

The New Criterion

Books

April 2008

American pastoral

by [Michael J. Lewis](#)

On *George Inness: A Catalogue Raisonné* by Michael Quick.

Michael Quick

George Inness: A Catalogue Raisonné.

Rutgers University Press, 1,274 pages (two volumes), \$400

In today's world, the production of a catalogue raisonné—the complete inventory of an artist's oeuvre, in which the provenance, exhibition history, and published criticism of each work is comprehensively documented—is nearly a Herculean feat. The market for costly reference books was always small and largely limited to university libraries, which are increasingly unwilling or unable to buy such specialized literature, preferring to invest in online reference works. This has not been lost on academic publishing houses, which once viewed it as their duty to bring out the significant scholarship on the canonical figures, regardless of the market. But without a canon, there can scarcely be canonical figures. Finally, the pressures of an academic career tend to discourage the kind of selfless scholarship needed to produce a catalogue raisonné. (No prudent careerist, for example, would invest a decade or more in a research project when the timetable for tenure is seven years.) For these reasons, and others, Michael Quick's catalogue of the works of George Inness is cause for jubilation.

Few American artists have been the subject of such a catalogue, a list that includes John Singer Sargent, Andy Warhol, Edward Hopper, and—soon to be released—N. C. Wyeth. Oddly enough, there already was a fine Inness catalogue raisonné, published by LeRoy Ireland in 1965. But Quick's massive two-volume work, with its wonderfully detailed entries on 1,154 paintings and splendid corpus of color photographs, is of a different order altogether. At a time when exhaustive catalogues are the result of teamwork and a division of labor, it is remarkable for a scholar to undertake such a daunting project by himself, or to inspect virtually every painting in the catalogue, as Quick has done. (As a matter of principle, he lists no works that he could not illustrate, such as paintings only named in old exhibition catalogues). As a result, the project has taken almost two decades to complete, but in compensation Quick has acquired an intimate understanding of Inness's artistic development, year by year. In most such catalogues, the notes accompanying each painting are rather perfunctory, but Quick's sense of the complex totality of Inness's career is astonishing, and it gives his notes on individual works an exceptional authority and urgency that a multi-author inventory could never achieve.

George Inness (1825–1894) is among the greatest of American landscape painters, on a par with Frederic Church and Sanford Gifford, yet in a sense it is misleading to think of him merely as a landscape painter. For Inness's great achievement was to free the genre of its peculiarly American limitations—that characteristic mixture of topographical exactitude and sentimental

moralizing—and make it an instrument of personal expression. In doing so, he took a medium that was quintessentially linear and graphic and made it as purely painterly as can be without tipping over into complete abstraction. This shift from the topographic description of place to the evocation of mood, from presenting facts to presenting feeling, is perhaps the central development of American art across the nineteenth century; in no other painter is this shift so vivid and complete as with Inness.

Inness's youth was spent in Newark, New Jersey, where his family moved around 1830. It had its share of quiet misery: as a child he suffered from epilepsy (“a fearful nervous disease”) and a teenage marriage ended in a few months with the death of his wife. Already he was trying to educate himself as an artist, but in a rather haphazard fashion. While working intermittently in an engraving firm, he studied briefly with various tutors and spent three terms drawing plaster casts at the National Academy of Design. He seems to have had no instruction in life drawing, which was not unusual for the time and which helps explain why his rendering of human figures are usually small and rather generalized. Of his tutors, the most important was evidently Régis-François Gignoux, a pupil of Delaroche. At a time when American taste was inclining toward the fashionable Düsseldorf School, with its taut neoclassical draftsmanship and earnest Teutonic theatricality, Gignoux was an unlikely mentor. From him Inness seems to have acquired his lifelong fascination with color and technique.

