

## Article

# Grounding the Landscape: Epistemic Aspects of Materiality in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Open-Air Painting

Noam Gonnem

Department of the Arts, Eilat Campus, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Eilat 8855630, Israel;  
noamgonnen@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This article examines how notions of “material” and “materiality” were infused, both technically and discursively, into American landscape painting in the late nineteenth century. Focusing particularly on the praxis of open-air painting as consolidating a new mode in landscape painting as well as a new artistic identity, this article argues that painting outdoors was perceived by artists in terms of agency, uniting painter, painting, and landscape; but unlike earlier romantic or Transcendentalist approaches, this idea was not conceived of as a solely spiritual union but, rather, as a mode that is embedded in the mundane, in the existence of objects, of embodied engagement and material means. The overt affinity between the basic idea of the praxis—painting outdoors in ‘real’ nature—and material aspects of art-making, is discussed as the underpinning of a new emerging episteme of American landscape painting, while considering the environment wherein this phenomenon was cultivated within a specific moment in American culture. Paintings and texts, generated by American painters and critics between the late 1870s and the 1890s, are read in this article through the lens of recent theoretical phenomenological approaches to landscape, illuminating the unique role that materiality played in these representations. Moreover, tying the findings to the changing conceptions of both landscape and art in the Gilded Age, the article concludes that landscape painters of the ‘new generation’ sought to evade commodifying tendencies of image-making by deliberately engaging with materiality, devising a mode of landscape representation that would not succumb to the flattening steamroller of capitalist consumer culture.



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Nine-tenths of our backwardness has been due to the overwhelming embarrassment of picturesque material that has all along been at our very door—material which, by reason of its grandeur and sublimity, in no sort of fashion would do to make pictures of. Simplicity alone has evaded us all along.

—Robert Swain Gifford, as quoted by Laffan and Strahan (1880)

Touch produces a form of confirmation of the subject-world at the interface between the materiality of that world and the hand.

—Kevin Hetherington (2003), “Spatial Textures: Place, Touch, and Praesentia”



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## 1. Introduction

John Haberle’s (1856–1933) painting *Torn in Transit* (Figure 1), now part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s collection, exemplifies a peculiar kind of sophistication. The first impression is that of a perfectly illusionistic rendition of materiality: torn packaging paper, stickers, and strings, from which a portion of a picturesque scenery emerges.<sup>1</sup> This kind of illusionism is the principal formalistic idea upon which the tradition of *trompe-l’oeil* painting, which gained considerable recognition and acclaim in late-nineteenth-century American painting, is based. Yet, in comparison with other *trompe-l’oeil* paintings by the same artist, this work is quite distinct: Whereas in many works, the represented objects

(playing cards, dollar bills, photographs, letters) are set within a frame—e.g., a drawer, or mounted on a board, having “space” between and around them—in *Torn in Transit*, the frame of the real painting is the frame of the represented “painting”. It might be even considered, in a way, to be a conceptual work of art, a painting of a painting, made 1:1—a simulacrum, in Baudrillardian terms (Baudrillard 2006).



**Figure 1.** John Haberle, *Torn in Transit*, ca. 1890–1895, oil on canvas, 36.8 × 51.4 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Sheila and Richard J. Schwartz, and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2018.6.

But beyond the illusionistic play on perception, *Torn in Transit* discloses a subtler theme, concerning the subject of its representation. Indeed, we may ask: *What is the subject of this painting?* Is it “American landscape”? Or is it, as I would like to contend, “the *image* of American landscape”? Pushing it a bit further, I would suggest that what this painting is really about is *the condition of the image* of the American landscape. A firmly established genre in the nineteenth century, American landscape painting was constructed on a set of conventions that formulated the basis of American scenery representation, contributing to the shaping of the national concept of wilderness as well as culture.<sup>2</sup> These basic compositional, iconographic, and technical conventions are all present in *Torn in Transit*: the trees that function as curtains to the ‘staged’ scene, with a horizon line that divides the format at golden ratio proportions; the low hills and the distant mountains, a waterfall and a small house; the carefully built layers of aerial perspective; the hazy, golden light that softens the contours, bathing the scene in a divine transcendental luminosity; and finally, total elimination of any evidence of facture or of paint’s materiality. Therefore, it is clear that the landscape depicted by Haberle is definitely *not* a real landscape, nor was it perceived as such in the eyes of late-nineteenth-century viewers. It is rather a deceit of a constructed, imagined reality, just as much as it is a deceitful play on the sense of sight in the tradition of *trompe-l’oeil* painting of which Haberle was a prominent figure.

Clearly enough, the unsound condition of this landscape-turned-object discloses that Haberle did not subscribe to the belief in the landscape’s inherent sublimity or transcendental qualities as modeled by many early- and mid-century landscape painters. Quite the contrary: The work presents the landscape in terms of consumption, as a commodified image whose sole purpose is materialistic.<sup>3</sup> This bitter soberness is consistent with the basic strategy of *trompe-l’oeil* painting and its ironic philosophical stance: Everything might be

rendered as an illusion, as a trickery of the senses.<sup>4</sup> But most ironic of all is the fact that the painting is titled “torn in transit”, suggesting that this fake painting of a fabricated *landscape* was allegedly moving *across the land* by some means of transportation, and was “unfortunately” torn en route. As a painting, it appears unharmed, i.e., no slashes or defects are visible; yet as a commodity, it presents a problematic and unpleasant situation for all involved, so to speak.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1890s, the kind of landscape painting that was ostensibly represented in Haberle’s *Torn in Transit* was considered by many to be a cliché, a status that validated it becoming a subject for ironic gestures like the one indicated in this work. The landscape devised as per recipe or formulaic conventions was no longer perceived as the “real” American nature. Yet, while Haberle shows landscape representation as a mere formula, an object for trade, other artists in the 1890s and previous decades were pursuing landscape’s authentic essence by setting to paint outdoors, with a clear declaration of intent to resist and parry any formulaic synthesis thereof. Such “realness” took root in the material nature of the praxis of open-air painting, and extracted its convictions therefrom.

This article examines how late-nineteenth-century landscape painters employed materiality in their work in order to redefine landscape painting while setting open-air painting as a ‘new’ artistic agenda. It focuses on the relationships between the work of art’s material existence and its surrounding worldly circumstances, reading them against both paintings and texts generated by American painters and critics in the northeastern United States as well as in Europe, where many young American artists went to study and develop themselves as professionals. Overall, I will argue that many artists in this period viewed outdoor painting praxis in terms of agency, connecting painter, painting, and landscape. Unlike earlier, Transcendentalist approaches, this idea was not conceived of as a solely spiritual or mental union, but rather as a mode that is set and embedded in the mundane, in the existence of objects, of embodied engagement and material means.<sup>6</sup> To approach this subject, I will refer to theories from the field of landscape phenomenology, a sub-current in humanistic geography studies. It is strikingly evident that despite obvious differences in the presumptions and aims of these two disciplines, there is also much in common between present-day geographic and anthropologic concepts, and the nineteenth-century shifting paradigm of landscape painting, particularly in how it was exclusively modeled by this embodied praxis of outdoor painting.

The notion of what I term a “phenomenological turn” at the end of the nineteenth century defines the contrasting epistemes of this generation of painters with that of earlier generations. Scrutinizing these various contexts eventually leads to the conclusion that by engaging with materiality and objecthood, this ‘new generation’ of painters—albeit being dependent upon sales like any other actor in a capitalist society—sought to resist commodifying tendencies of image-making, and instead to devise a mode of landscape representation that would not surrender easily to the flattening steamroller of capitalist consumer culture.

I have chosen to open with a painting that in many ways is antithetical to the main argument of this article. Obviously, Haberle did not paint his *Torn in Transit* out in nature: He might have copied it entirely or partially from a printed or painted image, or he might have painted it from his own imagination. Yet, understanding the background of skepticism, critique, or even negation of landscape as a permanent entity, might shed light on the circumstances surrounding its affirmation by artists who held ‘bold’ materiality as one of their fundamental convictions. Reviewing a work from the same decade by another artist—open-air painting devotee John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902)—may reify the point.

*The Rainbow’s Source* (Figure 2), painted by Twachtman in the 1890s (the exact year is unknown, as is the case with many of Twachtman’s works from this period), depicts, somewhat similarly to *Torn in Transit*, a waterfall with trees on its banks, bathed in soft light: a “typically American” nature scene. However, Twachtman takes an entirely different approach to landscape representation, depicting a rather fragmentary view, with



compositional arrangement deviating from the Neoclassical or Romantic conventions, with no clearly defined horizon line, and no distinct planes that build the illusion of depth (although it is built, using a different set of rules).<sup>7</sup> Unlike Haberle's representation of the landscape, which eliminates traces of the artist's work to a degree of eye-deceiving perfection, Twachtman's cascade scene is overrun with visible brushstrokes, paint layering, scumbling, and palette-knife marks (Figure 3), showing *real material* at work, applied so as to represent a portion of the landscape.

Beyond the immediate, facile, identification of "academic" versus "modern" modes of painting (an idea perfectly rooted in the master narrative of modern art), I suggest that these two very distinct approaches actually stem from the same chasm where postbellum American landscape painting found itself.<sup>8</sup> Both approaches reject the conventions of landscape painting, while using materiality as their subject matter: Haberle by alluding to the material status of the landscape as an image in a consumption culture, and Twachtman by enhancing the materiality of paint and facture in his personal impression of the landscape.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 2.** John Henry Twachtman, *The Rainbow's Source*, ca.1890–1900, oil on canvas, 91.4 × 64.1 cm, Saint Louis Art Museum, museum's purchase, 124:1921.





**Figure 3.** John Henry Twachtman, *The Rainbow's Source* [detail], Saint Louis Art Museum, museum's purchase, 124:1921.

## 2. Beyond “The Real” and “The Ideal”

At the end of the Civil War, the “old school” of landscape painting was beginning to lose more and more of its hold on the American public's opinion, slowly giving way to other conceptions of the landscape. Even before the war, as early as 1855, the *Putnam's Monthly* reviewer critically remarked upon observing the landscapes of the artist regarded by many to be the mythic founding father of American landscape painting, Thomas Cole (1801–1848):

[ . . . ] there is not an individual object in the picture which ever had its prototype in the natural world—not a tree, shrub or mountain form is there, which is not palpably a creation of the artist's imaginative brain.<sup>10</sup>

Although landscape painters such as Asher Brown Durand (1796–1886), Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823–1880), John Frederick Kensett (1816–1872), Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), and Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) enjoyed much public acclaim during the 1850s (culminating in the ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions of Church and Bierstadt in the mid-1850s), and to some degree the 1860s, the subsequent decades saw a growing antagonism to sublime and allegorical landscape conception. In 1872, Albert Bierstadt's once-celebrated paintings of the West and the Rocky Mountains (Figure 4) were attacked on the same grounds as Cole was criticized in 1855: of being too idealized at the expense of their realness.

