



Immortalizing the Bucolic Beauty of Kent By Christine Adams

Art history is Kent history, and it is a continuum. Since the 18th century, Kent has been an attraction to landscape painters seeking a beautiful setting to immortalize. Its bucolic nature has remained unspoiled by development for a variety of historic and ecological reasons: the removal of industry to the cities in the 19th century, the principle occupation of farming and the natural topography of the landscape. Therefore our lush Housatonic Highlands have remained very much as they ever were, thanks to this seeming commercial oversight.

By the 20th century, well over 250 artists chose the Litchfield Hills to paint, and many of them were drawn to Kent. They “had national reputations and are still well known, but the knowledge that they had painted [here] had been lost.”¹ Many others only came to light posthumously. The quality of their work was and is impressionable, some of the best in the country, but further examination is necessary to identify these lost works, when possible, as well as the geniuses behind their creation.

One such artist is George Inness. According to Helen Nelson, wife of the artist George Laurence Nelson (who bequeathed Seven Hearths to the Kent Historical Society), “Inness painted the sweep of the [Housatonic] Valley with its undulating hills, rising from the river bed, and the glint of the church steeple above the massed domes of the trees that line the village streets.”² There are no documented canvases in the Inness catalogue that reference Kent; and the painting she describes is not identified as a Kent scene as he used generic terms to title his work. However it should be noted that Mrs. Nelson, an art critic for the *New York Globe*, had a very trained eye. She is credited as being the discoverer of the “Kent Linner,” a talented but unidentified artist later identified as Ammi Phillips, whose works were first exhibited together in 1924, here in Kent.

Art historian Robert Michael Austin records in his book *Artists of the Litchfield Hills* that Inness absolutely painted in Connecticut. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which has several

¹ Austin, Robert Michael. *Artists of the Litchfield Hills*. Mattatuck Historical Society, Waterbury, Connecticut, 2003. p. 4

² Austin, Robert Michael. *Artists of the Litchfield Hills*. Mattatuck Historical Society, Waterbury, Connecticut, 2003. p.22

Inness works in its collection, reports that his “paintings...generally abjure known sites. Instead, they offer spaces for contemplation and reflection, an idea captured in one of his key remarks from this period: 'You must suggest to me reality, you can never show me reality.'” Therefore, a large part of Inness’s work is understandably and purposely vague as to location, most certainly influenced by his 1851 visit to the Paris Salon and its Barbizon painters:

Barbizon was more than just a place; it was an encompassing motif. Like other great motifs, it transcended geography. Inspirational and nurturing, even despite daily trials of frostbitten fingers at winter’s dawn or sunburned hands at summer’s midday, Barbizon answered the quest for landscape’s metaphoric power. The artists of the Barbizon School showed us the rapidly disappearing rural path to painterly “truth” well before the Impressionists trod the same forest and fields, carrying with them their factory-made satchels with metallic tubes of new pigments and their modern ways of seeing. Landscape painting was no longer subservient to history painting. It was history in the making.³

The idea to present the Places of Kent can certainly be credited to Jasper Francis Cropsey’s *Schatacook Mountain*, a work that leaves nothing to the imagination when it comes to setting. Our Board President, local artist Deborah Chabrian, was struck during a recent hike to the top of Bull Mountain, where she recognized the naturalistic setting of Cropsey’s masterpiece. The dichotomy between Inness and Cropsey is stark; “he exhibited regularly at the National Academy of Design, his realistic, meticulously detailed, and dramatically composed scenes were eclipsed in popularity by the smaller-scale, softer, mood-evoking landscapes of Barbizon inspired painters such as George Inness (1825-1894).” A student of the Hudson River School, Cropsey was one of the birthers of Landscape Painting in America. A contemporary of Inness, he romanticized the landscape and celebrated the natural beauty of our growing, but still as-of-yet unspoiled country. Some suggest that the Hudson River School landscapes are nationalistic in their attempt to create a sense of place here, one rooted in distinction and uniqueness, and firmly set apart from European works.

