

LOOKING THROUGH THE VARNISH LUMINISM -- THE MOVEMENT

LUMINISM, the Movement, was first authenticated in 1948 when a number of art historians found a unique quality in four painters of the Hudson River School, part of the 19th Century Naturalist Movement here in America. This speciality was noted a hundred years later by John Baur's catalog introduction of the Karolik Collection Exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and other essays, followed by Barbara Novak claiming these works as 'significant because there seen as part of the indigenous American cultural and artistic mainstream between the period of time of 1855 to 1875'. No sooner had the Hudson River School vanquished, that Luminism was passed over unnoticed by the flamboyant French and later American Impressionists Movements at the start of the Second Industrial Revolution. Luminism, for purposes of this discussion, will be considered as the final extension of the Hudson River School and to further the argument; Luminism is verifiably the last expression of Renaissance art as it was derived from the American artists sojourning abroad taking what remnants remained of Renaissance technique as it dispersed throughout Europe after the Golden Age of Art. This assumption is founded on the fact that both movements on either side of the Atlantic shared the same oil painting techniques in the use of drying oils and glazing mediums. These painting techniques were the product of the 'invention of oil painting' by van Eyck in 1410 that evolved into the Flemish Technique of the Old Masters. This was the technology that was the foundation for Renaissance oil painting.

The art of the Renaissance was inspired by a revival in Greek Classism forming the Humanist Movement and eventually engulfed by the demands of Roman Catholic Church. The Renaissance influence on the Hudson River School was an exploration of the American frontier, in particular the conflict Luminism faced with industrialism and the Transcendentalists essays on 'Nature and Commodity' and finding 'bliss in nature'. Apologetic for having to bring an esoteric polemic down to its raw minerals to understand the evolution of materials in the pictorial design as they coalesce in the harmony of painting.

Luminism was made up of four members of the Hudson River School; Martin Heade, Fitz Henry Lane, Sanford Gifford, and John Frederick Kensett. This school of painting has such a natural and effortless quality that the technique almost goes unnoticed, overlooked as rudimentary, nonexistent as if it just happened. Virtually nothing is known about the technique of these painters of this major American school. Not a single sentence has been recorded on the materials or techniques of the Hudson River School, yet from analysis the technique and practice is strikingly similar to the Flemish School, that the same investigation into materials and techniques applies here as abroad. The Flemish Antwerp Guild members and the Artists Union members of the Hudson River School could be interchangeable, however separated by two hundred years; curiously their paint formulations were passed amongst each other in secrecy without ever leaving the guild. Kensett traveled with Gifford to Colorado in 1870. Gifford was a prize

student of Frederic Church a leader in the Movement with Church and Cole. Heade maintained intimate lifelong friendship with Church. Heade and Lane were certainly aware of each other's work at the time if not in company of each other as they painted and lived in close proximity of the North Shore, one in Gloucester and the other in Newburyport painting the Ipswich marches till Lane's death in 1865. These painters formed a brotherhood, communing with each other in times of need, travel and friendship, forming art associations, gallery coops, exhibitions and functions in the metropolises of mid nineteenth century America, but most importantly was their commonality in sharing an aesthetic of nature's beauty and to maintaining the method paint it a secret.

The Renaissance formally ended after the Golden Age of Art undoubtedly with the death of Old Masters burring their secret recipes with them, yet bits and drabs of Flemish Technique were guarded as the Renaissance had splintered throughout Europe. In France, Fragonard (1732-1806) and Boucher carried the technique by way of lineage in workshops through the 18th C including portraitists like LeBrun (1755-1842), lingering longer in England with a select group of portrait and landscape painters; Gainsborough, Lawrence, Romney, Turner (1775-1851); ending finally in the 19th Century as far north as Scotland with the master of the square brush, Sir Henry Raeburn (1756-1823). This select group kept their techniques as proprietary, leaving any outsider to struggle with opacity and hardened edges void of transparency and glazed color nuances. However, this Flemish Technique, inadvertently reappears in the technique of the Hudson River School. Not only technique, the Hudson River School is fueled by the English writings and art manuals of John Ruskin, 'Modern Painters', Elements of Drawing'; William Gilpin modeled after Claude Loraine.' 'English Influences in the Art of Thomas Cole (1801-48) the founder of the Hudson River School in Catskill, New York in 1825 and much more.

