The Scope of Painting in the 1790's*

The eagerness of the Philadelphia artist Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) to teach his sons painting made him wish that the new United States possessed a type of institution that had never existed on this side of the water: a school of the fine arts which would "supersede the necessity and save the expense of a foreign education." As was being done by the Royal Academy in London, the school could be supported with entrance fees to an annual exhibition which would, in its turn, bring contemporary American art before the public for the first time in our history.

During a century and a half, every American painter had been forced to operate as an individual. Unless he could persuade a storekeeper to put one of his pictures in a show window, the artist had no place to exhibit except his studio. Once he had completed and sold a canvas, it passed forever out of his sight, for no power could rescue it from the house of the buyer. Group exhibitions being unknown, neither artists nor patrons could ever see a cross section of the work being produced in their community. If a youngster wished instruction, he would ferret out the name and address of a painter; then, unless he was too timid, he would knock on the door, beg for advice and the sight of pictures. A prospective purchaser would learn by word of mouth of a reputation, or examine the portraits in his friends' houses, or answer an advertisement. Except in very rare instances, a picture was not salable unless it was the right size and subject for a private wall, the right price for a private purse. John Singleton Copley (1738-1815) summed up the situation when he

* This article is based on a chapter from the as yet uncompleted second volume of the writer's history of American painting as an expression of American life. The first volume was American Painting: First Flowers of Our Wilderness (Boston, 1947).


2 Advertisement in Dunlap and Claypoole's American Daily Advertiser (Philadelphia), June 1, 1795.
wrote from Boston, "Fame cannot be durable where pictures are confined to sitting rooms." Peale had found a partial and personal solution to the problem by creating a private museum where his pictures, and those of his children, were hung over natural history exhibits and waxworks. It was in the halls of this institution that, about January 1, 1795, he called a convention of the artists resident in Philadelphia. He brought together a polyglot group, for the capital of the new nation had figured as a happy hunting ground in the minds of mediocre workmen from all over Europe. Newspaper advertisements reveal the presence of artists from London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Berlin, Paris, Bordeaux, Geneva, Rome, Venice, and Santo Domingo. With these foreigners there mingled a goodly number of native-born painters, sculptors and architects.

The Englishmen, who could never have squeezed into the Royal Academy at home, saw Peale's scheme as a delightful opportunity for glory. The miniaturist, Robert Field (c. 1768–1819), confided to a friend his expectation of "making a figure in an Academy of Arts and Sciences now establishing here, the plans for which are the most enlarged, liberal, and grand of any in the world. The President is much delighted with it, and will, when it is in a riper state, become the principal patron." This point of view touched off a controversy which reflected the war between England and France in Europe, and the political enmity between Federalists and Jeffersonians at home. The Britons wished to set up an authoritarian institution, patronized by the President as if he were a king, which would dictate the development of art throughout the United States. "Visitors" would travel from Philadelphia to other cities, and judge which of the local practitioners were worthy to become academicians in the national capital. The faction led by Peale and the figurehead carver William Rush (1756–1833) was horrified by such notions. They thought of themselves as a group of workmen banded together for mutual advantage; workmen in other cities might do the same. No one was better than anyone else. The Corsican sculptor Guiseppe Cerracchi

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6 Field to Robert Gilmor, Jan. 13, 1795, HSP.
(1751–c.1802), so violent a democrat that he was to die attempting to assassinate Napoleon as a betrayer of the world revolution, attacked the authoritarian faction with such vehemence that eight English artists resigned and tried to set up a rival institution.

A spirited engagement was fought in the press. The seceders charged Peale's group with "preventing and cramping the original idea of a National College into a contracted plan for an academical drawing school." Peale's faction replied, "Although many of us are not foreigners, but citizens of the United States, we would not presume to establish a national institution which would place similar institutions in other states in a subordinate position. Some gentlemen, who fancy themselves a better order of beings, imagine themselves equal to the most stupendous projects, . . . but America is not the soil to foster seeds of such vanity and arrogance. . . . We will leave conceptions so profound as a National College . . . to those who started up from the hot-beds of monarchy, and think themselves lords of the human kind. . . . We are not in monarchical subordination here."

