

# EVER SO FAITHFUL: THE PRE-RAPHAELITE LANDSCAPES OF EDWARD L. CUSTER (1837-1881)



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HAWTHORNE FINE ART

The Swiss-Born Painter Edward Luke Custer has heretofore received scarcely a mention in the art historical record. Though he was a well-recognized talent in his time—first in his adoptive hometown of Manchester, New Hampshire, then in Boston, Massachusetts, where he made a living as a highly-sought portraitist—upon his death, the memory of his remarkable talent faded. Though the demand for Custer’s highly skilled likenesses made him a prominent artist during his lifetime, his lesser-known and un-commissioned landscapes are what highlight his true talent as a master draftsman, and a dynamic voice of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in America. These scenic works, typified by the ten exhibited in *Ever so Faithful*, which encompass each major turn of Custer’s career, are the focus of this exhibition.

Edward Luke Custer was born in Basel, Switzerland on 24 January, 1837, and immigrated to the United States with his four siblings, mother, and stepfather in 1846, at the age of nine.<sup>1</sup> The family first settled in Syracuse, New York, before moving permanently to Manchester, New Hampshire. It was there that Custer’s stepfather, Emil Custer, took up work as a physician.<sup>2</sup> Although little is known about Custer’s early life or his decision to pursue painting, it is apparent that the artist exhibited a natural talent for the arts at an early age: according to the records of the Manchester Historical Society, Custer’s earliest formal paintings—scenes of his native Switzerland—were exhibited at City Hall when he was only 15 years old. Because he attended Manchester public schools and therefore received little, if any, formal artistic training, Custer’s early paintings of Switzerland are remarkable feats that convey not only a natural talent for the medium, but a tenacious appetite for learning.

Many of these early works remained in the possession of Custer’s family, and received renewed interest in the decades following his death. Writing of this early collection, Joseph Seecombe and Fred William Lamb observed in 1908:

While at school he delighted his playmates by his pencilings. He had inherited imitative powers and an intuitive feeling for art. Some of his pictures of farm-yards and rural scenes, done while an untaught boy of twelve, are still preserved by the family. Though, of necessity crude, they are strikingly natural in tone and action.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Manchester Historic Association, *Collections*, vol. 4 (Manchester: J.B. Clarke Company, 1908), pg. 116–117.

2 George Franklyn Willey, *Willey’s semi-centennial books of Manchester, 1846-1896*. (Manchester: G. F. Willey, 1896), pg. 92.

3 Joseph Seecombe and Fred William Lamb, *A Discourse at Amoskeag Fall, 1739*. (Manchester: Manchester Historic Association, 1908) pg. 116.



FIG. 1. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *Castrum Pfronten*, after W. H. Bartlett, 1858, Oil on canvas, 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 16<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, Signed at lower left, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY



FIG. 2. William Henry Bartlett (1809–1854), *Castrum Pfronten*, 1836, Engraving, Originally published in William Beattie, *Switzerland*. Illustrated in a series of views taken expressly for this work by W. H. Bartlett, esq., (London: C. Virtue, 1836), vol II, pg. 56.

One slightly later work, *Castrum Pfronten* (1858) [FIG. 1], is an example of the sort of Swiss landscapes Custer might have exhibited at Manchester’s City Hall several years prior. Despite not having traveled to Switzerland since his family emigrated, Custer must have had a great interest in his native land. *Castrum Pfronten* is a copy of an engraving by the British artist William Henry Bartlett (1809–1854) that depicts the landscape of the Swiss-German border [FIG. 2]. The engraving was originally published by the Scottish physician and poet William Beattie (1793–1875) in his book, *Switzerland* (London: G. Virtue, 1836) [FIG. 3].<sup>4</sup> The teenaged Custer must have acquired a copy of the booklet, from which he faithfully copied scenes of

Swiss landscapes. The original engraving depicts the ruins of Falkenstein Castle, a thirteenth century structure in the Bavarian Alps in southern Germany. Custer’s painting is a faithful rendering of Bartlett’s engraving, right down to the craggy details of the cliff face. Custer’s color rendering of what was originally a rather small black-and-white etching shows not only a careful attention to detail, but a remarkable eye for color, and sensitivity to line and tonality. The distribution of such illustrated works as this one no doubt provided Custer with ample source material for his early experimentation.

<sup>4</sup> William Beattie, *Switzerland. Illustrated in a series of views taken expressly for this work by W. H. Bartlett, esq.* (London: C. Virtue, 1836), vol II, pg. 56.

