

## JERVIS MCENTEE: AN ARTIST AND POET

*Home.....A Dream.*

*In rapture I gazed upon my happy home—  
On its rivers, its woods, and its bowers;  
The paths where so well I had loved to roam  
In by gone and happier hours.*

*And as I viewed the dear scene around,  
As I scanned each loved retreat,  
My heart with a stronger tie was bound  
To that blessed, that dearly loved seat.*

*I saw in the valley the silvery pond—  
The Rondout (bright stream) was in view—  
And I heard the mill-wheel turning round—  
For that sound was familiar too.*

*I entered unseen my early home—  
But the scene 'twere vain to describe—  
And I felt that I never again would roam  
From my home by the blue river's side.<sup>1</sup>*

Jervis McEntee's intimate connection to the Hudson River region and his native Rondout is nowhere better expressed than in the artist's and poet's own words, in the above excerpt from a poem published in the *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* signed "J. McEntee. Clinton Liberal Institute, May 29, 1845." Born in Rondout, New York in 1828, it appears that by the age of seventeen McEntee had already determined the source for his life-long creative output, namely the American landscape and his local environs (Fig. 1). It is therefore of no surprise that by the 1860s McEntee had grown to become one of the chief members and advocates of what was later coined "The Hudson River School."

McEntee left behind a trove of documentation attesting to his pivotal role in American landscape painting and the National Academy of Design, and among artists like Sanford Gifford, John F. Weir, Eastman Johnson and Worthington Whittredge, all of whom enjoy far greater recognition today than McEntee. Despite a number of positive exhibition reviews in distinguished 19<sup>th</sup> century periodicals and an impressive collector base during and immediately following his lifetime, McEntee fell into relative obscurity, with one notable exception; McEntee's nearly 4500 diary entries have been preserved by the

Smithsonian Archives of American Art and sleuthed over by scholars as an invaluable insider's guide to the New York City art world of the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for McEntee, the diaries have not revived interest in McEntee's artistic production but rather eclipsed it, a detrimental loss not only to McEntee's legacy but to an understanding of the Hudson River School altogether.

One of few privileged students of the legendary artist Frederick Edwin Church, with whom McEntee studied during the winter of 1850-51 in his only bout of formal artistic training, McEntee did not instantly take up art as a vocation. No doubt fueled by his family's exceedingly prosperous fate in a number of business ventures, McEntee worked in the flour-and-feed industry during the 1850s.<sup>3</sup> However, even then the young McEntee used his leisure to write poems like "The Trailing Arbutus" and "The Ruin" of 1855, some of which were published in *The Rose of Sharon: A Religious Souvenir*, edited by Mrs. C.M. Sawyer, as well as illustrate travel books like the *Illustrated Hand-Book of American Travel*, compiled and edited by T. Addison Richards.

Although McEntee soon fully committed to being a fine artist in 1858 when he began renting a room at the Tenth Street Studio building in New York City alongside New York's most accomplished and talented artists, McEntee's love and penchant for poetry was never lost and remained a significant element of his paintings.<sup>4</sup> McEntee was known to exhibit his paintings with poetic verses, and the influence of renowned poets such as William Cullen Bryant on the artist's work has been acknowledged by McEntee and art critics alike. Moreover, McEntee attributed his awakened interest in art to the poet Henry Pickering, who stayed at the McEntee home for an extended period while Jervis was a child.<sup>5</sup> Most conspicuous, however, is the poetic character of McEntee's paintings, largely evident in the artist's later works which expunge detail and topographical specificity in favor of more universal, timeless subjects and themes.

Several of the artist's early paintings, probably dating from the 1850s, show views from McEntee's home and its vicinity in Rondout. McEntee's brother-in-law Calvert Vaux, a landscape architect best remembered for his integral role in the design of New York City's Central Park, designed a one-room studio for McEntee on an elevated site in Rondout with views to the south of Rondout Creek

and the Hudson River, as seen in *Creek & Hudson River, with Ponckhockie Peninsula* and *View of the Hudson from Fair View*, and views to the north of Rondout village, visible in *Landscape of Kingston and the Catskills* (Figs. 2-5). Rondout and Kingston merged in 1872 to form the city of Kingston, which explains the title of the latter painting despite its depiction of the distinctive Rondout skyline, punctuated by church spires and framed by the Catskill Mountains beyond.<sup>6</sup>

After his marriage to Anna Gertrude Sawyer in 1854, McEntee expanded upon Vaux's original design by building a home onto the studio, though in size the studio remained the most prominent room in the house.<sup>7</sup> A painting by McEntee from 1865, *Sitting by the Fire*, is likely a portrait of the artist's wife inside his Rondout home, and demonstrates what Vaux described as the cottage's lofty and airy effect, heightened by the rafters left visible in the ceiling (Fig. 6). For contemplation of the cottage's commanding views, a hooded bench was installed on the exterior chimney where McEntee surely passed ample time during his stays in Rondout from the spring to fall seasons.

As made apparent by comparing McEntee's *Landscape of Kingston and the Catskills* with both an undated oil sketch of the view from the artist's studio window and the 1864 illustration of Vaux's design for the studio, McEntee was fairly accurate in the topographical details of his finished painting (Fig. 7). McEntee's early works are in fact characterized by greater specificity, factual detail, clarity and more precise, linear brushstrokes, as opposed to his later oeuvre, which is dominated by a more universal and impressionistic sensibility, as in the quintessential McEntee painting, *Autumn Landscape* of 1868 (Fig. 8).