Both sides called for recruits. As a group, the Philadelphia artists were Jeffersonians; they flocked to the liberal banner, while the English faction secured only one additional member. The secessionists thereupon left the field to Peale's "Columbianum, or American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, etc." Its published constitution added engravings, architectural and other models, enamels and drawings to the specialties of the organization; provided that not more than half the members could be amateurs; called for an annual exhibition limited to works of modern artists never before shown in America; provided for lectures on relevant subjects from perspective to chemistry, for a gallery of old masters—as soon as the society secured some—a library, and classes in drawing both from life and from casts. This was a noble plan, but before the year was out the Columbianum had expired. The demise of the first recorded attempt to found an art academy in America has usually


7 American Daily Advertiser, Feb. 26, 1795; Aurora and General Advertiser (Philadelphia), March 6, 1795.

8 The Constitution of the Columbianum or American Academy (Philadelphia, 1795).
been attributed to the internecine battle touched off by the same worldwide tension that had damaged John Trumbull's (1756-1843) scheme to sell on a national scale engravings depicting the principal events of the Revolution. Yet perhaps the project would not have collapsed anyway because the times were not ripe.

Although inaccurate history has blamed it on them, Peale's difficulty with his life class was not the fault of the Englishmen. The Columbianum had set up a room for some casts of antique statuary it had borrowed, and provided another room where the young might draw from the nude. The setting was fine, but where were they to get a nude? A baker was finally persuaded to pose; when he found many pairs of eyes intent upon his anatomy, he leapt into his clothes and departed. Not wishing his disciples to be frustrated, Peale stripped himself, but it was, nonetheless, a bad beginning. It is not clear whether the life class ever had a second meeting. Indeed, generations were to pass before an American youth could on American soil look at a naked human body as a routine part of his artistic training.

Before it collapsed, the Columbianum held in 1795 the first group exhibition in American history. Our earliest cross section of pictures being produced in an American city, the catalogue annihilates the long-accepted conclusion that portraiture was the exclusive interest of American artists. Of the thirty-seven painters represented, only nineteen, or almost exactly half, showed any likenesses at all, and many of these exhibited other types of pictures as well. Landscape and still life were almost as popular as portraiture, each being shown by eleven painters. Other subject matter was left far behind: three artists showed historical paintings, three showed maps, and there was one genre picture.

The figures, however, contradict the evidence of existing canvases—few pictures not portraits survive from those years in Philadelphia. When, as the nineteenth century unrolled, mounting sophistication of taste made all early American art seem crude, only those canvases that appealed to dynastic pride were likely to be preserved. As was pointed out in this writer's volume on colonial painting, the ash can


10 The Exhibition of the Columbianum or American Academy of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, etc. (Philadelphia, 1795).
yawned for landscapes and fruit pieces. Most of the subject pictures exhibited at the Columbianum have vanished, yet we can get some idea of their nature from other examples of the same modes which have somehow escaped the general holocaust.

Since Benjamin West (1738–1820) was the admiration of every American artist, it seems surprising that no historical paintings were exhibited by living professionals, the three in the show being by the deceased Englishman Robert Edge Pine (1730–1788), and by two amateurs who in their modesty revealed only their gender: An Allegorical Picture in Cryons being attributed to "a Lady of Philadelphia," and the more daring Cupid and Psyche to "A Gentleman." We gather that the artists did not presume to show in an exhibition the figure compositions they sometimes created to hang in signs over the street. Indeed, apart from Trumbull's highly finished pieces, the few historical paintings that survive from Federal America are by workmen too humble to worry about great art.

In western Maryland, a sign painter and drawing teacher, Frederick Kemmelmeyer (active in the 1780's and 1790's), did not hesitate to paint Washington as he saw the hero on his last military assignment, reviewing at Fort Cumberland the troops gathered to put down the Whiskey Rebellion. Two almost identical panels exist; although stiff and crude, they are charming in color and delightful in design. Almost as primitive is The Battle of Princeton, by William Mercer (c. 1773–c. 1850), which shows the death of the artist's father, General Hugh Mercer. William was a deaf-mute whom Peale, inspired by a warm heart and experimental curiosity, taught to paint after a fashion. It is typical that the half-educated pupil dared what his foreign-trained master would not have attempted.

