



*Gilbert Mungerson.*

Memoir

**Gilbert Munger**

Landscape Artist

1836 — 1903

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<https://gilbertmunger.org/>

# Distinctions Conferred upon Gilbert Munger

By Governments and Sovereigns of Europe

MEDALS, 1876, 1878, 1880; CROSS OF THE LEGION OF HONOR.

MEMBER OF THE SOCIÉTÉ LITTÉRAIRE INTERNATIONALE, FOUNDED BY VICTOR HUGO.

CHEVALIER OF THE LEGION OF HONOR, FRANCE.

KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF SAXE-ERNESTINE; GRAND CROSS FOR ART AND SCIENCE, GERMANY.

RED CROSS WITH THE RIBBON OF THE ORDER OF ST. ANDREW, RUSSIA.

KING LEOPOLD GOLD MEDAL WITH CROWN, BELGIUM.

DECORATION FROM THE DUKE D'AOSTA; GOLD MEDAL AND HONORARY MEMBER OF THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, ITALY.

OFFICER AND COMMANDER OF THE NATIONAL ORDER OF THE LIBERATOR, VENEZUELA.

## GILBERT MUNGER

THE reigning Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha conferred upon Gilbert Munger the Knighthood of his House Order, with title of Baron, he being the only foreigner who has received this decoration. A much-coveted distinction conferred upon him was the German Cross for Art and Science. These honors, like many others, were entirely unsought.

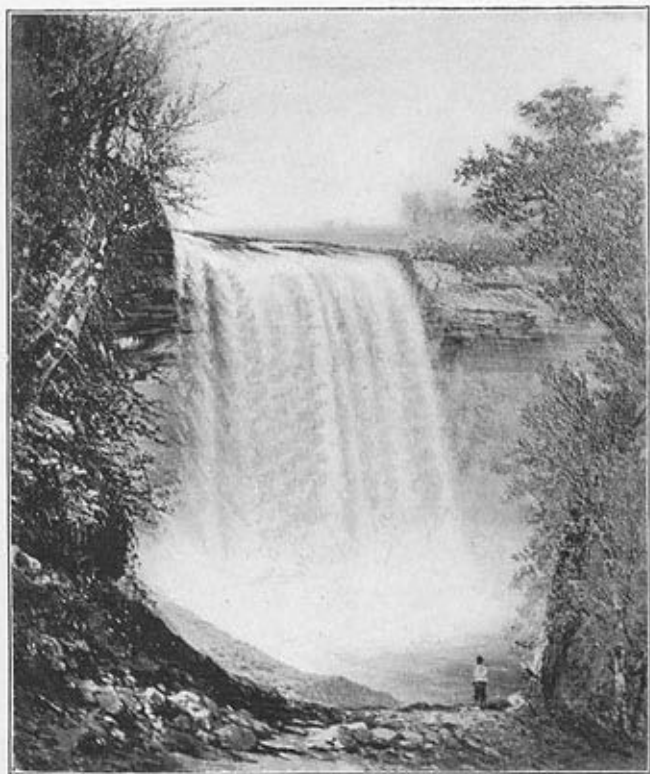
Gilbert Munger's birthplace was the village of North Madison, New Haven County, Connecticut. When a child he firmly believed he should become an artist, and told his parents so, but they thought he was acting on a childish freak and discouraged the notion. At that period he had never seen a picture of any merit; except in New York, there were no art schools or academies, and he had never been in New York. Fortunately for all lovers of art, he had as tutor Professor Lovell, an English gentleman of culture, an enthusiast in art, and when his pupil was only eleven years old he happened to see some of his productions. He saw in

