

American Art at the Montclair Art Museum

A continuing series focusing on museum collections across the country.

by Gail Leggio

The Montclair Art Museum opened its doors in the first decade of the twentieth century, as part of a museum building boom that ratified the nation's cultural coming-of-age. Recently, it has undergone an ambitious renovation and expansion program aimed at improving service to the region and at establishing a higher national profile. The museum is an integral part of a small but culturally sophisticated community. Denied the encyclopedic sweep of magnet museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., this New Jersey museum has developed a distinctive identity, with a solid collection of American art. In the late nineteenth century Montclair, New Jersey, hosted an artists' colony with the great landscapist George Inness (1825–94) at its heart. At the turn of the century William T. Evans, a successful drygoods merchant and collector of contemporary American art, offered the town thirty works—including paintings by Inness, Ralph Albert Blakelock and Childe Hassam—to form the nucleus of a museum. The Montclair Art Museum, housed in a Greek Revival building designed by Albert R. Ross, opened in 1914. Over time it has amassed an extensive collection (around 15,000 objects) of American art from all periods and a remarkable cache of Native American art (approximately 6,000 objects). Under a development project that will double the size of its facilities, the museum is opening a series of new galleries exploring themes in the permanent collection: Varied Visions and Affinities, American and Native American Art; American Sculpture from the Collection; Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art; Nature and Urban Life in Modern and Contemporary Art; Reflection and Contemplation, Works on Paper.

Appropriately, a highlight of the renovated museum is the George Inness Gallery, a permanent installation of paintings and memorabilia dedicated to Montclair's presiding genius. The handsome gallery, which has a period feel, thanks to astute color choices and details, is a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Frank Martucci, who are also financing a major Inness catalogue raisonné by Michael Quick, to be published by Rutgers University Press. The Inness Gallery and a recent exhibition on Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) exemplify the museum's in-depth approach to American art. Inness and Bierstadt are contemporaries, and both landscapists have ties to the Hudson River School, but they develop in very different directions.

Born in Newburgh, New York, Inness grew up in New York City and Newark, New Jersey. Briefly apprenticed to an engraver, he was largely self-taught as an artist. Several trips abroad—to Rome and Florence in 1847, to Italy and France in the 1850s and again in the 1870s—expanded his horizons. During his trip to Europe in the early 1870s, Inness found subjects not only in ancient ruins but also in simpler rustic scenes. *Albano, Italy* (1872) is less an exercise in local color and the picturesque than a meditation on the quality of light south of Rome in the Alban Hills. A distant red-roofed white house, great trees simplified to blocky, dusty-green forms, a flock of sheep indicated by flecks of white paint—all are bathed in an atmosphere of contemplative stillness.

Inness's earlier paintings fit fairly comfortably under the Hudson River School rubric. *Delaware Water Gap* (1857, Montclair Art Museum) is a signature work from this period. (Another version, dated 1861, is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.) The scene depicted is the picturesque split in the Kittatiny Range of the Appalachians, just

west of Columbia, New Jersey. Commissioned by the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad, the painting includes a distant train harmoniously integrated into the idyllic landscape. Inness is already developing a personal style. In comparison to other Hudson River School paintings, his compositions seem less rhetorical, and his palette is more muted. His surfaces show Barbizon influence, and the overall mood is serene. The line of hills in the background forms a barely interrupted horizontal; the limpid sky is streaked with fair weather clouds; trees are reduced to accents in the middle distance, rather than rising vertically to frame the image. Details are subordinated to a mood.

Inness carried this process of simplification to almost radical limits in the last decades of his life, and the change seems rooted in his conversion, around 1866, to Swedenborgianism. The Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) had already established himself as a polymath scientist when he experienced a religious crisis, a direct vision that inspired him to record thirty volumes of revelations, which led to a worldwide spiritualist movement. Inness learned about Swedenborg from William Page (1811–85), an American painter who lived in Rome and Florence, traveling in the same circles as James Russell Lowell and the Brownings. Page, in turn, had been introduced to Swedenborg's writings by the American neoclassical sculptor Hiram Powers (1805–73), in Florence. Swedenborg taught the co-existence of an invisible spiritual world with the world of the senses. William Page articulated an idea of painting that paralleled this mysterious layering of divine and natural in the sensible world: "like Noah's dove on her first flight returning back to the ark for rest, so should the idea penetrate forever for the bottom of the unfathomable depth, thereby suggesting the infinite space which forever opens before us in that last as well as greatest work of God."¹

