

American Landscape Watercolors at the Brooklyn Museum

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The Brooklyn Museum presents *Brushed with Light: American Landscape Watercolors from the Collection*, September 14, 2007, through January 13, 2008. The exhibition includes a selection of 80 works from the museum's large and widely recognized collection of American Landscape watercolors, spanning two centuries of works painted in the United States. The exhibition also explores the tandem development of landscape and watercolor painting.

Watercolors by some of America's best known and most original artists are featured in the exhibition. William Trost Richards, Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Childe Hassam, Maurice Prendergast, John Marin and Edward Hopper are represented. Additional watercolors by Thomas Hart Benton, Milton Avery, William Zorach and Marguerite Thompson Zorach, Charles Demuth and Arthur Dove are also included, providing a rich array of examples of the American modernist movement. The sum of all these works is an impressive whole that reflects the evolution of the watercolor medium from the late eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth.

The paintings are arranged chronologically from 1777 to 1945 and grouped to reflect significant trends in landscape art, including: topographical and picturesque view painting; the Hudson River School and Pre-Raphaelitism; post Civil War realism; American Impressionism; modernist abstraction; and American Scene painting. As a supplement, the show provides an introduction to watercolor materials and methods, demonstrated by visual examples.

Early landscapes

The landscape tradition in painting is often traced to the 17th century French artist, Claude Lorraine, whose depiction of the land, bodies of water and sky were some of the first paintings where natural outdoor scenes took precedence over the human figure. Aside from a few artists working in the genre in Italy, where Lorraine studied, the subject matter of most paintings had traditionally been limited to classical and religious themes as well as portraiture. The landscape painting genre gained in currency steadily and eventually reached the shores of the New World.

The first American landscapes were done by draftsmen and watercolorists commissioned by the French and English governments to document sites and geographic features. Such landscape paintings are, in effect, an extension of the map-maker's craft. A good example is the *Narrows at Lake George* by Captain William Pierie, who produced the painting in 1777 while stationed in North America as an officer with the British Royal Artillery. Even though the work is painted from nature, it reflects stiff academic compositional conventions of the era.

Plein air and Hudson River School

A more expressionistic and painterly form of landscape began to emerge at the beginning of the nineteenth century. A pioneer of the genre is the English artist J.M.W. Turner, as well as another Englishman, Thomas Cole, who emigrated to America and founded the Hudson River School of landscape painting. Later in the century, European artists, particularly of the Barbizon School including Courbet and Corot, advocated painting in *plein air* (outdoors), a radical departure from the academic studio approach to painting.

The early examples of Hudson River School painting followed relatively conventional academic formulae for composition and techniques. The artists used a method involving a ground of color wash over gesso, to which they built up layer upon layer of transparent paint glazes, a method originally used in the sixteenth century by Venetian painters such as Bellini. Thomas Cole originally adhered to strict compositional and technical conventions and painted in his studio. But he eventually departed



Homosassa River, by Winslow Homer, 1904. Watercolor with additions of gum over graphite on cream, moderately thick, moderately textured wove paper, 19 11/16" x 13 7/8". Purchased by Museum Collection Fund and Special Subscription.



Sunday on the Beach, by Maurice Brazil Prendergast, c. 1896-1898. Watercolor on cream, moderately thick, moderately textured wove paper, 17 3/4" x 13 15/16". Gift of Daniel and Rita Fraud, Jr.



Lassoing Horses, by Thomas Hart Benton, 1931. Watercolor over graphite on cream, medium-weight, slightly textured wove paper mounted to a secondary paper, 21 1/4" x 27 3/4". John B. Woodward Memorial Fund



Rhode Island Coast: Conanicut Island, by William Trost Richards, c. 1880. Transparent watercolor with touches of opaque watercolor on cream, moderately thick, slightly textured wove paper, 10" x 14 7/16". Bequest of Mrs. William T. Brewster through the National Academy of Design.

from this practice and began a series of sketching and watercolor expeditions, often accompanied by his friend and colleague Asher Durand. He produced a series of works in a variety of media during these artistic excursions. These jaunts revolutionized the American landscape vision.

