



White Birches, 1875

The Old Hunting grounds, 1859.

Figure 6. Worthington Whittredge, *White Birches* and *The Old Hunting Grounds*

Compare Whittredge's *White Birches*, 1875 and his former masterpiece *The Old Hunting Grounds*, 1859. Look at this difference of 16 years as a paradigm shift for the tragic transformation of the Hudson River School as a whole. Note how the trees have grown shorter by 1875 and their foliage has been Barbizonned. The abandoned canoe has disappeared and the drama of *The Old Hunting Grounds* has vanished. The same dramatic lighting is maintained in both paintings but it no longer has any meaning by 1875. The memory of the *Last of the Mohicans* has faded away. This is a very conscious transition for Whittredge who, because he was getting older, made the decision to go along to get along and adopt the artificial fad of the new Barbizon school. *White Birches* were an explicit test case of transition to see if Whittredge was going to be accepted by popular opinion as a Barbizon artist. He was not.

This is a very important clinical point to understand here, because, at a certain point, in someone's revolutionary life, loyalty to the cause will be put into question. Thus, 1875 marked the decisive turning point for Whittredge, when he decided to adopt the Barbizon style in which he was saying goodbye to his former self. Tragically, Whittredge may never have gotten over this bad decision. Moreover, the British-French enemy new exactly what was happening to Whittredge and took full advantage of it, especially through the manipulation of the art market and its private club controllers, as was demonstrated in the case of James Pinchot.

By the time he became 65, in 1885, Whittredge was going bankrupt. On March 9, 1887, he auctioned over seventy paintings At Ortgies' Art Galleries of New York City for which he only got a pittance. In February of 1900, nineteen of his paintings were auctioned for an average of \$40.00 each. It was under this condition of poverty and a rigged market that Whittredge was asked to preside over the Committee of United States Artists for the selection of works by living American artists for the Paris Centennial

Exposition of 1889. Art historian, Anthony F. Janson, who wrote the Cambridge University monography, *Worthington Whittredge*, claims he does not know what clear role Whittredge played in the controversies that surrounded the jury process that ultimately excluded Albert Bierstadt from the Paris Exhibition.

As the elder statesman of the Hudson River School, however, Whittredge was accorded an honorable mention at the Paris exhibition for two of his mediocre Barbizon paintings. Janson made quite clear the poor state of mind Whittredge was in during that period. “The majority of Whittredge’s efforts from the later 1880’s are undeniably disappointing. During that period Whittredge vacillated between several modes at once, making his chronology difficult to establish exactly. This stylistic waywardness in all likelihood reflects his demoralization over the eclipse of the Hudson River School, which is evident in the reluctant acquiescence to the predominant style of Inness and his followers.” (Janson, Op. Cit., p. 190.)

However, when it came to defending the Hudson River School orientation, Whittredge went even as far as denying the Barbizon influence of Inness on him and, strangely enough, admitted to his secret infatuation with the impressionist Claude Monet. See **Figure 4**. *The Artist at his Easel*. Whittredge wrote at that time: “The appearance of impressionism in our midst has never disturbed me in the least. The commotion it has created has kept us alive.” The following evaluation is a clinical attempt to identify why Whittredge let the Barbizon school take over the Hudson River School.

In the late 1850’s, when he parted company from Bierstadt in Florence, Whittredge felt distressed and overpowered by the greatness of the Italian Renaissance. He made a very important note of his state of mind later on in his *Autobiography*. He said: “I was at last in Florence, the cradle of the Renaissance. I wandered and wandered about the galleries for several weeks, generally alone, and often in the most despondent state of mind. For the first time in my life, I realized that the great works of art which had stirred the world and set the mighty chorus of praise ringing down the ages were not landscapes. The atmosphere of Florence was mild, milder than I had been accustomed to, and this may have had something to do with my depressed state. It was constantly recurring to me that I was ‘but a landscape painter’ and landscape painting seemed, in my low condition, to cut but an insignificant figure among the great works of art which had been produced in this world. I began to think of starting for Rome. I had made just no acquaintances in all Florence. I had been listless and completely out of sorts. The most intimate acquaintances I had were two vagrant dogs.” (Whittredge, *Autobiography*, pp. 33-4.)