Around the time of his conversion, Inness painted *Winter Moonlight (Christmas Eve)*, 1866, a sketchy landscape dominated by an intense, full-moon sky. A solitary figure approaches a simple farmhouse, and while no iconographic signals dictate a specific doctrinal interpretation, the pilgrim's journey radiates spirituality. The strong vein of religious meaning, allegory and fantasy in nineteenth-century American landscape has been recognized by a number of art historians; this aspect is most obvious in the works of Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole (1801–48), who creates fantastic civilizations *moralisée* and sets Everyman cycles in archetypal landscapes. Inness, in contrast, infuses ordinary places with mystical feeling. He prefers marshland to mountains, humble farmyards to sublime vistas. Inness, who despised the Impressionists, was more concerned with metaphysics than optics; the physical object should not be dissolved in light but transfigured by it. At the same time, he declined to employ the Symbolist vocabulary—angels and sphinxes, serpents and stars personified as nymphs—favored by his contemporary Elihu Vedder (1836–1923). In his study of the alternative tradition in American art, Abraham A. Davidson characterizes Inness as a "visionary of the normal."²

In his late works Inness smudges contours and narrows his palette. His idiosyncratic approach to space and color sometimes produces results that resemble Tonalist paintings, although Inness seems remote from the Japanese-inspired aestheticism of James McNeill Whistler and his circle. In *Pool in the Woods* (1886) Inness places a tiny figure in a thick glade, lighted by glimpses of luminous water and sky. The low light unifies everything in a greenish glow, suggesting the experience described by the Metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell (1621–78) in "The Garden": "Annihilating all that's made/To a green thought in a green shade." Inness's landscapes are part of a spiritual tradition, expressing a specific kind of religious contemplation. In an 1877 letter to his daughter, Nellie, Inness articulated his creed, as artist and believer, his conviction that what we see "is not the truth, but only an

appearance of the truth.” He continues: “we say the sun rises and the sun sets, but this is not true except as an appearance, and so it is with every fact of the natural world. The truth is the Lord Himself, who creates and controls all which is thereby made to appear to us.”³ Although clearly informed by a kind of nineteenth-century piety, Inness’s paintings also look modern, reminding us of the links between abstraction and spirituality in the art of some modernists.⁴

The work of Inness’s contemporary Albert Bierstadt, on the other hand, seems firmly fixed within the confines of a nineteenth-century aesthetic, despite Bierstadt’s technical and thematic innovations. A recent exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum, “Primal Visions: Albert Bierstadt ‘Discovers’ America, 1859–1893,” explored the painter’s significant role in adapting European pictorial conventions to the new terrain of the American west. The centerpiece of the show was the juxtaposition of two rarely exhibited monumental canvases lent by the City of Plainfield, New Jersey: the 1873 *Autumn in the Sierras (Kings River Canyon)*, epitomizing the sublime landscape, and *The Landing of Columbus* (1892), an example of history painting that was already out-of-date when the artist created it for the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. (Bierstadt, bowing to the inevitable, withdrew the painting before it could be officially rejected.) *The Landing of Columbus* usually hangs in Plainfield’s Municipal Courthouse, where it is often covered with drapery; even those scornful of the excesses of political correctness may be taken aback by Bierstadt’s depiction of San Salvador Indians kneeling at the sight of European explorers. Formally, this stagy tableau is one of Bierstadt’s less interesting works, but seeing it in the context of his overall oeuvre is worthwhile. The Bierstadt retrospective was envisioned in the context of the Montclair Art Museum’s commitment to Native American culture. (Another of the museum’s recent exhibitions, “Art in Two Worlds: The Native American Fine Art Invitational, 1983–97,” explored the fusion of ancestral traditions and contemporary artistic techniques.)



