

Robert Havell

*Hudson River Looking North to Croton Point*  
c. 1850

Oil on canvas

36 x 51"

Ossining Historical Society

**Robert Havell: Looking out Over the River**

*Home on the Hudson* Catalogue Entry

Hudson River Seminar

Professor Katherine Manthorne

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Robert Havell preferred to be remembered as an engraver and made no pretense to professional competence as a painter. His pictures in oil were done in America as a hobby, very few being sold during his lifetime. Little did he imagine that in the mature judgment of time he would be known as one of America's Hudson River artists.<sup>i</sup>

When Robert Havell (1793-1878) and his wife and daughter arrived in the United States in 1839, it was just after Havell had made his name as the engraver of what scholars have called "one of the most impressive monuments to 19<sup>th</sup> century print-making,"<sup>ii</sup> John James Audubon's *Birds of America*. Audubon was painstaking about the quality of work his project deserved and Havell did not disappoint. "The Whole is quite beautiful – you have exceeded anything previously done and you may now challenge the world of ornithological Engravers without any fear!"<sup>iii</sup> Already an accomplished engraver from a family of accomplished engravers when he started working with Audubon, Havell joined the ranks of the world's greatest aquatinters with the completion of *Birds of America*. Havell's biographer (and descendant<sup>iv</sup>) George Alfred Willams said the praise was an accurate reflection of Havell's skill.

The chief limitation of the aquatint process lies in the great difficulty of getting more than a few differences of shade as the ground goes to pieces rather rapidly after successive bitings, and the transitions from one tone to another are very few so that half-tones are not readily obtainable. It is in this economical use of these half-tones that Robert Havell, Jr., achieved so much and thereby produced a chiaroscuro seldom, if ever equaled in aquatint.<sup>v</sup>

Just what brought Havell and his wife and daughter to America is unknown. Williams says Havell's friendship with Audubon was a major factor. "Audubon had fired his enthusiasm with glowing accounts of the primitive grandeur and pictorial possibilities of American scenery; moreover, the free institutions of our political life appealed greatly to the democratic nature of the English engraver."<sup>vi</sup> Once here Havell and his family stayed briefly with the Audubons and then spent two years living in Brooklyn before finding a spot on the Hudson River in what is now Ossining. It believed that *Hudson River Looking North to Croton Point* (C.1850), reflects the view from Havell's studio in the cupola which topped Rocky Mount, the house the artist designed and built on the banks of the river.<sup>vii</sup> The scene certainly matches the view painted on a wall of the cupola discovered by later occupants of the house. The mural was removed before the building was torn down in the 1990s to make way for a development, but its current whereabouts are unknown.<sup>viii</sup> And though Rocky Mount is now gone, the Ossining street where it was located still carries the name of Havell.

*Hudson River Looking North to Croton Point* was acquired by the Ossining Historical Society in 1941 from Nelson Rockefeller.<sup>ix</sup> The canvas is painted in the delicate and meticulous style which is often associated with the Hudson River School of Asher B. Durand (also a former engraver) and Thomas Cole. The detailed interpretation of the panoramic scene reflects not just the engraver's precision, but the direct observation of nature as well. The topographical features of the work accurately reflect the view upstream from Rocky Mount, the eye first

hitting Kingsland Point (in the center) and then Croton Point further in the distance.<sup>x</sup> The bucolic feel of the scene is not only typical of a Havell landscape, but is most certainly testament to Havell's great feeling for the beauty and harmony of his adopted land. He depicts "a serene setting, with a sensitivity to atmosphere and the particularity of the site."<sup>xi</sup> The glowing pink sky, a poignantly striking sunset, is not only an example of the diagonals which add a sense of movement to Havell's "sometimes naïve"<sup>xii</sup> style, but also anticipates the equally dramatic skies depicted by Frederic Church in the years to come. The painting is also a striking example of the lovely cool greens, browns, light blues and grays<sup>xiii</sup> of Havell's unusual landscape palette, which some experts have compared to the brown pastoral palette of Thomas Doughty.<sup>xiv</sup>

The canvas demonstrates several of the stylistic characteristics which have come to be associated with Robert Havell's paintings. The most unexpected of these components is the painterliness of the artist's work. This is especially rare in the tightly painted pristine surfaces of the Hudson River school at this relatively early time. Havell's visible and delicate brushwork combined with small dabs of paint is evident in the foliage and foreground trees as well as in the lovely pink clouds. Even though he may have been "emulating such English artists as John Constable"<sup>xv</sup> in this regard, the painterliness is remarkable within the general linearity of the topographical composition. I have already mentioned Havell's unusual penchant for strong diagonals in connection with the rose streak in the sky. This tendency is also obvious in the

road winding into the background on the right (the road going back into the composition is another Havell commonplace), and the diagonal patches of sunlight illuminating the ground in front of the boy.

