UNKNOWN AMERICAN PAINTERS OF THE 19TH CENTURY[1]

By John I. H. Baur

THE pursuit of an unknown artist is much like exploring a dark room where the hand yields clues which often look surprisingly different when light is finally admitted. This is particularly true of 19th century American art because so much of the field still lies outside contemporary knowledge. We are beginning to realize that our traditional judgements were over-simplified, that it was a period of greater complexity and variety than was heretofore thought. As a result, we have no comfortable yardstick by which we can safely infer the character of the work that is still unknown. In the case of some recent rediscoveries, for instance, there was no precedent to forecast the unique character of the painting of Martin J. Heade, of John Quidor or of Erastus Salisbury Field. The clues to many artists of equal promise are still slender, but it is not until these have been explored with a fresh eye and a large measure of patient research that we can hope to see finally the full richness of this country's 19th century art.

A totally unknown painter is plainly destined to oblivion. There must be a starting point of enough interest to stimulate exploration, although the clue may give only a partial or even an erroneous idea of the artist's work as a whole. Three estimates, thus revised, in the author's own experience are perhaps relevant before turning to some still unknown men who seem to merit further research.

With John Quidor, for example, it was the rather theatrical canvas, *The Return of Rip Van Winkle,* now owned by the A. W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, which gave promise of a talent worth investigating. Formerly in the Thomas B. Clark Collection, the picture had been frequently reproduced and exhibited, but was apparently the only one of his paintings generally known. As further works by Quidor began slowly to turn up, however, the artist emerged as one of the unusual romantic painters of his time with a remarkably sensitive, varied and expressive style. In a day dominated by a tight and generally realistic handling, he could paint such a

[1] Based on a paper read on Feb. 1, 1947, in the program of studies in American Art, during the annual meeting of the College Art Association.

picture as *Leatherstocking Meets the Law* (New York State Historical Association) with a free brushwork and an exaggerated action admirably suited to the Cooper story. A developed color sense, almost impressionist, is apparent in the early canvas, *The Money Diggers* (Mrs. Sheldon Keck) with its reflected green lights and its touches of pure reds, yellows and greens in the face of the figure at the left. Later, color almost disappeared from Quidor's work and was replaced by a sensitive calligraphic line combined with monochromatic glazes. An example of the new style is the head of Wolfert in the painting *Wolfert's Will* (fig. 1). Some of these qualities were of course foreshadowed by the Rip Van Winkle picture but there was no precedent either in it or in other paintings of the period for the romantic scope revealed by the discovery of Quidor's work as a whole.

Even in the case of much better known artists than Quidor, research generally turns up surprises which affect our evaluation of the artist and eventually of the period. Eastman Johnson, for instance, was fairly well known for many years as a portrait painter and for his rather tightly handled, anecdotal genre subjects such as *The Old Kentucky Home* (New York Public Library). Half forgotten were his slightly later experiments with light and atmosphere, apparent in such Nantucket paintings as *In the Fields* (Detroit Institute of Arts) or *Woman on a Hill* (Addison Gallery of American Art). Virtually unknown were his still more advanced experiments with light and color embodied in a series of scenes from a Maine maple sugar camp. Yet it is the Nantucket and the Maine pictures that give the measure of Johnson's growth and link him to the parallel development of Homer in the same years. In this case research revealed not a unique talent like Quidor's, but an unexpected participation in the main progressive movement of his day.

Born a generation later, Theodore Robinson was one of the first of our native painters to come under the direct influence of French Impressionism and to adopt its broken color technique. Like Johnson, he could scarcely be called a forgotten artist, but the reconstruction of his career brought out two little known facts, which are perhaps less surprising than illuminating. Most important was the revelation of the character of Robinson's early work before his friendship with Monet converted him to Impressionism. Such a picture as the *Haying* (Otsego County Historical Society) shows his close allegiance to the Homer and Eakins tradition of factual realism tempered by an interest in *plein air* effects. This explains in turn Robinson's later modification of the French formula, his unwillingness ever to dissolve form completely in light and color. It explains also the second and more surprising fact that he often painted his figure compositions at least partially from photo-

graphs. Some of the artist's photographic studies are still owned by descendants and comparison with the corresponding canvases demonstrates how closely he followed the camera's vision. His diaries indicate that this was a measure of economy to save time with the model, also that it was a device more widely used by his contemporaries than is generally realized. Still, it is scarcely conceivable that a French Impressionist would have found the method acceptable. It was only because Robinson was so strongly rooted in a realist tradition that he could attempt to combine the unselective photographic image with a degree of sensuous color. Robinson's case sheds at least a little more light on the American Impressionist movement as a whole; all of his friends in the movement were faced with the same choice between a descriptive and a visual realism, and all of them compromised to varying extents, as he did.

