

# AMERICAN LIGHT

## FROM THE HUDSON RIVER TO THE BLUE RIDGE

This wonderful landscape exhibit evolved in the Hickory Museum of Art (HMA) Exhibitions Committee more than a year ago. Under the guidance of Executive Director, Lisë Swensson, three painters worked together to select some of the very best landscapes from the Hickory Museum of Art's Permanent Collection. All three painters are associated with the HMA. Kate Worm is the High School/Adult Educator and coordinated this exhibit. Steve Brooks is an HMA Board Member and Chairman of the Exhibitions Committee. Warren Dennis is a retired Professor of Art and Art History at Appalachian State University and is a former long-time member of the Acquisitions Committee.

The paintings selected were considered to be of high artist merit by all three painters. Although every effort was made to cover each time period from the Hudson River era to contemporary times, the first considerations were beauty in conception and execution. Though difficult, the selection process was exhilarating. Each painter commented on the honor felt as he or she reviewed the vast holdings of the HMA.

Our Museum began in 1944 through the hard work of Paul and Mickey Whitener (now Mickey Coe). Paul was an accomplished painter with many contacts in New York City, and together they created a core collection of paintings of very high caliber. The Collection has grown to more than 2,300 paintings and objects over the years. The three painters consider the works in this exhibition to be many of the best landscape paintings ever displayed in the HMA's 63 years of existence.

*Kate Worm, 2007*

# THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL (about 1825-1875)

Written by Steve Brooks

The great tradition of landscape painting in America came into its own with the Hudson River School. This artistic movement consisted of a group of diverse painters who shared an intense desire to be in nature and to draw their primary inspiration from it. To them, the study of nature was a religion: to be in nature was to be closer to God.

This movement began when its founder, Thomas Cole, produced his first mature landscape paintings in 1825. Cole's work is significant because he broke with the English tradition of History painting, choosing instead to work from an intense study of nature in all of its various forms. The Romantic notion that being in nature improved the man inspired Cole to work primarily with natural themes. Throughout his career, Cole produced multiple series of grand allegorical works dealing with Man in nature. In between these series, Cole produced a number of pure landscape paintings in the Hudson River area of New York, the Catskills, and the White Mountains in New England which established his reputation as America's first great landscapist. Asher B. Durand soon adopted this way of working, further developing it by introducing the practice of *plein air* painting. (*En plein air*, French for "in open air" refers to painting outside rather than in the studio.) Other great American painters, such as Worthington Whittredge, Fredric Church, and Albert Bierstadt chose this path and cemented this "school of painting" as the first great American Art Movement.

# LUMINIST MOVEMENT (about 1850-1975)

Written by Steve Brooks

The painters now known as the Luminists grew out of the Hudson River School. As their name suggests, they were interested primarily in studying light and its effects on the land, sky and water. However, a preoccupation with light was not the only quality that distinguished the Luminists from the rest of the Hudson River School artists. These painters worked on a much more intimate scale than their associates, who often painted on a grand scale.

From the smaller or more intimate approach, Luminist painters such as Martin J. Heade, Fitz Hugh Lane, John F. Kensett and Alfred Bricher painted mostly in a horizontal format, and their composition was planar rather than dynamic. Furthermore, visible brush strokes were subdued if not totally eradicated. This quality was brought about by their desire to be absolutely accurate in their depiction of the subject without injecting too much of their own personality.

The Luminist painter thought of himself as a conduit through which the image flowed onto the canvas. The Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson described himself as “a transparent eyeball” in his interaction with nature, which he believed elevated him to a higher spiritual plane. The Luminists were aware of these ideas and worked to incorporate them into their paintings. Working within this philosophy, the poet and painter were no longer separate from nature; they were a part of it. The art works they produced were merely the product of this transcendent experience. Another distinctive quality of Luminist painting is its uncanny stillness. Movement is rarely the subject of these works. Mountains do not soar, volcanoes do not explode, and waterfalls do not roar. Rather, these works present a quiet world of light and space devoid of frothy atmosphere, yet sublime in their quiet eternity.

# TONALISM MOVEMENT (about 1880-1915)

Written by Steve Brooks

A generation younger than the Luminists, the Tonalists group grew out of the older, more established landscape tradition to present a radically different approach to the treatment of landscape. Like the Luminists, they were interested in light and its effects on sky, land and water; however, they distinguished themselves by the misty quality of the light they created in their compositions, describing a soft edged world made up of closely related tones rather than highly contrasting colors. They preferred cloud cover and atmospheric haze to the clear sunlight of midday. They sought out the transitional light at sunrise and sunset. Evident in the dreamy landscapes of George Inness, the Nocturnes of James McNeill Whistler, and the moonlit seascapes of Albert Pinkham Ryder, the Tonalists created a world of mystery, contrasting significantly with the crystalline world of the Luminists.

Two main influences surface with the study of the Tonalists movement. The first is George Inness, who was inspired greatly by the French Barbizon painters such as Theodore Rousseau and John-Francis Millet. Inness stressed the importance of emotion in his work, stating: "A work of art does not appeal to the intellect – it does not appeal to the moral sense. Its aim is not to instruct, not to edify, but to awaken an emotion... Its real greatness consists in the duality and force of this emotion." Furthermore, Inness preferred harmony in his work, rather than coldly recording the image before him. According to Inness, "The arrangement of colours must be kept in harmony because it must reproduce not merely the facts of the landscape, either separately or in mass, but, rather, the effect of the scene upon the painter's feelings, the emotion it evokes. Not alone the grass and the trees, with whatever delicate recognition of gradation of colour, but the mood, of which they are the embodiment and cause, it is to be transferred to the canvas." Inness' attention to emotion, harmony and mood in painting became the prevailing attitude of many American landscape painters at the time.

