

## HISTORY

# An overlooked female painter of the Hudson River School

Julie Hart Beers was among the dozens of women who made their mark in majestic landscape painting despite the obstacles



Julie Hart Beers, "Sailboats on the Hudson River," Oil on board, 11 ¼ x 17 ½ inches, signed lower right.  
Courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC

By **David Levine**, *Freelance Writer*

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 Gift Article



The big names of the Hudson River School of painting — [Thomas Cole](#), Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, Asher Durand — are all men. Yet several women also made their mark painting in this style in the early to mid-19th century, overcoming obstacles of prejudice and sexism along the way.

At least 20 female artists were working in majestic landscape painting at the time, “and I think there are more,” said Jennifer Krieger, owner of [Hawthorne Fine Art](#) in New York City. Krieger specializes in 19th and early 20th-century American art with a focus on the Hudson River School and historic, but overlooked, women artists. “They were exhibiting too. Somehow, they were forgotten,” she said.

Fewer still were able to make any money at it. Perhaps the most successful of them was Julie Hart Beers.

Beers was born in 1835 into a Scottish family that later emigrated to America, settling in Albany. Her brothers, William and James, worked as commercial painters; James even trained in Europe. Their father was also employed as a painter, according to the 1855 census.

Little is known about Julie Hart’s early life and education, said Krieger, who provided her biography (which is available to [download online](#)). She was trained in painting by her brother James. By age 20, she married George Beers, an editor for the Albany Evening Journal. The couple lived in Albany with her parents and James. They had two daughters, Marion Robertson Beers, born in 1854, and Katherine S. Beers, born in 1856.





Left: Julie Hart, Marion Robertson Hart and James M. Hart, c. 1852, faded daguerreotype. Right: Julie Hart Beers standing with students, c. 1870, tintype.  
Albany Institute of History & Art Purchase, Marjorie and Richard Rockwell Fund

Both James and William became very successful Hudson River School painters. Their sister's success would come later.

## A young widow making ends meet

The Beers family soon joined them in New York, but after just four years of marriage, George Beers died. Now, Julie Hart Beers, a very young widow with two very young daughters, needed to work. She continued to paint, and by the 1860s, she had begun exhibiting with the Brooklyn Art Association. Her painting "A View near Bethel, Maine," exhibited in 1868, was praised by the Brooklyn Daily Eagle: "Mrs. Beers is a careful artist and all her pictures will bear critical inspection and the painting in question is no exception to the rule."

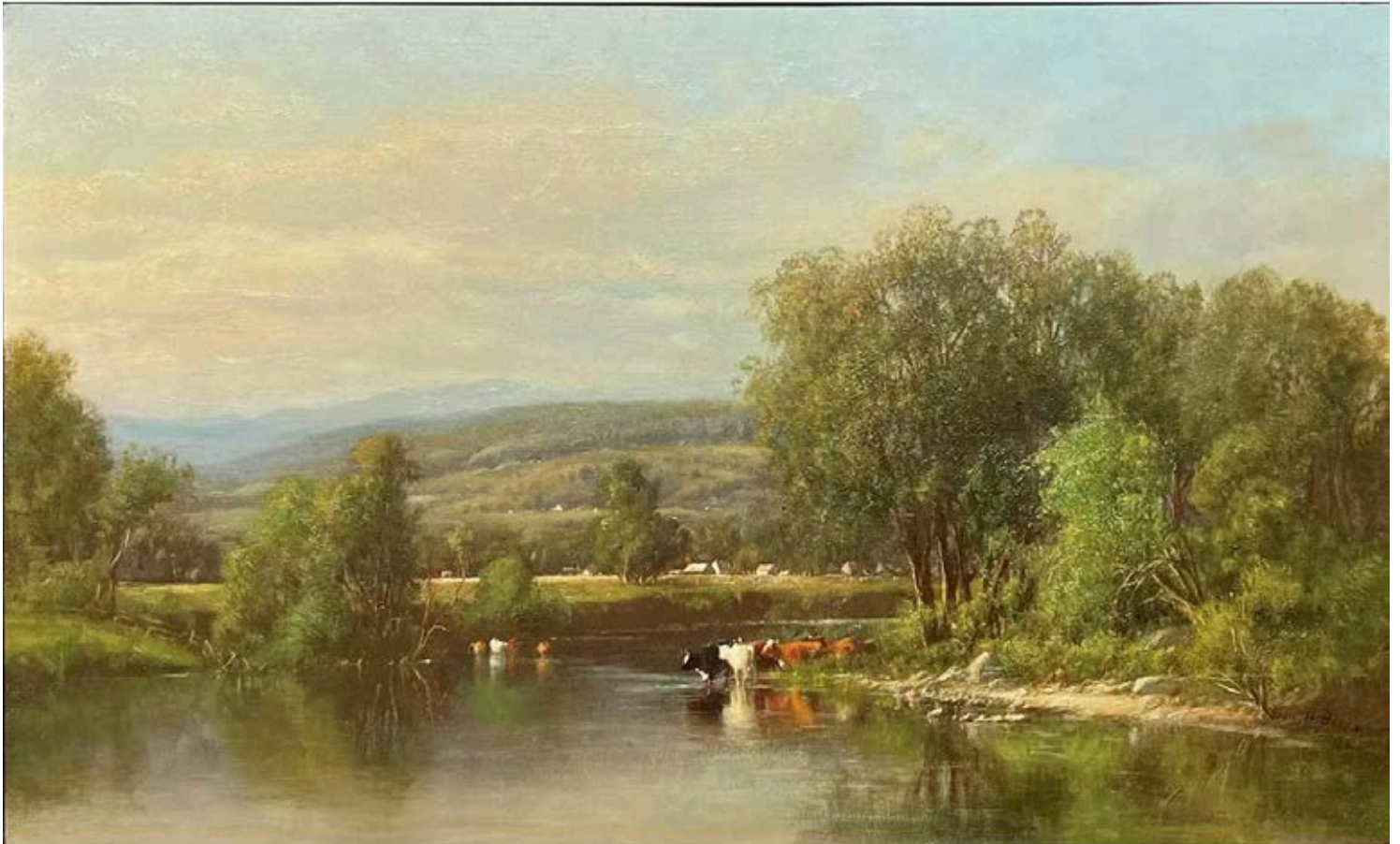
And like most fine artists, she needed other sources of income. So, Beers took other women on summer sketching trips into the woods. "It was one of the ways women artists could earn a living, with teaching and encouraging plein air nature study," Krieger said.

