# 6: George Harvey *Pittsford on the Erie Canal—A Sultry Calm* (1837)

Marjorie B. Searl

*Low bridge, everybody down!*
*Low bridge for we're comin through a town!*
*And you'll always know your neighbor,*
*You'll always know your pal,*
*If you've ever navigated on the Erie Canal.*[1]

When *Pittsford on the Erie Canal* came up at auction at Sotheby's in May 2005, the Memorial Art Gallery was determined to be the winning bidder and, thanks to a generous patron, the painting has come home to Rochester. The luminous oil, which had hung in three temporary exhibitions at the Memorial Art Gallery since the 1940s, now holds a distinguished place in the permanent collection.

Apart from the canalside village of Pittsford being home to many Gallery visitors, the Erie Canal itself is a significant subject for an art museum wishing to tell the story of landscape painting in nineteenth-century America. In its time, the Erie Canal was deemed one of the wonders of America, if not of the world. When it opened in 1825, the celebration cascaded from the Great Lakes to New York Harbor, with cannons, bell ringing, fireworks, and illuminated barges accompanying the final ceremony of the pouring of Lake Erie water into the Atlantic Ocean.[2] In the words of American Studies scholar David Nye, the Erie Canal represented 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."[3] While MAG's landscape collection celebrated the natural sublime with work by Bierstadt, Durand, and Kensett, *Pittsford on the Erie Canal* provides a link to Benton's *Boomtown* and Colin Campbell Cooper's *Main Street Bridge* (all represented by essays in this volume), paintings that extol the industrial landscape. In fact, because of the Erie Canal, Rochester itself was considered America's original boomtown.[4]

Originally Seneca land, the Rochester region was populated by waves of New England and downstate New York emigrants who moved to the upstate frontier following the Revolutionary War. The subsequent building of the Erie Canal and the railroad boosted the economy of nearby towns and villages, and Pittsford became a transportation hub for riders between Rochester and Canandaigua and those journeying by stage coach, rail, or canal boat between Albany and Buffalo.[5] Related businesses prospered, among them mills and inns. Canal boats pulled by horses or mules moved along the water at a stately pace, and church steeples nestled under a backdrop of sky and clouds. The canal is still a busy place in Pittsford, but used now for recreational rather than commercial purposes. On many summer days, voluminous and light-edged clouds appear in the Pittsford sky exactly as George Harvey described them in his painting. The scene has been located at what is currently called "King's Bend," just outside the village. In the 1820s, the skyline, while not exactly as Harvey painted it, would have included the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, and step-gabled buildings at the Four Corners, one of which, the Phoenix Building, stands today.[6]

George Harvey was an enterprising man whose energies were well matched to his times.[7] A Briton who came to America in 1820 to seek his fortune, he gamely tried his hand at a variety of métiers—writing poetry and owning a marble quarry, among other things. In his preface to *Harvey's Scenes in the Primeval Forests of America,* he reminisced:

> *It was one of the earliest dreams of my school-boy days that…caused me to become an Artist: a student of the form and poetry of nature: and in these my after years, it has been my highest delight to ramble uncontrolled in search of the picturesque.*[8]

The newly established National Academy of Design recognized Harvey's talents by electing him Associate Academician by 1828, only eight years after his arrival from England. In Boston, he excelled in painting portrait miniatures but, on his doctor's advice, he moved to "the country," to the east side of the Hudson River, in Hastings, New York.[9] In 1835, he began a series of landscape watercolors intended to be engraved and sold by subscription. Entitled *Atmospheric Landscapes*, the series was to convey "to the nations on the other side of the Atlantic ideas of scenery which could never have entered into their imaginations, and convictions of American enterprises and improvements which description could hardly bring home to general belief."[10] It is likely that he used sketches from his earlier travels as subjects for the more finished work. Among his watercolors was *A Sultry Calm. Pitsford* [sic], *on the Erie Canal* (Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York; the painting is now titled *Pittsford on the Erie Canal*). Harvey recounted in an 1850 publication:

> *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.*[11]

George Harvey,
1800–1878
*Pittsford on the Erie Canal–A Sultry Calm* (detail), 1837
Oil on panel, 17½ x 23⅝ in.
Gift of the Margaret M. McDonald Memorial Fund, 2005.33

While the subscription project failed, Harvey reused the Pittsford subject in an oil painting that he exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1837, *Dead Calm, Afternoon View Near Pittsford, on the Erie Canal* (original title of the MAG painting). A critic for *The Knickerbocker* wrote about the painting when he first saw it at the exhibition: "[It was] really a very clever picture, although we have puzzled ourselves in vain to account for the patches or dabs of white on the water in the foreground."[12] Those are, of course, the reflections of the clouds overhead; up close, they do appear to be "dabs of white," but at a distance, the brushstrokes coalesce and create a coherent and compelling effect. Whether dead or sultry calm, Harvey suggested the stillness of the water with painstaking reflections of the sky, boat, trees, and even horses.