Still, from early on McEntee learned from Church and his fellow Hudson River School companions to carefully and selectively compose his scenes. For example, *Landscape of Kingston and the Catskills* bares McEntee's knowledge of the history of landscape painting stemming from Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin in Europe to the so-called father of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole, in America. A path for the woman and child, as well as the spectator, is clearly demarcated from the foreground, through the rolling hills with scattered sunshine in the middle-ground, to the village of Rondout in the background. Unlike the grand, dramatic vistas of Church and a number of other American landscape artists, McEntee clearly did not care for a 'fine view' but rather the 'impression of a simple

scene in nature,' as he himself remarked.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, McEntee's landscapes generally espouse calm skies and muted tones over theatrical clouds and colors, and grounded vantage points over elevated sweeping views.

McEntee's two early scenes of the Hudson River further reveal a tension between a factually accurate representation, one which would have portrayed a significant degree of industrialization and human encroachment upon nature, and a more idyllic scene. Both paintings show man's mark on nature, with sailboats, buildings and deforested grounds dotting the landscape. *View of the Hudson from Fair View* further depicts cleared, farmed property, a single steamship in the middle of the Hudson River, and manmade roads and paths, while *Creek & Hudson River, with Ponckhockie Peninsula* features a three-story warehouse on the peninsula. Nevertheless, the extent of man's intrusion on nature is mitigated for an overall harmonious effect.

Rondout was undergoing rapid industrialization by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, in 1850 there were 1500 residents of Rondout, while by 1855 the number had grown to over 6000, making Rondout larger than its neighbor Kingston.<sup>9</sup> The Rondout Creek and Hudson River probably had a greater amount of vessel traffic than is suggested in either picture, including steamboats, which allowed McEntee to make his annual trip to New York City in order to spend winters at the Tenth Street Studio building.

Interestingly, the artist's father James McEntee was vital to the development of Rondout and Kingston into a commercial and industrial center. James McEntee worked as an engineer on the establishment of the Delaware and Hudson Canal in 1828, which led to great economic growth and change for Rondout as it became a busy center for canal and river commerce.<sup>10</sup> The importance of this project not only for Rondout, but for the McEntee family in particular, cannot be overstated; James McEntee named his son, Jervis, after the chief engineer for the D&H Canal, John B. Jervis.<sup>11</sup> From this initial role James McEntee went on to a number of other business ventures integral to the industrialization of the area, including the formation of the Ulster and Delaware Railroad in 1870.

Although Jervis McEntee's stand on industrialization and man's intrusion on nature is not documented, McEntee would certainly have been aware of the importance of this issue for 19<sup>th</sup> century

Americans, and for his circle of artists and poets in particular. That McEntee's own father participated to such a degree to industrialization and the resulting destruction of the American landscape must have made this issue particularly fraught for the artist.

McEntee in fact illustrated a poem by Bryant, an outspoken critic of deforestation, advocate of nature preservation, and man about whom McEntee remarked upon his death: 'What little I have been enabled to accomplish in Art has been largely due to him [Bryant].'<sup>12</sup> A tale about an oak tree that outlives mankind, the poem *Among the Trees* epitomizes permanence in the figure of a tree and essentially deplors deforestation (Fig. 9). In yet another unexpected link between McEntee and Bryant, Bryant was the first person in the 1840s to suggest the creation of an urban park in New York City, an idea later realized by McEntee's brother-in-law Vaux in 1853 along with Frederick Law Olmstead.<sup>13</sup> Further testament to McEntee's knowledge and probable alignment with Bryant and Vaux is an 1858 painting by McEntee of a *View in Central Park, N.Y.C* (Fig. 10). Thus, perhaps it is not a far leap to see in McEntee's later predilection for autumn and winter scenes, in which trees take on a calligraphic, fragile presence, a symbol of decay most suitable for the depiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American landscape, but also the promise of future rebirth.

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<sup>1</sup> Jervis McEntee, "Home....A Dream," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (June 27, 1845) 208.

<sup>2</sup> Smithsonian Archives of American Art, *Diaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Painter Jervis McEntee*, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/guides/site-jervis/index.cfm>.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Steuding, *Rondout: A Hudson River Port* (Fleischmanns, New York: Purple Mountain Press, Ltd., 1995) 128.

<sup>4</sup> Garnett McCoy, "Visits, Parties, and Cats in the Hall: 'The Tenth Street Studio Building and Its Inmates in the Nineteenth Century,'" *Archives of American Art Journal* (vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 1966) 2.

<sup>5</sup> T.B. Aldrich, "Among the Studios," *Our Young Folks: An Illustrated Magazine for Boys and Girls* (October 1866) 624.

<sup>6</sup> William Bertolet Rhoads, *Kingston, New York: The Architectural Guide* (Hensonville, New York: The Friends of Historic Kingston, distributed by Black Dome Press Corp., 2003) 16.

<sup>7</sup> Sandra S. Phillips, ed., *Charmed Places. Hudson River Artists and their Houses, Studios, & Vistas* (New York: Bard and Vassar Colleges, in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988) 81.

<sup>8</sup> G. W. Sheldon, *American Painters: With One Hundred and Four Examples of Their Work Engraved on Wood*, (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1972) 52.

<sup>9</sup> Sanford A. Levy, *Joseph Tubby (1821-1896), Artist: Rondout, New York* (Kingston, New York: Friends of Historic Kingston, 2008) 6.

<sup>10</sup> Rhoads 127.

<sup>11</sup> William Heidgerd in Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, *History of Ulster County New York* (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1880) 4.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Kay Feldman, *A Selection of Drawings by Jervis McEntee from the Lockwood DeForest Collection* (New York: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, 1976) 3.

<sup>13</sup> Michael P. Branch, "William Cullen Bryant: The Nature Poet as Environmental Journalist,"

