

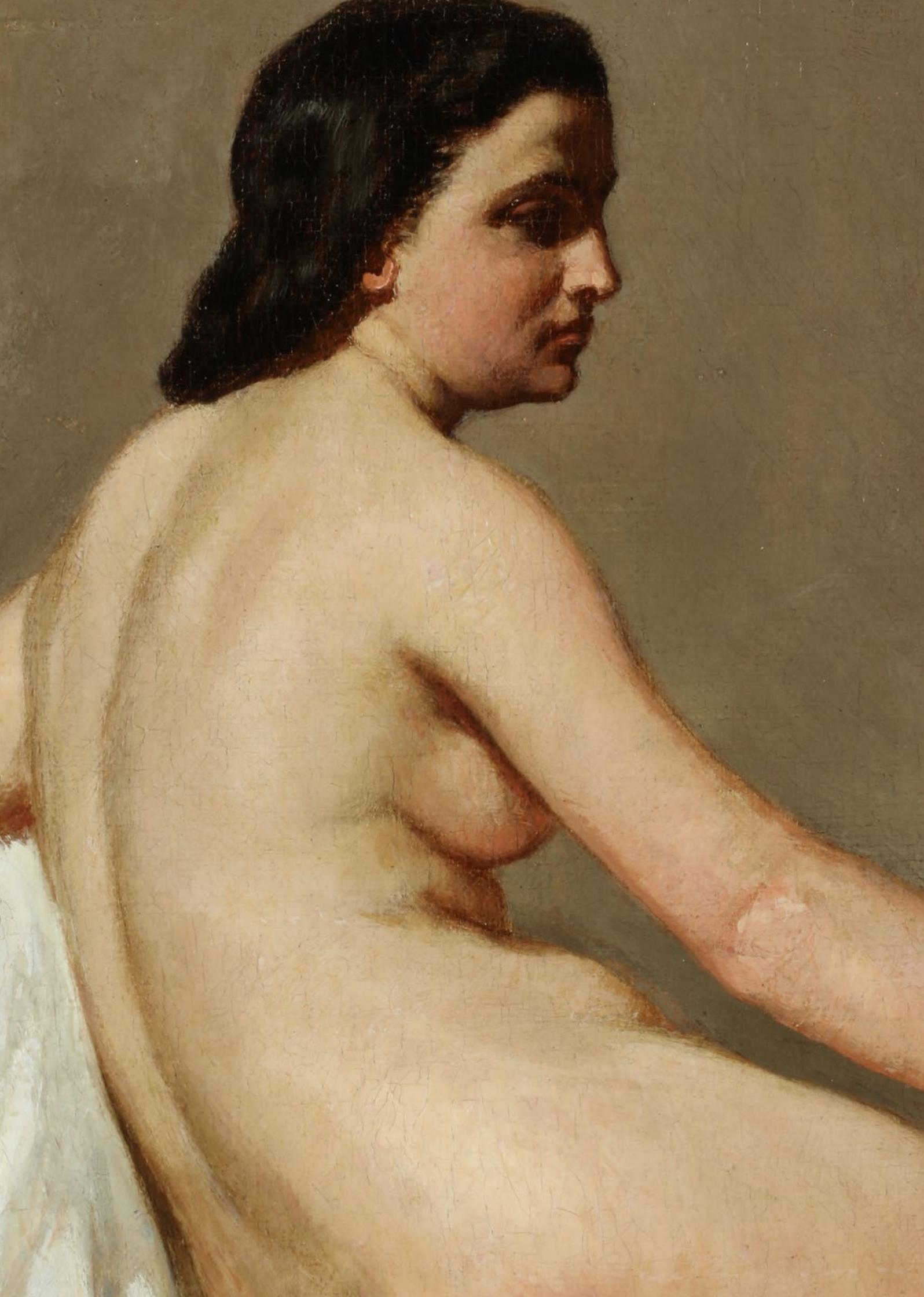


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ELIHU VEDDER
AND HIS INTERNATIONAL
ARTISTIC CIRCLE IN FLORENCE,
1857-1860

Elihu Vedder is most often associated with Rome, the city where he resided as a mature artist of international stature for more than fifty years, from 1867 until his death in 1923¹. Less well known are the three years, from 1857 to 1860, that the American spent as an art student in Florence, attracted by a sophisticated network of private and public facilities that had developed around the Accademia di Belle Arti, complementing its activities and expanding its sphere of influence among a cosmopolitan array of painters and sculptors². While Vedder took advantage of the many opportunities that Florence afforded — for private instruction, attending life schools, studying anatomy, copying old masters, and exhibiting — he also forged many enduring relationships that informed his artistic practice and helped determine the course of his career. A self-described republican and unapologetic bohemian, he eschewed the company of Florence’s Anglo-American literary establishment in favor of the avant-garde members of the Macchiaioli and the Roman painter-patriot Nino Costa who frequented the progressive Caffè Michelangelo³. He emerged from this period with an enhanced technical proficiency and a signature style that gave material form to the visionary workings of his fertile imagination, and he soon garnered critical notice and widespread recognition in America for his uncanny — sometimes macabre — pictures that could only be described as “vedderesque” and which earned him the moniker of the “Edgar Allan Poe of painters”⁴. Vedder’s formative experiences amid the vibrant artistic milieu that congregated under the liberal auspices of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany at mid-century uniquely positioned him to become a leading figure in transatlantic processes of cultural exchange in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Elihu Vedder was born in New York City on 26 February 1836 to parents who were both proud descendants of the early Dutch settlers of New York, known as Knickerbockers. His father was a struggling dentist who moved to Cuba in the wake of the Panic of 1837, and young Vedder migrated seasonally between the Spanish colony and his maternal grandfather’s rustic farm in the borough of Brooklyn, accompanied either by his mother or older brother. In the 1850s he attended boarding school on

Long Island, receiving a basic education typical of the era, and on his own he began drawing, painting in watercolor, and modeling in clay. He earned his mother's consent to pursue a career in art and, following her untimely death in 1852, his father honored her word. For about one year, around 1854-55, Vedder numbered among a handful of pupils of Tompkins Harrison Matteson in the remote rural village of Sherburne in Upstate New York. Matteson was a respected academic portrait and history painter as well as a successful illustrator, and skills such as he possessed were in great demand in New York at a time when popular journals increasingly relied upon engraved pictorial accompaniments to their letterpress to grow their circulation⁵.

