



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art

William Merritt Post (1856-1935)

Scholars continually rediscover competent American artists who enjoyed successful careers at the turn of the century, but whose legacy has been lost over time. One of these, William Merritt Post, was a tonalist landscape painter often associated with the Barbizon school and the early New England Impressionists.

Born on December 11, 1856 in Brooklyn, Post was the son of a commodities merchant. His parents separated after sixteen years of marriage and four children, suggesting a troubled home life. Post's attraction to nature began in the fall of 1879, when an excursion from Brooklyn to a marshy region made Post think, "If I were an artist, this region would be one of the first places I would strike out for." Unlike many artists of the day who studied in Paris, Germany and Holland, Post developed his eye for composition, his technical knowledge of the craft of painting and his deft draftsmanship in the artistic community of New York.

At the age of twenty-four, he began taking drawing lessons from the relatively unknown Samuel Frost Johnson. By 1880, Post had already begun painting Hudson River pictures on academic board and signing them "W. Post." By 1881-1882, he moved on to the Art Students League, where he worked with J. Carroll Beckwith. Paintings during this phase were signed "W. M. Post."

By 1884, Post was twenty-eight and had launched a career as a landscapist. That same year, the National Academy of Design accepted for its autumn exhibition one of his paintings signed W. Merritt Post. This remained his signature for the rest of his professional life. It was in these years that he became greatly influenced by the landscape painter, Hugh Bolton Jones. Both men were attracted to tightly focused landscape scenes, particularly streams amid trees and meadows, and their primary goal was to capture light at different times of day and in different seasons.

This predilection, in turn, drove both artists to excursions outside of New York into the countryside of the marsh towns in New Jersey and on Long Island. It was in the marsh areas of Milburn, South Orange and Nutley, New Jersey that the country stream emerged as an infinitely variable formula to display subtle reactions to a particular aspect of nature.

In the 1890s, Post perfected the country stream motif and the evident salability of these paintings no doubt explains how he became financially independent of his father, and it also obliges us to assume that his significance as an artist depended on his virtuoso interpretation of this theme to the end of his long life.

Post exhibited continually at the National Academy of Design, the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts as well as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He also exhibited in Buffalo, Chicago, St. Louis and Washington DC (the Corcoran gallery), receiving many awards. Also an active



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member of the two watercolor clubs that had been established in New York City, Post was later elected an associate member of the National Academy of Design (1910).

Post's era was really the first when American artists could actually make a living from their art. Biographical dictionaries suggest that there were more than a thousand artists living in New York City at the turn of the century. Many landscape artists spent extended periods of time in the countryside sketching, which Post had done since the early 1880s. But most artists returned to their New York studios to create their paintings and to take part in the city's active art community.

In 1906, Post married his wife, Katherine Van Nest. He was 49; she was 36. They had a daughter, Katherine (later Mrs. William E. Gardner), three years after they wed. Even though Post became noted for his landscape paintings done in Connecticut, the Posts always kept an apartment in the city.

The Posts first summered in Bethlehem, Connecticut around 1908. In 1912, they purchased a 15-acre farm, Applewood, in West Morris (Bantam) fifteen miles northwest of Waterbury. With the help of New York architects, the Posts completely remodeled the place adding a studio addition in the process. The Bantam River ran westerly at the back of the property. After settling in his West Morris studio, Post began painting plein-air landscapes, and traveled throughout the northeast, collecting landscape motifs in his sketchbooks. Perhaps more so than any other American artist, he was fascinated with country streams and reflections on water, and concentrated on these themes all of his professional life.

Connecticut had been attracting landscape painters for decades, but most of them were attracted to the shoreline colonies at Cos Cob, Old Lyme and Mystic and to an Impressionist approach to landscape painting. Post stands apart for his choice of a rural retreat in the northwest hills of Connecticut and his steady exploration of his chosen theme, the country stream.

While his peers turned toward the bright palette of Impressionism, he remained committed to tonalist hues and the rich greens that also appealed to his mentor, Hugh Bolton Jones. Those seeking an escape from the increasingly urban New York metropolitan area, rode the Shepaug Railroad, completed in 1872, into the quiet Litchfield colony, where they helped create and preserve an idealized rural lifestyle, a reminder of an America that they feared was rapidly disappearing. This railroad ran only a few miles from Applewood.

When at the age of seventy, Post moved back to Manhattan with his wife to be close to their daughter, Post's only serious professional effort lay in offering two paintings at the National Academy of Design annual exhibitions about 1930. This was later reduced to one painting per year.

William Merritt Post died in New York City of heart problems on March 22, 1935 at the age of



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seventy-eight. The contents of his studio in West Morris were auctioned off in 1937, and the high bidder donated many of the items purchased to the Mattatuck Museum, including drawings, sketchbooks, small oil paintings, documents, and artists' materials.

Artist biography by Kevin Murphy sourced from askart.com

Sources:

Peter Hastings Falk, Editor, *Who Was Who in American Art*

US Census Reports

The Art of the Country Stream, catalog published by the Matatuck Museum in Waterbury, Connecticut in Dec. 1997 to Feb. 1998 to coincide with its retrospective exhibition of Post's work.