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*The Hudson River Portfolio* and the Dissemination of the American Landscape

A landmark in the history of printmaking, the *Hudson River Portfolio* is one of the earliest series of views of American landscapes. Published in 1823-24, this set of twenty hand-colored aquatints brought America's indigenous environment to a wider and larger public than did such painted landscapes. The printed scenes were also re-used as sources for popular entertainment and home decorations, further disseminating such views and permeating American consciousness. This broad circulation of the *Portfolio* scenery stimulated a growing interest in national history and landscape and ultimately contributed to the establishment of the Hudson River School.

The *Portfolio* was a collaboration between two European artists, William Guy Wall and John Hill. The Dublin-born Wall (1792-after 1864) arrived in New York in 1818. Already a trained painter, he quickly became immersed in the local art scene.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1820, he toured the Hudson River and sketched scenic locales between Lake Luzerne and the New York City harbor.<sup>2</sup> These watercolors are fine examples of the English topographical tradition, with orderly and balanced compositions that are enlivened by charming, diminutive figures. This picturesque style was transferred to America through such expatriates as Wall, whose artistry was quickly and widely known through the prints of the *Hudson River Portfolio*.

Englishman John Hill (1770-1850) was working as a printmaker in Philadelphia when, in 1821, he was approached by New York publisher Henry Megarey to create a print series based on Wall's watercolors.<sup>3</sup> Hill had been a successful printmaker in London, working on numerous publications including William Henry Pyne's *Microcosm* (1808) and Rudolph Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* (1808). His arrival in America in 1816 was announced by *The Analectic Magazine*, "he brings credentials of his professional skill, as well as of his moral character; and we hope he will find sufficient encouragement to induce his settlement in our city."<sup>4</sup> Hill was one of the first highly skilled printmakers to arrive in this country, and his appearance introduced fine printmaking to America. He was especially skilled in the tonal technique of aquatint, which was prized in England during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it was used primarily to reproduce topographical watercolors. Hill's facility in the technique allowed him to successfully capture every nuance of Wall's watercolor models and his published prints inspired a flourishing of aquatint in America during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

For the first year of the project, Hill received shipments of Wall's drawings and worked in the studio at his Philadelphia home. The process was a family affair: his wife assisted with the printing and their two adolescent daughters, Catherine and Caroline, colored the impressions. Acting as an assistant was their young son, John William, who eventually became a successful printmaker and watercolorist. In April 1822, at the urging of Megarey, Hill and his family moved to New York where he received regular visits from Wall and John Agg, the author who was preparing the accompanying text.

The prints were issued serially from 1823-24.<sup>6</sup> Each number, which included four prints, cost sixteen dollars, or the entire portfolio could be purchased for eighty dollars.<sup>7</sup> While the portfolio was a risky venture, both time-consuming and costly to produce, its publication was an immediate success. Megarey's first edition was printed in fewer than 200 copies and in 1827 the series was re-issued by G. C. & H. Carville. In addition, individual impressions, both colored and uncolored, were available from fine bookdealers and printshops.

The objective of the *Portfolio* was to foster the fine arts in America, as Megarey declared in the prospectus, "let our unanswerable reply to the slanders and sneers of the old world, be a vigorous, united, and enduring effort, to originate works of sterling excellence."<sup>8</sup> Critics, too, were eager to promote this publication as an affirmation of fine taste and a patriotic rebuff to the European dominance in the fine arts. One writer in the *New-York Spectator* warned "if the work before us be suffered to perish for want of public sustenance, we shall give foreign writers too much cause to lampoon our intellectual character."<sup>9</sup> Reviewers were laudatory and asserted that the *Portfolio* was proof of the growing quality and status of American art. As one critic writing in *The New-York Mirror* declared "on the whole, it is by far the most splendid work that has ever appeared in the United States; and is a strong evidence that the time is not far distant, when the fine arts of this country will be excelled by no other on earth."<sup>10</sup>

The *Portfolio* also disseminated information about the topography and history of the sites along the Hudson River. Each image was accompanied by a page of text written by Agg, who extolled the natural charm of the scenery while also providing such practical information as geographical details, population figures, historical facts, common flora and fauna and accounts

of local industries. In describing one of the most sublime views, the stone cliffs of the Palisades, Agg proclaims, “to the eye of the traveler, rising in savage grandeur, and stretching their tree-crowned summits far as the vision can compass, these rocks are too prominent a feature in the scenery of the Hudson to be overlooked.”<sup>11</sup> The natural splendors of the Palisades also supported thriving industries, like lumbering, and Agg noted the ease with which the wood was harvested and loaded into “vessels which lie close under the shore, and conveyed to a ready and profitable market.”<sup>12</sup> Yet for Agg this mutually beneficial relationship between man and nature was tenuous, and the natural world seemed poised to assert its dominance. He concludes, “from the quarries at the foot of these rocks, inexhaustible supplies of stone are transported to the city; and the scanty cottages and other buildings which are scattered along the shore, present a singular contrast to the stupendous edifices of nature, which overtop them, and seem to threaten them with continual destruction.”<sup>13</sup>

These explanatory texts educated the viewers and, as critics argued, an erudite audience was essential to the formation of a refined American taste. Both young and old could better themselves through viewing the *Portfolio*, as one writer claimed in the *New-York Spectator*, “we shall hail the day when the merchant of this country, after the business of the counting-house is ended, shall retire to his family, and, over such works as ‘The Hudson River Port Folio,’ instill into his children the principles of taste and the rudiments of useful knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> Other critics acknowledged its appeal to female collectors, who were important in promoting fine taste in the domestic sphere. According to a letter published in an 1821 edition of the *Evening Post*:

