

# George Inness and the Visionary Landscape

by Gail Leggio

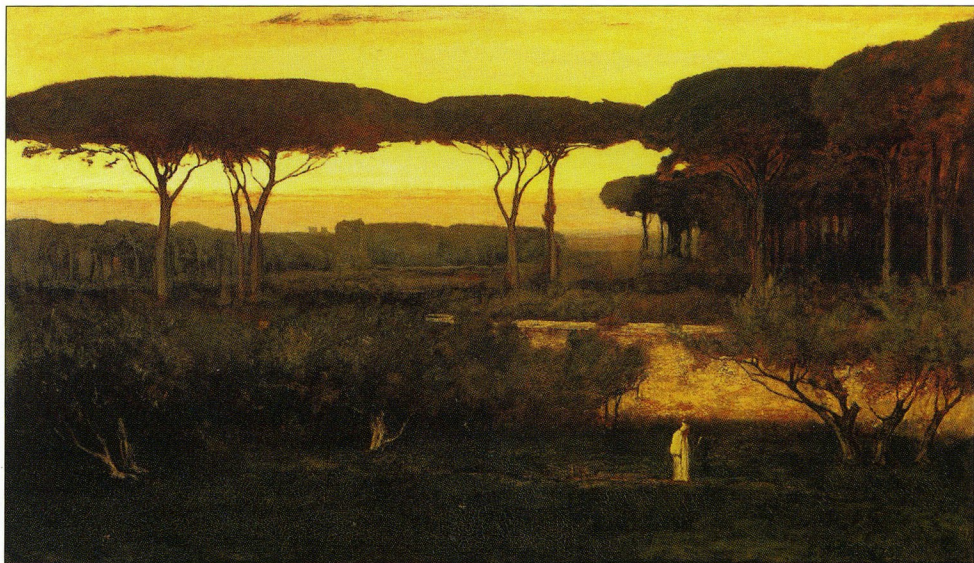
I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH,  
“LINES WRITTEN ABOVE TINTERN ABBEY” (1798)

At first glance, the title of this lovely forty-work show, at the National Academy of Design in New York City, seems off kilter. The snowstorms and slave ships of J.M.W. Turner, the florid New World edens of Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole, the tropics and icebergs of Frederic Church—these are obviously natural wonders depicted by painters in pursuit of the sublime. The landscapes of George Inness (1825–94) are, in comparison, modest in scale, muted in palette and restrained in topography. Mountains do not soar, chasms do not loom, and while he lived and painted in Italy and Florida, those locales are seen as no more—or less—beautiful and mystically freighted than the unassuming farmland around his Montclair, New Jersey, home.

“The civilized landscape,” Inness once remarked, “can communicate human sentiment; and therefore I love it more and think it more worthy of reproduction than that which is savage and untamed.”<sup>1</sup> For Inness, the term “field of vision” takes on layers of meaning; what he most often sees as an artist is a cultivated piece of land saturated by a spiritual presence. As guest curator Adrienne Baxter Bell points out in the exhibition catalogue, Inness believed that “the artist’s calling was to reflect the omnipresence of divine influx in nature.”<sup>2</sup> That influx is visible not only in the lights and shadows, shapes and colors of the phenomenal world but also in the artist’s brushstrokes, physical evidence of painting as a devotional act. Art historian Abraham A. Davidson has characterized Inness as a “visionary of the normal.”<sup>3</sup>

Inness never quite went out of fashion, unlike his more allegory-minded colleagues in the Hudson River School. Modernists instinctively responded to his abstract tendencies and painterly gestures. But he rarely occupies center stage in studies of American art. This show, not a full retrospective but an in-depth look at the later career, makes an important contribution by acknowledging a significant strain in the history of American spirituality. Bell focuses



*The Pines and the Olives (The Monk)*, 1873 ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART, PHILLIPS ACADEMY, ANDOVER, MASSACHUSETTS

on Inness's philosophy, his conversion to Swedenborgianism around 1866 and the cultural context of the period dominated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and William James.

Although he had been apprenticed to a map engraver and studied briefly with the painter Regis Gignoux, Inness was largely self-taught. But he was no eccentric loner. He began participating in annual exhibitions at the National Academy of Design in 1844, maintained a New York City studio and turned out accomplished landscapes—such as *Delaware Water Gap* (1857, Montclair Art Museum; another version, 1861, Metropolitan Museum of Art)—at the more pastoral end of the Hudson River School spectrum. He spent extended periods in Europe, absorbing the lessons of the Barbizon painters in France and basking in the light of Italy. As a painter, Inness responded immediately to the dusky atmosphere of woodscapes by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Théodore Rousseau and Charles-François Daubigny during an intense period in the early 1850s; the loose, visible brushstrokes they employed encouraged Inness to develop his own tactile style. He could see Barbizon paintings, too, at the Crayon Art Gallery in New York City. He picked up the use of layered transparent glazes from his friend William Page (1811–85).