Vedder's father next agreed to sponsor his promising twenty-year-old son's trip to Europe to study in the great capitals of art. By now, a period of foreign training had become *de rigeur* for ambitious painters of Vedder's generation, and Paris, with its *École des Beaux-Arts*, annual Salons, system of independent ateliers, and cultural resources, was generally considered to be the world epicenter of the fine arts. Thus, when Vedder departed New York on 29 July 1856 his destination was the French capital, where he soon became a student of the elderly painter François-Édouard Picot. Vedder's choice was an unusual one as most of his countrymen opted for the more fashionable and liberal-minded studio of Thomas Couture, who was more than twenty-five years Picot's junior⁶. Writing in the "Bulletin of the American Art-Union" in 1850, one of Couture's former students disparaged Picot as "a servile teacher of all the academic rules of drawing," whereas "M. Couture prefers his pupils to have mastered the rudiments of drawing before they enter his atelier, as it leaves him to teach them solely *how to paint*"⁷. It was a criticism that Vedder apparently was sensitive to, as he wrote years later in his memoirs *The Digressions of V* (Boston, 1910): "Had I fallen in with some of the American students of Couture, I might have gone there and gotten over a faithful but fiddling little way of drawing which hangs around me yet"⁸. Vedder recollected, however, that he approached Picot not only because he had won the Prix de Rome in 1813 but also had produced more Prix de Rome winners than anyone else at the time. Vedder's assignment was drawing from plaster casts after the antique, an intermediate step between copying from engravings and working from the living model in the traditional academic curriculum. It was monotonous, unrewarding work, but it may have had its desired effect as Vedder became a consummate draftsman, as epitomized by the fifty-four original illustrations that he drew for the universally acclaimed edition of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (Boston, 1884). His paintings, too, are characterized by an assured line, restrained brushstroke, and sober coloring that owe, in part, to this early discipline.

After eight months in Paris Vedder departed for Italy in April 1857, traveling to Rome, Florence, and Venice over several months before returning around August to the Tuscan capital, where he resumed the academic regimen that he had begun

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in Paris, albeit with greater autonomy. In the nineteenth century, Florence and its royal academy, first under the directorship of Pietro Benvenuti from 1804 to 1844 and then that of his student Giuseppe Bezzuoli from 1844 to 1855, were understood to be comparatively receptive to the progressive tenets of French Romanticism and had, according to Norma Broude, an “antineoclassical attitude”⁹. That Vedder probably was aware of this pro-French disposition is supported by the correspondence of Josiah Green, one of Vedder’s closest English friends who had spent five years with Couture before moving to Florence in 1859. Green wrote to a mutual friend who remained in Paris: “Couture is thought to be the leading figure painter by the painters here, and to have been his pupil is esteemed the height of Fortune’s favor [...] for here French painting is all the rage. Unfortunately, the young men imitate it through the medium of lithography, after Decamps and Troyon, which leads to painting heavily and making black shadows. The only picture that they know of Couture’s is the *Fool*¹⁰, a picture that Couture considers unfinished”. He concluded by saying: “[...] do not fail to say something to Couture of the admiration that his talent inspires to the Italians”¹¹.

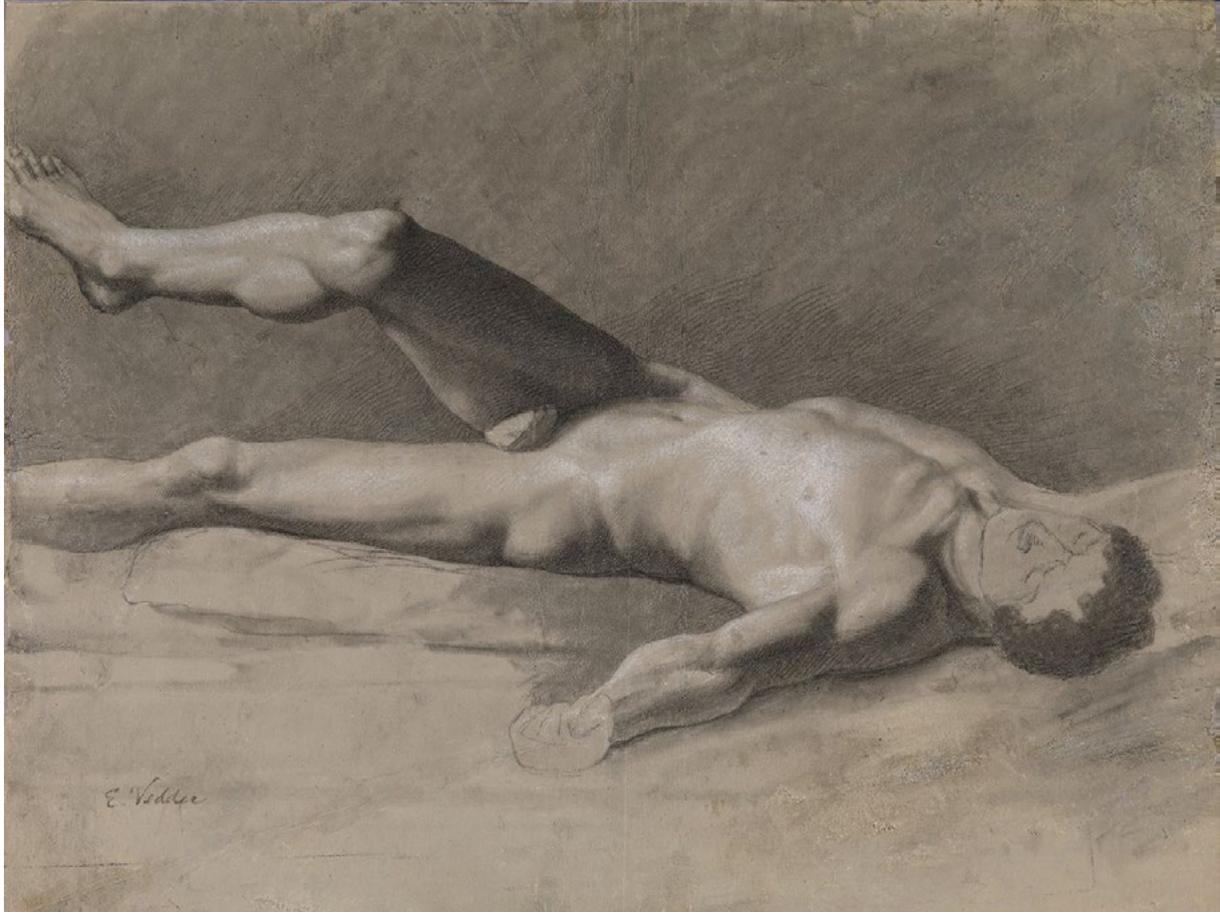
The seminal influence of modern French painting upon the nascent Macchiaioli group at mid-century, especially the work of Rosa Bonheur, Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, and Constant Troyon, has often been remarked upon, but the question of when and where they could have seen representative examples in Florence has remained largely unanswered. While some scholars emphasize the trip that Saverio Altamura, Serafino De Tivoli, and Domenico Morelli made to Paris in 1855 to attend the Salon, their verbal descriptions of the qualities they admired in the works that they saw there — especially the “violent chiaroscuro” of Decamps — seem insufficient as the guiding impetus for the founding of one of the most visually compelling and historically significant artistic movements of the nineteenth century. Others speculate that the private collection of modern French paintings that Anatole Demidoff assembled in his villa at San Donato on the outskirts of Florence may have been a place where some Macchiaioli painters could have seen paintings by Decamps, Troyon, Bonheur, and the Barbizon school; however, the likelihood of this has proved to be problematic based upon documentary evidence¹². Green’s firsthand account of the contemporary scene is therefore important because it confirms that there was a perceived artistic affinity between the two art capitals of Paris and Florence and that much of the French influence was transmitted through reproductive prints, not through a direct knowledge of original paintings and drawings.