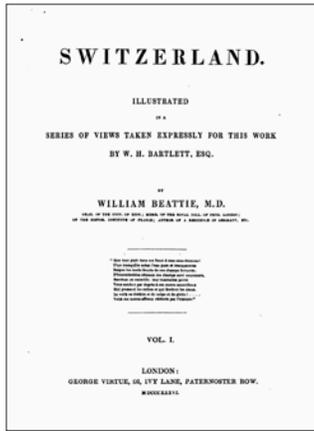


FIG. 3. Title page, William Beattie, *Switzerland. Illustrated in a series of views taken expressly for this work by W. H. Bartlett, esq.* (London: G. Virtue, 1836).

Custer's talent with paint and brush was not merely a hobby. As indicated by Manchester's city directory, Custer was making his living as a "sign and ornamental painter" in 1858 and, in 1860, as a "Banner and Decorative Artist, Teacher of Drawing and Landscape Painting."<sup>5</sup> Like many American artists at this time, Custer made the decision to further his education abroad. In 1860, he traveled to Europe to receive a formal education, first studying in Dusseldorf before enrolling at the Royal Academy in Munich, Bavaria.<sup>6</sup> Under the primary tutelage of the landscapist Johann Gottfried Steffan (1815–1905), Custer honed his academic precision and developed a skill for rendering idealistic landscapes typical of the Munich school. Custer's summers were spent on sketching trips with his teachers to Switzerland.<sup>7</sup> These sketches would form the basis of his more elaborate studio works, such as *Waterfall and Fisherman* (1861) [FIG. 4], an early example of Custer's assimilation of his European training.

Steffan, who was himself a faithful student of the Munich School and a meticulous painter of the Swiss Alps, had a great impact on the young Custer's development. Steffan's oeuvre is rife with sublimely mountainous landscapes foregrounded by idyllic allegories of shepherds and livestock, or steep, canvas-filling inclines of rock walls and dense vegetation [FIGS. 5 and 6]. Custer's *Waterfall and Fisherman* is highly reminiscent of Steffan's instruction. His use of compositional devices (using middle-grounded figures to indicate scale) and his clear appetite for contrasting shape, color and textural elements (a distant mountain peak foregrounded by the compositionally-grounded waterfall and dense vegetation), as well as a slightly elevated vantage point (giving the viewer an increase sense of wild expanse) all point to Steffan's teachings while underscoring Custer's developing skill, adaptability, and keen sense of color and tonality. It is likely that Custer also painted *Kindli on Lake Lucerne* [FIG. 7] during his summer travels to Switzerland.

Following his two years of study abroad, Custer returned to his hometown of Manchester, where he quickly took to painting scenes of New Hampshire and Vermont. As George Franklyn Willey reflected in 1903, "[Custer's] realistic studies of these localities, afterwards wrought into more artistic form, were widely known and admired."<sup>8</sup> Although Custer's works from this period pay homage to the terrain of New Hampshire in the tradition of the Hudson River School painters, his focus shifts away from the allegorical scenes and dramatic compositions of his European training in favor of precise natural study. During this time the foliage and botanical detail of Custer's landscapes begin to exhibit an attention to precision befitting of natural history textbooks. In scenes such as *River Valley in New Hampshire* and *Towards Mount Moosilauke, Lyme, NH* [FIGS. 8 and 9], it is almost as if Custer has turned himself from the dramatic mountain vista before him to look at the abundant potential in the immediate underbrush. While recalling the draftsmanship of such artists as Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) in the botanical accuracy of native flora, Custer further aligns stylistically and temporally with the American Pre-Raphaelite painters that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.

5 George Franklyn Willey, *State Builders: An Illustrated Historical and Biographical Record of the State of New Hampshire at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. (New Hampshire: The New Hampshire Publishing Corporation, 1903), pg. 380.

6 Manchester Historic Association, *Collections*, 116.

7 Willey, *State Builders*, 382.

8 Willey, *State Builders*, 382.



FIG. 4. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *Waterfall and Fisherman*, 1861, Oil on canvas, 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, Signed & dated 1861 at lower center, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY



FIG. 5. Johann Gottfried Steffan (1815–1905), *Ein Wasserfall im Hochgebirge*, 1855, Oil on canvas, 65 x 54.5 cm, Monogrammed and dated lower right: JGSt. 1855th, Private Collection



FIG. 6. Johann Gottfried Steffan (1815–1905), *Motiv aus der Ramsau bei Berchtesgaden*, 1874, Oil on canvas, 82 x 115 cm., Signed lower right, dated and inscribed: J. G., Steffan. 1874. München.