Harvey's views of nature were also illustrations of a personal utopian vision. He predicted the settling of America by

> *a multiplicity of races, who will become fused into one people, like the English in the present day, by a common language; whose laws and literature, and even religion, will probably receive an impress in unison with some general type of humanity, whereby a glorious future will bless, not only ourselves, but mankind….*[13]

He continues:

> *Providence has doubtless ordained this action and reaction, this interchange of physical and moral benefits, for the perfecting of humanity whereby, in the fulness of time, the world is to witness the millennium foretold in the Scriptures.*[14]

(Facing page)
George Harvey,
1800–1878
*Pittsford on the Erie Canal–A Sultry Calm*, 1837
Oil on panel, 17½ x 23⅝ in.
Gift of the Margaret M. McDonald Memorial Fund, 2005.33

George Harvey,
1800–1878
*Pittsford on the Erie Canal,*
ca. 1837
Watercolor on paper,
8¼ x 13¾ in.
Fenimore Museum,
Cooperstown, New York

Harvey was not alone in his "second creation" view of America, to adopt another phrase of David Nye's.[15] Hudson River School painters Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, for instance, were similarly mindful of the American landscape's Edenic qualities. Harvey's philosophical writings make a case for a "millennial" reading of the Rochester painting: the canal boat, a symbol of Adam in the new Eden, is pulled westward along a manmade waterway, securely protected between the steeples of Christian churches, with the divine light of Providence shining upon the scene. Its passengers share a common destination and are safely protected from any dangers lurking in the dark forest nearby.[16]

Diaries of canal travelers vary in their expressions of harmony and well-being, however.[17] Voyages on the canal tended to be rough and uncomfortable, as Fanny Trollope, the mother of the British novelist Anthony Trollope, described in 1832: "I can hardly imagine any motive of convenience powerful enough to induce me to imprison myself again in a canal boat under ordinary circumstances."[18] On the other hand, for some, the trip was a luxurious cruise, as this anonymous writer suggests:

> *[T]hese boats are about 70 feet long, and with the exception of the Kitchen and bar, is occupied as a Cabin, the forward part being the ladies Cabin, is separated by a curtain, but at meal times this obstruction is removed, and the table is set the whole length of the boat, the table is supplied with everything that is necessary and of the best quality with many of the luxuries of life....[T]hese Boats have three Horses, go at a quicker rate and have the preference in going through the locks, carry no freight, are built extremely light, and have quite Genteel men for their Captains, and use silver plate.*[19]

Nathaniel Hawthorne's ironic description of his canal trip, published in 1835, belies the contented scene that Harvey depicted:

> *Behold us, then, fairly afloat, with three horses harnessed to our vessel, like the steeds of Neptune to a huge scallop-shell, in mythological pictures. Bound to a distant port, we had neither chart nor compass, nor cared about the wind, nor felt the heaving of a billow, nor dreaded shipwreck, however fierce the tempest, in our adventurous navigation of an interminable mud-puddle—for a mud-puddle it seemed, and as dark and turbid as if every kennel in the land paid contribution to it. With an imperceptible current, it holds its drowsy way through all the dismal swamps and unimpressive scenery, that could be found between the great lakes and the sea-coast. Yet there is variety enough, both on the surface of the canal and along its banks, to amuse the traveller, if an overpowering tedium did not deaden his perceptions.*[20]

Harvey died in 1878, only a few years following another failed attempt to publish prints based on his paintings, this time scenes of Florida. While *Seeing America* is the title of this publication, it could aptly have been used to describe George Harvey's lifelong efforts to celebrate the beauties of the American landscape and to promote their allure and significance internationally. The newly acquired Pittsford scene takes its rightful place alongside Asher B. Durand's *Genesee Oaks* and Thomas Cole's *Genesee Scenery*. The triad makes a powerful statement about the allure of the Rochester region for nineteenth century artists who sought fitting subjects to depict the "discourse of Manifest Destiny."[21]

Marjorie B. Searl is Chief Curator, Memorial Art Gallery.