

Connecting with the Land

Twenty paintings of the Catskills by Sanford Robinson Gifford to exhibit at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site

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**Thomas Cole National
Historic Site**

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by James D. Balestrieri

One of the many cool aspects of *Sanford R. Gifford in the Catskills*, a new exhibition at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, New York, is the “walking-and-driving experience” that allows visitors to see the very views that inspired Hudson River School painters like Cole and Gifford. Having seen many of these views firsthand—the Hudson Valley is my bailiwick—what is remarkable is not only what has changed in the last 150 years, but what remains the same. If you’re there at dawn or dusk, or when the weather is one of its Lenape or Dutch moods: fog hung, or with clouds building to thunder, or with the sun breaking through after a storm, you can see what inspired Gifford or Cole (or Church, or Bierstadt, or Cropsey, or Durand). More importantly, you can feel what they felt, a feeling that we in the art biz are generally too staid and academic to discuss—joy, unbridled joy.

And once you understand joy, as Sanford Gifford expressed it through landscape, you can apprehend the conflicting emotions—despair and grief—buttressing other canvases he painted while serving in the Union Army during the Civil War—prospects of dark, brooding, fiery and fire-scarred scenes in his same beloved Catskills. Fortunately,



Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880), *Going Sketching in the Catskills*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 11½ x 9¾ in., signed and dated lower right: ‘S.R. Gifford, 66’. Barrie and Deedee Wigmore.

the exhibition at the Cole House has a number of 1860s works that demonstrate the range of emotions that Gifford experienced and sought to convey in art.

Sanford Robinson Gifford grew up in Hudson, New York, on the east side of the Hudson River, north of Catskill, which is on the west side of the river. Born into a relatively affluent family who

encouraged his artistic endeavors, Gifford studied with John R. Smith in New York and Henry Ary, a neighbor of Cole’s who moved from Catskill to Hudson. Gifford trained to be a portrait artist but fell under the spell of Cole and his Hudson River companions. He began to exhibit at the National Academy of Design in 1847 and journeyed to Europe in 1855 to



Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880), *A Sketch of Hunter Mountain, Catskills*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 16 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Private collection.



Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880), *Mount Merino*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 11 x 22 in., signed and dated lower left: 'S R Gifford, 1860'. Private collection.



Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880), *Ledge on South Mountain, in the Catskills*, ca. 1861-62. Oil on canvas, 12 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum. Gift of Sanford Gifford, M.D., 2006.1. Photograph: Imaging Department, President and Fellows of Harvard College.

further his studies. J.M.W. Turner's work and a meeting with Turner's champion, John Ruskin, inspired him to pursue and push the effects of light on landscape. Gifford's mature style would locate him among the "luminists," whose softened, limited palette marked the first real

evolution from Hudson River School practice. When he returned from Europe, Gifford took a studio in the famous Tenth Studio Building in New York, beside Bierstadt and Church.

Painted circa 1861-62, *Ledge on South Mountain, in the Catskills*, though

it is a small work, exemplifies the sort of joy Gifford would have already missed while he was in uniform. In the painting, under a soft sun, a climber, having reached the ledge, waves his hat to two companions who are still scrambling up the rocky slope. He

beckons them to join him, to share in the vista that stretches down into a river valley and out into the milky pastel distance.

Henry Tuckerman, in his 1867 edition of *Book of the Artists*—an incredible, highly readable and all-but-forgotten resource for American art scholars—praises Gifford for his skill at reproducing “the effects of a misty atmosphere so often witnessed by summer travelers in the mountains; when the thick vapor which sometimes, at early morning, shrouds their lofty summits from view, is partially dissolved by the sun, the thinned fleecy moisture expands, and clings in half-dense, half-luminous wreaths...” Tuckerman goes on to say that Gifford’s upbringing in the Catskills, his familiarity with his own backyard, allowed his gifts to flourish.

During the war, however, Gifford had to leave home. He was stationed in Washington and Baltimore and never saw action, but one of his brothers committed suicide when the war broke out while another brother lost his life in battle. Profoundly moved, not only by these events, but by what he saw as a darkness that had settled over the promise of America, Gifford made this darkness visible in his landscapes.

In works like the 1861 masterpiece, *Twilight in the Catskills*, Gifford wrestles luminosity to serve a feeling that is anything but joyous. An oily river, a river the likes of which you will not see again until Charles Burchfield begins to forge his feelings about the First World War into landscapes, moves through a burned and blasted valley. Tolkien’s Mordor could not be more ominous and forbidding. Above, the sun sets under a sky the color of the flayed flesh of an open wound. Immaculate nature, as the Hudson River School envisioned it, here becomes barren, a wasteland.

