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Fine Art

WILLIAM HART (1823 1894)

Summer Idyll in the Hudson Valley, 1849

Oil on canvas

22 x 30 inches

Signed and dated 1849, lower right

Provenance:

The artist to his 10th Street Studio Building neighbor

By descent in the family until 2012 when acquired by Hawthorne Fine Art

Private Collection, MA

An esteemed and significant second generation Hudson River School painter, William Hart is primarily known for his finely detailed, bucolic American landscapes. Born in Kilmarnock, Scotland in 1823, he immigrated with his family to Albany, New York when he was eight years old. His younger siblings, James McDougal Hart (1828 1894) and Julie Hart Beers (1835 1913), also went on to become accomplished landscape painters. The Hart brothers began their artistic careers painting decorative side-panels for a coach-maker in the Albany-Troy area. Around the age of eighteen, William pursued a career as a portrait painter, touring the Midwestern states in search of commissions. However, he soon turned his full attention to landscape painting, which he studied further in Scotland from 1849 to 1853.

Summer Idyll in the Hudson Valley is a rare and very early example of the pastoral landscapes for which William Hart became well known. Dated 1849, it was painted while the artist was still based in Albany. Few paintings are known from the period prior to his move to New York City in 1853, though he exhibited at the National Academy of Design as early as 1848. In 1849, Hart exhibited two paintings at the American Art Union, *Scene on the Helderberg Mountains* (Fig 1) and *Distant View of Albany* (Fig 2), both of which are comparable to Hawthorne's painting. In each of these 1849 works, Hart pictures the Hudson River Valley as a Claudian Arcadia with grazing cattle, lush pastures, rocky outcroppings, meandering rivers, and figures at rest. This view of America as a New Eden was popularized by the American Art Union, which promoted and disseminated works by young American landscape painters such as Hart, John F. Kensett, Frederic E. Church, Jasper F. Cropsey in the 1840s and early 1850s.

Contributing to the picturesque quality of Hart's *Summer Idyll in the Hudson Valley* is the Italianate villa nestled within a group of trees at the water's edge. Beginning in the 1840s "Tuscan" villas such as this, with their distinctive low-pitched roofs, wide overhanging eaves, narrow arched windows, and corner towers, were built throughout the Hudson River Valley, replacing the Federal style mansions of the



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

previous era (Fig 3). Leading this Romantic movement in architecture were landscape architects Andrew Jackson Downing and Alexander Jackson Davis, who called for a more “natural” architecture following English Gothic and Italian Renaissance models, both of which are more integrated with the landscape than box-shaped Federal houses. Downing and Davis emphasized in their writings the importance of a harmonious relation between the house and its setting, between domesticity and nature. Gothic cottages and Italian type villas are still conspicuous in towns along the Hudson River.



Fig 1. William Hart, *Scene on the Helderberg Mountains*, 1849. Private Collection.



Fig 2. William Hart, *Distant View of Albany*, 1849. Albany Institute of History and Art.

Though his artistic vision and skill were already fully developed at the time that he painted *Summer Idyll in the Hudson Valley*, Hart spent the next four years studying landscape painting in Scotland, and painting the Scottish and English countryside. Upon his return to the United States in 1853, he exhibited these European pictures at the National Academy of Design. That same year, Hart established a studio in New York City. His landscape paintings, which skillfully blend realism of detail and idealism of spirit, soon captured the interest of art critics and collectors. He received positive reviews in *The Crayon* and the *The Cosmopolitan Art Journal*. These journals also published notes on his whereabouts and activities, a level of attention reserved for the most renowned of American painters, such as Frederic Church, John Kensett, Jasper Cropsey, and Asher Durand—a testament to Hart’s rising importance.

Hart was elected as an associate member of the National Academy of Design in 1855 and a full member in 1858. He served as the first president of the Brooklyn Academy of Design in 1865, and as the founding



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

president of the American Society of Watercolorists. By 1879, his landscape paintings of New York, Maine, New Hampshire, Virginia, and Michigan, according to one contemporaneous critic, could be found “in almost all the principal private collections in the Atlantic cities”¹ Hart’s paintings now reside in the distinguished permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., among many others.



Fig 3. Lindenwald, the estate of President Martin Van Buren in Kinderhook, New York. Originally built in 1797 as a red brick Georgian-style house, it was remodeled into a fashionable Italianate villa in 1849 by American architect Richard Upjohn.

¹. Mark Sullivan, *James and William Hart: American Landscape Painters* (Philadelphia: John F. Warren, 1983), 6.