FIG. 7. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *Kindli on Lake Lucerne*, Oil on canvas, 12 1/8 x 21 inches, Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY



FIG. 8. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *River Valley, New Hampshire*, Oil on canvas, 12 x 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, Signed at lower left, inscribed with title on stretcher, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY

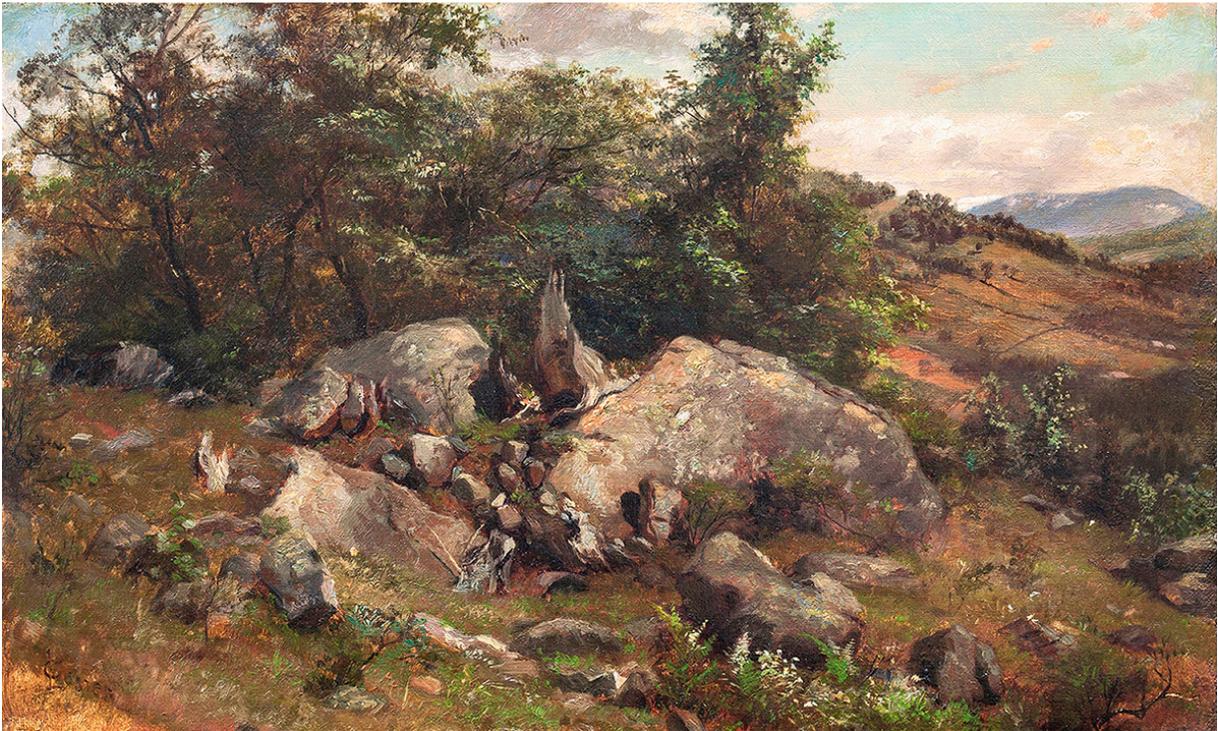


FIG. 9. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *Towards Mount Moosilauke, Lyme, NH*, Oil on canvas, 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, Signed at lower left, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY

The American Pre-Raphaelites, founded in 1863 under the banner of the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art, were a product of the English Brotherhood of the same name. The British group's standards of artistic reform was exemplified in the work of the group's founders: artists John Everett Millais (1829–1896), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), and William Holman Hunt (1827–1910). The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood advocated an artistic return to a time before Raphael, whom they perceived as the exemplary contributor to art's compositional and stylistic corruption. This call for reform was picked up in America and adopted by artists Thomas Charles Farrer (1839–1891), John Henry Hill (1791–1882), John William Hill (1812–1879) and William T. Richards (1833–1905), as well as many others who would have otherwise been considered Naturalists and Realists. The English critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) championed the work of the Brotherhood, and the American artists looked to both his writings and the aesthetics of their English counterparts as their source of inspiration. They called for aesthetic rehabilitation in the form of truthful representation. Although the American Pre-Raphaelites did not exhibit an appetite for the allegorical, medieval revivalism exemplified in the work of Rossetti, which has become iconic of the Brotherhood, they did adopt the group's emphasis on naturalistic detail, adopting a meticulous eye and concern for accuracy, as well as a palette of bright colors that further distinguished them from their peers.