The work done on these men is a small fraction of the discoveries made by others in recent years and an almost invisible portion of the work that remains to be done. The three artists which follow are only a few of the many unknown men to whom we have clues in one form or another which seem to warrant further exploration. In some cases this may be already under way. In some, too, the results may not be worth the effort, for it often occurs that one painting by an artist may suggest qualities which are more in the eye of the beholder than in the painter's intention—qualities which may turn out to be patently lacking in his work as a whole.

For example, there is *The Circus is Coming* (fig. 2) the single picture known by the otherwise obscure artist Charles Caleb Ward. Dated 1871, it is evasively tantalizing to modern eyes in that it suggests a sensitive feeling for a spare rectangular sort of design wedded to an Eakins-like intensity of observation. Yet when the picture was exhibited at the Ehrich-Newhouse Gallery about ten years ago, Homer Eaton Keyes wrote of it in *Antiques* (June, 1935): "A simple bit of story-telling by an artist of no great moment. Today perhaps as appealing for its exact transcript of Barnum's . . . posters as for its apt characterization of three human posteriors." Which judgement is right? It will take some basic research to find out, for Ward is not listed in any of the standard sources on American art. E. P. Richardson, who illustrated the picture in his *Romantic Painting in America* discovered only that Ward exhibited at the National Academy from 1868 to 1890. Otherwise, we know nothing of him or his work.

Fitz Hugh Lane, whose immaculately painted seascapes make him a marine counterpart of Heade, is today a better known painter than Ward, but we are only beginning to comprehend the extent of his talent. A few years ago he was chiefly known as a Boston lithographer who worked for W. S. Pen-

dleton and for his own firm of Lane and Scott. Now, although published material on Lane is virtually non-existent, Charles D. Childs, the Boston art dealer, has unearthed enough biographical information to make it possible to see at least the outline of the artist's career. We know, for instance, that he was a cripple who painted many of his pictures from ships off-shore or from the windows of his studio in the so-called "Stone House" at Gloucester which he himself built in 1850. We know also that he was born in Gloucester in 1804, lived most of his life there and died there in 1865. The subjects of his paintings show that he must also have travelled widely, for there are scenes from New York Harbor and one view of the city of Havana. The quality of his work at its best is well demonstrated by the painting, *Southwest Harbor, Maine* (fig. 3), done on a trip north about 1852. Many additional canvases by Lane have come to light in recent years. The bulk of these, as well as many of his drawings, are still owned in Gloucester, but a number of the finest are now in the collection which Maxim Karolik has given to the Museum of Fine Arts at Boston. When this is catalogued and exhibited we shall have a better opportunity to gauge the artist's stature within the expanding ranks of our native realist movement.

A slightly different problem is raised by an artist like Charles Deas, who enjoyed more of a reputation during his own lifetime than either Ward or Lane. Tuckerman, whose *Book of the Artists* was published in 1867, devotes several paragraphs to Deas, recounting that he was born in Philadelphia in 1818, lived for a time on the Hudson River, moved to the Middle West in 1840 where he painted many serious and comic Indian scenes and finally settled in St. Louis. Toward the end of his life he became mentally deranged and Tuckerman reports that he painted then several "wild pictures" such as one "representing a black sea, over which a figure hung, suspended by a ring, while from the waves a monster was springing." It was so horrible, says Tuckerman, that "a sensitive artist fainted at the sight."