What has [Bierstadt] done but twist and skew and distort and discolor and be-little and be-pretty this whole doggoned country? Why, his mountains are too high and slim; they'd blow over in one of our fall winds. (King [1872] 1935)

The idealized landscape is perceived here as a fake representation, condemned by its incapability to adhere to the material and physical structures of its real source, thus exposing its weakness: In reality, Bierstadt's mountains were surmised to “blow over” in a gust of wind like autumn leaves. Yet, while being judged by some for not being real enough, these paintings were criticized by others as adhering too much to the external aspect of reality, neglecting the artist's “inner world” in their attempt to render nature accurately and rigidly in all its details (Bolger Burke and Voorsanger 1987).



**Figure 4.** Albert Bierstadt, *Merced River, Yosemite Valley*, 1866, Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 127 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the sons of William Paton, 1909. Accession No: 09.214.1.

Thus, painters of the younger generation (born mid-century and reaching professional maturity during the 1880s and the 1890s) were striving for a first-hand impression of the landscape, an engagement that encompassed personal experience on the one hand, and avoidance of worn-out schemes of representation on the other.<sup>11</sup> Many of them adopted open-air working methods, which were also engaged in by former generations of landscape painters, but injected new life into the praxis while adjusting it to an emerging new artistic persona (See [Gonnen 2022](#)).<sup>12</sup> With this change, which involved some notable European influences, Nature became less spectacular, less majestic, less divine, and accordingly more intimate, more tranquil, and more mood-driven, or transient.<sup>13</sup> It evoked a kind of secular, personal spirituality, which was often referred to by the term “poetic”.

In the broader American historiographic context, this tendency might reflect what historian T. J. Jackson Lears referred to as “antimodern impulses”. In his seminal book *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* ([Lears \[1981\] 2021](#)), Lears argued that the changes that American society underwent in the last decades of the nineteenth century, especially the crumbling of Protestant values juxtaposed with accelerated industrialization, prompted Americans to dismiss the modern way of life and search for alternative lifestyles and ideas. For this generation, Lears contended, modernism reverberated with a constant sense of “unrealness”:

For the educated bourgeoisie, authentic experience of any sort seemed ever more elusive; life seemed increasingly confined to the airless parlor of material comfort and moral complacency. Many yearned to smash the glass and breathe freely—to experience ‘real life’ in all its intensity. (Ibid, p. 5)

Hence, “the real” became, in a way, “the ideal”, and vice versa. Moreover, Lears tied the awakening of such sentiments, and the notions that sprung therefrom, to the emergence of consumer culture in the new corporate state:

The older morality embodied the ‘producer culture’ of an industrializing, entrepreneurial society; the newer nonmorality embodied the ‘consumer culture’ of a bureaucratic corporate state. Antimodernists were far more than escapists: their quests for authenticity eased their own and others’ adjustments to a streamlined culture of consumption. (Ibid, xxiii)

Later on, I will address both striving for realness and the perplexing producer/consumer identity as fueling a new mode of landscape painting, grounded in open-air painting, enthusiastically practiced by American artists and publicly affirmed by critics. However, the ‘realness’ that was enabled in the process of emancipating artists from the studio routine is to be considered first in its plain, practical dimension.

### 3. Down to Earth: Physical Engagement in the Work of Art

As a starting point, in terms of practical means, there is a major difference between a work executed in the studio and one executed out of doors. While a painting created entirely indoors presumably occupies a corner in the space of a studio and is mostly in a static, “receptive”, condition (hence the term “easel painting”), the open-air painting literally moves with the painter, who carries it to the site and back when the painting session is over; it is also subject to accidental damage in transport, such as holes or smears (in fact, it might be literally “torn in transit” . . . ); its transportation needs to be carefully calculated, taking into account weight, size, and bulk; moreover, it is exposed to the elements, and may suffer damage thereby—reparable or not—inflicted by rain, wind, dust, dirt, leaves that stick to its wet surface, and so forth. As a consequence, a painting executed outdoors inevitably turns into a *thing*, and a-priori occupies a differing status from the studio easel painting that can maintain its ‘transparent’ materiality as a two-dimensional illusionary window.

Open-air painting also involves additional requirements concerning the physical protection and welfare of the *artist’s body*. This may include an umbrella, light or warm clothing, a hat, food and drink, and so on. The artistic equipment must be wisely packed and organized for being carried some distance.<sup>14</sup> Hence, going outdoors to paint in nature requires from the artist an entire set of technical solutions and equipment, as well as bodily arrangements, resulting in expending much energy on explicitly material concerns before even stepping over the threshold to meet the physical world, which in turn, does not always align itself with the effort on the part of the artist, as shown in an early nineteenth-century French grisaille painting (see Figure 5).<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 5.** Anonymous French, *Accident while Painting in the Open Air*, ca. 1820–1830, oil on paper, 31.2 × 27.6 cm. Private collection.



In spite of, and perhaps because of all these challenges, many artists were drawn to this method of working. It enabled the emergence of a new type of artistic identity, as Anthea Callen showed in her book *The Work of Art: Plein-air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-century France*: that of worker-painter (Callen 2015).<sup>16</sup> In both Europe and the United States, the praxis was reserved mostly for men, as social norms of the Victorian Age discouraged women from engaging in such activity, although this changed somewhat toward the end of the century.<sup>17</sup> Whereas for the Hudson River School painters, working outdoors in remote nature was part of the constructed identity of the artist as frontiersman, for the subsequent generation of American painters, favoring the more-accessible countryside, this identity formation was constructed so as to align with the innovative avant-garde artist, in itself a kind of frontiersmen in a cultural sense. The extroverted, unorthodox, and individualistic approach of the European avant-garde artist galvanized the American “new men”, as they were sometimes referred to by critics, and corresponded with American ideals of democratic individuality.<sup>18</sup> Aspiring to generate paintings that went against the grain of reality and yet were carved out of reality, these painters rejected the so-called “licked”, highly finished, varnished *surface*, and advocated a textured, hastened, matt *object*.<sup>19</sup>

The unique material-oriented condition of the outdoor-painted work of art was illuminated by Will Hicok Low (1853–1932) in his personal memoirs from Barbizon. An American painter who, like many of his colleagues, trained in France, Low’s detailed account of the routine of American painters who enthusiastically followed in the footsteps of Theodore Rousseau (1812–1867), Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875), and Jean-Francois Millet (1814–1875) in the forest of Fontainebleau, enables us to see the celebrated corporeal nature of the work of art:

Canvases of large dimensions, too large to be carried to and fro, would be firmly fixed to upright stakes driven in the ground and, with the absorbent back of the canvas protected from the weather by oil cloth, would be left out of doors for weeks until the painting was completed. No other protection was necessary; the painted surface of the canvas was practically impervious to rain, and the chance faggot gatherers, the forest guards, or even errant children passing that way had, one and all, too hearty [a] respect for the arts to inflict the slightest damage on a painting in progress, thus left at their mercy. Many a picture in the museums to-day, protected by frame and glass, and the temperature of the gallery where it hangs carefully regulated, was thus born gipsy-like in the woods, where the shafts of sunlight by day and the stars by night watched curiously the progress of its growth. (Low 1908)

Whereas in the museum, the artwork as an object of cultural and monetary value is completely protected from the harmful effects of the *outside environment* (whether human or otherwise), Low stresses its creation moment as *a product of the outside environment*, with a minimum of protection required, where even the most common, simple people respected it.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in Low’s figurative language, the materiality of the work of art is embedded in and emanates from an animated world of nature, that witnesses (“watch[es] curiously”) the process of its creation (“growth”, as part of the realm of fauna or flora). The painting, thus, is symbolically regarded as a work of ‘nature’, rather than ‘culture’.

The creation of a work of art in the open air is also evident in some of John Singer Sargent’s (1856–1925) now-famous outdoor works, wherein the artist portrayed his painter friends accompanying him in various locales. In the course of his intensive outdoor sessions in the English countryside in the mid- and late 1880s, Sargent was—according to one of his companions—“accustomed to emerge, carrying a large easel, to advance a little way into the open, and then suddenly to plant himself down nowhere in particular, behind a barn, opposite a wall, in the middle of a field”, where he would paint “whatever met his vision” (Quoted in Esten 2000, p. 22). In some cases, he would depict his friends from what would appear to be occasional viewpoint. Dennis Miller Bunker *Painting at Calcot* (Figure 6) from 1888, appears at first to be a simple, sketch-like genre painting (or

a dual portrait) of a painter working in the countryside beside a quiet female companion (Sargent's sister Violet [1870–1955], in fact) who is typically reading a book. Yet, on closer examination, the painting turns out to be addressing more subtle issues of artist < > artwork < > environment relationships.



**Figure 6.** John Singer Sargent, *Dennis Miller Bunker Painting at Calcot*, 1888, Oil on canvas mounted on Masonite, 68.6 × 64.1 cm, Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1999.130.

Bunker (1861–1890) was an American artist friend who spent the summer of 1888 with Sargent in Calcot Mill, a village west of London. In this painting, the painter is depicted from the front, in the middle distance, from a slightly elevated vantage point. Instead of looking at the surroundings, he appears absorbed in contemplation of its representation on canvas, standing with his hand, perhaps unconsciously, playing in his pocket. Sargent remarkably catches the nuanced tension of this focused state: of suspension between thought and action, between cognition and movement that might occur in the subsequent moment. The painter's female companion functions as a counterpoint, as she, too, is immersed in her book. Proceeding rightwards, the third "figure" in this scene is formed by the lavender strokes on the water, conveying yet another substance of reflectiveness.

Sargent successfully renders the mental states of his two models, as well as the nature of the stream's half-translucent, half-reflective, liquid substance. Yet the only object that remains impenetrable here is the 'cause' of this event: the painting.<sup>21</sup> Supported by three simple poles instead of a manufactured easel, the painting's materiality stands forth: close to the ground, much below eye level, its illusionary facet hidden while its material essence—



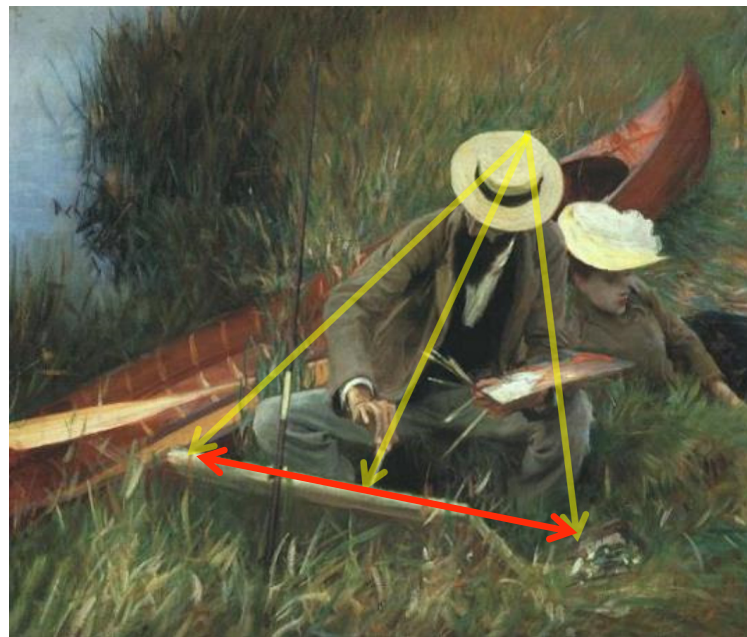
unprimed back-of-canvas, stretcher (the wooden frame), supporting poles—is revealed. It is part of the material world, an object, much like the depicted umbrella, the book, or the palette in the artist's hand.

