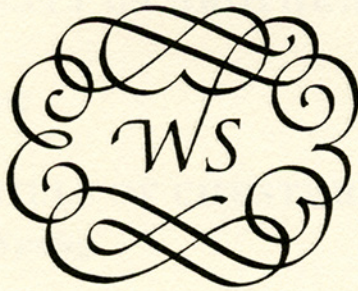


THE
WALPOLE SOCIETY
NOTE BOOK



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Images of the Railroad in Nineteenth-Century American Paintings

THE ADVENT OF THE RAILROAD in the nineteenth century revolutionized American life. For the first time in history quick and inexpensive transportation was available to a broad spectrum of the population. As the geography of the United States increased significantly in the middle of the century with the acquisition of the western third of the country, the railroad became even more important as a way of moving goods and people across vast distances.

In the United States, the railroad was seen as a positive force.¹ "Agriculture, commerce, manufactures, wealth and population will feel its influence," intoned Governor Leland Stanford at the 1863 groundbreaking ceremony for the Central Pacific Railroad in Sacramento, and he hailed the "new era of progress" that would accompany the railroad's completion.² This sentiment echoed the generally laudatory view of the railroad held by cultural leaders in the East. A few voices, Henry David Thoreau's among them, lamented the railroad's noisy presence in the countryside, but most Americans welcomed the mobility and prosperity that were the railroad's immediate benefits. In his essay, "The Erie Railroad," part of a collection of essays and poems on the American landscape illustrated by artists, Bayard Taylor pointed out that the railroad's critics soon became seduced by "its miracles of speed, comfort and safety.... We now more frequently hear of the power and poetic mystery of the steam engine." He went on to state that "no great gift of science ever diminishes our stores of purer and more spiritual enjoyment, but rather adds to their abundance and gives them a richer zest."³

In Taylor's view, the principal spiritual enhancement offered by the railroad was comfortable access to the nation's natural beauty in its various forms. Railroad companies were quick to exploit

America's infatuation with its scenery, arranging special excursions for artists to sketch the countryside adjacent to their tracks in hopes that the resulting art would attract passengers. One such outing sponsored by the Baltimore and Ohio in June of 1858 included such important New York painters as John F. Kensett, Louis Rémy Mignot, and James A. Suydam and was the subject of an extended article in *The Crayon*. The article's anonymous author characterized the railroad as "magnificent" and made a point of praising its engineering marvels—the viaducts, bridges and tunnels that were encountered along the way.⁴ Instead of being seen as a violation of the purity of the Edenic wilderness, the railroad was regarded as a benign highway to spiritual interaction with God's creation.

More recently, a group of art historians has taken the view that nineteenth-century artists became propagandists—wittingly or unwittingly—for powerful business interests eager to promote development and westward expansion.⁵ It is likely that most artists were happy to produce works that might boost the prospects of the fledgling railroads, so strongly did they share the common admiration for the real progress the railroad was bringing to American life. But it is doubtful that these artists suppressed images that might raise questions about the advisability of railroad building, as is sometimes alleged by recent scholarship. For example, one writer has suggested that Albert Bierstadt omitted any evidence of environmental damage caused by railroad construction in his *Donner Lake from the Summit* in order to demonstrate that "the beauty of the Sierra had not been compromised by the railroad."⁶ But this way of analyzing nineteenth-century art assumes that painters like Bierstadt felt free to treat their subjects photographically—that unpleasant debris from railroad construction could find a place in a major exhibition painting. Such a notion would have been absurd to Bierstadt, whose most difficult challenge in this painting was to amalgamate the worldly human invention of the railroad into a rarefied aesthetic universe governed by inherited conventions and philosophies.



Plate I. Starrucca Viaduct, Pennsylvania, by Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823–1900), 1865. Oil on canvas, 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 36 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.



Plate II. The Lackawanna Valley, by George Inness (1825–1894), c. 1855. Oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{7}{8}$ by 50 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Notions of the sublime, picturing man as a tiny entity in a nature of terrifying grandeur; and of the picturesque, emphasizing rough and broken natural forms, were difficult to square with portrayals of the railroad. The artist J. D. Woodward refused to execute “an extended and architecturally complete view” of the railroad bridge at Portage, New York, for the chapter “The Valley of the Genesee” in *Picturesque America*. “This is a tour in search of the picturesque,” he remonstrated, “and the straight lines, sharp angles, and cut-stone buttresses of a railway-bridge do not belong to that order of beauty.”⁷ When Jasper Cropsey painted *Starrucca Viaduct* (Pl. I) in 1865, portraying a landmark situated along the Erie Railroad line, he set it far in the distance where it fits inconspicuously into the wilderness panorama of the painting’s composition. As Barbara Novak points out, this distant siting of the railroad in landscape paintings was typical: “How remote and insignificant are the trains that discreetly populate the American landscape paintings at mid-century!”⁸ She mentions various works by Thomas Cole, George Inness, and Asher B. Durand to reinforce this point, and indeed works by lesser-known painters of the period like Harrison B. Brown of Portland, Maine, can be cited to underscore it further.⁹