Although earlier periods are not clarified by so inclusive a record as the Columbianum catalogue, it is possible to demonstrate by compiling scattered sources that at no period was the output of American artists limited to portraiture. From colonial times few pictures not likenesses survive, yet such documents as advertisements, wills, inventories and letters reveal the creation of every kind of picture common in the western world. Flexner, First Flowers, 148–175, 309–314.


Rembrandt Peale, "Reminiscences," The Crayon, I (1834), 370; Sellers, see index.
The Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777
By William Mercer
The one genre painting at the Columbianum, *A Boy Holding a Cat to a Mouse*, was by another simple workman. The contemporary art chronicler William Dunlap (1766–1839) wrote of Jeremiah Paul (c. 1760–1820): “This is one of the unfortunate individuals who, showing what is called genius in early life, . . . are induced to devote themselves to the fine arts, without the means of improvement or the education necessary to fit them for a liberal profession. . . . He was a man of vulgar appearance and awkward manners.” Dunlap disdained Paul for daring hugely; he mocked the sign painter who exhibited in an engraver’s window, during 1811, “*Venus and Cupid*, nine feet by seven, taken from living models.” Paul’s career was, indeed, not glorious. Like so many of his colleagues a drunkard, he drifted unsuccessfully from city to city, seeking business at last in the new settlements of the Ohio Valley, where he painted “phantasmagorias” and theatrical scenery.¹⁴

A surviving composition of Paul shows a small girl sketching on the pavement a portrait of a boy who stands with amusing self-consciousness. Two other children play with a tub of water. Most fascinating is the organization of space, the stark background with its deep perspective. Perhaps the picture, which has a Dutch flavor, was based on an engraving. In any case, it is so exciting a canvas that we may well wonder whether, when more of his works are unearthed, Paul will not fill an important place in the history of American art.

Fruit and flower pieces were a standard exercise for beginning artists; no one needed to be shy about attempting still life. Since pictures of natural objects appealed to American middle-class taste, we should expect still life to be as popular as it was at the Columbianum, where the usual decorative subjects were supplemented with representations of game, fish, and raw meat. “Deceptions” fooled the eye into accepting the actual existence of a painted image. That still life had been prized by American collectors since the first years of settlement is demonstrated by documents, but it is impossible to determine when it rose to that popularity with artists which the Columbianum reveals. Certainly we cannot judge from existing

examples, since all the paintings listed in the catalogue have vanished, along with every still life certainly painted on these shores before 1800.

We do, however, have many examples created after 1815 by two of the Columbianum exhibitors, C. W. Peale’s brother James (1749–1831), and his son Raphaëlle (1774–1825). The unassuming and closely related little canvases of uncle and nephew reflect Dutch models of the seventeenth century. Edges of tables make horizontal lines at the bottoms of most of the pictures, while bowls, with the fruit that fills and surrounds them, stand out before plain walls. The lighting is arranged unnaturally to present sharp contrasts: where the foregrounds are most brightly illuminated the backgrounds are in shadow, and on the rear walls light and shade break in sharp diagonals. James’ pictures display abundant leafage and ribbonlike tendrils; Raphaëlle’s are more simply composed. James made his high lights self-contained spots of color, while Raphaëlle blended them into the mass with half tones, thus giving his forms more solidity. Both men handled their colors agreeably to achieve the greatest possible verisimilitude. Organization of weight and space, so important to modern still life painters, does not seem to have consciously concerned the Peales; their objective was decoration grounded in realism.15