In the summer of 1871, she led six young women to Elizabethtown, a small hamlet in the foothills of the Adirondacks, where they sketched along the banks of the Boquet River. The Brooklyn Daily Eagle noted that, "Some of the lady artists, under the accomplished direction of Mrs. Beers, are working hard and have made fine progress."

In 1875, Beers spent the summer sketching in Dorset, Vt., with her daughter Marion, known as Minnie, who was by then an artist herself, where they worked on studies of wildflowers and ferns. Less is known of her daughter Katherine, or Kitty, though she is listed as an artist in an 1880 U.S. Census record.

In 1876, Beers married her second husband, Dr. Peter Tertius Kempson, a journalist and an editor of the New York Insurance Times. Kempson lived in Metuchen, N.J., and the Beers clan moved there with him. Beers continued to paint and exhibit under the name Julie Kempson.

Along with exhibitions at the Brooklyn Art Association, she also had shows at the National Academy of Design, the Artist's Fund Society, the Palette Club, the Lotus Club and the Boston Athenaeum, among others. Beers also had exhibitions with Minnie at the Brooklyn Art Association, the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition and the Inter-State Industrial Exposition of Chicago in the 1870s.



Julie Hart Beers, "Summer Landscape" (1866), Oil on canvas, 12 ½ x 20 ½ inches, signed and dated 1866, lower right.

Private collection, Norfolk, Va./Image courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC



Julie Hart Beers, "Pastoral Landscape with Hay Wagon" (1860s), oil on canvas.  
Albany Institute of History & Art Purchase, Sargent Fund, 2021.34



Julie Hart Beers, "Hastings on Hudson" (1898), Graphite and pencil on paper; 10 x 14 inches, Signed, dated Aug. 4 '98 and inscribed Hastings on Hudson at lower right.

Private collection, Irvington, NY/Photo courtesy of Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC

Julie Hart Beers Kempson died in 1913 at age 79. Her paintings are now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Albany Institute of History & Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, Mint Museum of Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, Hudson River Museum, Toledo Museum of Art, The Rockwell Museum, the Allentown Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, the Newark Museum, and numerous private collections. The Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester recently acquired her "Birch Tree beside a Woodland Path (1870)" as part of the museum's mission to recognize what it called "the often-overlooked role of women artists in 19th-century American landscape painting."

## **'All those crazy things they had to wear'**

What made Beers' career so extraordinary, according to Krieger, are the obstacles women artists faced at the time.

America's most prestigious art academies did not admit female students, and Victorian-era decorum meant women were excluded from drawing the human body, which is fundamental to artistic education. Female artists were also excluded from prominent art clubs where men could secure patrons. And women's prescribed domestic duties had to come before any artistic aspirations, unlike male artists.

And then consider this: landscape painting required extended periods of mucking through the woods, over hills and across streams. Try that in the fashion of the day: bustles, long skirts, trains and high heels. A quote from someone at the time, Krieger said, noted that "women shouldn't be traipsing around the landscape."

"I'm sure there was a gender resistance they encountered," Krieger said.

Krieger believes there are more women artists from that time waiting to be discovered. "If you go to an antique show or exhibition and see an artist you are not familiar with, look them up. Research it. That's how these artists come out of the woodwork," she said.

Often, women used only initials in their signatures because they wanted to remain anonymous. "There are lost works" to be found, she said, "not just by scholars and art dealers. It's really for everybody."

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**David Levine**



**FREELANCE WRITER**

David Levine, a freelance writer, is the author of [“The Hudson Valley: The First 250 Million Years.”](#)

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