them such promise of future distinction that he earnestly advised the parents to allow their son to follow his own inclination and become an artist. Unfortunately, at that time the prosaic and practical inhabitants of New England did not consider the profession "quite respectable." However much we may be amused now at such an opinion, we must not forget that within the nineteenth century an artist even in England was not considered "quite respectable" unless his success and consequent wealth happened to be unusually great. At last his tutor conquered, and at the age of thirteen he became the pupil of a natural-history and landscape engraver at Washington. His school-days soon came to an end, and at the early age of fourteen he was a full-fledged engraver of rare discoveries in natural-history, receiving a salary from the United States government. During the following five years he was employed principally in engraving large plates of plants, birds, fish, fossils, reptiles, portraits, and landscapes, published by the government in connection with the exploring expedition of Commodore Wilkes, and for Professor Agassiz's works and the works for the Smithsonian Institution.

Although his time was thus busily occupied, Munger never renounced his intention of becoming a landscape painter, and only adopted engraving as a means to that end. He borrowed from a friend

Ruskin's works, and read them, and purchased a copy of J. D. Harding's drawing-book. Rising in the summer months at four o'clock, he hastened, sketch-book in hand, to the woods, and drew careful studies of trees until eight o'clock; then back to his home, and from nine till five earned his daily bread at his engraving-desk. After that, three more hours in the woods with his pencil and paper. Could any other profession have been successful to such an enthusiast? The most ardent worshipper of the arts could not have been more devoted to the shrine of his goddess. Except the little technical knowledge he may have gleaned from seeing amateur artists at work from time to time, nature was his only instructor, and he never attempted to study under any other tutor. In this he but followed the example of some of our greatest artists, although in his boyhood he was probably unconscious of the fact.

In the year 1860 the war-clouds had lowered over the United States, the arts and sciences, the luxuries of a nation, had to be abandoned, the national life was endangered. Munger was offered and accepted a position as engineer in the Federal army. The new calling was not congenial, the imaginative artist temperament being "cribbed, cabined, and confined" when all his duties were comprised in the more mechanical labors of the military engineer. However, he studied hard to fit himself



Minnehaha

for the new calling which fortune had conferred upon him, and with such success that he became a constructing engineer, with the rank of major. During the four years' war he was engaged upon the field fortifications around Washington, and so, while actively employed for the defence of his country, happily escaped the horrors of the battlefield. When peace was concluded and the vast army disposed of, Munger also laid down his arms and resigned his commission, though much against the advice of his friends. He was now at last to follow in earnest the career his boyish fancy had chosen.

Taking a studio in New York, he painted two pictures during the winter, both of which were exhibited in the National Academy of Design, favorably noticed by the press, and sold. A large work, "Minnehaha," the laughing waters of Longfellow's "Hiawatha," was next painted and exhibited in many cities – a specially paid ticket exhibition. This picture attracted great attention, and brought him a commission which resulted in his painting the "Niagara Falls" for the Prussian government, for which he was paid the sum of \$5000.

The New York *Herald* at that date, over thirty years ago, says:

"If there is an honest art critic in New York, that man is Mr. Perry of the 'Home Journal.' We are glad to see that he has written a most eulogistic notice of Munger's 'Niagara.' Mr. Munger may well be proud of such appreciation."



## The St. Paul *Press* says of "Minnehaha":

"We have heretofore omitted to notice that Mr. Gilbert Munger, an artist from New York City, was engaged upon a large-sized painting of 'Minnehaha.' It is now completed and on exhibition, and is, in our opinion, the first painting ever finished which does entire justice to our little gem of a water fall. Its truthfulness to nature is perfect, and the evident labor which has been lavished upon the most minute particulars proves that it was a work of interest to the artist. The painting is 36 by 50 inches in size, and takes in a view of the falls and a portion of the rapids immediately above, and also the birch trees upon either side of the stream. As a work of art, it is a rare production.

"Mr. Munger is a young artist of very decided ability and promise, and we are glad that a painting of 'Minnehaha' has at last been produced by a gentleman so well qualified to do it justice."

This painting of "Minnehaha" was purchased by Ralston, the noted San Francisco banker, for \$5000.

