

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

ADVANCE FACT SHEET

- Exhibition: American Light: The Luminist Movement (1850-1875)
- Dates: February 10 through June 15, 1980
- Purpose: A fresh and comprehensive examination of the movement now commonly called luminism, this exhibition focuses on the culminating phase of nineteenth-century Hudson River school painting. In the vocabulary of American art history, luminism reflects American attitudes toward nature and the national identity--manifestations of Jacksonian optimism and expansiveness, combined with the belief in the transcendent spiritual beauty of nature. Recognition of this movement has only existed for the past thirty years, chiefly through definitions by John I. H. Baur in the late 1940s and by E. P. Richardson in 1956. Since the middle 1960s, a younger generation of art historians has produced both provocative and stimulating writing and exhibitions on luminist artists. It was virtually ignored in American art history throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- Scope: Considered the conclusive development of early American landscape painting, luminism is viewed as the central movement in nineteenth-century American art, from the death of Thomas Cole in 1848 to the American centennial in 1876. The Gallery's exhibition will be the first to concentrate on the full scope of luminist painting, drawing, watercolor, and photography.
- Antecedents of luminism will be examined in the works of the founding members of the Hudson River school. They reflect the beginning of the country's first consciousness of the American landscape, out of which gradually emerged plein-air recordings of nature.

(more)

In addition, the exhibition will cover those artists who followed luminism, showing how the serene light of luminism yielded to a new, psychological realism and how luminist structure was transformed into the looser palette of a romantic impressionism.

Content:

Over 250 paintings, 40 drawings and watercolors, and 24 photographs will be lent from public and private American collections. Although there are no recognized leaders or organizers of the movement, luminism is most clearly shown in the work of five key figures--Fitz Hugh Lane, Martin Johnson Heade, Sanford Gifford, John F. Kensett and Frederic Edwin Church. Over a dozen paintings by each of these artists, plus several drawings and watercolors, will be included in the exhibition. Works by contemporary and related artists, such as Albert Bierstadt, A. T. Bricher, William S. Haseltine, Worthington Whittredge, William Bradford, and William Trost Richards will also be on view.

Among the founding members of the Hudson River school will be Thomas Cole, Washington Allston, George Caleb Bingham, William Sidney Mount, Asher Brown Durand, and Robert Salmon.

During and after the 1870s, luminism yielded to a new realism--as seen in the work of Eastman Johnson, Winslow Homer, and Thomas Eakins--and American impressionism--including examples by George Inness, Homer Dodge Martin, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler.

Also on view will be luminist photography, which partly for technical reasons did not come into its own as a medium for luminist landscape until the 1860s and 1870s. Luminist photography has rarely been treated in this context before. On view will be examples by Eastern photographers such as Henry L. Rand, Louise Woodbridge, and S. R. Stoddard, and Western photographers Carleton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan, among others.

Installation:

The exhibition will be the last to go into the West Building special exhibition galleries (ground floor). Generally, it will be installed chronologically, although some thematic sections, focusing on views

by several artists who painted at the same time along the Newport-Narragansett shore, around the coast of Mount Desert, Maine, and at Lake George, will also be included. Also brought together will be similar views by several luminist painters of sunlit crystalline atmosphere as examples of the belief in the spiritual beauty of nature and the feeling of optimism and expansiveness. Threatening and explosive storm scenes and twilight vistas of the 1860s speak of the turbulent Civil War years and the poignant sense of loss in the years that followed. Additionally, by the late 1850s, the luminist artists turned increasingly to glowing evening sunsets and fiery panoramas of wilderness twilights as new, hotter hues of pigment appeared on the market. These thematic sections will offer insights into American attitudes toward nature and the national identity during this important period of development.

Organization: The exhibition has been organized by John Wilmerding, the Gallery's Curator of American Art and Senior Curator.

Publication: A book on luminism is being published by the Gallery in conjunction with the exhibition. To include 32 color plates and 350 black-and-white illustrations, it contains essays by Mr. Wilmerding (The Luminist Movement: Some Reflections), Earl A. Powell, III (Luminism and the American Sublime), David Huntington (Church and Luminism: Light for America's Elect), Linda Ferber (Luminist Drawings), Lisa Andrus (Design and Measurement in Luminist Art), Weston Naef ("New Eyes"--Luminism and Photography), Albert J. Gelpi (White Light in the Wilderness: Landscape and Self in Nature's Nation), Barbara Novak (On Defining Luminism) and Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. (Luminism in Context: A New View). The publication will summarize current theories on luminism as well as bring out new material on the subject.

Education:

Mr. Wilmerding will deliver a lecture on the exhibition on Sunday, February 10 at 4 p.m. in the East Building Auditorium. Other lectures are being planned. In addition, gallery tours of the exhibition will also be given by members of the Gallery's Education Department.

END

October 9, 1979

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs, contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer) or Pamela J. Driscoll, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. 20565, area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 511.