

# *The Art and Influence of George W. Whitaker*

by Nancy Whipple Grinnell

**G**eorge W. Whitaker (1840-1916), remembered as the “Dean of Providence Artists,” was an enthusiast of the French Barbizon style of painting and felt strongly that an artist should paint what he (or she) feels. While a prolific artist, Whitaker was also instrumental in creating a culture of art in the state of Rhode Island. He was a founder of the Providence Art Club, co-founder of the Rhode Island Watercolor Society and first instructor in oil

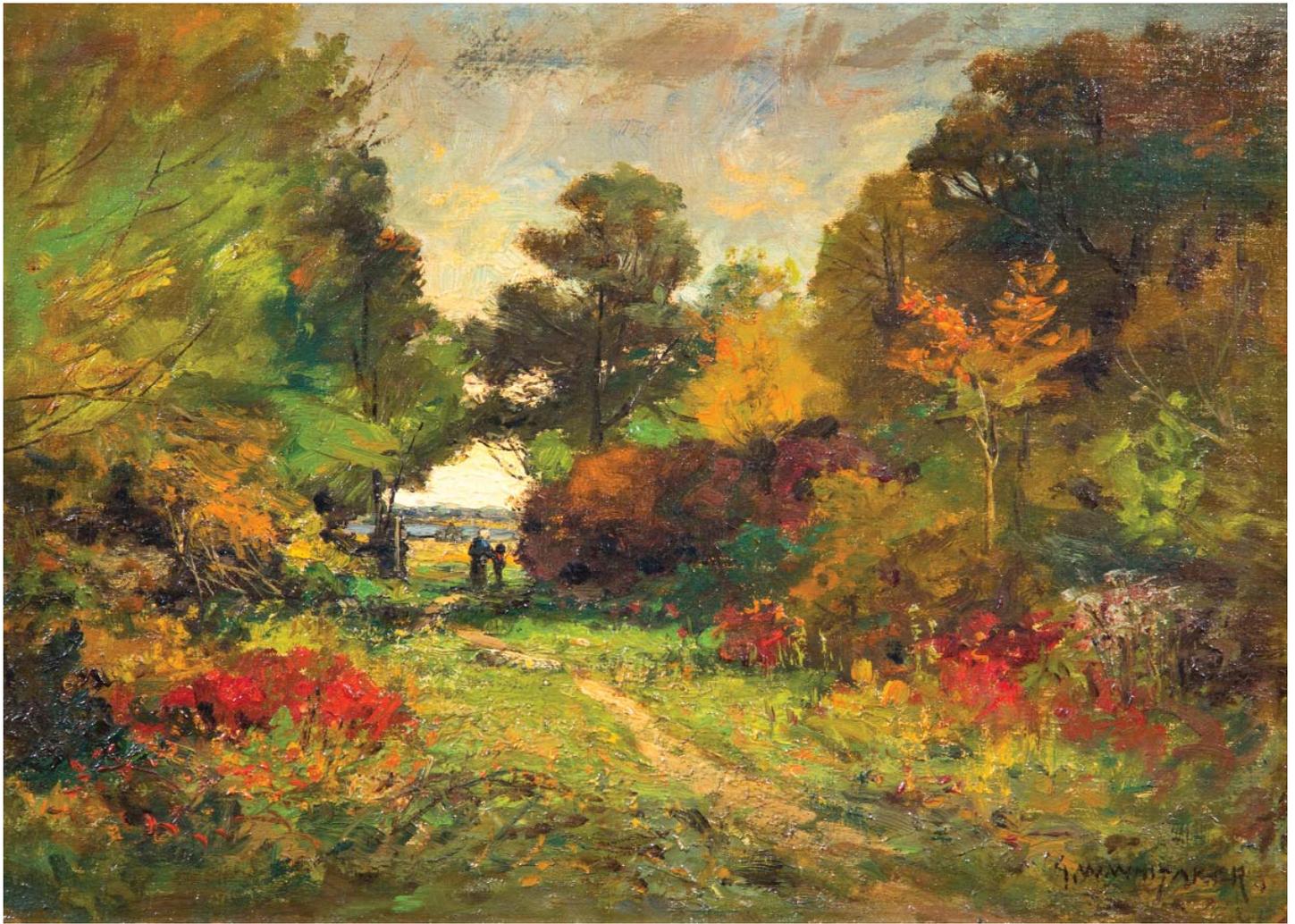
painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1885 Whitaker joined with other artists and business leaders to form the Ann Eliza Club, designed to create a forum for the discussion of art and ideas in Providence. Here and at other venues he lectured on art and artists and often astonished his audiences by “painting a picture right before their eyes.”