Like all Charles’ sons, Raphaëlle toyed with museums. He amused customers by making them grope on walls for objects that were not really there. His one surviving “deception,” After the Bath, was painted to tease his termagant wife who, according to the Peale biographer, Charles Coleman Sellers, “comes storming into his painting room—what is he about now? A large canvas rests upon the easel. Something indecent, as far as she can judge, by the bare feet at the bottom, and the undressed hair held up on a slim woman’s hand, at the top. But the man has concealed the rest, fastened a tape across it and to this has pinned one of her best linen napkins. She goes instantly to retrieve the cloth and learn what lies behind it—only to find, with her fingers against the canvas and the laugh upon her, that linen and canvas are one, a painted picture only.” Conceived of as a

joke, the canvas nonetheless carried the artist in exciting new directions. He was, as Walker and James have pointed out, far in advance of his generation when he "devoted a canvas to so purely visual a theme as the play of light on the various planes of a white towel."\(^{16}\)

At the Columbianum, landscape vied for popularity with still life. Again the actual paintings shown have vanished, but we are entering a period from which many landscapes remain. They range from purely decorative combinations of natural elements and factual portraits of places to reflections of academic British landscape art.

Typically, the decorative combinations were painted directly on walls, or on boards that were built into paneling, often over a mantle. As in the murals of the Colonial period, trees were spaced to frame a composition; houses were rectangles with black squares to indicate windows; people and animals, placed for effect, were made whatever size most suited the design. It did not matter if a dog could at one mouthful gulp down his master's residence as long as the space was broken up agreeably. Indeed, as the house painters who usually executed such scenes realized, too much naturalism would not enrich the general effect of the room, but shatter it. Exotic beasts and buildings—tigers and castles and pyramids—were quite at home in this world with rabbits and colonial houses. The result was admirably suited to its purpose, yet the pictures were so quickly and crudely painted that, when separated from their walls and their purely practical purpose, they are likely to be disappointing as works of art.\(^{17}\)

For some generations, artists had been tramping the American countryside making in water color what were advertised as "perspective views of gentlemen's estates." When they sketched cities or natural wonders that would interest many people, their drawings were sometimes engraved. In England, such activity was to flower in the work of Girtin and Cotman into authentic landscape art, but these men were yet young; and anyway the leading foreign watercolorists did not come to the United States. There arrived a perpetual succession of minor Europeans, both amateur and professional, who joined with native artists to create the steady stream to topograph-

\(^{16}\) Sellers, II, 390; John Walker and Macgill James, *Great American Paintings* (New York, 1943), 7.

\(^{17}\) Information from Nina Fletcher Little. Edward B. Allen, *Early American Wall Paintings, 1770-1850* (New Haven, 1926).
ical views in water color which seem to have been early America’s most ubiquitous landscape art.

Among the most prominent practitioners were the Scotch brothers, Archibald Robertson (1765–1835) and Alexander Robertson (1772–1841). In 1791 they opened a successful drawing school in New York, the Columbian Academy, and eleven years later published, over Archibald’s signature, a book of art instruction. Although they paid lip service to historical painting as the highest mode, they concentrated their teaching on landscape in water color, “a very desirable accomplishment” which “every man may have occasion for.” They pointed out that “rocks, mountains, fields, woods, rivers, cataracts, cities, towns, castles, houses, fortifications, ruins, or whatsoever else may present itself to view . . . may thus be brought home and preserved for future use, both in business and conversation.”

The method the Robertsons taught had been evolved for the production of aquatint engravings, in which the plate printed a graduation of values from grey to black that gave contour and shape to transparent water-color washes later applied flatly by hand. The Robertsons encouraged their pupils to draw in “the light and shade” before adding colors. This, the teachers boasted, enabled beginners to achieve “with very little labor . . . a considerable effect.” View of Collect Pond, by Alexander or one of his pupils, reveals both the charms and the weaknesses of the result. The composition has grace, but the even washes give neither strength nor vibrancy. Most serious and typical of all is the lack of any real feeling for nature. There is no air in the spaces, no mood in the sky, no growth in the trees, no dirt in the ground that has been tinted according to an artificial and elegant formula.

Nobody in the United States knew how to make aquatints, or any really satisfactory landscape engravings. That drawings by the Robertsons and others were sent abroad for reproduction reveals a real interest in American scenes. Beginning in 1787 with A View of the Ohiophyle Falls in Pennsylvania, various American magazines

18 Archibald Robertson, Elements of the Graphic Arts (New York, 1802); Emily Robertson, ed., Letters and Papers of Andrew Robertson, . . . also a Treatise on the Art by his Eldest Brother, Archibald Robertson (London, n. d.).

