

Gilbert Munger, Artist - 1836-1903

By Myra Dowd Monroe

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My interest in Gilbert Munger is a natural one; he was my uncle. But he was much more than that. He was an internationally acclaimed artist.

He was born in the Munger Homestead on Opening Hill Road, his first American forebear being Nicholas Munger who was born in England in 1623, arrived in New Haven 1639, and died in 1688.

Four sons and a daughter were born and reared in the Homestead. Then the family moved to New Haven where the children completed their schooling. Gilbert Munger's tutor, Mr. Lovell, impressed with the lad's talent for drawing, urged his parents to give him special training. At the age of 13 he became the pupil of a natural history and landscape engraver at Washington, D. C. at 14 years of age he was a full-fledged engraver drawing a salary from the U. S. Government.

Thus early for him came the separation from his family. Replying to his mother's anxious inquiry as to how he spent his spare time he wrote: "Don't worry about me, Mother, I am always in the best of company and that is Gilbert Munger's."

For several years he was steadily employed making large plates of birds, plants, fish, reptiles, portraits and landscapes published by the Government in connection with the exploring expedition of Commodore Wilkes, and for Professor Louis Agassiz' works and the works of the Smithsonian Institute. This work, to him was only a means to an end. He was determined to be a landscape painter. He read Ruskin's work and purchased a copy of J. D. Harding's drawing book, and rising at four o'clock in the summer months he went into the woods and made studies of trees till eight o'clock, then back to his engravers desk from nine till five. After that three more hours in the woods with pencil and paper.

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(Madison's Heritage: Historical Sketches of Madison, CT, Madison Historical Society, 1964)

For more information go to the Munger Web site at
<https://gilbertmunger.org/>

During this period he visited the atelier of a sculptor from Rome and for the first time saw a sculptor at work on a statue. Taking home some clay he tried modeling portions of the human fingers. These studies were received at the exhibition of the Metropolitan Institute of Science and Art and awarded first medal. This success did not curb his desire to paint. He got a box of colors and some brushes and for the first time tried to copy the hues as well as the forms of the Colombian Woods.

Then came the Civil War. Appropriations for Arts and Sciences had to be withdrawn and Mr. Munger was out of employment. He was offered and accepted a position as engineer in the Federal Army. The new work was not congenial. However, he studied hard to fit himself for his new calling with such success that he became constructing engineer with the rank of Major. During the four-years' war he was engaged upon the field fortifications around Washington.

The late Mr. Dwight Williams of Casenovia, N. Y., artist, art critic and close friend of Gilbert Munger, wrote me in connection with this period: "He (Gilbert) served the Government well and faithfully and was called Major in those days and had men under him both as construction chief and in the department of lithography, which department he fathered and saved the Government much money. He simplified the department of map-making during the war. He has frequently told me about it. (Note: These maps were used by the Generals in Sherman's campaign. After the war the Government offered Munger a permanent position in this field with a large salary, but he chose art.) Really he knew a lot of unwritten war history which I have often tried to have him write out; but he never had time, he would rather paint.

General Early of the Confederacy rode through his headquarters and they stole horses and mules and many other things. This was out in the Maryland countryside, very near Silver Spring, where Frank Blair of Lincoln's Cabinet lived. It was his niece, whom Gilbert is supposed to have been in love with and who may possibly be Madeliane Marston in his play which

was given in London in 1886. I have often heard him relate the experience there and also speak of this lovely young woman who played the piano so well. The play opens, as you know, with a beautiful girl playing the piano, and a young artist enters and begins to assist her in turning over the leaves of the music.

"I wish I could talk with you and I would tell you a lot of interesting things concerning our pleasant relation. We have so often painted together in the field. He was lovely good fun at times. We have often sat up all night painting and talking art matters.

After the war Gilbert Munger took a studio in New York. During the winter he painted two pictures which were exhibited in the National Academy of Design that were favorably noticed by the press and sold.

Later he went to St. Paul Minnesota and established a studio in Munger Brothers Music Store building. At that time subjects he chose were interesting Minnesota scenes. notably the Red River ox trains which brought furs down from the Canadian Border and were sufficiently picturesque to attract attention.