More importantly, Page—who had lived in Florence and Rome, part of the intellectual circle that included James Russell Lowell and the Brownings—introduced Inness to the works of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Swedenborg was a celebrated scientist, with treatises on mathematics, metallurgy, anatomy and physiology, when he experienced a religious conversion. He devoted the last thirty years of his life to recounting his visions. His



followers established the Church of the New Jerusalem in London to promulgate his ideas, and Swedenborgianism became a worldwide phenomenon. This confluence of science and mysticism is not unique. John Dee (1527–1608), court astrologer to Queen Mary I of England and a magus, was a respected mathematician and geographer. Even Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), one of the heroes in the history of science, studied alchemy and left a remarkable manuscript commenting on the prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse. The fascination with Swedenborg makes sense in the context of the later nineteenth century, with its confusing welter of new science and spiritual seeking. For a landscape painter such as Inness, one of Swedenborg's sayings would have special resonance: "all things that come into existence in nature, from the least to the greatest are correspondences. They are correspondences because the natural world with all things belonging to it comes into existence and continues in existence from the spiritual world, and both worlds from the Divine."<sup>4</sup> While this notion might seem to support an allegorical approach to landscape, Inness finds a less literal way of revealing the co-existence of physical and metaphysical realms, as perceived subjectively—"in the mind of man," in Wordsworth's phrase, or in the painter's gaze.

Inness's Italian landscapes, a subject considered virtually *de rigueur* at the time, illustrate his strategy. He made several trips to Italy, in 1847, the 1850s and from 1870 to 1875, when he and his family lived there. The financial incentive was a factor in his career plan; pictures of Italy sold. Inness made a few pictures in the north, but most of his Italian landscapes—over 125—depict the Roman Campagna or the nearby hills around Tivoli and Albano. The ruins that dominate or provide a pretext for other nineteenth-century artists do not much interest Inness, although he is—like all the rest—besotted with the light. As William Vance remarks, "the Roman landscape itself was deeply sympathetic with his essentially pastoral and religious art."<sup>5</sup> Sometimes he includes recognizable landmarks. *Castel Gandolfo* (1874, Portland Art Museum) treats the eponymous monument—topped with trees, pushed to the far right at the horizon—as a geometric form in an almost proto-Cézanne way. This work of human history has been subordinated to and integrated into the fabric of creation. In her essay Bell does a good job of pointing out the underlying geometry that gives stability to Inness's Italian compositions, a kind of sacred geometry that reveals the divine order behind the apparently accidental beauties of light and color. The burden of the past does not trouble Inness, and the historical narrative that is implicit in so many Italian landscapes is subsumed into his own personal experience. On the one hand, Inness is the antithesis of a tourist painter. When asked about a particular scene's location, he bristled: "Nowhere in particular. Do you think I illustrate guide books?"<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he is sensitive to the numinous qualities of the places he depicts.

This is clearly true of Italian scenes focused on water and trees, such as *Lake Nemi* (1872, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Inness made half a dozen

images of the site, playing the massed trees of the grove against the light-reflecting surface of the lake. The grove of ilexes, not far from the walls of Rome, was an ancient pilgrimage site, associated with the founding of Roman religion and legends of the nymph Egeria and King Numa Pompilius, successor to Romulus. Trees were part of Swedenborg's symbolic lexicon, and he worked out an elaborate series of correspondences: "Trees, according to their species, correspond to the perceptions and cognitions of good and truth from which intelligence and wisdom come. For this reason, the ancient people who had a knowledge of correspondences, held their sacred worship in groves."<sup>7</sup> *The Pines and the Olives* (*The Monk*) from 1873 (Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts) is perhaps the most striking of Inness's Italian paintings. The darkness of the trees—massed on one side but extending like a low-lying cloud across the canvas—shapes the bands of light in the sky. The tiny, white-robed figure is neither a classical shepherd, a descendant of conventional staffage characters, nor a contemplative observer in the manner of the German Romantics, although the spirit here is remarkably close to that of Caspar David Friedrich. Inness's monk is a sign of human presence, an allusion to the spirituality that lies at the heart of true human perception. The world glows with the warm color imparted by the fire of heavenly love, while the shadows suggest a withdrawal into the realm of imagination.

The solitary figure, usually indicated by a few daubs of paint, is a recurring motif. The figure can be as dramatic as the shrouded individual moving toward a simple farmhouse under an intense full moon, in *Winter Moonlight* (*Christmas Eve*) (Montclair Art Museum), painted in 1866, around the time of Inness's conversion. Or the figure can be matter-of-fact, like the woman standing in an open field surrounded by elegant trees in the late *Landscape* (1888, Cleveland Museum of Art). Such figures seem to exist simultaneously in two realms, the natural world and the world of the artist's canvas, where brushstrokes are the evidence of a vital force animating the dead matter of paint. Inness's paintings look nothing like van Gogh's, but the two artists have a similar shamanistic attitude toward paint-handling.

