

SEEING AMERICA: George Harvey's *Pittsford on the Erie Canal – A Sultry Calm*, 1837

In this painting, Harvey portrays nineteenth-century America's romantic view of nature, as well as the young country's pride in its technological mastery.



George Harvey (1800 – 1878)
Pittsford on the Erie Canal - A Sultry Calm, 1837
Oil on panel
Gift of the Margaret M. McDonald Memorial Fund,
2005.33
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

The Art

In the nineteenth century, American landscape painting served to provide factual information about lands newly acquired or settled, but also to reflect national sentiment that the land's extraordinary beauty was a sign of God's special providence. By the mid years of the century, Americans were interested to see how the nation was putting its land to human use, and scenes of the domesticated landscape were immensely popular. The Erie Canal, a waterway begun in 1817 that connects the Hudson River to Lake Erie, is deceptively natural looking. With its gracefully winding path and treed banks, it was a popular choice of artists.

In Harvey's painting, the gentle diagonal curve of the Erie Canal leads the viewer's eye along the towpath, past the packet boat and on to the distant village of Pittsford, New York, just outside the city of Rochester. Neither the soft delicate buildings in the town nor the man-made waterway and towpath appear to disturb the natural land forms. The stillness of the water reflects every detail of the sky, the trees, and the packet boat.

Pittsford on the Erie Canal – A Sultry Calm and a similar work now at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York were painted from sketches done during the artist's visit to the Rochester area in 1835 or 1836. Viewing the canal from the south bank at King's Bend approximately one mile west of Pittsford village, Harvey in carefully rendered details includes the towpath, three horses, a guide and rider, the trees and flora of the area, and, in the distance, the village of Pittsford with two church spires and a brick-red step-gabled building.



The Pittsford Harvey saw was changing rapidly. The canal had brought people and business to the port at Pittsford, which lay at the juncture of the stage-coach road to the county seat in Canandaigua, New York. As a result, the community grew large enough to be incorporated as a village in 1827, and by the time Harvey visited, the tracks of the new Rochester & Auburn Railroad were being laid north of the Erie Canal. However, the dome and spires in Harvey's painting more closely resemble those in the skyline of the larger nearby village of Rochester as rendered by Captain Basil Hall and engraver William Home Lizars in *Forty Etchings for Sketches Made with the Camera Lucida*, in North America, in 1827 and 1828.



William Home Lizars (1788 – 1859)

The Village of Rochester, 1829

Etching

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frank W. Lovejoy, Jr., 84.36

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Harvey's interest in the varying effects of atmospheric conditions on the landscape at different times of day is evident in the painting, where clouds fill the top half of the painting and are carefully reflected in the water below. As an introduction to a lecture for the Royal Institution of Great Britain in 1849, Harvey wrote:

The cumulous cloud, from which the sketch was taken, rose with great suddenness. At noon the weather was very oppressive and sultry, and not a cloud to be seen; at two o'clock the sky was in commotion, and at three a most terrific thunder storm burst upon the country. The little village in the distance is near to Rochester, a great place for flour mills. The principal trade of Pitsford [sic] is the purchase of grain for other markets; it is situated in one of the most productive agricultural districts in the Union. (Seeing America, 41)

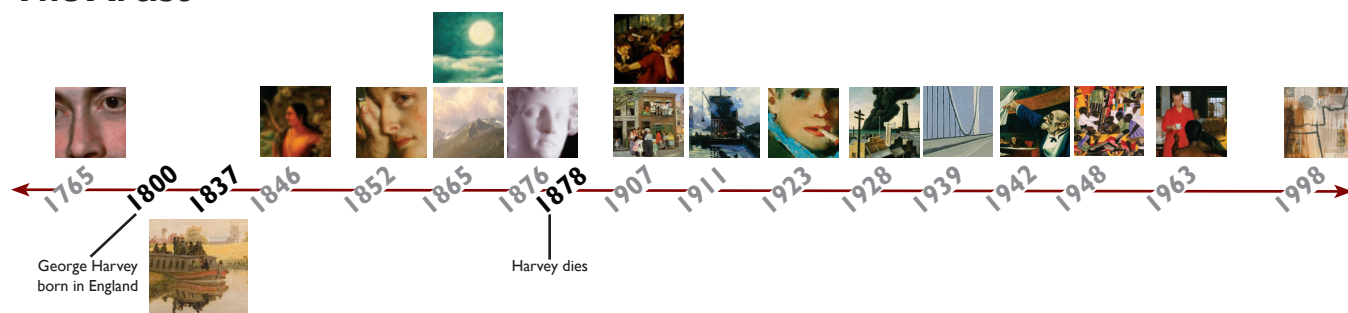
Harvey shared with many **Hudson River School** artists the view of American wilderness as a "second creation." In this view the canal boat becomes a symbol of Adam in the new Eden, securely protected between the steeples of Christian churches with the divine light of Providence shining upon the scene. American Studies scholar David Nye wrote of the Erie Canal as the "'technological sublime'—both a part of the 'preservation and the transformation of the natural world' and a component of a 'moral machine' that 'ensured not only prosperity but also democracy and the moral health of the nation.'" (Seeing America, 39)

