

Merna Popper



THE HUDSON RIVER PAINTERS THEN.... AND RIGHT NOW

by Merna Popper

Love of the Hudson River began hundreds of years ago when the first explorers sailed those uncharted waters. Today, Museums are filled with the best and most moving views of the 19th Century Hudson River School of Artists. The good news is: great love and appreciation for The Hudson River is alive and well and flourishing right here/right now in 2018, with painters lining the shores to report sights most people never get to see and would find hard to imagine.

Thomas Cole and Frederick Church are guardians of The Hudson River School of Painters. With their stately homes on the shores of the river, a reminder of the original beauty and history their art recorded. Today, a new generation of painters continues the fascination with The Hudson, and they are still capturing the

views, the dancing sunlight, and the magic of The River.

Thomas Cole's great house perched on a rise above the water, overlooks The Hudson in the tiny hamlet of Catskill, New York, a reminder of the inspiration of those original Hudson River painters, and for two centuries of artists that followed. Cole was the founder of The Hudson River School of Painters.

Frederick Church, the mighty student of Cole, built his Olana homestead,--grand and imposing across the river just outside Hudson, New York, a town today, filled with art, antiques, and river views from vantage points along the shop-lined streets. Church's enormous river and mountain views hang in museums across America.

Merna introduced me to the work of Michael Mendel. He is a gifted painter with a love of the Hudson.

It's a privilege to present his work to readers of Boating on the Hudson and Beyond.

John H Vargo, Publisher.



“HOMERIC”. 1972, 11” x 16”. Watercolor. . Docked on the west side of lower Manhattan.

Artist Michael Mendel, a European born American artist, is a reporter of the 20th century Hudson. The Exhibition of Mendel's Hudson River watercolor paintings on the pages of this issue of Boating on The Hudson and Beyond, delivers today's movement and images of boats and water traffic and tranquility, all of which The artist still finds and records on The River. Different from the Original School of Artists, Mendel's views, his different lights, different passion, a different artist's eye, tells his story of The Hudson River today.

In 1825, Thomas Cole went to the Catskill Mountains to paint their rugged cliffs and streams. It was the birth of the Hudson River School of painting, which flourished until the turn of the 20th century and which has now come back into vogue.

Nineteen years later, Cole's most famous student, Frederick Edwin Church, came to study with him in Catskill. Church was 16 years old; he would later build his own home across the Hudson River, south of the city of Hudson. After him came Asher B. Durand, George Inness, John Kensett, Samuel F. B. Morse, Jasper Cropsey, Albert Bierstadt and scores of other artists.

It was the magnificent scenery of the river and the mountains to the west that lured the artists north from New York City, first as summer painters and then as permanent residents.

The artists left a permanent legacy, one that can be seen not

only in their art but also in their homes, some of which have been preserved as museums open to the public. And now, at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson and at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, an exhibition called “Charmed Places: Hudson River Artists and Their Homes, Studios and Vistas” shows in paintings, drawings and photographs the places in which many of those artists lived and worked.

At Bard, the exhibition includes paintings by some of the artists of their homes, studios and gardens as well as architectural drawings and old photographs. At Vassar, 20 new color photographs of some of the artists' homes as they exist today, taken by Len Jenshel, a New York City photographer, are on display.

The joint show, which will end on Aug. 12, was put together by Dr. Sandra S. Phillips, a former curator of the Vassar College Art Gallery and now curator of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It is the first exhibition to document and explore the environment of the Hudson River artists, according to Linda Weintraub, the director of the Edith C. Blum Art Institute at Bard. It also traces the relationship between the artists and such Hudson Valley architects as Andrew Jackson Downing, Alexander Jackson Davis and Calvert Vaux.

Only a few paintings by the artists are included in the Bard exhibition, among them a view by Church from his home; a Cole vista of Mount Merino across the river from his home; an Inness painting of the Hudson at Milton, and a Cropsey view of the Hudson.

The famous paintings of the Hudson River School are on display at museums all over New York State -including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New York Public Library and the New-York Historical Society in Manhattan; the Brooklyn Museum; the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, and many others.

But the joint exhibition at Vassar and Bard and a visit to some of the artists' homes, not far north of New York City, make a pleasant outing. The Bard museum is open from noon to 5 P.M. Wednesday through Sunday. Admission is free; the number for information is (914) 758-6822, extension 178. To get there, take the Taconic State Parkway north, Route 199 through the village of Red Hook, and Route 9G north a short distance.

The Vassar gallery is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11:30 A.M. to 8 P.M. Admission is free. Information: (914) 471-6844. To get there, take the Taconic State Parkway north and Route 55 west, turning left on Raymond Avenue to a blinking light at the college entrance.

In addition, four of the "charmed places" - the homes of Church, Morse, Cropsey and Cole - are now small museums, open to the public. Some of the other homes of Hudson River painters have become private residences; several were destroyed by fire, and others have been extensively remodeled. Church's Olana

The most spectacular home of them all is a 37-room Persian-looking castle that sits on a hill overlooking the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, a few miles south of the city of Hudson. It was built between 1870 and 1874 for Church (1826-1900) and his wife and was called Olana, a word coined by Mrs. Church to mean "our place on high."

