorant. The person of this individual was to the last degree ungainly without being in any particular manner deformed. He had all of the bones and joints of other men, without any of their proportions. Erect, his stature surpassed that of his fellows; though, seated, he appeared reduced within the ordinary limits of the race. The same contrariety in his members seemed to exist throughout the whole man. His head was large; his shoulders narrow; his arms long and dangling; while his hands were small, if not delicate. His legs and thighs were thin, nearly to emaciation, but of extraordinary length; and his knees would have been considered tremendous, had they not been outdone by the broader foundations of which this false superstructure of blended human orders was so profanely reared. The ill-assorted and injurious attire of the individual only served to render his awkwardness more conspicuous. A sky-blue coat, with short and broad skirts and low cape, exposed a long thin neck, and longer and thinner legs, to the worst animadversions of the evil disposed. His nether garment was of yellow nankeen, closely fitted to the shape, and tied at his bunches of knees by large knots of white riband, a good deal sullied by use. Clouded cotton stockings, and shoes, on one of the latter of which was a plated spur, completed the costume of the lower extremity of this figure, no curve or angle of which was concealed, but, on the other hand, studiously exhibited, through the vanity or simplicity of its owner. From beneath the flap of an enormous pocket of a soiled vest of embossed silk, heavily ornamented with tarnished silver lace, projected an instrument which from being seen in such martial company, might have been easily mistaken for some mischievous and unknown implement of war. Small as it was, this uncommon engine had excited the curiosity of most of the Europeans in the camp, though several of the provincials were seen to handle it not only without fear with the utmost familiarity. A large, civil cocked hat, like those worn by clergymen within the last thirty years, surmounted the whole, furnishing dignity to a good-natured and somewhat vacant countenance, that apparently needed such artificial aid, to support the gravity of some high and extraordinary trust.” (James Fennimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*.)

What naturally comes to mind, upon reading such a cursory description of a man, who is identified only by this external allure, is that it appears to be lifted from some theatrical recommendation note for costume-fitting of a significant character in some play. If this was the thought the reader had while perusing this page, your first impression

were not far off from the intention that Cooper was delivering to his reader; for he is, by far, the best Shakespearean writer that America ever produced, and his writing are all settings or tableaux that are aimed at attracting the reader into attunement with the intentional nature of his subject. This is also what characterized the Hudson River School of painting during and after the lifetime of James Fennimore Cooper.

As with the case of Cooper, what truly defined the Hudson River School is the powerful national identity of young America represented by John Quincy Adams idea of bringing civilization to the wilderness with his idea of Manifest Destiny. This was most highly represented, particularly, by a team of artists, notably Worthington Whittredge and Albert Bierstadt who worked together and traveled to the Rocky Mountains together. They brought with them the constant purpose of elevating the minds of the spectators. The idea of expanding Western Civilization westward was stamped very subtly on every one of their paintings, with ironies that attract the spectator into seeking and discovering those thoughtful moments that the American landscapes would present to the inquisitive mind of a discoverer. Therefore, bringing civilization to the wilderness did not mean taming the savage; it meant introducing to the new frontier, the intellectual heritage of a principle of discovery and meeting the intellectual challenging response of the corresponding newly discovered territory; it meant bringing together such a fitting correspondence between man and nature, in such a manner that the description of one became also a valid garment for the other. The paintings are explicitly inspired by this method of James Fennimore Cooper, that is, by his unique way of producing ironies intentionally, but in all appearance unintended as “if nature had intended an effect, which had been thus produced by chance.”

The dramatic and unique American landscapes with the light source in the background and the shadows in the foreground, such as Whittredge’s *The Old Hunting Grounds*, created such extraordinary “natural effects” that the spectator is pulled forward into the delights of the scenery, as if into a preconscious state, and is attracted in their most intricate recesses by the anomalies of reflections and shadows that the subtle crafting of light and darkness seem to have been put there by nature itself. Such were the secrets that Whittredge and Bierstadt had calculated they could *civilize au naturel* in the American wilderness. The dramatization of shadows and reflections mastered by these two artists can only be compared with scenes from the School of Leonardo and Rembrandt in Europe.

The purpose was to enlist the spectator to go beyond and transcend the subject of the landscape itself. Both Bierstadt and Whittredge very consciously used this method of Leonardo whereby the painting must reflect the intention in the mind of the subject or of the author. Thus, the treatments of a mountain or a water hole were not represented at their face value. Their purpose was to express a thought process or an emotional evocation that related to the history of America, its cultural heritage, and its trials. Some of those scenes were very large and very detailed so as to give the spectator the opportunity to wander about and seek the relevant idea behind the trees, so-to speak. Other paintings were in small format, representing more intimate representation of similar same purposes and intentions. The general idea was to 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 the artist was reproducing. *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak, 1863*, by Bierstadt is an excellent example of this Leonardo method of ideal perspective.