Glossary

Camera Lucida: Drawing aid which reflects the image of a subject through the use of mirrors onto an artist's drawing surface.

Hudson River School: Mid-19th century American art movement in which painters celebrated the landscape of Hudson River Valley and nearby areas.

The Artist



English-born George Harvey came to America in 1820 to seek his fortune. A skilled and successful painter of portrait miniatures and delicate watercolor landscapes, he was elected to the **National Academy of Design** in 1828. Both artist and entrepreneur, Harvey planned to create and market an elaborate album of engravings of significant American landscapes. He was intrigued

Glossary

National Academy of Design: Founded in 1825, as a professional organization of artists, its annual exhibition in the 19th century was the premier venue for American artists to show their work.

by the “ever-varying atmospheric effects” of the American climate, which he found remarkably different from those in England. In 1835 he began recording his impressions in a series of sketches and watercolor paintings; it was at this time that he visited Pittsford village in western New York.

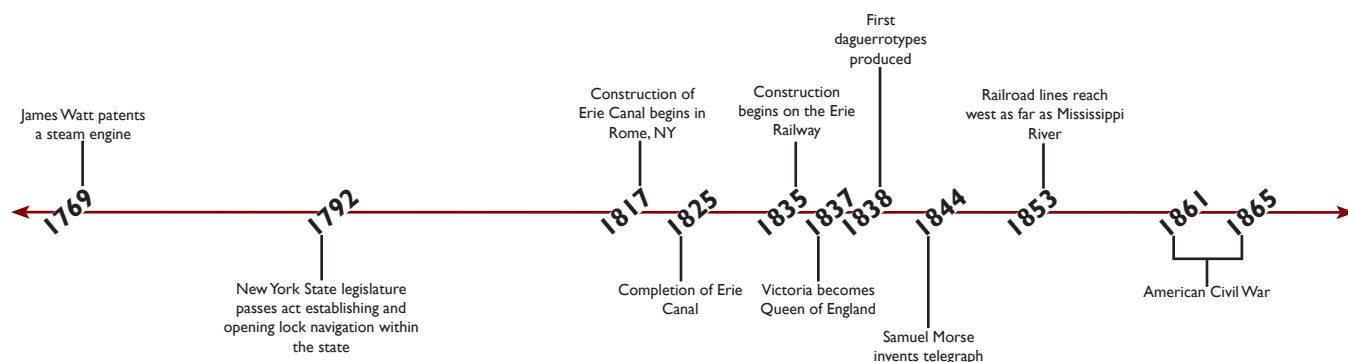
In 1841, Harvey published his portfolio *Atmospheric Landscapes*, with engravings by William J. Bennett from Harvey’s watercolors. Four engravings, collectively entitled *Scenes of the Primitive Forest of America at the Four Periods of the Year*, were issued as **aquatints** in 1841 under the patronage of Queen Victoria. The portfolio, however, was too expensive; only 250 copies were sold, and the project was discontinued. In the late 1840s Harvey transcribed many of his watercolor sketches onto glass lantern slides for lectures to introduce English audiences to America’s extraordinary landscapes.

Although he continued to travel between England and America, George Harvey made his home along the Hudson River near his friend Washington Irving.

Glossary

Aquatint: Method of etching producing finely granulated tonal areas rather than lines.

America



The Erie Canal introduced New York State’s natural wonders to the world. Americans were fascinated with their untamed landscape and eager to find forms in nature that gave them an American identity and linked them to their own glorious and indigenous past. Many believed they could read the landscape as a kind of Holy Scripture, and find moral lessons therein.

