

Basic Detail Report



Title: The Wilds of Lake Superior

Date: 1864

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@28cfa

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: The 1860s were fundamental Moran's growth as an artist. During this period he learned the value that travel and plein-air sketching had for his studio work. Between July and September 1860 Moran made his first extended trip, visiting Lake Superior in Michigan. His sketches such as "The Great Cave, Pictured Rocks from the East" (1860; Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Okla.) reveal his developing interest in a close, quasiscientific investigation of nature and show him to be a conscientious artistic geologist in the manner of John Ruskin. (1) Upon returning to Philadelphia, Moran used his Lake Superior sketches to produce two oils, which he exhibited in 1861 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts: "The Grand Portal of Pictured Rocks, Lake Superior" and "The Pictured Rocks from Miner's River, Lake Superior" (both whereabouts unknown). (2) It was usually in his sketches that Moran displayed a devotion to accurate landscape morphology and geological documentation; he insisted that his finished paintings were not meant to be "literal transcriptions of nature." (3) A second important sketching trip, made from late July to August 1864, took Moran to central Pennsylvania, where he sketched along the Juniata and Conemaugh Rivers, perhaps in an attempt to create an American

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parallel to Turner's "Rivers of France" and "Rivers of England". (4) Although this region was heavily populated and abounded with water-powered mills, Moran generally opted to sketch, and later to paint only the scenic aspects of the sites he visited, rendering images of beauty and tranquility while ignoring signs of commerce. His sketches from this trip include studies of valleys and meandering watercourses, many of which contain identifiable topography, such as Tussey Mountain, as seen in "Spruce Creek, Pennsylvania"; and, as he had done at Lake Superior, he also rendered rocks with great care and individuality, as in the drawing "Warrior Ridge, Huntington, Pennsylvania" (both 1864; Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Okla.). After returning to Philadelphia in late August, Moran began translating his sketches and recollections into finished work. By December he had completed several paintings: he entered the last one in his ledger as opus 11, "The Wilds of Lake Superior". (5) Although his title implies a scene based on his trip of 1860, the painting is not simply a reprisal of his earlier interests, as supported by the inclusion of Tussey Mountain in the central background. Understandably, recent recollections of the summer's sketching trip exerted a strong influence on Moran's composition. The rest of the topography in the painting is general enough to relate to both Lake Superior and central Pennsylvania or to any of the other places that Moran had depicted, such as the Wissahickon or Tohickon Creeks. Then why did he assign such a title? He certainly did not hesitate to acknowledge his experience in central Pennsylvania in the titles of contemporary paintings, such as "The Conemaugh, Autumn" and "The Juniata below Huntingdon" (both 1865; whereabouts unknown). (6) If "The Wilds of Lake Superior" is a hybrid image, then it would be useful to identify images that are thematically purer. There are compositional similarities between "The Wilds" and two other works made in 1864, "Sawmill" and "Twilight Lake Superior" (both Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Okla.), which are known only as large complex charcoal drawings on canvas photographed by John Moran. "Twilight Lake Superior" shares not only a titular kinship but also many key compositional elements. Both portray rocky promontories on the left, a humped mass in the center, and a twisted dying tree on the right. "Sawmill" shares the more perceptible geographical connection with central Pennsylvania as well as such elements as the large flattish rocks that confine the stream's flow, tree stumps, and fallen decaying trees. We may never know why Moran gave "The Wilds of Lake Superior" a title that does not betray the influence of the 1864 trip; his motive may have been nothing more mysterious than assigning a title that he hoped would strike a buyer's fancy. Or the title may be related to the fact that the painting was one of four works commissioned by Philadelphia dealer, James Earles. Perhaps it was assigned to make the painting fit the strictures of the commission, the specific terms of which are unknown. Although Moran himself sometimes switched titles when referring to certain paintings, there is no indication that he ever called "The Wilds of Lake Superior" anything else. (7) AM Bibliography: Thomas Moran Archival Collection, Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art (Gilcrease Museum), Tulsa, Okla.; Thomas Moran Biographical Collection,

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East Hampton Library, N.Y.; Thurman Wilkins, "Thomas Moran, Artist of the Mountains" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966); Joni L. Kinsey, "Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West" (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); Anne Morand, "Thomas Moran: The Field Sketches", 1856-1923 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996); Nancy K. Anderson, "Thomas Moran", exhib. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997). NOTES: 1. In 1873 his views of Lake Superior appeared as wood engravings in "The Pictured Rocks of Lake Superior," Aldine 6 (January 1873): 14-15. 2. Anna Wells Rutledge, ed., "Cumulative Record of Exhibition Catalogues of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts" (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1955), p. 146. 3. Thomas Moran, "Knowledge a Prime Requisite in Art," "Brush and Pencil" 12 (April 1903): 15. 4. The sketches were eventually published as wood engravings in "Aldine" 9 (1878): 156-61. 5. Gilcrease Museum Archives, ledger 4026.4048, p. 11. The entry reads: "No 11 The Wilds of Lake Superior Earles Commission No 3 painted in December 1864 Size 30 x 45 inches Received for it - 300\$ Sold at Earles sale in spring of 1865 to Leonard Grover for - 610\$." 6. Ibid., pp. 13-15. 7. For instance before adopting the title, "Glory of the Canyon" (Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Okla.), Moran had for many years referred to the painting as "The Rock Towers of the Colorado". Dimensions: 30 1/8 x 45 1/8 x 1 1/8 in. (76.5 x 114.6 x 2.9 cm) Frame Dimension: 38 1/2 x 53 1/2 x 4 in. (97.8 x 135.9 x 10.2 cm)