Contemporary accounts in *Godey's Lady's Book* (December, 1846) and in Charles Lanman's *A Summer in the Wilderness* of 1847, which were recently uncovered by Robert McIntyre, add much new information on the first half of the painter's life. They infer that he was largely self-taught and that as a boy he spent much of his time in Sully's painting room and at the Pennsylvania Academy. His move to the Hudson was dictated by a desire to enter the military academy at West Point, but when he failed to obtain his appointment as a cadet he turned to painting professionally and studied for a year or two at the National Academy in New York. *The Turkey Shoot, Hu-*

FIGURE 1. John Quidor, *Wolfert's Will* (detail), 1856, in the Collection of the Brooklyn Museum.

NOTE: Photographs for figs. 2 and 3 are courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Others are courtesy of the owners.

FIGURE 2. Charles Caleb Ward, *The Circus is Coming,* 1871, in the Collection of Mrs. Bates Block.

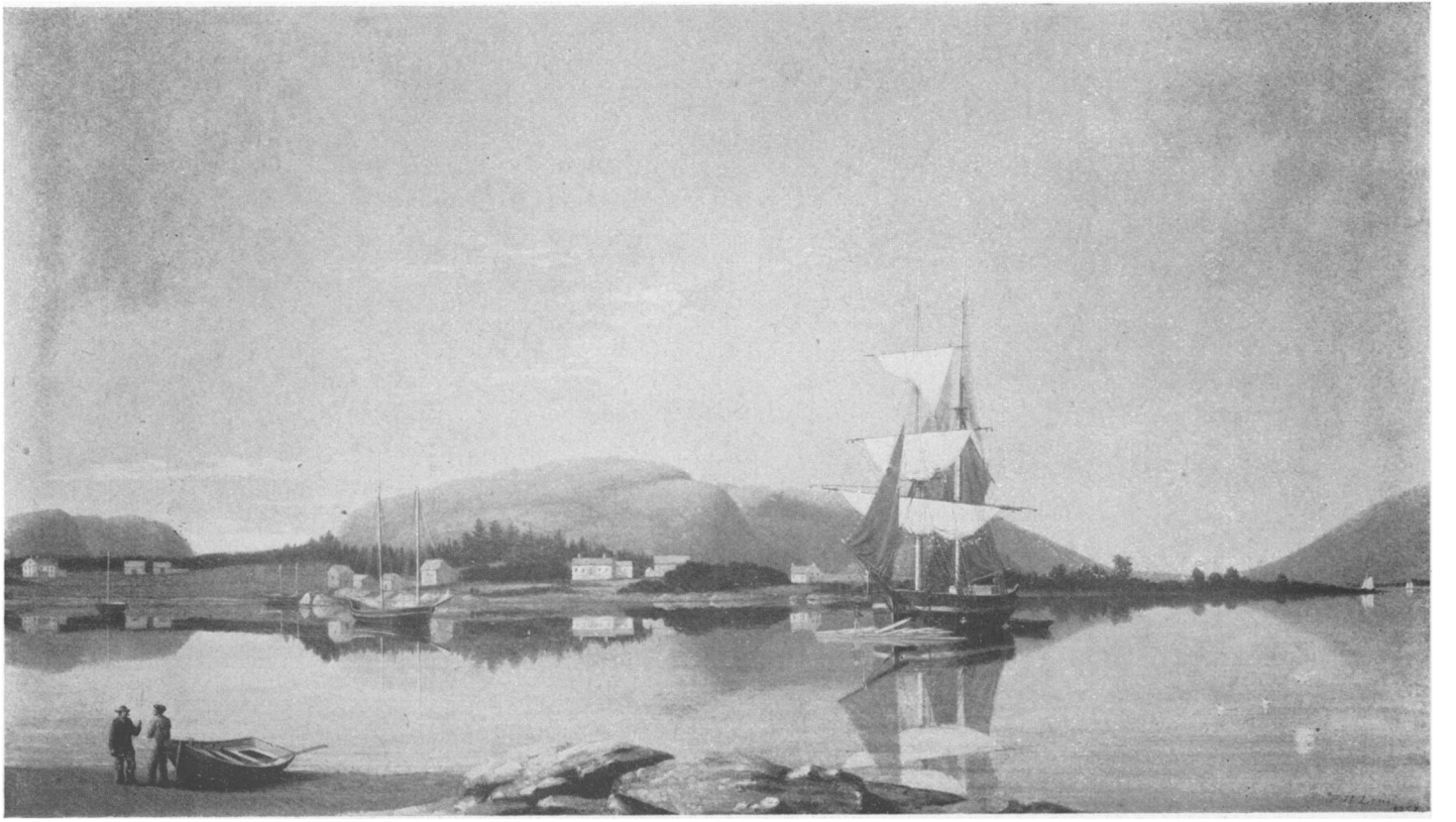

FIGURE 3. Fitz Hugh Lane, *Southwest Harbor, Maine,* 1852, in the Collection of Pierrepont E. Johnson.

