

Nineteenth-Century American Paintings

// Orin Zahra

Three works, by Kate Newhall (1870–1917), Abigail Tyler Oakes (1823–1898), and Maria Dixon (active 1870s–d. 1896), are among the latest additions to the museum's walls, enriching its holdings of nineteenth-century paintings. They are museum purchases made possible by a generous gift from founding members Dr. Robert Beckman and Susan Beckman, in memory of Robert's mother, Marion Forman Beckman.

Marion Beckman was born in 1918 in Philadelphia. Although she had dreams of becoming an artist, she instead faced familial obligations to earn money to support her brother's education. "What really strikes me about

my mother is her persistence," recalls Robert Beckman.

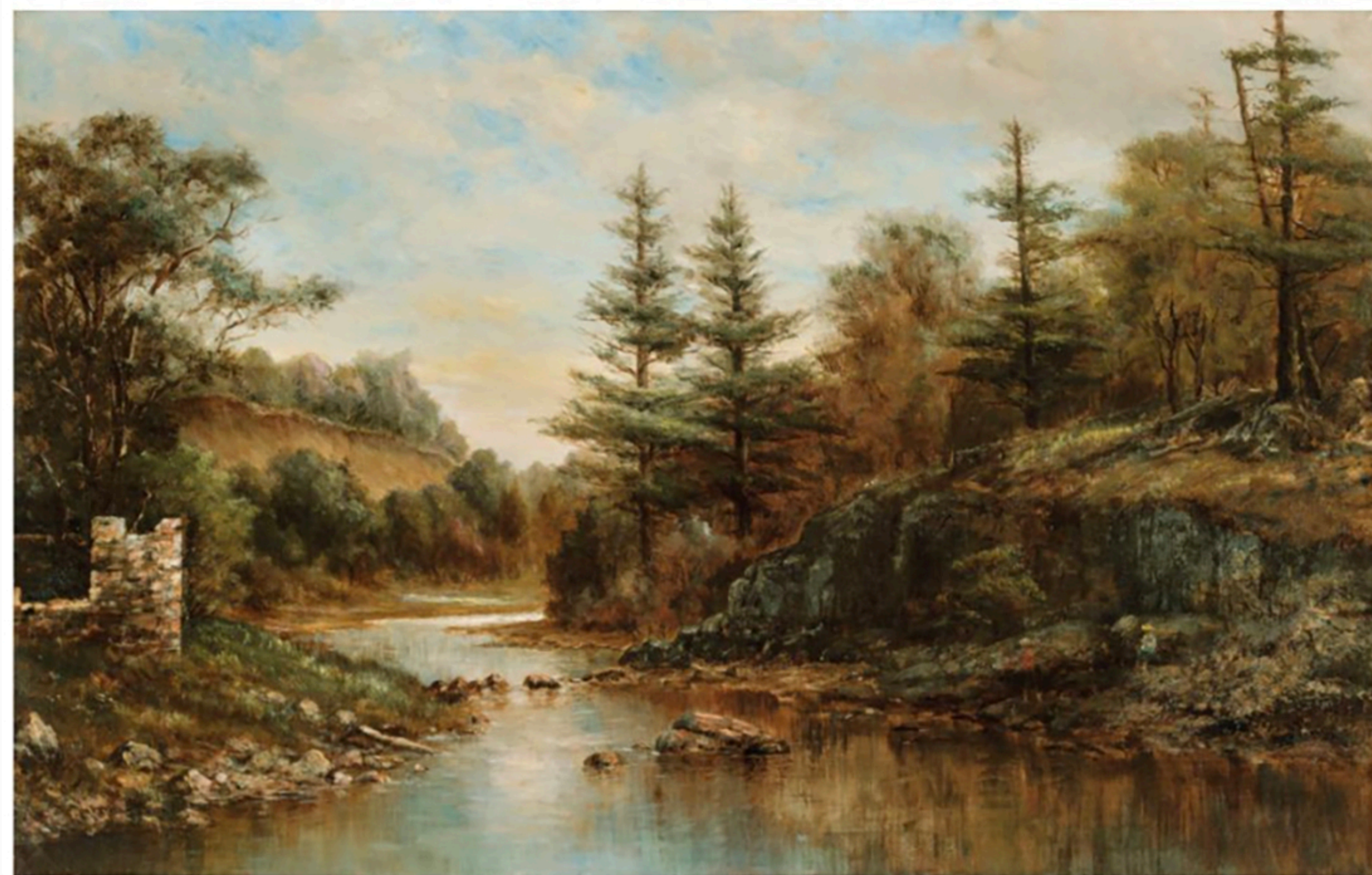
Working as a bookkeeper during the Depression years, she taught herself oil painting, producing landscapes and still lifes with the goal of honing her skills. At the age of forty-five, she suffered a stroke and was never able to pursue her craft with the same vigor. "She was a courageous and loving wife and mother, and a dynamic self-taught artist." Marion Beckman's story is one that echoes the lives of many aspiring women artists. The Beckman family felt a deep resonance with NMWA's mission: they were eager to help the museum unearth and shine a light on the cultural triumphs of women artists, particularly those whose contributions

