Frank English: Images of a Vanishing American Landscape

by Michael Schantz

"Frank F. English, painter of watercolors, died at his home in Point Pleasant Thursday Night. For many years he was identified with the art life of Philadelphia, and was vice-president of the Sketch Club. His subjects for his brush were mainly taken from suburban and countryside scenes. Studies of mammoth oak and sycamore trees, farm and harbor scenes were a few of his favorite subjects, and Mr. English attained such success from their almost limitless production that his name was a household one from Maine to California."

So read the obituary of artist Frank F. English (1854 - 1922) in the Doylestown, Pennsylvania, Daily Intelligencer, December 26, 1922. Like so many other celebrated artists, English's renown died with him, and later generations of historians and collectors were left to reestablish his rightful place among the annuals of American art.

English was a highly competent oil painter as evident in Bucks County Farm and The Glow of Evening; these works rendered with impastoed applications of color, demonstrate his sound training and knowledge of impressionistic trends. However, English's reputation primarily rests with his outstanding facility as a watercolorist; most of his known paintings are executed in this medium. English's propensity for its use coincides, appropriately enough, with the watercolor's growing popularity among other American painters.

Ten years of diligent promotional efforts by artists such as James D. Smillie, and the American Water Color Society brought the medium special prominence by the late 1860s, and acceptance on the level of oil painting in 1876. That same year, the society was invited to display its works at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Its members exhibited 116 watercolors, and their public exposure was enormous. It is safe to assume that during the 159-day Centennial, Frank English was among the nearly 10 million exposition attendees, surpassing attendance records at all preceding world's fairs.

At age twenty-two, English, who lived in Delaware, certainly traveled to Philadelphia to see works by the Society's notables such as Samuel Colman, R. Swain Gifford, Louis Comfort Tiffany, Albert Fitch Bellows, William Trost Richards, and James D. Smillie. Professional and popular acceptance of their pioneering efforts undoubtedly influenced English to adopt the medium as his primary artistic vehicle. Like fellow Philadelphian watercolorist Edmund Darch Lewis, English's prolific output brought lucrative results.

The Water Color Society's endeavors within the United States were inspired by similar developments in Britain. A writer for The Library Table in 1876 acknowledged England as the "real Birthplace" of watercolor and credited the "present popularity" as "owing almost wholly to English artists, whose environment of fog and mist, possibly predisposes them to this predilection of colors mixed with aqua pura rather than oils." The American Art Annual also acknowledged this impetus with the London Society of Painters in Water Colors's success in establishing "a life school in New York for the development of the art in this country."

Amid growing regard by artists and the general public, English executed his watercolors with consummate skill and originality in handling; he set himself apart from contemporaries. English did not follow the British tradition of small opaque brush strokes applied over the entire surface as did Albert Fitch Bellows and Alfred Thompson Bricher. Nor did he subscribe to the tightness and hardness advocated by American Pre-Raphaelites, like William Trost Richards. English worked more loosely, incorporating broad and transparent washes of color strengthened by the judicious application of gouache.

English came from Louisville, Kentucky, but is more commonly associated with Claymont, Delaware, Philadelphia, and finally Point Pleasant, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he lived from about 1910 until his death in 1922. His earliest
professional experiences were as an illustrator, contributing to newspapers, periodicals, and books.[1]

The nineteenth-century witnessed enormous growth in public demand for illustrated books and periodicals, spurred by technical developments in printing presses, improved transportation and distribution networks, better domestic lighting, the proliferation of commercial printing establishments, and an increasingly literate, prosperous society with more leisure time. The American public developed an insatiable appetite for images of notable people and places, as well as the beauty of their country’s natural scenery.

The artist took full advantage of the burgeoning industry, having his own bucolic images duplicated and disseminated in diverse ways. According to guest curator Frank Bianco:

[They] were widely reproduced during his lifetime. Some, dating as early as 1892, were published by a variety of firms including J. Hoover & Sons, Philadelphia. The majority of prints known date after 1906; some of these were copyrighted by English himself. Other later ones were published by a variety of firms including Atkinson Fox, Philadelphia; American Art Works, Inc., Conshocon, Ohio; and F.A. Schneider, New York. These different prints numbered into the hundreds and were mass produced for calendars, advertisements, art prints, and store promotions. His art was also reproduced for post cards copyrighted by R. Hill in 1903 and published by Edward Stern & Co., Inc. of Philadelphia.[2]

Even Parker Brothers, the famous board game company, produced a Valentine’s Day puzzle featuring one of English's blacksmith scenes.

Frank English kept his ties to the Philadelphia art community. During the 1880s, he lived at various center-city locations. At this same time, he attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, received the finest instruction the country could offer, and learned from prominent artists such as Thomas Eakins, James Kelly, and Thomas Anshutz, another transplanted Kentuckian. English regularly participated in regional exhibitions.

Beginning in 1881, his name and painting titles are frequently listed among exhibition checklists. Records of his works can be found in shows held at the Pennsylvania Academy, the Art Club of Philadelphia, the American Water Color Society, The Plastic Club, the Art Institute of Chicago, and as far afield as the Pan-Pacific International Exposition in California.

English is, perhaps, most closely associated with the Philadelphia Sketch Club, the oldest American organization of its kind. The group's office was located on “the little street of clubs,” 235 South Camac Street, Philadelphia, an address not very far from English's downtown residence. The artist played an active role, serving in the Club's governance and instructional programs. He is memorialized by fellow member Thomas Anshutz, in one of many portraits Anshutz painted of early Sketch Club members, and arrayed in a frieze along the top of the Club's library.

English's years in Point Pleasant were some of his most productive; he is fondly and best remembered for his interpretations of Bucks County's rural character. He was part of the vanguard landscape tradition drawn by the area's natural beauty.

During these years, Bianco notes:

He worked quietly on the outskirts of the art communities in New Hope and Phillips Mill. It seems he preferred painting alone and selling his works privately.... He painted breath-taking works in oil and some pastel paintings, but he excelled in capturing the countryside in watercolor; a medium which very few other artists were as successful or prolific in.[3]

Frank F. English is best known for bucolic scenes of rural occupations and commutation: ploughmen with teams of horses, grazing cattle, blacksmith forges, cider making, harvesting chores, stage coaches, and horse drawn carriages. His works symbolize and preserve America cultural transition from an agrarian society. Like so many other nineteenth-century artists, he sought the pastoral environment, not only to escape urban realities, but to record the environment soon altered by expanding populations and technologies.

Landscape traditions are often a reaction to modernity and metropolitan expansion. While New York artists of the last century escaped to the Hudson River Valley, Philadelphia artists ventured up the Delaware River. After years in center-city Philadelphia, English ultimately settled in rural Bucks County, capturing unique atmosphere, light, and terrain that attracted so many others. Perhaps English's ability to replicate, with aqueous medium, the drama of fluorescent sunsets or the brilliance of sun-parched summer days remain his greatest legacy.
About the author

Michael William Schantz is The Patricia Van Burgh Allison Director and CEO of the Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia, a position he has held since 1981. Dr. Schantz received his M.A. in art from San Diego State University and his Ph.D. in art history (emphasis: American art and history of prints; dissertation title: "James David Smillie and the Evolution of American Printmaking") from UCLA. He has curated over 100 exhibits while at Woodmere, and has authored numerous articles and exhibition catalogues, serves on several boards and committees, and is an accreditation reviewer for the American Association of Museums.

Resource Library editor’s note

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