Sargent's *An Out-of-Doors Study* (aka *Paul Helleu Sketching with his Wife*) (Figure 7) from the following year depicts similar subject matter: an artist, engaged in an intensive session of outdoor painting on the banks of a river, accompanied by an 'idle' female (there might be even a book concealed in the grass, momentarily neglected by its reader); and the fruit of this artistic effort removed from our sight. Sargent—this time painting his French friend Paul Helleu (1859–1927) and spouse Alice (1870–1933) on the banks of the River Avon in Worcestershire County—renders the scene, again, from a relatively elevated vantage point, as if standing over it. Yet here, the canvas of the portrayed painter looks as if it sits directly on the ground, with only a fishing pole as improvised support. The idea of *contact* is a central theme in this painting, conveyed also by the tighter compositional arrangement: the figures of Helleu, Alice, and the elongated canoe are bundled together, almost touching each other; the painter's brush touches the canvas in a highly tense gesture that appears both decisive and hesitant; and, finally, like the canvas, the figures appear to be in close contact with the ground. Moreover, looking at the diagonally poised triangular shape formed by the figure of the seated painter—a very central structural element in the composition—we can see that the canvas forms the base of this triangle (Figure 8). Thus, the canvas is both *placed on the ground*, and *functions as the ground* for this activity.



**Figure 7.** John Singer Sargent, *An Out-of-Doors Study*, 1889, oil on canvas, 66.4 × 81.6 cm, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Museum collection fund 20.640 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 20.640\_PS6.jpg).





**Figure 8.** John Singer Sargent, *An Out-of-Doors Study* [with diagram], Brooklyn Museum of Art, Museum collection fund 20.640 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum).

The very idea of painting on the ground won some critical attention during this period, reflecting the material existence of the work of art in stark contrast to the exalted profile of conventional large-scale ‘easel’ landscape painting. The Boston-born painter Joseph Frank Currier (1843–1909), known for his very loose style of landscape painting that tended toward abstraction, presumably adopted such a method in his watercolor landscapes. Like Sargent, Currier was an expatriate, living most of his life in Germany (where he initially studied briefly at the Munich Royal Academy);<sup>22</sup> and like Sargent, he maintained close contact with his homeland, influencing American artists such as William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), Winslow Homer (1836–1910), and John Twachtman, either by functioning as a sort of mentor to whom many Americans abroad looked, or by regularly sending his paintings to art galleries and annual exhibitions across the Atlantic. However, unlike Sargent, Currier’s paintings were the subject of much controversy in the United States, especially in the late 1870s and early 1880s.<sup>23</sup> Much of the debate swirled around Currier’s barely intelligible images of landscape, painted using unconventional methods. Reviewing Currier’s New York exhibition in 1883, a critic of *The Art Amateur* commented:

When [Currier] produces his impressions from nature in water-colors, it is his custom, I am informed by one who has seen him work, to put his paper on the ground, dip a brush into a convenient puddle and after well soaking the paper, pinch the desired colors directly on to it from the tubes and let them find their level; and it must be said that the “impressions” in water-colors Mr. Currier used to exhibit gave the impress of truth to this description. (Rosenberg 1992, p. 144)<sup>24</sup>

The mixture of amazement and sarcasm in the above excerpt well reflects the controversy caused by Currier’s works at the beginning of the 1880s. Yet, beyond that, an interesting point in this review is that natural elements are immanently present and merge into the painting’s substance: The paper is “put [ . . . ] on the ground” and the brush is dipped into “a convenient puddle”. These natural resources meet natural (physical/chemical) processes, as the colors are squeezed “directly on to [the soaked paper] from the tubes” while the artist “let them find their level.” As a result, the liquid materiality of water and diffusing paint is overtly present, as Currier’s *Landscape Sketch* (Figure 9) clearly exemplifies. Moreover, this

kind of creative process seemingly resists any sort of schematic formulation, and cannot be repeated, copied, or reproduced.



**Figure 9.** J. Frank Currier, *Landscape Sketch*, ca. 1880, Watercolor on paper, 21.3 × 32.7 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of Dr. William Henry Holmes. Object no. 1930.12.31.

Currier was personifying a sort of hybrid identity, working in the German countryside while being deeply influenced by the writings of American essayist Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and, like Thoreau, embodied an approach that could be considered both idealistic and non-conformist. “My studio shall be wherever some beautiful thought in nature for a time holds me. I think I will have a ‘Walden’ near by to bathe in,” Currier wrote in one of his diary’s entries. Setting an ethical work code for himself to follow, he stated, “I must always regard Nature through the medium of thought, remembering that all material is but the means of expressing an idea.” (Quoted in [White 1936](#), pp. 9–13) Material, in this sense, could be interpreted as referring to observed nature, as well as alluding to the physical ingredients of the painting, which embody the means of expression.

Currier indeed developed an innovative approach regarding the materiality of paint and the painting’s support. Besides working in watercolors, Currier was also a prolific oil painter, and his habit of working outdoors on large formats also constituted a model for the younger Americans (See [Peters 2006](#), p. 80).<sup>25</sup> Along with fellow American painter Frank Duveneck ([1848–1919], whose portrait of Currier is in the Art Institute of Chicago collection), the two explored the Bavarian countryside, finding the small village of Polling in southern Bavaria a perfect locale of rustic profile. The bravura style, characteristic of Munich Academy, was further pushed to its limits by both Duveneck and Currier. Duveneck’s *Beechwoods at Polling, Bavaria* (Figure 10) exemplifies the style cultivated by the two artists: employing *alla prima* technique, with bold brushwork and abstracting qualities, and performing a highly virtuosic style with a limited “earth palette” of browns, grays, and neutral greens. In this painting, as in many others by the artist, the paint surface is uneven, ranging from thick *impasto* in the foreground to a liquid, diluted film of paint in the background (see details in Figure 11). Though at first glance it may look like a small sketch, the real measures of Duveneck’s *Beechwoods at Polling, Bavaria* (115.6 × 94 cm) indicates that it was more than a study, and was likely considered an accomplished painting by the artist, who later donated it to the Cincinnati Art Museum, where it still remains part of the permanent collection. Duveneck seemingly viewed the sketchy appearance as highly



important, as he occasionally scraped the paint while reworking his paintings, in order to convey an appearance of a more spontaneous work (Mayer and Myers 2013, p. 44).<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 10.** Frank Duveneck, *Beechwoods at Polling, Bavaria*, ca. 1878, oil on canvas, 115.6 × 94 cm. © Cincinnati Art Museum/Gift of the Artist/Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 11.** Frank Duveneck, *Beechwoods at Polling, Bavaria* [detail], © Cincinnati Art Museum/Gift of the Artist/Bridgeman Images.

Exceptionally charismatic, Duveneck was a prominent teacher of many American painters (dubbed “the Duveneck boys”). This influence seemed to extend quite broadly, as Duveneck was dividing his time between Europe and the United States. Currier, although



spending most of his career in Germany, had no less influence, and “his leadership consisted in his association and example, not in the taking of pupils” (White 1936, p. 22). Admiring the simple, unpretentious, environment of the German countryside, and eager to gain mastery in the dexterous and expressive outdoor painting technique encouraged by their teachers, many young American artists spent time—some for frequent or long stays, others for brief visits—in Polling, at the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, mainly in the late 1870s.<sup>27</sup> Pastoral imagery was intermixed with paint’s intensive performance, like that seen in William Merritt Chase’s *View near Polling* (Figure 12) from the mid-1870s, probably one of the artist’s earliest landscape paintings. Evident in this work is that whereas the sheep are scarce in detail, the entangling wool-like appearance of the clouds renders the landscape and the atmosphere itself highly tactile.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 12.** William Merritt Chase *View near Polling (Landscape with Sheep)*, ca. 1875, oil on canvas, 92.1 × 121.9 cm, Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas. Photography by Dwight Primiano.

Yet, the presence of intense outdoor activity was sometimes conveyed in ways other than the depiction of country scenes or the manipulation of paint. As we saw in Will H. Low’s description, as well as in Sargent’s depictions, in some cases it was the material means that contributed to the distinction of the “open-air painter” from all the other artistic personae. In a sketch made by one of the more frequent visitors to Polling—the painter John White Alexander (1856–1915)—the artist beautifully captures the activity of the “American Club” in the village, conveying it through the row of hats hanging on the wall (the drawing isn’t brought in this article. See Peters, p. 74). As indicated by the names of Duveneck, Dwight (Edward Huntington Dwight, 1856–?), McEwen (Walter McEwen, 1860–1943), Currier, Hopkins (George Hopkins, 1855–1923), Wendel (Theodore Wendel, 1859–1932), and Carrington (the Englishman James Y. Carrington, 1857–1892) inscribed just above each hat, it is a subtle group portrait more than it is a still life drawing, a portrait in which hats function as representatives of their owners, substitutes for their bodily presence.

Absorbing themselves in the material means of their profession, outdoor landscape painters were consolidating an identity of workers or artisans that coexisted with that of sophisticated, educated intellectuals.<sup>29</sup> Such evidence of communal life and work as

narrated by Alexander's row of hats draws the viewer's attention to the mundane life of an object, which is both functional in the praxis of open-air painting and emblematic thereof, thus defining the identity of the outdoor landscape painter as a workman, first and foremost.

#### 4. Tiles, Hats, and Cheese

Among the many items that became emblematic of the praxis (like the white umbrella, folding easel, backpack, etc.), of which we have a multitude of famous examples (Gustave Courbet's [1819–1877] *The Meeting* from 1854—now in Musée Fabre, Montpellier—immediately comes to mind), the brimmed hat is an interesting and intriguing one, exemplifying both toil and manly fashion. It is unsurprising, then, that hats also opened the *Scribner's Monthly* 1879 midwinter holiday issue (Figure 13), once again as emblematic of outdoor painting praxis. The cover illustration shows eleven men crowded around a woman holding a hat, who gazes downward somewhat shyly, while the conceited-looking gentlemen stare in various directions, some of them seizing hats. The title below reads: *The Tile Club and the Milliner of Bridgehampton*. The depicted occasion, drawn by Charles S. Reinhart (1844–1896), was one of many anecdotes in the documented journey of the New York-based Tile Club members to sketch and paint on the shores of Long Island and in its villages. In a specific moment narrated in the text, the eccentric group came across a millinery in Bridgehampton, Long Island, where they eagerly beseeched the milliner to stitch colorful ribbons to their hats.

