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Soaring Sights

Luminist landscapes by female Hudson River School artists on exhibit at Hawthorne Fine Art

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The impediments to exploring and to painting in the out of doors were many for women in the 19th century. In an exhibition essay Jennifer Krieger writes, “Perhaps the most visible and symbolic of encumbrances was the restrictive nature of conventional female dress. Corsets, trains, bustles, hoops and tight bodices were not conducive to aerobic exertion or freedom of movement.” She continues, “The vast majority of formal art academies did not admit women, and a prevailing Victorian prudishness did not permit females to draw or paint from nude models. Female artists were often excluded from prestigious art clubs and were therefore barred from an important means of cultivating patrons. There was also an overarching social prejudice against women painting outdoors.”

Krieger is the founder and managing partner of Hawthorne Fine Art in New York. The gallery focuses on the women who persevered in the exhibition *Soaring Sights: Luminist Landscapes by Female Hudson River School Painters (1825-1875)* opening February 16 and continuing through April 20. It can be viewed by appointment. The gallery notes, “The exhibition focuses on these women’s contributions to the history of the Hudson River School, luminism and American landscape painting.



Laura Woodward (1834-1926), *Home in the Wilderness*, 1877. Oil on panel, 10½ x 8¼ in., signed and dated lower left.

Spanning half a century, the paintings on view represent a cross section of landscapes from painters with unique points of view and various levels of formal training.”

Drawings and small studies of the details of the Hudson River landscape are always attractive and intriguing, perhaps

encouraging the viewer to look more closely on a walk through the woods.

Study of Ferns, a tiny 6-by-8-inch oil by Mary Josephine Walters (1837-1883), is a fine example. She studied with Asher B. Durand (1796-1886), who espoused naturalism in landscape painting and an intimate examination of “the simple



Susie M. Barstow (1836-1923), *In the White Mountains*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 9 x 12¾ in., signed and dated lower right: '1872'.



truths of nature." Walters focused in on a block of granite fallen from a cliff, slowly disintegrating through the actions of water and vegetation. Ferns grow out of depressions in its surface. She doesn't overwhelm with color, as Durand advised, and captures the soft light and shadow of the forest.

Susie M. Barstow (1836-1923) was a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, which was founded in 1876. She made frequent visits to the White Mountains in New Hampshire. Krieger quotes an article

Abigail Tyler Oakes (1823-1898), *View of the Hudson River*, 1854. Oil on canvas, 17¾ x 24 in., signed and dated lower center.



Mary Josephine Walters (1837-1883), *Study of Ferns*. Oil on canvas, 6 x 8 in., signed lower center.



Isabella Bissett (1830-1870), *Pair of works [Hudson Valley & Catskill Landscapes]*, ca. 1850s. Oil on canvas, 7 x 13 in. each, signed on stretcher.

from 1889 that declared Barstow had climbed “all the principal peaks of the Catskills, Adirondacks and White Mountains, as well as those of the Alps, Tyrol and Black Forest, often tramping 25 miles a day, and sketching as well, often in the midst of a blinding snow-storm.” Barstow exhibited at the National Academy of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy annuals and at the Brooklyn Art Association.

Her painting *In the White Mountains*, 1872, celebrates the grandeur of the landscape and the presence of the divine found in other painters of the Hudson River. It also alludes to the eventual decline of mankind in the decaying and moss covered trees in the foreground.

Abigail Tyler Oakes (1823-1898) was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, and moved to California with her husband

before moving back East and settling in New York. There, she exhibited at the National Academy of Design. She is recognized as one of California’s first woman professional artists.

She painted a *View of the Hudson River* in 1854. It has the orderly composition, the luminosity and the expression of Hudson River School philosophy that makes it indistinguishable from the work of her male counterparts. ■