

The Merging of Contrasts: Seth Eastman on the Hudson and the Drawing School at West Point.

Seth Eastman was a man of multiple talents and careers. Educated at West Point from 1824-1829 he was an American painter, draughtsman and military man who is renowned for his images of Native American life in the United States. There is a substantial body of secondary literature on Eastman, the West and Native American life. This literature has been thematically enriched by analyses of the aesthetic and theories of military and expeditionary art. However, Eastman's earliest body of work largely depicted the Hudson River (*Figs. 1-4*). Although acknowledged by most major sources, Eastman's Hudson River works have not been subject to a concentrated study. The military associations of Eastman's western works are relatively concrete; they are images produced under the aegis of the government by a soldier in their employ, with an accompanying political and ideological agenda. Conversely, the Hudson River views were endeavors in the Fine Arts; produced for Eastman's own artistic development and for exhibition and sale at prestigious New York art venues. Nevertheless, Eastman's military persona was equally significant in regard to his Hudson River works, for it was at West Point that he received his artistic training; first as a cadet and later as assistant drawing teacher from 1833-40<sup>1</sup>.

Although founded in 1802, by 1803 the Department of Drawing was established at West Point. As, the first engineering program in the United States it was essential that officers learn the basics of drawing: it was a skill required of "engineers, artillerists, topographers and infantrymen alike"<sup>2</sup>. In its inclusion of a drawing program West Point followed in the tradition of distinguished European military programs; namely that of the French *École Polytechnique*<sup>3</sup>. However, from the early through mid-19<sup>th</sup> century West Point sought out accomplished fine artists to instruct a course in the rudiments of military drawing. In this regard West Point serves as a focus of great significance. The Academy was an early program of arts education located in one of the most profoundly inspiring settings in the history of American Art: the Hudson River.

The myriad aspects of this program: military, artistic and geographic, bear great significance in the early works of Seth Eastman.

According to the regulations of 1823 drawing was a required course for the third and second classes. The second class spent two hours a day, three days a week in study of the human figure. The third class had two hours of landscape and topography drawing daily<sup>4</sup>. Clearly, the program emphasized landscape.

As a cadet Eastman studied under Thomas Gimbrede, a French engraver and miniature painter of dubious skill. William Dunlap spoke poorly of Gimbrede but whatever the reality of the artist's abilities he did enjoy some success as an engraver in New York. Dunlap maintained that Gimbrede managed his post at West Point by placing "approved models" before his students and copying from prints became a staple of the program<sup>5</sup>. Although early on West Point had a small collection of prints this was supplemented by Gimbrede's own collection<sup>6</sup>. Observation of prints, along with Gimbrede's profession as an engraver may have influenced the crisp aesthetic of Eastman. Moreover, Gimbrede betrayed another aspect of his teaching method through his dictum "everyone can draw". He was quoted as saying:

"There are only two lines in drawing, the straight line and the curve line, everyone can draw a straight line—and everyone can draw a curve line—therefore everyone can draw!"<sup>7</sup>.

This pronouncement bears great similarity to numerous American drawing manuals of the 1820s and 30s. Such texts posited the instruction of drawing in exceedingly elemental terms and built artistic skills progressively, often designating the mastering of the straight and curved lines as the first lesson<sup>8</sup>. West Point, much like any early drawing academy, had a good collection of drawing books. No one book was named as a course text. Nevertheless, due to the variety of books available in the collection it is likely that they were a common supplement to the course and were expected to make up for any deficiencies of the instructor. *Lucas' Progressive Drawing Book* of 1827 was part of the collection during Eastman's course of study. Significantly, this book contains plates by West Point alum John H.B. Latrobe<sup>9</sup>. Latrobe had also

studied under Gimbrede as a cadet. Perhaps, his plate *West Point from the East Bank of the Hudson* (Fig. 5) can tell us something about the character of Gimbrede's teaching methods that remaining written sources cannot. Like Eastman, Latrobe pictures a very particular sort of landscape: picturesque, pastoral and Claudian. He features a vista with a central scoop of water, and anecdotal human incident. These similarities to Eastman's aesthetic reveal that Gimbrede's students were not only versed in the technical aspects of topographical drawing but were given a foundation in traditional European modes of depicting landscape. Nonetheless, the West Point collection of drawing books did contain a variety of more mathematical texts, including *A Treatise on Shades, Shadows and Linear Perspective* written by Charles Davies, West Point professor of Mathematics, in 1832<sup>10</sup>. This text was required for Davies' course and it emphasized a mathematic approach to perspective and shading.