The best way to approach Olana is to get off the Gov. Thomas E. Dewey Thruway at Exit 21 in Catskill and take Route 23 east across the Hudson River. As you cross the Rip Van Winkle Bridge, cast your eyes up: directly in front of you is the splendid structure, its pyramidal towers jutting into the sky above the trees, looking like the setting for a tale from the Arabian Nights.

Vaux was the architect, although Church himself designed many of the interiors. The building has a studio wing, but Church did little painting there; he worked in a studio on the grounds, and at his Park Avenue town house in New York. He lived at Olana with his wife and four children, assisted by 15 servants, until his death.

A few of Church's paintings are on view in the house, which is furnished in a melange of styles - American-made furniture, Persian rugs, Mexican pottery, Waterford crystal, Canton chinaware, and paintings by a variety of American and European artists.

Now a state historic site, Olana is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M., and on Sunday from 1 to 4 P.M. Reservations are suggested. Information and reservations: (518) 828-0135. Admission is \$1. Locust Grove

Samuel F. B. Morse, a painter who is better known as an inventor (1791-1872), moved into the Hudson Valley in 1847, three years after he invented the telegraph. With the help of

Andrew Jackson Downing, he remodeled his home into a Tuscan villa, with a four-story tower facing the river.

Today, it is a museum called Locust Grove, an oasis of serenity at the beginning of a strip of shopping centers two miles south of Poughkeepsie on Route 9.

Although the house contains a replica of the telegraph and an English landscape attributed to Morse, it reflects more the collecting mania of the Young family, which owned it after Morse's death. Its 24 rooms are crowded with antique furniture, old paintings and some Morse memorabilia.

Just outside the front door is a plaque put up in 1968 by the New York chapter of the Morse Telegraph Club. It reads: "Samuel F. B. Morse, Father of the Telegraph, Built This House Locust Grove. It was his summer home 1852-1871." The initials F. B., by the way, stand for Finley Breese.

Guided tours are held from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. Wednesday through Sunday. Admission: \$3. Information: (914) 454-4500. Cropsey House

Jasper F. Cropsey (1823-1900) bought 45 acres in Warwick in 1866 and three years later designed and built a studio-house called Aladdin, but he was forced to sell it in 1880. A few years later, he bought a board-and-batten structure in Hastings-on-Hudson and built a studio there close in design to the one at Aladdin.

Sitting on a hill in a four-and-a-half-acre plot surrounded by other residences, the yellow two-story Cropsey house is Gothic in style, with gingerbread ornaments. It contains about 100 oil paintings, watercolors and drawings by Cropsey. "Quaint" is the word for the house, said Florence Levins, the curator.

Cropsey lived and worked there from 1885 until his death in 1900. An architect as well as a painter, he designed two churches on Staten Island and several stations of the now-demolished Sixth Avenue Elevated line in New York City.

Today, the house, at 49 Washington Avenue in Hastings, just off Route 9, is maintained by the Newington/ Cropsey Foundation. It is open by appointment only; admission is free. Telephone: (914) 478-1372. Cole Studio

Thomas Cole (1801-1848), a self-taught artist who was born in England, arrived in the United States in 1818. In 1836, he married Maria Barlow and settled in her family home, Cedar Grove, outside Catskill. In 1846, only two years before his death, he designed and built an Italianate studio on the property. That has been destroyed, but an old stable that he also used as a studio still stands.

The Cole house, at 218 Spring Street in Catskill, is a pleasant-looking three-story brick structure that stands today between a synagogue and another residence. It is pleasant looking, with nothing to distinguish it from the suburban homes that surround it.

A chain across the driveway shows it is closed for repairs, but it can be seen by appointment. It will reopen to the public on July 6, repainted in its original colors. Information: (518) 943-6533; admission is free. To get there, cross the Rip Van Winkle Bridge going west and turn immediately onto Route 385 south; the house is a few hundred feet on the left. Dining

Eating out on a day trip to the Hudson Valley is pleasant in another respect - inexpensive to moderate prices in the restaurants, most of which are on or just off Route 9, which is the valley's major north-south road.



"IN THE SHADOW OF THE TOWERS"
1972, 19" x14" watercolor.

One of the most important paintings ever created by MICHAEL MENDEL.

Conceived in 1972 forty-three years ago, this image was conceived as a black and white photo for a page in a children's book tentatively titled, "Jamie Visits the Harbor." Sad to say, the idea of a photographic book aimed at youngsters rather than the traditional illustrations, was rejected by publisher after publisher and thus...the concept was scrapped.

Forty three years later, Mendel came upon a proof sheet of photos taken in 1972 and saw this tiny 2x2" photo. It showed one of the Twin Towers prominently looming in the distance and a lone tug gently plying the still waters of the Hudson River. Mendel thought it would make a stirring painting and sure enough, he has been proven right!

