

{ *“Many of his smaller landscapes are gems of quiet, yet salient beauty.”* }

— Art Critic, Henry Tuckerman¹



A Handful of Harts

The Cabinet Landscapes of William Hart (1823–1894)

BY JENNIFER C. KRIEGER

The nineteenth century critic George W. Sheldon spoke to the popularity of William Hart's (1823–1894) cabinet landscapes² when he observed they “may be found in almost all the principal private collections in the Atlantic cities... These productions always meet with a ready sale. Their author is very industrious and persevering.”³ What is notable about this quote is the stir that physically small landscapes created, particularly in relation to the heroic panoramas executed by fellow landscape painters at the time. As art his-

torian Phyllis Peet would later record about William (and his brother James [1828–1901]): “By the late 1850s leading magazines and newspapers reported on the landscape painters William and James Hart as frequently as their famous Hudson River School colleagues, Frederic Church (1826–1900) and Asher B. Durand (1796–1886).”⁴

William Hart embodied the meaning of Ralph Waldo Emerson's belief: “To be simple is to be great.” His compositions relied on a simplicity of elements combined and developed in a variety of ways, so that



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Fig. 1: William Hart (1823–1894), *Autumn in the Catskills*, ca. 1865. Oil on artist board, 6¼ x 5¼ inches. Signed lower left. Courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC.

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Fig. 2: William Hart (1823–1894), *Autumn Brook*, 1876. Oil on board, 6½ x 11 inches. Signed and dated 1876, lower left. Courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC.

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Fig. 3: William Hart (1823–1894), *Summer Meadow*, 1860. Oil on panel, 4½ x 6⅞ inches. Signed and dated 1860, lower left. Private Collection, CT; Courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC.



while the landscapes shared similar content, they were by no means repetitive or formulaic. Sheldon articulated Hart's straightforward schema: "Mr. Hart's landscapes present the sunny and peaceful aspects of Nature—the sylvan stream, the refulgent sunset, pleasant trees, honest cows and lush, green grass."⁵ Such elements create a calm and pleasant mood, striking a balance between contemplation and elation. As we begin to study these landscapes, their simplicity, variety, and balance become more apparent, as does the artist's technical skill.

William Hart was born in Paisley, Scotland. He was the elder brother of James McDougal Hart and Julie Hart Beers (1835–1913), both of whom would also become artists. At the age of eight, he emigrated with his family to America, where they settled in Albany, New York. William began his career painting coach panels, window-shades, and portraits in an effort to gain immediate income. He later cultivated his skills as a landscapist, studying landscape painting in Scotland in 1846 and again between 1849 and 1852. By 1854, his art had gained



sufficient attention in New York that he was made an associate of the National Academy of Design, and, by 1857, had been elected an academician. Hart subsequently served as president of the Brooklyn Art Association, which was where he delivered what became his famous lecture on the future of landscape painting entitled “The Field and the Easel,” which defined “the principles and sympathies which have given distinction to landscape art in our country.”⁶

Hart’s association with other leading artists of the Hudson River School, while important, by no means diluted his individuality as an artist. As Sheldon stated, Hart, “was never a copyist—of anybody but himself.”⁷ For the subjects of his cabinet scenes, Hart selected forest interiors, pastoral vistas of meadows and farmland, and Luminist landscapes of long horizons and reflective waters. An intimate forest interior, *Autumn in the Catskills*, circa 1865 (Fig. 1), contains a few simple elements, including a handful of trees and a stream in the distance, yet these features are employed in such a way as to create maximum impact. The brilliant red of the tree in the middle ground provides an instant blast of rich color, while the orange foliage in the foreground creates a delicate window onto the wispy trees rising over the stream. With skillful economy, Hart renders an entire scene of poise and interest. *Autumn Brook*, 1876 (Fig. 2), follows the same forest interior format, yet presents it horizontally and includes a reflective stream. In this work, the artist subdues his palette to create a harmonious range of color and employs a thicker, Barbizon-like treatment, building texture and glazes for a lush surface. In this image he has introduced a few cows, who lend scale to the scene and reflect pleasingly in the creek.

