26: George Inness *Early Moonrise in Florida* (1893)

David Bjelajac

During the last decade of his life, when his primary residence was in Montclair, New Jersey, George Inness traveled extensively. The New York-born landscapist established a second home and studio in the newly incorporated city of Tarpon Springs in west-central Florida on the Gulf Coast. From 1884 until his death in 1894, Inness painted over thirty landscapes on trips to Florida and the South.[1] Like other Americans, he was encouraged to make these trips by corporate interests. Railroad companies sought to open the sunshine state for tourism and development as they rapidly laid new tracks to resort communities from St. Augustine to Palm Beach.[2] Promotional literature published during the 1880s described Florida as an ideal environment for tourists, convalescing invalids, and young settlers seeking their fortunes.

Inness chose Tarpon Springs for a winter home due to frail health. He suffered bouts of epilepsy, rheumatism, dyspepsia, and nervous exhaustion and sought seclusion and relative rest rather than dramatic scenery and oceanic adventures. Tarpon Springs was not known as a tourist resort but based its growing economy on the sponge industry, which benefited from new techniques in deep-sea diving.[3] The aging artist, whose career began during the heyday of the Hudson River School tradition of landscape painting, probably hoped that this relatively unheralded section of Florida's Gulf Coast would help him recuperate or at least avoid further maladies produced by harsh New Jersey winters.

(Facing page)
George Inness,
1825–1894
Early Moonrise in Florida, 1893
Oil on canvas, 24⅜ x 36¼ in.
George Eastman Collection
of the University of Rochester,
36.61

Inness did not depict the laborious physical exertions of Tarpon Springs's sponge divers. Though he sometimes included signs of industrial activity in his later landscapes, as with the distant belching smokestack in his 1889 *Niagara* (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.), the artist generally avoided scenes of economic modernization. Sympathetic critics praised him for his hostility to commercialism and the profit motive.[4] Inness had become renowned in the Gilded Age as a spiritual seeker attuned to nature as a religious resource for mining invisible, hidden truths.

Dating primarily from the 1890s, Inness's paintings of Tarpon Springs typify the artist's late style, which accentuated emotionally evocative color tones and the abstract formal elements of pictorial composition over illusionistic, precisely defined details.[5] Early in his career, during the 1860s, Inness had diverged significantly from the imaginative, romantic realism of the Hudson River School, favoring the more broadly painted style of French Barbizon School landscapes, as exemplified by Charles Daubigny's *Near Andresy* (1872, Memorial Art Gallery). Enormously popular among American collectors by the second half of the nineteenth century (including George Eastman in Rochester), these French painters impressed Inness by their quiet expression of personal, intimate moods through the freer manipulation of natural forms and tonal effects.

Charles François Daubigny
1817–1878
Near Andresy, 1872
Oil on panel, 17 x 32½ in.
George Eastman Collection of
the University of Rochester,
78.7

The French Barbizon style suited Inness's desire to transform the very act of painting into a religious exercise. By the early 1860s, Inness had moved from an early affiliation with more conventional Protestant faiths to an identification with Swedenborgianism, or the Church of the New Jerusalem, founded upon the visionary writings of the eighteenth-century hermetic philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg.[6] Unlike orthodox Christian belief, which taught that God had created the world out of nothing and that there was an essential dualistic opposition between matter and divine spirit, Christian hermetic philosophers such as Swedenborg drew upon the occult traditions of alchemy and Renaissance "pansophist" or wisdom literature to argue that God's divine light or wisdom was hidden throughout nature down to the smallest particle of matter.[7]

In harmony with this tradition, Inness interpreted painting as an alchemical process. Rather than transforming base metals into gold, the discredited goal of traditional alchemy, the American painter, following in the footsteps of the Renaissance master Titian and other great colorists, believed he could spiritually develop his own being by transmuting the humble pigments of nature into landscapes that glowed with an aerial, unifying light.[8]

Certainly, *Early Moonrise* radiates a powerful light that suggests the procreative presence of God's Word more than merely impressionistic observations of natural light effects.[9] Inness painted other moonlight scenes at Tarpon Springs in addition to early morning sunrises, evening sunsets, and twilit landscapes, all suffused by mysterious colors and powerful light-dark effects.[10]

Inness's abstract painterly style has challenged beholders, who have had difficulty in deciphering his forms. Scholars have variously interpreted the barely distinguishable figure standing on a path near the foreground.[11] The figure appears to represent a robed, religious man or, in Swedenborgian terms, a seeker of divine wisdom, who stands in profile looking upward while apparently holding an offering toward the full moon. In contrast to the softened, out-of-focus contours of the terrestrial forms, Inness's low-hanging moon possesses the geometric rigor of a distinct, perfect circle.[12] The moon dominates the picture with its radiating light and through a pictorial composition in which directional lines, formed by the curving pathway and stand of lofty trees, follow the wise man's gaze toward the lunar disc. In the background to the right, a large house with a gently sloping red roof also leads the eye upward to the silver moon floating within a luminous blue sky.

Writing in 1867 under the influence of Swedenborgian ideas, Inness referred to the moon as "the natural emblem of faith."[13] Reflecting the light of the sun, traditional symbol for God's light, the moon, Inness wrote, reassures the faithful that divine light still exists even though it is no longer directly visible in the night sky. Inness further equated the moon with the cross of Christ, symbol for the human embodiment of divine light. Elsewhere in a Swedenborgian newspaper, Inness identified blue as the color of faith.[14] Associating red with the love of God and yellow with the love of man and the natural world, Inness argued that when all three of the "primitive" or primary colors were perfectly combined, they produced harmony or a state of spiritual and aesthetic unity.

The blue of faith dominates *Early Moonrise in Florida*. Yet, Inness employed all three primaries in various ways to suggest his harmonic ideal of unity. Clouds streak across the top of the picture, their rose-tinged hue signifying God's love. Meanwhile the tall green pine trees, like the moon, also stand as traditional symbols of Christ. A combination of blue and yellow, nature's evergreens promise life everlasting.

For Inness and other Swedenborgians, death was only a small step onto a higher plane of being, one that was essentially continuous with the natural world. The reverent figure in *Early Moonrise* could be interpreted as Inness's spiritual self-portrait, painted in hopeful anticipation of his crossing through a heavenly threshold. The artist died in Scotland the next year following a tour of the European continent. This picture was displayed shortly afterward in New York at a memorial exhibition and then sold in 1895 along with several hundred other works by the estate executor. By 1915, George Eastman had acquired the painting from New York's Macbeth Gallery. Like Inness, Eastman had rejected the bright, anarchic paintings of French Impressionism, though the collector may have been more concerned that the vivid hues of the impressionist palette would clash with the interior decoration of his home.[15] An admirer of French Barbizon paintings, Eastman found their American counterpart in this southern, moonlit landscape.

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