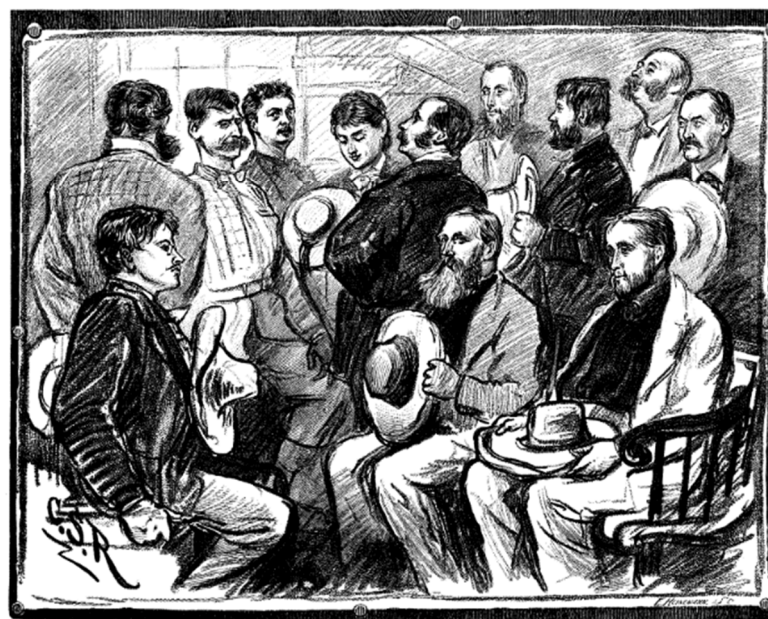
MIDWINTER HOLIDAY NUMBER  
OF  
SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY.

VOL. XVII.

FEBRUARY, 1879.

No. 4.

THE TILE CLUB AT PLAY.



THE TILE CLUB AND THE MILLINER OF BRIDGEHAMPTON.

**Figure 13.** Title page of *Midwinter Holiday Number of Scribner's Monthly*, February 1879, and opening illustration for "The Tile Club at Play", featuring engraving after a drawing by Charles S. Reinhart, *The Tile Club and the Milliner of Bridgehampton*. Hathi Thrust Public Domain resources.

While the Tile Club was a more official organization than the Polling American community, it still maintained a spirit of informality. Essentially, it was a group of independent artists who had decided to meet once a week at the studio of one of them and make artistic and decorative tiles to cope with the “decorative age”.<sup>30</sup> However, more than being a functional, productive organization, it served as a social club for a clutch of male artists, which operated “as a body without officers, limited in the number of its members to twelve, and [ . . . ] dispense[d] altogether with entrance fees or dues of any description” (Laffan 1879a, p. 403). Membership was quite fluid, and at various times included famous figures such as Winslow Homer, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), Julian Alden Weir (1852–1919), Robert Swain Gifford (1840–1905), Edwin Austin Abbey (1852–1911), John Henry Twachtman, William Merritt Chase (both used to paint in Polling and joined the Tile Club upon returning from Europe), Napoleon Sarony (1821–1896), and architect Stanford White (1853–1906), to name just a few.<sup>31</sup> Each member had a nickname, in a somewhat ironical gesture alluding to occultist fraternities.<sup>32</sup> Between 1878 and 1881, the Tilers (as they often referred to themselves) launched outdoor painting excursions to locales around New York: The first was to the southern shores of Long Island, the second was up the Hudson River to upstate New York, and the third to Port Jefferson and the northern shores of Long Island. Two members, William MacKay Laffan (1848–1909) and Earl Shinn (1838–1886, writing under the pseudonym Edward Strahan), amateur artists who were also established art critics, wrote the accounts of the trips to be published in *Scribner’s Monthly* (the fourth and last one was published in *The Century Magazine*), narrating these journeys in a light, humorous-verging-on-caricature tone that appealed to the popular taste of an “illustrated magazine for the people.”<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, despite their designation as entertainment reading, these texts astoundingly reveal these artists’ aims, habits, agendas, interests, beliefs, and disbeliefs, and most significantly, their affinity to open-air painting as well as their conception of the praxis.

As aforementioned, it is no coincidence that the image in the millinery was chosen as representative of the Tile Club’s first outdoor painting journey. The artists’ preoccupation with hats conveyed both a “manly” code of fashion and a professional means that accorded with their engagement with the outdoors. Yet, unlike the rustic simplicity conveyed by Alexander’s sketch from Polling, the Long Island excursionists publicly exhibited their dandiness and eccentricity, as well as their consumerist profile, all consistent with the popular culture at which they aimed. The following excerpt describes the purchase of the hats in Sayville, Long Island, prior to their being taken to the millinery in Bridgehampton:

Then the club started for Sayville, [ . . . ] the “Gaul” roaring loudly for a grocery store and cheese. The store was found, and while the unusual demand for cheese was being satisfied by the amazed proprietor, the “Owl” spied a pile of enormous hats of straw, with brims nearly six feet in circumference. He tried one on, gazed proudly around, and every Tiler bought one on the spot, at an outlay of twenty-five cents. Such a rushing hat trade never was done in Sayville before or since, and it is currently reported that the worthy grocer has never quite recovered from the mental shock that he sustained on the occasion. (Laffan and Strahan 1879, p. 463)

The colorful descriptions of the Tile Club’s outdoor excursions formulated a specimen of artist-tourists, mobile agents of culture. Rather than lofty poets-of-the-brush or ‘dignified’ intellectuals, these men are ultimately portrayed as enmeshed in the worldly aspects of existence, dependent on physical *things*: a steady supply of crackers and cheese, as well as liqueurs, and an occasional desperate need for bread (for use as a charcoal eraser!) (Ibid, 464). Moreover, rather than seeking to be absorbed in the common habits and life of the locals, these metropolitans brought with them a capitalist, commodity-oriented lifestyle (the humorous yet patronizing tone toward the parochial character of Long Island’s small towns is conspicuous here, as it is in many other portions of the text). ‘Materiality’ here connotes an ongoing dialogue with ‘materialism’ in a liberal modern culture of objects



and trade. The new persona of the artist, a cosmopolitan who feels at home in the world (whether 50 miles from New York or across the Atlantic), accorded with the motivation to set out-of-doors to paint. But whereas in the various European landscapes, Americans could more or less evade their national and cultural identity, painting the American landscape seemed more demanding in this sense. Moreover, it required confronting how it had been depicted by previous generations; and therein, issues of materiality were explicitly utilized.

### 5. The Material of American Landscape

Up to this point, I have shown how artists emphasized the material nature of the work of art itself, or its process of making, by describing the physical aspects of open-air painting. Yet materiality was also attributed to the landscape itself, which was considered a ‘material’ for one’s artistic work, a source or substance from which the process of making a meaningful representation begins. Using the word ‘material’ in this context is much more than prosaic. In its deeper sense, it validated the painter as a mediator and landscape painting as a vehicle, linking between realities: taking a ‘raw material’ (i.e., the landscape itself) and transcribing it visually for a dedicated viewer (or consumer), thus constituting a means of communication as well as a way of production.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike former generations who were searching for the genuinely ‘American’ in the landscape so that it could be distinguished from the ‘European’ landscape, the late-nineteenth-century painters and art critics proposed a much broader and more inclusive conception of ‘the American landscape’. In 1879, the same year of the publication of “The Tile Club at Play”, William MacKay Laffan published an essay in *The American Art Review* titled “The Material of American Landscape”. Unlike in his previous piece, this time Laffan took a much more serious tone, overtly sentimental at times, as well as authoritative and critical, calling American artists to promptly adopt the local, familiar landscape with which they are best acquainted, as a proper and worthy ‘material’ for their art:<sup>35</sup>

[ . . . ] our landscape art is and must be largely a matter of latitude. In its material it must be concerned with the things whereof we have the best and truest knowledge, whereof the images are implanted in our minds, and which we unconsciously love and cling to from mere association and familiarity. (Laffan 1879b, p. 30)

For Laffan, such material consisted of:

The forms of our trees, the color of our vegetation, the moods of our skies, every physical manifestation of our daily life, are things understood by us and fitted to us and with which we are in full accord and sympathy. (Ibid.)

Laffan’s article opens with a long description, written in first person, of the author sitting at the mouth of a river on an early May morning, accompanied by a painter who depicts the scene. Laffan describes the locale, comprised of a fusion of natural elements and industrial features, as overall “a vulgar scene, a commonplace thing at home, a thing to look at and hold one’s nose” (Ibid.). The painter stops painting after rendering a general depiction of the view, and upon being asked by the author for the reason for his cessation, replies: “It is too much. I can only look at it and feel it. I can only hope for an impression of it, a note which shall reveal the key of its harmony.”<sup>36</sup> In a conversation that ensues, the painter—who is described as having studied in Europe for a considerable time, and having done the “usual Continental course” in the United States before returning home to the northeast—speaks on behalf of the American landscape.<sup>37</sup> Viewed as a “radical” but sincere person who was not biased by the picturesqueness of the Old World, the Mediterranean, or the savage wilderness of more remote places in America, Laffan credited his fellow artist with a genuine ability:

He could see. His mind was wholesome and sweet; he could discern his own natural impulses, and the ‘material of American landscape’ was not a sealed book to him. This material is what a majority of the men who study abroad

seriously condemn and refuse to see, and as a consequence we have them painting bric-a-brac landscapes in their studios [ . . . ]. (Ibid)

“Bric-a-brac” indicates an imagined, invented, idealized, constructed landscape that does not ‘meet’ reality. The positioning of the common, local, American landscape as contrasted to both European landscape and remote American locales of ‘grand’ nature, serves Laffan’s central argument, which not only stresses the importance of choosing the ‘right’ and ‘real’ landscape for painting, but also led him to the conclusion that fidelity to the *local* American landscape, “understood by us and fitted to us and with which we are in full accord and sympathy”, will benefit the artwork and the artist with an equally truthful representation of the artistic *self*:

American artists are withdrawing their allegiance from the Hudson River, the Falls of Niagara, the Rocky Mountains, and the big trees of Calaveras. A little introspective study, and such little humility as nearly a century of futility and arrogant ignorance has yielded to, have taught us to seek the humbler intimacy that Nature permits to us. There only may be attained such power to express her beauty and her simple truths as a natural reverence for them and a receptive and impressionable disposition render us capable of. From all this it follows easily enough that, if truth to Nature be any part of an artist’s art purpose, he can but seek it by looking where experience teaches him that his deepest sympathy and native function of expression most naturally lie. (Ibid, p. 32)

“Introspective study” and “humility” are contrasted with “futility and arrogant ignorance” (Laffan implicitly nods here to the former generation of painters, the Hudson River School, and their successors); the Ruskinian ideal of “truth to nature” is shifted, or updated, to wed with a conception of personal “experience”, subjective “deepest sympathy”, and “native function of expression”. In other words, truth to nature should go hand in hand with truth to *one’s own* nature, which could only be found in the familiar landscape close to home. Moreover, according to Laffan, such merit is achieved when one strengthens the bonds to the “simple truths” of nature by adopting a “receptive and impressionable disposition” in one’s way of depicting it, as did the painter that Laffan described at the beginning of his article.<sup>38</sup> In other words, while the genuine Americanness of the landscape is a significant thing, it is not conveyed through any typical feature whatsoever; rather, it is conveyed through the painter’s own physical and mental presence therein, and intrinsic knowledge thereof.

