

Figuring Thomas Pritchard Rossiter

Elizabeth L. Block

ART 87300, Hudson River School Revisited

Professor Katherine Manthorne

The Graduate Center

December 15, 2008

A resident of Cold Spring, New York, during the last decade of his life, Thomas Pritchard Rossiter (1818–1871) maintained a deep devotion to the local landscape throughout his painting career. A worldly traveler who lived and worked for many years in Italy and France, Rossiter imbued his passion for the particulars of landscape, both stateside and overseas in many of the more than five hundred drawings, paintings, and watercolors that made up his oeuvre.¹

Although recognized today as an active Hudson River School practitioner, in the limited literature² about Rossiter, he is perennially referred to as a traveling companion of the better-remembered painters Thomas Cole, John F. Kensett, and Asher B. Durand, often merely mentioned in a list of painters who studied and journeyed abroad. Not only does Rossiter deserve rescue from “friend of” status, but also the breadth of his work deserves deeper investigation, reaching beyond the handful of paintings by him that are usually discussed in publications.

In particular, Rossiter’s treatment of the figure in the landscape provides fertile ground for investigation. His sketchbook of 1854–58, now in the New-York Historical Society, provides a fascinating glimpse into his drawing and compositional methods, belying his studied interest in the female and male figure, historical and contemporary costumes, and hairstyles (fig. 1).³ By investigating these aspects we may better appreciate their significance, namely their function as cultural documents.

Thomas Pritchard Rossiter

Born in 1818 in New Haven, Connecticut, Rossiter began his artistic career as an engraver under the tutelage of portraitist Nathaniel Jocelyn. As a young man he took a studio in New Haven and painted portraits.⁴ In 1837 he began exhibiting at the National Academy of Design in New York,⁵ and moved to that city the following year after a brief stay upstate in Troy. His connection to the metropolis and its institutions continued throughout his life, as he interacted with the major players of its vibrant art circles. An active contributor to the criticism of the day, he wrote several pieces for *The Crayon*, most notably an 1855 review of the Paris Exposition, in which he remarked that all the American works “were minor,” and that he wished Kensett, Durand, Church, and Cropsey were exhibited.⁶

As did most of his contemporaries, Rossiter journeyed to Europe to study. In 1840 he set off with friends John William Casilear, Kensett, and Durand. Beginning in London, Rossiter and Kensett proceeded to Paris to study at what Kensett referred to as the “École Préparation des Beaux-Arts,” which was possibly the Académie Suisse, and to copy old master works at the Louvre.⁷ One of his best-known paintings, *A Studio Reception, Paris* (1841, Albany Institute of History and Art), depicts the communing of American painters in Paris, including Cole, Kensett, Durand, and Casilear. In autumn 1841 Rossiter headed for Italy, most likely with Thomas Cole,⁸ spending winters in Rome and summers visiting other locales in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland, for a total of five years.

After returning to New York in autumn 1846, Rossiter was elected to the National Academy of Art in 1847 and helped found the Century Association.⁹ He had also

exhibited at the Apollo Association beginning in 1839 and at the American Art-Union. From 1851 to 1852 he shared a studio at Broadway and West Fourth Street with Louis Lang, where he focused on historical and biblical subjects.¹⁰ On October 15, 1851, he married Anna Ehrick Parmly (1830–1856), a daughter of Dr. Eleazer Parmly (1797–1874) of New Haven, a prominent and wealthy dentist who was the first president of the Society of Surgeon Dentists of the City and State of New York,¹¹ an avid supporter of the arts, and a committed abolitionist.¹² Beginning on May 28, 1853, Rossiter and his wife spent two years in Europe, visiting England, Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Switzerland. While in Paris they lived at 16 Place Vendôme¹³ and Rossiter exhibited three works at the Paris Exposition of 1855. In 1854 they had twins, Charlotte Evangeline and Ehrick Kensett, whose middle name was a tribute to John F. Kensett. In March 1856 another daughter, Anna, was born, and two months later Mrs. Anna Parmly Rossiter passed away. An entry from Rossiter’s diary expounds upon his wife’s character and his great loss—“Sweet spirit, how gentle and pure is your memory!”¹⁴ After her death, Rossiter and the children returned to New York, where Rossiter opened an art gallery at his home at 17 E. 38th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues. The house was designed by Richard Morris Hunt in an Italian Renaissance style, and Rossiter often entertained at this “spacious and elegant residence.”¹⁵ He attained a certain amount of fame outside of his immediate circle, enjoying widespread compliments for his series of George Washington and the series of the life of Christ.¹⁶