The boy in the foreground illustrates another characteristic of the Havell canvas, the use of a repoussoir figure (or figures) to lead the viewer's eye into the picture. A nearby touch of light (or something white), in this case the patch of light ground in front of the boy, aids this device. *Hudson River Looking North to Croton* also displays two key features of Havell's Hudson River work in oil which are often criticized: too many boats on the water and too many houses on the banks. Both of these aspects, common in his work, have been perceived as detracting from the pastoral quality of the paintings. The number of houses in the mid-ground on the right, however, is most certainly an accurate depiction of the development of the area, and the same is no doubt true of the number of boats on the river. Their inclusion is evidence of Havell's topographical training and the detail that attracted his engraver's eye. I would say as well that both indicate that nature's accommodation of man is a big part of the allure of Havell's Hudson River paradise, and that this attitude differentiates his work from that of some of the more well known Hudson River painters.

*Hudson River Looking North to Croton Point* is one of an estimated one hundred fifty oil paintings done by Robert Havell in his nearly forty years of living along the banks of the Hudson River. Although he began showing his work at the National Academy of Design within a year of his arrival in New York,<sup>xvi</sup> he is said to have sold few paintings during his lifetime. (A sale of some seventy works is reported shortly before his death, including landscapes, panoramic views and copies of the ornithological plates he had executed for Audubon.<sup>xvii</sup>) The scarcity of the work combined with Havell's habit of neither dating nor signing his canvases has left scholars in a difficult position. This is compounded by the difficulty of finding the work, most of which is believed to be in private hands. The few paintings Havell did sign or date he inscribed on the back, often making attribution subject to the need to reline the painting. *Hudson River Looking North to Croton Point* is neither signed nor dated, and thus is, in this respect, typical of Havell's work. (The attribution to Havell was reaffirmed during a recent cleaning of the painting.<sup>xviii</sup>) The view is also typical of Havell and can be seen in several other of his paintings. One of the few extant documents that attests to Havell's working method, "Key to View of Haverstraw Bay from Sing Sing," seems to be a detailed sketch of the view from his cupola at Rocky Mount. The various local landmarks are labeled and show Havell's interest in the accurate depiction of the topography out his window. The sketch is in the collection of the New York Historical Society.

Havell did not abandon engraving for oil painting when he landed in New York in 1839, and in fact produced a number of aquatints of American views and cities, including New York, Boston, Hartford, Baltimore, Niagara Falls and West Point. These prints survive today in "scanty

quantities...and are unquestionably among the loveliest of nineteenth century American aquatints.”<sup>xxix</sup> Havell’s last American aquatint, published in 1848, was a view of West Point from Fort Putnam, a typically detailed view including “West Point, Newburgh, and the river traffic in between ...all carefully delineated against a backdrop of mountains and swirling clouds.”<sup>xxx</sup> Unfortunately, “with its completion, the great age of aquatint printmaking in American ceased,”<sup>xxxi</sup> and from that time on, printmaking focused on the cheaper process of lithography. In 1848 Havell also produced a painting titled *West Point from Fort Putnam* which he exhibited with the American Art Union that year.<sup>xxii</sup> It has been speculated that “he may have looked upon his painting as a means of stirring up interest in selling his prints, for he would sometimes exhibit both together.”<sup>xxiii</sup> There are records of Havell exhibiting his painting through 1866, either with the National Academy of Design or the American Art Union.