Then out to the Rockies. Munger was for some years associated with Government Geological Surveys and was allowed to travel with them as artist and guest in connection with the first Geological survey, ever organized by the U. S. Government, under Clarence King. He and King, were warm friends. In Clarence King's book "*Mountaineering in the Sierras*" (P 282) King makes this reference, ". . . but best we liked to sit at evening near Munger's easel watching the great lava cone glow with light almost as wild and lurid as if its crater still streamed."

In regard to Munger's work at this period, Mr. Walter Paris, artist and friend of Gilbert's, wrote me January 5, 1904: "It was then that he (Munger) devoted himself to the close study of Nature's grand effects and scenery.

"I met him for the first time in San Francisco in 1875, where he was then established in his studio as an artist, and the

work he was doing at that time was the most careful and conscientious interpretation from nature, fine in color and strong in artistic values. His work of those days I consider the most interesting period of his life as it was absolutely sincere and not influenced by the art of any other country. It was spontaneous and full of the most careful feeling for truth and for Nature."

This strong work amid the extinct volcanoes of Oregon, Washington, California and the Yosemite brought enthusiastic response and he received a commission from the U. S. Government to paint a series of pictures illustrating the scenery of that wild region. He received also commissions for painting from some English gentlemen whom he met there and who earnestly advised him to go to England with his studies. This he did.

In London he found his work much appreciated but the great city was stifling to him after his long free life in the mountains. He soon made his escape, painting in the Highlands of Scotland with Sir John Millais, on the Cornish coast, and for weeks at a time from his houseboat moored at a picturesque bend on the river Thames.

After the second season he sent eight pictures to various exhibitions - to the Royal Academy, to Manchester, to Newcastle and to Liverpool. Seven of them were sold. His sales of pictures . . . always phenomenal, bringing flattering sums, a few, as high as \$5,000. He exhibited comparatively little, his paintings being sent directly to their owners. and many of his best and most important works are scattered about the world in private galleries.

After ten years spent in England he went to Paris and was soon recognized as the most talented landscape artist in the American Colony. Munger spent so many years in the Forest of Fontainebleau that he said he felt quite at home there. And the country around was better known to him than to most of the natives. He painted many interesting scenes from his houseboat on the Seine and the Bise (Goose) River. He was familiar with every part of France, and this, together with his perfect knowledge of the language, often caused him to be mistaken for a Frenchman.

He traveled extensively throughout Europe and gained a thorough understanding of the English, French, German and Italian languages - "taught" as he said, "by a private instructor, myself."

Urged by Ruskin he went to Venice and painted fifty pictures which were exhibited in London, producing a sensation and establishing his fame in England.

His paintings have been purchased for the Luxembourg, the Royal Academy, and the Museums at Berlin, Munich, Schwerin, Meningen and Coberg. Decorations awarded for merit alone and not by influence were conferred upon him by France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Belgium and other countries. (See Memoir, Madison Historical Society.)

To quote further from Mr. Walter Paris' letter: "I next saw Munger in London about the year 1882. He was then occupying a fine studio close to New Bond Street. He had a great display of pictures on the spacious walls and on easels and he appeared to be full of work and in a most prosperous condition of life. He in those days was one of the best dressed men who walked Bond Street and Piccadilly and at the same time was an extremely, distinguished looking man. I saw considerable of Munger at that time and found great pleasure in his acquaintance as a friend and as an artist.

"His work was somewhat changed at this period as he had been studying the great galleries of Europe and England. Altogether, I should say that his best work was painted from 1880 to 1890. But after this I am not sure, as I saw nothing of his work after I left him in London in 1882, I believe, until I met him again in Washington some seven or eight years ago (1896-7) and by this time I found he was painting greatly under the influence of the great landscape school of France - Corot, Diaz, etc, and this feeling he indulged in more or less in everything from that period till the time of his death. Munger was a most indefatigable worker and his whole mind and soul were given to his love of Art.

"The fascination was so strong that of late years he was

not satisfied to work the whole day but he too frequently toiled the whole evening and frequently the whole night as well. This naturally affected his health as he no longer took meals at regular hours, only when he felt like it."