Vedder related an anecdote that corroborates Green’s observations and suggests that Nino Costa functioned as a conduit for the dissemination of modern French prints among Florentine artists when the Roman arrived in the autumn of 1859, writing: “I first met Costa in Florence. The French held Rome and Civita Vecchia

[sic], and there was a lull. Costa had left off fighting and had come on to Florence and resumed his painting. He had brought with him some splendid lithographs by Déschamps [sic]; particularly fine was the *Defeat of the Cimbri*¹³. I thus became acquainted at the same time with both Masters. Costa and I became and remained friends from that day on”¹⁴. While Costa’s pivotal role in the transnational exchange of artistic trends in the mid-nineteenth century was widely acknowledged during his own lifetime and subsequently¹⁵, Vedder’s recollection has, to my knowledge, gone unnoticed by art historians. That Costa was largely responsible for introducing the lithographic work of Decamps into the Tuscan capital in 1859 is an intriguing premise that warrants further research.

As he had in Paris, Vedder sought out a respected private instructor and commenced a regimen under Raffaello Bonaiuti¹⁶, a professional copyist and intermediary draftsman known for making highly finished drawings after paintings by Fra Angelico, Fra Bartolomeo, Raphael, and others for use by etchers, such as Domenico Chiossone and Antonio Perfetti. In 1858, precisely when our artist was in Florence, a correspondent for Turin’s “*Rivista Contemporanea*” lavished praise on Bonaiuti as an “able and conscientious draftsman [...] whose modesty and singular love for art, rather than ingenuity, earned him the love and the reverence of the good”¹⁷. Girolamo Gargioli’s book *Il parlare degli artigiani di Firenze* referred to Bonaiuti as “an extremely modest artist with ancient customs, who naturally had the creative power to be among the best painters of our time, and who was surpassed by no one in interpreting the works of the ancients with truth and intelligence”¹⁸. Vedder concurred with these assessments of his tutor’s humility, perseverance, and erudition, writing: “My old master in drawing was a man of another age, an old-fashioned Florentine. He was a mild, faded-looking man, but hid under that exterior an iron will. He had once been given the commission to make drawings of most of the marbles in the Vatican Gallery, and had taken advantage of that opportunity to study them for his own improvement, so that I cannot conceive of anyone understanding the antique better than he did. His explanations and illustrations of the Elgin marbles given me during his lessons were beautiful, and I felt quite unworthy of the privilege”¹⁹.

I am aware of only one other American who studied under Bonaiuti and that is the Virginia sculptor Edward Virginius Valentine, who was in Florence in 1860-61 after a period with Couture. Valentine also frequented the Museum of Zoology and Natural History, commonly known as La Specola²⁰, perhaps on the recommendation of Bonaiuti, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Vedder likewise might have benefitted from access to the museum with its displays of wax anatomical figures and body parts. This famed collection, opened in 1775 by Grand Duke Peter Leopold of Tuscany, was visited by many American artists throughout the nineteenth century, from Rembrandt Peale in 1829, Sanford R. Gifford in 1856, to Vedder’s good friend

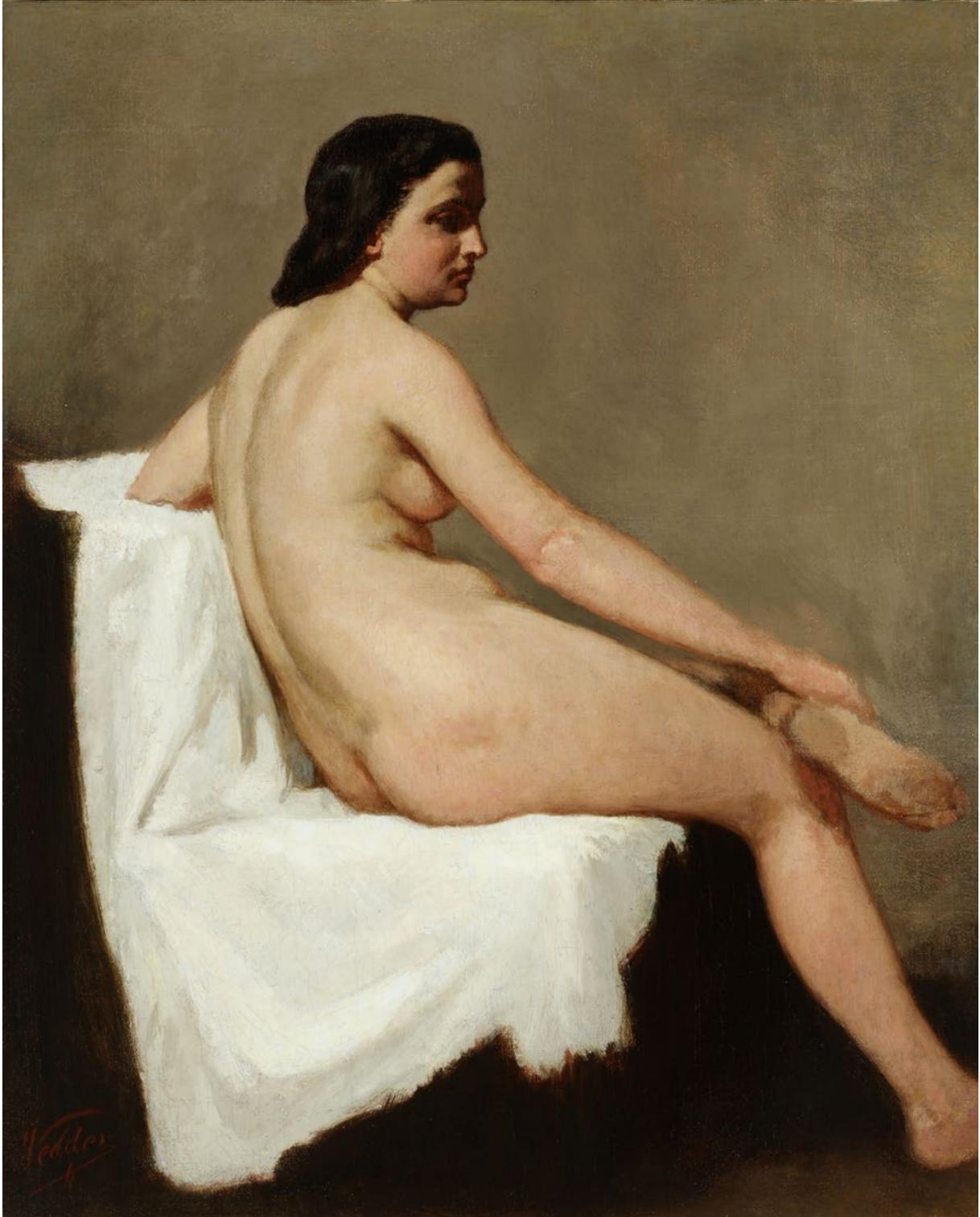


1

Elihu Vedder, *Reclining Male Nude*,
ca. 1857-60, graphite and white chalk on blue laid paper, 40.6 x 52.8 cm,
private collection (photograph: J. F. McGuigan).

