

Beginnings: John Vanderlyn's *Hudson at Kingston*, ca. 1790

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Generally attributed to Pieter Vanderlyn (c. 1687-1778), a portrait of *Pau de Wandelaer*¹ (ca. 1730) in the Albany Institute of History and Art offers a rare early portrayal of the Hudson River at Albany. A bird is perched in the youthful Wandelaer's raised right hand, which guides the viewers' gaze beyond to the distant riverbank at sunset. A sloop pulling a flat-bottomed bateau used to ferry passengers to shore may be a reference to Wandelaer's occupation. Hence, the inclusion of the background seems more than incidental. Yet, colonial American portraits with such scenic backdrops of the Hudson are scarce.

By the early nineteenth century as the new nation took stock of its sublime vistas, romanticized studies of the natural scenery along the Hudson culminated in the trend culminated in the iconic Hudson River School. One may observe, however, in certain late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century artists a prescient interest in

¹ Alice P. Kenney, "Neglected Heritage: Hudson River Dutch Material Culture," *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 20 No. 1 (Spring, 1985), p. 65, Fig. 6. For another painting showing the subject holding a bird see William Partridge's *Sara Gansevoort*, Albany, February 1, 1721, oil on canvas, 44 ¾ x 35 3/8".

the idealized landscape. *Hudson at Kingston* (15 x 19 ½") by Pieter's grandson John Vanderlyn (1775-1852) is such a work.²

Once owned by Vanderlyn's biographer Robert Gosman, *Hudson at Kingston* is presently housed in the Senate House Museum in Kingston— the first capital of New York and Vanderlyn's birthplace. The Senate House Museum contains the largest permanent exhibition of his canvases and sketches. The painting, one of his smallest aside from some portrait miniatures, depicts a view of the Hudson from the downtown area of Kingston once the town of Rondout, which borders the Rondout Creek.³ The creek empties into the Hudson through an estuary that was also once the terminus of the Delaware and Hudson canal built to haul coal from Pennsylvania to New York City.⁴ Gosman describes the painting as follows:

A view of the mouth of the Rondout Creek with the Hudson in the middle distance and the hills of Dutchess [County] as a background, painted in 1794, is in the hands of the writer. Its fidelity is remarkable and the painting, particularly the foliage very remarkable as the production of untutored youth. Perhaps the most remark-worthy fact in connection is, that two fishermen, noted anglers and village celebrities, are represented going down the hill. There were peculiarities of walk in which both were caught to the marvel and

² Ex. Coll. Robert Gosman; Mr. Edward C. Coykendall; Senate House Museum (to present).

³ Kingston, formerly Esopus and Wiltwyck, was burned by the British in October 1777, following Clinton's expedition up the Hudson and the capture of Forts Clinton and Montgomery. A second *Landscape of Kingston* (c. 1818-20) has been tentatively attributed to Vanderlyn. An oil view of Venice appears on its reverse. See Kenneth C. Lindsay's *The Works of John Vander Lyn*. (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1970), Fig. 93, p. 118 and 152.

⁴ Cite.

each villager recognized at the first glance Hans & [blank in manuscript].⁵

Gosman, also a Kingston native, would have had first hand knowledge of the local populace and been able to identify these figures easily. Indeed, at the left of the foreground, two men wearing broad brimmed hats and balancing long fishing poles and cloth sacks over their shoulders make their way down the slope towards the water. One fisherman wearing a red jacket and blue breeches is stooped and carries a walking stick. He gazes toward a horse-drawn cart at the right. Clothing, posture, and the careful painting of his visage, make this figure a recognizable portrait, perhaps of Hans. Nearby, a team of horses, one dark brown and the other white, pulls a cart laden with a large barrel up the road in the opposite direction as their driver brandishes a switch. Occupying the middle ground is a majestic Hudson beneath a brilliant cerulean sky.