Novak discusses how artists used this diffident approach to portraying the railroad as a result of their “desire to tailor the machine and its effects to the pastoral dream” of the unspoiled American wilderness. She properly relates this question to the propriety of picturing mundane things—like trains and bridges—in exalted landscapes couched in the vocabulary of the classical landscape tradition.¹⁰ Certainly the Cropsey and other landscapes she cites show the characteristics of the compromise often made by American painters of the Hudson River school in incorporating elements of real American scenery into compositions that retain not only the formal design, but also the idealizing spirit of the classical tradition. Classical compositions, as they evolved in seventeenth-century Rome, usually featured a tall tree on one side of the foreground to define the picture plane, and another group of trees further into the composition on the opposite side to create a sense of progression into the distance. A pool of water reflecting a bright

patch of sky was placed in the middle ground to attract the eye, and distant hills were bathed in the Arcadian light of late afternoon, spreading a mellow, idealizing glow through the composition. In the nineteenth century, the public demand for “real” American scenes coupled with John Ruskin’s injunctions to study nature firsthand caused a modification in the classical formula which favored realism. But American painters wanted to have it both ways—classical compositions featuring American scenes. Cropsey’s viaduct, for example, is not disturbingly different from the Roman aqueducts or arched bridges depicted in seventeenth-century works by Claude Lorrain.

One mid-century landscape that does give some prominence to the image of the train is *The Lackawanna Valley* (Pl. II) by George Inness,¹¹ a painting that has become justly celebrated in the twentieth century but was unknown when it was painted as a commission for the Delaware Lackawanna and Western Railroad in about 1855. The fact that the painting was done as a commission and not as a work destined for art exhibitions explains why the train has a greater presence in this painting than it does in other Inness landscapes with trains. Even so, the artist has been careful to observe the rules of the classical composition. The foreground includes the usual framing tree which sets off the broad panorama of the Pennsylvania countryside. In the left and right distances respectively, we see the church steeple of Scranton, Pennsylvania, balanced by the roundhouse of the railroad, as though both were equally deserving of our attention. In the middle ground a train puffs towards the viewer but does not disturb the pastoral tranquillity of the scene. The field, full of stumps which twentieth-century critics might interpret as the artist’s condemnation of environmental damage, would have been seen by Inness’ audience as laudable results of human industry.¹² In the foreground of the painting, we see the Arcadian shepherd of the classical landscape reconfigured as a red-shirted spectator who gives no indication of distress at the technological invasion of his domain. To reassure us that everything is all right, a cow contentedly rusticates in a field adjacent to the train.

The scale of the painting is sufficiently broad that the works of man are enveloped by the surrounding landscape. Such details as the train and the distant roundhouse and factory add a picturesque variety of visual impressions to the scene without being overwhelming. The small to great proportion of man's to God's work depicted in this painting fits it into the tradition of the sublime.

That Inness saw the railroad as a beneficent force in the land is reinforced by other major works the artist executed in the five years following the completion of *The Lackawanna Valley*. Several views of the Delaware Water Gap, painted in the late 1850s or early 1860s depict the train on a smaller scale but in the same benign context as we see in this work.¹³ Some of these landscapes discard the vestiges of the classical composition, choosing the broad open foreground and the impressionistic technique of the Barbizon painters, while adhering to the grand scale and optimistic vision of the Hudson River school aesthetic.¹⁴

If the railroad was important to the culture and economy of the eastern states, it was crucial to the growing settlements three thousand miles across the continent on the Pacific Coast. The social reformer Henry George, writing in 1868 in anticipation of the completion of the transcontinental railroad, gave voice to the common sentiment held by Californians when he described the railroad as an improvement "we have looked for, prayed for so long."¹⁵ The following year, Dr. J. D. B. Stillman recalled the dreadful isolation he had felt in 1849 when he and his family had first stood on "the iron-bound shores of the Pacific" after a horrible sea voyage "and thought in our forlorn hearts that the last tie that bound us to our native land was broken."¹⁶ Even after steamship travel was made more comfortable in the late 1850s and 1860s, it took a month to travel to New York from San Francisco, and the trip included two steamer rides and an anxiety-filled trek across Panama or Nicaragua. The railroad reduced the journey to less than a week.