I have reproduced this extensive statement for clinical reasons. What Whittredge was suffering from is known as the “Stendhal Syndrome.” The syndrome was clinically identified when Stendhal went to Florence in 1817. And, since then, hundreds of artists and writers have manifested similar symptoms of apathy, depression, including sometimes paranoia, disorientation, and even hallucinations during their visit to Florence. This does not explain Whittredge’s change of identity during the middle of the 1870’s, but it does shed some light on why he usually shied away from the large panoramic and sublime views that Bierstadt and Church enjoyed so much, and it might explain why

Whittredge mostly gave his preference to painting intimate scenes. This has something to do with how to address the universal in its relationship with the individual. Let me explain.

Sanford Gifford and Albert Bierstadt, who were also in Florence with Whittredge at the time, did not have any such bad experience. However, when the three joined together in Rome, Whittredge began to have the same recurring syndrome. He wrote in the *Autobiography*: “I soon arranged myself in Rome and endeavored to become calm. Nevertheless more discouraged than tired (tiresome it is to look at pictures), I often came away from the Vatican and other galleries, which were filled with the works of the Old Masters, with a kind of indifference which I am afraid did not speak well for me as a student. I did not however give up the study of their works, for, after all, a landscape painter may derive as much benefit from studying the works of a figure painter as the works of a mere painter of landscape. The whole matter is one of touching only our taste, and that certainly can be improved by the study of all great historical performances.” (*Autobiography*, p.36.) Here, art historian, Janson, had a good clinical insight, but he did not make any attempt to investigate the matter any further. He said: “Thus, shielded from his malaise, Whittredge resumed painting.”

That is right. The key words, here, were “taste” and “shielded.” Taste was Whittredge’s fall back option, or his “comfort zone.” An artist can always resort to his own “taste” after everything else has failed. That is the reason why, shortly after their visit to Rome, in Switzerland with Bierstadt, Whittredge resorted to his “taste” in order to shield himself from the need to produce *The Foot of the Matterhorn*, the only sublime vertical landscape that Whittredge has ever painted. The painting is remarkably academic. Jenson reported then that Whittredge had “admitted to being unsuited temperamentally to treating the sublime.” (Janson Op. Cit., p. 56) That is the crucial point. Every human being is suited for the sublime, but it is not everyone who has a “taste” for it. This is where the clinical flaw of Whittredge lied and which made him susceptible to being manipulated by the Barbizon operation run against the Hudson River School.

4. THE IRONY OF HUNTER MOUNTAIN, TWILIGHT.

Sanford Gifford (1823-1880) had traveled extensively with Bierstadt and Whittredge in Europe and was originally influenced by the Dusseldorf Academy. He initially established a studio in the Tenth Street Building, in New York City, where Bierstadt and Church had their own studios. Gifford’s painting career was interrupted briefly by his enlistment into the Civil War, after which he toured the Middle East and the American West. However, Gifford was less infected by the Dusseldorf method and much more so by the Barbizon luminist manner, as exemplified by *Kauterskill Clove*, which expressed a dreamy state with an artificial misty light effect that permeated the entire canvas. The dreaminess effect, however, offering the spectator a bird’s eye view of a vast Catskill mountain range, had the strange effect of nearly hiding the famous Catskill Mountain House, a lake scene below it, and cascading series of waterfalls in the distance. It’s beautiful, but dreamy.



Figure 7. Sanford Robinson Gifford, *Kauterskill Clove*, 1862.

Though he did not rank with the genius of Church and Bierstadt, Gifford nonetheless brought a lasting contribution to this American Cultural Revolution by painting what may be his ugliest but most polemical and ironical landscape, *Hunter Mountain, Twilight*, 1862.



Figure 8. Sanford Robinson Gifford, *Hunter Mountain, Twilight*, 1866.

As I was examining this extraordinary painting, I asked myself: why would Sanford Gifford, a prominent artist of the Hudson River School, paint *Hunter Mountain, Twilight* as a desolate moonscape of tree stumps with a heavy acidic-like Saturnal twilight over a denuded hill, while Worthington Whittredge, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Church were, at the same time, reproducing the grandiose green forests of the Americas with incredible hope-filled skies and sunsets? What could have prompted Gifford to abandon the magnificent autumnal colors of the Catskills and replace them with such depressing brownish slash and burnt tones? Was he succumbing to the Barbizon temptation of melancholy?

