



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872)

Bash-Bish Falls, 1857

Oil on canvas

34 ¼ x 27 inches

Signed and dated 1857, lower left

In 1864, James Jackson Jarves called John F. Kensett, ‘the Bryant of our painters’¹ for the way he poeticized landscape and led the artistic development of the Hudson River School’s second generation. While Cole invented the epic American landscape composition and depicted nature on a grand and lofty scale and Asher B. Durand took to recording forest interiors, which have a slightly more intimate feel, Kensett brought the landscape down to human terms. Through the fine detail of his brush and the brilliant illumination of his Luminist technique, nature became more intimately accessible to the beholder.



Figure 1: *Bash-Bish Falls, 1857*, Oil on canvas
34 ¼ x 27 inches, Signed and dated 1857, lower
left, Hawthorne Fine Art

The renowned critic and art historian, Henry Tuckerman noted this personal element in the artist’s work when he wrote, “The calm sweetness of Kensett’s best efforts, the consciousness with which he preserves local diversities-the evenness of manner, the patience in detail, the harmonious tone-all are traceable to the artist’s feeling and innate disposition, as well as to his skill.”

Kensett was also honored for his noble accomplishments both in the artistic production and politics of his time. He was appointed in 1859 by President Buchanan to serve as one of the three art commissioners that directed the artistic decoration of the capital. In 1864, he served as the chairman of the Metropolitan Fair’s Art Committee, which raised funds for the U.S. Sanitation Committee. Kensett was a founder and president of the Artist’s Fund Society and was an active member and fundraiser for the National Academy of Design.

¹ Cited in Spassky, Natalie, *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Volume 2* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985) 31.



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art



Figure 2: *Bash-Bish Falls*, 1851, Lyman Allyn Art Museum.



Figure 3: *The Bash-Bish Falls*, 1855, Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 29 inches, National Academy of Art.

Bash-Bish Falls, located on the border of New York and Massachusetts was a favorite subject amongst 19th century painters. In the mid-19th century Kensett painted the falls from various vantage points more than 5 times.² In *Bash-Bish Falls*, 1857 [Hawthorne Fine Art], the arch of the tree canopy overhead is repeated in Kensett's choice of an arch shaped support. The sky is hidden behind dense foliage while sunlight penetrates the center of the composition with a soft green glow. The dark shadows of the foreground contrast with areas of light on the craggy rocks creating an interesting chiaroscuro effect. The cool palette and foreground shadows recall Kensett's earlier painting *The Bash-Bish*, 1855 [National Academy] while its compositional elements are most similar to *Bash-Bish Falls*, 1851 [Lyman Allyn Art Museum].

In *Bash-Bish Falls*, 1851 [Lyman Allyn Art Museum], Kensett chose a small oval format for his composition creating an intimate space for the viewer while the figures on the footbridge add an element of scale. In *The Bash-Bish*, 1855 [National Academy] and *Bash-Bish Falls, Massachusetts*, 1855 [MFA Boston] Kensett chose to forgo the oval format of 1851 and used instead a larger support to further emphasize the height of the falls. The vertical composition reveals the influence of his friend and colleague Asher B. Durand, who favored this format in his forest interiors.

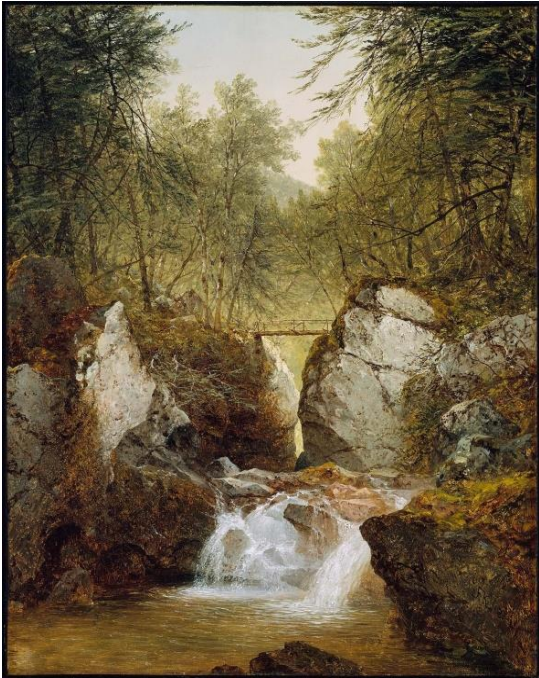
While compositionally similar, each painting has a slightly different vantage point. In *The Bash-Bish*, 1855 [National Academy], the viewer is placed slightly deeper within the composition and off to the right. The two central boulders overlap slightly and the footbridge they support has a slight diagonal skew. In *Bash-Bish Falls, Massachusetts*, 1855 [MFA Boston], the footbridge is perpendicular to the picture plane and we view the falls nearly head on.

² Howat, John K., *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987) 151



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art



Kensett's palette in *In Bash-Bish Falls, Massachusetts, 1855* [MFA Boston] is full of warm browns and greens. Sunlight filters through foliage in the background and a small opening in the gorge. The cascading water shimmers as it empties into a transparent pool of shallow water. Conversely, in the National Academy painting Kensett has used a cooler palette. The sky is dappled with small clouds and hints of sunlight flicker through the trees at the upper left. The rocks in foreground are reduced to shadow.

In each painting of Bash-Bish, Kensett has successfully created "...a magical otherworldly grotto, a place of private enchantment."³

Figure 4: *Bash-Bish Falls, Massachusetts, 1855*
Oil on canvas, 29 7/8 x 24 1/8 inches, MFA Boston.

³ Howat, John K., *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987) 153