



HAWTHORNE
Fine Art

GEORGE LAFAYETTE CLOUGH (1824—1901)

Balcony Bridge, Central Park, New York City

Oil on canvas

11 1/8 x 16 1/8 inches

Signed lower left

Heralded as “Brooklyn’s most popular artist,”¹ George Lafayette Clough garnered acclaim as an accomplished oil painter at the end of the nineteenth century. Heavily influenced by the Hudson River School artists, Clough’s paintings featured a wide range of subjects, but his landscapes of quaint country scenes and local urban spots were his most praised and collected works. Indeed, his reputation persists today as a leading landscapist of his time.

Clough was born in Auburn, New York in 1824. He was the youngest of six children; his mother, a recent widow, died shortly after his birth. Consequently, Clough spent his early childhood in poverty and became a child laborer when he was ten years old. However, by the age of fifteen, he discovered his natural talent for painting and eventually attracted the attention of a local portraitist, Randall Palmer (1807-45), who took Clough under his wing. In 1844, when he was twenty years old, Clough opened his own studio in Auburn.

Clough began to acquire local renown, which drew the attention of the celebrated portraitist Charles Loring Elliott (1812-68), who was also born in Auburn and had returned to his hometown from New York City to paint the portrait of the prominent resident William H. Seward. (At the time, Seward was a well-known lawyer in Auburn, but would later become an influential politician. He was a New York State Senator; the Governor of New York; a United States Senator; and the Secretary of State under Lincoln and Johnson.) Clough left Auburn to study under Elliott in New York City in 1847, where he became a respected portrait painter himself; he received a commission to paint the composer Stephen Foster’s portrait, among others. After his marriage in the 1850s, he briefly returned to Auburn before travelling extensively in Europe.

Upon his return to the United States, Clough concentrated on landscapes that were markedly influenced by the Hudson River School painters. His pictures featured woodland scenes of Pennsylvania, New England, the Adirondacks, and the Finger Lakes region of New York. He moved to Cleveland in the 1860s, where he took to painting the city’s urban landscapes, which he continued when he returned to New York—this time to Brooklyn—in the 1880s.

¹ The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, Sunday, November 15, 1885, p. 13.



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This painting of Central Park's Balcony Bridge is from this late period in Clough's career. Situated over a small inlet that flows into the Lake near the West 77th Street entrance to Central Park, the Balcony Bridge supports the West Drive. Built in 1860 by Calvert Vaux, the stone² arch vehicle bridge once connected the Lake and what was known as the Ladies Pond, an area of the Lake reserved for female ice skaters during the 1860s and 70s. This area, separated by an open fence from the main part of the Lake, once provided women with a special landing platform and a dressing house.³ The Ladies Pond was filled in during the 1930s (when the popularity for ice skating on the Lake diminished) and is now Naturalists' Walk.

The Balcony Bridge is so-named for the two bench-lined bays on its eastern side, which give the bridge an asymmetrical quality, and provide a scenic view over the lake toward the city skyline of Central Park South and Fifth Avenues. Clough's painting affords us a view of the bridge itself, situated against the picturesque backdrop of the Upper West Side, a nascent neighborhood that experienced a building boom from 1885 to 1900.⁴ Modern viewers are afforded a remarkable vantage point of the bridge itself from the shores of the Ramble or from a rowboat on the Lake.



Balcony Bridge, 1869.⁵

Clough's painting is an early example of what would become an iconic image of New York City. Groups of people populate the banks of Clough's Pond, small children accompanied by their

² The bridge is constructed from sandstone, cast stone, schist, and greywacke.

³ "Skating and Winter Sports in the Central Park," *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1860.

⁴ According to a comparison of numerous contemporary maps by Will Taylor and Sanborn Fire Insurance, the church in the background, since demolished sometime after Clough's painting, was likely located at 85th Street and Riverside Drive. This was one of only two churches with steeples located on the Upper West Side at this time in the late nineteenth century (the other located on 99th Street and 10th Avenue).

⁵ Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. "Balcony Bridge." *New York Public Library Digital Collections*. Accessed August 30, 2017. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-0fec-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



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mothers or caregivers, who watch as they try to play with the ducks and swans that float in the water just out of their reach. As an 1871 guide to New York City points out, “The swans are not the least interesting feature of the Lake,” having originally been a gift of the city of Hamburg, Germany, the swans (and the white ducks that swim alongside them) “are very tame, and come readily at a call.”⁶ Viewing Clough’s picture today, one becomes acutely aware that despite the centuries, people’s appreciation of the beauty found in this respite from the bustle of the surrounding metropolis remains unchanged.

Clough became one of Brooklyn’s most celebrated artists at the end of the nineteenth century. He was very active in the Brooklyn Arts Club, and served as its President for eight years. He was included in numerous group shows with the club, and had several solo exhibitions in local galleries, most notably with the Sherk Brothers’ Gallery on Fulton Street. He also showed with the National Academy, the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, the Boston Art Club, and the Cosmopolitan Art Association. Clough returned to Auburn in 1897, where he would remain until his death four years later in 1901, shortly before his 77th birthday.

⁶ *The Metropolis Explained and Illustrated*. New York: Devlin & Company, 1871, p. 22