



URBAN ART AND ANTIQUES

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William Coventry Wall at Treadway by Lin Wang



A New Look at Old Rooms

by Eric Miller

Amelia Peck, Curator of American Decorative Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art gave an insightful talk recently on the American Period Rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) from their inception through the present renovations. Peck said the renovation and reopening of the American period rooms at the Met not only allowed for a better flow through the galleries, but gave the museum an opportunity to refine the rooms on display. At the same time, other museums and historical societies were able to benefit their collections by adding paneling and rooms from the Met.

In the current installation of the rooms, five were removed entirely as no longer appropriate to the collection. Two were moved to new locations within the Museum more appropriate in the chronology. One wall of paneling from the Met is now part of the Pine Room at Bayou Bend in Houston. Others were relocated to New Hampshire and Maryland where they will again be on display, now in local museums.

The 1909 Hudson-Fulton Exhibition at the Met was the first time American decorative arts were shown at the museum. Then Met President Robert DeForrest, whose wife Emily collected many American items now at the

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On June 6, Treadway, along with the Cincinnati Art Gallery, had its annual art pottery and glass sale. In particular Rookwood pottery took much of the stage in terms of quantity and quality.

One of the lots (Lot 571), however, was a landscape painting of "View on the Allegheny River," by William Coventry Wall. Painted around 1854, the picture is fairly large (28.5h x 42w). On the back of the canvas, one label shows it was exhibited at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1855.

More interestingly, the label also gives the locale of the scene. According to the label from Vixseboxse Art Gallery in Cleveland, Ohio, the picture depicted the spot where George Washington crossed the river on a raft in January, 1754. Thus, under the pastoral tranquility, W. C. Wall paid the homage to the founder of the nation and demonstrated the harmony between progressive civilization and expansive nature of the once Western Frontier.

Washington's experience crossing the Allegheny River, however, was far from restful. Western Pennsylvania's Januaries have always been harsh. At the age of 22, Washington volunteered as the emissary to the Ohio River Valley to warn the French to leave British Lands. After St. Pierre's polite refusal, Washington's journey back to Williamsburg turned out to be a winter nightmare. Nearly falling victim to the French Indians, the Allegheny River also posed the threat of turbulent rapids and swirling icechunks. Their raft, made onsite, crashed and tumbled. Washington barely saved himself by holding a log and slept with his frozen clothes on a small island in the middle of the river. Fortunately, the river was again frozen the next morning and Washington arrived Williamsburg on January 15, 1754.

A More Peaceful Nature

With the fading memory of American Revolution and heroic figures, the grandeur of the landscape became the new artistic voice of patriotism and national pride in the second quarter of the 19th century. W. C. Wall, with his

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Addams Family Empire

by Eric Miller

The Addams Family is set for a run on Broadway where character Wednesday will turn 18 and deal with getting a boyfriend. The original creation of the Addams family was of course on television in the 1960s with a set containing numerous curiosities in a Second-Empire mansion. One of these is an empire-style sofa I noticed while watching an episode on Hulu.com. I captured a screen shot and set out for a discussion on a LinkedIn group.

My first reaction was that the good carving made it a “period” sofa, probably from New York that somehow made it to California and onto the set. There were signs it may not be period, a thin crest rail in the back being one, but the four carved feet nudged me toward the idea that it could be.

One thing the LinkedIn discussion did was made me think about the use the word “period.” Strictly speaking, the Empire Period ends with Napoleon at about 1815. I became aware that I was using the term “period” to mean the time when a style was first produced. In the United States, the empire style took hold after 1810 and much of what we think of as “empire” in the United States is not from the “Empire period,” and so there is little out there that can be called “period.” The most elaborate furniture in this style was made around 1815-25.

I figured the sofa to be from the middle of the 19th Century, somewhere between 1835 and 1865. The mis-use of the word “period” led to a mis-understanding of the meaning of re-production. A reproduction of something from the Empire period is different from something produced when the style was popular in the United States.