FIGURE 4. Charles Deas, *Prairie Fire*, 1847, in the Collection of M. Knoedler and Company.

dibras Engaging the Bear-Baiters, Walking the Chalk, Shoeing a Horse by Lamplight are some of the pictures done at this time.

Deas' trip West in 1840 was apparently inspired by his admiration for George Catlin's Indian pictures. Since he had a brother in the Fifth Infantry at Fort Crawford, he went first to him, travelling by the lake route to Mackinaw, then by way of Green Bay, Fort Winnebago and Fox Lake to his destination. Here there was a large encampment of Indians, whom Deas started immediately to sketch. He gathered more material on expeditions to the wilder country around Fort Atkinson and Painted Rock and on another trip into the interior of Iowa on which he penetrated as far as the east branch of the Des Moines River. In the winter of 1840-41 he revisited Fort Winnebago, and the following summer he made a tour of Fort Snelling and the upper Mississippi. At an unspecified later date he accompanied an expedition under Major Wharton which went from Fort Leavenworth to the Pawnee villages on the Platte River. His headquarters were in St. Louis where many of his Indian paintings will doubtless be found when a systematic search is made. Some of the titles of his work in these years were *Indian Jake,* painted from a typical mountain hunter, *Indian Guide,* a portrait of the old Shawnee who had accompanied Major Wharton, *The Wounded Pawnee, The Voyageur, The Trapper* and *A Group of Sioux and Hunters on the Prairie.* Several of these paintings are described at length and a number of other titles are listed. The evidence seems clear that Deas was prolific and that his work enjoyed a considerable popularity at the time.

Deas died in 1867. Today he is known almost exclusively by a single picture, *The Turkey Shoot* (Rutherford-Stuyvesant Collection) of 1836, which allies him to that persistent if minor current of caricature and rather crude comedy which runs through American art in the work of such painters as Blythe, Broweer, David Claypole Johnston and others. Painted before he went West, it scarcely prepares one for the powerfully romantic *Voyageurs* of 1846 (now in the Karolik Collection), or the dramatic *Prairie Fire* (fig. 4), two lesser known paintings which have recently come to light. Except for a small picture owned by Hermann W. Williams, no further works by Deas have been identified. All trace has apparently disappeared of the "wild" pictures which Tuckerman ascribes to the period of his insanity. Here is surely another man whose varied abilities would repay investigation.

These are only three of the obscure 19th century artists who still need to be sought out. The list of virtually unknown painters could be expanded to include many names such as those of Henry Alexander, Henry Ary, Jeremiah

Hardy, George Harvey, David Johnson, Thomas Le Clear, Charles Christian Nahl, Francis A. Silva, Jerome Thompson and William John Wilgus, to list only a few. Equally necessary is a more thorough documentation of better known men such as Bierstadt, Blakelock, Blythe, Seth Eastman, Kensett, Ryder, Robert Salmon, Twachtman and a host of others.

This process of rediscovery and reconstruction is more important than the sum of its parts, for the work of every creative artist has a two-fold significance: it is the revelation of an individual and it is a part of the cultural atmosphere in which other painters worked. To uncover Eastman Johnson's experiments with light and atmosphere, for example, is to understand better Homer's similar development at the same time. Every movement is the work not of one man but of many, and to comprehend our major artists we must know the minor figures who worked beside them. This is the justification, if one is needed, for the painstaking research which sometimes seems to squander an unwarranted measure of time and effort on art of less than heroic dimensions. But it is through the by-ways of our art as much as through the well-trodden paths that we are gradually reaching a fuller understanding of the complexity and richness of our native schools.

The Brooklyn Museum

MATISSE, woodcut, 1944.