Albert Henry Baldwin, who wrote in 1860: “I am studying up anatomy. There is a splendid museum here with very numerous and beautiful anatomical models in wax—every bone and muscle is duly illustrated”²¹. It is, frankly, inconceivable to think that Vedder was not at least familiar with these well-known rooms and the opportunities that they afforded for learning anatomy.

Baldwin additionally reported: “There is an Academy — free — with antique and life schools. I draw occasionally in the former, and every evening at a private life school where we have the nude one week and costumes the next — the latter is stunning”²². The private life school that Baldwin referred to was almost certainly the Accademia Galli, which Valentine also attended²³ and Vedder remembered for its “little smoky, dim oil-lamps”²⁴. Vedder’s drawing of a *Reclining Male Nude* (fig. 1) probably was made at the Accademia Galli as the pose of the model was informed by visual antecedents from within Florence’s own estimable artistic tradition, in Benvenuti’s



2

Elihu Vedder, *Study of a Model (Female Nude)*,
ca. 1857-60, oil on canvas, 33.5 x 27.3 cm,
private collection (photograph: J. F. McGuigan).

imagines

painting of *The Death of Abel* (1828, Florence, San Lorenzo, Cappella dei Principi) and Giovanni Dupré's more recent *Dead Abel* (1842, St. Petersburg, Hermitage), one of the masterpieces of Tuscan Romantic sculpture. The subject proved to be of abiding interest to Vedder who later completed a large composition of *The Death of Abel* (*The Dead Abel*) (1869, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco) with the arms similarly positioned. The skillful modeling in charcoal heightened with white, convincing foreshortening, and use of blue-gray paper to establish a unifying middle tone demonstrate a degree of sophistication in our student at this early date, in spite of its state of unfinish.

It is certain that Vedder painted this *Study of a Model (Female Nude)* (fig. 2) at the Accademia Galli one night as he wrote on the back of the canvas: "Study — Galli Academy, Florence. Europe 1st time". The dull gray walls and austere backdrop, devoid of narrative props or ornament, were typical of academic settings in this era, as they encouraged artists to concentrate on line over color and the formal aspects of composition over the distinguishing features of the individual. The model's placement, sinuous posture, and elongated spine and limbs are indebted to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Grand Odalisque* (1814, Paris, Musée du Louvre), a touchstone of French Romantic painting. Long after his years of residence in Rome (1806-20 and 1835-41) and Florence (1820-24), Ingres's influence remained tangible in the work of Bezzuoli and Lorenzo Bartolini in Florence and Luigi Mussini in Siena, again reflecting a receptiveness to French impulses among the liberal-minded protagonists in Tuscan academic circles.

Another facet of Vedder's ongoing education was painting copies after the old masters in the galleries of the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace. Copying in the royal collections was strictly regulated and Vedder had to apply for the privilege under the auspices of his local banker, George D. Maquay of the respected firm Maquay and Pakenham, who vouched for him in a letter dated 30 October 1857, and he was granted permission for a period of twenty days on 3 November²⁵. The practice of copying suffered from many negative connotations due to its association with the numerous professional painters of varying degrees of competence who inhabited the galleries fulfilling commissions for a thriving, but largely undiscerning, international market; it was, however, considered a valuable pedagogical instrument within the academic curriculum — the French Academy in Rome was established in 1666 specifically for the production of highly finished literal copies by the pensioners in service to the king — for it was believed that the emulation of great works of art had a salutary effect on emerging artists by training the eye, improving executive ability, and fostering discrimination. It is likely that Bonaiuti, himself a well-known and admired copyist, encouraged his maturing student to try his hand at it.

According to his own list of works sold from 1856 to 1907, published as an appendix to his memoirs, Vedder painted a copy after a portrait by Rembrandt that was purchased for the respectable sum of forty American dollars by an unidentified



3

Elihu Vedder, *Sketch after Veronese's "Martyrdom of Saint Justina"*,
ca. 1857-60, oil on artist's board, 14.8 x 18.5 cm,
private collection (photograph: J. F. McGuigan).

college in the American South. It probably was either Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as a Young Man* or *Self-Portrait as an Old Man*, both of which are now in the Uffizi, but we cannot know for certain as the copy is unlocated²⁶. Although the private consumption of copies as a predominantly middle-class pursuit in the nineteenth century has been well-documented, the collecting of them by secular public institutions for their moral and civic function — frequently aimed at socio-economically disadvantaged audiences in urban centers — has gone largely unrecognized. Virginia Nixon, writing about museums of copies, noted: "Indeed, public perception often came to regard art as a substitute for religion in terms of its ability to help create good citizens from potentially disruptive, even criminal elements, and thus lower-class viewers assumed special importance. The ennobling effects of art were assumed to arise from both the aesthetic experience engendered by outstanding artworks and through uplifting

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subject matter”²⁷. Especially in the New World, where few original old master paintings existed, the acquisition of copies, as well engravings and casts of antique sculpture, for their didactic value was an act of democratization. In this context, verisimilitude to the original was of paramount importance and we may assume, therefore, that Vedder’s copy after Rembrandt was as faithful as he could manage.

Vedder also completed in the Uffizi a *Sketch after Veronese’s “Martyrdom of Saint Justina”* (fig. 3)²⁸, in which he painted quickly and succinctly on a small scale in order to convey the essence of the narrative, as well as the brilliant chromatism and shimmering play of light and shadows deployed by Veronese. This type of work, known as a sketch copy, was an intimate act of discovering and appropriating the creative genius that lay behind the original — a loose interpretation, not a slavish imitation. As James Jackson Jarves, the noted American critic and pioneering collector of early Italian Renaissance paintings, astutely judged: “While in Italy, Vedder manifested a keen appreciation of the best elements of its old art. A close, indefatigable student, he never became a mere copyist, but, making notes of ideas and technical details, assimilated to himself much of the lofty feeling and strong manner of the world’s masters in painting”²⁹. Whereas literal copies typically were sold, sketch copies usually remained in the private possession of the artist as a sort of talisman in the studio. Our artist was no exception as this work descended in his family, and Veronese, and the Venetian school more broadly, continued to be a point of reference for him, as his wife Carrie noted about his recent progress in an 1876 letter: “First, his work *The Cumaean Sibyl* is coming on gloriously, astonishing himself as well as all his friends. He has been studying all during the fall old Italian works on the Venetian painters and their methods — Boschini and other authors — and before beginning, laid down a course for himself which thus far, as I said, works splendidly”³⁰. In his book *La Carta del navigar pitoresco* [sic] (Venice, 1660) Marco Boschini defended the painterly technique and visible brushwork that were characteristic of the Venetian school and elevated the aesthetic of the sketch from a matter of marginal interest to one of central artistic inquiry³¹.