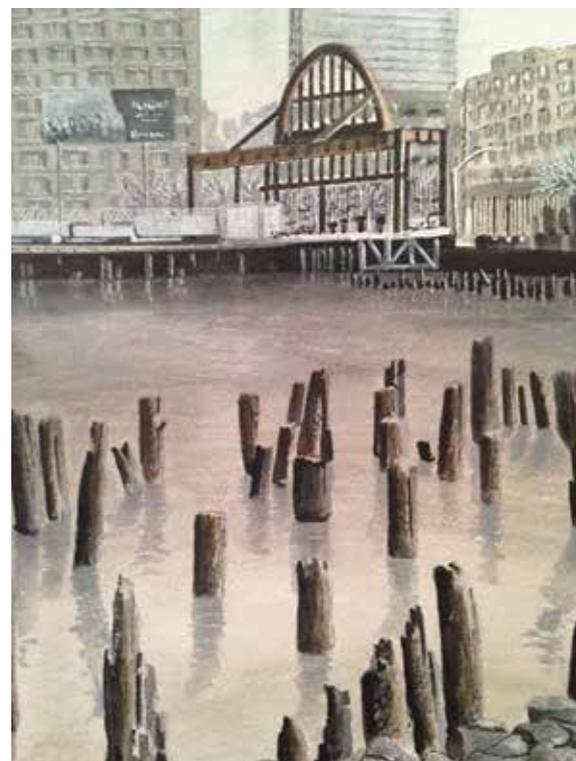
Mostly monochromatic, this is a scene that instantly catches one's eye and holds one's attention.



above: **"WHERE ONCE ALGONQUINS ROAMED"** 2012. Watercolor. 20" x 15".
With the Palisades in the background, a young couple paddle home to their town of Hastings on Hudson.

right: **"PIER 59. AWAITING TITANIC"** 9"x13". Watercolor.

Thousands of motorists drive by it daily. Hundreds of cyclists, joggers and strollers pass by too, yet 99% of them have absolutely no idea what importance this spot holds in New York City history. On April 16th 1912 the grand new ocean liner TITANIC was scheduled to dock at Pier 59, the planned destination of her maiden voyage. As the world quickly learned...SHE NEVER ARRIVED!
Pier #59, (run by White Star Line,) its unique iron arched entranceway in readiness, never got to greet her. Today, the spot is but a barren strip of metal and concrete but there are moves afoot to develop it as a park,



above: **"PT 615. AWAITING REBIRTH ON STRAND STREET"** (Kingston, NY) 2017, Watercolor. 15 x 10". At the edge of the Hudson River, World War II PT boats await complete restoration.

STRAIGHT TALK FROM THE ARTIST HIMSELF

I don't actively try to connect with nature when I paint, nor do I invite viewers to have out-of-body experiences when they look at a specific painting. There are no hidden meanings or messages in my work. What you see is what I saw! I'm a simple guy with a few tubes of paint, a couple of brushes and decent quality, long-lasting watercolor paper. However, 100% of the time, the subject matter of every painting I create is of something that I've witnessed, experienced and really enjoyed looking at. Before starting a new painting I always ask myself, "Will someone else actually enjoy this scene as much as I do?" And then I'll ponder, "Will it stand the test of time?" If I respond YES to these simple questions, I will proceed! How do I price my paintings? A number of issues come to play. First is the power of the painting itself. Does it make a strong statement. Is it well conceived and executed. Size and framing costs come into play also and finally, an inner feeling based on time and energy spent, in not only the final execution, but all the preliminary unseen labor and thought that preceded the "brush to paper" phase.

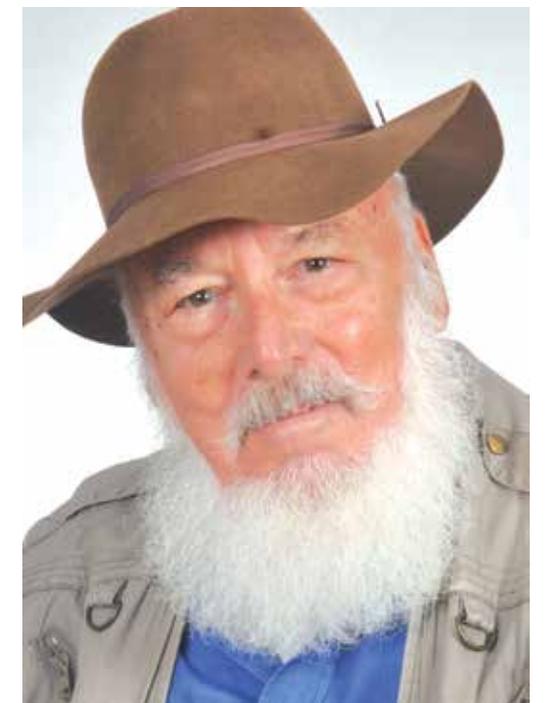


Photo by Barbara DellaFamina.