

Simplicity of the Land

Exhibit at Sullivan Goss showcases important Tonalism works between 1870 and 1930

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The later years of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century were times of contrast in landscape painting. Hudson River School painters in the United States were painting romantic visions of the grandeur of America while French painters of the Barbizon School were celebrating the calm simplicity of rural life. The high-keyed and scintillating landscapes of the Impressionists complemented low-keyed, poetic, and atmospheric landscapes of the American Tonalists.

The tonalists are gone and mostly forgotten, although their aesthetic lives on in a new generation of landscape artists. Childe Hassam (1859–1935) went to Paris to study at the Académie Julian in 1886 and returned as perhaps the foremost American Impressionist. Before he left for Paris he painted subdued landscapes heavily influenced by the Barbizon School.

Hassam wrote, “Art, to me, is the interpretation of

the impression which nature makes upon the eye and brain.” His interpretation changed over the years but the impression of the actual landscape is conveyed in his paintings throughout his career. *Sunrise-Autumn* (1884) is as strong a statement as his later paintings for which he is better known.

Sunrise-Autumn is in the exhibition *Tonalism-1870-1930*, curated by Jeremy Tessmer, at Sullivan Goss in Santa Barbara, California.

Much less known and equally exciting to discover in *Tonalism* is Hassam’s contemporary Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932) whose early career was on the East Coast and who began wintering in Santa Barbara in 1900. He was a distant relative of Frederic Church (1826–1900), whom he took as his mentor.

In an essay on de Forest, Joseph Goldyne quotes the artist, “My idea in picture painting is to make every one who looks at my pictures think of real nature, and not of me or the way the painting is done. That is art as I conceive it. Where all the personality of the artist, author or musician is so concentrated on his concept that he becomes the perfect medium through whom the idea is transmitted to others that it becomes theirs not his.”



Childe Hassam (1859-1935), *Sunrise-Autumn*, 1884.
Oil on canvas, 12 x 18 in., signed lower left.





Charles Melville Dewey (1849-1937), *Return of the Hayboats*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 in., signed lower left.



Lockwood de Forest (1850-1932), *Daylight Full Moon over Reflection*, Sept. 3, 1910. Oil on artist's cardstock, 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 14 in., signed lower left.

De Forest was more prominent as a designer and businessman through his design firm, Associated Artists, which he formed with Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933), Samuel Colman (1832–1920), and Candace Wheeler (1827–1923), yet he was elected to the National Academy of Design for his paintings in 1898.

Tessmer notes, “The West was the perfect subject for de Forest’s special approach to landscape paintings, which was grounded in 19th-century Hudson River painting and its transcendentalist reverence for nature, but which set aside grandeur in favor of a kind of painterly honesty. De Forest wanted you to feel like you were there—caught in a quiet moment in the vast landscape.”

De Forest’s small plein air oil sketches reduce the landscape to its essentials. *Daylight Full Moon over Reflection* (Sept. 3, 1910) prefigures abstraction in its simplicity and reflects the spiritual minimalism of Japanese sumi-e painting.

Another contemporary, Charles Warren Eaton (1857–1937), also chose simple vistas and simplified them even more. Influenced by the Barbizon School, he concentrated on the subtleties of early and late light as in *Bruges, Moonlight* (circa 1910). Eaton admired the poetic paintings of George Inness (1825–1894). They worked in the same building in New York in 1889, and Inness bought one of his paintings.

Charles Melville Dewey’s *Return of the Hayboats* was painted in 1892 and exhibited at the Chicago World’s Fair the following year. Dewey (1849–1937) was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1907. Although his work is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art, Dewey, as so many of his fellow tonalists, vanished from consideration in the history of American art.

Sullivan Goss goes a long way to bring tonalism and its artists the attention they are due. The simple spiritual subtlety of their work offers the viewer the opportunity to be “caught in a quiet moment in the vast landscape.” The gallery’s exhibition *Tonalism-The Present Moment* is running concurrently. ■



Charles Warren Eaton (1857–1937), *Bruges, Moonlight*, ca. 1910. Oil on canvas, 36 x 30 in., signed lower left.



Leon Dabo (1864–1960), *Storm King on the Hudson*, ca. 1900. Oil on canvas, 30½ x 33¾ in., signed lower right. Courtesy Sullivan Goss.