Whitaker was born in Fall River, Massachusetts, in September 1840, to James and Elizabeth (Monday) Whitaker, and was orphaned by the age of two. He was

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brought up by his maternal grandparents and recognized as a young boy that he was destined to be an artist. His uncle, Nathaniel Monday, took him into the family engraving business in New York City, where Whitaker learned the rudiments of





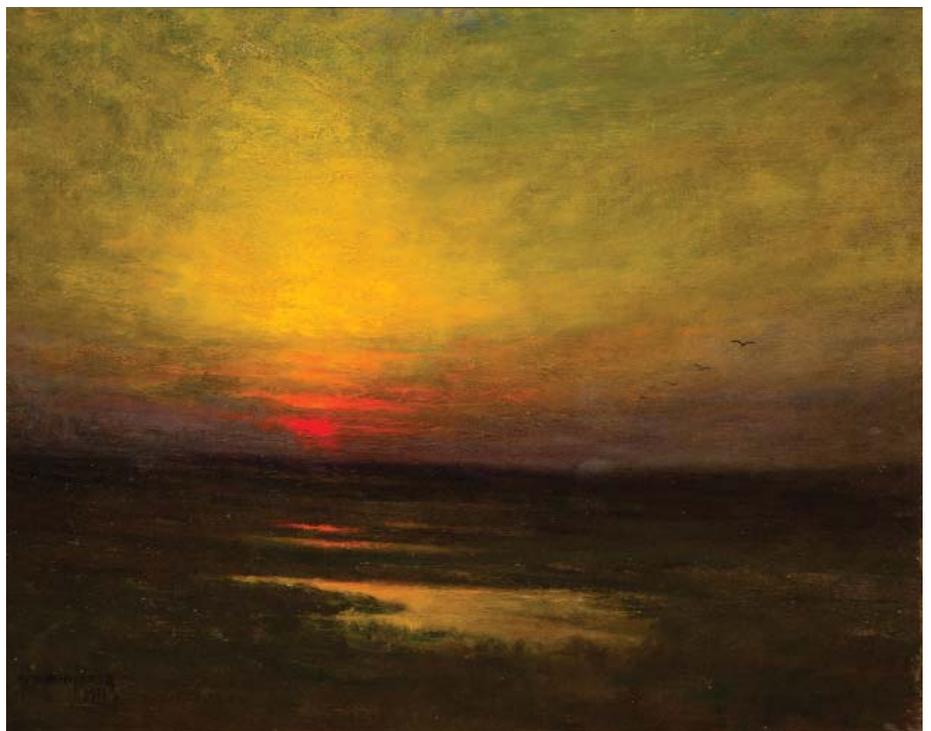
ABOVE: *Autumn*, o/c, 14 x 19 1/2, Beth and Stanley Weiss.

RIGHT: *Summer Sunset*, 1911, o/c, 22 x 28, Beth and Stanley Weiss.

LEFT: *Providence Waterfront*, 1895, o/c, 14 x 17 1/2, Beth and Stanley Weiss.

the craft but simultaneously discovered the burgeoning New York art world. Whitaker also worked in the Utopian community of North American Phalanx in Red Bank, New Jersey, being introduced to the idea of social harmony through cooperation. Founders Rebecca Buffum Spring of Rhode Island, and her husband Marcus Spring also hoped to foster an appreciation of art, music and literature, and Whitaker studied drawing.

By far the most auspicious happening in the life of the young Whitaker was meeting the great landscape painter George Inness, who mentored and encouraged him. From 1864 to 1867 Inness offered art in-





ABOVE: *The Fruit from Our Garden in the Country—Study*, o/c, 12 x 16 1/4, Nicholas P. Bruno.

LEFT: *Landscape with Cat*, 1902, o/c, 12 x 16, Nicholas P. Bruno.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Approaching Morning*, 1896, o/c, 18 x 29, Roger King Fine Arts.

RIGHT: *Windmill*, 1877, o/c, 25 5/8 x 21 1/2, Providence Art Club, gift of Sharon Linder.



for exhibition purposes.” A watercolor titled *The Birches*, the picture was accepted in the National Academy of Design and hung on the line in 1867.

