

Gilbert Munger: Quest for Distinction

by Peter F. Spooner

Gilbert Munger, born in North Madison, Connecticut in 1837, was the son of a laborer. His artistic talent would eventually be highly praised by critics at home and abroad and even honored with distinction by European nobility. Largely self-taught as a painter, Munger appears to be the ultimate self-made man of his time. He learned to fashion and manage a highly successful career as a producer of Hudson River Valley school-inspired landscapes of the west in post-Civil War America, and later, of Barbizon School-inspired works in Europe.

Self-supporting, unmarried, ambitious and energetic, Munger traveled freely, beginning at age thirteen with a move from his Connecticut birthplace to Washington, D.C., where he apprenticed with and took room and board from William H. Dougal,

an engraver for the U.S. Government. It was from Dougal, a competent landscape painter as well as a graphic artist, that



Munger probably first learned the craft of engraving and painting. It is also clear that throughout his career, the craft of engraving informed the topologically precise painting style he was appreciated for.

During the Civil War Munger was a clerk and later a construction engineer for the Union army. He painted in nearby Virginia with his artist friends John Ross Key and John Mix Stanley, and carefully studied the art of his time, including the writings of John Ruskin, whose ideas about sketching en plein air and fidelity to nature impressed and influenced the young painter.

In 1866 Munger moved to New York, renting a studio in the same building as Frederick Butman, who had already painted in the west, and whose travels may have fueled Munger's own ambitions. His two brothers relocated to Minnesota in 1859, and by 1867 Munger made it that far west himself. His depictions of local scenery at-





Gilbert Munger: Quest for Distinction is on view through December 5, 2004, at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum, 625 Williams Street, New London, Connecticut, 06320, 860-443-2545, www.lymanallyn.org. Accompanying the exhibition, which was organized by the Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth, is a 172-page hardcover book authored by Michael D. Schroeder and J. Gray Sweeney and published by Afton Historical Society Press (Afton, Minnesota). An on-line catalogue raisonné and extensive chronology is available at www.gilbertmunger.org.

All illustrations are by Gilbert Munger.

ABOVE: *Golden Gate*, 1871, o/c, 18 x 33 1/2, Wanda M. Fish.

RIGHT: *Near Reuilly*, 1889, o/panel, 12 x 16, Tweed Museum of Art, gift of the Orcutt Family in memory of Robert S. Orcutt.

ABOVE LEFT: Gilbert Munger, c. 1890, photograph frontispiece from *Memoir: Gilbert Munger: Landscape Artist*, De Vinne Press, New York, 1904.

LEFT: *Yosemite Valley*, o/c, 28 x 48, Nick and Mary Alexander.

tracted attention. A critic for the *Chicago Art Journal* quoted in the *St. Paul Daily Press* praised Munger's first monumental canvas, one of at least three versions of Minnehaha Falls he painted, for its sensitivity and its fidelity to nature.



Munger's formative experiences and early successes in Washington, New York and St. Paul paved the way for the first big break of his career, which came in 1869 with an invitation to travel to Utah as a guest artist with Clarence King's Fortieth Parallel Survey. Having spent years engraving the plates for other's expeditions, Munger was delighted to finally be a participant. The comradery of botanists, survey-

ors, geologists, photographers and painters working and exploring together created a heady and stimulating atmosphere.

Photographers Andrew Russell and Carleton Watkins accompanied King's surveys as well, occasionally documenting the activities of the survey party. Comparing photographs of Lake Lal and Mt. Agassiz or Lake Marian with Munger's paintings of the same scene, it is clear to see that geo-



logical and topological accuracy were principal concerns of Munger. Despite this service to science, Munger's paintings from the Fortieth Parallel Survey, and his later works in Yosemite and the Pacific Northwest always stood on their own as aesthetic objects, and were almost universally praised

by critics in New York and San Francisco.

Between 1869 and 1877, Munger established a solid reputation in New York, St. Paul and San Francisco as a highly skilled painter of landscapes that were both scientifically accurate and aesthetically pleasing. On the advice of British patrons,

he relocated to London in 1877, where he quickly established himself by producing paintings from his sketches, which readily sold to European clients hungry for images of the American West. Munger quickly gained entrance to the highest ranks of London society, befriending (Sir) John Everett Millais and John Ruskin, exhibiting and marketing his etchings and paintings through The Fine Arts Society and the Hanover Gallery.

Painting in France in the mid-1880s, Munger successfully negotiated a stylistic transformation from the tight representation and distanced views of the Hudson River school, to more the intimate, moody and emotional plein air scenes of the French Barbizon painters. After spending sixteen years as a successful painter and a fashionable society figure moving between London and Paris, Munger returned in 1893 to an America that was radically different from the one he left in 1877. He spent the last decade of his life trying in vain to regain the reputation he had enjoyed abroad in his own homeland.