Vedder lodged in several places over the years³² and his studio was in a house that he shared with the exiled Pugliese painter and revolutionary Francesco Saverio Altamura and the British Pre-Raphaelite painter Jane Eleanor Benham Hay on the banks of the Torrent Mugnone on the outskirts of Florence leading to Fiesole. “In a house near the bridge, three of us lived and worked”³³, Vedder stated matter-of-factly; but the circumstances were more complicated as Altamura and Hay were intimately involved with each other and both had separated from their spouses. They each had a son from their previous relationships living with them and went on to have children together out of wedlock. Vedder could not have been unaware that their living arrangements scandalized the Anglo-American colony in Florence, but he made no

mention of the unconventional situation. Some of Hay's paintings, such as *England and Italy* (1859, unlocated), *The Reception of the Prodigal Son* (ca. 1862, Bournemouth, Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum), and *A Florentine Procession* (ca. 1867, Cambridge, Homerton College), combine religious, historical, and genre elements with a medieval figurative tradition in a highly synthetic style of Romanticism closely associated with the political and civic aspirations of the Risorgimento³⁴. Meanwhile, Altamura, with his background in the realistic *veduta* landscape tradition of Naples, involvement with the plein-air painters of the so-called School of Staggia, exposure to avant-garde French painting in Paris in 1855, and use of a black mirror, or darkened concave lens, to exaggerate light and shaded areas, influenced many painters in Florence and probably Vedder as well³⁵. "A wonderfully clever man", Vedder deemed his housemate, "whose style changed with every passing whim of the artistic world, and whose facile hand often ran away with his head"³⁶.

It is tempting to speculate that Altamura was responsible for introducing Vedder to the Caffè Michelangelo at via Larga 41-43 (now via Cavour 21), the favorite haunt of the Macchiaioli painters, where the young American became a regular³⁷. This establishment was the epicenter of artistic, social, and political fomentation in Florence, and was likened to Paris's iconic Café Momus as portrayed by Henri Murger in *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (Paris, 1851) by Carlo Del Bravo: "The language of that 'true bohemian' was at the same time extravagant technical paradoxical ironic intelligent; there were unheard of aphorisms about art; the conversation was such that the waiter who served them had become an idiot in the prime of life"³⁸. Aside from our artist's own recollections that he was a regular customer at the Caffè Michelangelo and known among its habitués, a letter to Vedder dated 1865 — years after he had left Florence — from an English friend substantiates his presence there: "After walking up the Via Larga I dropped into the Michelangiolo [sic] in hope of finding [De] Tivoli there, so as to ask if he had heard anything of you, but he was not there, and I did not recognize any of your old friends"³⁹. This anecdote also implies that Vedder perhaps maintained friendships he had made in Florence long after he returned to the United States. In *Digressions* Vedder mentioned many of the Italians in his social orbit in Florence, most of whom were patrons of the Caffè Michelangelo, including Cristiano Banti, Gaetano Bianchi, Vincenzo Cabianca, Nino Costa, Michele Gordigiani, Stanislao Pointeau, Michele Rapisardi, and Angelo Tricca. He also remembered going with many of them to the demonstrations against Grand Duke Leopold II and his peaceful departure from Florence on 27 April 1859: "There had been much plotting in the Caffè Michelangelo. I had not been taken into the plot, but being a rank republican was considered one of them"⁴⁰.

We thus see that Vedder was socially affiliated with and politically sympathetic to the iconoclastic members of the Macchiaioli, and there are many readily apparent



4

Elihu Vedder, *Fiesole*, 1859,
oil on canvas, 38.1 x 74.3 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts,
Founders Society purchase with funds
from Mr. and Mrs. James S. Whitcomb (work in public domain).

similarities in subject and style between the paintings of his Florentine period and theirs that certainly suggest an affinity, if not a reciprocal influence exactly. The location of his studio and living space also placed him alongside them, as he noted: “The banks of the Mugnone torrent, which runs around a part of Florence past the Porta San Gallo, used to be a favorite walk among the clients of the Caffè Michelangelo [...]. On the high banks of this stream, overlooking the country [...] we walked and settled all the great questions of the day. Following up the stream, you finally reached the spot where it passes under a bridge at the foot of the long ascent which leads to Fiesole”⁴¹. Vedder’s painting of the Mugnone, known today simply as *Fiesole* (fig. 4), resembles other views of the streambed by the Macchiaioli, for instance Giuseppe Abbati’s *Il Mugnone alle Cure* (ca. 1865, oil on panel, private collection) and Odoardo Borrani’s *Il Mugnone* (ca. 1865, oil on panel, Rome, GNAM). Evident in these works is a mutual interest in depicting the built environment of the Florentine landscape as a harmonious blending of history and nature, redolent of past art and literature. Vivid colors, sharp juxtapositions of light and shadow, quasi-abbreviation of forms, and long horizontal format reminiscent of the predella panels of quattrocento altarpieces were favored by many of the Macchiaioli as well as Vedder.



5

Elihu Vedder, *Dominicans. A Convent Garden near Florence (Three Monks at Fiesole)*, ca. 1859, oil on canvas, 29.5 x 24.1 cm, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd (work in public domain).

In addition to the Italians of his acquaintance, Vedder naturally knew most of the Anglo-American artists then living and working in Florence. Of the many resident sculptors he mentioned were Alexander Galt, Joel Tanner Hart, his nephew Robert Hart, William Henry Rinehart, and the elder statesman of the community, Hiram Powers. Vedder's fellow painters included Baldwin, Walter Gould, Thomas Hiram Hotchkiss, Henry Augustus Loop, Abel Nichols, and Henry Wilmot Waugh. Vedder counted fewer British friends, perhaps owing to his ambivalent attitude toward Ruskinian artistic theory and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which together dominated their aesthetic discourse. He was friends with John William Inchbold, a protégé of Ruskin, but complained: "I never could get from Inchbold a clear definition of what constituted P.-R.-ism. Going back to the art previous to Raphael? Not quite that"⁴². Nearer to him were the aforementioned Green and William Frederick Yeames.

In 1860 Vedder's accomplishments were acknowledged when three of his paintings were chosen for the sixteenth annual juried exhibition of Florence's Società Promotrice delle Belle Arti, a private organization of benefactors that promoted young and innovative local talent by offering an alternative venue to official academy exhibitions. Among the other exhibitors were Altamura, Cabianca, Costa, De Tivoli, Green, Hay, Pointeau, Silvestro Lega, Rapisardi,

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6

Elihu Vedder, *Landscape with Sheep and Old Well*,
ca. 1857, oil on canvas, 38.1 x 72.71 cm,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston,
Bequest of Charles Sumner (work in public domain).

Telemaco Signorini, and Tricca. Vedder wrote to his father optimistically: “I stand a good chance of selling something. The exhibition is only for a month [...]. You will no doubt laugh at my counting my chickens before they are hatched; however, I comfort myself with believing that pictures, like dogs, have their days, and that sooner or later the opportunity for selling will come. Besides, with all due modesty they are not so bad as I have seen and, in fact, the artists here think them pretty good”⁴³. The first of the three works chosen by the exhibition committee was listed as *La Passeggiata de’ Frati*, which today is known as *Dominicans. A Convent Garden near Florence (Three Monks at Fiesole)* (fig. 5)⁴⁴. Vedder described: “The little picture was really a sketch I made on a dark stormy day, of Fiesole with the road and cypresses coming down from it, into the foreground of which I had painted three Dominican friars, whose black and white garments carried out the feeling seen in hillside and sky”⁴⁵. The second painting, entitled *Un Piccolo Paggio* (unlocated)⁴⁶, depicted a seated pageboy in medieval dress playing a lute from music before him⁴⁷. The third painting, *Un Paesaggio*, cannot be identified with certainty but it may be the work now titled *Landscape with Sheep and Old Well* (fig. 6)⁴⁸, about which the correspondent for the “Boston Evening Transcript” wrote that its “coloring completely annihilated the two landscapes beside it”⁴⁹.



