



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art



WILLIAM LOUIS SONNTAG (1822-1900)

Cumberland River
Oil on canvas
30 x 50 inches
Signed lower left

Provenance:

Private Collection, PA

William Louis Sonntag, Sr., born in East Liberty, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, was best known as a central figure in the Hudson River School of painting. At age twenty-one, despite objections from his parents, Sonntag moved to Cincinnati to continue his study of painting at the Cincinnati Academy of Fine Arts. Here he would have met fellow landscape painter Robert Scott Duncanson (1821–1872), with whom he developed a life-long friendship. Throughout his time in Cincinnati, Sonntag made trips through the Ohio River Valley and into the mountains in West Virginia and Kentucky. He also had his own studio and store-front gallery, where his exhibitions caught the attention of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad company, which commissioned the artist to paint landscapes along their railroad route for publicity purposes.

In 1853, Sonntag took the first of a series of trips to Florence, Italy, often accompanied by Duncanson, and eventually moved to New York City in 1856 where he completed Romantic, idealized paintings of landscapes and ancient ruins in Italy. Sonntag also began traveling throughout New England and the Hudson River Valley, creating grand compositions of the American wilderness in scenes of locations like the Catskill Mountains, which were inspired by the father of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole (1801–1848).

Beginning during the Civil War, Sonntag also traveled in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The closing of the South to travel eliminated the possibility of painting in much of the Allegheny and greater Appalachian Mountain Range. However, Sonntag continued to visit the White Mountains throughout the remainder of his career. Between 1850 and 1900, the White Mountains were a popular location for tourists, artists, and writers searching for picturesque views and artistic inspiration.¹ The expansion of the Atlantic and St. Lawrence Railroads to the White Mountain Range in 1851 made it much easier for tourists to get to their destination in the mountains. Gorham, New Hampshire, became a major tourist destination, and many hotels and inns opened up as jumping off points for visitors to the mountains. By 1870, the White Mountains had become one of the most fashionable vacation areas in America, although it was still mostly unexplored wilderness.²

By the late-nineteenth century, Sonntag began painting landscapes of the western United States in an elaborate statement of Manifest Destiny. However, it is probable that the artist never traveled to the American West, and that these images are based on photographs.

¹ Julie Boardman, *When Women and Mountains Meet: Adventures in the White Mountains* (Etna, N.H.: The Durand Press, 2001), 42.

² Boardman, 55.



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art

In addition to his grand landscape paintings, Sonntag is also known for his collaboration with John C. Wolfe (life dates unknown) in the early 1850s on impressive panoramas of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, based on the epic poem by John Milton. Sonntag became an associate member of the National Academy of Design in 1860, where he regularly exhibited, and an Academician the following year. He was also a member of the American Water Color Society, the Artists Fund Society, and the American Art Union.