

## Jervis McEntee

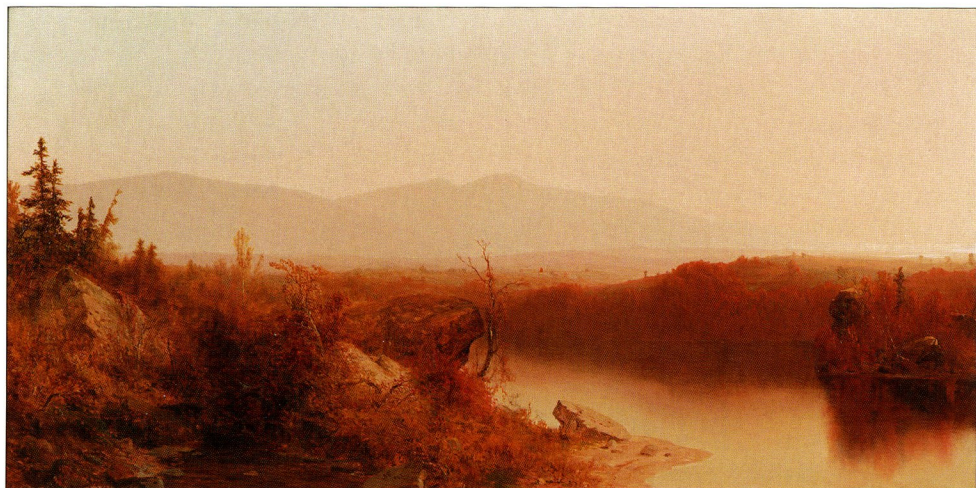
“Jervis McEntee: Painter-Poet of the Hudson River School,” which was on view at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in New Paltz, New York, from August 26 to December 13, 2015, was the first museum retrospective for McEntee (1828–91). Eighty works illuminated the career of this lesser-known American landscapist, a native of the Hudson River Valley with a distinctive painting style. *View on the Hudson near the Rondout* (n.d.) depicts the terrain around the artist’s home in a wide-angle shot that encompasses homesteads and sailboats, fields and trees, with the Catskills as a modest shadowy shape in the background. As the placid serenity of the composition suggests, McEntee—unlike some of his Hudson River School colleagues—had little enthusiasm for the sublime. In an 1879 letter summing up his aesthetic philosophy, cited in the show’s catalogue, McEntee explained that he purposely ignored the “magnificent and commanding” views around him in favor of “places that at first are not picturesque” but which address “one’s artistic feeling.” (The 130-page catalogue is richly illustrated, with essays by Lee A. Vedder, Kerry Dean Carso and David Schuyler; it is distributed by the State University of New York Press.)

McEntee preferred to intimate a mood rather than create an exact depiction. One of his loveliest paintings, *Twilight* (1862), shows the influence of Frederic Church, McEntee’s teacher, with pink-gold light hovering above the horizon and reflecting in a foreground pond. But Church’s palette is heightened, flamboyant in works such as *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860), while



Jervis McEntee, *Autumn Reverie*, 1880

COURTESY SAMUEL DORSKY MUSEUM OF ART, NEW PALTZ, NEW YORK



Jervis McEntee, *View Facing the Catskills*, 1863

COURTESY SAMUEL DORSKY MUSEUM OF ART, NEW PALTZ, NEW YORK

McEntee lowers the volume with shadowy masses of foliage, for a more melancholy, introspective mood that suggests the Nocturne genre.

McEntee was a sophisticated artist, who traveled in Europe and had rooms in New York City's Tenth Street Studio Building, along with Church, John Kensett and Sanford Gifford. He was aware of contemporary art world trends, disliked the Impressionists but admired J.M.W. Turner. McEntee's *Danger Signal* (1871) pays homage to Turner's 1844 *Rain, Steam and Speed—The Great Western Railway*. Usually, however, McEntee avoids experimentally bold work while exploring subtle weather effects, as in the marvelous *Mist Rising near New Paltz* (c. 1861). The grey vapors—ranging from pewter to charcoal—that drift across the dark hillscape have a convincing consistency, born of spongy brushwork that daringly clings to the picture plane.

McEntee astutely varies his brushwork to capture nature's textures, as in *The Yellow Autumn Woods* (1884). Blurred gold-toned foliage shimmers across the black-brown scaffolding of bare branches. The melancholy beauty emphasizes McEntee's love of suggestion over "servile copying," as he notes in an 1879 letter. McEntee's reticence distinguishes him from the Hudson River School painter Jasper Cropsey, best known for his multicolor autumn landscapes. (When challenged on the authenticity of his palette, Cropsey famously had a selection of autumn leaves brought to the exhibition space.) McEntee beckons us down the overgrown path into the deep recesses of the forest, following a contemplative labyrinth. *The Yellow Autumn Woods* is closer in sympathy to spiritual Tonalism than to Cropsey's Technicolor pictorialism.

McEntee's work evades the neat categorization often applied to nineteenth-century American landscape. By birth, choice of home and professional



association, he was a Hudson River School painter, and his subjects rarely deviate from the canonical themes of his friends and colleagues, as exemplified by *View Facing the Catskills* (1863). He shows us a foreground stream and its disheveled banks, rocky and overgrown with twisted roots, with the Catskills nothing more than a hazy backdrop. It is easy to imagine Asher B. Durand delving into that riverbank snarl of vegetation and stone, but McEntee chooses to blur some of the realistic details Durand would have relished. In his drawing, McEntee remarks, he tried to copy “every little twig and leaf,” but the finished painting aimed at “suggesting.”

In *Autumn Reverie* (1880), McEntee adopts a grey palette, with strikingly silhouetted trees against a cream and dove-colored sky and a solitary figure, a nicely dressed young woman. The picture is hard to place stylistically—perhaps Tonalist or even a throwback to Corot—but easily identifiable as coming from McEntee. *Lake Scene at Sunset* (c. 1864) shimmers in overall roseate light, which emanates from the yellow-white sun and beautifully carves out the rocky forms that establish a Claudean coulisse in the right foreground. The term Luminist comes to mind, although it must be kept in mind that the word is a twentieth-century critical coinage. McEntee immersed himself in the contemporary art world: he studied Durand’s *Letters on Painting* (1855) and went on sketching expeditions with Gifford (in New York, Maine and Italy) and with Church (in Switzerland). His art evolved throughout his career, as he experimented with various styles. Yet his distinctive personality—gracious, melancholy, in love with Nature’s beauty in modest scenes and late autumn weather—shines through.

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—Gail Leggio