The difficulties of building a railroad across the Sierra Nevada were greater than the obstacles that faced railroad builders in the East, but once the project got underway in the middle 1860s, it



Pl. III. Cape Horn, by Norton Bush (1834–1894), 1868. Oil on canvas, 16 by 24 inches. Private collection.



Plate IV. Donner Lake from the Summit, by Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), 1873. Oil on canvas, 72 by 120 inches. New-York Historical Society, New York City.

proceeded rapidly. Whole mountainsides were dynamited to provide roadbeds for the tracks. One of the most challenging locations for the railroad builders became known as Cape Horn, partly because the railroad doubled back around a hairpin turn at that place, suggesting “rounding the Horn” at the tip of South America, and partly because any tremendously difficult passage got named “Cape Horn” by California pioneers with long memories of the treacherous straits at that location. When Norton Bush painted *Cape Horn* (Pl. III) in 1868, he followed the habit of eastern painters in depicting the railroad as a tiny detail far in the distance. No hint of the prodigious mountain-altering construction creeps into his panoramic view of the Sierra Nevada from a point looking east towards the high country covered in snow at Donner Summit in the far distance. Instead, vestiges of the classical composition are found in the foreground—the dead tree on the left evokes the picturesque as it is found in countless eastern paintings by Cole, Durand, or Frederic Church while it doubles as the requisite framing tree element. Providing water in the middle ground was impossible for Bush, given the steep canyon of the American River that lay at his feet, but he did bathe the subject in the mellow twilight of the alpenglow, conferring an Arcadian tranquillity on the rugged mountain panorama.

Bush’s painting was, in its way, a celebration of the trans-Sierra railroad. It gives the viewer a sense of the huge extent of mountainous terrain that had been overcome by its builders. But as far as we know, it was not specifically commissioned as a celebration of the railroad.

Bierstadt’s *Donner Lake from the Summit* (Pl. IV), first exhibited in 1873, was such a commission.¹⁷ The painting was ordered by the New York member of “The Big Four” barons of the Central Pacific Railroad, Collis P. Huntington, as a way of celebrating the completion of the railroad. According to Benjamin P. Avery, writing in the *Overland Monthly*, Donner Lake was chosen as the subject of the painting

at the ins[is]tance [of Mr. Huntington] because right here were overcome the greatest physical difficulties in the construction of the road,

*while the immediate vicinity was the scene of the most pathetic tragedy in the experience of our pioneer immigration for it was...on Donner Lake that the Donner party...suffered horrors worse than the death which over took so many of them. The two associations of the spot are, therefore, sharply and suggestively antithetical: so much slowness and hardship in the early days, so much rapidity and ease now; great physical obstacles overcome by a triumph of well-directed science.*¹⁸

Dawn was chosen as the time of day to signify the birth of a new era in California ushered in by the completion of the railroad.

With so ambitious a program forming the conceptual basis of the painting, the visual result is surprising and instructive. The presence of the railroad is minimal. It is represented by a distant line of sheds built to keep snow off the tracks. No fancy passenger cars that might have suggested the ease of railroad travel are visible. A tiny puff of blue smoke emerging from the tunnel is the only evidence of an actual train. This detail would have been interpreted by many viewers, nursed on the allegorical tales of Hawthorne and Melville, as a symbol of the transience of human endeavors. It was a curious approach to flattering the ego of the hardware merchant turned railroad czar.

In reviewing this painting, several critics praised the artist for his reticence in depicting the “unpleasant but useful and practical C.P.R.R. (Central Pacific Railroad),” in the words of the reviewer for *The Grizzly*.¹⁹ On January 11, 1873, the critic for the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* wrote: “The railroad, with its enveloping snow-shed, is indicated plainly enough without any obtrusion of its ugliness.” The truthfulness to local characteristics was praised in several quarters—actual Sierra flowers and trees can be found in the foreground—but no one seemed to notice that Bierstadt’s composition also nodded to Claudian landscape conventions. A group of framing trees appears in the left foreground, Donner Lake is the water in the middle ground; the effects of the sky have been exaggerated to give an idealized glow to the scene. The latter point is confirmed when the artist’s handling of light is compared to that found in a study *View of Donner Lake, California*, now in the M.H.

de Young Memorial Museum Collection in San Francisco, which captures dawn in the Sierra with greater fidelity. In the latter, a smaller work, we do not find the unnaturally dark foreground contrasted with the golden distances, but a more uniform gradation of tones illuminating the scene. The rising sun shining through mist was a time-honored and—by 1873—hackneyed borrowing from Claude, as well as from J.M.W. Turner's well-known *Sun Rising through Vapour*, accessible to the curious nineteenth-century art student at the National Gallery, London. The vaporous sunrise or sunset is found in numerous American landscapes by Cole, Church, and others, but, most relevant to Bierstadt is *Mansfield Mountain*²⁰ of 1858 by Sanford R. Gifford in which the treatment of light and the handling of the mountains is almost identical to that of *Donner Lake from the Summit*.