What emerged from the American side of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was a shift in landscape representation, as artists came to favor a hybrid composition that merged panorama and nature study. Much like their Hudson River School predecessors, these artists roamed the mountains and valleys of New England in search of their subject matter. One of Custer's New Hampshire vignettes, *Waterfall on Mill Brook, NH* [FIG. 10], for

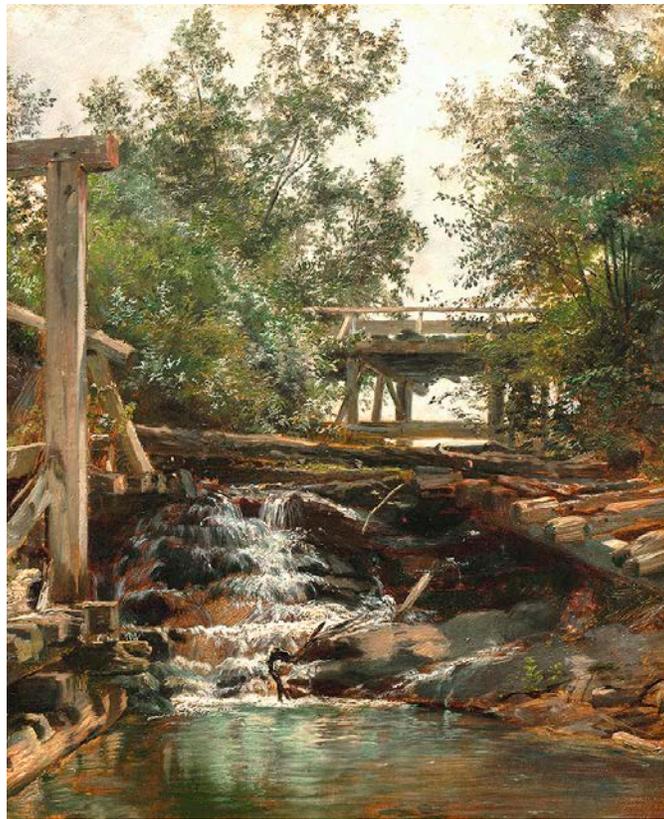


FIG. 10. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *Waterfall on Mill Brook, NH*, Oil on canvas, 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 10<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, Signed at lower right Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY



FIG. 11. William Louis Sonntag (1822–1900), *Mill Brook*, New Hampshire, ca. 1879, Oil on canvas, 20 x 36 inches, Private Collection

example, illustrates the glacial cascades in the area surrounding the valley town of Thornton. It was just one of many areas made popular by the Hudson River School artists, and was similarly depicted by William Louis Sonntag in 1879—to much different effect [FIG. 11]. Where the Pre-Raphaelites differed from their Hudson River School counterparts was in the sentiment behind their renderings: while the American artists of the previous half-century were grounded in seventeenth-century European tradition, the post-1860s artists railed against their predecessors'

interpretive renderings and, with the advent of John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, sought to turn their painting materials to the natural world with the exactitude and faithfulness normally relegated to the photograph, the natural history textbook, and the topographical map. In merging scientific observation with artistic homage, the American Pre-Raphaelites sought to render the American landscape "in such a way that the poet, the naturalist and the geologist might have taken large pleasure from it."<sup>9</sup>

It was at this time that Custer returned to America, formally trained and well-poised to pick up on this this newest art world upheaval. The division of subject matter and space in the compositions of *River Valley in New Hampshire*, *Towards Mount Moosilauke*, and *New England Coastal Landscape* [FIG. 13] are almost metaphors for this mid-1860s estrangement from the traditions of the previous century. Not only do the foliage and underbrush envelop considerably more of the composition than they would have if executed by a Hudson River School painter, but they are so well-rendered that identification of individual plants is entirely possible for the well-trained botanist. Custer has paid such attention to detail in *Towards Mount Moosilauke* that outcroppings of lichen can be seen against the rock face, and the delicate white flowers of the false spirea, North America's native flowering fern, bloom recognizably in the foreground. Custer's attention to foliage and detail in his landscape scenes is superseded only by his meticulous plant studies, such as *Burdock Plants Beside a Fence* [FIG. 12]. Once again, Custer utilizes his skill and attention to detail, embracing the disorderliness and haphazard growth of the plant in its natural state.