In December of 1833 Gimbrede passed away. The search for a new instructor soon commenced and prominent painter Charles Robert Leslie received the position. Although of American parentage Leslie had spent the majority of his life in England, was educated at the Royal Academy and later became a Royal Academician. Leslie remained at West Point for a short time, finding teaching too time consuming to pursue his own work<sup>11</sup>. Significantly, Leslie also became homesick for England, in his reminiscences of 1860 he stated "So entirely did I now feel that England had become my home- so anxious was I to be again among my brother artists"<sup>12</sup>. This quote serves to remind us of the European connection which Leslie provided in Eastman's career and to the program at West Point. Eastman taught under Leslie and studied privately with him for approximately six months<sup>13</sup>. Little has been made of this connection in the secondary literature but it was a significant educational opportunity for Eastman. Moreover, in the scope of available artistic education in the United States, a course of private study with a Royal Academician was indeed remarkable. Even after his departure from West Point Leslie proved to be a significant connection for the Academy's drawing program. Correspondence between Leslie and the next drawing instructor, Robert

Walter Weir, illustrates his continued influence. In a letter of April 7, 1834 Leslie writes to Weir that, among other useful household items that he has left in the drawing instructor's residence, is a tube of scarlet vermilion paint<sup>14</sup>. On October 12, 1838, Leslie writes from London that he "has received five shillings" from Weir which he has used to purchase articles of clothing which would be useful as props for Weir's own compositions. Leslie had spent only a portion of this money and commented that the balance remained "in my hand awaiting your further order." Additionally, he stated "the money for the Mr. Chalon prints I received and paid to him long ago"<sup>15</sup>. Clearly, Leslie remained a conduit for the transmission of European materials to the West Point program.

Weir was the last drawing instructor under which Eastman worked and studied at West Point. Weir had studied in Italy under the history painter Pietro Benvenuti and after three years, returned to New York. He quickly came to prominence in the United States, being elected to the National Academy of Design in 1831. The corner stone of Gimbrede's teaching method had been the copying of engravings. Similarly, Weir exposed his students to a variety of prints, also incorporating his own extensive collection. Additionally, Weir seems to have encouraged more free hand sketching, perspectival views and is noted for his emphasis on landscape. He commonly instructed in watercolor; a technique which Eastman employed numerous times throughout his career<sup>16</sup>. Eastman's watercolors of the 1830's display how the influence of Weir differed from that of his other two instructors (*Figs. 6-8*). Compositionally, the watercolors can often be more inventive though some clearly owe a debt to European and Claudian modes of landscape production. Above all, Weir provided a more "painterly" influence, which is most evident in Eastman's watercolors, whose sketch-like appearance contrasts with the tightly controlled aesthetic of his oil paintings. Notably, Weir was known to commonly remind his students to include "more atmosphere" in their paintings<sup>17</sup>.

Weir has also been more widely considered in relation to the Hudson River School and was acquainted with many notable artists. Significantly, J.F. Weir noted that both Cole and Durand made trips to West

Point to visit with the artist<sup>18</sup>. Presumably, it was Weir who aided Eastman's entrée into the New York art world and Eastman exhibited at the National Academy of Design from 1836-40, largely to favorable reviews. He was elected an honorary member in May of 1838 and exhibited at the Apollo Gallery in New York City in 1839<sup>19</sup>. From 1836-40 Eastman exhibited 19 works of art, all of which were landscapes except for one<sup>20</sup>.

Under Weir, Eastman was responsible for teaching topographical drawing. In 1837 Eastman made a significant contribution to the drawing curriculum in his *Treatise on Topographical Drawing*, which was a required text for cadets<sup>21</sup>. This treatise is little more than noted in most secondary literature, probably on account of its highly technical nature, but is marked by its attempt to standardize and clarify modes of topographical documentation. Indeed, Eastman was so well recognized as a topographical expert that, in 1839, he was elected Professor of Topographical Drawing and Painting at Jefferson College, MI; a position that he declined<sup>22</sup>. Albert Boime has mentioned the topographical aerial perspective as an essentially dominant point of view, central to the act of military surveying<sup>23</sup>. This perspective is adopted in many of Eastman's fine art views of the Hudson, but, moreover, the precise delineation of forms in these images hearkens to the clarity which Eastman describes as central to viewing landscape in his treatise.

A closer examination of the West Point drawing program reveals its bipartite nature. It combined technical instruction, in mathematical perspective and topographical drawing, with traditional training in the Fine Arts. Moreover, the program provides a significant example of an early American art academy. In many ways it was similar to other early academies including Archibald and Alexander Robertson's schools<sup>24</sup>, the National Academy of Design, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts<sup>25</sup>. All courses of study included copying from prints and casts, which was surely possible at West Point after the addition of a sculpture gallery 1838<sup>26</sup>. All boasted European trained instructors or European materials. West Point however, was unique for its emphasis on landscape and its courses in more technical, military