It is clear that Bierstadt regarded the railroad as an indecorous intrusion into this conventional artistic universe. As a nineteenth-century man, he admired the advances of science and their applications to practical life. He was also an unusually warm friend to successful men of affairs. But in his important exhibition paintings, he insisted on maintaining what he felt were the high standards of decorum that he had inherited from the past.

In 1875, Leland Stanford commissioned Thomas Hill to paint a six-by-ten-foot painting of Donner Lake from the same vantage point as Bierstadt had. When it was finished, he urged Hill to exhibit it at the Philadelphia Centennial. Hill demurred on the grounds that "a picture of a railroad was unpoetic and might hurt my prospects of receiving a medal for a work of art."²¹ Stanford then bought Hill's large scene *Yosemite* that was just being finished, and sent both it and the Donner Lake to Philadelphia. Hill came away with the medal he desired. Hill's large view of Donner Lake was destroyed with Stanford's Nob Hill mansion in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906; *Yosemite* survived in Palo Alto and is now in the collection of the Oakland Museum.

If the conventions of landscape painting banished the hard fact of the railroad to specks of detail in huge panoramas, it fell to genre painters to celebrate what Bayard Taylor called "the power and the



Plate V. The 9:45 Accommodation (formerly entitled The Railway Station, Westchester), by Edward L. Henry (1841–1919), 1867. Oil on canvas, 16 by 30 ⁵/₈ inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.



Plate VI. Sacramento Railroad Station, by William Hahn (1829–1887), 1874. Oil on canvas, 53 ³/₄ by 87 ³/₄ inches. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

poetic mystery of the steam engine.”²² Genre painters felt no conflict between worldly and transcendental values in incorporating the train into their compositions. The challenge for them was to create an image of the railroad that would lift the scene above the commonplace and relate a commentary of some sort on American life.

The most important eastern genre paintings depicting railroads were executed by Edward Lamson Henry, especially his painting entitled *The Railway Station, Westchester* (now entitled *The 9:45 Accommodation*; Pl. V) which was commissioned in 1867 by railroad magnate John Taylor Johnston.²³ This painting is an evocation of the bustle surrounding the imminent departure of a train from a suburban railroad station. The artist has not been reticent about depicting the engine. Instead, he has made it the most prominent object in the foreground, cleverly positioning it at an angle to the picture plane to allow the viewer to see both a front and side. The locomotive’s impressive power is communicated through the reaction of the white horses in front of the station who shy away from the train as they throw a frightened glance in its direction. Choosing a suburban setting has allowed the artist to emphasize the commotion generated by the railroad in a community big enough to allow many carriages and people to converge on the station, but not so urban as to cause the railroad and its bustle to become just another element in a busy city environment. The open country and hills behind the train are reminders of the huge scale of the American continent and thus of the railroad’s role in connecting human settlements in a vast land. Altogether the painting suggests that the railroad has become a benign focus of human activity in the American countryside. The history of its ownership confirms the esteem railroad magnates placed on this work. When John T. Johnston sold his collection in 1876, the painting was bought by John W. Garrett, president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.²⁴ In his description of the Garrett collection Edward Strahan wrote: “‘Railway Station’...gives a good idea of the citizen-haunted railway at a point near the large capitals and reminds a great railway monarch of the tide of travel over which he holds despotic sway.”²⁵

Despite some similarities in composition and overall concept, William Hahn's *Sacramento Railroad Station* (Pl. VI)²⁶ of 1874 was probably produced without knowledge of Henry's work. It is doubtful that Hahn would have seen it in the Johnston collection during his brief visit to the East during the winter of 1871–1872. Hahn, a German, was a professional genre painter in Düsseldorf when he accompanied William Keith, an American painter who had been studying there to the United States in 1871. Hahn's German works tend towards artificial and sentimental depictions of happy peasant festivals. The son of a butcher, Hahn was intrigued by the democratic ideas of the American art students he met in Düsseldorf. In the United States, his treatment of genre shifted towards an unsentimental depiction of scenes from American life, often including ordinary working people doing their jobs. In 1872, Hahn went with Keith to San Francisco, the city of Keith's early success as a painter.