By the fall of 1865, with the war having just concluded, Gifford was back in his beloved Catskills. Under a waxing crescent moon in a benign lemon sky, night falls on a settlement nestled in a shallow valley in *A Sketch of Hunter Mountain, Catskills*. The soft blue mountain that dominates the center of the picture is like a healed

cicatrice, suggestive of hope and of the promise of a rebirth after the conflict. In the felled trees, Gifford makes an accommodation between civilization and nature, between progress and preservation, but at least the figure in the white shirt has paused from his labors to appreciate the scene.

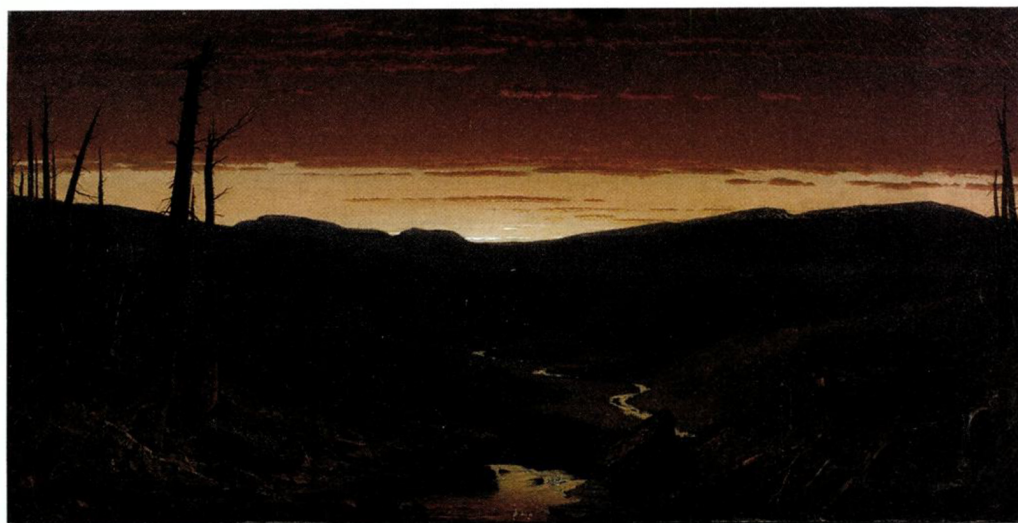
A year later, in *Going Sketching in the Catskills*, Gifford shows us his back as he heads into a welcoming womb, under the Promethean arches, into the primordial cathedral of the forest in autumn. The artist is small, aware of his own insignificance even as he is aware of nature’s majesty. Gifford would continue to master the panoramas and lofty views, in Europe and South America as well as in the Catskills and White Mountains of New Hampshire. But forest interiors such as *Going Sketching* balance those noble, towering views with a kind of humility.

Because they often studied in Germany and adapted some of the approaches to paint handling that characterize High German Romanticism—think Caspar David Friedrich—the Hudson River School are often grouped with the Romantics. But after spending some time with Sanford R. Gifford, I think I could make a good argument for placing him among—and ahead of, in many ways—the Barbizon painters, like Corot, and the first wave of impressionists,

like Monet. For me, you have to get to Van Gogh before you find the depth of feeling that Gifford creates in his landscapes. To get back to Tuckerman for a moment, something he wrote in 1867 hints at this. After listing Gifford’s mastery of the different aspects of landscape, he mentions “local effects which have so much to do with the impression that awes and pleases the spectator at the same time; and yet which are so rarely effective in a picture. This trait of Gifford’s landscapes has won for them a class of warm admirers who discover a subtle charm therein that compensates for the less-highly finished details which is the distinctive merit of so many of our artists.”

Gifford moves away from realism in order to create an “impression.” His “details are less-highly finished.” Say that with a French accent. Look at the paintings again. Sound familiar?

I don’t hear Wagner when I look at Gifford. Nor Beethoven. Schubert? Maybe in some of his songs. But move ahead to the generation of composers that come after Gifford’s death and listen to them when you look at the paintings. Listen to Debussy, Ravel, Mahler. Listen to American composers like George Chadwick, Amy Beach and Charles Ives. You will, I believe, have a new or renewed appreciation for Sanford Robinson Gifford. ■



Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880), *Twilight in the Catskills*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 27 x 54 in. Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Joanne and John Payson in memory of Joan Whitney and Charles Shipman Payson, Class of 1921, and in honor of Joan Whitney Payson, B.A. 2009, 2007.178.1. Images courtesy Thomas Cole National Historic Site.