Though Vanderlyn's practical skill with oils is evident in the work, Gosman's dating of the canvas to 1794 bears scrutiny. Vanderlyn's skilled "India ink" and wash *Drawing of a Harbor Scene* of 1789 is inscribed, "Drawn by John Vander Lyn when he was 14 years." Several more of Vanderlyn's early sketches like this copy from an imported European, perhaps Dutch, landscape print exist and remain in private

⁵ Gosman manuscript, New York Historical Society; Misc. Mss. Vanderlyn (types transcript); the original Gosman manuscript is in the Hoes collection.

collections.⁶ Occupying the center of this fanciful scene is a ship at full mast gliding on a glassy river as fishermen cast nets nearby. Clusters of buildings appear on either side of the bank, and on the left appears a fortified castle-like structure. A man strides toward the river with a walking stick similar to the stooped fisherman of *Hudson at Kingston*. Indeed, the *Harbor Scene* appears to prefigure *Hudson at Kingston* in its general composition with the path toward the river bifurcating the left segment of the canvas and the river dominating the right. The hills and other aspects of the landscape are also subtly echoed in the painted vista. Further, the canvas's naïve quality suggests its completion at any point between 1791 and late 1794 during Vanderlyn's studies in New York at the Columbian Academy of Painting and employment as an assistant at Thomas Barrow's artists' materials and engravings shop where he famously copied Gilbert Stuart's portraits.

On a journey from Philadelphia to New York to examine mastodon skeletons in 1801, Charles Willson Peale passed Kingston (Esopus). He wrote:

Altho' the wind was contrary we soon reached Newburgh, and had an enchanting passage, the awful heights of each side, continually changing their fronts, one of which distinctly presents a very perfect profile of a head changing as we pass it and in some instants a well proportioned

⁶ As the sketch was completed prior to his documented art training, is it plausible that Vanderlyn was shown such original prints among the possessions of his grandfather Pieter, who died in 1778 in the home of John's father Nicholas.

face, this is opposite [B]utter [H]ill⁷ which has still the marks of a cannon ball that was shot against it by British Sloop of War at the time those Tyrants Burt Esopus, some of our Riffle men on the Hill fired their pieces at the ship, but the Amazing height of the Hill of course the distance would prevent their feeble shots from annoying the [B]ritish, nor could the Vessel elevate any of her cannon only to a very small part of the hight of the stupendous piles of Rocks. We had many anecdotes related by the Gentlemen that accompanied us in the barge; were shewn the piece of Rock which Putnam tumble from the sumit of the Mountain.⁸

The Vanderlyn family home in Kingston had been burned in the very British raid described by Peale.

It was during this eventful journey that Peale completed his *Hudson River Sketchbook* now in the collection of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. Not only do these pencil/ink and watercolor sketches reveal his captivation with landscape, his writings express his awe as well. He wrote of the view from Fort Putnam, “The prospect was sublime, an awful grandeur seized the mind while viewing the steep declivity which on the West side was almost perpendicular...”⁹ In 1802, Vanderlyn himself sketched the Hudson highlands, West Point and other scenes along the Hudson with the aim of having them produced and sold as engravings. Only his Niagara views were successfully made into engravings in London in 1804.

⁷ Butter Hill is now known as Storm King mountain.

⁸ *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, Volume 2, Part 1., p. 329.

⁹ p. 328

While endeavors such as the Niagara engravings, and his panoramas of Paris and Versailles, all shown throughout the United States, were not financial successes, their impact upon a generation of artists to follow cannot be overlooked. Artists of the Hudson River School, for example Frederic Church, exhibited their own Niagaras and other monumental landscapes publicly to great acclaim.¹⁰ Although Vanderlyn's career was largely devoted to portraiture, the impact of his landscapes of which *Harbor Scene* and *Hudson at Kingston* were nascent efforts, perhaps deserves further critical attention.

In 2008, a retrospective of nineteenth-century Kingston artist Joseph Tubby (1821-1896), noted for his paintings of local landscapes, was featured in the Friends of Historic Kingston Gallery.¹¹ Tubby, a disciple of the Hudson River School, lived in Rondout and was a close friend of the artist Jervis McEntee (1828-1891) who was born there. The two shared a studio in New York City and completed a two-month tour through the Adirondacks in 1851 sketching landscapes and keeping diaries. An undated sketchbook by Tubby containing drawings of Kingston remains in the collection of the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Today, the beauty of Kingston's scenery together with its artistic heritage has garnered the city an outstanding reputation as one of the best art communities in the nation.

¹⁰ John K. Howat, *Frederic Church*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 68-74.

¹¹ *Friends of Historic Kingston, Keepers of Your Heritage*, Winter/Spring 2008.

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