Hahn immediately became the leading genre painter working in the West, and he seems to have been fascinated by the strangeness of the new society evolving in California. Some of his earliest paintings portray exotic scenes from San Francisco's Chinatown, and he also painted a large view of the produce market on Sansome Street. The latter sold at a high price to Judge E. B. Crocker of Sacramento, lawyer for the Central Pacific Railroad and brother of the railroad baron, Charles Crocker. As Edward Strahan pointed out in his chapter "Collections in San Francisco," "It is the railway kings...who are found [to be] the best patrons of art."²⁷

Whether Hahn was hoping that a "railway king" would find his ambitious *Sacramento Railroad Station* irresistible we can only surmise, but we know that he did paint it without a commission and that he tried, unsuccessfully, to sell it at auction in 1876, two years after its first exhibition.²⁸ The painting was unveiled at Nile's Art Gallery in San Francisco in April 1874, and it received several favorable notices in the press.²⁹ In August and September of that year, it was exhibited at the Mechanics Institute Fair. As in E. L. Henry's *The Railway Station, Westchester*, Hahn has positioned the various foreground vignettes at an angle to the picture plane, "an

arrangement,” in the words of the critic for the *San Francisco Call*, “which gives space to display the various groups and objects without confusion or crowding.”³⁰ But Hahn’s larger painting has a more ambitious theme: in giving us a close-up view of the crowds thronging the station, the artist offers a cross-section of California’s population, from the wealthy banker’s family with its stylish carriage to the humble seller of apples seated to the left of the banker’s horses. A Chinese workman can be seen scurrying in the background and an immigrant family is seated next to their modest belongings in the shade in the right foreground. Putting the immigrant and wealthy families side by side raises the possibility in the viewer’s mind that the wealthy folks could have once been humble immigrants themselves and that the immigrants could rise to the wealth and position of the banker’s family in this new world of opportunity. The two families are also emblematic of the state of California society in 1874. The presence of the wealthy family dressed in fashionable clothes and outfitted with a carriage complete with top-hatted coachman demonstrates that California is no longer a rough-and-ready frontier environment but has become a settled culture with all the amenities of other societies.

The humorous vignette to the left of the banker’s family—the spilling of feminine finery from a flimsy trunk whose bottom has split apart—serves as a balance to what might otherwise be too obsequious a rendering of upper-class Americans. The well-dressed lady who has turned a ghostly white in shock at having her lingerie emerge into public view is the butt of the joke. Her discomfort is enhanced by the expression of suppressed mirth on the face of the red-shirted porter about to split his sides with laughter. An anonymous critic in the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* for April 11, 1874, remarked that his “expression...would do credit to a Hogarth.” The incident gives the artist the opportunity to suggest—in a very gentle and indirect way—that the trunks of wealthy Americans may be overloaded with material possessions. It also allows him to depict the unobsequious demeanor of American workers in the presence of their employers.

What brings all of this social commentary into focus is the



Plate VII. Driving the Last Spike, by Thomas Hill (1829-1908), 1881. Oil on canvas, 8 by 12 feet. California State Railroad Museum, Sacramento.

railroad. Its role in creating or facilitating economic development is suggested in the way that the distant factory chimney repeats the locomotive's smokestack. The locomotive itself is fully articulated. "It was a bold venture in the artist," continued the *Bulletin's* critic, "to bring so complex a piece of machinery into the foreground but success has crowned the undertaking." No carping at the "ugliness" of the Central Pacific Railroad appears in any of the reviews; instead, the locomotive exhibits "some of the most artistic detail we have seen." The profusion of activity inspired by the arrival of the train—workers unloading baggage, attending to the locomotive, picking up passengers in carriages—symbolizes the economic ferment generated by the railroad. The *Bulletin's* critic noted Hahn's ability to unite this scattered human energy into a coherent image in which "everything and everybody seems to be in the right place" creating a vision of men and machines working harmoniously together.

If the genre paintings of Hahn and Henry allowed the artists to create compositions with sociological significance, the composition of the huge history painting, *Driving the Last Spike*,³¹ (Pl. VII) by Thomas Hill was largely determined by the historical event it sought to commemorate. This was the gathering of railroad executives and other notables at Promontory Point, Utah, on the afternoon of May 10, 1869, to celebrate the completion of the transcontinental railroad. The Central Pacific Railroad had been built from west to east, and the Union Pacific from east to west. Promontory Point was the location where the two railroads finally came together.

The magnitude of the event for the country can be judged by the elaborate preparations made for the celebration as depicted in the painting. Two ceremonial "last spikes" were to be driven into the last railroad tie by the senior officials of each railroad. The spikes were wired to a telegraph line that would send signals to major American cities, setting off fire alarms across the country to signify the completion of the railroad. A national celebration would ensue.

The idea for a huge painting commemorating this event came from Governor Leland Stanford, who drove the last spike on behalf of the

Central Pacific Railroad. As noted above, Stanford and Hill had a strong patron-artist relationship. Hill felt that Stanford had informally commissioned *Driving the Last Spike*, and Stanford acted as though he were going to be the future owner, insisting that he be the central figure in the composition.

