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GEORGE LAFAYETTE CLOUGH (1824—1901)

Gapstow 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 sought 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 who then died herself shortly after his birth. Consequently, Clough spent his early childhood in poverty and became a child laborer when he was ten years old. By the age of fifteen, however, he had discovered his natural talent for painting and eventually gained the attention of a local portraitist, Randall Palmer (1807—1845), who took him under his wing. In 1844, when he was twenty years old, Clough opened his own studio in Auburn.

Clough began to gain local renown, which drew the attention of the celebrated portraitist Charles Loring Elliott (1812—1868), 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; United States Senator; and 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

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



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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.

This painting of Central Park's famous Gapstow Bridge is from this late period in Clough's career. Here, the artist captured the now iconic bridge in its infancy. Located on the northeast corner of Central Park's Pond, the original bridge was built in 1874 by Jacob Wrey Mould. It was constructed of wooden with cast iron railings, but due to excessive use, it was replaced with a schist stone bridge in 1896 by the company Howard and Caudwell; this is bridge that stands today. Clough's bridge is the stone replacement, surrounded by the newly landscaped pond shores. The Gapstow Bridge is famous for its picturesque views of the Upper West Side high rise building skylines, the beginnings of which we can see in the background of Clough's painting. The Upper West Side experienced a building boom from 1885 to 1900, which places the date of this picture sometime between the stone bridge's construction in 1896 to the last year of the neighborhood's expansion in 1900.



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Today, Gapstow Bridge is arguably the most photographed location in New York City. It has appeared in numerous films and television shows situated in the city, and is a highly visited spot for the city's millions of tourists. 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 mothers or caregivers, who watch as they try to play with the ducks that float in the water just out of their reach. 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.