Second is the famous expatriate painter, Whistler, whose art-for-art's-sake tendencies drew him to compose works based primarily on value rather than color relationships. The title of Whistler's most famous work, *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, bears testament to this concern. Like Inness, Whistler focused on harmony in his compositions. In fact, it was his primary concern. The emerging generation of young painters now known as the Tonalists applied these concepts to their own work in addition to those of Inness and the Barbizon painters. Henry Ward Ranger, Chauncey Ryder, Johnson Murphy and Elliot Daingerfield, among others, were the authors of perhaps the most subtle artistic movement in the history of American Art. The fact that Tonalism is often referred to as Quietism underscores this opinion and stands in distinct opposition stylistically to the exuberant and colorful canvases of their heirs, the Impressionists.

# AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM (about 1890-1915)

Written by Steve Brooks

Like their European counterparts, the American Impressionists were interested in capturing the fleeting effects of light upon their subject. They derived their procedure of *plein air* painting from the Barbizon painters in France; some of them traveling to Barbizon to study the same light as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Eugène Boudin and Théodore Rousseau. Homer Martin, often considered during his life to be the first American Impressionist, painted in France and later in England where he worked along side Whistler. Today, Martin with his subtle harmonies is considered a bridge between the Tonalists and the Impressionists.

John La Farge, Julian Alden Weir, John Twachtman and Childe Hassam, to name only a few, made up the core of the American Impressionist movement. Like Martin, La Farge and Weir developed painting styles reminiscent of Tonalism, yet they pursued their desire for light through a heightened use of saturated color. Twachtman's extreme use of white and his disintegration of form to the point of abstraction cemented him as one of the most innovative of the group, where as Hassam's exuberant use of color tied him closely to the French Impressionists. Younger painters such as Edward Pottast, Ernest Lawson and Maurice Prendergast continued to stretch the bounds of American Landscape painting by their use of saturated color and dissolution of form. These innovative painters, working well into the twentieth century, heralded the impending revolution in the plastic arts known as abstraction.

# TWENTIETH CENTURY

Written by Steve Brooks

The 1913 Armory Show in New York introduced America to radical new ideas from Europe. The American public turned out in droves to view the Fauvist paintings of Henri Matisse, the Cubist works of Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp's scandalous *Nude Descending a Staircase*, which turned the conservative New York Art scene on its head. Visitors were shocked. Art critics wrote biting reviews; even President Theodore Roosevelt exclaimed "That's not Art!" But American Art would never be the same. American artists were eager to try out these exciting new ideas in their own work. Landscape painters such as John Marin, Milton Avery, Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe, to name only a few, all embraced the European concepts of abstraction and expressionism and made their own unique contributions to painting.

Forty years later, the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock shook the art world again with his controversial all-over drip paintings. He and his associates influenced an entire generation of young painters who considered the action painting of Pollock and Franz Kline or the color field works of Mark Rothko and Hans Hoffman as modes of expression to use in their own works. For example, Wolf Kahn's landscapes are recognizable as such, but they also read as color field images. Abstract expressionist influence can also be seen in Boyce Kendrick's work with its bold shapes of color.

# Paul Austin Wayne Whitener (1911-1959)

## *Founder of the Hickory Museum of Art*

“Paul Austin Wayne Whitener was born in 1911 in Lincoln County and grew up in Hickory. His energies during high school and college at Duke University were primarily football and an occasional dabble in cartooning for the college paper. After three years at Duke, his college career ended due to a serious illness. Whitener began work at a mountain resort in Little Switzerland, North Carolina. It was in Little Switzerland that Whitener met an art student, Mildred McKinney, who later became his wife. Her interest in art sparked an interest in Whitener. He then enrolled in the Ringling School of Art where he studied with Donald Blake and Frank Herring.

At an art exhibition in Asheville (NC) Whitener met the renowned portrait painter, Wilford Conrow. Whitener petitioned Conrow to instruct him in portrait painting. Although it was not his practice, Conrow was so impressed with Whitener’s work that he accepted Whitener as his first student. During his years of study, the idea of an art museum in Hickory was born in Whitener’s mind. Believing in the importance of American art, Whitener, with help from his wife, Conrow, and later A. Alex Shuford, Jr., a local industrialist, began planning for the museum, keeping that principle in mind. In 1943, an exhibition of American art was held and the Hickory Museum of Art was born.

Whitener worked diligently to establish the museum. His days were filled with meetings and fund drives. However, Whitener continued to find time for painting. He was in demand as a portraitist but his love was landscapes, especially the mountains of North Carolina. Brilliant colors, fall scenes, and vibrant mountains are characteristic of Whitener’s works. Repetitive contouring, shadowing, and diagonal blending of line encourages the eye to travel distances down the mountain sides and up to the clouded heavens. Whitener’s work has an over-all effect of heightened sensory awareness. He was a thorough technician, beginning his canvases with carefully drawn monochrome under-paintings, but working with spontaneity and freedom.

After suffering a crippling illness in the mid-1950s when he was little more than 40 years old, Whitener taught himself to paint again, this time with his left hand. His style became more imaginative and impressionistic, producing highly colored and visionary works in several media including casein.

Whitener was a member of the Salmagundi Club in New York City and a member of the national board of the American Artists Professional League. He held positions in state art societies and the Duke University Arts Council. Whitener died in Hickory in 1959, leaving behind a legacy that still creates and develops a sense of arts awareness in the community today.”

*(Hickory Museum of Art 50th Anniversary Catalog)*