

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN LUMINIST EXHIBITION

OPENS AT NATIONAL GALLERY FEBRUARY 10

WASHINGTON, D. C. January 29, 1980. American Light: The Luminist Movement (1850-1875), an exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Art, is a fresh and comprehensive examination of the 19th-century school of American landscape painting called luminism.

The exhibition, on view from February 10 through June 15, is the first to concentrate on the full scope of luminist painting, drawing, watercolor and photography, although many of the major American artists in the exhibition have previously been treated in separate monographic exhibitions and books. On view will be over 160 paintings, 49 drawings and watercolors, and 47 photographs.

The exhibition has been organized by John Wilmerding, the Gallery's curator of American art and senior curator.

Luminism was virtually ignored in American art history throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Recognition has only existed in the nomenclature for the past 30 years. And though one of the most inconclusively studied areas of American art, the works are of a quality and interest as high as any in the national school.

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There are no recognized leaders of the movement, but the style is seen most clearly in the work of five principal artists: Fitz Hugh Lane (1804-1865), John F. Kensett (1816-1872), Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904), Sanford Gifford (1823-1880), and Frederic E. Church (1826-1900). Among the paintings on view will be The Icebergs by Church, sold at auction last October and given anonymously to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

The early canvases of the luminist painters are still and peaceful creations--for example, harbor scenes in broad daylight by Lane and Kensett--that coincide with and illuminate the culminating years of Jacksonian optimism and expansiveness, combined with the belief in the transcendent spiritual beauty of nature.

By the end of the 1850s to the mid-1860s, Lane and Kensett, among others, turned to conditions of haze, fog and mist and Church began his series of twilight paintings, that parallel the national crisis of the Civil War.

Luminist subjects of violence and explosion emerged out of the Civil War years--for instance, the great evening pictures of Heade and Gifford as well as most of the major thunderstorm scenes. During this last phase of luminism, from the mid-1860s and into the 1870s, a more romantic or painterly style emerges and also shows a conflict in the luminist vision, torn between drama and calm, a lack of clarity of ideals and melancholy meditations of loss. Several luminist painters, notably Church and Gifford,

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traveled beyond the New England coast to the arctic, South America, California and Alaska, the Mediterranean and the Near East in search of more exotic subject matter.

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 photographs, it contains 9 essays, by Mr. Wilmerding and other leading Americanists on various aspects of luminism. In addition, Harper & Row will publish a hard-cover edition of the book.

The exhibition is installed in the ground floor exhibition galleries in the West Building. Generally, it will be installed chronologically, although some thematic sections are included, offering insights into American attitudes toward nature and the national identity during this country's important period of development.

In addition to the five key luminists, contemporaries and artists related to the movement, such as Albert Bierstadt, Jasper Cropsey, Worthington Whittredge and William Bradford, are represented.

Rarely treated before will be luminist drawings, watercolors and photographs, all important subordinate aspects of luminism. Luminist structure and light emerge as key stylistic elements as shown in the spare outlines, spacious formats and light-filled expanses. Several selected sequences of sketches or versions of a particular subject--such as Heade's Newburyport marshes, Lane's

Brace's Rock, and photographer Carleton Watkins' Yosemite Valley--illuminate this aesthetic process.

The exhibition also examines the antecedents of luminism. These are shown in the works of the founding members of the Hudson River School, reflecting the beginning of this country's first consciousness of the American landscape. It was out of the Hudson River School that plein-air recordings of nature emerged. Among the artists in this group are Thomas Cole, Washington Allston, George Caleb Bingham, William Sidney Mount, Asher Brown Durand and Robert Salmon.

In addition, the exhibition will cover those artists who followed luminism. The serene light of luminism yielded to a new, psychological realism, as seen in the paintings of Eastman Johnson, Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins. Luminist structure also was transformed into the looser palette of impressionism and works on view by George Inness, Homer Dodge Martin and James Abbott McNeill Whistler reflect this development.

Partly for technical reasons, luminist photography did not come into its own as a medium for luminist landscape until the 1860s and 1870s. On view are examples by such Eastern photographers as Henry L. Rand, Louise Woodbridge and S. R. Stoddard, and Western photographers such as Timothy O'Sullivan, A. J. Russell, and Jack Hillers, in addition to Watkins.

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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.