Though the painting was done shortly after the end of the American Civil War, Hunter Mountain is near the Hudson River, and nowhere near the battlegrounds of this terrible conflict. So, Gifford could not have painted a scene for the purpose of representing a Civil War battleground. What did Gifford see on that mountain that would call for such a dramatic anomaly to be set on a canvas? Was Gifford warning the general public against some impending catastrophe? Even more intriguing is the question: why was that painting hidden from the general public for more than ninety years?

What the general public does not know is that *Hunter Mountain, Twilight* was the representation of another terrible war that the artists of the Hudson River School were waging against their own patrons, the controllers of the American art market. Hunter Mountain was the first ecological scandal of deforestation in America, and the man

responsible for this state of affair was one of the ‘friends’ of the Hudson River School, rubber baron, James Pinchot, the New York City lumbering millionaire who befriended Whittredge and Gifford for his own benefit. And so, this ecological deforestation was used to cover up a more odious disaster: the destruction of the Hudson River School itself.

It was James Pinchot, the correspondent “friend” of Whittredge, who bought *Hunter Mountain, Twilight*, for a pittance, and put it up as a mantelpiece over his family home fireplace, in order to hide it from the general public and to use it as a Damocles’ sword against his own son. When he realized the dangers of having public opinion informed by such a painting, Pinchot made sure that no such works would ever be brought before the American public, and thus, he began to take control of numerous works of the Hudson River School in order to hide them. Moreover, since slashing and burning the American forests was not going to be very popular with public opinion, Pinchot created the Yale University School of Forestry, and even named his own son, Gifford, after the artist’s name. How friendlier could a wolf be for the Hudson River chicken coop? Gifford Pinchot was born in 1865, the same year that the artist began making sketches for this damning painting. I would not be surprised to discover that Pinchot had also invited Gifford to become the godfather of his son!

The son grew up to become the most notorious environmentalist friend of Theodore Roosevelt, and later became Governor of Pennsylvania for two terms. It was quite an irony that, along with the western American rubber baron, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, was to become the first director of the United States Forest Service under President Theodore Roosevelt, and the most prominent conservationist of America. Both Pinchot and Muir were the controllers of slash and burn as well as conservation. Today, Muir’s interests control and dominate thousands of woodland acreage north of New York City where Mayor of New York, “Benito” Bloomberg, has been buying up large areas of natural water supply for his city, as a way to avoid the cost of building expensive water filtration plants. Useless to say that these pristine forest areas are today off-limits to hikers or to any other form of human encroachment, including artists who have been banned from these sites, forever.

So, the irony is that Gifford’s *Hunter Mountain, Twilight* was a hidden “smoking gun” until the painting was found after the death of Gifford Pinchot in 1946, and was later relocated in Chicago’s Terra Museum of American Art where it now hangs. According to art historian, Jim Lane, over 200 works of the Hudson River School had disappeared at the personal hands of James Pinchot, just like *Hunter Mountain, Twilight* did, and were found hidden in the basement of the Pinchot residence. However, those paintings did not enjoy the same recovery, as did *Hunter Mountain, Twilight*. Jim Lane reported the truth of what happened to those 200 paintings. He wrote: “Pinchot family members believe they may have simply been left there in the basement of the house were they were stored and been bulldozed over when the structure was demolished and the area reforested. Today, such nineteenth century Hudson River School paintings bring five and six figure bids at auction. Thus, in the greatest irony of all, valuable art was likely sacrificed in the name of conservation.” (Contributed by Jim Lane, 9 June 2001.)

<http://www.humanitiesweb.org/human.php?s=r&p=a&a=i&ID=1054>) And, I might add, so much for the conservation of the family name of this great art lover, James Pinchot. Why not send an archeological crew from Yale University dig up this treasure and restore the precious evidence before the court of history? How many other hidden revolutionary gems from the Hudson River School treasure chest await the curious investigator?

Such treatment of universal history by the Hudson River School, as represented among others by Church, Bierstadt, Whittredge, Duncanson, and Gifford, has graced America and the world, with a tremendous treasure of ironies still to be discovered. It is not because they are hidden from public view that an inquisitive eye cannot make their invisible surprising shadows visible again. Chance a single infinitesimal angular glance into the dark water hole where Hawkeye and Chingachgook used to stop for a drink and you will find the source of inspiration that generated this American Renaissance in Classical Artistic Composition. 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 Fennimore Cooper, *The Pathfinder*, The New American Library, Inc., 1980, p.viii.)

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