Always a man of his time who was willing to take advantage of newly available means of transportation, Rossiter joined Kensett, Lang, and Louis Mignot on an “artists’ excursion” on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1858, during which he produced

landscapes.¹⁷ In 1859 he traveled to Michigan and Minnesota, and in 1860 he married his first cousin Mary Sterling (d. 1907).¹⁸ It was then that he commissioned the building of his house, “Fair Oaks Farm” in Cold Spring, where he lived until his death on May 17, 1871 (see figs. 2, 3).¹⁹ The Italianate-villa style house is now in private ownership.²⁰ Rossiter’s commitment to the Cold Spring–area is evident in *The Legend of Breakneck* (ca. 1867, not after 1868), a 67-page poem that Rossiter wrote, and illustrated in watercolor, which told the tale of Breakneck Mountain, which he could see from his home.²¹ The fine illustrations depict serene landscapes, romantic encounters between male and female characters, and dramatic meetings between Native Americans and European Americans, all within miles from Rossiter’s home. Rossiter also sketched and painted the environs throughout the decade he spent there. Beautiful examples of his Hudson River landscapes are the unpublished *Sunrise on the Hudson* (fig. 4); *Peaceful Path by a Brook* (fig. 5); and *Cold Spring, New York* (fig. 6). Another is the small canvas *Inlet* (after 1860, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College). Most telling is *A Picnic on the Hudson* (fig. 7), which shows an outing on Constitution Island, a tourist locale on the Hudson River, including officers of the United States Military Academy at West Point, artists, writers, and friends.

Rossiter was better appreciated in his time than he is today. As Samuel Isham wrote in 1943: “Rossiter’s work is facile, rapidly done, and was popular in its day, and for that very reason is antiquated now”²²; and in 1970 Harry W. French remarked: “...As an artist Mr. Rossiter was not a complete success...in drawing he was more deficient...His smaller pictures are, many of them, exquisite gems; but the larger ones are invariably confused.”²³ Rossiter’s success with atmospheric effects in such landscapes as

Twilight in the Wilderness (undated, Shelburne Museum) and *Niagara Falls* (undated, Albright-Knox Art Gallery) has been recognized, but his efforts to depict figures within landscapes have often been regarded as stilted.

One of the reasons Rossiter's works fell out of favor is his penchant for allegorical, biblical, and historical subjects—see for example *Washington and Lafayette at Mount Vernon, 1784* (*The Home of Washington after the War* (1859, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; landscape painted by Louis Remy Mignot) (fig. 8). Similarly, his contemporary Hudson River scenes that contain figures carrying out a narrative are often dismissed as awkward “conversation pieces.”

These narrative landscapes deserve reevaluation in light of their cultural significance as documents of middle-class life in the Hudson River Valley. Rossiter made a concerted effort to accurately depict the people who lived in the Cold Spring–area. Paintings such as *Home on the Hudson* (fig. 9); the aforementioned *A Pic-Nic on the Hudson* (see fig. 7); and *Picnic Above the Hudson* (*Picnic by the Lake*) (fig. 10), carefully portray women and men in contemporary dress engaged in daily activities.

Rossiter's close studies of figures, dress, and hairstyles are found in his sketchbook (1854–58), which spans time spent in New York and Europe (figs. 11–22). The drawings were used for works during that period and after he moved to Cold Spring in 1860. The leatherbound, pocket-size (8 x 5 1/4 in.) sketchbook has 46 wove-paper leaves with pencil illustrations on most of the rectos and versos. In fragile condition with some loose pages, it has never been reproduced in full.²⁴ Of varying levels of elaboration, the sketches include figure studies, landscapes, and portraits. Here we find Rossiter's playful caricatures of a bearded man, studies of ladies' historical costume, and a drawing

of a contemporary woman in an off-the-shoulder dress, hair pulled back in a stylish bun. He used the same woman in another sketch, there allowing the incongruence between her contemporary dress and the classical staff in her left hand. The sketch provides a dual study for a conversation piece and an allegorical work. In a similar drawing the woman holds a large scythe. Labeled studies of the allegories Faith and Hope are also included. One sheet is a study of men's faces in various emotive expressions, and another of men's legs. A compositionally spare sketch of Rossiter's baby son's head is notated "72 hours old." Several studies of children's heads follow shortly afterward, as well as a family scene with father, mother, and children, dated April 6, 1858. Handwritten script on the final page of the book pairs the following methods and old masters: "Chiaroscuro: Rembrandt; Chiaroscuro: Veronese; Composition: Raphael; Designs: M. Angelo," an indication of lessons learned during European travels.