FITZ HENRY LANE - 1804-1865 - Born in Gloucester, on the North Shore of Boston, of five generations from 1653 on Lane's Cove. After 18 months he became paralyzed from the waist down with polio. Unable to pursue the life of a fisherman, he developed strong powers of observation and enlisted as an apprentice in 'The Pendleton- Moore Shop' in 1835, Boston's premier lithography firm, a new artistic process, developing and refining his drawing style. Pendleton's was on the cutting edge Boston's art scene and an entry into this establishment was the equivalent of academy training. He was introduced to oil painting by Robert Salmon his mentor and colleague and after his death; Fitz Henry Lane became the leading marine artist of Boston's prestigious maritime fleet. With his success he built a granite home on the North Shore of his design and with the new railroad to Boston he keep in contact with his clients and the intellectual stimulus of the transcendental movement, the Religious Union of Associations, including reform minded liberals as Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau. Lane's membership into the Gloucester Lyceum hosted transcendentalists beliefs: 'the more mystical side of transcendentalism, as several transcendentalists saw these disciplines as being a means 'to attain a higher

consciousness and become the 'Transparent Eyeball' to which Emerson refers,' and 'to access higher levels of awareness, and the transcendental insight that accompanies it'.

Spiritualism is highly evident in Lane's later period coinciding with 'the calm, tranquil, placid, mirror like waters'. Mirrors figure prominently in the transcendental literature, both as tools of contemplative inward thought and as windows into the state of one's soul. Nathaniel Hawthorne would declare, 'I am half convinced that the reflection is indeed the reality- the real thing which Nature imperfectly images to our grosser sense.'" Lane's methodical and precise renderings are architectural in formality devising a thinner technique to accommodate his calculated precision. The Historical Society of Gloucester has dedicated several rooms in creating a sanctuary of luminous bliss like no other in honor of this great American Artist.

MARTIN JOHNSON HEADE 1819-1904 - Born Lumberville, Pennsylvania on a farm Heade started painting at the age of eighteen while studying with his neighbor Edward Hicks, portraiture. In 1843 Heade first moved to New York; unsettled as an itinerate painter, he traveled the country for the next fifteen years, spending two years in Rome, through a gift from his father, when in 1857 exploring landscape painting in the White Mountains of New Hampshire he met John Kensett and Benjamin Champney. Finding landscape more difficult than he anticipated he took up a studio in the Tenth Street Studio Building in New York the following year, he soon befriended Frederick Church and Sanford Gifford. Heade and Church became lifelong friends.

1859 marks the start of Heade's mature period with 'Approaching Thunder Storm' along with his iconographic marsh scenes and uniquely botanical still life. Painting over six hundred paintings, half were marsh scenes with the other two quarters split between seascapes and mountain valleys, wooded pastures and still life. Heade painted the New England coast and made three trips to Central and South America, Rio de Janeiro 1864, Nicaragua 1866 to paint hummingbirds in their natural habitat after James Audubon. He created his own individualistic stylistic conception of rendering the 'light effect' which guided his oeuvre.

Heade had earned a modest reputation over the course of sixty-five years exhibiting and selling in numerous galleries, from Philadelphia, Boston, Derby Gallery in New York, O'Brien's Gallery in Chicago, Cincinnati, Gill's Gallery in Springfield. He sold between fifteen and twenty-five paintings a year for a modest price of 100 to 200 dollars. Heade continued painting long after the Hudson River School dropped out of vogue and married in 1883 in St. Augustine, Florida and by 1886 he stopped sending paintings to Northern Galleries, whence he vanished from the art scene and by the time of his death 1904 he was dropped from the history books as if he never existed until his rediscovery in 1948 to become one of the uniquely original American landscape visionaries.

Heade's personal original style of repetitive linear compositions of hay stacks has been an expressive form as much as his still life with humming birds. The marshes become instruments for the autobiographical story telling similarly to Thomas Wolfe in 'You Can't Go Home Again', 'Look Homeward Angel', 'Of Time and River' in their repetitive nature where the finite nuances can be embellished over and over again bringing out the endless moods and light effects as if sitting at Thoreau's 'Walden Pond'. The rarity of an artist so contained in subject matter with such total devotion to theme such as to create a continuous theater with a repertoire of nature's sublime moments as the Ipswich Marshes is reminiscent of Monet's Cathedral paintings or Vermeer's genre paintings.