Inness was a very physical painter, quick, energetic, often using his fingers, and the concept of the finished work of art was anathema. "No great artist ever finished a picture or a statue," he said.<sup>8</sup> He often painted over completed canvases, and some canvases supported as many as twenty-five different images. If there is something modernist about this art-as-process philosophy, it also reminds us of Buddhist sand mandelas, lovingly created and then poured out into running water as a blessing. The world we live in, according to Inness, "we eventually find to be a continual changing state, but a state which forms the basis of all our knowledge...."<sup>9</sup>

Placing Inness in the context of contemporary American art movements is tricky. He despised the Impressionists, whose optical experiments he found overly materialistic. There are limited affinities, Bell remarks, between Inness



and the Luminists, a loose group of artists—Martin Johnson Heade, Sanford Gifford,<sup>10</sup> Fitz Hugh Lane and John Frederick Kensett are the most important—sometimes associated with Transcendentalism. The typical Luminist painting is a shorescape with signs of human commerce, owing something to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings in the genre but somehow suspended in a mood of contemplation. The light—often washing over everything in shades of blue, rose or gold—clearly has spiritual connotations, bestowing a benediction on the physical world. This use of light Inness understands. Yet there are differences. A Luminist painting typically has a smooth skin; brushstrokes do not call attention to themselves. The atmosphere, emotional as well as meteorological, is extraordinarily lucid. In contrast, Inness gives paint its own autonomy; we are constantly aware of what Bell calls “the rhythm of the working hand.”<sup>11</sup>

The difference is striking if we compare two paintings with the same title. Martin Johnson Heade’s *The Coming Storm* (1859, Metropolitan Museum of Art) is, by Luminist standards, a dramatic subject. The curved inlet has become an inky bowl, and the tiny, brilliant white sail in the distance seems poignantly fragile, leaving us to wonder whether it will be sucked into the imminent vortex of wind and water. Yet the scene is also eerily quiet, not simply because it is the clichéd calm before the storm, but because the composition is so stable. Sky and water are balanced, one oval shape on top of another. The boy and his dog standing in for the viewer as observer remain serene. Inness’s 1878 painting *The Coming Storm* (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York) seems wind-tossed, in comparison. The setting is a broad stretch of pastureland with groves of trees and low hills behind. Instead of a sail, a couple of birds are picked out in light against the dark clouds. There is an allusion to the Claudian coulisse in the lower right-hand corner, where a slender tree shivers. The mood is less ominous than in Heade’s picture. The texture-dot cows deployed across the

Photograph of  
George Inness  
ARCHIVES OF  
AMERICAN ART  
SMITHSONIAN  
INSTITUTION,  
WASHINGTON, D.C.





*Hackensack Meadows, Sunset*, 1859 THE NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY, on permanent loan  
from THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

sunlit green grass are placid, even as the roiling grey storm clouds mass in the distance. The scruffy brush in the foreground, the foaming billows of foliage, the wonderful scudding banks of clouds—all are united in the gestural flow of Inness's brushstrokes. The storm of paint marks laid down in the fury of creation corresponds to the transforming energy of the clouds in nature. If Inness often conjures up the modest epiphanies of Wordsworth or, as Bell suggests, the vitalism of Whitman, here we come close to Percy Shelley's "The Cloud" (1820):

*I am the daughter of Earth and Water,  
And the nursling of the Sky,  
I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores,  
I change but I cannot die.*

In Luminism, a sense of illusionist space, a pretense of recession, is maintained. Inness remains anchored in the conventions of mimetic landscape, but at the same time recreates the natural world in bands of gloriously smudgy paint. "Inness," Bell writes perceptively, "nearly dissolved alliances between brushstrokes and naturalistic referents."<sup>12</sup>

In many late works, the thread holding together the physical world of nature and its simulacrum in paint becomes tenuous. After all, Swedenborg



had stressed that earthly existence was a dimension of appearances; reality was spiritual. That does not make nature a tissue of lies, because it is through encountering shapes of the good and beautiful in nature that we learn about the spiritual plane. Inness's 1883 *Sunset Glow* (Montclair Art Museum) distills natural elements—a clearing, a few trees, the sky—into a painterly composition united by the variegated orange-gold glow of sunset. The horizon line nearly bisects the canvas, balancing the predominantly orange upper half against the predominantly green lower half. The bristly paint surface unites everything gesturally. Color takes on a life of its own, in the service of spiritual revelation. In images as abstracted as this one, the line of succession from nineteenth-century American Romanticism to Mark Rothko's modernism seems evident.