This inimitable production of the pencil and pen has great claims on public feeling, but particularly on the attention and support of the ladies of our city, who by encouraging it, not only provide themselves with an elegant evening recreation when the business of the tea table is concluded, but contribute greatly to the

circulation of a correct and exalted taste, in those walks of society where good example should always originate.<sup>15</sup>

The imagery of the Hudson River Portfolio quickly circulated outside the confines of the print publication. In 1828, William Dunlap premiered his *A Trip to Niagara or, Travellers in America, A Farce in Three Acts* at the Bowery Theater. It included a moving painted panorama based on Wall's images, which was the main draw of the attraction. In his preface, Dunlap concedes that his script is "a kind of running accompaniment to the more important product of the scene-painter."<sup>16</sup> According to one reviewer in *The Critic*, the panorama was "decidedly one of the most, if not the most successful effort of scenic exhibition that we have ever beheld."<sup>17</sup>

For those who could not afford the *Portfolio*, or were unable to attend the performance at the Bowery Theater, Wall's landscapes also appeared on domestic goods. Several British companies, most notably Andrew Stevenson and Ralph & James Clew, reproduced these images on Staffordshire pottery, which was produced in England specifically for an American middle-class audience.<sup>18</sup> The simple, yet powerful, compositions could easily be reduced and transferred onto ceramic dishes without losing any of their visual impact, while the charm and beauty of such scenes guaranteed an appreciative audience. They were mostly collected by women, who were mindful of how their domestic space could inspire and edify their families. According to Nancy Siegel, "their selection of the appropriate dish pattern could instill a desire for finery in her children and perhaps, and more importantly, educate them on the history and topography of the United States."<sup>19</sup>

The publication of the *Hudson River Portfolio* signaled a new period of sustained interest in the American landscape, and the broad circulation of its imagery through various formats helped to establish a national market for such scenes. Its appearance was lauded by critics who praised the didactic and patriotic goals of these landscapes. More importantly, the *Portfolio* answered the call for the creation of fine arts in America and laid the necessary groundwork for the formation of the Hudson River school.

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<sup>1</sup> Wall was a founding member of the National Academy of Design and exhibited there from 1826 to 1856. He was also a member of The Sketch Club, a gathering mostly of fellow National Academicians and writers, including Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand and William Cullen Bryant. For further details on the club, see James T. Callow, *Kindred Spirits: Knickerbocker Writers and American Artists, 1807-1855* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> According to Roberta J.M. Olsen, Wall most likely made on-the-spot pencil sketches, which he later worked into finished watercolors in his New York City studio. See Olsen's entry on Wall's watercolors in *Drawn by New York: Six Centuries of Watercolors and Drawings at The New-York Historical Society* (New York: The New-York Historical Society, 2008), 167.

<sup>3</sup> On August 24, 1821, Hill noted in his account book (N-YHS), "letter from Mr Megarey N.Y. about some large plates." He replaced John Rubens Smith, who was listed as the printmaker on the initial prospectus. Smith had only begun work on four plates, which were finished by Hill. For a discussion of possible reasons for Smith's replacement, see Richard J. Koke, *A checklist of the American engravings of John Hill (1770-1850) master of aquatint, together with a list of prints colored by him and a list of his extant original drawings* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1961).

<sup>4</sup> *The Analectic Magazine* (November 1816): 453.

<sup>5</sup> William James Bennett was another extremely talented British printmaker who had worked for the London-publisher Ackermann. He arrived in America in 1826 and Hill introduced him to his publisher Megarey, who began to also publish Bennett's prints. A history of Bennett's career is included in Gloria Gilda Deak, *William James Bennett, Master of the Aquatint View* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> The original advertisements projected six numbers of four prints each, but only five numbers, a total of 20 prints, were published.

<sup>7</sup> Georgia Barnhill, *Wild Impressions: The Adirondacks on Paper* (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1995), 9-10. The price was later lowered, according to an announcement in the December 27, 1828 edition of *The Critic*, "the subscription price of this work was originally eighty dollars; but we understand that it is now reduced to fifty dollars a copy, neatly bound."

<sup>8</sup> Edwin Wolf and Marie Elena Korey, eds., *Quarter of a Millennium: The Library Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1981), 202.

<sup>9</sup> *New-York Spectator*, December 11, 1821.

<sup>10</sup> *The New-York Mirror*, November 15, 1823.

<sup>11</sup> John Agg, *The Hudson River Portfolio* (New York: Henry I. Megarey, 1823-24), plate XIX.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Spectator*, December 12, 1821.

<sup>15</sup> *Evening Post*, December 19, 1821.

<sup>16</sup> *A Trip to Niagara or, Travellers in America, A Farce in Three Acts* (New York: E.B. Clayton, 1830), preface.

<sup>17</sup> *The Critic*, December 13, 1828. For the influence of such panoramas on Thomas Cole, see Ellwood C Parry III, "Overlooking the Oxbow: Thomas Cole's 'View from Mt. Holyoke' Revisited," *American Art Journal* vol. 34 (2003-2004): 7-61.

<sup>18</sup> From 1829-36 the Clews manufactured a series, *Picturesque Views*, based on Wall's images. A more detailed history is provided by Ellouise Baker Larsen, *American Historical Views on Staffordshire China* (New York: Doubleday, 1939).

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<sup>19</sup> “Decorative Nature: The Emblematic Imagery of Thomas Cole,” In *Within the Landscape: Essays on nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*, eds. Phillip Earenfight and Nancy Siegel (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 67.