modes of representation. How did this duality, the themes of art and science which so often course through the literature on American art, affect Eastman's mode of picturing the Hudson? Perhaps the best illustration of this point are two images of Ft. Putnam created by Eastman: one a free hand sketch, the other a topographical map (Figs. 9-10). Various authors have attempted to interpret the duality of Eastman's career in regard to his Hudson River subject matter. John Francis McDermott states that the artist's military training granted him objectivity and allowed him to paint only what he saw<sup>27</sup>. In her 1994 dissertation Sarah Boehme revised McDermott's over simplified reading. She states that Eastman kept his topographic and fine arts modes separate. She names topographical drawing a "conceptual" mode, which, through abstract symbols surveys terrain unable to be seen from a single vantage point. She explains that Eastman reserved his "perceptual" mode of seeing for his landscape work<sup>28</sup>. However, a review of the 1839 National Academy of Design Exhibition, featured in the *New York Literary Gazette*, inextricably merges Eastman's two modes. Of Eastman's *Butler Hill, from Fishkill, on the Hudson*, the reviewer states:

Such a picture as this, for instance, would be of considerable utility to a military man, who desired to acquaint himself with the positions of the country; but it possess little interest as a work of Art<sup>29</sup>.

This review begs the question how "perceptual" are Eastman's fine art views? Certainly the finished paintings he exhibited are quite formulaic. The extant body of Eastman's Hudson River work largely displays a picturesque, often pastoral, Claudian mode of vision. Although Eastman consistently displays grand vistas his works are not awe-inspiring. The picturesque and pastoral clearly was and is not the only reality of the Hudson River. Herein lies the import of Eastman's military training. Whereas other contemporary practitioners of Hudson River Scenes, such as Cole and Doughty, infused their landscapes with poetic and literary import, Eastman's fine arts images were passed through the filter of military precision. These works are indicative of the influence of West Point's unique program in both its Fine

Arts and military aspects. Eastman's vision of the Hudson merges traditional academic compositions with the technical clarity that he learned in his military training and so valued in his treatise.

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<sup>1</sup> John Francis McDermott, *Seth Eastman: Pictorial Historian of the Indian* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 225-226.

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Anne Kindred, "The Army Officer Corps and the Arts: Artistic Patronage and Practice in America, 1820-85" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1981), 86.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Elizabeth Boehme, "Seth Eastman: Illustrating the Indian Condition" (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1994), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Boehme *Illustrating the Indian Condition*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York: George P. Scott and Co. Printers, 1834) 255.

<sup>6</sup> Boehme, *Illustrating the Indian Condition*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Kindred, *The Army Officer Corps and the Arts*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Peter C. Marzio, *The Art Crusade: An Analysis of American Drawing Manuals, 1820-1860* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Boehme, *Illustrating the Indian Condition*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Davies, *A Treatise on Shades, Shadows and Linear Perspective* (New York: J&J Harper, 1832).

<sup>11</sup> Boehme, *Illustrating the Indian Condition*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Robert Leslie, *Biographical Recollection of the Late Charles Robert Leslie, R.A.*, ed. Thomas Taylor Esq. (London: John Murray, Abermarle Street, 1860) Vol. I, p.127.

<sup>13</sup> McDermott, *Pictorial Historian of the Indian*, 225.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Robert Leslie, West Point, New York, to Robert Walter Weir, 7 April 1834, transcript in the hand of Charles Robert Leslie, Special Collections, Archives of the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Robert Leslie, London, to Robert Walter Weir, 12 October, 1838, transcript in the hand of Charles Robert Leslie, Special Collections, Archives of the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Moss ed., *Robert W. Weir of West Point: Illustrator, Teacher and Poet* (West Point, New York: United States Military Academy, 1976), 30-51.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph P. Farley, "Art in the Army—A Retrospect," *Journal of the Military Service Institution* (January, 1908), 45.

<sup>18</sup> John F. Weir, *Recollections of John Ferguson Weir, Director of the Yale School of Fine Arts, 1869-1913*, edited by Theodore Sizer (New York and New Haven: New York Historical Society and Yale University, 1957), 37.

<sup>19</sup> McDermott, *Pictorial Historian of the Indian*, 225-226.

<sup>20</sup> Boehme, *Illustrating the Indian Condition*, 82.

<sup>21</sup> Seth Eastman, *Treatise on Topographical Drawing* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1837).

<sup>22</sup> Anonymous, *Biographical Document on Seth Eastman*, Special Collections, Archives of the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c.1830-1865* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 23.

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<sup>24</sup> Megan Holloway Fort, “Archibald and Alexander Robertson and Their Schools, The Columbian Academy of Painting and the Academy of Painting and Drawing, New York, 1791-1835” (Ph.D diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Elliot Bostwick Davis, “Training the Eye and The Hand: Drawing Books in Nineteenth-Century America” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Kindred, *The Army Officer Corps and the Arts*, 93.

<sup>27</sup> McDermott, *Pictorial Historian of the Indian*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Boehme, *Illustrating the Indian Condition*, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous, “Exhibition of the National Academy.- No. VI. The Landscapes,” *New York Literary Gazette*, 22 June 1839, 166.