ABOVE: *Duluth*, 1871, o/c, 25 x 50, City of Duluth, Duluth Public Library.

RIGHT: *Cazenovia Old Mill*, o/c, 44 x 36, Tweed Museum of Art, gift of Miss Melville Silvey.

LEFT: *Niagara Falls Showing the Canadian and American Views*, c. 1903, o/c, 72 x 120, Michael F. McNutt.

ABOVE LEFT: *Venetian Scene*, o/c, 40 1/2 x 56, Tweed Museum of Art, gift of Miss Melville Silvey.

When Munger's brothers, Roger and Russell, moved west to Minnesota from Connecticut in 1859, they unwittingly set into motion a chain of events that, almost 150 years later, culminate in the first modern study of their brother's work. The music store Roger and Russell established on Third Street in St. Paul became a midwest stop and a studio for their brother Gilbert. In 1869, Roger moved north to Duluth, then a fledgling settlement that he was instrumental in developing into an important inland port—and Gilbert traveled and painted there as well.

Another accident of history that led to the Tweed Museum of Art's role as the largest single repository of Munger's work, is the fact that Munger never married. Had he, it is likely that the body of work left in his Washington, D.C. studio at his death would have been sold, dispersed, or taken en masse to another part of the country. As fate would have it, it was up to Roger to





LEFT: *Mountain Lake Scene*, o/c, 17 x 25 1/2, Tweed Museum of Art, gift of the Orcutt Family in memory of Robert S. Orcutt.
 RIGHT: *Bridal Veil Falls, Yosemite*, 1877, o/c, 20 x 28, private collection.
 BELOW RIGHT: *Cazenovia Hay Field*, o/c, 17 x 25 1/2, Tweed Museum of Art, gift of the Orcutt Family in memory of Robert S. Orcutt.

BELOW: *Minnehaha*, 1868, o/c, 108 x 72, Notre Dame de Namur University, Belmont, California.



execute Gilbert's estate, close up his studio, and bring his body to Duluth for burial. Most of the paintings remaining in the studio at that time came to Duluth with Roger, and many of them were eventually donated by his descendants to the Tweed Museum of Art.

Michael Schroeder, a computer scientist who also collects paintings of the American west, contacted the Tweed Museum of Art in 1995 about Munger paintings he owned. He also spoke of a group of Munger works which had been collected by Robert S. Orcutt of Guilford, Connecticut, near where Munger was born. Mr. Orcutt was recently deceased, and the family sought a home for the collection where his work was appreciated. With the Orcutt gift in 1996, the Munger holdings at the Museum increased to twenty-two, and it became increasingly important to reconstruct the artist's forgotten career.

In many cases artists escape lasting attention because their works never extended, physically and in terms of influence, beyond regional borders. But Munger's future obscurity was due in part, to the exact opposite. The very fact that he was mobile and never connected with the art market of a particular place, has contributed significantly to his lack of reputation. While other late-nineteenth century artists forged strong relationships with dealers, Munger stubbornly insisted on managing his own career. In addition, the artist described himself as being very secretive about his personal and professional life. This led to confusion even among his contemporaries, but especially to future generations, about who the real Gilbert Munger was. He cleverly adapted his work to market conditions. Despite the fact that his works were said to compare favorably to, and often surpass, those of Albert Bierstadt, Corot, and Rousseau.

Two significant and massive canvases, both depicting waterfalls, form the early and late "bookends" of the current exhibition, *Quest for Distinction*. Painted in 1868,



Minnehaha Falls shows Mungler emulating the conventions of his Hudson River school mentors, and coming out with a “grand picture.” The painting is tightly though somewhat naively executed, crisp and highly detailed, but a bit stylized in its depiction of water, figures and foliage. It reveals an artist whose drawing was steady but who was still learning how to paint.

Mungler’s last monumental painting, *Niagara Falls Showing the Canadian and American Views*, was finished in his studio just before his death on January 27, 1903. Returning to a typical American subject of which he painted at least four versions, Mungler’s last Niagara is imbued with the somber darkness of Barbizon School painting, together with the crisp details of earlier American painting. One of few paintings in which figures, or for that matter, any evidence of human life appear, the depictions of humans may be an indication that the artist was infusing his late works with allegory. Two figures peer down on the scene from rocks near the top of the falls, distant



observers. Two other figures, all but obscured in the mist of the crashing water, balance precariously on an observation bridge. Finally, a lone figure appears, bare-

ly visible against the rocks at the base of the falls. Perhaps this is the artist himself, with walking stick and knapsack, now and forever engaged on his quest for distinction.