George Inness Gallery, Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey



George Inness, *Pool in the Woods*, 1886

Aesthetically, the heart of “Primal Visions” was the image of western topography, as constructed by Bierstadt and contemporaries Thomas Moran (1837–1926), Frederic Church (1826–1900) and photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904). The fifty works on display demonstrated some curious cross-pollination between the Romantic landscape tradition and the fledgling enterprise of photography. Bierstadt studied at the famed Düsseldorf Academy from 1853 to 1857, steeping himself in a finished European style that had considerable influence on American painting. Returning to the United States, he traveled west as part of Colonel Frederick Lander’s expedition mapping a wagon route through the Rockies. Bierstadt went west twice before the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. In 1863, accompanying writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow, Bierstadt explored from the Oregon Trail to the Pacific Northwest, on an itinerary that included Yosemite. The work of Bierstadt and photographers such as Muybridge and Carlton Watkins (1829–1916) helped persuade President Abraham Lincoln to designate Yosemite Valley state land in 1864. Bierstadt purchased some of Watkins’s photographs and visited Yosemite with Muybridge.

These mid-century images of the west hover between documentation and grand style. Both photographers and painters took liberties with the geographic facts. Muybridge printed separate cloud studies for the top register of his Yosemite landscapes, a common technique to compensate for bleached-out skies due to overexposure; he also used tangled tree debris, from storm or flood damage, as foreground elements to enhance depth in stereoscopic photography.⁵ Unlike the photographers, Bierstadt could exploit color, and he liked to contrast the warm sunshine of low-lying glens with the icy blue of towering peaks. In finding pictorial precedents for American scenery, the Rockies were often compared

to the Alps, although Bierstadt's emphasis on dizzying extremes sometimes suggests that Native American encampments and settlers' cabins are sited on the edge of the Himalayas. In terms of art historical pedigree, the shimmering light and swirling, stormy vortexes of Bierstadt's 1866 *Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie* (Brooklyn Museum of Art) are Turneresque. Yet Bierstadt avoids the cathartic terror of the sublime in favor of a more accessible and inviting landscape, a fact that contributed to his enormous popularity in the 1860s and 1870s. Bierstadt's oil-on-paper plein-air sketches from his journeys have a casual immediacy that makes them appealing to the modern viewer, but he made his reputation on such gloriously theatrical and optimistic panoramas. Bierstadt's huge canvases were, like Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes* (1859), profit-making ventures, mounted in single-picture exhibitions accompanied by pamphlets, engravings and tours.⁶

Among the thirty-three other Bierstadt paintings in the Montclair exhibition, curated by associate curator Diane P. Fischer, were *View from the Wind River Mountains* (1860), *Yosemite Valley* (1868–75) and *Yosemite Falls* (c. 1881). The fully illustrated catalogue explores debates surrounding Bierstadt's subjects and reputation. "Primal Visions: Albert Bierstadt 'Discovers' America" travels to the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio, and the E. B. Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento, California, June 1–July 22, 2002.

The Montclair Art Museum is entering a new phase of its history, with an expanded mission supported by a multifaceted strategy to redefine its place in the community, the region and the nation. The ambitious building program underlines the importance of the museum's architectural, physical presence in the urban environment. Lectures and educational programs emphasize the museum's role as community resource. While the museum offers the most convenient experience of art for its own city, the proximity of Montclair to the cultural hub of New York City creates an interesting dynamic. The museum sponsors daytrips to galleries in Manhattan. At the same time, it mounts substantial, well-publicized exhibitions designed to draw museumgoers from all over the region. Touring shows and scholarship increase the prestige of the museum nationwide. The Montclair Art Museum approaches its second century reinvigorated, an emblem of civic pride and a testament to the way art enhances everyday life.

The Montclair Art Museum is located at 3 South Mountain Avenue, Montclair, New Jersey 07042. Telephone: (973) 746–5555. On the Web at: www.montclair-art.com.

Notes

1. Cited, Abraham A. Davidson, *The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters* (New York: Dutton, 1978), p. 55.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
4. For a discussion of the tendency towards abstraction in Romantic landscape, see Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
5. Mary Warner Marien, "First Images of Yosemite, First Icons of the American West," in *Cosmos: From Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, ed. by Jean Clair (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, in association with Prestel, 1999), p. 83.
6. Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, with Helen E. Wright, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise* (Brooklyn Museum, in association with Hudson Hills Press, 1990), p. 26.