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THE PAINTER AND THE NATIONAL PARKS

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Head Curator, National Gallery of Art

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THE PAINTER AND THE NATIONAL PARKS.

By WILLIAM H. HOLMES, Head Curator, National Gallery of Art.

It gave me great pleasure to install in the large room of the National Gallery the collection of paintings brought together for this occasion in illustration of the wonderful scenery of our national parks. It is for the most part a sane exhibit although not wholly free from the pathologic manifestations which characterize the so-called modernist movement of to-day.

I would call especial attention to the works of Moran, Bierstadt, and Hill who, with Church, are the great exponents of American landscape art. The genius of these men alone has risen to heroic heights enabling them to grasp and present on canvas the greatest subjects which the continent affords. Following close upon the footsteps of these masters are Laurence, Parshall, Butler, Rungius, Ufer, Leigh, the Powells, Groll, Potthast, Daingerfield, Peyraud, Babcock, Dunton, and others whose works, shown in this collection, are worthy of the admiring attention of the public.

When I came to the Smithsonian Institution 45 years ago Thomas Moran was exhibiting in the main hall of the institution his great painting of the Yellowstone Canyon which now hangs in the United States Capitol. To-day he is at El Tovar, on the south rim of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, still at work, true to his early love and adding steadily to his marvelous record. He is the master par excellence of the canyons, the plateaus, and the mountains. His grasp of the great subjects and his knowledge of form, color, rock structure, vegetation, and every phase of atmospheric effect are marvelous.

The painting of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, shown on the east wall of the gallery, is his masterpiece—a work which insures his place as the first painter of our national scenery, if not indeed, the greatest landscape painter that the world has produced. I have climbed the sculptured walls and slid down the sulphurous slides of the real canyon and studied the subject from all points of view and under all atmospheric effects and find this work a wonderful interpretation in its reality, beauty, and poetic expression, yet presenting with the utmost faithfulness the infinity of detail which characterizes the original and which escape the brush of all others who have attempted the subject.

Bierstadt's "Mount Whitney," on the west wall of the gallery, is a superb work true to the type of the Sierra Nevadas and a strongly

poetic interpretation of one of the grandest phases of our crystalline mountain ranges. Those of us who have dwelt for a time in these wilds find it hard to pass this picture. The gallery to which it belongs has fallen heir to one of the greatest treasures of American landscape art.

The "Awakening of the Grand Canyon," by Parshall, is a masterly interpretation of a phase of this marvel of marvels which few have sought to represent. The sun strikes the lofty rim of the far-away cliffs, while the canyon itself is filled with mist so that the observer must search for the gorge and the river as he must search for the real gorge and river before the morning sun has thought of revealing them.

My failure to mention other works in detail must not be thought of as indicating that many of them are not worthy of mention, for every picture in the central group tells its vivid story of the wonders of our great West.

It is entirely natural that one who began exploring in the Rocky Mountains 44 years ago and who has witnessed the development of the great surveys and the inception of the movement for the establishment of national parks should take to reminiscing, but I shall not weary you by recalling the multitude of scenes and events that come to mind. I have sketched perhaps every range and group of mountains from Montana to Mexico and have climbed nearly all of the great peaks of the ranges and explored the valleys and canyons. When I am homesick at all it is for these wilds and especially for the upland parks which nature has arranged with more than the skill of the landscape gardener. Everywhere there are subjects to inspire the painter's brush and at the same time to test his skill.

I may speak of the Yellowstone Valley where we began our explorations in 1872, and recall the inception of the idea of setting aside the central portions of this wonderful land as a national park. Dr. Hayden, the director of the survey of the Territories and his able executive officer, James Stevenson, conceived the idea, and on their return to Washington they, with others, urged upon Congress the advisability of reserving this great area as a free resort to all the people. The paintings of Moran, who accompanied the expedition in 1871, were an important factor in bringing the project to a successful issue.

In those early days many of the physical features of the park were without names, and names were freely given for convenience of reference in the topographic as well as the geologic work. I had the pleasure of naming mountains, valleys, streams, and geysers, but did not name the peak which bears my own name. That was the work of Geographer Gannett, but I did not object. A feature of particular interest on the east fork of the Yellowstone is Amethyst

Mountain on the marvels of which I made the first report. The face of the mountain shelves off in narrow cliffs in which stand out in bold relief the trunks of petrified trees, suggesting the columns of a hundred ruined temples. The Tertiary forests had been buried one over another in the gradually accumulating volcanic débris and thus became petrified and the erosion of the valley in subsequent ages wore away these partially consolidated formations leaving the trunks exposed. Many of these trunks were originally hollow and as petrification progressed they were filled with crystals of quartz many of which have the amethystine hue, and on breaking open the trunks the crystals were exposed and easily extracted. Our pack mules were loaded to the limit with the remarkable specimens.

In 1872 our work carried us to Colorado, where several years were passed in exploring the great ranges, the features of particular interest being the conquest of the Mountain of the Holy Cross, myself being the first person known to have reached the summit, and the valley of the San Juan, on the wonders of which I had the honor of making the first report. Moran's great paintings of these subjects are well known.

In 1880 I had my first look into the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River. In company with Maj. Dutton, I approached the gorge from the north, riding through the deep forest which covers the great Kaibab Plateau. As we rode forward we began to catch glimpses of the blue through the mesh of tree trunks and foliage, and gradually as we approached the rim the blue, which seemed the blue of the sky, sank deeper and deeper until we found ourselves hesitating to proceed, the impression being strong that we had come to the edge of the world. Reaching the edge, the great gorge began to reveal itself, and what at first had seemed the blue sky became a vast expanse of sculptured plateau fronts, diversified by promontories, isolated pyramids, and deep recesses in infinite detail, extending to impenetrable depths. To the east the chasm cut the horizon in a great notch and the same again far to the west.

I spent two full days in making a pencil panorama of the canyon, my own natural method of expression being the graphic. Description is vain. We must depend upon the pictorial art to convey to the mind of those who can not visit the region some idea, howsoever weak, of this greatest wonder of the world. But I can not go on. The memories and scenes crowds upon my mind so that I am helpless in the face of the task.