If the sofa was made early in the 19th Century, however, it wouldn’t have a padded seat pillow. I assumed it was added later and the “whale’s tail” design on the arms could have had bolster pillows.



from the Victorian period would make some sense, given its location in California. Things are shipped all the time, so there isn’t much to be gained from discussing an items current locale.

A search through liveauctioneers.com turned up a very similar sofa, this one auctioned in Florida. The auction house doesn’t seem to make any assessment other than saying it was an empire-style sofa. It also has a seat cushion, this one in three-parts. Closer inspection makes it seem there isn’t room for bolsters. Since both have similar seat cushions that look Victorian in origin, perhaps this the sofa was produced for an second Empire-style home not unlike the one pictured in the show’s opening scenes and is Victorian, perhaps from the 1870s.

I’d be interested in any additional insight. ■



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Met, and Board member R.H. Halsey were instrumental in developing the American Galleries and eventually period rooms.

Bringing the period rooms into the 21st Century meant providing a wider chronological spread of rooms, and bringing visitors through the rooms in a chronological order. This meant adding a new glass elevator and signage, minimizing the abundance of rooms from around 1750 and improving the quality of rooms. New interactive computer screens were also added.

One interesting fact was that George Washington celebrated his last birthday in the Alexandria Ballroom. The room currently houses a large portrait of our first president by Gilbert Stuart.

There’s more to come. The Van Rensselaer room, perhaps one of the best at the Met, is not yet on display.

Peck also provided some insight into the philosophy of DeForrest and Halsey. DeForrest thought of the museum as a retreat from urbanity and daily life, as necessary as Central Park and green space. Halsey, however, thought of it as a way to introduce immigrants to American culture in hopes they will take ownership of it. That’s a powerful sentiment, incredibly relevant today. ■

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meticulous brushstrokes and staggering light — two main characteristics of the Hudson River School, was never the less impressed by nature itself. Quite often, he depicted the changing landscape of the hills and riverside of Ohio Valley with dams, factories and residence. In one particular case, he painted several pictures of destructive fire in 1845 which devolved a 24 block area of the city and two-thirds of total wealth. (The paintings won him both financial and artistic success.) On one hand, the picturesque Ohio Valley, with milder hills and meandering waters, lacks the dramatic vantage points of Hudson Valley that inspired artists with the panorama views. On the other hand, the rapid civilization and industrialization of the region during the first half of the 19th century must have had a dazzling effect on local artists.

As a town with a population of 1,565 in the year of 1800, Pittsburgh, with its abundant petroleum, natural gas, lumber, and farm goods, grew into a tremendous industrial city within 50 years. By 1857, Pittsburgh's 1,000 factories were consuming 22,000,000 bushels of coal yearly and employing more than 10,000 workers.

The transformation of the landscape, and the changing lifestyle commanded much of W. C. Wall's time and energy. In the Carnegie Museum of Art where artworks are displayed based on the year they were created, more than two paintings by W. C. Wall were exhibited in different rooms. "Crossan Country Home on the Allegheny River (near Verona)," painted in 1865, is a picture of idyllic rural beauty. Unlike the luminism paintings where waters are tranquil like mirrors, the reflections of the houses, raft and cows are blurred in the seemingly perpetual pastoral living. However, a painting of "The Pittsburgh Bessemer Steel Company" in 1884, displayed in a different room, features rows of chimneys with black smoke up in the air that would cause environmentalists nowadays to frown and shriek.

In my mind, among all Scalp Level School painters, W. C. Wall's attitude toward industrialization seems ambiguous. He painted faithfully regardless whether it is about urban debris (after great fire) or primitive forests. He composed the painting in traditional landscape format, and in the case of black smoke on the verge of breaking the balance of horizontal design, minimized the urban and industrial intrusion so that they look assimilated into the nature.