19 Robertson, Elements of the Graphic Arts, 6.

20 Robertson, Letters and Papers of Andrew Robertson, 39–40.
published occasional local landscapes engraved in line on copper.\textsuperscript{21} The illustrations are unexciting renditions of physical topography. Invariably, the exact spot depicted is identified in the title, yet the accompanying text often generalizes, trying to catch in words wide implications which the pictures miss. Thus \textit{A View at Minisink, New Jersey}, drawn by Jacob Hoffman (?—?), is described as "an elegant rural prospect from a part of our country which affords as many novel and romantic scenes as a lover of the charms of nature can anywhere meet with, or as the most enthusiastic artist could desire."\textsuperscript{22} \textit{View on the Mushanon River}, also after Hoffman, is said to demonstrate that "no quarter of the world, however celebrated, affords more novel and sublime scenes than are to be met with among the romantic wilds of America."\textsuperscript{23} The desire to show Nature luxuriating in all the glories of her local raiment, which was to inspire the Hudson River School, was clearly already present. The dryness of the drawings and the engravings after them was due less to lack of will than lack of skill.

Landscape in water color was still regarded as a minor art; claimants to immortality worked in oil. Scholars have been so convinced that such painting began in America during the 1830's that they have, with recent and rare exceptions, ignored the continuing influx of conventionally trained English workmen which followed the Revolution. The immigrants brought with them a richer tradition than that of the water-colorists, and also a more conventional one. Roots went back to the classical serenity of Claude Lorraine, the tempests of Salvator Rosa, and the modified realism of the Dutch. Through the years these influences had become interwoven into formulas, more direct when the Dutch element was predominant, yet always applicable by rote. Although in England a few choice spirits were beginning to see nature with a vision as fresh as that of the emerging romantic poets, the majority of academically trained landscapists, including those who emigrated to America, failed to look at scenery with their own eyes. They vended sterile recipes.

A partial exception may have been Charles Catton, Jr. (1756—

\textsuperscript{21} Frank Weitenkampf, "Early American Landscape Prints," \textit{Art Quarterly}, VIII (1945), 40–67.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{New York Magazine}, V (1794), 323.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{American Universal Magazine}, I (1797), 39.
JAMES THOMAS FLEXNER January

1819), who reached these shores probably in 1801, and spent the rest of his days on the banks of the Hudson. "During his residence in the United States," his obituary tells us, he "devoted attention principally to agricultural pursuits, and seldom exercised his pencil, except to gratify personal friendship, and enliven the dull monotony of rural winter life." Yet between 1816 and 1822 his name was attached to twenty-three entries in the annual exhibitions of the American Academy of the Fine Arts held in New York. The titles include: Design for the Drop Curtain of a Theatre; View at Harper's Ferry in Virginia; A Storm at Sea; A Wood Scene; Landscape with Cattle and Figures; Landscape, Rocky Shore and Moon Rising; Composition for a Family Picture; Landscape, Ploughing; The Barn Door; Refreshment, Harvest Scene; Snow Storm.

Catton’s English style had been basically conventional, but lightened with personal vision. The knowing historian Grant considered him “a strong and able painter,” who combined Morland’s choice of subject with the “virile hand” of James Ward and the “finished draughtsmanship” of John Herring. His hot, vivid coloring foreshadowed William Shayer. No writer on American landscapes has ever mentioned Catton’s eighteen years in this country. That such a workman vanished from history when he stepped on these shores shows again how grievously we have neglected our early landscape painting.

The riches which investigation would probably turn up in any locality is revealed by Dr. Pleasants’ discoveries in that secondary art center, Baltimore. He found that during the 1790’s four Englishmen who specialized in views made their headquarters there. Three were academically trained: George Beck (1748/9-1812); William Winstanley (active in America c. 1792-c. 1801); and Wil-

25 The exhibition catalogues of the American Academy may be found at the New-York Historical Society.
liam Groombridge (1748–1811), who was one of the seceders from Peale’s Columbianum. Conventional exemplars of ordinary British landscape painting, the work of all three has the sterile and withered charm of an old maid who has not forgotten that once—long, long ago—she was beautiful. Although George Washington bought two landscapes by Beck and four by Winstanley, although several of Beck’s American views were handsomely engraved in England, all three painters failed to make a good living from their art. Groombridge and Beck turned to school teaching, while Winstanley’s greater enterprise carried him into forging Stuart Washingtons. Yet the fourth Baltimore landscapist sold his paintings by the hundreds.