SANFORD ROBINSON GIFFORD 1823-1880 - Born in Greenfield, New York. Attended Brown University 1842-1844 followed by drawing from the antique and life, perspective and anatomy at the National Academy of Design in New York. After a sketching expedition into the Catskills his 'eyes opened to the beauties of nature' and determined him to forsake the antique, anatomy, and the portrait for the 'absolute freedom' of the landscape painter's life. 'From this time my direction in art was determined.'

Sojourned abroad 1855, British Isles, Paris, Belgium, 1856-7 Italy, wintered in Rome. He returned to New York City Studio at 15 Tenth Street. In 1859 he returned abroad with Jervis McEntee and joined 7th New York Regiment during the Civil War. Abroad again in 1868, then in 1870 he went west with Whittredge and Kensett.

Rarely did Gifford paint large paintings, yet he was brilliant in painting atmosphere as a vehicle to surround his effects in a mystical blanket. "More than anyone else's, Gifford's paintings describe the quality of atmosphere noted by Durand 'It is felt in the foreground, seen beyond that, and palpable in the distance. It spreads over all objects the color which it receives from the sky in sunlight or cloudlight.'"

JOHN FREDERIC KENSETT 1816-1872 - Kensett is the most cosmopolitan, philanthropic innovator of the Hudson River School movement leading the cultural heritage of American Art, resembling Peter Paul Rubens in affairs of state and painterliness. Born in March 22, 1816 in Cheshire, Connecticut of engravers working in his father's shop of Shelton. In 1829 found Kensett a mere thirteen years old when he went to work in New York at the shop of Peter Maverick, premier engraver. There he met John Casilear and Arthur B. Durand, another founder of the Hudson River School along with Thomas Cole, also fellow engravers, later to become landscape painters and lifelong friends. From 1838 to 1840 Kensett works for Hall, Packard, and Cushman in Albany.

Casilear wrote Kensett of his departure for England in the Spring of 1840 with the eminent Durand, and Thomas Rossiter, where Kensett readily himself for a sojourn throughout Europe absorbing the glories of antiquity on the Grand Tour-- London, Paris and Rome. To the newly arrived Kensett on first viewing the National Gallery in London, God was first revealed as Claude Lorraine with his

formal compositions abutting a large umbrian mass against the smooth hues of a brilliant sunset glow; he remained his mentor for life. Kensett copied Claude Lorrain 'Seaport with the landing of Cleopatra at tarsus, 1642 , 46 x58 inches at the Louvre, Lorrain was a product of the Dutch Guild painters after Jacob van Ruisdael, Willem van de Velde, and Meindert Hobbema. Here he laid the foundation for his personal artistic decree and realized his indebtedness to art as an institution and his fellow artists. Kensett writes to his brother Thomas in New York and proclaims 'I have long set myself down as a confirmed old bachelor, beyond the hope of redemption- I am wedded to the arts and they must be my bride, and a more charming mistress I could not hope to win.' Never to have wed.

He established a long-standing 'friendship with Francis William Edmonds (1806-1863), characterized by Kensett as 'a distinguished member of the Banking fraternity of New York'. An accomplished genre painter, Edmonds was a leader in New York Art politics, founder and officer of the committee of the Apollo Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in the United States, which later was renamed and reorganized as the American Art-Union. Between 1840 and 1852, Kensett sold a total of forty-eight pictures through the Art Union, eleven of them while he was in Europe.'

Kensett's arrived in New York in 1847 after seven and half years and his gregarious nature attracted him to the epicenter of the New York art scene and his paintings gaining in fame opened doors. As one of first fifty members of the National Academy of Design, member of the Art-Union, the exclusive Sketch Club, President of the Union League Club, he organized the immensely successful New York Metropolitan Fair of 1863, when it became apparent that a permanent picture gallery was needed in the metropolis, becoming a founding member and Trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He presided over the Artists' Fund Society – a life insurance society to benefit the families of deceased painters, and went on the National scene as one of the three artists on the Art Commission approved and appointed by President James Buchanan to review all designs for sculpture and painting for the United States Capitol, which was soon abolished because of the critical nature of the artists involved.