The first mention in the San Francisco press of a Hill “last spike” painting occurred in the *San Francisco News Letter and California Examiner* for September 26, 1874, but the work was not finished until 1881 when it was first exhibited. Hill put considerable energy into it, painting seventy-one portraits from life as preparation for the work, according to the reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner*.³² Thomas Hill is often thought of today as a painter of formulaic Yosemite paintings, but during the 1870s and early 1880s, he seldom painted Yosemite, executing landscapes of many different subjects and moods, as well as excellent still life paintings and portraits. In fact, his earliest San Francisco paintings of the 1860s were portraits. Hill was the best qualified San Francisco painter to undertake a huge painting of figures in a landscape.

Since the composition of *Driving the Last Spike* was dictated by the event, the artistic challenge was to make a significant aesthetic image out of “a crowd of extremely ordinary and prosaic men, including the railroad magnates themselves in conventional modern dress” to quote a critical notice in the *San Francisco Examiner* of April 7, 1881. A pamphlet published in conjunction with the painting’s exhibition at the San Francisco Art Association in February 1881 pointed out that the work “represents the assiduous labor of nearly four years—four years of determined effort to make the absolute and commonplace yield to the principles of art.”³³

This was a difficult challenge indeed. As the pamphleteer noted, “‘The Last Spike’ symbolizes the victory of will rather than the triumph of passion, a grander incident (than battle scenes) but less available for the purposes of art.”³⁴ History paintings of American subjects usually depicted incidents sufficiently removed from the experience of their audience to have acquired a romantic or nostalgic appeal; Benjamin West’s *Penn’s Treaty with the Indians* (The Museum of American Art, Philadelphia) is an example of this

kind of history painting where the exotic Native Americans confront the English colonists. Another popular subject for history painters, was the melodramatic battle scene—"the charging squadrons and dashing columns, the dying soldiers, the trampled and contorted dead (clothing) the scene with vitality."³⁵ *Washington Rallying the Troops at Monmouth* (University Art Museum, Berkeley, California) by Emanuel Leutze is an example of this kind of painting. But as a Sacramento reviewer pointed out, Hill had no comparable drama to portray, and the vast expanse of desert in the background also deprived the artist of details from nature that might have enlivened the scene.

As a first step in raising this group portrait above the commonplace, Hill chose to depict the most solemn moment of the celebration, when a prayer was said just before the spikes were driven. In the words of eyewitness Dr. J. D. B. Stillman: "A reverend gentleman present was invited to invoke the blessing of Almighty God upon the work. The (telegraph) operator announced 'Hats Off, prayer is being said'; and...we uncovered our heads.... It was a sublime moment and we realized it."³⁶ The white-haired gentleman in the immediate foreground of the painting can be identified as the Reverend Dr. Todd; he stands with his hands extended, performing his religious duty, while most of the figures arranged in front of him have removed their hats as was customary when prayers were uttered. Getting the hats off the gentleman was a huge advantage when it came to painting portraits, as likenesses were more compelling when hats did not cast shadows on the faces. Portraying the prayer also introduced the major theme that the painting embodies—namely that progress as represented by the railroad was fulfilling the perceived divine mandate behind western expansion—the introduction of Christian civilization into the vast empty regions of the West. Hill has included reminders of the Wild West that the railroad and its dark-suited officers will eventually civilize—Conestoga wagons crossing the distant desert, a mustang race, even a poker game on a barrel head. The writer of the Last Spike pamphlet made a point of mentioning a background "stage-coach, old fashioned, effete, its occupation gone, its slow courses

shamed by the swift wheels of the flying locomotive..."³⁷ Closer to the foreground, rough-hewn westerners have disregarded the injunction to remove their hats, including one who is selling cigars during the prayer. But they are far outnumbered by the cohorts of the faithful, who listen respectfully, hats in hand. Several women are given prominent places in the crowd, including the wife of the Central Pacific's superintendent J. H. Strobridge, and Misses Earl and Annie Reed in the very front. In the nineteenth-century mind, no settled institutions were possible without the domesticating presence of women. A reminder of Christianity is seen in the cross made by the telegraph pole on the right-hand side of the composition. Perhaps it is not an over-interpretation to see this familiar symbol repeated in the extreme left foreground where a pick and a spike lay directly across the track. Contemporary photos of the scene show no such objects lying in this position.