Laffan ultimately sees in the American landscape a manifestation of its inhabitants’ memories, emotions, and experiences, a view shared by many contemporary leading artists and thinkers.<sup>39</sup> The renowned landscape painter George Inness (1825–1894) similarly stressed the importance of representing what he termed the “civilized landscape”.<sup>40</sup> Like Laffan’s perception of a landscape whose “images are implanted in our minds, and which we unconsciously love and cling to”, Inness, too, associated mental, emotional, and psychological aspects of human nature with the physical landscape, deeming such relationships reciprocal:

The highest art is where has been most perfectly breathed the sentiment of humanity. [ . . . ] Some persons think that landscape has no power of communicating human sentiment. But this is a great mistake. The civilized landscape peculiarly can, and therefore I love it more and think it more worthy of reproduction than that which is savage and untamed. It is more significant. Every act of man, everything of labor, effort, suffering, want, anxiety, necessity, love, marks itself wherever it has been. (Trumble 1895, p. 40)<sup>41</sup>

While nowadays the nationalist sentiment of these words could not be more clearly articulated (nor could the omission of the native inhabitants of the continent pass without notice), as well as their underpinnings in the mode termed American Regionalism, I choose to adopt here a perspective that differs significantly from the social-political one, a



perspective with which the issue of materiality could be scrutinized from its ontological and epistemological aspects.<sup>42</sup> Suggesting viewing these ideas through the lens and tools of relatively recent approaches from the discipline of humanistic geography and anthropology, more specifically the field that is termed “landscape phenomenology” (which is a broad and extensive frame of thinking in itself), I seek to show how late-nineteenth-century American artists and culturists were trying to conceptualize a rather wholistic worldview of human < > landscape relationships. Moreover, therein, the materiality of the painting and landscape alike played a major role.<sup>43</sup>

## 6. Building Dwelling Painting

In his seminal work *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000), social anthropologist Tim Ingold pointed out the dichotomy, prevalent in his discipline, of “opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space” (Ingold 2000, p. 189). Based on the philosophical writings of phenomenological thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Ingold developed a theory that he referred to as the “dwelling perspective”, a term that he drew from Heidegger’s “Building Dwelling Thinking” 1954 essay. Adopting this new point of view, Ingold contended, enables anthropologists to understand human life and the landscape as an intricate, reciprocal system rather than a cognition-oriented ordering of space. By adopting Heidegger’s view of the immanent human trait (which is not merely functional nor utilitarian) of dwelling—or in Heidegger’s words: “We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built [ . . . ] because we are dwellers”<sup>44</sup>—as well as examining human material culture with its association to the landscape, Ingold arrived at the conclusion that:

... the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings. (Ingold 2000, p. 186)<sup>45</sup>

Ingold’s dwelling perspective formulates a view of human activity in the lived-in world (which is distinct from a representational world-of-ideas), as well as a view of the essence of landscape itself. “The landscape,” states Ingold, “is not a totality that you or anyone else can look at, it is rather the world in which we stand in taking up a point of view on our surroundings.”<sup>46</sup>

The distinction between looking *at* and being *in* is a crucial one, a fundamental principle of phenomenological thinking. “Space is not [ . . . ] a network of relations between objects”, stated Merleau-Ponty. “I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me” (Merleau-Ponty [1961] 2004, p. 309).<sup>47</sup> This basic recognition is also one of the subjects embedded in late-nineteenth-century discourse, manifested in the dismissal of the mid-century landscape painting by late-century landscape painters and critics. In their efforts to validate a new kind of landscape episteme, this later generation of culturists objected to the detached “mind” observing the breathtaking vistas of American scenery, searching for a simpler, intimate vision of nature. They devaluated their predecessors for operating an optical regime toward nature that was detached from (what they perceived as) the inner world of the artist and viewer. In March 1880, Laffan and Earl Shinn published in *Scribner’s Monthly* another article documenting a Tile Club excursion, titled “The Tile Club Afloat”, this time on a barge up the Hudson River, a locale thoroughly identified with former generations of American painters. In a certain moment, as the barge sails along on the waters of the Hudson, artist Robert Swain Gifford is quoted reflecting on what he perceived as the problematic progression in American art throughout the century. “Nine-tenths of our backwardness,” Gifford exclaimed, “has been due to the overwhelming embarrassment of picturesque material that has all along been at our very door—material which, by reason of its grandeur and sublimity, in no sort of fashion would do to make pictures of. Simplicity

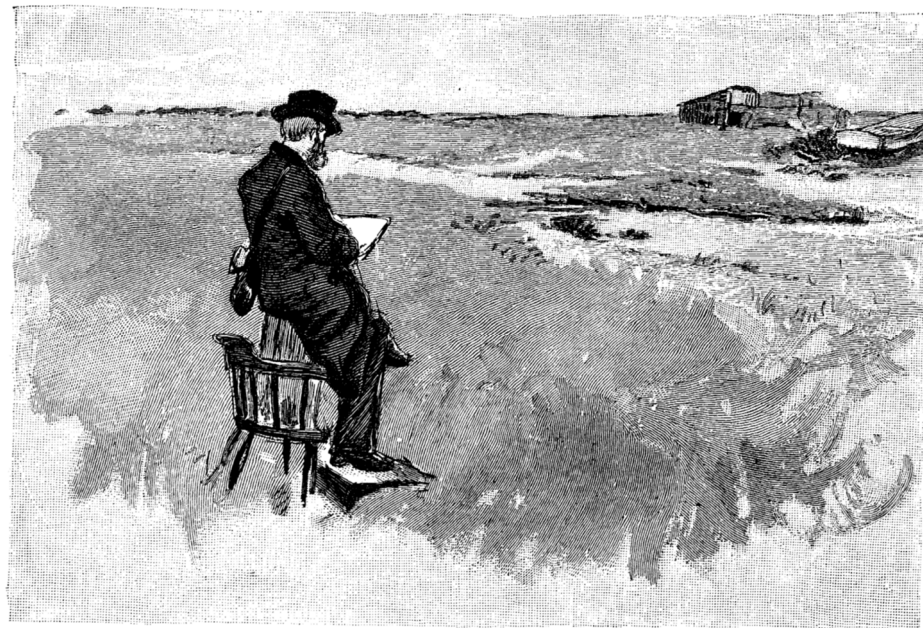
alone has evaded us all along” (Laffan and Strahan 1880, p. 648). This statement explicitly shows how deep these painters’ objection to, and condemnation of, the Hudson River School’s formalistic and thematic approach was. The sublime features of the American landscape were so overwhelming that they ostensibly blinded past generations of painters. “Simplicity” stood for “the humbler intimacy that Nature permits to us”, as Laffan phrased it in “the Material of American Landscape”, for being *in* the landscape rather than looking *at* it in admiration and embarrassment. In many of Robert S. Gifford’s paintings, “simplicity” is suggested through the flattened land, the choice of subject matter, the omission of details, and the clearly seen facture and texture—evidential of the ‘artist’s hand’; and although quite conservative by way of compositional arrangement, these paintings accentuate this “phenomenological” mode. In Gifford’s *The Coast of New England* (Figure 14), for instance, the viewer is immersed in the textural essence of the grassy marsh of this very large (more than 150 cm. wide) painting, much like the two figures. The idle, perhaps broken, fishing boat, almost invisible, is immersed in the landscape as well.<sup>48</sup>



**Figure 14.** Robert Swain Gifford, *The Coast of New England*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 152.8 cm, Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Carll H. de Silver, 06.76 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 06.76\_SL1.jpg).

Gifford himself (referred to as “the Griffin”, his Tile Club sobriquet) was portrayed from the back while sketching during the Tile Club’s first journey, sitting on a crate of champagne placed on a chair (Figure 15).<sup>49</sup> His entire figure seems physically surrounded by the land: His head is aligned with the horizon line, and the objects that he is allegedly sketching are located literally at his eye level, while his body is submerged in the expressive strokes that represent the earth, whether sand or grass.<sup>50</sup> The painter is depicted as immersed in the landscape as well as in his art, both bodily and mentally. This immersion, as this illustration exemplifies, is enabled precisely owing to the shift from the visually distant, unreachable horizon to the close, bodily experience of the landscape.





THE "GRIFFIN" AT WORK.

**Figure 15.** Engraving after a drawing by Edwin Austin Abbey, *The "Griffin" at Work*, published in "The Tile Club at Play", *Scribner's Monthly*, February 1879. Hathi Thrust Public Domain resources.

The meaning of being *in* the landscape, while resisting its picturesqueness, as implied by Gifford's description and paintings (and by Abbey's portrait of him), evokes senses other than sight. Most prominently, it relates to the sense of touch. In landscape phenomenology, which refers more to material epistemology than to representational thinking, the sense of touch becomes a significant agent in the construction of experience and knowledge, and, more broadly, in the making of culture.<sup>51</sup> The centrality of "*tactile*, as opposed to *visual*, landscape experiences" is discussed by geographer John Wylie (Wylie 2007) as an important shift in mindset:

The conceptual shift from landscape-as-image to landscape-as-dwelling correlates with a substantive shift from *horizon* to *earth*. In general, the proliferation of research on the body and embodied experience turns landscape from a distant object or spectacle to be visually surveyed to an up-close, intimate and proximate material milieu of engagement and practice. Landscape becomes the close-at-hand, that which is both touching and touched, an affective handling through which self and world emerge and entwine. (Wylie 2007, pp. 166–67, emphasis in original)

In American landscape painting, the "shift from *horizon* to *earth*" is reflected either by texture, as we have already seen, or by spatial arrangement. Whereas the far-seeing, penetrating vision of mid-century paintings such as Bierstadt's (Figure 4), for example, was conveyed by a multitude of pictorial planes (from foreground to background): In many late-century landscape depictions, the horizon line obtains less and less significance, and in some cases is even abolished or ultimately blocked, as in John Twachtman's depiction of *Landscape near Cincinnati* (Figure 16). Here, the painter exchanges the illusionary deep space for a flattened, wall-like rendition of landscape, consisting of multi-layered films of thin paint.<sup>52</sup> In some cases, this tendency leads to a representation of the land's surface itself, in a more literal sense. In John White Alexander's *Landscape, Cornish, N. H.* (Figure 17), for example, it appears as if the painter is standing downhill, rather than up on the hill's summit (a position that usually enables one to see far into the distance, and that was warmly embraced by most early- and mid-century landscape painters, see Boime 1991, p. 5). Thus, the trees are half-concealed behind the hill, and the viewer's eye has no access to the distant planes; the landscape is seen as a nearly two-dimensional surface: *Horizon* is traded

for, replaced by, *earth*. In the same way, the peculiar vantage points from which Sargent chose to paint his painter-colleagues (Figures 6 and 7), gazing upon them slightly from above, plays on this theme: More ground is seen, less deep space is created. The artists are literally *in* the landscape. In Ingold's terms, this positioning might illustrate the concept of "the dwelling perspective", wherein the painter 'builds' his representation, derived from the landscape, while being absorbed therein.