Although many of the drawings have faded with time (and are extremely difficult to photograph), the intimacy of the artist's hand is readily apparent. The care with which Rossiter studied women's costume and hairstyle, in particular, offers a sense of how the artist developed his thoughts, and a new appreciation for the figures in paintings such as *Picnic Above the Hudson* (fig. 10). The voluminous rust-colored skirt, white shirtwaist, and royal blue shawl or blanket under the central woman's arm (the hue of which matches the ribbon on her summer straw hat), for example, along with her middle-parted cork-screw hairstyle may be seen as a document of a middle-class woman's fashion about 1862 (see figs. 23–25). The woman on the left is similarly attired in daywear, donning a rose-colored skirt, dark shirtwaist with a white collar and cuffs. Turned slightly to her right to listen to the young man speaking and offering her a flower, we have a frontal

view of her hairstyle. Parted in the middle and brushed over her ears to fasten in the back, this style was fashionable in the early 1860s. Examples in Richard Corson's *Fashions in Hair: the First Five Thousand Years* (1971), derived from *Godey's Lady's Book* show the popularity of the middle part and the various options of styling at the back of the head (figs. 26, 27).

Rossiter shows that he was a keen observer of people and perhaps also of fashion plates. He was familiar with contemporary periodicals and, living with a wife and daughter, undoubtedly would have seen ladies' magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, which were teeming with costume and hairstyle fashions and advertisements. In addition, Anna Parmly's parents and extended family were prominent New Yorkers with access to the latest fashions. His further interest in clothing is attested by items that were auctioned after his death in February 1873 at Clinton Hall on Astor Place:²⁵ a "suit of the era of Washington (light striped green velvet but little worn)"; and a "buff vest of the time of Washington."

Rossiter's sketches are the work of a keen observer and an excellent draftsman. Scale, tone, and animation are of the highest quality in the small sketchbook, and document his practice of sketching both in plein air and in the studio. These intimate works speak to us directly from the artist's pencil, time, and place, inviting us to extend our conversation about his Hudson River paintings.

¹ Roberta J. M. Olson, *Drawn by New York: Six Centuries of Watercolors and Drawings at the New-York Historical Society* (New York: New-York Historical Society; London: in association with D. Giles, 2008, 283). A large number of Rossiter's works are either lost or unidentified. See Bevan, 19; and M. Broaddus, "Thomas P. Rossiter: in Pursuit of Diversity," *American Art and Antiques*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1979), 106.

² The only lengthy, interpretive study of Rossiter is Ilene Susan Fort, *High Art and the American Experience; the Career of Thomas Pritchard Rossiter* (M.A. thesis, Queens College, New York, Department of Art, April, 1975, unpublished). The other main source is by the artist's granddaughter: Edith

Rossiter Bevan, *Thomas Pritchard Rossiter, 1818-1871*. Photocopy of typescript; includes check list of paintings (Ruxton, Maryland, March 1957).

³ The sketchbook is in the New-York Historical Society, 1956.68. A letter of May 23, 1956, from assistant curator Carolyn Scoon to Mrs. William F. Bevan (Edith Rossiter Bevan), the donor, documents the acquisition (see New-York Historical Society curatorial files). See also the preceding letter from Edith Rossiter Bevan to Ms. Scoon, of May 5, 1956. An earlier drawing book (1836–37) of Rossiter’s is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (accession number 51.610). Unfortunately, there is no object file or any photographs of this early drawing book (per email correspondence with Elizabeth Kathleen Mitchell, assistant curator, Department of Prints, Drawings and Photographs, November 21, 2008).

⁴ Examples of Rossiter’s portraiture (Casilear and Lang are included) and one undated self-portrait made for his diploma presentation are in the National Academy of Design. See David Dearing, ed. *Paintings and Sculpture in the Collection of the National Academy of Design* (New York; Manchester, Vt: Hudson Hills Press, 2004), 481–82.

⁵ Rossiter became an associate of the National Academy of Design in 1840. Olson, 283. See Naylor, *The National Academy of Design Exhibition Record, 1861-1900* (New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1973), 811–12, for records of his inclusion in the National Academy of Design, and James L. Yarnall and William Gerds. *The National Museum of American Art's Index to American Art Exhibition Catalogues: From the Beginning Through the 1876 Centennial Year* (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1986), 3047–3052, for his exhibitions at numerous institutions nationwide, throughout his career.

⁶ The quotation is in *The Crayon*, vol. 2, no. 25, December 19, 1855, 390–91.

⁷ Olson, 283; Bevan, 5. For Rossiter and Kensett’s travel, see Fort 1975, 26–27. H. Barbara Weinberg, in *The Lure of Paris: Nineteenth-Century American Painters and Their French Teachers* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 29, speculates that the “École Préparation des Beaux-Arts,” was possibly the Académie Suisse.