7

Elihu Vedder, *Desolate Landscape*,
ca. 1867, oil on canvas, 36 x 118.5 cm, private collection (photograph: J. F. McGuigan).

Vedder's entries in the 1860 Promotrice situate him among a transnational group of plein-air painters and sketchers in Florence at mid-century whose art married a direct observation of the landscape with a refined sensibility for its cultural and historical resonances, especially the writing of Boccaccio. His advancement was a source of inspiration for his colleagues, with Green declaring: "I am waiting anxiously for the spring in order to attack landscape once again. Vedder having had a great success last year, I am determined not to be behindhand"⁵⁰. Hotchkiss was Vedder's most intimate friend and regular companion on sketching expeditions, with Vedder recalling that, "In Florence, Hotchkiss and myself were painting as faithfully as we knew how [...]"⁵¹. Both men painted views outside of the convent of San Miniato (figs. 8, 9), and their similarities certainly attest to the intensity of their sympathetic outlooks and may indicate that they worked side-by-side or from the same sketch⁵². These strongly vertical scenes, with their cloudless skies, long shadows, and sheltering trees that dominate the figures and the architecture, possess a totemic character that is wonderfully evocative of the *genius loci* of Florence.



That spring Vedder and Hotchkiss embarked on a sketching campaign through Umbria, a trip they would reprise in 1867, at which time Vedder made numerous preliminary sketches and oil studies for *Desolate Landscape* (fig. 7). Depicting Monte Catria outside of Gubbio, it captures the essential qualities of the artist's initial impressions and distills them into a timeless and hauntingly beautiful painting, reminding me of the importance that Nino Costa placed upon the concept of the *eterno bozzetto*—the first sketch—as a constant point of reference when composing a painting. The half-buried buffalo skull in the foreground may be, in fact, a reference to Costa's iconic *Donne che imbarcano legna a Porto d'Anzio* (1852, Rome, GNAM)⁵³, the extended format of which was adopted as a hallmark of modernism by the Macchiaioli who saw it in Florence in 1859⁵⁴, and Vedder's use of it here belongs to that same aesthetic mindset that continually sought to push the accepted norms of landscape painting.

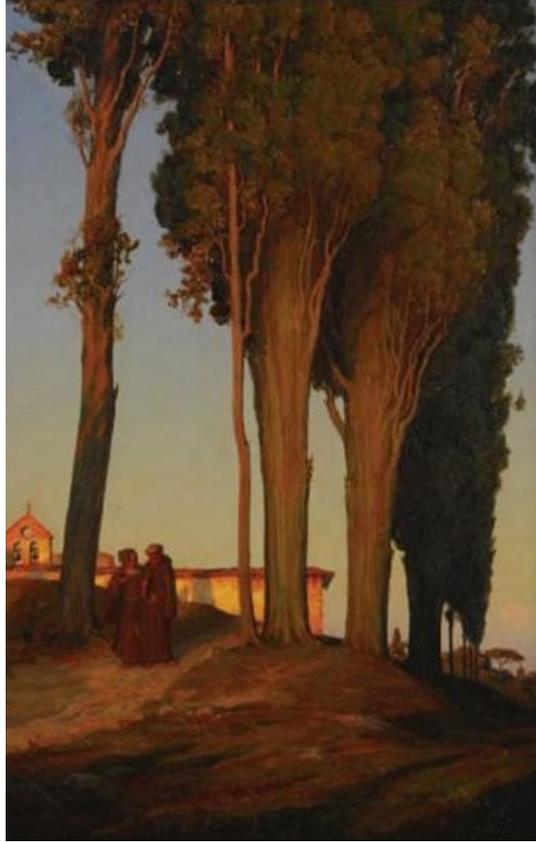
In August Vedder and Hotchkiss spent three weeks in Volterra along with Waugh and Green⁵⁵. Vedder wrote from the hill town: "It is about thirty-five miles from Florence, rail half the way, so we came in one day and with the exception of



8

Elihu Vedder, *Cypress Trees at San Miniato*,
by 1865, oil on paper on canvas, 24.8 x 16.5 cm,
private collection (photograph: J. F. McGuigan).

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9

Thomas Hiram Hotchkiss, *Cypresses and Convent at San Miniato near Florence*, 1868, oil on canvas, 36.2 x 23.2 cm, private collection (photograph: J. F. McGuigan).

three rainy days at the commencement we have worked hard ever since. In fact, used up all our canvas and sent to Florence for more. So I think I shall be able to get the materials for several good pictures. It is now three weeks that we have been here and the place interests us more and more each day. It is built on the summit of a high hill, as I know to my cost, having commenced two views halfway down which I paint on in the afternoons and it takes a long and a strong pull to get up again in the evenings. [...] On one side of the town there is a great ravine, and the hillside has been crumbling away in it for centuries. [...] The rocks and all the old walls are covered with the most plentiful weeds and plants, we have been making studies of them. [...] The soil is of clay, and the gullies and pinnacles left in it by the rain make the scene one of the wildest beauty. I have commenced a painting [...] looking over the plains with the White Mountains of Carrara in the distance. There are so much and so many beautiful things to do that it almost drives us to despair, and we often vow, that if we live, we will most certainly come back here again”⁵⁶. Tinged with melancholy, this last comment foreshadows the tragically early deaths that befell Vedder’s three



10

Elihu Vedder, *Caves of Nero, Porto d'Anzio*,
ca. 1874, oil on canvas, 18.3 x 38 cm,
private collection (photograph: J. F. McGuigan).

fellow travelers within the decade: Waugh returned to the United States during the final stages of consumption and died in 1863; Green passed in 1868, probably from consumption as well⁵⁷; and the tubercular Hotchkiss died in the arms of the American painter, John Rollin Tilton, at Taormina in 1869 after hemorrhaging in his lungs.

Worried about the looming American Civil War and low on funds, Dr. Vedder summoned his son back to Cuba in late 1860. “And thus”, Vedder remembered, “I left Eden”⁵⁸. Exempt from military duty after a hunting accident permanently affected his left arm, he returned to New York in May 1861, after a four-year absence. He eked out a living as a commercial illustrator, falling back on his earliest training under Matteson, while struggling to establish a reputation and career. He found solace, however, by retreating into the recent past: “All the little pictures I painted in Florence and all the drawings, to the most insignificant scrap, I had with me; they formed a sort of carapace or turtle’s shell in which I lived”⁵⁹. He worked diligently and submitted twenty-two paintings to the Annual Exhibitions of the National Academy of Design in New York, the most prestigious venue for contemporary American art, from 1862 to 1867. Among them were some of his most iconic pictures, including *The Lost Mind*, *Lair of the Sea Serpent*, and *The Questioner of the Sphinx*. The American public, eager to escape the cruel realities of wartime, responded enthusiastically to Vedder’s imaginative and emotionally provocative works in part because their charged ambiguity resonated in that uncertain era.

imagines

Vedder's paintings from the Civil War epoch won him accolades and became synonymous with the man for years to come.