**Figure 16.** John Henry Twachtman, *Landscape near Cincinnati* (also titled *Landscape*), ca. 1882, oil on canvas, 88.9 × 116.8 cm, Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY. Museum purchase, 58.9.



**Figure 17.** John White Alexander, *Landscape, Cornish, N. H.*, ca. 1890, oil on canvas, 77.2 × 114.2 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, museum purchase, 1985.79.1.



In this shift of paradigms, ‘visual’ and ‘tactile’ must be comprehended as two distinct systems of knowledge, forming a differing episteme of ‘place’. In his exploration of the “ways in which people make place through touch”, cultural geographer Kevin Hetherington ([Hetherington 2003](#)) defines “touch” thusly:

Touch produces a form of confirmation of the subject-world at the interface between the materiality of that world and the hand. Such an encounter is understood not as initially meaningful and representational to a subject who is distinct and distally knowledgeable about the world, but as constitutive [ . . . ] of the subject itself.

Touch is rendered meaningful for making the subject, in a way, *one* with the object, whereas sight maintains distance and separation.<sup>53</sup> Hetherington contrasts “proximal knowledge” with “distal knowledge”, the former being based on tactile encounter, while the latter is based on optical information.

We think of touch, at least initially, as up close, local, and specific (proximal) in its way of knowing. It is also inherently dialogical in character. We are often touched by what we touch.

Proximal knowledge is performative rather than representational. Its nonrepresentational quality is also context-specific, fragmentary, and often mundane. This contrasts with distal knowledge, which generally implies a broad, detached understanding based on knowledge at a distance or on a concern for the big picture. [ . . . ] Distal ways of knowing are concerned with an ontology of being in which the ‘thing’ being known is assumed to be in a stable and finished state and thereby amenable to representation.<sup>54</sup>

With these notions in mind, we may go back to Joseph Frank Currier, painting on the ground, dipping his brush in a puddle and soaking his paper with water. Currier was literally trading the vertical mode of painting (coordinated with the *horizon*) for a horizontal mode (coordinated with the *earth*). Moreover, this entire set of contacts between man and his immediate material environment, as well as the reciprocal contact between all agents (paper, earth, artist, water) align with the concepts of “landscape-as-dwelling” and “proximal knowledge”. For Sargent, Currier, Duveneck, Alexander, R. S. Gifford, Chase, Twachtman, and many other late-nineteenth-century landscape painters, “proximal knowledge” was cultivated through immersion in open-air painting and engagement with the painting’s materiality (whether paint or canvas/paper). Landscape was not perceived as a thing “in a stable and finished state”, likewise its representation could be executed only through the elevation of process, of non-representative agents such as texture and abstracting qualities. Some painters adopted a thick, highly textured paint surface; others went for the soft, evanescent, and misty appearance of very dry or thinned layering of paint that brought forth the material nature of the canvas’ weave.<sup>55</sup> Whatever the technique employed, the viewer’s sense of touch (the haptic sense) was supposed to be stimulated.<sup>56</sup> William Sartain’s (1843–1924) work *Solitude* (Figure 18) demonstrates both technical approaches: whereas the clouds in the upper part convey their wooliness through a thick *impasto*—probably executed with the aid of a palette knife—the ground in the lower part discloses the weave of the canvas, and was probably scumbled using a dry bristle with little paint on it. Hence, the softness of the sky and the coarseness of the marshland is not merely observed, but tactically felt.<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 18.** William Sartain, *Solitude*, by 1892, oil on canvas, 51.1 × 61.1 cm, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA. Gift of Mrs. James Mapes Dodge in accordance with the wishes of the artist. 1931.13.1.

## 7. A Matter of Surface

The gravitation toward more tangibly experienced landscape paintings, favored over the glossy, even-surfaced academic landscape painting, was a far more ambitious, extensive, and intricate change of mindset than was the “modernist” rebellion against “traditional” or “academic” techniques. The idealistic naturalism of the Hudson River School was often equated to mechanical, nonhuman reproduction. In a critical account that surveyed the 1880 retrospective exhibition of recently deceased Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823–1880) at the Metropolitan Museum (an exhibition that art historian Eleanor Jones Harvey dubbed “a symbolic funeral for the fading Hudson River School aesthetic” (Harvey 2003, p. 87)), the *New York World* critic categorized the late artist as belonging to “that class of artists who set themselves down to deliberately copy nature, rigidly stifling every attempt at utterance which the poetry and melody of their own souls might make. They were photographic, they were topographic, but they never succeeded in being artistic.”<sup>58</sup> Once again, looking at the landscape emanates nothing, according to the critic, except the surface of things, just as photographic or topographic rendering does. Being “artistic” stands for being attuned to one’s own “real” self, and opposes graphic or mechanical means of image-producing. This quality was considered to have become rarer in an age marked by aggressive consumption and commercialism, wherein the printed image played a crucial role.

In the late-nineteenth-century American cultural climate, an era most commonly referred to as the Gilded Age, the American art world was also undergoing significant changes as art collectors and dealers, art critics, galleries, and auction houses, were all becoming more notorious and competitive. Addressing issues of art and publicity, art historian Sarah Burns defined it as “the age of surfaces” (Burns 1996). In her seminal book *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America*, Burns commented that by the late nineteenth century, “the status of art as commodity became too obvious to ignore and too threatening to discount.” (Ibid, p. 49)<sup>59</sup> Artists were dependent upon the sales of their works in a highly competitive capitalist market and in an unstable economic climate. Nonetheless, being commercial for an artist was considered a disgrace: professional treason



against the “pure” motivations of true art. Maneuvering in this paradox, “artists had to weigh their options carefully in seeking to perfect their own precarious balancing acts—or risk being toppled from the higher planes of art.” (Ibid.)

The problem that nearly every artist faced was to create an aesthetic product destined for the marketplace without appearing to collude too deeply with its commodification. The further from the realm of market activity an artist could position himself, the more legendary his status was likely to become. (Ibid, p. 67)

This ambivalence is starkly reflected in the humorous dialogues of the Tile Club members: On the one hand, a conscious and reasonable decision to “do something decorative” as “this is a decorative age”; on the other hand, when one of the members posits the other with the question “What’ll you do with [the accomplished tiles]?” the answer is “Just what you do with the pictures you paint. [ . . . ] keep them” (Laffan 1879a, pp. 401–2). This wry, ironical comment reveals the status of many of these young painters, aspiring for financial success yet accepting its improbability with a certain amount of pride. Making art is conceived of as not aligning with financial considerations.

The dual relationships that artists of the Gilded Age developed toward consumerism and the dismissal of image production, was paving the way to and defining the new episteme of landscape painting as a practice based on authentic, raw experience in the landscape, enhanced in terms of materiality. It went hand-in-hand with the rationale of the Arts and Crafts revival that T. J. Jackson Lears viewed as one of the manifestations of antimodernism. “Arts and Crafts ideologues,” Lears noted, “came usually from among the business and professional people who felt most cut off from ‘real life’ and most in need of moral and cultural regeneration.” (Lears [1981] 2021, p. 61) The praxis of painting outdoors while cultivating “proximal knowledge”—alluding to the sense of touch, getting to ground level (both metaphorically and physically), taking ‘homey’ nature as a subject, and referring to the mundane—could therefore serve as an antidote to the repeatable schemes of visual trickery employed by former generations of landscape painters, and regain reality. During a large auction of John La Farge’s (1835–1910) paintings in 1878, the artist’s open-air works in particular were praised for the “rare and noble” ambition of their makers to be “free from artifice, from the vulgar *convenu*.” (Mr. LaFarge’s Pictures 1878, pp. 182–83)<sup>60</sup> Whereas the critic regarded La Farge’s outdoor paintings and studies (Figure 19) as exemplars of originality, integrity and authenticity, s/he emphasized their deviation from, and resistance to, the work of other popular landscape painters who –

[ . . . ] have made considerable progress toward the acquisition of infallible art-recipes of their own. [ . . . ] Is it that nature presents herself to these artists always under the same aspect? Or can it be that, having once succeeded in representing her under a certain form to the admiration of the crowd, they devote themselves thenceforth to the mechanical repetition of the effects by which they have won applause? (Ibid, 182)

This “mechanical repetition”, associated with print, photography, and industrial production—all practices largely employed in the consumer culture—signified the shallowness and lack of originality that many painters and critics spotted and tried to abolish. Moreover, it threatened America’s dearest, and perhaps oldest, resource and symbol of exceptionalism: nature. In the 1870s, 1880s, and to a greater extent the 1890s, landscape representation was at a risk of growing ever more commodified, the subject of schemes and recipes in which “the canvas at a proper distance presented a marketable imitation of nature.” (ibid.) Returning once more to Laffan’s “The Material of American Landscape”, a few sentences—wherein he refers to the “old school” of landscape painting influenced by German Romanticism—are particularly telling:

Nothing could be more devoid of true sentiment than [these paintings], and they are now being very properly relegated to the ignominy of the makers of cheap chromos, whom Providence seems to have selected as the agents whereby to do full and poetic justice to everything of the kind. (Laffan 1879b, p. 31)

By the overt preoccupation with materiality—of the work itself or the circumstances of its creation—artists were hoping to evade the work’s debasing categorization as a material commodity, like those “cheap chromos” that imitate preconceived formulas adopted by former generations. Resting on the *material* qualities of the work and, simultaneously, resisting its *materialist* aspect as a reproducible commodity, this ‘new generation’ of landscape painters tried to survive in the corporate “decorative age” while not sacrificing what they perceived as artistic integrity. They had to re-envision landscape painting, to prevent it from the grievous and ridiculed fate reflected in Haberle’s *Torn in Transit* (Figure 1), discussed at the beginning of this article, wherein the ‘real’ landscape is thoroughly transformed into an image, then exhibited, sold as a commodity, packaged, delivered—as an object—through the land from ‘here’ to ‘there’, and, unfortunately, its wrapping is inevitably torn and its material aspect eventually revealed. Accordingly, late-century painters embraced the material aspects of the work of art, not in order to qualify it as a mere commodity, but in order to underscore its purported truthiness and authenticity, as a thing of invaluable status. Nonetheless, as both Lears and Burns noted, eventually these strategies of resistance functioned as promoters and price tags within a capitalist order.