Custer frequently showed his paintings in New York City, where they were sold as quickly as could be exhibited.<sup>10</sup> Following his marriage to Ruth A. Porter—a childhood friend and schoolteacher from Manchester—in 1864, Custer and his wife settled in Boston, Massachusetts. Once in Boston, Custer quickly became well-recognized for his talent as both a landscape painter and a portraitist. Many of Custer's sitters were prominent figures in the community, and he painted a number of Judges. Speaking in 1908 of Custer's practice, Seccombe and Lamb recounted:

His portraits were uniformly good likenesses, for no man was more accurate in the observation of traits, or more faithful in their reproduction. He had the genius of patience and attention, and his power of concentration kept him alike from the sentimental and the

9 J.S., "Art as Record," *The New Path* 1, no. 4 (August 1863), p. 43; "Notices of Recent Pictures. Bierstadt's 'Rocky Mountains.'" *The New Path* 1, no. 12 (April 1864), p. 162.

10 Willey, *State Builders*, 382.



FIG. 12. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *Burdock Plants Beside a Fence*, Oil on board, 6 ¼ x 10 ½ inches, Signed at lower left, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY



FIG. 13. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *New England Coastal Landscape*, Oil on canvas, 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 16 1/8 inches, Signed at lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY

overemphatic style of treatment. It was wonderful to see how he could look into a faded photograph and discern the character and lineaments of a deceased subject. Some of his pictures made in that way were almost startling to friends, who could scarcely believe that the painter had never seen the original among the living. . . . He was also very happy in the pictures of childhood, combining natural expression with intuitive grace, setting off the features with charming freshly studied backgrounds.<sup>11</sup>

Five years after their relocation, in 1870, Custer again traveled abroad, this time with his wife to accompany him. Together the pair traveled to Italy, Holland and Germany, where they visited galleries and museums. Custer no doubt studied carefully the art world developments among his contemporaries. Upon their return to Boston, Custer again picked up work as a portraitist, and returned to landscape painting with a bright palette and renewed subject matter. Two Italian scenes, likely painted either during or based on sketches from this trip, are a testament to this introspective year. *The Old Gate, Albano, Italy* and *Italian Villa With View Toward Albano* [FIGS. 14 and 15], depict the provincial suburb of Rome, Albano Laziale, tucked away in the Alban hills—an area steeped in Roman history and ruins that piqued Custer’s interest in close study.

Following the death of his wife in 1878, Custer again traveled abroad before re-marrying in 1880. His death, however, followed shortly after in the winter of 1881. His obituary, published in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, conveys the significant loss his passing meant for the community:

To his friends Mr. Custer was more than the popular and successful painter; he was a man to be esteemed, a friend to be loved. He was as simple as truth itself, prone to no avarice, vanity or envy. He was a hearty and natural man, with strong sensibility, firm principles and a high sense of honor. In his domestic life he was constant, affectionate and delicate. The friends of twenty years’ standing were still most warmly attached to him. To his family the loss is irreparable, and there are many homes where he will be missed as a brother. It is difficult to realize that we are no more to see his face, nor feel again the grasp of his honest hand.<sup>12</sup>

Though Custer left no children, his legacy was clearly felt by his friends and has lived on inherent in his paintings. The ten works exhibited in *Ever So Faithful* underscore Custer’s historical position as a champion of site-specific documentation and truthfulness in representation, who cultivated a hybridity of still life and landscape that stylistically distinguished him from his peers. Viewed as a whole, these paintings situate Custer in his historical moment, as an enduring and impactful voice in the latter half of nineteenth century American art.

—COURTNEY A. LYNCH

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<sup>11</sup> Seccombe and Lamb, *Discourse*, 117.

<sup>12</sup> F. M. U., “Edward L. Custer Obituary,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 10, 1881, pg. 4.



FIG. 14. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *The Old Gate, Albano, Italy*, Oil on canvas, 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY



FIG. 15. Edward L. Custer (1837–1881), *Italian Villa with View Toward Albano*, Oil on canvas mounted to board, 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches, Signed at lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, NY