



(James Wells Champney, "Self Portrait" 1880-1885, Boston Museum of Fine Arts)

James Wells Champney (1843-1903)

"A Hartford Biography"

© 2016 Gary W. Knoble

Champney only spent seven years travelling to Hartford once a week to teach at the Art School of the Decorative Arts Society of Hartford (now known as the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, the nation's third oldest art school). But, he had a significant impact on the artistic life of Hartford. He was the first director of the Art School and taught many of Hartford's young women and men who went on to become accomplished artists.

James Wells Champney was born in Boston on July 16, 1843, the son of James H. and Sarah Wells Champney. He was a distant relative of the painter Benjamin Champney. His mother died young and he was reared by his aunts. He attended the Lowell Institute in Boston. When he was 16 he was taught wood engraving. He also attended anatomy classes taught by Oliver Wendell Holmes, a close friend of the novelist Henry James and a future U.S. , a Supreme Court Justice.

Champney served in the Civil War as a corporal in the Massachusetts 45th Volunteers. He fought in the battle of Gettysburg and was eventually discharged when he contracted malaria. After his discharge he taught drawing at Dr. Dio Lewis' "Young Ladies Seminary" in Lexington, Massachusetts, where he first met his future wife, Elizabeth Johnson Williams.

In 1866 he went to Paris to study with Edouard Frere and in 1868 he studied with Joseph Francois Henri Van Lerius at the Antwerp Academy. He spent the winter of 1869-1870 in Rome and the winter of 1871-1872 in Paris.

In 1873 eloped with Elizabeth Williams, who was living with her family in Kansas, to save her from an arranged marriage to a Kansas farmer. In the same year he accompanied Edward King, an author and journalist, on an expedition through the Southern Appalachians. "...he with camp stool and dripping umbrella slung on his shoulders, with broad slouch hat crushed down over his eyes, and a variegated panorama of the road along which he had passed painted by the weather upon his back--the artist, whose hands were filled with the mystic tin box; behold him! the envied cynosure of boyish eyes." (Edward King)

In 1874-1875 Champney and his wife spent time in Spain during the Carlist war. Elizabeth was a graduate of Vassar College and the author of 30 novels. The two often collaborated with Elizabeth writing and Champney providing the illustrations. They had two children, Edouard Frere Champney, who became a Washington Architect, and Maria Mitchell Champney (Mrs. John Humphry).



(James Wells Champney and his daughter, 1874)

He established a studio in Boston in 1873, but in 1876 the Champneys moved to Deerfield, Massachusetts where he established a studio in the ancestral home of his wife's father, Samuel Barnard Williams. The couple spent the summers there until his death in 1903.

In 1877 he was hired by Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, then just six years old, to create an art department. He taught at Smith until 1884. He was also a founder of the Smith Art Gallery.

In the same year the Decorative Art Society of Hartford established an Art School to teach young women how to draw and paint, hiring two women from Boston as teachers. The new school was so successful that in January 1878 they hired Champney. In announcing his appointment the *Hartford Courant* lauded Champney's talent for painting, drawing, and teaching in the "French Method". It was noted that he had travelled widely in Europe and had just returned from a trip to Brazil. For seven years (1878-1885) Champney traveled once a week to Hartford to conduct his classes. The tuition was \$12 for twelve lessons, payable in advance. Under Champney's direction the school thrived. Champney was assisted by a local artist, John Edward Wylie (?-1882) who taught watercolor.

In 1879 Champney established a studio in New York City but continued to teach in Northampton and Hartford. A *Courant* article on September 29, 1880 announcing the opening of the school year noted that Champney had just returned from Spain and Portugal and that his students will "*receive the same methods of instruction as are given at the Art League in New York, at Cooper institute and at the art schools in Paris.*"

The classes at the Society art school continued to grow so much that additional teachers were hired to assist Mr. Champney. In June 1882 the school, located in the Cheney Building on Main Street, rented additional studio space in the Phoenix Building nearby, and hired Dwight Tryon (1849-1925), a Hartford born painter who was also teaching at Smith. Tryon taught classes in "out-of-door painting" during the summer. In January 1883, Charles Russell Loomis (1857-1936) of New Haven was also hired.



(The Cheney Building, Main St., Hartford)



(The Phoenix Building on Main St, Hartford)

In 1881 Champney recommended one of his students Karl Gerhardt (1853-1940) to Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) who sponsored Gerhardt to study in Paris. Gerhardt became a noted sculptor. His most famous work is probably his bust of Clemens. Mary Rogers Williams (1857-1907) of Hartford, another early student eventually went on to teach at Smith College under Dwight Tryon (1849-1925) in 1888.

In the spring of 1884 Champney, who had recently begun working in pastels, announced that he was resigning his positions at both the Decorative Art Society School and Smith College to devote himself full time to his painting. Dwight Tryon of Hartford replaced him at the Art Society School and also took over his position at Smith.

From 1885 on, Champney was noted primarily for his genre pastels. He became an Associate of the National Academy of Design in 1892. In 1897 he had an important show of over 40 of his pastels at the Knoedler Gallery in New York City.

He was a member of the American Watercolor Club, the Boston Art Club, the Boston Watercolor Club, the Century Association, the American Fine Arts Society, and the New York Camera Club.

On May 1, 1903 Champney was at the Camera Club to develop some film. An elevator at the club was being used to transport a large table on the top of the elevator cab. Saying he was in a hurry, Champney entered the elevator despite the admonition of the elevator operator to stay out. The table shifted, lodging in the elevator's mechanism and stopped the elevator between floors. Again, despite the operator's warnings, he forced open the door and attempted to swing to the floor below. He fell down the elevator shaft to his death.

Champney was highly regarded in Deerfield. The "History and Proceedings of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association" written shortly after his death states, "*No one enjoyed living more than Mr. Champney; his industry was marvelous; he loved his work, he loved his play; there were no dull hours for him.*" He is buried on the old burying ground in Deerfield in a spot he had chosen among the veterans of the Revolutionary War, "*the only one there buried who served in the war that saved the nation.*"

Antiques and Fine Art, James Wells Champney

Art Amateur, 1895, Biographical interview

Collections Database, Five Colleges and Historic Deerfield Museum Consortium, "James Wells Champney

Dearinger, David B., "Paintings and Sculpture in the Collection of the National Academy of Design", Volume 1. 1826-1925, pages 91-92

Gulahiye.blogspot.com, "His Friends Called Him Champ", 2007

Hartford Courant, October 22, 1878

Historic Deerfield, Champney papers.

"History and Proceedings of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association", Volume 4, 1905

Memorial Hall.mass.edu (1874 photograph)

“National Cyclopaedia of American Biography”, Volume 11, James Wells Champney, 1909

New York Times, May 2, 1903

Oxford Gallery Inc. website, James Wells Champney

Wikipedia, James Wells Champney



James Wells Champney, "Hamilton, Mass In Back of Joseph F. Danes Farm" painted (obscured),
oil on board, 10 ½" x 13 ¾"