Driving the Last Spike is a statement in pictorial form of the sentiments expressed by California Governor H. H. Haight in his speech delivered in Sacramento two days before the Promontory Point ceremony: "Railways and telegraphs are potent civilizers," he intoned, but he immediately warned against the potential for corruption inherent in all human activities. "Above all, we must recollect that the only basis for morality is religion.... Let us be careful to render unto God the things that are God's."³⁸

As a work of art, the painting received a mixed reception when it was first exhibited. The reviewer for the *San Francisco Examiner* for January 30, 1881, praised the naturalness with which all the figures had been introduced into the composition, "the spectator of the picture unconsciously forgets it to be a picture and feels impelled to himself shoulder nearer to the Governor." On the other hand, the reviewer for the *Californian* saw the subject as impossibly unartistic: "Large groups of gentleman," he pointed out, "all arrayed in the modern stiff black suit, are not even graceful. There is no appeal to any of the higher passions....It is simply a canvas crowded with black coats and pants."³⁹ The same critic conceded the importance of the event commemorated by the painting, including "the future suggested by the scene." But he saw it as

beyond the power of art to express.

Hill's picture had a checkered exhibition history and never was accorded the acclaim that it should have received. It was exhibited at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, but more as an illustration of western culture than as a viable work of art.⁴⁰ After receiving harsh criticism for his prominent place in the painting, Stanford refused to buy it from the artist,⁴¹ who owned it until his death. It passed into the ownership of the State of California and now is regarded as a piece of railroad memorabilia in the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento. Inevitably *Driving the Last Spike* will be recognized for the great work of art that it is and will find its way into a major museum where it can be judged and admired as a great achievement of nineteenth-century culture. *Driving the Last Spike* is the largest and most ambitious of the nineteenth-century railroad paintings. Virtually all of them portray the railroad as a beneficial force in American life, worthy to be included, even if only as a detail, in landscapes celebrating the sublime; worthy, also, of being the chief subject of portentous genre and history paintings. The artists were giving expression to the widely-held admiration in American society for the technological achievements that were bringing civilized comforts and broad-based prosperity into American life.

Alfred C. Harrison, Jr.

Footnotes

¹ The standard work on attitudes towards the railroad in nineteenth-century American culture is Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York, 1964).

² Quoted in an anonymously written pamphlet, *'The Last Spike,' A Painting by Thomas Hill* (San Francisco, 1881) p. 16.

³ *A Landscape Book* (1868; New York and London, 1976), pp. 100–101.

⁴ "An Excursion on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad," *The Crayon* (July 1858), pp. 208–210.

⁵ See William H. Truettner, "Ideology and Image," in *The West as America*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington and London, 1991), pp. 38–39 and Nancy

K. Anderson, "The Kiss of Enterprise" in *ibid.*, pp. 260–265. Albert Boime in *The Magisterial Gaze* (Washington and London 1991), pp. 4–5 and 123–137, calls attention to the close relationship often formed between artists and entrepreneurs and expresses the view that landscape painters were eager participants in an unofficial public relations campaign to promote westward expansion. One can concede this point without wholeheartedly accepting Boime's larger thesis that the settlement of the American continent by Europeans entailed a morally indefensible despoilation of the wilderness along with the destruction of Native American cultures. In Boime's view, the artist shared the cupidity of the businessman and often painted landscapes from elevated vantage points, casting a "magisterial gaze" downward over a panorama, taking "the perspective of the American on the heights looking for new worlds to conquer" (p. 21). The actual theme of most of the paintings he cites as embodying the "magisterial gaze" has more to do with the humility that comes from the realization that man occupies a tiny niche in a huge universe. Boime also finds it convenient to omit mention of the fact that the great majority of landscapes of the period take his so-called "reverential gaze," from ground level looking up at distant mountains.

⁶ Truettner, "Ideology and Image," p. 263.

⁷ *Picturesque America*, ed. William Cullen Bryant (New York, 1874), vol. 2, p. 354.

⁸ *Nature and Culture* (New York, 1980), p. 169. Her discussion of trains in nineteenth-century American art raises some of the issues discussed in this essay and is a most important contribution to scholarship in this area.

⁹ See, for example, Harrison B. Brown, *New England Town on the Train Route*, illustrated in Barridoff Galleries, auction catalogue, *American and European Art* (Portland, Maine, August 7, 1996), Lot 73.

¹⁰ *Nature and Culture*, p. 171.

¹¹ For discussions of this work see Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, pp. 220–221, whose correct interpretation of the pastoral conventions observed in this painting I have restated. Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. "George Inness and the Hudson River School: The Lackawanna Valley" (*American Art Journal* [Fall 1970], pp. 36–57) is an excellent essay about the background of the work which acknowledges more Barbizon influence than I do. See also, Novak, *Nature and Culture*, pp. 172–174; and Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., "The Lackawanna Valley," in Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. and Michael Quick, *George Inness* (Los Angeles, 1985), pp. 74–77.