Munger was a man of unusual character and in everything a born artist. Personally he was full of idiosyncrasies which developed more especially toward the end of his career and drove him in a measure to becoming a recluse from the outside world. This condition of things was brought about, doubtless, by the losses he sustained in investing his lifelong saving in speculative schemes and companies which paid no dividends and so deprived him of the income which he had relied on for his old age. Every man he had dealings with seemed to take a mean advantage of his confidence in his fellowmen.

Munger was a man of refined tastes and high artistic culture, a great student, a man of high ambitions and to those whose privilege it was to know him thoroughly he was always a dear friend and always a gentleman.

Mr. Dwight Williams dwells on the charm of Gilbert Munger's personality. "His sparkle, inspiration and 'go' and enthusiasm fairly thrilled one to do one's best. He impressed one as having much nervous energy and strength. Forceful, of the lean lank type, with much manner. He was such delightful fun at times. He would entertain a bevy of girls in the most refined and charming way. He was a rare story teller possessed of an exquisite 'light touch' in the matter of polite small talk and a much-sought-after dinner party man. He took a lively interest in politics and affairs. He was a mild user of tobacco. He, like Turner, would accept one glass of wine and refuse the second. Mr. Munger liked to know men of affairs and men of action and he was fond of little children.

"I wish I could see you and talk with you", writes Mr. Williams. "Perhaps I would say: that Gilbert Munger was careful in the selection of his subjects He looked upon landscape as the environment of man and tried to paint the qualities of nature which suggest and appeal to the mind. He succeeded in

conveying in his art the emotions he experienced himself before nature. To me his art was a philosophy."

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

"If you insist upon a categorical answer to the question 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 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 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 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 following successively such wide differing phases of Nature and Art that I have at last come to a final phase of my painting about the recent 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."

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 most congenial to him - a recluse among his pictures, having accumulated in addition to his own quite a large number of the Old Masters. He spent an autumn season with his friend Dwight Williams in Casenovia, N. Y., doing some fine work characteristic of the scenery of that locality.

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 7, 1903 in his studio in the city where he had painted his first picture nearly half a century, before. Yet he still lives upon the canvases into which he wrought his personality, his reverence for nature, his keen sense of truth and by which his spirit stands revealed.

In connection with Gilbert Munger's character we have this interesting incident through the late Mrs. William T. Foote (Emma Munger Foote) of Guilford. In her reading one day she came across mention of Gilbert Munger Wright, son of the novelist Harold Bell Wright. Her curiosity was aroused and she wrote to Mr. Wright in Tucson, Arizona. She received from him this letter which she showed me and allowed me to copy, and I am sure she would like to have it read to you.

"My oldest son was named Gilbert Munger Wright because Gilbert Munger, when I was a young man, was my most intimate and dearest friend and because to him and to my association with him more than to any other cause, perhaps, I owe whatever measure of success I have attained in life.

"It was Gilbert Munger who first opened for me, by his intimate comradeship, advice and inspiration, the doors into the World of Art. I was a penniless nobody, a wanderer with no one even to bid me look in the right direction. But Sir Gilbert for some reason or other took me into his inner life and while

the association and this close companionship was not of years standing, it still left such an impression on me that my whole life was shaped from that time.

"There are some things, Madam, that are too big to write about; some things that we cannot put into words. This, my young man friendship with Sir Gilbert Munger, has always been one of those things to me.

"It may interest you to know that I submitted to him my first efforts and many times he would save to me in his studio, while we ate lunch in some little out of the way eating house, or during our evening walks - 'You'll do it some day, lad, you'll do it'.

"He wished me to go abroad with him but for many reasons it seemed best for me to, as we say in the vernacular, go on my own. I left him then, one afternoon, to begin anew my wanderings and have never seen him since.

"Do you wonder, Madam, that I named my first-born, 'Gilbert Munger Wright'?"

In this vicinity of Madison there are a few Munger paintings, more than 20 of them in the collection of the late Hon. Lyman A. Mills of Middlefield, Conn. One entitled "Franchard near Fontainebleau" was given by Mr. Mills to Hartford Athenaeum for its permanent collection. The Yale Art Museum has the one Munger in its collection of eight important canvases of the Barbizon School. The Mungers I have were given me by Roger S. Munger after his brother's death in 1903.