At this date Munger went West and spent three years in the wildest scenery of the Rocky Mountains, California, and British America. In the vast mountainous region which divides the continent he found some of the grandest scenery the mind of man could conceive; on every side was a new subject for his brush: the fitful changing shadows on the peak before him, with its hues of gold, ruby, indigo, or gray; the mountain stream, as it rushed through the valley, swollen with the melting snow;

the vast chain of mountains, rising peak after peak and foothill after foothill, stretching from the tropics to the North Pole. Well supplied with food, with health, youth, and strength, and, above all, with a reverence for and delight in the beauty of nature, the artist was in an earthly paradise. In all seasons the mountains are beautiful: in winter, when clad from base to summit with the virgin snow, with jutting rocks showing gray and dark, with park-like valleys dotted with deep-hued piñon trees, and narrow cañons impassible for the foot of man; in spring or summer, when the dry, rarefied mountain air softens the burning heat of sun, when a hundred miles of country are open to view, and nothing can be seen but lofty peaks, with a rosy gleam upon the unmelted snow, when sleep under a blanket in a sheltered nook is more delicious than all the refinements of civilization; but above all, in late autumn, when the quivering haze of the Indian summer softens the hard outlines of rugged hills, and throws a glamour upon everything.

Turning his back on the mountains and the plain, Munger travelled westward to the famous Yosemite Valley, the scene of wonders equally gigantic. Four thousand feet high the solitary rock, El Capitan, rears its head, and this is but one of the enormous works which nature has lavished on the strange land. St. Paul's Cathedral in



Border Forest of Fontainebleau

London is about 365 feet from foundation to cross, and if we can imagine another St. Paul's placed above it, and then another and another until eleven cathedrals are reared in one huge whole, we can obtain an imperfect idea of the height of that great rock. One season was passed amid the extinct volcanoes of Oregon, California, and Washington Territory. He chose them as the subjects for a series of paintings, and he also received a commission from the United States government to paint a series of pictures illustrating scenery of that wild description. The attractions of the Yosemite were sufficiently powerful to draw him to the spot during two seasons. Here he met Lord Skelmersdale, with other English gentlemen, who gave him commissions for works illustrating the scenery of the neighborhood, for which he was paid \$10,000. They earnestly advised him to set out at once for England with his collection of studies. After due deliberation, he decided to accept their counsel, and returned to New York to arrange his affairs before proceeding to England.

The San Francisco *Bulletin*, published in 1868, says:

“Gilbert Munger exhibits, as the results of two months' conscientious open-air work, a noble view of Mount Tamalpais, taken from a point about one mile back of San Rafael. This most beautiful peak about the bay has been a favorite with the pencil of Keith and the pen of Stoddard, and now Mr.

Munger reproduces it for us with a fidelity and strength truly admirable. . . . In saying that Mr. Munger's picture shows us all this, we have paid the highest compliment to his skill and honesty as an artist."

The *St. Paul Press*, published at above date, says:

"After to-day art-loving citizens of St. Paul will have the privilege of seeing a very fine picture which Mr. Gilbert Munger has finished, since his return to this city, of one of the most striking views in the Yosemite Valley of California. . . . None but a born artist could reproduce this splendid effect. The geological formations of the monstrous old walls of the valley have been the subject of close study and accurate representation, and all the accessories will be found to be almost as vividly and minutely true to nature as the productions of the once famous pre-Raphaelite school of painters, whose chief aim was to reproduce on canvas every leaf and sprig and blade of grass of a landscape. The picture is not offered for a purchaser, since its destination is already fixed; it is to be exhibited solely for the benefit of art lovers. To understand and appreciate it is of itself a liberal education in art.