⁸ Bevan, 5. See Thomas B. Brumbaugh, “A Venice Letter from Thomas P. Rossiter to John F. Kensett, 1843,” *American Art Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1 (May 1973): 74–78. See also Lois Fink, “American Artists in France, 1850–1870,” *American Art Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2 (November 1973): 32–49. See the full-scale drawing *View Opposite My Balcony in Florence*, 1842, pencil on paper. New-York Historical Society, 1956.72.

⁹ Olson, 283.

¹⁰ Bevan, 10.

¹¹ Bevan, 11. *Catalogue of American Portraits in the New-York Historical Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 603. For Dr. Parmly’s abolitionist affiliations, see Husch, Ch. 8. Rossiter’s portraits of Dr. and Mrs. Eleazar Parmly, née Anna Maria Valk Smith (1801–1857) are in the New-York Historical Society, 1943.8 and 1948.563, respectively.

¹² Gail E. Husch. *Something Coming: Apocalyptic Expectation and Mid-Nineteenth Century American Painting* (Hanover, N.H: University Press of New England, 2000), 202–203.

¹³ Bevan, 11–12; Fort 1975, 83

¹⁴ Parmly, Eleazar. *Thoughts in Rhyme* (New York: T. Holman, 1867), 50. Parmly’s publication included selections from Rossiter’s diary.

¹⁵ *The Crayon*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1860, 82–86.

¹⁶ He was of sufficient renown to be included in Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life Comprising Biographical and Critical Sketches of American Artists, Preceded by an Historical Account of the Rise & Progress of Art in America* (reprint, New York: J. F. Carr, 1966); and Samuel Isham, *The History of American Painting* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943).

¹⁷ See *The Crayon*, vol. 5, no. 1, July 1858, pp. 208–210. Rossiter’s library contained books on the railroad and steam engine and periodicals discussing scientific discoveries. See *The Railroad in the American Landscape, 1850–1950: The Wellesley College Museum, Wellesley, Massachusetts, 15 April–8 June 1981* (Wellesley, Mass: The Museum, 1981), 84–85. See also Rossiter’s painting *The Opening of the Wilderness* (ca. 1858, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 48.471).

¹⁸ The two had a son, Sterling Rossiter, in 1861.

¹⁹ In 1860, *The Crayon* reported that J.D. Sherwood, Esq. hosted a farewell party for Rossiter at Rossiter’s home. Also, on December 20, 1859, a large sale of his works was held at the National Academy of Design before he moved to Cold Spring. See *The Home Journal*, December 3, 1859, p. 2, col. 5.

²⁰ The house is on Route 9D in Cold Spring. See Frances F. Dunwell, *The Hudson River Highlands* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 54, illustration.

²¹ The manuscript (watercolor on paper, 26 x 21 cm) is in the Manuscript Department of the New-York Historical Society. It is comprised of 67 full- and half-page illustrations in black and white, made with ink wash. He also illustrated an edition of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, of 1865. Rossiter signed the preface as follows: "Thomas Pritchard Rossiter/HUDSON HIGHLANDS, DEC. 1864." New-York Historical Society Library, Main Collection, ND237.R71 A35 1865).

Rossiter's further devotion to sketching and illustration is evident in three published volumes for which he provided the decoration: *Poems*, by Anne C. Lynch (New York: 1849), one illustration by Rossiter; *Vala: A Mythological Tale*, by Parke Godwin (New York: George P. Putnam, 1851), seven capital letters and three larger designs by Rossiter; *Prismatics* (New York, 1853), three illustrations by Rossiter. Source: *Early American Book Illustrators and Wood Engravers, 1670-1870; a Catalogue of a Collection of American Books* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Library, 1958), 203.

²² Isham, 291.

²³ Harry W. French, *Art and Artists in Connecticut* (New York: Kennedy Graphics, 1970), 103.

²⁴ See Broaddus, 108, for one landscape sketch, and 113 for a sketch of a woman. See Richard J. Koke, comp. *American Landscape and Genre Paintings in the New-York Historical Society: a Catalog of the Collection, Including Historical, Narrative, and Marine Art*. New York: New-York Historical Society, in association with G.K. Hall, Boston, Mass., 1982, 112 for the sketch *Joan of Arc in Prison*, dated February 23, 1854, a preparation for the oil painting of the same title, also in the New-York Historical Society.

²⁵ "Thomas Prichard (*sic*) Rossiter and Rossiter family papers, 1840–1961." "Catalogue of Valuable Antique Furniture, Paintings, Engravings and Books, Articles of Vertu, and Curiosities. Also a Few Coins, Seals, Watches, Etc., Etc." Archives of American Art files, microfilm roll N46 101–121. Fellow Hudson River artist Jervis McEntee "bought some French books" from the sale. See "Jervis McEntee's Diary," February 8, 1873, Archives of American Art.