were neglected or stymied.

Robert Beckman worked with the museum to select gifts that would be valued additions to the collection and aptly reflect Marion Beckman's artistic interests. NMWA curators approached Hawthorne Fine Arts, a New York City gallery that specializes in works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American art, many by women largely forgotten to history. Beckman's support allowed the curators to focus on and purchase these paintings, which particularly augment the museum's representation of historical women artists exploring the American wilderness, a genre that has typically focused on male artists in art historical scholarship.

The Beckman family felt a deep resonance with NMWA's mission—their recent gifts help shine a light on the cultural triumphs of women.

Kate W. Newhall, *Near Plainfield, NY [In the Gorge]*, 1881; Oil on canvas, 16 x 25 in.; NMWA, Museum Purchase: Funds donated by Dr. Robert A. Beckman and Family in honor of Marion Forman Beckman



Abigail Tyler Oakes, *View of the Connecticut River Valley*, 1854; Oil on canvas, 17 1/4 x 24 in.; NMWA, Museum Purchase: Funds donated by Dr. Robert A. Beckman and Family in honor of Marion Forman Beckman

The curators' selection of the paintings by Newhall and Oakes was inspired by Marion Beckman's own appreciation for historical landscapes and seascapes. Newhall was a prolific landscape painter, depicting subjects from the mountains and rivers of New England to coastal scenes of the San Francisco Bay Area. *Near Plainfield, NY [In the Gorge]* (1881) is rendered in careful detail. Its sense of quiet calm is enhanced by the stillness of the clear water, which captures the reflection of the nearby trees and rocky cliffs.

Abigail Tyler Oakes, one of California's first professional women artists, created panoramic landscape paintings that have commonalities with those of the famed Hudson River School.¹ *View of the Connecticut River Valley* (1854) depicts a highly atmospheric background in a condensed composition. A small group of grazing cattle, lush vegetation, and distant mountain peaks direct the viewer's eye to the hint of a town along a winding riverbank. Both successful artists in their lifetimes, Newhall and Oakes have not received the recognition they deserve posthumously.

Maria Dixon's *A Quiet Moment* (1896) introduces a genre previously absent from NMWA's holdings of interior scenes and portraiture—historical women reading. The painting features a young woman, likely Dixon's daughter, Tillie, leafing through a book. Depictions of women reading had cultural significance in the late nineteenth century, as increased access to literature gave women intellectual freedom and exposure to worlds beyond the domestic