Despite earning fame and the approbation of his peers, as evidenced by his election as an Associate of the National Academy of Design in 1864 and Academician the following year, Vedder struggled to secure patronage and, with the end of the American Civil War, he began to think of returning to Europe. Paris again was deemed to be the most advantageous place for him and he returned there in December 1865, taking a studio in Montmartre, but he was unhappy and felt misunderstood as an artist. He recalled: “[...] the French artists I did meet could see nothing in my work, for it did not resemble that of any one they knew, and so they could not classify me. The French have little respect for anything they cannot classify — which explains their slow recognition of Corot and of Millet”⁶⁰. Receiving a cash windfall from the sale of some paintings, he made the impetuous decision to move to Rome the following December and rented a studio on the via Margutta, ensconced amid a transnational artistic milieu of kindred spirits.

In Rome Vedder renewed the friendship forged years earlier in Florence with Costa, who was one of the dominant figures of the cosmopolitan art scene in the capital. The American's work was included in the exhibition of the Circolo Artistico Internazionale that Costa organized as the Casina del Pincio in 1872⁶¹, and he is sometimes counted among the members of the Etruscan group formed by Costa in 1883-84⁶². The two men went on sketching excursions together, including one overnight trip to Velletri where they painted the same landscape but with different methods, as Vedder described: “Costa approached the subject by parallels, — prepared it with red one day, and on another inserted greys, and again went over it, then took it to Rome and painted on it from time to time for several years; that was his way. I took it by assault; he, by siege. I don't think he saw more in Nature than I did; but he saw more in Nature to paint than I did [...]. He was a fighter and a founder of a school. He believed in painting direct from Nature, with all the strength and love you are capable of; this he did, but he showed little love for those who differed from him. He delighted in stealing upon Nature in her most intimate moods — taking her by ‘tradimento’, was his very Italian expression; for he was a thoroughgoing Italian and was as great a patriot as he was a painter”⁶³.

On another occasion in 1874 Carrie Vedder wrote about a trip that her husband and Costa took to Porto d'Anzio, along with the American painters Charles Caryl Coleman and Casimir Clayton Griswold: “The day seems very dreary, there is a driving storm outside and I feel it more than usual because Vedder went yesterday down to Porto d'Anzio for a few days' pleasure trip and I know what a disappointment it will be to him. He wanted to go last week when the weather was lovely but had to wait for Costa, an Italian artist who was going to show him things

down there”⁶⁴. Three days later she reported: “Vedder came back last night from Porto d’Anzio. They had had a most delightful trip in spite of the rain. Vedder is wild about the place”⁶⁵. Vedder’s paintings in and around Anzio, such as *Caves of Nero, Porto d’Anzio* (fig. 10), share in the same luminous quality of light that characterizes many landscapes of the area by Costa, who had been sketching there since at least 1852 when he finished *Donne che imbarcano legna a Porto d’Anzio*, and demonstrate the abiding influence of the older Roman on Vedder, who fondly reminisced: “Happy days! How happy are those first days of the artist’s life, passed in some solitary spot, with no thought of exhibitions or sales or ambition, painting from the pure love of it and his delight in Nature. Such work, Costa used to say, was religion”⁶⁶.

NOTES

- 1 The fundamental sources for information on Vedder are the Elihu Vedder papers; Vedder 1910; Soria 1970; Taylor 1979; and Soria 1982.
- 2 For Vedder’s student years in Florence see Elihu Vedder papers; Vedder 1910; Soria 1986; and McGuigan 2009.
- 3 Also referred to as the Caffè Michelangiolo. I am using Vedder’s preferred spelling. See Vedder 1910, *passim*.
- 4 B. Taylor, letter to the “New-York Tribune,” as quoted in *American Artists in Rome*, in “Freeman’s Journal”, 15 January 1869, p. 4.
- 5 Callow 1967, p. 99.
- 6 Besides Vedder, the only other Americans known to have studied under Picot are Edwin White in 1851, and Vedder’s traveling companions in 1856, Benjamin Henry Day Jr. and Joseph Lemuel Rhoades. Couture’s American students in the 1850s included William R. Baker, Albion Harris Bicknell, George Bernard Butler Jr., Charles Caryl Coleman, John Whetten Ehninger, Franklin Richard Grist, Thomas Hicks, William Morris Hunt, John La Farge, Henry Augustus Loop, Edward Harrison May, Thomas Satterwhite Noble, Enoch Wood Perry Jr., William Shaw Tiffany, Edward Virginus Valentine, and George Henry Yewell.
- 7 T. H. [Thomas Hicks], *Parisian Hints for Artists*, in “Bulletin of the American Art-Union” 5, August 1850, p. 75.
- 8 Vedder 1910, p. 129.
- 9 Broude 1987, p. 22.
- 10 Possibly Couture’s painting known as *The Madman (Le fou) (Il pazzo nella cella)*, n.d., oil on canvas, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera.
- 11 Josiah Green to George Yewell, 26 January 1860, George Henry Yewell papers.
- 12 On the subject, see Broude 1980; Broude 1987; and Spalletti 1996.
- 13 Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, *The Defeat of the Cimbri*, 1833, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre.
- 14 Vedder 1910, pp. 372-73.
- 15 See, for example, Agresti 1904; Dini – Frezzotti 2009; and Schmidt 2016.
- 16 Also referred to as Bonajuti, Buonajuti, and Buonaiuti. I am using Vedder’s spelling. See Vedder 1910, pp. 151-53.
- 17 *Corrispondenza Toscana*, in “Rivista Contemporanea” 13, 26 April 1858, p. 134 (translation my own).
- 18 Gargioli 1876, p. 255 (translation my own).
- 19 Vedder 1910, pp. 151-52.
- 20 Valentine 1929, p. 59.
- 21 Albert H. Baldwin to George Yewell, 3 December 1860, George Henry Yewell papers.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Valentine 1929, p. 59.

