



HAWTHORNE
Fine Art

ALEX JEAN FOURNIER (1865—1948)

Morning, Highlands of the Hudson, 1887

Oil on canvas

20 x 32 inches

Signed and dated 1887, lower right

Inscribed with title on verso

Provenance:

Private collection, St. Louis, MO

Alexis Jean Fournier has a two-pronged legacy in American art history. He was highly regarded for his Barbizon-like naturalistic landscapes, particularly of his native Minnesota. He was also a major figure in the American Arts and Crafts movement, arguably the most prolific artist of Elbert Hubbard's Roycroft community in East Aurora, New York. As such, Fournier made important inroads in diversifying American art tradition.

Fournier was born in St. Cloud, Minnesota in 1865 into a French-Canadian family. When he was 14, the family moved to Minneapolis, which provided him with means to pursue his aspirations to be an artist. While the family could not afford formal artistic training, Fournier found work painting signs and stage scenery, which often required him to paint panoramas. Soon, Fournier applied his skills to painting landscapes, and found modest success; he earned enough money to attend a class at the newly opened Minneapolis School of Art, where he studied under the Boston artist Douglas Volk (1856—1935). After this formal training, Fournier's work matured and he was able to establish a studio and support his family as a professional artist.

Fournier enjoyed the support of many benefactors during his career, one of which was a



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Fine Art

man named J.J. Smith who hired Fournier as a staff artist on an archaeological trip to the Southwest. Upon his return, he painted a 50 x 12 foot panorama called *The Cliff Dwellers*, which depicted the stone cliff dwellings of the Ancient Pueblo Indians in the Mesa Verde region of Colorado. This mural was shown in the 1893 Colombian Exhibition in Chicago, but was then sold without record and ultimately disappeared; its location is still unknown today.

At this time, Fournier's painting was beginning to turn away from the Impressionistic style of his early works to one more inclined with Realism. In 1893, he travelled to France (funded by several benefactors) to study at the Académie Julian and learn from the French Barbizon painters, whose blend of Realism and Romanticism mirrored his own aesthetic. He made several more trips to Paris between 1895 and 1901, returning to Minneapolis where he continued to paint Minnesota landscapes in an increasingly Barbizon style.

Concurrently with this time, however, Fournier was increasingly becoming active in the growing American Arts and Crafts movement. In 1903, he accepted the role of Art Director for the Roycroft art community in East Aurora, New York, although he would not move there permanently until 1937 (he first split his time between Minneapolis and East Aurora, and then between there and Indiana, where he became associated with the Brown County Impressionist Painters). Fournier died in 1948 from injuries he sustained from slipping on an icy sidewalk. His obituaries described his as "one of the last representatives of the Barbizon school of French painting."¹

During his career, Fournier also spent time at various art colonies throughout the United States, including the one settled in Woodstock, New York.² It is most likely he painted *Morning, Highlands on the Hudson* during this period in New York. Fournier's subject, the

¹ *The St. Louis Star and Times*, January 21, 1948, p. 4.

² It is unknown exactly when Fournier was at the Woodstock colony.



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Hudson Highlands, is very important in both American art and history. A range of mountains situated on both sides of the Hudson River in New York, it was a strategic stronghold for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, preventing the British from cutting off New England from the rest of the colonies. Decades later, it inspired many of Thomas Cole's (1801—1848) earliest canvases, paintings that would be the first created in what is now called the Hudson River School. The region had not lost its popularity with American artists by the end of the nineteenth century; not only Fournier, but also many other artists, depicted the area in its contemporary context as a major water route for trade and tourism. Fournier's painting features not only sailboats set out on the river, but larger steam-powered vessels as well, a new technology used to ferry both cargo and tourists up and down the river. This juxtaposition between the old and the new, which highlighted the changes affecting both commerce and leisure at the end of the nineteenth century, was a common fascination among Fournier and his contemporaries. Take, for example, Samuel Colman's similar depiction of Storm King, a mountain situated in the Highland Hudsons.



Samuel Colman, *Storm King on the Hudson*, 1866, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Fournier's painting is one of great detail, from the moss growing on the rocks in the foreground to the wisps of smoke issuing from the steamboat's stacks in the center of the composition. Like Colman's painting, it documents not only a transition in technology, but also in American painting, an early example of a modern landscape.