"Arriving in London in 1876, Mr. Munger received commissions for paintings of American scenery. Fresh from the unpopulated mountain ranges and valleys of the Far West, he soon made his escape from the stifling wilderness of houses, and in the autumn of the same year spent some weeks at Dunkeld in company with Sir John Millais. The second season was passed at Skye, Stornoway, Loch Maree, and Dunkeld. In 1879 he sent no less than eight pictures to the various exhibitions – to the Royal Academy, "Loch Coruisk," "Loch Maree," and "Great Salt Lake, Utah"; to Manchester, "A Glimpse of the Pacific" and "Loch Coruisk"; to Newcastle-on-Tyne, "Woodland Streams" and "Herring Fleet"; and



On the Seine near Poissy

to Liverpool, "Great Salt Lake." Seven of these pictures were sold. To this year's exhibition of the Royal Academy he has sent his large picture of "King Arthur's Castle, Cornwall," a fine work, which is fortunately on the line and well placed. His work would have been better known had he commenced to exhibit on his arrival, but until last year he preferred to send the picture direct to the owner. He intends to adhere to the rule of painting direct from nature, and exhibiting the original pictures so painted, the result being necessarily safer. Mr. Munger's visit to England is not that of a bird of passage: he has made this country his home, and is willing to trust his fortune to his own ability and the unprejudiced opinion of Englishmen. Although when travelling in foreign countries our insular ideas are somewhat too stubbornly maintained, yet Englishmen are always willing to give a hearty welcome to the traveller who visits their shores, and none are welcomed with more unselfishness than those who come to vie with the natives themselves. Mr. Munger's bark has now been fairly launched on British waters, and he need not fear that any storm of envy or calumny will be raised to drive it out of its course."

*Colburn's Art Magazine*, June, 1880.

A frequent exhibitor in the Royal Academy, his paintings found ready buyers. Through one art dealer alone in London over two hundred were sold to the nobility in Europe. Extremely modest and somewhat eccentric, he would never encourage the purchase of his paintings; but Europe's best collectors bought them as among the finest examples of landscape in modern art, and though practically unknown to the American art lover, so called, there they are to be found in the most

noted private and public galleries. The Royal Academy of London, the museums at Coberg, Berlin, Munich, Schwerin, Weimar, Meiningen, and in the Luxembourg Art Gallery of Paris, as carefully selected property of the public, they hold their own side by side with the masterpieces of all ages.

In the following paragraphs may be read the opinions of some of the most noted art critics of Europe.

The president of the Luxembourg Gallery once remarked of Munger's pictures: "They do not resemble any other artist's of the present day," a striking compliment to his individuality.

Referring to the Winter Exhibition at the Hanover Gallery:

"There are several fine examples of the art of Gilbert Munger, while Jules Dupre contributes one canvas, a landscape of uncommon merit. The gems of the collection are, perhaps, the landscape and figure piece of Corot, but we confess that the view near Franchard, by Munger, with its lovely distance and quiet, harmonious tones, runs it somewhat hard.

*The London Telegraph*, October 23, 1890.

"Of the Hanover Gallery I have little to say. Gems of the French and Belgian schools are selected for this exhibition with unerring taste. What pleases me most here is always the work of Gilbert Munger, an American artist, who lives at Barbizon, and who for years has saturated himself with the beauty of that nature that inspired Corot and his friends. He





Forest of Fontainebleau

sees for himself, and his own mark is upon all that he does; and he alone of modern painters can lay claim to have dressed himself in some portion of the Elijah mantles of the great ones who have ceased to be able to materialize for us their ideas of nature.” – *The London Echo*, 1886.

### Referring to the Royal Art Exhibition:

“We shall not quarrel with those who prefer the delicate ‘Greville,’ by Millet, or the peaceful evening scene, ‘Near Barbizon,’ by Gilbert Munger.” – *The London Times*, 1886.

“Rub out the signature of Gilbert Munger, and American painter, still young, we believe, from any one of his landscapes, and it would pass for a work of that same school which glorifies the forest scenery of Fontainebleau. Corot, in his deeper and firmer mood, is reproduced, with no slavish effort of dull mechanical imitation, but with the appreciative reverence of an original hand, by the same Mr. Munger.”