Kensett's fame grew as his departure from the old forms of the Hudson River School moved into his defining of his poetry of light merging into serene silence creating harmony with the sublime. From 1841 until 1872 he would set out in June and return in late October often times tracking several distant destinations in one season, always searching for the perfect vista, and with Vincent Colyer bringing his material back to his New York studio. It wasn't until Colyer upon looking for a summer retreat took a boat up Long Island Sound and found a remote inlet off the coast of Darien, Connecticut where in 1866 he bought a thirty-five acre island called Ox Island or Contention Island and later renamed it Contentment Island. That next year Kensett bought a parcel from Colyer and built a studio overlooking the Sound. It was in the fall of 1872 that tragedy befell Kensett. Mrs. Colyer's carriage had turned over on the cause way to Contentment

Island, when she drowned. Kensett in a failed attempt tried hopelessly to save the limp body and later that fall died of complications with pneumonia. The word of Kensett's death reverberated throughout the New York papers with a series of articles over the tragic loss of this selfless hero.

In his last months of life Kensett painted 38 paintings and sketches in the summer of 1872 until his untimely death, known as the 'Last Summer's Work of 1872'. Twenty-two were larger paintings on canvas leaving a remarkable production of a painting a day on some days. Kensett found poetry in the quiet tranquil vistas of Long Island Sound a stone's throw from New York, where his last paintings 'Sunset on the Sea' approach a tonal abstraction of hues that could be anywhere but are everywhere in our minds eye. Most of these 'Last Works' were gifted back to the Metropolitan Museum whence Kensett was a trustee. Diane Dwyer, in 'John Frederick Kensett, An American Master' writes on Kensett's technique; "The chief peculiarity of the method which it involved was that the picture, properly so called, required to be executed 'alla prima;' the colours which needed no varnish at last were themselves equivalent to a varnish; and the painting, however gradually and exquisitely wrought, was only a final process, applied to a carefully finished design". How succinctly Dwyer describes the facility of Flemish Technique. Kensett's technical treatment of rocks resembles the pointillist stippling technique visible in Albert Crup (1620- 1691) dramatic light of 'Castle with Cows' landscape and Jan Vermeer's pointillist treatment 'The Milkmaid'. The paint is dappled at the end of stiff brush as if by pure accident.

Throughout this movement the paint medium is of critical importance to the Hudson River School and nowhere more effective than the alla- prima thumbnail sketches and slightly larger paintings. Rubens and colleagues of the Flemish Guilds could cover larger surfaces at one time, note the sizes in this competition. In 'Rembrandt The Artist at Work' the author Wetering cites 'The Painting Contest' a public event where three artists perform publicly in Leiden in 1630 recorded by Hoogstraten, a student of Rembrandt's, that Francois Knibberbgen, Jan van Goyen, and Jan Porcellis competed and finished their painting in one day, Knibberbgen, 'Mountain Landscape', canvas 38x 59 inches; Goyen, 'River view with the Ruin of the Church of Warmond', 16x24 inches; Porcellis, 'Riverscape Marine with Sail boat leaving the Harbor', panel 23x31 inches.

Dwyer continues; "The physical evidence of Kensett's work reflects a methodical mind and working method and suggests that he was able to visualize the completed composition from the movement he began his pencil sketch on the blank canvas. There are, for example, almost no pentimenti, or traces of changes, in his pictures." also describes 'en plein -air' painting "For painting out-of-doors, artists frequently brought along outstretched canvases for convenience sake." (thin panels, and gesso paper) "These were pinned to a board... Tack holes in the corners of a canvas therefore suggest that Kensett painted it not in the studio but in the field." These thin supports work well on extended excursions where many paintings after drying overnight and can be stacked for travel. "Kensett executed

most of the sketches and paintings, even his later work, much more directly, with a versatile, stiff, paste like paint, which handles easily. A variety of effects are possible with this material: it can be smoothly stippled to produce a subtly graded field of sky from horizon to zenith,... or dramatically to juxtapose brush strokes of different colors,... the stiffness of the paint, due to high ration of pigment to medium, also relates to its opacity. This excellent characteristic is very desirable for sketching out-of-doors, as it allows for rapid coverage of the white ground using only one layer. This is clearly the technique of Kensett ...the brushwork attests to his quick and vigorous manner of painting. There are other advantages to this stiff paint: it does not run, and because it is so opaque, the ground can be used to maximum effect... he uses the end of the brush extensively to define and emphasize the marsh grass...This sgraffito work functions both as highlight and calligraphy...stippled and textured, here with the tip of the brush, less to mimic the form of the grass than to convey the sense of pleasure the artist took in the brush work..."

