

Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823-1900)

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, 1891

Oil on canvas

12 x 18 inches

Signed and dated 1891, lower right

Provenance

A direct descendant of Jonathan Sturges (1802-1874)
and Mary Cady Sturges (1806-1894)

*A curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.*

*Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:*

*Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.*

*Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's-shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.*

Thomas Gray (1716-1771), *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*

Gray's famous poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* held special significance for Jasper Francis Cropsey as he executed a series of paintings devoted to its imagery. This example is particularly noteworthy not only for its exquisite beauty, but also for its personal history. It comes from the family of Jonathan Sturges (1802-1874) the preeminent patron of the Hudson River School, and one of the key organizers as well as the Acting President and Director of the Illinois Central Railroad. Referenced in her papers, Gray's poem was one of Jonathan's wife, Mary Cady Sturges' favorites, as her father would have read it to her as a child. According to family lore, Cropsey may have painted it expressly for Mrs. Sturges knowing her fondness for the poem.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, 1891 is a perfect delineation of the poem. Sensitive to its halcyon tone, the painting depicts the 'knell of parting day,' the retiring action of the plowman and the sweet burgeoning repose of the landscape. All elements of the scene, both living and inanimate, conspire in the closing of the day; the evening bell

resonates from its tower as the sky shows the first shining, roseate glimmer of night. For a prototype, one looks to the glistening sky of *Moonlight*, 1833-1834 (The New-York Historical Society) by Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Cropsey's ultimate mentor. As the transition into night occurs, both Gray's poem and Cropsey's painting enshrine the thriving elements of daylight: the vivid green foliage of 'those rugged elms,' the energetic spray of birds, and the keen glint caught upon the 'ivy-mantled tower.'

The viewer marvels at the riveting architecture of the church present. Cropsey was incredibly skilled both as a leading landscape painter of his day as well as an architect, having built his Gothic Revival estate, Aladdin, in 1867, a villa for railroad industrialist, George M. Pullman in 1874 and a Queen Anne style revival for W. H. Webb in 1887.¹ Growing up in Staten Island, New York, before any exposure to painting, Cropsey was apprenticed for five years to New York architect, Joseph Trench who emphasized the importance of landscape architecture.²

Both the poem and the painting were inspired from the gothic heights of the Church of Stokes Poges in England. Cropsey apparently found eager collectors for this subject. In his well-known volume, *Book of the Artists*, Henry Tuckerman records of Cropsey's work: "The first set of pictures of Stokes Poges—the scene of Gray's Elogy—was painted for Sir Danie Gooch, who has seven of Cropsey's pictures."³

¹ Hall-Duncan, Nancy, *A Man for All Seasons: Jasper Francis Cropsey* (Greenwich, CT: The Bruce Museum, 1988), n.p.

² Hall-Duncan, n.p.

³ Tuckerman, Henry T., *Book of the Artists* (New York: James F. Carr, 1967; first published in 1867) 536.