Yet Inness never lost his affection for specific places, however much he might take them into another plane—formal, spiritual—of existence. *The Home of the Heron* (1893, Art Institute of Chicago) draws on the topography of Tarpon Springs, Florida, Inness's winter home for the last few years of his life. The canvas features a few economically signaled incidents, notably a smoking chimney in the distance and, at the luminous heart (although not the exact center) of the painting, the eponymous bird. Silhouetted against a streak of burnished gold, the heron recalls other, symbolically rich birds—the lark ascending, the phoenix rising from the ashes. A number of nineteenth-century American artists were drawn to tropical scenes: Frederick Church with his sweeping Technicolor panoramas of South America, Martin Johnson Heade with his intimate close-ups of hummingbirds and orchids, Winslow Homer with his sun-splashed watercolors of cottages laden with flowering vines and boating afternoons. The Florida alluded to (not quite depicted) in *The Home of the Heron* has nothing to offer the armchair explorer or winter-bound potential tourist.

The sun is richly symbolic for Inness, in accordance with the Swedenborgian tenet that it carries a charge of divine love. But the earthly sun, especially in Inness's late work, is seen through a glass darkly. The gathering dusk blurs details and leaves only stain-like shapes, which throw the golden light of the setting sun into magical relief. Using his brush, a rag, his fingers, Inness rubs and smudges paint into indistinct forms that hover on the edge of recognizability. And yet *The Home of the Heron* has an almost musical order, with earth and sky dividing the picture in half and the slender trees, arranged like notes on a staff, providing the vertical rhythm. Just to the left of center, the sun burns on the horizon, casting golden reflections on what must be marsh water—just at the point where the heron appears. The geometry gives the viewer a sense that the world is in perfect harmony, even if the illusion of recessionary space has become uncertain. While still on earth, we seem to have found our way into the dimension of angels and spirits who, according to Swedenborg “do not have any spatial intervals, and without spatial intervals, there are no spaces....”<sup>13</sup>

Inness's paintings run deep with hermetic meaning, which gives his work

an intensity that distinguishes it from contemporaries such as the Tonalists and attenuated followers of Whistler's Aesthetic Movement style. On the other hand, he largely ignores the overt, sphinx-and-serpent iconography of American Symbolists such as Elihu Vedder. Inness's landscapes can be appreciated purely for their evocation of a particular kind of natural beauty or purely for their painterliness. But how much richer they become when we are attuned to the mystical undercurrent that powers them. The list of artists influenced by Swedenborg—John Flaxman, William Blake, Hiram Powers and Thomas Anshutz, as well as Inness—is an intriguing one. In her catalogue essay, Bell modestly offers her exploration of this intriguing chapter in the history of the art and theology dialogue as a jumping-off point. *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape* should certainly bring this wonderful, enigmatic artist to the forefront of discussion in American art history. More immediately, her sensitive portrait of a fascinating personality and far-reaching analysis of his intellectual milieu will touch anyone who has ever been enthralled by Inness's somberly lyrical art. The richly illustrated 174-page catalogue is published by the National Academy of Design in association with George Braziller, Publishers, New York (paperback, \$19.95).

"George Inness and the Visionary Landscape" was organized by the National Academy of Design and remains on view through December 28, 2003, at 1083 Fifth Avenue, NY, NY 10128. Telephone (212) 369-4880. On the Web at [www.nationalacademy.org](http://www.nationalacademy.org). The exhibition travels to the San Diego



*The Home of the Heron*, 1893 THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



Museum of Art from January 24 to April 18, 2004. 1450 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego, California 92101. Telephone (619) 232-7931. On the Web at [www.sdmart.com](http://www.sdmart.com).

#### NOTES

1. Charles C. Eldridge, *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 1979).
2. Adrienne Baxter Bell, *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape* (New York: National Academy of Design in association with George Braziller, Publishers, 2003), p. 29.
3. Abraham A. Davidson, *The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters* (New York: Dutton, 1978), p. 98.
4. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Its Wonders and Hell*, translated by J.C. Ager (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1989), # 106.
5. William L. Vance, *America's Rome*, Vol. I, Classical Rome (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 126.
6. Cited, *America's Rome*, p. 125.
7. Swedenborg, *Heaven*, # 111.
8. Cited, Bell, p. 47.
9. 1877 letter from Inness to his daughter, cited, Bell, p. 120.
10. A seventy-work retrospective, "Hudson River School Visions: The Landscapes of Sanford R. Gifford" is on view October 8, 2003–February 8, 2004, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.
11. Bell, p. 38.
12. Bell, p. 50.
13. Cited, Bell, p. 74.