¹² Stumps serve this function in such paintings as Cole's *Home in the Woods* of 1847 (Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina) and Gifford's *Hunter Mountain, Twilight* of 1866 (Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago). In another work by Inness, *Midsummer Greens* of 1856 (private collection), a prominently placed stump in the foreground shows a beneficial human intervention in the landscape, as Cikovsky points out, in Cikovsky and Quick, *George Inness*, pp. 80–81. In *The Magisterial Gaze*, Boime sees the distant smoke rising from the roundhouse as evidence of industrial

pollution, not mentioning the balancing plume of smoke visible behind the church on the other side of the composition. In neither case would Inness have seen the smoke as a source of pollution but as a symbol of human industry (in the case of the factory) and warmth-producing fire of a domestic settlement (near the church). Boime similarly misinterprets the “insistent” stumps of the foreground as evidence of the artist’s “ambivalence” about the destruction of the environment caused by the railroad. Inness did not see the tiny presence of the railroad surrounded by hundreds of square miles of open country as a threat to the environment (pp. 125–127).

¹³ See LeRoy Ireland, *The Works of George Inness* (Austin, Texas and London, 1965), Nos. 145, 146 (p. 37); No. 168, (p. 41); and Nos. 231, 232 (p. 57). One of the most beautiful of these works (No. 146), painted in 1857, is illustrated in color in *The Odd Picture*, James Maroney exhibition catalogue (New York, 1984), pp. 46–47.

¹⁴ Although the only two of these works with significant Barbizon affinities are from the early 1860s. They are illustrated in Ireland, *The Works of George Inness*, Nos. 231 and 232.

¹⁵ “What the Railroad Will Bring Us,” *Overland Monthly* (October 1868), p. 298.

¹⁶ “The Last Tie,” *Overland Monthly* (July 1869), p. 77.

¹⁷ For discussions of this work see Nancy K. Anderson and Linda Ferber, Albert Bierstadt, *Art and Enterprise* (New York, 1990), pp. 94–98; Nancy K. Anderson, “The Kiss of Enterprise” pp. 259–266; Alfred C. Harrison, Jr., “Albert Bierstadt and the Emerging San Francisco Art World of the 1860s and 1870s,” *California History* (Spring 1992), pp. 83–87; and Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze*, pp. 135–137.

¹⁸ “Two California Landscapes,” *Overland Monthly* (March 1873), p. 286.

¹⁹ “Art,” *The Grizzly* (January 18, 1873), p. 3.

²⁰ Now in the Manoogian Collection.

²¹ Thomas Hill, “History of the ‘Spike Picture,’” pamphlet, (San Francisco, n.d.) pp. 2–3.

²² *A Landscape Book*, pp. 100–101.

²³ See Natalie Spassky, et al., *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 2 (New York, 1985), pp. 559–61. For a description of the painting as a work in progress, see *The [New York] Evening Post*, January 14, 1867.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, December 20, 1876, which notes that at the sale of the Johnston Collection, *The Railway Station, Westchester*, sold for \$530.

²⁵ Edward Strahan (pseud.), *The Art Treasures of America* (1879; New York and London 1977), vol. 3, p. 76.

²⁶ For a catalogue entry on this work see Sally Mills, “William Hahn” in Marc Simpson et al., *The American Canvas* (New York, 1989), pp. 118–119. For

biographical information on Hahn, see Marjorie Arkelian, *William Hahn, Genre Painter* (Oakland, California, 1976).

²⁷ *Art Treasures of America*, vol. 3, p. 41.

²⁸ *San Francisco Evening Post*, March 18, 1876.

²⁹ See, for example, *San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, April 11, 1874 and "Art Notes," *Overland Monthly* (May 1874), p. 481.

³⁰ September 29, 1874, p. 4.

³¹ For discussion of this work, see Birgitta Hjalmarsen, "The Spike Picture," *Antiques West* (December 1985), pp. 1, 8-9.

³² January 30, 1881.

³³ "The Last Spike,' A painting by Thomas Hill" (San Francisco, January, 1881), p. 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁵ "The Great Picture," c. 1910 (University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Hill clipping file).

³⁶ "The Last Tie," p. 83.

³⁷ "The Last Spike," pp. 33-34.

³⁸ *Address of H.H. Haight, Gov. of California delivered at Sacramento, May 8, 1869, upon the completion of the Pacific Railroad* (San Francisco, 1869), p. 6. A copy is in the Bancroft Library.

³⁹ "Art and Artists," *The Californian* (March 1881), p. 282.

⁴⁰ *The Morning Call* (San Francisco), December 12, 1892. "[The painting] will be exhibited in the California building and not in the general art building."

⁴¹ *San Francisco Call*, February 14, 1898.