Local legend has it that in 1841 when Havell and his family came upon the site in Ossining on which they would build Rocky Mount, they had been on a sketching trip along the Hudson of the sort they used to take in England (which Havell used as the source for his many aquatint views of the English countryside). They reputedly were so taken with the property that they immediately placed the winning bid on it. However the family acquired the land, they lived happily on the spot until 1857 when an equally choice parcel of land drew them to Tarrytown. The river view from the Tarrytown house (no longer extant) was also compelling and Havell is said to have spent his declining years painting the charming region immortalized by Washington

Irving, never tiring of the broad sweeping Hudson, visible from his bedroom window.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Along with other luminaries from the area, including Irving, Havell is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

During his time in America Havell participated fully in the life of his new country and locality. He was connected as an agent authorized to receive subscriptions with the American Art Union and served as one of the building trustees on the committee for the Washington Irving Memorial at St. Mark’s Church in Tarrytown. When he first came to America it was with the intention of making sketches of the Hudson River area and then returning to England.<sup>xxv</sup> It seems clear that his continued presence in the region as well as his long devotion to the subject matter of the Hudson River Valley were the result of his love of his adopted country, and more particularly his love of the area.

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<sup>i</sup> Harry, P. Havell, “Robert Havell’s ‘View of the Hudson from Tarrytown Heights,’” *The New York Historical Society Quarterly* XXXI, no. 3 (July 1947): 160. In this instance Havell is speaking specifically about *View of the Hudson from Tarrytown Heights* which he presented to the New York Historical Society in 1946. However Robert Havell made a practice of not signing his canvases and *Hudson River Looking North to Croton Point* is also unsigned.

<sup>ii</sup> The Metropolitan Musuem of Art, Albert TenEyck Gardner and Stuart P. Feld, *American Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965),198.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Waldemar H. Fries, *The Double Elephant Portfolio: The Story of John James Audubon's Birds of America* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1973), 93.
- <sup>iv</sup> George Alfred Williams, "An English Engraver of American Nature: Havell," *Antiquarian* (July 1931), 64.
- <sup>v</sup> George Alfred Williams, "Robert Havell, Jr., Engraver of Audubon's 'The Birds of America,'" *The Print Collector's Quarterly* 6 (October 1916): 247-248.
- <sup>vi</sup> Williams, "An English Engraver of American Nature: Havell," *Antiquarian* (July 1931), 64.
- <sup>vii</sup> Sandra S. Phillips, "Document of Personal Landscape," *Charmed Places, Hudson River Artists and their Houses, Studios and Vistas* (New York: Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Bard College, and Vassar College Art Gallery in association with H.N. Abrams, 1988), 62.
- <sup>viii</sup> Conversation(s) with Norman MacDonald, current president of the Ossining Historical Society, ongoing, October, November and December, 2008.
- <sup>ix</sup> Conversation(s) with Norman MacDonald – see no. 8 – and Ossining Historical Society Accession records: No. 41.8, January 20, 1941. The Rockefeller Archives do not reflect this transaction (email from Rockefeller archivist Amy Firth to author, Friday, Dec. 12, 2008).
- <sup>x</sup> Havell, "View from Tarrytown Heights," *NYHS XXXI*, no. 3 (July 1947): 162.
- <sup>xi</sup> Phillips, "Documents of Personal Landscape," *Charmed Places*, 62.
- <sup>xii</sup> Phillips, "Documents of Personal Landscape," *Charmed Places*, 62.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Gerold Wunderlich, "The American Paintings and Aquatints of Robert Havell, Jr.," 15.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Metropolitan Museum, Gardner and Feld, *American Paintings*, 199.
- <sup>xv</sup> Gerold Wunderlich, "The American Paintings and Aquatints of Robert Havell, Jr.," 15.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Mary B. Cowdery, *National Academy of Design Exhibition Record 1826-1860* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1953).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Metropolitan Museum, Gardner and Feld, *American Paintings*, 198.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Conversations with Norman MacDonald, see above nos. 8 and 9.
- <sup>xix</sup> H. Wunderlich, "Reality, Romanticism, Realism, Two Centuries of American Painting," *Kennedy Quarterly* VII, no. 4 (December 1967): 271.
- <sup>xx</sup> Glenn Collins Peck, "Robert Havell, Jr., and his American Aquatint Views" Thesis (M.A.)—University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1982, 52.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Peck, "Robert Havell, Jr.," 61.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Mary B. Cowdery, *American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art Union Exhibition Record 1816-52* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1953), 175.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> H. Wunderlich, "Reality, Romanticism and Realism," *Kennedy Quarterly* (December 1967): 271.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Williams, "An English Engraver," *Antiquarian* (July 1931), 64.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Several sources concur on this point.

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