Fig. 4: William Hart (1823–1894), *Autumn on Lake George*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 7½ x 12½ inches. Signed lower right. Courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC.

Again, the scene is small, yet whole in its content and exact in its treatment.

An example of the pastoral mode in Hart’s early

work, *Summer Meadow*, 1860 (Fig. 3), demonstrates the agrarian role of cows in his works. The viewer’s eye follows their quiet passage into the idyllic pasture. Hart renders the scene with a miniaturist’s hand, capturing minute props and details within the farm’s serene confines. Hart’s introduction of concentrated light foreshadows his transition to a Luminist style.


Autumn on Lake George (date unknown) (Fig. 4) and *Sunset Landscape*, Troy, NY, 1869 (Fig. 5), further exemplify Hart’s drift into Luminism. With its dramatic flaming tree, *Autumn on Lake George* shows the artist’s mastery of perspective. He pierces into the distance with an oblique perspective to progressively open the layers of Adirondack scenery bordering the lake. He may have painted the scene from a location near Sabbath Day Point, looking south along the Tongue Mountain Range, most likely depicting Deer Leap in the middle-ground.⁸ Hart emphasizes the power of light, as water, earth and sky all merge in the waning horizon. *Sunset Landscape*, Troy, NY, is one of the artist’s most sensitive visual essays. He painted the scene for his friend Sarah Whitlock, as indicated by an inscription he left on the painting’s reverse.⁹ The woman at the water’s edge might depict the intended recipient of the painting. With affection, Hart surrounds her in a beautiful twilight. The scene evokes lines Hart had once cited from



Fig. 5: William Hart (1823–1894),
Sunset Landscape, Troy, NY, 1869.
 Oil on canvas, 8¼ x 13½ inches.
 Signed, dated and inscribed, verso and again on stretcher:
 [To] Sarah S.H. Whitlock / Troy, May 1st 1869 / From Wm. Hart.
 Courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC.

Byron's poem, "Monody on the Death of the Right Hon. R.B. Sheridan."¹⁰

When the last sunshine of expiring day
 In summer's twilight weeps itself away,
 Who has not felt the softness of the hour
 Sink on the heart, as dew along the flower?
 With a pure feeling which absorbs and awes
 While nature makes that melancholy pause,
 Her breathing monument on the bridge where Time
 Of light and darkness forms an arch sublime,
 Who hath not shared that calm so still and deep,
 The voiceless thought which would not speak but weep,
 A holy concord—and a bright regret,
 A glorious sympathy with suns that set?

An exhibition of William Hart's cabinet landscapes will be on view from March 7 through April 25, 2009 at Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, 74 East 79th Street, Suite 3A/B, New York, NY 10075. For more information visit www.hawthornefineart.com or call 212. 731.0550. 

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1. Henry Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artists Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Son, 1867), 547.
2. Cabinet paintings are small paintings first produced in the fifteenth century for exclusive viewing in confined private rooms referred to as "cabinets."
3. G. W. Sheldon, *American Painters* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1881), 86.
4. Judy Larson, Donelson Hoopes, and Phyllis Peet, *American Paintings at the High Museum of Art* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1995), cat. 26.
5. Sheldon, 86–87.
6. Tuckerman, 549.
7. Sheldon, 86.
8. Email correspondence with Stuart A. Cartwright, December 11, 2008.
9. Ms. Sarah Whitlock died in Troy, NY in 1891. She was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Troy and bequeathed a portion of her estate to her parish. Email correspondence with Gary L. Stiles, January 29, 2009.
10. Hart cited these lines in a catalogue entry for a work that was exhibited at the Louisville Industrial Exposition of 1872. Larson, Hoopes and Peet, cat., 26.