

8: DeWitt Clinton Boutelle *The Indian Hunter* (1846)

Marlene Hamann-Whitmore

*Where are the blossoms of those summers!—fallen, one by one: so all my family departed, each in his turn, to the land of the spirits. I am on the hill-top, and must go down into the valley; and when Uncas follows in my foot-steps, there will no longer be any of the blood of the Sagamores, for my boy is the last of the Mohicans.*¹

So concludes an impassioned proclamation by Chingachgook, a Mohican chief, about the fate of his people and his son, Uncas, early on in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. First published in 1826, Cooper's epic tale can be viewed as a direct source for DeWitt Clinton Boutelle's painting *The Indian Hunter*, completed in 1846. Boutelle's lush and dense landscape is a visual realization of Cooper's prose.

Both Boutelle and Cooper sought to define and encapsulate the plight of the Native American in the wake of European settlement and westward expansion. The population of the United States almost doubled between 1830 and 1850, and the effect this had on the already stressed Native American culture was cataclysmic.² The portrayal of the disappearing or "doomed" Indian became a popular topic across the arts, and visual artists and writers frequently responded to each other's work.³ When Boutelle exhibited *The Indian Hunter* in New York at the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design in 1846, the catalogue entry for the painting was accompanied by the following poem, written by Eliza Cook:

*Oh! Why does the white man follow my path,
Like the hound on the tiger's track?
Does the flush on my dark cheek waken his wrath?
Does he covet the bow of my back?
He has rivers and seas, where the billows and breeze
Bear riches for him alone;
And the sons of the wood never plunge in the flood
Which the white man calls his own.
Then, why should he come to the streams where none
But the red skin dare to swim?
Why, why should he wrong the hunter, one
Who never did harm to him?*⁴

In addition to the literary influences of Cooper and Cook, Boutelle would almost certainly have been aware of the work of the American poet William Cullen Bryant. In the last two stanzas of Bryant's narrative poem, "An Indian at the Burial-Place of His Fathers" (1824), the Native American narrator speaks with melancholy, with a voice that echoes in Boutelle's painting:

*Before these fields were shorn and tilled,
Full to the brim our rivers flowed;
The melody of waters filled
The fresh and boundless wood;
And torrents dashed and rivulets played,
And fountains spouted in the shade.*



Those grateful sounds are heard no more,
 The springs are silent in the sun;
 The rivers, by the blackened shore,
 With lessening current run;
 The realm our tribes are crushed to get
 May be a barren desert yet.⁵

As topical as these nineteenth-century literary references may seem to our twenty-first-century sensibilities, all were produced within a framework of nostalgia and romantic historicism. Boutelle was also working with the benefit of historical perspective, and composed *The Indian Hunter* through a similar lens. The first government-sponsored Indian reservation was organized in the Northeast in 1794, after the signing of the Treaty of Canandaigua. The six member nations of the Iroquois Confederacy—the Oneida, Onondaga, Mohawk, Cayuga, Tuscarora, and Seneca—were granted land in western New York that had been ceded by a previous treaty. By 1800 it was clear to most native people, and nearly everyone else, that the indigenous Native American way of life would soon be extinct.



Born in Troy, New York, in 1820, Boutelle was named for DeWitt Clinton, the first governor of New York and the main force behind the construction of the Erie Canal.⁶ Boutelle never attended art school and was largely self-taught. However, he was successful enough in his day to maintain a studio in New York City from 1846 through 1855. From New York, Boutelle made sketching trips up and down the Hudson River, throughout the Catskills and New Jersey, and on the Susquehanna River. By 1857, he had left New York for Philadelphia. In 1859 he settled in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he continued to paint until his death in 1884.⁷

DeWitt Clinton Boutelle,
 1820–1884
The Indian Hunter (detail), 1846
 Oil on canvas, 32½ x 47½ in.
 Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
 84.47

Like many artists of his generation, Boutelle was greatly influenced in scope and composition by the early paintings of Thomas Cole, the work of Asher B. Durand, and other artists active in the Hudson River School.⁸ *The Indian Hunter* employs several compositional devices frequently used by Cole. Most notable is the panorama of trees in every conceivable stage of the lifecycle. By following Cole's example, Boutelle utilized the landscape as a metaphor for the passage of time and the constancy of change.

Even though *The Indian Hunter* does not depict a specific place, the painting reflects the topography and local history of the region surrounding Boutelle's native Troy. Once home to the Mohawks, these densely wooded hills and ravines are still evident in New York State's capital region. Although he was a convincing landscape painter, Boutelle's lack of formal training is apparent in the stylized tree forms and the simplified figure of the hunter. Yet he ably leads the viewer through the canvas with his sophisticated manipulation of line, scale, and value.

Boutelle's painting engages us on many levels, but it is primarily a painting of opposites and opposing agendas: light and dark; life and death; future and past; settler and native; victor and vanquished.

(Facing page)
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Here Boutelle's "doomed Indian" has been relegated to the margins of a world that was once entirely his. He surveys the once-familiar landscape from the lower right-hand side of the composition, dejectedly leaning against an outcropping of rocks, as he gazes forlornly into a valley in the far distance. Following his gaze, we see a newly minted European settlement barely visible through the clearing. It is evident that the newcomers have taken some of the best land—riverside—and have already completed a church with a towering steeple.

DeWitt Clinton Boutelle,
1820–1884
The Indian Hunter (detail), 1846
Oil on canvas, 32 1/8 x 47 1/8 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
84.47



The parallels between art and literature bring us back to James Fenimore Cooper. In a sentiment again expressed visually by Boutelle's lone Indian hunter, Cooper concludes his novel with a resigned Tamenund, the aged and wise chief of the Delawares:

*Why should Tamenund stay? The palefaces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red men has not yet come again. My day has been too long. In the morning I saw the sons of Unamis happy and strong; and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohican.*⁹

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