



### 31: John Henry Twachtman *The White Bridge* (late 1890s)

Susan G. Larkin

John Twachtman settled in Greenwich, Connecticut, in the spring of 1889.<sup>1</sup> For the next ten years, his property on Round Hill Road—eventually totaling about seventeen acres—was the focus of his emotional and artistic life. Unlike many of his colleagues, who spent summers in the country but made their primary home in New York City, Twachtman, a Cincinnati native, lived in Connecticut year-round. “I feel more and more contented with the isolation of country life,” the city-bred artist wrote to his friend J. Alden Weir in December 1891. “To be isolated is a fine thing and we are then nearer to nature. I can see how necessary it is to live always in the country—at all seasons of the year.”<sup>2</sup> He found nearly all of his subjects on the farm where he and his wife, Martha Scudder Twachtman, reared their children. Their house was a classic fixer-upper, and Twachtman did much of the work himself, sometimes enlisting his friends’ assistance. During a stay in Greenwich in 1894, Theodore Robinson noted in his diary that Childe Hassam was helping Twachtman lay the foundations for an addition.<sup>3</sup> Robinson also witnessed Twachtman’s enthusiastic transformation of the farmland surrounding his home into an inviting garden. “Twachtman, as usual, making a trellis or porch for vines,” he noted, adding a few days later that his friend was “busy engaged in gardening.”<sup>4</sup>

Twachtman had been attracted to the place by Horseneck Brook, which ripples through a corner of the site, splashing over small cascades and collecting in wider pools as it flows to Long Island Sound. Unlike the neighboring farmers who exploited the brook to irrigate their fields and water their cattle, Twachtman enhanced its beauty and recreational value. He dammed it to make a swimming hole for his children, planted trees along the banks, and built the white wooden footbridge celebrated in the Memorial Art Gallery’s painting.<sup>5</sup>

John Henry Twachtman,  
1853–1902  
*The White Bridge*, late 1890s  
Oil on canvas, 30¼ × 25½ in.  
Gift of Emily Sibley Watson,  
16.9

A bridge became a practical necessity after Twachtman acquired land on both sides of the brook in 1892.<sup>6</sup> The artist’s neighbors crossed the stream on unadorned bridges sturdy enough to bear the weight of a laden oxcart. His children enjoyed another option: Robinson depicted two of them picking their barefoot way across the brook in *Stepping Stones* (1893, Senator and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller IV). But with his bridge, Twachtman provided a third alternative, enabling his family and friends to cross the brook dry shod, while also creating a garden ornament.

The bridge depicted in the Gallery’s painting was not the first on the site. Four other canvases also depict a small covered footbridge on Twachtman’s property: *The White Bridge* (Art Institute of Chicago), *The Little Bridge* (Georgia Museum of Art), *The White Bridge* (Minneapolis Institute of Art), and *Bridge in the Woods* (private collection).<sup>7</sup> Although none of the canvases is dated, stylistic evidence indicates that the MAG oil and *Bridge in the Woods* are the last in the series, their bold brushwork exemplifying Twachtman’s return at the end of his career to the bravura paint-handling he had learned as a student in Munich. The paintings show two distinctly different structures, alike only in their white paint and latticed railings. The bridge in the Chicago and Georgia oils has a peaked roof and a flat deck, whereas that in the other canvases has a curved roof and deck. Set low over the water, the flat-decked bridge would easily have washed away in the spring flooding that is common on Horseneck Brook. In his second attempt at bridge-building, Twachtman arched the deck over the stream, thus securing greater protection from seasonal torrents and allowing his children to glide underneath in the rowboat shown in the MAG painting. (A few dabs of blue paint suggest a child’s form in the boat.)

Twachtman's ingenious design—clearly evident in the Museum's *White Bridge*—enabled him to achieve an arched effect with limited carpentry skills. He built the planking in three parts: two side sections, each set on a slant, step up to a raised central platform. (The structure seems oddly unfinished: a gap in the planking poses a hazard to strollers, and the railing is latticed only on one side.) Twachtman's inspiration may have been the myriad footbridges over the canals of Venice, where he spent a total of at least eighteen months in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>8</sup> Although the more elaborate Venetian bridges, like the Ponte di Rialto, are curved on the underside, their pedestrian surface exhibits an angular three-part construction similar to Twachtman's homemade footbridge.

But if Venice informed Twachtman's design, it was only one source among several. His cosmopolitan, eclectic taste manifested itself in his living room, described by a contemporary: "plaster was thrown on the walls, which were then bronzed over with a brush, resulting in a quiet Japanese effect.... The fireplace is massive with...one stone...projecting as a bracket for an Italian saint."<sup>9</sup> On the exterior, the classical portico (said to have been designed by Stanford White), vine-covered pergola, and standard trees in terracotta pots lent a European flavor to the Connecticut farmhouse. Similarly, the footbridge's ancestry is American in its diversity, evoking at once the Chinese-Chippendale embellishments of the Colonial Revival, the high-arched bridges of Japanese gardens, and the crisp white-wash of New England picket fences.<sup>10</sup>

The white paint links Twachtman to the taste of his time. Instead of leaving the wood bare, with the bark unpeeled, as the influential landscape designer Alexander Jackson Downing advised in the mid-nineteenth century, or coating it with red lacquer, as Asian garden designers preferred, he painted it white, matching his house. "He was especially fond of white in sunlight and left many impressions of white houses among green trees," one critic observed after viewing Twachtman's estate sale.<sup>11</sup> The white bridge enlivened the brookside landscape, making the delicate structure a worthy challenge to a painter who enjoyed exploring the chromatic subtleties of snow. Years earlier, Twachtman had expressed his admiration for the French painter Jules Bastien-Lepage's treatment of white. "What tasks the man did set himself in the painting of a white apron with which he was as much in love as the face or the person," Twachtman wrote.<sup>12</sup> The same might be said of his own delight in the varied colors playing over his nominally white bridge.



John Henry Twachtman,  
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*The White Bridge* (detail),  
late 1890s  
Oil on canvas, 30 3/4 x 25 1/4 in.  
Gift of Emily Sibley Watson,  
16.9

Besides making it the subject of his painting, Twachtman may also have used the bridge as a place from which to paint. The central platform provided a raised vantage point and the space to set an easel. The cloth canopy, arched in the center like a Palladian window, functioned like the white umbrella that was standard equipment for a *plein-air* artist. Since the bridge's exact location is only speculative, it is impossible to identify works painted from that viewpoint. However, several of Twachtman's canvases depict Horseneck Brook from an elevated position in mid-stream, suggesting that he sometimes used the bridge as an outdoor studio.





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*The White Bridge* (detail),  
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Oil on canvas, 30¼ x 25¼ in.  
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Twachtman moved out of his home on Round Hill Road in December 1899. For the following year and a half, while his wife and children lived in France, his primary base was the Holley family's boardinghouse in the Cos Cob section of Greenwich. He also visited his family in Honfleur and spent time in New York, Boston, Cincinnati, Chicago, and Buffalo. During the summers, he taught at Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he died on August 8, 1902. Three years later, *Country Life in America* published an article on his house and garden.<sup>13</sup> The author took readers on a virtual stroll along the brook, but did not mention a footbridge. That fragile structure had probably succumbed to repeated winter gales and spring floods. It catches the sunlight still in *The White Bridge*.

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