While his rivals were studying art, Francis Guy (1760–1820), was apprenticed to a tailor in Westmorelandshire. Groombridge and Beck exhibited at the Royal Academy; Guy invented machines for glazing silk and became—or so he claimed—“calender and dyer to Her Majesty.” Failing to keep ahead of his creditors, he fled to America, where he tried in factories in New York and in Philadelphia to apply his new methods. When success still evaded him, in the words of Rembrandt Peale, he “boldly undertook to be an artist, although he did not know how to draw.” This was about 1797.

Applying his inventive mind to his new pursuit, Guy built a portable tent with a single window, across which he stretched a piece of black gauze. He then “drew with chalk all the objects seen through the medium, with perfect perspective accuracy. This drawing,” Peale continues, “being conveyed to his canvas by simple pressure from the back of his hand, he painted the scene from Nature, with a rapidly-improving eye, so that in a few days his landscape was finished, and his tent conveyed in a cart to some other inviting locality. . . . He produced four pictures of extraordinary merit as rough transcripts from Nature. They were exhibited in the ballroom of Bryden’s Hotel, and soon found purchasers at twenty-five dollars each. Whilst he continued this mode of study, his pictures were really good—but excited by the reputation he was gaining, he afterwards manufactured landscapes with such vigor that I have known him to display in the sunshine, on a lot contiguous to his residence near the

30 Grant, I, 147–148; Pleasants, Four . . . Landscape Painters.
city, forty large landscapes, which were promptly disposed of by raffle. He painted standing, stepping frequently back to study the general effect, and taking a huge pinch of snuff from a large open jar—perhaps in emulation of Mr. Stuart—then advancing with dramatic energy to his picture, first flourishing his pencil in the air, executed the leaves of his trees, with flat brushes and cut quill feathers, as he imagined no one had ever done before.”

Guy was an eccentric. Typical of his frequent notices in the newspapers is his “Communication to the Friends of Literature,” in which he characterized himself, without any sense of incongruity, as both a landscape painter and a dyer. He was projecting a book to teach these twin arts. In painting he would “pitch the key to young beginners, that natural taste and genius, if they have any, may play the tune.” Dying and scouring, he added, “will give the American families a pleasant and profitable amusement.” The book would also contain his autobiography, an attack on Deism, a satirical ballad called *The Devil and Tom Paine*, and a humorous article recommending the substitution of “Scotch snuff” for the atomic bomb of those days, the Congreve rocket, “that the enemy might be blinded . . . and taken all alive.” It is melancholy to report that this volume was never published.

In 1807, Guy and Groombridge held a communal exhibition at Baltimore. That people clamored to buy the pictures of the self-taught artist and shunned those of the educated British landscapist enraged a female editor, Eliza Anderson. Daughter of a distinguished Irish physician and fiancée of the French architect, Maximilian Godefroy, she styled Baltimore “the Siberia of the arts,” and admonished those Americans who had not acquired “the knowledge necessary to constitute a judge of painting” to accept the dicta of experts who “have an acknowledged and established right to pronounce on these points. . . . They say that the genius of Mr. Guy is a wild plant; that nature had intended him for a landscape painter; . . . but they will also say that he has not studied; . . . nor has he made a single striking step in the art. . . . In a word, that if Mr. Guy is a diamond, it is without polish.” On the other hand, “real

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33 *The American* (Balt.), Feb. 6, 1819, quoted in Pleasants, Four . . . Landscape Painters, 73–74.
connoisseurs will say that, as for Mr. Groombridge, he views nature with an artist's eye; that he is familiar with good schools; that he has a great deal of felicity; and that to produce paintings really fine" he needs only encouragement.