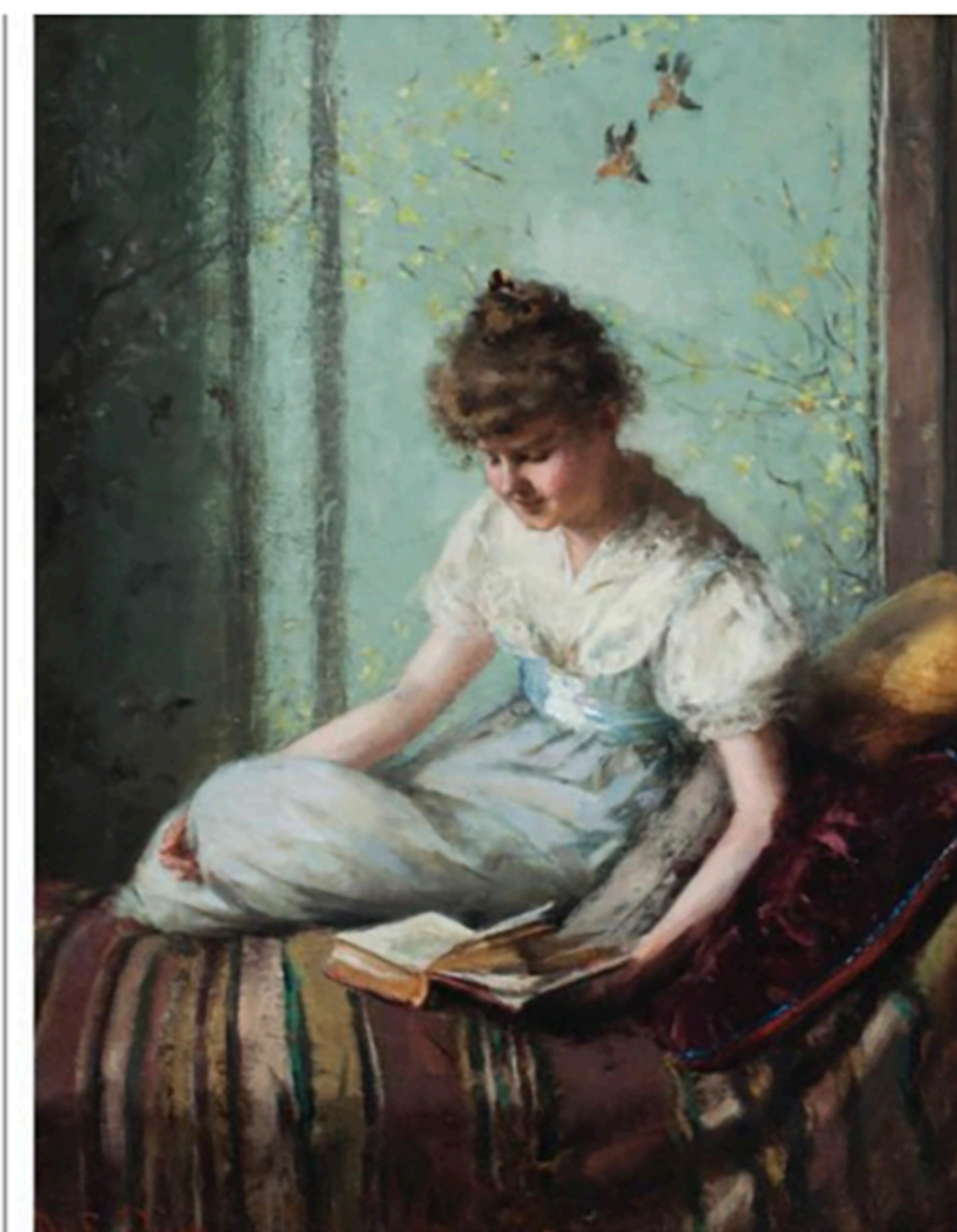
realm. Of this painting, Robert Beckman says, "When we saw *A Quiet Moment*, we loved it, as we knew my mother would."

This year, when Marion Forman Beckman would have turned 101, NMWA honors her life through the acquisition of three vibrant examples of historical American art. Through the Beckman family's vision and support, the artists Newhall, Oakes, and Dixon join a fellowship of women whose artistic visions are recognized in the nation's capital. Ready to be discovered by NMWA's visitors, these works enhance the museum's collection as it continues to tell a fuller story of women in the arts.

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Note:

1. This is the second painting by Oakes in NMWA's collection, after *Hudson River Landscape* (1852), a recent gift from the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. The Hudson River School was a mid-nineteenth-century art movement whose artists depicted sweeping landscapes surrounding the Hudson River Valley.



Maria R. Dixon, *A Quiet Moment*, 1896; Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 in.; NMWA, Museum Purchase: Funds donated by Dr. Robert A. Beckman and Family in honor of Marion Forman Beckman