It should also be noted that the mid-nineteenth century British Pre-Raphaelites and Romantics had a significant influence upon American watercolorists. In addition, John Ruskin, who wrote extensively about watercolors, greatly influenced American artists. Ruskin argued it was imperative to record nature accurately and precisely. The standard of truth to nature inspired a whole group of American followers, including William Trost Richards, who began as a member of the Hudson River School of painting. Realism and the representation of landscapes taken directly from nature replaced idealized studio pieces. Trost Richards' "Rhode Island Coast: Conanicut Island" (c. 1880) is a fine example of a naturalistic and highly detailed watercolor in this manner. Critics also cite Emerson's essay *Nature*, and the Transcendentalist movement in general, as having enormous impact upon the American scene. A tendency toward Romanticism, and the desire for pictorially accurate representation in nature, is evident in the work of George W. Beck, (1748-1812) whose *Stone Bridge over the Wissahickon* gives an idealized view of nature. But it is realistic and beautifully rendered in a manner that would have pleased Ruskin, while also conveying a romantic landscape vision, as well as the transcendental spirit.

Watercolors as fine art

By the mid-nineteenth century the estimation of watercolor paintings as fine art had been firmly established; professional organizations and regular exhibitions, as well as acquisitive collectors, furthered the genre. The so-called American Watercolor Movement, in which Winslow Homer (1836-1910), emerged as a leading figure, continued to evolve toward increasingly experimental and innovative use of this transparent, fluent medium. His paintings, from as early as "Fresh Air" (1878), which was still informed by an idealized pastoral landscape vision, (including a blousy and bonneted shepherdess and lambs), are revolutionary in approach and technique. The brilliantly colored and innovative paintings, "Homosassa River" and "In the Jungle, Florida" (1904), represent perhaps the apogee of the *plein-air* tradition, as well as the transition from realism and the figurative representation of nature, toward a more intuitive expression.

Impressionist influence

By the 1880s most Americans had seen the work of the Paris-based Impressionists, whose emphasis on the changing qualities of light in relationship to color and the hour of the day revolutionized the approach to painting. Many American artists began to adopt a freer style, exploring the potential of the medium by deploying lively strokes of color.

Childe Hassam's "The Gorge, Appledore" (1912) and Maurice Prendergast's "Sunday on the Beach" are fine examples of American Impressionism. They present an almost dazzling view of the beauty of nature in jewel-tone palettes of impressionistic luminance. These works mark the end of nineteenth century taste and a departure from realism, or illusionistic representation of nature. After Impressionists like Hassam and Prendergast, however, there was a brief return to a form of realism adopted by the American Scene Painting movement. We see this return in works such as Edward Hopper's "House at Riverdale" (1928) and Thomas Hart Benton's (1889-1975) "Lassoing Horses" (1931); both works appear in the exhibition. Although realists, Hopper and Benton discarded Victorian compositional techniques and subjects in favor of the bold, candid depiction of unadorned American scenes.

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Brushed with Light concludes strongly with a fine collection of American modernists. New Yorkers got their first taste of Parisian avant-garde painting in Alfred Stieglitz's gallery as early as 1908. John Marin's (1870-1953) "Pine Tree" (1917), a sparse, a nearly calligraphic gesture expressed against a blank expanse of white watercolor paper, signals the onset of the Modernist movement in the United States. The watercolor medium lent fluidity and freedom to the landscape genre, allowing artists to experiment with abstract pictorial modes that referred to the formal structures or geometries of their landscape subjects. Works by Milton Avery, William Zorach and Marguerite Thompson Zorach, Charles Demuth and Arthur Dove are stunning reminders of the strength and level of sophistication achieved by American artists during this era. The dynamic tension between color, light, composition and form in these paintings, as well as their aesthetic integrity, argues that American Modernist artists equaled, if not surpassed, their European counterparts.

The Brooklyn Museum is located at 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York 11238-6052, phone (718) 638-5000; www.brooklynmuseum.org. Hours are Wednesday-Friday: 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Suggested admission contribution: \$8; students with valid ID: \$4; adults 62 and over: \$4; Museum members and children under 12: free.



Narrows at Lake George, 1777, by William Pierie (Captain). Watercolor on cream, thick, rough-textured, laid paperboard, 8 7/16" x 10 3/16". Dick S. Ramsay Fund.