By the late 1860s Whitaker had earned enough income to travel to France for a year of further training. He studied with the young Hungarian painter Ladislav de Paal, a disciple of Jean Francois Millet. He painted in the Forest of Fontainebleau with other Barbizon artists, including Millet. In 1871 Whitaker returned to New England, settling in Providence, Rhode Island, with his wife, Sarah Hull Whitaker.

struction and criticism out of a second social reform community run by the Springs, in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. It is likely

here that Whitaker received advice from Inness. Whitaker recalled that “Under Inness’s influence I painted my first picture

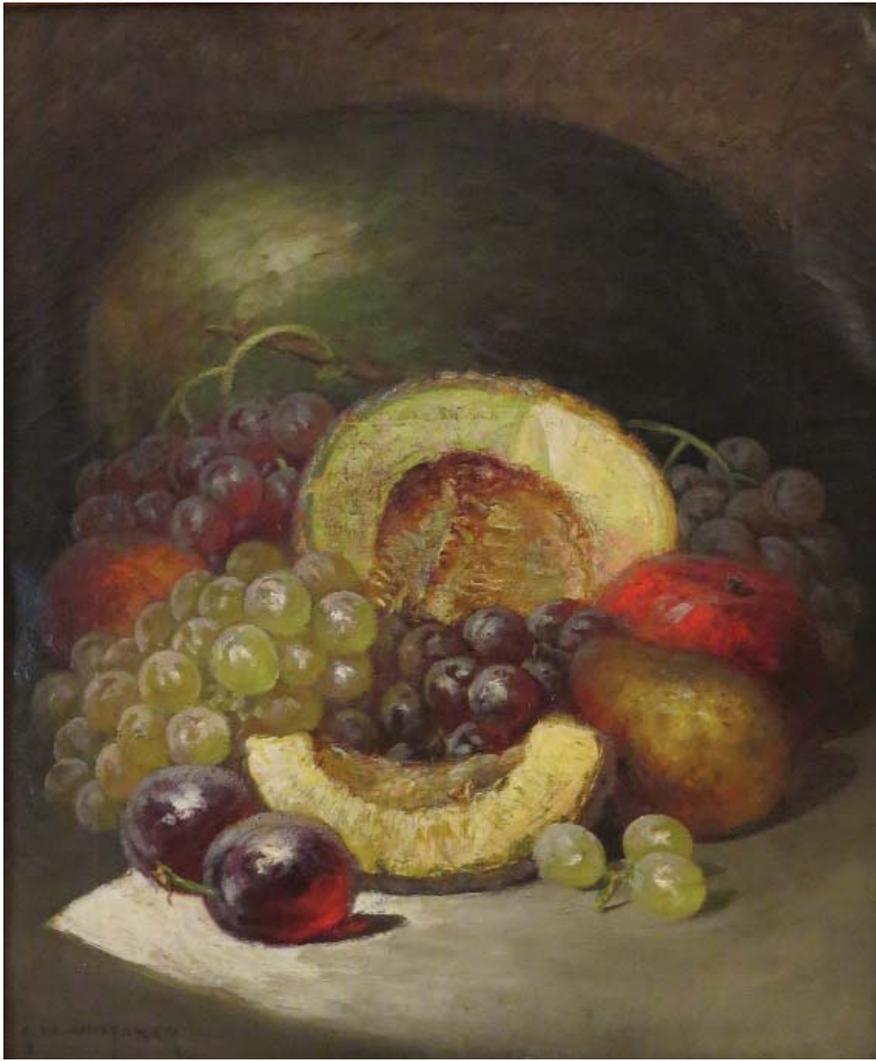


Whitaker translated his love of the Barbizon countryside and the waterfront of Calais to the terrain of southeastern New England, creating rich, tonal landscapes filled with “woodlands and cloudlands.”

A typical Whitaker landscape might be a field or a forest interior, a glimpse of blue sky peeking through dramatic cloud forms. Often figures intrude just so slightly, either walking, working or resting within the bucolic paradise. Whitaker sought to integrate these humans within nature’s perfection, by means of an expressive use of color and light. In one lecture he noted, “We are aware that the painter’s feelings may not be shown at once, they may work little by little in hues and colors so as gradually to animate the whole canvas.” The two diminutive, but highlighted figures in the untitled *Landscape with Clouds* are seemingly in harmony with the brightly hued plants and field that surround them.

Whitaker stressed over and over again that the interior mind, or spiritual vision is more important than the exterior—or natural—observation. He particularly admired his friend, artist Edward M. Bannister, about whom he wrote, “Seldom going outside of himself, he gives us what his mind’s eye beholds.” The same can be said for George Whitaker. Much





LEFT: *Still Life with Melons*, c. 1890, o/c, 17 x 14, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Mechnig.

BELOW LEFT: *Landscape with Clouds*, o/c, 22 x 28, Beth and Stanley Weiss.