The Erie Canal, completed in 1825, resulted in the explosive growth of Rochester and communities in the Genesee Valley. The rich farmland was ideally suited to wheat production. The Genesee River carried tons of grain north to Rochester’s Genesee Falls where waterpower ground the wheat into flour. With cheap transportation on the canal available to ship 300,000 barrels of flour a year to American and overseas markets, Rochester became America’s first “boomtown.” The Erie Canal also opened up huge markets in the West for eastern manufactured goods. The urbanization of New York State was underway, and New York City became “the greatest commercial emporium in the world,” as Governor (and canal champion) Dewitt Clinton had promised.

The successful completion and dramatic results of the Erie Canal were seen by Americans—and even by the Europeans—as proof of America’s exceptionalism. The technological accomplishment awed the world and established



John Cousen (1804 – 1880)
The Genesee [sic] Falls, Rochester, 1838
 Hand-colored engraving
 Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frank Lovejoy, Jr., 84.38
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
 University of Rochester

America's reputation as human master of the natural environment. Among the canal's most challenging engineering dilemmas was the 802-foot-long aqueduct built to carry the canal across the Genesee River in the city of Rochester. In neighboring Pittsford, laborers constructed The Great Embankment to take the canal safely over the Irondequoit Creek plain seventy feet below. For many, the success of the Erie Canal confirmed America's **Manifest Destiny**—its mission to expand and civilize the wilderness.

Civilization moved quickly as the "Old West" of the Great Lakes states gave way to a huge new frontier in the vast area west of the Mississippi River. The canal itself was replaced—in people's minds as well as in practical use—by newer technology. In 1835 construction began on the New York and Erie Railway, which ironically ran alongside the canal through much of New York State. And very soon, American nationalism and pride were challenged by the growing disagreements between "eastern" manufacturers and "western" farmers over protective tariffs and the role of the government in constructing additional public projects. The Erie Canal continued to be of significant economic importance but America's people had lost their sense of its wonder.

See also Marjorie B. Searl, "George Harvey: Pittsford on the Erie Canal—A Sultry Calm (1837)," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 39–42.

Glossary

Manifest Destiny: 19th century self-proclaimed belief that the United States was divinely ordained to expand across the North American continent.

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where and when it was painted?

How has the artist created the illusion of a real place?

How does knowing the title, *Pittsford on the Erie Canal – A Sultry Calm*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

Compare Harvey's *Pittsford on the Erie Canal – A Sultry Calm* with *Morning on the River* painted by Jonas Lie 75 years later. Compare their artistic styles as well as their choice of subject matter. How has technology changed the land and attitudes toward it? What does each artist suggest about the relationship between humankind and the environment?



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the

University of Rochester



George Harvey (1800 – 1878)

Pittsford on the Erie Canal - A Sultry Calm, 1837

Oil on wood panel

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Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist and America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

Exploring the Context

George Harvey and the Hudson River School artists wanted to capture the beauty of nature before it was destroyed by human touch. Explore artists' history of romanticizing the American landscape. What effect did the artists have on Americans' attitude toward the land and ecology?



John Frederick Kensett (1816 – 1872)

A Showery Day, Lake George, ca. 1860

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 74.29

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester



Thomas Cole (1801 – 1848)

Genesee Scenery, 1846-1847

Oil on panel

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 94.40

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester



Asher Brown Durand (1796 – 1886)

Genesee Oaks, 1860

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Women's Council in honor of Harris K. Prior, 74.5

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



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Finding and Analyzing Point of View

American artists lived through periods of great technological change. Many paintings record the transformation of the national landscape while others capture Americans' excitement about the technology itself. What do you think was the point of view of each of these artists?



Stuart Davis (1894 – 1964)

Landscape with Garage Lights, 1931-1932

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.3

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



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Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
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Ralston Crawford (1906 – 1978)

Whitestone Bridge, 1939-1940

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.2

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

Finding and Analyzing Point of View/Exploring the Context

Compare the point of view expressed in a song sung at the opening celebration of the Erie Canal with George Harvey's visual portrayal. Why do you think so many artists were inspired by the opening of the Erie Canal?



Yet it is not that Wealth now enriches the scene
Where treasures of Art and of Nature convene;
'Tis not that this Union our coffers may fill:
O! no it is something more exquisite still.

'Tis that Genius had triumphed and Science prevailed
Tho' Prejudice flouted, and envy assail'd
It is, that the vassels of Europe may see
The progress of mind in a land that is free.

From *The Meeting of the Waters of Hudson and Erie*,
by Samuel Woodworth, 1825

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