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BOOKS & ARTSART REVIEW

‘George Inness: Visionary Landscapes’ Review: Enchanted by the Light

The paintings in an exhibition at the Montclair Art Museum devoted to the American Romantic are colored by his feeling for the shifting look of a day, from dawn to dusk to moonrise.



Installation view of ‘George Inness: Visionary Landscapes’

PHOTO: PETER JACOBS/MONTCLAIR ART MUSEUM

By Lance Esplund

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Montclair, N.J.

The George Inness Gallery, which opened in 2001, is the crown jewel of the Montclair Art Museum. It’s a dignified, wainscoted, barrel-vaulted hall 30 feet long by 17 feet wide by 17 feet high. Though modest in scale, it’s the only gallery in the world dedicated to Inness, the Romantic artist, art critic and mystic philosopher (often acknowledged as the father of American landscape painting) who lived and worked in the township from 1885 until his death, at age 69, in 1894. Currently, it houses “George Inness: Visionary Landscapes,” an impressive, captivating grouping of oils spanning his entire career. A long-term, in-house exhibition (through June 30, 2024), it comprises 20 landscape paintings: 19 from MAM’s

renowned collection of 24 works by Inness and a grisaille portrait of the artist sketching just outside his Montclair studio, painted by his son, George Inness Jr. (1854-1926).

Inness was enamored less with capturing a sense of place than he was with conveying an emotional, spiritual feeling for light, and MAM chief curator Gail Stavitsky, the show's organizer, honors this. "Visionary Landscapes" is hung salon-style (paintings, staggered, are grouped above and below one another, instead of in a single, eye-level row). This arrangement allows Inness's landscapes loosely to reflect the daily cycle from dawn to sundown to moonrise. The installation is tasteful, unified, inspired. The space has the sanctity of a chapel. Walls painted medium-ocher (a neutral hue evocative here of both sunshine and earth) provide the perfect ground not just for Inness's evanescent landscapes but for their gilded frames. The arched ceiling, indirectly lighted and painted a violet-tinged blue, opens as if into a bowl of sky. From the center of the gallery, viewers can easily survey the entire room's panorama, as Inness's landscapes spark at dawn, brighten into full day, and are engulfed by sunsets, dissolved by dusks, and enveloped by nights illuminated by yellow moons.

Born in Newburgh, N.Y., Inness traveled widely. He lived in numerous cities in the American Northeast and for extended periods in Florida, Italy and France. Early on, he worked as a map engraver in New York, which led him to become a landscape painter who dutifully recorded observed minutiae. This skill, in the 1850s, landed him commissions from the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad to commemorate, in landscapes, industrialization's manifest destiny.



George Inness's 'Albano, Italy' (c. 1874-75)

PHOTO: MONTCLAIR ART MUSEUM

Initially, Inness was influenced by Europeans, especially the pre-eminent French landscape painters Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot; and the American Hudson River School painters, including Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand. He embraced the Barbizon School's practice of working *en plein air*, and is credited with introducing this approach to America. But Inness seems to have been primarily drawn to scintillating light. In Paris, something spiritual awakened in him. Inness became a follower of the Christian sect of Swedenborgianism, which saw in nature (especially during transitions such as twilight, sunrise and sunset) manifestations of the divine. Through painting landscapes, Inness sought to commune with God.

Because "Visionary Landscapes" is installed thematically, it ebbs and flows between more realistic, finely detailed, picturesque paintings (influenced by John Constable and Théodore Rousseau) and mature, nearly abstract landscapes inspired by Swedenborgianism and the Impressionists. These signature paintings culminate in an expressive, iridescent haze combining elements, seemingly, of Titian, J.M.W. Turner and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, as they presage Mark Rothko's vibrating, abstract color rectangles.



George Inness's 'Winter Morning, Montclair' (1882)

PHOTO: MONTCLAIR ART MUSEUM

Early standouts include the expansive, sun-drenched "Delaware Water Gap" (1857), which alternates in swathes of light and cloud shadows. Misty bands of yellow, turquoise, green and blue sweep across the silvery Delaware River, purple Appalachian Mountains and planted fields, emphasizing tiny particulars such as a boater's hat and a swinging cow's tail. "Winter Moonlight (Christmas Eve)" (1866) is dreamy, visceral. Saturated in blacks and blues, it suggests works by the German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich and the American Albert

Pinkham Ryder. A full moon cuts a clearing in its cloud-stacked sky, illuminating a lone, silhouetted figure on a brilliant, white snowy path.

In transitional pictures such as “Albano, Italy” (c. 1874-75) and “Winter Morning, Montclair” (1882), Inness, articulating each leaf, branch and color change, wavers between holding onto the world and letting it go. “Moonrise, Montclair” (c. 1893) softens into a russet fog, as forms almost vanish completely. In “Breaking Through the Clouds” (c. 1883-94), color, now an emotive force, detaches from things. In “Out of My Studio Door, Montclair” (c. 1878-79) and “Early Autumn, Montclair” (1888), both reminiscent of Gustave Courbet, nature isn’t observed but felt. And in “Sunset Glow” (c. 1883-85) and “Sunset” (1892), shimmering patches of dark greenish-browns and burning oranges vibrate against one another, as if Inness had set the sky apocalyptically ablaze.



George Inness's 'Early Autumn, Montclair' (1888)

PHOTO: MONTCLAIR ART MUSEUM

From here on, Inness’s landscapes enter another realm. The deep, dark green “Pool in the Woods” (c. 1890) nearly liquefies and flattens. In “Montclair Sunset” (c. 1891-94), a central bronze tree trunk appears apparitional, and green earth and fiery sky—mirrored, immaterial—seem interchangeable. Above each of the two Inness Gallery doorways is an 1882 quote from the artist: “Knowledge Must Bow to Spirit.” In the brushy, gorgeous and ethereal “Gathering Clouds, Spring, Montclair, New Jersey” (c. 1890-94), in which nature, light, sensation and emotion all merge, Inness, the landscape painter, has left the landscape behind.

—*Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.*

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