Cropsey was a guest of another famed local artist, Charles Seely Gaylord, for whom the Gaylordsville section of New Milford is named. Cropsey used Gaylord’s studio in which to paint, and described his timeless version of Schaghticoke Mountain in romantic prose: “...a lofty ridge of mountains stretched away their wooded slope gradually down to the river which rolled unceasingly in its serpentine course visible...for miles up the valley mill and scattering dwellings enliven its banks, cattle dott (sic) the fields.” The painting was created from sketches done on site, *en plein aire* studies, and was one of the few of the era that was completed close to the landscape being portrayed, keeping it faithful and true to the vista.

³ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/inne/hd_inne.htm

Gaylord himself painted many scenes along the Housatonic as well as in the village of Kent, although after his marriage in 1848, he took up farming which turned out to be a fatal choice. While painting in one of his cow fields, he was gored by a bull and died a week later of injuries sustained in that attack, an event that arguably adds to the romance of his non-allegorical work.

In 1874, the poet and editor William Cullen Bryant published a highly regarded and influential work, *Picturesque Americ*, in two volumes, and commissioned John Douglas Woodward (1848-1924) to illustrate the sections pertaining to “The Valley of the Housatonic,” immortalizing Kent and surrounds as worthy of preservation. Largely perceived as a work that operated in conjunction with the goals of the Hudson River School - with origins in romanticism, patriotism and preservation - art historian Sue Rainey described *Picturesque America* "as the first publication to celebrate the entire continental nation, it enabled Americans, after the trauma of the Civil War, to construct a national self-image based on reconciliation between North and South and incorporation of the West."⁴ Within Bryant’s work are two of Woodward’s drawings of Kent, which depict landscapes that have remained largely unchanged. It seems Bryant’s goals of preservation were successful, as was his launching of Woodward’s career as one of the most popular illustrators of his time. It also coincided - understandably so - with a boom in the tourist industry, after the Civil War, when small manufacturing was re-establishing itself in more populous areas. Kent was no stranger to this phenomenon; city dwellers were seeking places of beauty and breathing room, and Kent, nestled in between several breathtaking mountains, fit the bill.

Collectors, too, began trickling into the area. The area had become a popular summer destination for cultural New Yorkers, who as much as they loved country summer living, were not willing to part with their aesthetically-minded lives. Along with the opening of hundreds of country inns, summer theatre and concerts were organized in all area villages. Visual art, of course, was included in the repertoire. Soon thereafter, a new era of nostalgia and aestheticism sprang forth "whereby Historians, architects, and curators are interested in the Colonial Revival phenomenon. Most date its start to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. Thus an exhibition celebrating the miracles of modern industry launched a movement glorifying the past...Many [less affluent] families bought up plain, old farmhouses and 'improve' them into handsome homes. Books gave advice on how to turn the 'smallest eyesore of a structure into a Colonial jewel.' Elaborate flower gardens helped paint a beautiful, if fanciful, picture of the past. Symbolism mattered more than reality."⁵ Artists found authentic colonial homes and their

⁴ Rainey, Sue *Creating Picturesque America: Monument to the Natural and Cultural Landscape*. Vanderbilt Univ Press, Norman, Oklahoma, U.S.A., 1995, p. xiii

accompanying barns, simple in design and the products of industrious craftsmanship, perfect for their purposes.