Never trained formally, W. C. Wall utilized all the faculty and struggled to present his vision of humanized nature. In this particular lot, his signature style is evident in every detail. The early autumn has chilled some of the mountains leaves, but not

"Give me insight into today and you may have the antique and future worlds." Ralph Waldo Emerson

enough to stop wading and fishing. The sky, with typical Western Pennsylvania clouds, is championing the gradation of hues. Although the atmospheric perspective is not completely convincing, the golden light, suffused from the sky and water, is painted with poetry and sensibility. A close up shows he painted individual leaves and blades of grass with a desire for perfection. I used to only see one side of his paintings: the sharp linearization and the stylized depiction of mountains that were common among amateurish artists; now I am beginning to see these works as an artistic triumph over technical inefficiency, a quintessential American optimism that emphasizes on empirical trial and error problem solving methodologies. In particular, just because W. C. Wall might not fully insert his personal interpretation of nature into the canvas, he, more than other artists of his family, relied on what is provided in the scenery, thus leaving us a great treasure of landscape with marvelous historical accuracy.

The estimation of the lot was 500 to 1000 dollars, and it sold for more than \$22,000 plus premium. The availability of W. C. Wall's paintings is very limited.

Curiously, at the foreground of the painting, one of the fishermen is holding a fishing pole, scintillating at dusk light. Was Wall referring to the pole that Washington once used to push the raft on that cold wintry day? ■

The History of Antique Shows

by Eric Miller

The All Saints' Antiques Show in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware will celebrate sixty years when the show opens at the end of July. That's one of the oldest operating shows in the country. I thought the occasion may be a good time to take a look at the history of antique shows.

Recently some sad news came out of the U.K., the Grosvenor House Antiques Fair is closing down after 75 years. The most prominent shows in the U.S., the Philadelphia Antiques Show and the Winter Antiques Show, don't extend back that far. 2009 was the 40th year for the Philadelphia Antiques Show. The Winter Antiques Show was founded in 1954.

A show that claims to be the South's oldest antiques show takes place in Asheville, North Carolina. The Asheville Antique Fair began in 1946. The curious thing is on the history page of the Asheville show web site, it conveys that the show started after two local women came back from New York's Winter Antiques Show. Of course if all the information we have is correct, the Winter Antiques Show began well after the Asheville show.

It's a show in the mid-west, however that seems to predate most, if not all, of the east coast shows. The Dunham Tavern Museum show in Cleveland has been one of the biggest funding sources for the museum since it began in 1937—only three year's junior to the Grosvenor House Antiques Fair. Oddly a press release puts the Dunham show start date at 113 years ago (1890s) when most anything considered an antique must have been English (and you have to wonder how much of that might have been in Cleveland).

Still, it's possible... ■

Moran's Pennsylvania Valley Goes To Crystal Bridges

by Lin Wang

Yesterday, Alice Walton announced another addition to Cristal Bridges' permanent collection. "Autumn Landscape" by Thomas Moran was previously purchased by Bernice Jones, in an estate sale in Chicago for decorating her husband's office. She didn't know who the painter was, she was simply attracted by the eastern Pennsylvania valley scene with expansive rolling hills, particularly spectacular in autumn.

From the picture shown on the Crystal Bridges website, it is a great example of Hudson River school, yet it is probably a more moderate and restrained work by Moran, possibly dating to his early career. In his large scale paintings of American West dated 1870's, the sky and the rocks convey such brutal force that can hardly be rationalized or imagined in the east coast. Although Jones only paid \$500 for the "unknown" painting (a great bargain for a canvas of 40 inches tall and 63.5 inches even if it were not by Moran), the purchase price by Crystal Bridges has not been disclosed.

At the time when New York art institutes such as the Brooklyn Museum, Guggenheim and the Met all cut their staff,

Crystal Bridges of American Art is quietly growing bigger, assembling some of the best American works in a town of approximately 20,000 people. (The metro region has about 400,000.) The Met still proudly hangs Asher Durand's famous "Kindred Spirits" in their American Wing, but it will be returned to Bentonville, Arkansas for before completion of American Wing in 2011. Walton defended the question of amassing art collection in Northern Arkansas by saying "Why not? After all, this is the heartland of America."

The art will be there, the question of many will come remains to be answered. ■



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