imagines

- 24 Vedder 1910, p. 164.
- 25 Barker 2008, n.p.; Bradley 1989, pp. 65-66.
- 26 Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as a Young Man* (Uffizi cat. no. 00186869) was acquired by Ferdinand III of Lorraine in 1818, entered the Galleria Palatina in 1913, and was transferred to the Uffizi in 1928. Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as an Old Man* (Uffizi cat. no. 00186867) was recorded in the collection of Leopoldo de' Medici on his death in 1675 and was transferred to the Uffizi (polomuseale.firenze.it/inv1890).
- 27 Nixon 2006, p. 96.
- 28 Paolo Caliari, called Veronese, *Martirio di Santa Giustina, 1570-79* (Uffizi cat. no. 00099769) (<http://catalogo.uffizi.it>).
- 29 Jarves 1864, pp. 242-50.
- 30 Caroline R. Vedder to Rose Sanford, 19 January 1876, Elihu Vedder papers.
- 31 Sohm 1991, p. 1.
- 32 In 1858 Vedder listed his address with the Gabinetto Vieusseux as "Casa Sante, Borgo SS. Apostoli" and in 1859 as "Stab. Niccolini 20.70.", see *Libro dei Soci, Gabinetto Vieusseux* (vieusseux.it/librosoci/librosoci_list.php); in 1860 he states that his home address is at 20 via dei Maccheroni and his studio is at piazza dell'Indipendenza, "B", see Elihu Vedder to Dr. Elihu Vedder, 13 March 1860, Elihu Vedder papers.
- 33 Vedder 1910, p. 165.
- 34 For Hay, see Tornesello 2008 and Robinson *et alii* 1997.
- 35 For Altamura, see Farese Sperken *et alii* 2012.
- 36 Vedder 1910, p. 165.
- 37 For the Caffè Michelangelo, see Spalletti 1989.
- 38 Del Bravo 1975, p. 786 (translation my own). Agresti also made the comparison between the Caffè Michelangelo and Murger's description of the Café Momus. See Agresti 1904, p. 89.
- 39 F. C. Black to Elihu Vedder, 22 October 1865, Elihu Vedder papers.
- 40 Vedder 1910, pp. 149-50.
- 41 *Idem*, pp. 163-64.
- 42 *Idem*, p. 161.
- 43 Vedder to Dr. Vedder, 13 March 1860, Elihu Vedder papers.
- 44 Promotrice 1860, cat. 73, p. 6.
- 45 Vedder 1910, pp. 164-65.
- 46 Promotrice 1860, cat. 139, p. 9.
- 47 Field 1860, p. 1.
- 48 Promotrice 1860, cat. 147, p. 9.
- 49 Field 1860, p. 1.
- 50 Josiah Green to George Yewell, 26 January 1860, George Henry Yewell papers.
- 51 Vedder 1910, p. 161. For Hotchkiss, see Novak - Felker 1993.
- 52 A page from an 1859-61 sketchbook by Hotchkiss (private collection) includes a watercolor that bears marked similarities between both the Vedder and Hotchkiss paintings and may have served as the common source for both men.
- 53 For the iconography of the buffalo skull, see Marigliani 2013, pp. 130-31.
- 54 Bon Valsassina 1990, p. 437 and Marigliani 2013, p. 129.
- 55 *Sketchings: Domestic Art Gossip*, in "Crayon" 7, no. 11, November 1860, pp. 324-25. The anonymous author was probably also an artist. Soria initially stated that Nino Costa accompanied Vedder to Volterra, see Soria 1970, pp. 29-30; however, this is not substantiated by the historical record. Soria later corrected her error, see Soria 1982, p. 313.
- 56 Elihu Vedder to Dr. Elihu Vedder, 6 August 1860, Elihu Vedder papers.
- 57 Vedder 1910, pp. 292-94.
- 58 *Idem*, p. 172.
- 59 *Idem*, p. 190.
- 60 *Idem*, p. 292.
- 61 Agresti 1904, p. 196.
- 62 See, as one example, Sisi 2012, p. 78.
- 63 Vedder 1910, pp. 373-74.
- 64 Caroline R. Vedder to Caroline B. Rosekrans, 3 May 1874, Elihu Vedder papers.
- 65 Caroline R. Vedder to Rose Sanford, 6 May 1874, Elihu Vedder papers.
- 66 Vedder 1910, p. 166.

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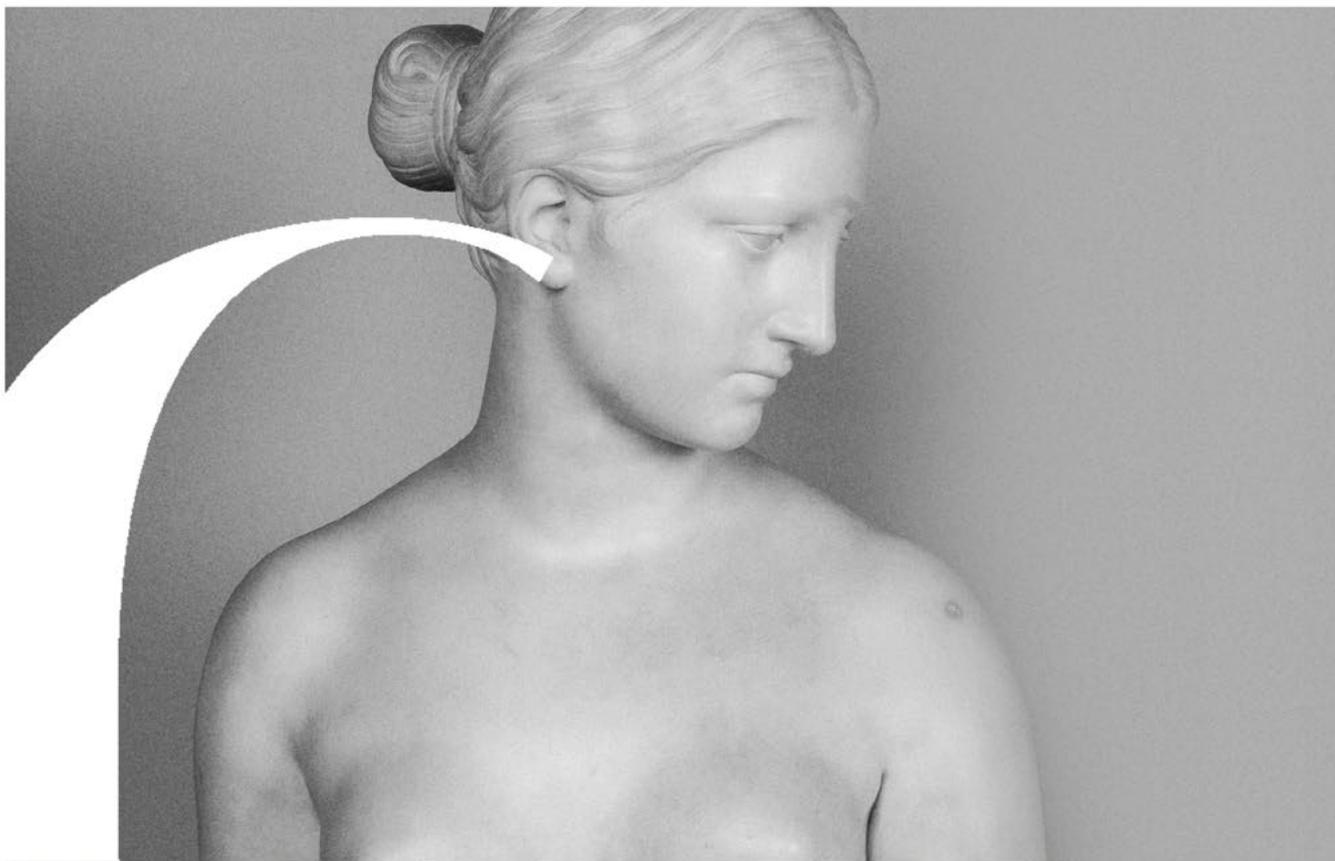
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