*The London Daily Telegraph*, 1886.

“There is one really notable picture by an American in London – Mr. Munger – which recalls Rousseau absolutely at his best. It represents three oak trees crowded together in a wildish land, the shadows not obscure and the lights still sober.”

*Standard*, June 10, 1886.

“. . . Beneath this vivid piece of coloring hangs a woodland picture by an American artist – G. Munger – that is one of the finest in the collection. It is suggestive of Constable and of Patrick Nasmyth, but like neither, and certainly deserves the highest praise.” – *Morning Post*, October 4, 1886.

“In the upper gallery is, to our mind, the gem of the collection, a view ‘Near Barbizon,’ by G. Munger. The gifted

artist, one of the many Americans who find artistic training and domicile in Paris, has given a bit of the grand old forest of Fontainebleau.” -- *Brighton Guardian*, October 13, 1886.

“L’artiste Américain Munger ne figure malheureusement qu’avec une seule œuvre ; mais cette œuvre est fort belle.”

*Journal des Arts*, October 15, 1886.

“The two landscapes which Mr. Gilbert Munger, the well-known American artist, had destined for the Universal Exhibition were acquired by H. R. H. the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen for the museum at Meiningen, last April. A few days ago, Mr. Munger received from the Duke the Cross of Merit for Art and Science.” – *Galignani’s Messenger*, Paris, 1887.

“Where judgment is exercised in the purchase, an investment in pictures by young artists is about as profitable a one as can be made. With this view, let me recommend a visit to the Hanover Gallery, there to choose from Gilbert Munger’s landscapes. The atmosphere and breadth of treatment in his canvases are wonderful.” – *Fame and Fortune*, March 3, 1887.

“Gilbert Munger, le peintre Américain, qui suit de si près les traditions de nos grands maîtres français est bien représenté.”

*Journal des Arts*, October 20, 1887.

“. . . and a beautiful Gilbert Munger, the French-American, whom Hollander and Cremetti introduced to England last year, and whose fame will yet be great.”

*Land and Water*, October 29, 1887.

“Near Arbonne,” by a clever American artist, G. Munger, is about as fine a landscape as anything of its kind since Constable.” – *Whitehall Review*, November 3, 1887.



Venice

Mr. Dwight Williams, American artist and traveller, writing from Genoa, Italy, August 18, 1896, says:

“My time has been put in sketching and studying the old masters. I have not seen such good landscape as Gilbert Munger’s over here, except in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. This is saying a good deal, but I believe it is true.”

To Gilbert Munger’s years of diligent work in Italy may be attributed several of the most charming pictures of Venice in this country, and to every art lover they evidence the hand of the master. Urged by Ruskin, many years ago, he went to Venice and painted fifty pictures, which were exhibited in London, producing a sensation.

Soon after his arrival in England, some thirty years ago, Munger was introduced to Sir John Millais, the distinguished artist, with whom he spent several pleasant seasons sketching, in the Highlands of Scotland. They became very warm friends, which continued until his death. While in England many of his summers were passed in sketching from his house-boat on the Thames. He was never so happy as when at work with palette and brush, and he invariably finished his pictures at the point of observation, often delayed weeks in the completion of a task until the weather would unfold to view a landscape in perfect accord with his own peaceful sentiments. In all his pic-

tures there is a feeling of peace and tranquillity which carries one "far from the madding crowd." His coloring, while usually subdued in tone, is full of truth and harmony and poetic treatment. A fine colorist, he also possessed a scientific knowledge of the chemistry of colors, obtained by half a century of laborious investigation.

In an interview in Paris, 1892, he was asked why our artists live abroad, and said in reply:

"If you insist upon a categorical answer to the question, Why do American painters live abroad? I must say that I cannot give it; but one of the reasons for my own stay, now prolonged since 1873 – and the reason with which I am fond of appeasing my own patriotism whenever it urges my return to the blue skies of my native country – is the increase of knowledge and the sure means of growth in art everywhere at hand in these old lands.