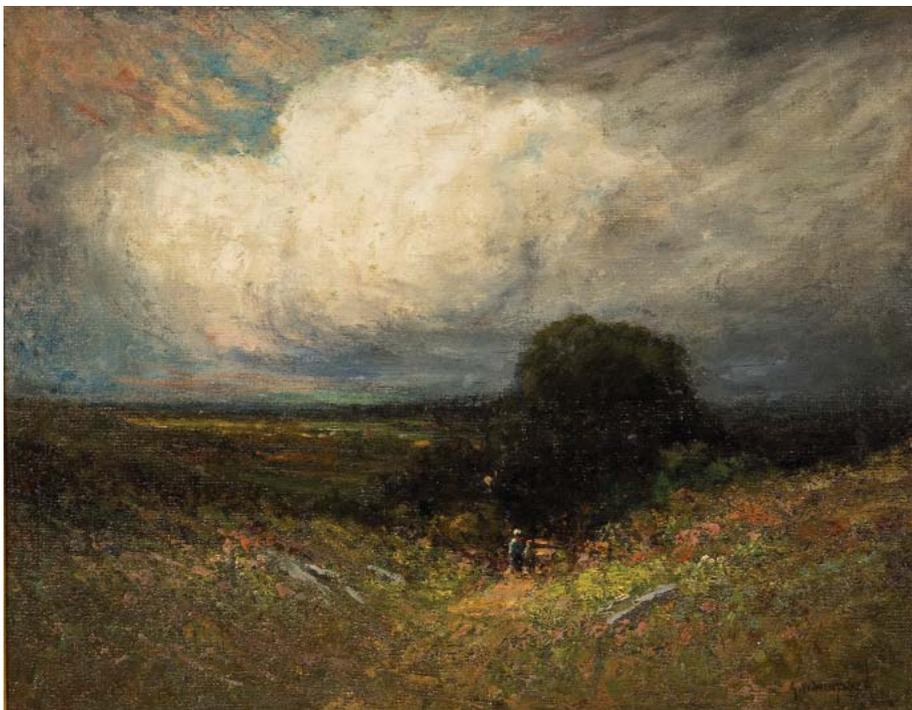
RIGHT: *Cat Swamp*, 1897, o/c, 19 x 32, Charles and Jean Coelho.

BELOW RIGHT: *Adelaide Grove*, 1880s, o/c, 18 1/2 x 14 1/2, private collection.

of Whitaker's artistic life was fueled by his belief in the religious teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, who believed that natural objects were inanimate until imbued with life through spirituality. The foremost artist to embrace Swedenborgian theory was George Inness, and Whitaker surely absorbed these ideas from him. Indeed, in many of his A.E. Club lectures Whitaker referred to himself as "the Metaphysician," a description also allotted to Inness by his biographer. A metaphysician was intrigued by philosophical questions of existence and reality. Whitaker did not paint portraits or figures; he preferred to probe the essence of the trees and forests, the seashores and marshes. His still lifes came alive with voluptuous grapes and succulent melons saturated with color.

Although Whitaker's paintings are often not site specific, he did lovingly record many buildings and landscapes in his state, creating a record of rural Rhode Island. *Adelaide Grove* depicts what in the 1880s was a popular picnic area in the now developed area of Elmwood Avenue. Today's India Point in Providence is pictured as it was in 1895 in *Providence Waterfront*. Like the Barbizon artists, Whitaker painted endless rural landscapes, but he also painted the sea—and its sailing vessels. Whitaker often sailed around Narragansett Bay with his close friend, Bannister. In one spectacular view Whitaker portrays Fall River across Mount Hope Bay, accurately depicting the buildings and boats. By 1911, *As Summer Sunset* indicates, Whitaker was embracing a brighter, more impressionistic idiom—although he never would have admitted it!

Whitaker believed that artists revealed the beauty in nature that is "hidden from those who will persistently not look for [it]. The Artist sheds a light on these generally unperceived things. His works can be compared to a candle taken into a dark room where the light reveals to us its contents—though the contents in nature were always there. The objects in nature re-





spend to his magic touch.” Those artists who had succeeded in this quest: Millet, Corot and other French Barbizon painters, as well as Americans Inness and Alexander Wyant, were among those about whom Whitaker spoke in his lectures. He believed strongly in educating the public about the great artists, and that art could have a positive effect on people of all classes. Interestingly, he brought two of his colleagues to visit Gilbert Stuart’s Birthplace and, in another lecture, regaled his listeners with his tale of becoming lost in the wilds of southern Rhode Island. Whitaker had space in the legendary Fleur de Lys Studio at the Providence Art Club, where he mingled with his artist friends Bannister, Charles Walter Stetson, Frederick Batchellor, and Hugo Breul, and often promoted their work in his lectures.

George Whitaker seemed content to pursue his career in Rhode Island—with field trips to Boston, Washington, D.C., New York and the Maritime Provinces, among other locales. He was a “beacon of light” to younger artists, freely offering advice and criticism. His well-earned reputation as a collegial artist likely had its roots in his early experiments in communal living in New Jersey. After his death at home in March 1916, Whitaker was lauded for his great successes. His memorial service was held at the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem—where he had served as secretary—with a memorial exhibition following at the Providence Art Club.