Dwyer's lucid first hand observances could describe the work of the sketches of Rubens and Rembrandt. In her book on ancient binding media, varnishes and adhesives, L. Masschelein-Kleiner, of the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Burssels, suggested that 'it is almost certain that the Old Masters, from Van Eyck to Rubens, had managed empirically to produce a thixotropic paint'. Thixotropic rheological gel formulations are viscous gel mediums performing chemically as much as mechanically, a 'fusion', where by the edges are softened chemically melting or fusing together without the need of extensive brushing and then setting up immediately allowing to superimpose another layer of paint. She based this assumption on the observation that layers were superimposed 'à frais', without 'the successive layers intermixing, Thus Rubens was able to paint 'La Kermesse' in twenty-four hours. Examination of the painting shows that the superimposed layers are distinctly separated, since the brush strokes are visible in the underlying layers.' Masschelein-Kleiner added that after Rubens, the composition of thixotropic paint seems to have been forgotten.' Van de Witering continues; 'the appearances of the surfaces of Rembrandt's paintings has led rheologists, confronted with these phenomena, to believe that Rembrandt used thixotropy as well.'" He also observes the use of a 'lay-in of brown paint' in Rembrandt's underpainting, and typical of Ruben's studies as well, where some studies consist solely of this brownish grissaille oil paint with lead white highlights. The same phenomenon was observed by Dwyer in Kensett's preliminary 'oil staining' or in her terms 'ground staining' tested as 'brown iron oxide' that 'remains as a layer of drying oil applied by the artist'. Iron oxide is the foundation for drying recipes of Renaissance oil varnishes and is the drying agent in the dark iron resonate varnish coupled with the clear zinc resonate varnish at the heart of the Flemish Technique of the Old Masters.

Sir Charles Eastlake in 'Methods & Materials of Painting of the Great Schools & Masters' distinguishes between the 'dark' and 'white' varnish covering 300 pages on the Flemish mediums, "the drying property of the varnish, it is

perfectly hydrofuge surface, the firm consistence which its in-mixture with the pigments insured, its effect in kindling the colours, its permanent luster, its tendency to promote the fusion of the tints -- are all applicable to the amber varnish, and, in various degrees, to the oil-varnishes generally when duly prepared; but in most of the above respects, to no medium without either a resinous ingredient or a resinous principle." This is also the technique that best describes the paint quality of Thomas Cole and Jasper Cropsey, and sketches of Bierstadt; the versatility of their paint quality, expressive brush work, freshness of paint, spontaneity, and rapid layering is part of this technique. The fluid ability to create an infinite gradation of smooth paint with these mediums is the signature for Luminism. Unfortunately, Eastlake who was hired by the British Royal Academy to uncover the lost secrets of the Old Masters was unable to formalize an oily-resinous recipe and denounced van Eyck's 'invention of oil painting', which has become the accepted white lie for art history today .

The definition of LUMINISM: painted mood transformed by light, with reference to nature, yet nature as subject not the object, where the horizon, substance or information eludes the picture plan. Landscape, seascape setting, sunset hues often with bodies of water laden with heavy reflections. Glowing tones juxtaposed with transparent murky shadows. Smooth surfaces where the sign of a mere brush stroke can destroy the illusion of quietness, stillness, reflection, diminish distances, or influence the outcome of a honed classical design. Luminism hides behind a uniform plastic veil in order to maintain its profound illusion that can only be interrupted by some falsity, inconsistent or off note into the movement from light into shade. Be it a disturbance in the surface that breaks the glassed surface or a primary color that is out of key and jars our sensibility releasing the viewer from the space of Luminist fantasy, or an object that reeks sentimental havoc either by playing with emotions or incredulity because of size or scale destroying that community with Nature's Bliss that by some miraculous mind altering mechanism paint can create in a timeless vacuum at a given moment. Luminist composition emerges from divergent shadows forming shapes that zig-zag back into the distant horizon as the glowing corpuscular light undulates with vibrating tonal gradations surrounding the opaque brilliance of sunlight's many moods. Infinite hues of palpitating light saturates the mind's eye taking ever so long to translate the peak effect, suspended in space, transcending you, the viewer, into the picture plane of nature's bliss - stopping time with paint.

In the glory of Renaissance light that qualifies the quintessential Luminist painting there is no reference to God and yet by the magnificence of design and glowing nuanced hues there is a sense of divine presence. The immortal words from "The Transcendentalist" Selections of Ralph Waldo Emerson;

"Standing on bare ground,-- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."

By Peter Arguimbau 2015 - An excerpt from a book in the making.

HOW THE RENAISSANCE WAS WON

Boy/Apprentice/Artist Discovers Secrets of the Old Masters