"Furthermore, it is in Europe rather than in America that the indefinable and singular charm in painting which men call style is most readily attained. Perhaps the ample survey of the whole field of art offered in Europe better enables a man to 'strike his personal note,' as the French say – to find out his failings and avoid them, I should say. The gratifying measure of success which has greeted my humble efforts in these latter years is due, I am sure, to having found a way to my own style through a number of experiments and a series of careful observations which I should not have been able to make if settled at home. There is a crystallization of style in painting, as in literature. It is, of course, a slow process, and, in my own case, is the fruit of long seasons of painting in the foothills of my own Rocky Mountains, in the shadow of El Capitan in

the Yosemite, and of St. Paul's Cathedral in London; of work in the open in Scotland with sir John Millais; of solitary toil in the lagoons of Venice, and, finally, of the long and thoughtful season of severe effort in Fontainebleau Forest in the track of the masters. It is in following successively such widely differing phases of nature and art that I have at last come to a final phase of my own painting, about the recent general recognition of which the *Journal* kindly asks, Could I have reached this stage at home? Frankly, no; but mainly for the reason that art is as yet comparatively undeveloped in America, and not because of any special limitations in the country itself."

Gilbert Munger spent so many years in the Forest of Fontainebleau that he said he felt quite at home there. The Barbizon, Asnières, Saint-Germain, and the country round about were better known to him than to most of the natives, and he painted many interesting scenes from his house-boat on the Seine and Oise (the Goose River), which Daubigny did much to immortalize.

He was familiar with every part of France; this, together with his perfect knowledge of the language, often caused him to be mistaken for a Frenchman. Of English descent and American by birth, yet his thorough understanding of the English, French, German, and Italian languages often caused him embarrassment. He was frequently asked at what university he had taken his degree, and always replied that he had been taught by a private instructor, meaning himself. A man of enormous

energy, sixteen to eighteen hours of each day he devoted to his labors.

Like Troyon and Corot, Munger remained single through life. His paintings were his family; he often said they were the best friends he had known and disliked to part with them.

Gilbert Munger's exquisite landscapes bask in the mellow sunshine, and teach us how thoroughly his brush was saturated with the best traditions of Barbizon.

After a long absence in Europe, Gilbert Munger returned to his native land, to find that many of his old friends had passed away and that he was a stranger almost in the land of his birth. More assiduously than ever he applied himself to his work; taking a studio in New York for a few years, he led the life to him most congenial, a recluse among his pictures, having accumulated, in addition to many of his own, quite a large number of the old masters.

His health failing him in 1901, he was advised to try the somewhat milder climate of Washington, but the change made little difference in his general health, and he passed quietly away, January 27, 1903, in his studio in that city, where he had painted his first picture nearly half a century ago. Conscious and happy to the end, he breathed his last almost at the moment when he had put the finishing touches to his great canvas, "Niagara





Near Saint-Germain

Falls," showing both the American and Canadian views. In the writer's opinion, no similar work by any other artist has ever equalled this picture.

His death will prove a great loss to all art lovers. His life was an example to be followed, and worthy of comparison with the best. Pure in mind and act, he sought and knew only the good and beautiful in all things.

It can be as truthfully said of Gilbert Munger, as of Millet, Corot, and Daubigny, that he created not only a distinct style of treatment, but a distinct style of subject, and revealed to the world the artistic possibilities of the very simplest phases of nature when translated with a sympathetic appreciation of their modest beauties and the subtle poetry which invests them.

January 1, 1904.

The foregoing Memoir has been compiled by a friend of Gilbert Munger, assisted by his relatives, and from reliable art critics both in America and in Europe, and will undoubtedly be of interest to his many friends and all art lovers.

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