**Figure 19.** John La Farge, *Snow Field, Morning, Roxbury*, 1864, oil on beveled mahogany panel, 30.5 × 25.1 cm, Art Institute of Chicago. Purchased with funds provided by Mrs. Frank L. Sulzberger in memory of Mr. Frank L. Sulzberger. 1981.287.

## 8. Conclusions

The new phase in landscape painting, launched in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, embarked on open-air painting while developing a new approach to materiality. The idea of being immersed in a physical world of phenomena, and reacting thereto by emphasizing the mundane status of both painter and painting, contributed to the formulation of a new artistic episteme. By referring to phenomenological theories of the landscape < > human relationship, herein I sought to refine and define this moment in

American art. Tim Ingold's concept of dwelling, which opposes conceptions that set cognitive organization of space as preceding embodied and material practice, was presented in order to theorize the orientation of this outdoor praxis, adopted so enthusiastically by these painters. "Building [ . . . ]," stated Ingold, "cannot be understood as a simple process of transcription, of a pre-existing design of the final product onto a raw material substrate."<sup>61</sup> In very much the same way, late-nineteenth-century landscape painters viewed engagement in/with the landscape, signified by materiality and material means, as preceding or replacing schemes and narratives. Thus, the possibility of touching the landscape, whether literally outdoors or through its representation in a painting as a material surface, instead of merely looking at it as if through a window, formed the basis of an entirely new experience that might be understood through the term "proximal knowledge". By transforming the "material" of the American landscape—visual data of geographic features (both cultural and natural)—into "materiality", via the physical presence of paint, support, and earth, the painters under discussion 'built' their landscapes on the canvas in a literal sense.

Given the centrality of landscape imagery in nineteenth-century American art and culture, this shift echoed the striving of contemporaries (not solely artists) for realness and for an intense experience that T. J. Jackson Lears noted was occurring in a world that was becoming ever more detached, unreal, instrumental, and interest-driven. Thus, from a cultural-historical perspective, this new artistic episteme of the landscape, in a way, reflected an attempt to moderate the Gilded Age's emerging capitalistic agendas, which threatened to translate everything into saleable goods. Late nineteenth-century landscape painters' criticism of the former generation, which allegedly exhausted the image of the American landscape, targeted the latter's so-called detached arrogance, optically based rendition, and 'mechanical' schemes. While John Haberle's *Torn in Transit* undermines and empties the sense of touch—rendering the possibility of identifying materiality tactilely into a mere optic illusion—the landscape painters who insisted on going 'out there', into 'real' nature, affirmed materiality and touch, making it, by their own account, a gateway to reality.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The painting is in fact one of a series of three paintings on the same subject, bearing the same title, depicting three different landscape scenes. For more on Haberle in the context of American *trompe-l'oeil* painting, see Sill (2010); Drucker (1992).
- <sup>2</sup> While American painters of the 1830s and 1840s formulated American landscape painting as a leading genre in American painting, aesthetically they were resting on established Neoclassical and Romantic conventions from England, France, and Germany (most notably the Düsseldorf School), and on the work of Claude Lorraine (1604/5?–1682). See Novak (1980, 2007); O'Neill (1987).
- <sup>3</sup> By the time Haberle painted *Torn in Transit*, this perception was not new, as photographs and engravings of tourist attractions in the United States had become stock-in-trade since the mid-century. See Mackintosh (2019); Sears (1998).
- <sup>4</sup> For an inclusive study on visuality, truth, and deception in American art in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, see Leja (2004). Chapter 4, "Touching Pictures by William Harnett" addresses *trompe-l'oeil* paintings.
- <sup>5</sup> Notice the half-torn signature of the artist, which suggests another layer of meaning: Playing on the theme of postal delivery, it is inscribed as "from . . . Haberle", with the artist's first name torn, therefore omitted. This implies the commodified attribution of the object (the work) to its maker, and is a play on the concept of "originality", placing both object and authorship in an allegedly questionable or precarious state. Moreover, the artist's signature—his affirmative mark of authenticity—is represented rather than a presented.
- <sup>6</sup> The recent two decades saw a growing interest in the aspect of materiality in visual arts. See Roberts (2017). For Roberts' own notable contribution to the understanding of American eighteenth and nineteenth century painting through issues of materiality, see Roberts (2014).
- <sup>7</sup> As in mid- and late-nineteenth century European art, the notable non-Western influence on some of these painters, including Twachtman, was Japanese prints. See Bolger (1990).



- 8 On the Civil War as a national crisis and its reflection in the representation of the American landscape, see [Harvey \(2012\)](#). On the crisis of late nineteenth-century landscape painting, see [Cao \(2018\)](#). A fascinating study that challenges the binarity of “avant-garde painting” versus “academic painting” in European art is [Rosen and Zerner \(1984\)](#).
- 9 In American art literature, there is a tendency to define two major movements—Tonalism and Impressionism—through which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists were consolidating themselves stylistically. However, the distinction is not always as clear and constructive as one would like it to be, and there are many liminal cases. In this paper I largely ignore such stylistic categorization, addressing instead the issue of materiality in open-air painting, while noting that both Tonalists and Impressionists employed open-air painting methods to various degrees.
- 10 The National Academy of Design ([The National Academy of Design 1855](#)). This attitude represented part of the public’s opinion, whereas for many, Cole was still exemplary of genius as founder of the national school of landscape painting. Karen Georgi wonderfully showed the controversy that raged in the New York art world concerning these subtle issues, the opposing opinion being that the excessive naturalism employed by painters such as Asher Durand reflected art having become a technical craft, lacking artistic imagination, and represented materialism. [Georgi \(2006\)](#).
- 11 The core group of these younger artists seceded from the National Academy of Design in 1877, claiming that the Academy was too conservative and stringent, and established the Society of American Artists, thus lending an institutional manifestation to these contradictory conceptions. This is yet another interesting aspect that unfortunately could not be developed here.
- 12 While late nineteenth-century painters sometimes considered open-air paintings to be accomplished paintings in their own right, for previous generations, outdoor painting functioned as a (sometimes essential) sketching phase. Nonetheless, the appreciation of outdoor sketches as works of art to be exhibited at shows began mid-century, as was shown by [Harvey \(1998\)](#).
- 13 Such influences were most notably French—whether the School of Barbizon, and later, French Impressionism, or individual teachers such as Thomas Couture (1815–1879) and Carolus-Duran (1837–1917)—but also influences from England, Germany (especially Munich), The Hague school, and the Old Dutch Masters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
- 14 Some painters were known to even own a wagon or a boat to enable more accessible and convenient outdoor sessions. The more famous were the “floating studios” of artists such as Charles-Francois Daubigny (1817–1878) and Claude Monet (1840–1926), yet there are some interesting American precedents from the 1840s such as William Sidney Mount’s (1807–1868) “portable studio” furnished in a wagon ([Novak 2007](#), p. 120).
- 15 This wonderful image was taken from the exhibition catalogue by [Luijten et al. \(2020\)](#). I am grateful to Juliette Parmentier-Courreau from the Fondation Custodia, Paris, for providing a high-resolution image. Unfortunate accidents while painting outdoors were the subject of some biographic anecdotes, often told in first person. One of the more famous was Monet’s description of himself painting at the Porte d’Aval, when a big wave dashed him into the water: “My immediate thought was, I’m a goner [ . . . ] but I finally got on all fours, in such a state, Lord! [ . . . ] the palette, still in my hand, hit me in the face, so my beard was covered in blue, yellow, etc. [ . . . ] I lost my picture, which was quickly broken, along with my bag, my easel, etc.” Quoted in [Wildenstein \(2016\)](#), p. 265. This account and others reveal the miseries of the unfortunate open-air painter, at the same time as it shows the artist’s determination and willpower.
- 16 [Callen \(2015\)](#). On the subject of the worker-painter, see pp. 9–10, and Chapter 2: “*Maître Courbet: The Worker-Painter*,” pp. 105–58.
- 17 On women American landscape painters, see [Siegel \(2011\)](#), pp. 149–84). Late nineteenth-century examples of open-air painting might be found in the works of prominent women painters such as Lilla Cabot Perry (1848–1933), Cecilia Beaux (1855–1942), and Evelyn McCormick (1862–1948), among others.
- 18 See, e.g., [Brownell \(1880\)](#), p. 10). However, this ultimate individualism, wherein an artist can invent his own techniques, was ambivalently received. American paint firms warned painters that “deterioration in hue” in contemporary paintings should be “attributed to the ignorance of the modern artist as regards the actual nature of the materials he employs.” [Standage \(1886\)](#). Quoted in [Katlan \(1999\)](#), p. 22).
- 19 Some painters overtly resisted varnishing, and aspired to simpler, less eye-catching frames. See [Mayer and Myers \(2013\)](#), esp. Chapter 2, “Eclectic Materials and Methods, 1860–1910.” On hastened or hastened-looking painting in French art, strongly influencing American art in this era, see [Brettell \(2000\)](#).
- 20 One can easily trace French philosophy, in particularly Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–1778) ideas on the innocence of nature, echoing in Low’s description.
- 21 Apparently, none of Bunker’s paintings from his stay in England with Sargent survived, so it is impossible to know what was actually painted on his canvas. There is even an interesting possibility that Bunker painted Sargent on this occasion. See ([Terra Foundation n.d.](#)).
- 22 Munich had become the preferred location for studying in the early 1870s, when France’s painful defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and subsequent political instability rendered Paris a problematic place to study. Munich Royal Academy, with its less classical heritage, became for many Americans the forefront of modern painting, fusing the Courbet-influenced teachings of Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900) with a great appreciation for the Old Dutch and Spanish Masters, such as Frans Hals (c. 1582–1666) and Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). However, in the 1880s, Paris regained its status as a European capital for the arts.