Inness's early work followed the Hudson River School formula: precise pencil sketches were made on site and then brought to the studio to be squared off and transferred to the canvas, usually at a larger scale. In making the oil painting, the artist would rely on his memory and his verbal notes for color (and only occasionally on watercolor field sketches). The result was a distinct linearity in which color, however vivid or intense, was necessarily subordinated to the drawing. Inness's earliest masterpiece, *The Lackawanna Valley* (1855), is in this mode. A lone observer reclines in a field and watches a railroad emerge from the industrial village of Scranton, whose largest building is no longer its church but its massive new railroad works. Looking closer, we are startled to discover that the fields and meadows in the foreground have been freshly cleared and are strewn with tree trunks. We are fortunate to have the preparatory sketch, which shows how little Inness changed. Even the melancholy tree trunks are retained from the original (perhaps the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad, which commissioned the painting, viewed them proudly as trophy scalps).

But as Quick's meticulous inventory makes clear, Inness had already begun to free himself from mere draftsmanship. He spent several years in Europe (1851/1852; 1853/1854), where he came under the influence of the Barbizon School, which suggested a looser manner of working and a stress on mood. But Inness was a painter of exceptional restlessness and receptiveness to new ideas. He would often alter his method of working after an encounter with a new school of art. Even his encounter with the English Pre-Raphaelites, whose way of working and thinking differed wildly from that of the Barbizon School, left its mark on him; so did his prolonged stay in Rome from 1870 to 1874. But these influences refused to gel into a fixed mode of working; throughout his career he would work for a few years in a particular mode and then rapidly change technique, painting sometimes opaquely, sometimes transparently, shifting from glazing to direct painting and then back again. “I have changed from the time I commenced,” he claimed, “because I had never completed my art and as I do not care about being a cake I shall remain dough subject to any impression which I am satisfied comes from the region of truth.”

This Inness wrote in 1884, after which time he did become something of a cake, settling into the decorative mode of his late work, those softly painted twilight scenes for which he is best known. Here he vanquished the last lingering vestiges of Hudson River linearity, painting works such as *Home of the Heron* (1893), in which there was scarcely a line at all but only a golden iridescence of sunset through a stand of Florida pines. Inness, of course, was hardly the only painter to depict

subjects at times of restricted vision, such as dusk, fog, or moonlight; Whistler was the obvious source, and his influence is unmistakable. Yet there is an essential difference, for Whistler's twilight reveries were primarily aesthetic essays, in which the barely visible subject matter was incidental, and served merely as the point of departure for formal investigation. Yet with Inness one invariably has the sense that he was deeply invested in the places he depicted, and at the most intimate personal level. It is this sense of intense, nearly mystic personal involvement that has led scholars to connect Inness's late work with his Swedenborgian religious faith, to which he was first introduced by the American painter William Page in 1851, when both were living in Rome.

Swedenborgianism, however, is not a way of painting but a way of believing, and it does not do to ascribe Inness's late work to a vague religious mysticism. It is in fact the outcome of an entire career spent trying to achieve pictorial unity by means of light and color, and to subordinate all of the objects in a painting to an overall sense of palpable mood. This is the leitmotif of Inness's career, for all his stylistic divagations, and it is the great merit of Quick's book to show how he pursued this goal at different times with radically different means.

Of course, no catalogue raisonné is entirely complete, or can be so for long. Even as Quick was completing his study, an important new research tool became available as a growing number of nineteenth-century newspapers have been digitized. Instead of the laborious slog with a microfilm reader, hunting for the stray reference, one may now retrieve every one from the entire run of a newspaper in a matter of minutes. (This is not quite as straightforward as it sounds. The computer will often misread imperfectly printed letters on crinkled paper, and a diligent researcher needs to anticipate likely misreadings; I have found references to Frank Furness by looking up "Fumess.") But this will scarcely affect the value of this remarkable, intelligent, and exceptionally lovely book. Along with Dr. Johnson's dictionary, it deserves a place on that shortest of all lists: that of reference books that can be read with pleasure.

Michael J. Lewis's latest book is *American Art & Architecture* (Thames & Hudson).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 April 2008, on page 68

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/american-pastoral-3819>