In another article Mrs. Anderson reported with horror that in America such uneducated creatures as bricklayers and carpenters pretended to a taste in painting. She denounced the national tendency to make no sharp distinction between artisans and fine artists. While "duly appreciating the utility of those who profess the useful arts, we must, nevertheless, observe that Apollo is somewhat aristocratic and does not permit of perfect equality in his court. . . . The Muses are rather saucy, and do not admit workmen to their levees." She held against Guy that he had been a tailor and advised him to return to his "soul-inspiring avocation of making pantaloons." Guy replied that Groombridge was a good painter, who deserved more support than he received, but added, "The connoisseurs of Baltimore will not be dictated to by insolence and abuse."  

Today, the artistic taste of the populace seems far superior to that of the refined lady and her well-educated French fiance. Proper, conventional, and insipid, Groombridge's landscapes are based not on nature or any belief, but on other pictures. With conviction and a wild joy, the tailor painted images his own eyes had seen, his own mind conceived. He organized naturalistic details into unnaturalistic designs, fusing all over the flame of imagination. So strong was his creative will that, despite their underlying literalness, his pictures carry us into his personal fairyland. No one could be lonely in this ecstatic world; figures walk in twos; even the cows and dogs have mates. Before the Maryland mansion, Bolton, stroll a pair of elegantly attired ladies painted completely in dead white; their gay and ghostlike forms sweep this carefully drawn "perspective view" into some other-worldly stratosphere. Guy’s pictures are dreams, not fantastic, but dreams of reality. About 1817, Guy moved to Brooklyn. Ailing, rotted with drink, he painted over and over again the view out of his window. With the passionate realism that had taken the place of his former imaginative mood, he depicted tumble-down buildings under a grey sky. There

34 The Observer, I (1807), 11, 381, 390–391.
35 Federal Gazette (Balt.), Nov. 17, 1807.
are melancholy, peopleless pictures, which seem to brood on the shabby pointlessness of man's earthly habitat; and also his chef d'oeuvre, the same scene, but gay now, crowded humorously with neighbors. The artist, we are told, "would sometimes call out of the window to his subjects, as he caught sight of them on their customary ground, to stand still, while he put in the characteristic strokes. . . . Jacob Hicks, whose house is just visible on the corner of Main Street, was brought to a halt, goose in hand; and after he had been sketched, politely sent the goose as a present to the painter, that he might 'sketch the fowl more deliberately, and eat him afterwards.'"

In many ways, Guy's vigorous Winter Scene in Brooklyn, though painted a few years later, typified the most vital art produced in America between the Revolution and the War of 1812. Detail, accurate and voluminous, selected and organized into design; a mingling of knowing and crude techniques; color applied superficially yet often harmonious; literalness tempered by ebullient imagination —these characteristics appeared everywhere. Although the sublime was talked about and admired, it was left to European masters, who would by definition be more competent to achieve it. Americans practiced a local and human art, loving neighbors and their possessions. Episodic in approach and eccentric in execution, it was more likely to be charming than profound. Yet it grew naturally from the painters' environment and revealed the ungainly vitality of young and growing things.

The tradition which was forming itself so gradually promised much for the future, but it was menaced by doubts that might block maturity. Profound art could not be produced until the artists dared work profoundly, until they escaped from ignorance, self-abasement, and sheepish fear. True, the painters, although for the moment they felt constrained to work unambitiously, dreamed of mighty canvases that would rival the great productions of the past. Yet when high art beckoned to them, it seemed to call them to leave their American roots, to leave themselves. Conning elegant ideas from books, they were far from sure that beauty could be unearthed by using greater knowledge to dig more deeply in the soil they had always known. Certainly the Elysian Fields were made of more exotic earth.

36 Stiles, 103.
The end of the War of 1812 was to permit the return to these shores of a group of able American artists who had been trapped in Europe. They were to bring with them many skills their home-grown brethren lacked and longed for. Whether these gifts would strengthen the vernacular tradition or overwhelm it depended very much on the characters of the returning painters and the thoughts they cherished.

*New York City*  
*James Thomas Flexner*