George Laurence Nelson described his Kent home, Seven Hearths, as only an artist could, paneled in ancient pine, “the fine rich tone that age alone can give.” Nelson went through great lengths to retain that authentic patina in his own renovation projects, as he “waited for a rainy day when the curled clapboards softened and could be nailed flat again without cracking. [He] could not bring himself to part with them and their old wrought iron nails. They lent texture to the surface which new siding never possesses. To an artist, texture is important. [He] had seen too many old houses made over to such an extent that they looked like the new colonial reproductions seen in our city suburbs.”⁶

In 1923, the Kent Art Association formed, as the popularity of Kent and the surrounding area did not wane for artists. One of the founders, Robert Hogg Nisbet, was an artistic pioneer here; when he moved to Kent in 1910, there were no other artists in residence, other than for summer hiatuses. His depictions of the winter landscape of the time are part of a unique 20th Century American genre where snow itself became the subject of these landscape paintings. He was prolific during all seasons of the year, and considering his 50-year tenure in Kent, his contribution to the Kent body of work is formidable.

Despite the somewhat scandalous nature of his arrival (his reputation was damaged in New York City circles after he married Marguerite Metcalf, the wife of his former teacher, Willard Metcalf), other artists followed Nisbet. Kent was soon to become an established artist colony; although in 1910, the total population of the town was a mere 1000, nestled in a spectacular landscape neatly tucked in between Kent, Skiff and Bull Mountains. 13 short years later, the Kent Art Association held their First Annual exhibition, boasting 600 attendees.

Francis Luis Mora, another Art Association founder, arrived in neighboring Gaylordsville in 1912, living in a tent until he and his wife could build a studio. Elected a National Academician at the unusually young age of 32, he is considered the first Spanish master to bring his talents to the United States. He describes his “pure landscape” *The Hills Toward Kent* as “not a souvenir of foreign travel. Not a study of strange lands. Simply the quiet of a Connecticut hillside, where many birds have come to nest, and oaks and cedars march in mixed procession, and group themselves about the boulders, where lichen tints the gray and mosses blend their various shades - a place in which to live - to work - and play.”⁷

George Laurence Nelson was another of the Kent Art Association’s founders. He was the son of two prominent New York artists, Carl and Alice Hirschberg. His father was a founder of the Salmagundi Club in Greenwich Village. A few years after Alice’s death, Carl and Laurence

⁶ <https://connecticuthistory.org/the-welcoming-warmth-of-kents-seven-hearths/>

⁷ Austin, Robert Michael. *Artists of the Litchfield Hills*. Mattatuck Historical Society, Waterbury, Connecticut, 2003. p.59

came to Kent in 2015. Carl died just a few months before the Kent Art Association was officially established, but he had been very much part of the group in Kent. The family connections proved influential in making Kent an established artist colony.

The *plein aire* art movement is nothing new, but depicting the landscape in Kent was a difficult task historically. Most artists would make sketches and bring them back to their respective studios for full-color rendition, as mobility with copious supplies and equipment was a challenge. In the mid to late 20th century, when abstract work grew in popularity, figurative work waned. Realism slept. These days, the genre is experiencing a renaissance, as the task of painting a landscape from life is more accessible. Deborah Chabrian and her husband Edward Martinez moved to Kent in the 1980s because their home on Long Island didn't provide the setting or the safe haven that rural Kent offers. During the COVID pandemic, Chabrian noted that the safe, solitary, creative work flourished and online instruction surged. Painting *en plein aire* offered an opportunity to record the extraordinary times, to record the artists' response to the landscape, and their relationship to it. In 2020, when the environment healed with fewer human interactions, artists comforted, entertained and healed themselves and their viewers.

Creativity remains intrinsically woven into the Kent community, one where nature is appreciated and the spirit of environmentalism is strong, as evidenced by the many artists who have chosen to work and live here over the last century. The creative body of work that was born here has provided images of our shared experience of Kent's beautiful surroundings. The landscape paintings created in Kent have connected us through art to the human condition, through the continuum that is history of the human experience, both of which transcend time. They have beautifully documented the ethereal beauty of the Places of Kent, and provided a sense of place, a collective and emotive bond with this town we call home.

The Kent Historical Society is proud to bring Kent's collective history forward with our latest exhibit, *Places of Kent*, a unique opportunity to celebrate this continuum of art history during a renaissance of the *plein air* art movement.