



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art

Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (1819 – 1905)

Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait was born in 1819, in a suburb of Liverpool, England. At the age of only twelve years old, he began work at a fine arts shop in Manchester, called Agnew's Repository of Arts. It was Agnew who fostered Tait's early interests in painting. Shortly thereafter, Tait began studies at the City Art Gallery (then the Royal Manchester Institution), where he practiced drawing from plaster casts of Greek and Roman statuary.

In 1838, Tait married Marian Cardwell, quitting his job at Agnew's to pursue art as a profession – first as a teacher of drawing. As a method of income, Tait taught himself lithography, and eventually found employment as a lithographer and draftsman in Manchester with two church architects, Charles Bowman and Joseph S. Crowther. During the summers of 1840 and 1841, Tait made several trips to Scotland and the Isle of Skye to produce watercolor sketches. The following year, Tait and his wife moved to Liverpool, where he sought commissions and procured work with other architects based on recommendations from Bowman and Crowther.

Tait spent the summer of 1843 making pencil-and-wash sketches of the Manchester and Leeds Railway, which had only recently been completed. The following year, he copied these as lithographs and, in 1845, twenty of these drawings appeared in *Views of the Manchester and Leeds Railway, Drawn from Nature and on Stone*, by A.F. Tait. This was the high point in his career as a lithographer, though the skills he learned would serve him well throughout his career as a painter.

Shortly thereafter, Tait took up the study of oil painting. He began with derivations of his railroad scenes before beginning to paint animals; though largely self-taught, Tait may have been influenced by the style of William Huggins, a painter Tait would have been familiar with in Liverpool. Although his style has often been compared to that of Edwin Henry Landseer, Tait's style was more naturalistic, as he was not prone to sentimental or allegorical anthropomorphism.

In 1850, Tait's cousin George Danson, a scene painter in London, invited Tait to join him in America to help with his commercial public entertainment business. Tait accepted, and moved with his wife to Manhattan. Ultimately, the project with Danson failed, after which Tait pursued his opportunities as a painter. He set up an arrangement with Williams, Stevens & Williams, a shop similar to Agnew's, where he sold his paintings and from whom Tait could purchase painting supplies on credit. An early acquaintance with James H. Cafferty (one of the founding members of the New York Sketch Club) gave Tait an introduction to the artist community in Manhattan. Tait later became a member of the Sketch Club, which included such artists as T. Addison Richards, Charles Blauvelt, John F. Kensett, and Charles Loring Elliott.

From the start of his painting career in America, Tait focused on birds and animals. He began with still-life studies of waterfowl he had shot in the wetlands of Long Island or New Jersey. Tait's signature technique for achieving the texture of feathers involved wrapping corded silk around his finger and



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rolling it over the semi-dried oil paint until he achieved the desired quality. In 1854, the printmaking firm Currier & Ives published *American Feathered Game* after four of Tait's waterfowl paintings. The timing was opportune for Tait's success, as an interest in field sports was on the rise in America.

In the summer of 1851, Tait first stayed at the Bellows boarding house on the Lower Chateaugay Lake, where he could hunt and paint a wide variety of game animals. Over the next few years he would spend a great deal of time there. Many of the paintings he produced could also be reproduced as lithographs; Tait's experience in lithography meant that he could paint within the parameters of the medium so that his paintings could be best reproduced. For the most part, the reproductions are highly faithful to the originals, and throughout his career Currier & Ives published a number of his works.

Throughout the 1850's, Tait spent his summers painting at the Chateaugay Lakes, Ragged Lake and Loon Lake in the Adirondacks, all the while doing his best to avoid the summer crowds – many of whom, ironically, were drawn there because the area had been made so popular by paintings and lithographs such as his.

In 1854, Tait was elected as an associate member of the National Academy of Design, and had one painting included in the exhibition that year. Two years later, six of Tait's works were selected to be shown at the Academy's annual show. The following year, Tait was appointed to the Academy's Committee of Arrangements (also known as the Hanging Committee), which managed the annual show.

Despite a series of controversies which arose in the newspaper, Tait was elected into full membership into the National Academy of Design in 1858. That same year, a favorable article in the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* by Samuel Putnam Avery (an art dealer and a founder of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), bolstered Tait's reputation, and in 1859 he was elected as one of the members of the Council of the National Academy of Design.

In the summer of 1860, as his favorite camp sites became more popular and crowded, Tait made camp at Raquette Lake in the Adirondacks, where he would spend several summers. By this time, the impending civil war meant that there was a public demand for powerful nature scenes such as Tait's. The pre-war economy was conducive to an increase in art collection and production, which thereby created a need for art dealers. With the subsequent emergence of downtown dealers – of which Tait had three – to sell his work for him, Tait moved with his wife to Morrisania, NY.

The years between 1861 and 1864 saw a surge in the lithographic reproduction of Tait's paintings before his relationship with Currier & Ives came to a sudden end in 1865. In the fifteen years that he had worked with the printmaking firm, they reproduced 42 of his paintings and made his name familiar across the country. Despite the success of his lithographs reproductions, however, Tait largely supported himself by selling smaller, lower-priced paintings.

In 1866, Tait began working with a Boston-based lithographer, Louis Prang, who worked to make Chromolithographs of Tait's work which were immensely popular. Tait received royalties from the sales,



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which were significant. However, the success of the chromolithographs did make it more difficult for him to sell his small oil paintings.

In 1869 Tait moved back to Manhattan from the suburbs. It was also his final year at Raquette Lake, as that summer the Adirondacks were particularly overcrowded for his liking. He spent the following summer at Palmer's boarding house on Long Lake where he discovered the nearby, secluded, South Pond. Tait would invite his wife and niece to join him there the following summer.

Following the death of his wife Marian in 1872, Tait purchased land on Long Lake and married his late wife's niece, Polly. On the land they built a year-round home, which they called "Woodside." The Tait's would live there year-round between 1873-6. During the 1870's, Tait undertook three commissions for commercial art – the first for gunpowder; the second for champagne; and the third for cigarettes.

After his wife Polly died giving birth to their second son in 1880, Tait sold the house and property on Long Lake, moved back to Manhattan and married Emma, Polly's half-sister. Entering the last phase of his career, Tait concentrated on painting domestic animals and fowl, rather than the wild game that had made him so popular early in his career. At the time, paintings of hunting and fishing scenes had depreciated in value, and there was much more of a market appreciation for the domesticated animals – especially the sheep – that he painted in later life. At the time of his death in 1905, Tait had exhibited a total of 193 paintings at the National Academy of Design over the course of 53 years – an ambitious number for any artist.