- 23 See [Johnson et al. \(2006, p. 68\)](#). Now a nearly forgotten painter, Joseph F. Currier was a well-known figure in the late nineteenth-century American art world. In fact, his artistic influence was so strong that the critic William Brownell claimed that Currier's watercolors "became the subject of endless discussion and may almost be said to have divided 'art circles' into two hostile parties". See W. C. Brownell, "The Younger Painters of America", *Scribner's Monthly*, 10. Surprisingly, the main scholarly resource about this fascinating artist remains Nelson White's book from [White \(1936\)](#). Since then, an inclusive, updated monograph on Currier's work has not been published to my knowledge.
- 24 *The Art Amateur*, Volume II, No. 8 (January 1883). Quoted in [Rosenberg \(1992\)](#), p. 144. Responding to this critical comment, Rosenberg remarks that "The medium transcends the barrier between artifice and reality, painted and real ground are wed and landscape is made from itself." See *Ibid.*, p. 145. Somewhat similarly, Twachtman's habit of deliberately exposing his canvases to the sun and rain as a way to render representation a part of the physical landscape, was discussed in Gonnen, "Performing Openness", pp. 44–45.
- 25 It is reasonable to assume that the practice of working on the ground was compatible with small formats and watercolor, and that while working outdoors with oil paints, especially on large canvases, Currier set his canvases vertically.
- 26 On the issue of staging spontaneity and its cultivation in French painting, see [Brettell \(2000, pp. 28–35\)](#).
- 27 On the American community in Polling, see [Peters \(2000, pp. 56–91\)](#).
- 28 Chase was also an avid collector of Currier's works. See [White \(1936, p. 71\)](#).
- 29 The Realist tradition, intensely cultivated by painters such as Courbet and Millet, viewed the artist as a worker, proletarian, a comrade of the farmers and laborers who were the subjects of so many paintings during the era. See [Callen \(2015, pp. 105–58\)](#). Another worker's identity was that of the artisan, notably constructed by the Arts and Craft movement that gained considerable influence in the United States. See Lears, *No Place of Grace*, Chapter 2: "The Figure of the Artisan: Arts and Crafts Ideology", pp. 59–96.
- 30 In the first *Scribner's Monthly* article on the Tile Club that appeared on January 1879, "The Tile Club at Work", the reasons for the establishment of the Tile Club were explicitly explained: "'This is a decorative age,' said an artist. 'We should do something decorative, if we would not be behind the times.'" See [Laffan \(1879a, p. 401\)](#).
- 31 Note that some of those mentioned became famous only a decade or two later, and at least some of their public visibility can be credited to the Tile Club's activity. For more information on the Tile Club, see Ronald G. Pisano, "Decorative Age? Or Decorative Craze? The Art and Antics of the Tile Club (1877–1887)" in [Pisano \(1999, pp. 11–69\)](#).
- 32 Using nicknames in the magazine's article might have also served as mildly obscuring, separating between the amusing character of the published account and these artists' more "serious", respectable public personae in intellectual circles, connecting them with collectors and dealers. Although it was not hermetic, as there were some hints as to the real identities of the article's subjects, such a separation served to preserve "appropriate" public appearance.
- 33 Laffan had a successful career as a journalist, later becoming editor of the *New York Sun*. Shinn, besides writing for several magazines on art issues, published several books on art and had a special interest in private art collections.
- 34 Art critic William Brownell stressed, "Nature is to [the new generation of artists] a material rather than a model." [Brownell \(1880, p. 8\)](#).
- 35 Although this approach suggests a certain shift from the "exotic" travel of the Tile Club to rural Long Island, it is more likely that Laffan considered such relatively "near" locales (for New Yorkers or New Englanders) to be places of familiarity, versus the far West, the South, or Europe. Overall it is to be noted that Laffan wrote for the Bostonian *American Art Review*, thus aiming to awaken, first and foremost, Northeasterners' sentiment. This aim correlated with late-nineteenth-century regionalism. On this subject in the context of American painting, see [Rosenbaum \(2006\)](#).
- 36 *Ibid.* The phrasing of this sentence is obviously very "Whistlerian". James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) was a most influential figure on many American artists, and also embodied the link between the much-sought-after European training and American identity. His painting, notably his *Nocturnes* of the Thames, and his theoretical ideas—which were fundamental to Aestheticism—of "musical" color harmonies, were a model for landscape painting adopted by Americans. Yet despite having worked with Gustave Courbet in his early artistic career and befriending Manet, Monet, and other Impressionists, Whistler eventually had little significance to open-air painting, and his *Nocturns* were mostly reflective representations of visual memories and orchestrated, aestheticized compositions.
- 37 Although the identity of the painter remains anonymous, it was suggested that it was Twachtman, as besides being friends with Laffan, some biographical details in the description correlate with that of Twachtman. Moreover, the painting described matches some of Twachtman's works. See Lisa N. Peters, "Twachtman's Realist Art and the Aesthetic Liberation of Modern life, 1878–1883" in Peters, ed., *John Twachtman: A "Painter's Painter"*, pp. 40–42.
- 38 Twachtman did adopt Laffan's ideas by making the natural setting of his private property in Greenwich, Connecticut the almost sole subject of his work during the 1890s. See the recent exhibition and catalog, [Peters \(2021\)](#), *Life and Art: The Greenwich Paintings of John Henry Twachtman*. The use of the terms "impression", "impressionable", and even "impressionist" in American journalism in the 1870s and the early 1880s rarely refers directly to the French movement or its influences; rather, the use of such terms is generic and descriptive, usually in the context of a looser handling of paint and a sketch-like appearance.

See, for instance, Henry James' (1843–1916) criticism of paintings of rocks in Utah by Thomas Moran (1837–1926), for depicting remote locales: [James \(1875, pp. 95–96\)](#).

Inness was a prominent painter and intellectual who had a strong and lasting influence on the late-nineteenth-century art world. His conceptions regarding art also derived from Swedenborgian thought, which views the physical and spiritual worlds of existence as parallel one to another. Born in 1825, while Inness was of the same generation as the so-called “second-generation” Hudson River School painters (such as Frederic E. Church and Sanford R. Gifford), he radically changed his approach to landscape painting in the 1870s, therefore it spoke more to the ‘new generation’, affecting a great many of them.

This quotation originally appeared in an interview with Inness, published in *Harper's Magazine* on February 1878. See [Trumble \(1895, p. 40\)](#).

Such analysis of socio-political meanings in American landscape painting is well established and contributed greatly to the scholarship of American art in the latter decades of the twentieth century. See [Miller \(1993\)](#); [Boime \(1991\)](#); [Pyne \(1996\)](#); [Rosenbaum \(2006\)](#).

I do not contend, obviously, that these nineteenth-century figures shared the same worldview as late twentieth- and twenty-first century thinkers. I rather suggest that approaching the late nineteenth-century mindset and ideas about the landscape with the terms and tools of landscape phenomenology, might help us to clarify some points. The common criticism of phenomenological approaches is that they tend to overlook socio-political issues, gender, class, and race issues, etc. Nonetheless, phenomenology provides a valuable lens that helps to re-envision entities such as landscape, experience, and humanity; scrutinizing cultural epistemes, and addressing issues of embodiment, non-representation, and subject < > object relationship, all of which are consistent with this article's main thesis.

Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” quoted in Ingold, “Building, Dwelling, Living” in *The Perception of the Environment*, p. 186.

Ingold, “Building, Dwelling, Living: How Animals and People Make Themselves at Home in the World,” in *The Perception of the Environment*, p. 186. According to Paul Cloke and Owain Jones, who adopted Ingold's “dwelling perspective”, dwelling is “about the rich intimate ongoing togetherness of beings and things which make up landscapes and places, and which bind together nature and culture over time.” [Cloke and Jones \(2001, p. 651\)](#).

Ingold, “The Temporality of the Landscape”, p. 207.

Merleau-Ponty himself, in order to demonstrate his ideas about perception, used late-nineteenth-century painter Paul Cezanne. Therefore, the link between twentieth-century phenomenological thinking and late-nineteenth-century painting has a previous basis. See [Merleau-Ponty \(1992\)](#).

The grounded boat in the painting, quite far from the water, provides another interesting perspective, especially with reference to the citation above.

See the description of this illustration in [Laffan and Strahan \(1879, p. 461\)](#).

The original work from which the engraving was made consisted of charcoal and body-color wash—the latter probably used to convey the earth's texture. See *Ibid*.

See, for instance, [Tilley and Bennett \(2008\)](#), a study that takes a kinaesthetic approach—one that uses the full body and all the senses—rather than an iconographic approach to carvings and other forms of prehistoric rock art.

The high horizon line and flattened space in late-nineteenth-century landscape painting (both American and European) is regularly attributed to Far Eastern influences—most commonly Japanese prints—a notion that has become nearly axiomatic. While not dismissing this firmly established idea, I suggest here another perspective on this tendency in American art.

Hetherington studied visually impaired people's experience of place. Notably, part of his research focuses on these people's way of experiencing art at the museum.

[Hetherington \(2003, pp. 1934–36\)](#). Hetherington relies on the work of Cooper and Law, and Josipovici. Undermining the sense of vision and visual perception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is explored in [Jay \(1993\)](#). It is interesting how the French word *touche*, “touch”, played a significant role in avant-garde jargon, standing for a daub of color and emphasizing the painter's action.

This method of painting was termed by Joyce Hill Stoner “weavism”, and was often employed by artists related to the Tonalist movement. On the issue of painting's materiality in the context of American Tonalism, see [Stoner \(2008, pp. 91–109\)](#).

For more research on the sense of touch and embodied experience in landscape painting of the Gilded Age, see [Bell \(2012, pp. 287–352\)](#).

Sartain's words are worth quoting in this context, as his notions on simplicity and viewer's vantage point relate to other aspects hitherto discussed: “[...] take two people with a camera—one who simply understands the working of the machine, and an artist who knows nothing about photographing, but who does know a picturesque spot that will make a picture when he sees it. The first man always wants to get up on a high place, where there is a fine view covering miles of scenery. [...] He wants what he calls a ‘view.’ But the artist knows this will be uninteresting as a picture. There is too much in it. The eye becomes confused in trying to take in so many objects. [...] One of the virtues of a landscape painting is that it suggests itself at once to the observer as a whole. [...] [T]he painter [...] is satisfied with interpretations on a smaller scale. He looks for ‘bits’ which he can handle



successfully[ . . . ]. Some of the most successful and pleasing landscapes are often very simple in subject.” See interview in Ives (1891), pp. 81–82.

- 58 “The New Loan Exhibition,” *New York World*, 1880. Quoted in David Schuyler, “Jervis McEntee: The Trials of a Landscape Painter” in Nancy Siegel, ed., *The Cultured Canvas*, p. 203.
- 59 For more on the complexity of being between the marketplace and “ideal” art, see Chapter 2, “The Artist in the Age of Surfaces”, pp. 46–76.
- 60 Most of La Farge’s open-air oil paintings of landscapes were made during the 1860s and early 1870s, as in the mid-1870s and 1880s he was absorbed in his decorative and interior design projects. His later landscapes were mostly aquarelles.
- 61 Ingold, “Building, Dwelling, Living”, p. 186.

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