

Home on the Hudson

Women & Men painting Landscapes, 1825-1875

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This exhibition is scheduled to be on view from June 6 to September 7, 2009 at Boscobel Restoration in Garrison, NY. It is being organized by Katherine Manthorne, Prof. of Art History, Graduate Center, City University of New York, who directed student members of her graduate seminar on the Hudson River School. A publication accompanies the exhibition.

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This exhibition explores the dual dimensions of our title “Home on the Hudson”: 1st, the sites where the artists lived and worked; and 2nd, the domestication of Hudson River imagery on plates, folding screens, prints, & other decorative objects as well as fine art paintings that adorned the home.

The term “Hudson River School” is in wide circulation. It references a group of landscape artists who painted the scenery in and around the Hudson Valley in the years from about the 1825 through 1875 and established themselves as America’s first native school of art. Their artistic careers correspond to an historic moment when New York City was emerging as the economic capital of the country and concomitantly its center for the arts. There are, to be sure, many books and exhibitions that have dealt with the general topic in various permutations. Our focused exhibition and its accompanying publication entitled *Home on the Hudson: Women & Men Painting Landscapes 1825-1875* promises a fresh perspective.

This show takes a multi-pronged strategy. First, we shift the focus away from New York City to the homes of the artists and their patrons up the river, we map their country residences and link them with their local scenery. The homes of Thomas Cole, Jasper Cropsey, and Frederic Church are tourist destinations today. But they are only the tip of the iceberg. Seth Eastman lived and taught drawing at West Point, as did Robert Weir; Robert Havell Jr. lived in Ossining; John William Hill lived in West Nyack; Jervis McEntee lived in Kingston; Joseph Tubby was in Rondout. Samuel F. B. Morse built Locust Grove, still standing in Poughkeepsie.

Second, our show expands the canon to include women who are generally excluded from consideration. Eliza Pratt Greatorex resided in Cornwall; Julia McEntee Dillon had a home in Rondout. And Julie Hart Beers, sister of William and James Hart, lived and worked in various locales from Albany to Tarrytown. Her masterful canvas *The Hudson near Croton Point* replaced the masculine presence in the pictures of male landscapists with a mother and child walking on the path, perhaps the artist herself and her young daughter (who also went on to paint). Beers & her sister artists took to the open fields alongside their male counterparts and in our exhibition are rightfully integrated into this expanded picture of artistic activity in the Hudson Valley.

This exhibition blurs the boundaries between the “high” art of landscape and the “low” art of women’s crafts. For in the 19th c. women began training in craft work, the most popular of which was china painting. So we include examples of landscape paintings on plates, as well as a spectacular decorative screen upon which was painted a scene of the Hudson from Albany. To supplement this, examples of Hudson Valley furniture round out the installation.

The exhibition of about 32 art works is divided into 9 small clusters of related artworks:

Group 1. These objects conveys the myriad ways in which the Hudson scenery pervaded home décor: on screens, plates & prints that decorated middle class homes. Thomas Rossiter, who owned the home that stands adjacent to Boscobel, depicts one such happy home & family enjoying a river vista.

Group 2. Women belonged to the first rank of landscapists, but are only now being recognized for their achievements. Our exhibition celebrates three of them. Nominated to the National Academy in 1869, Eliza Greatorex (nee Pratt) was a leading female artist who went on excursions with her accomplished friend Julie Beers (nee Hart), taking their children along. It is not always recognized that Fanny Palmer, the most prolific artist in the employ of Currier and Ives, made popular images of a number of venerated sites on the Hudson.

Group 3. Sanford Gifford & Henry Ary often painted the scenery around their homes in the town of Hudson, often joined by their friend James Suydam. Across the river in Catskill was the home of HRS founder Thomas Cole, which had become a pilgrimage site, as depicted here by Falconer. They often pictured the river with natural landmarks like Mount Merino while signs of industrial growth were downplayed or ignored.

Group 4. Kingston, the 1st capital of New York, was also an important art center, beginning with the presence of John Vanderlyn. Later, Jervis McEntee had home & studio there, & sketched w/ local figures Joseph Tubby & his cousin Julia Dillon.

Group 5. Portfolios of Prints served as pictorial guidebooks to the river's historical and topographical sites. Photography subsequently took over this role. Here we see one of the first photographic guides to a river & a stereographic view by Bierstadt Bros.

Group 6. Even artists not usually associated with the Hudson River School succumbed to its spectacular scenery. These pictures by Perkins and Carmiencke testify to the endless variation and popularity of every stop along the river excursion.

Group 7. One of the canonical Hudson views spreads out before Boscobel, nextdoor to Rossiter's home. Across the river, West Point was another favorite motif. A drawing instructor at West Point, Robert Weir lived there and trained many American artists including his son John .F. Weir.

Group 8. "Elder statesmen" of the art world paid homage to the Hudson. S.F. B. Morse & Robert Havell, British engraver of Audubon's *Birds of America*, acquired property upstate. Best known for his poetic evocations, Thomas Doughty rendered Fishkill Creek with an eye to specificity.

Group 9. Painters sometimes strayed from the immediate banks of the Hudson, to paint the surrounding hillsides & tributaries. In these complex compositions, Durand organized multiple vistas through the woods while Inness surveyed the Hudson Valley from a hillside near Leeds.

The exhibition installation features a didactic map of the river that pinpoints where the artists lived and the motifs they painted from NYC to Albany. A display case and a website offer a look at illustrated guide books that instructed painters and patrons in their importance of particular sites, along with ferry and train schedules on how to get there. Programming will include readings of poetry singing the praises of the Hudson, and movies that feature it as their setting.

In contrast to most Hudson River School exhibits that are held far from the landscape that gave rise to it, *HOME ON THE HUDSON* is hosted by Boscobel, situated directly on the river just opposite West Point, marking one of the canonical river views. Visitors can move from the natural belvedere on Boscobel's grounds into the galleries to see the scenery portrayed. This is an important opportunity for viewers to compare and contrast physical motif with paintings and prints of it. Interpretive material throughout the exhibition will compare art

to reality, which in turn enhances the act of looking at art and of understanding how landscape art is created.