

Basic Detail Report



Title: Autumn Day

Date: 1911

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@291ac

Medium: Oil on wood panel

Description: "Autumn Day" is a fine example of the Tonalist landscapes for which Tryon is known. It is an intimate work, lyrical, elusive, and ethereal, and it has the look that the artist made his own: a row of trees growing in a New England field, their delicate tracery of limbs and leaves silhouetted against the sky. Popular in America from about 1880 to 1915, Tonalism is related to the mid-century Barbizon movement in France. (1) Although Tonalist paintings were as intimate and emotional as those of the Barbizon painters, Tonalists generally imposed on their landscapes a dominant color—often gray, gold, or blue—or an envelope of mist that blurred forms and produced an even hue. Trees were focal points in the meadow and marsh scenes they all favored, but Tryon's trees are different. They are generally young, tall, slender, even a bit sinuous, and in a line across the middle ground. The two small stands in Autumn Day are more naturalistic and closer to the picture plane than most by the artist. In the late 1880s, when he first began painting the seascapes and landscapes that were famous in his time, Tryon avoided autumnal scenes because he said they reminded him of death. After 1900, however, he

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painted fall scenes frequently; by about 1908, some of these, such as "Autumn Day", were lit by an overcast daylight, a departure from the dawns, sunsets, and moonlights he had been executing. (2) Working from memory in the studio (a practice he shared with fellow Tonalists), he often took years to finish a painting, setting it aside for long intervals, working and reworking it, until at last, as he said, "All of a sudden, I know what I want. After that, one beautiful tone suggests another still more beautiful-and I try for that. And so on until it is all beautiful." (3) Tryon had a well-earned reputation as a superb colorist. Autumn Day offers a color scheme closer to nature than that in some of his other works. Yet until 1913, when he was perhaps responding to the high-keyed modernism in the Armory Show, he generally chose colors that, though subdued, did not sharply deviate from local color. The boldest color area in Autumn Day is the immediate foreground, where a band of green grass meets the eye. A small silvery patch, representing water, is tucked behind, followed by a horizontal row of rust-colored stalks. In the middle distance a thin streak of gold impasto and a line of dark-colored dabs appear to indicate a meadow edged by a stone wall. A soft blue area of sky is near the horizon, below the gray clouds. While these colors are the most obvious, closer examination reveals a much richer range of coloration, which, by 1911, Tryon was applying in so many ways and with so many layers of paint and varnish that his friend and pupil, the painter Henry C. White, could only marvel at such "strange and unheard-of expedients . . . fantastic, almost beyond the province and possibilities of pigment." (4) At the very least, the brushwork in Autumn Day ranges from controlled strokes (trunks and branches of trees), to rubs and smudges (distant hills), to dabs and gestures (foliage and foreground), to impasto (meadow and bits of foreground). The refinement in Tryon's work was the result of lengthy intense effort. Tryon never painted outdoors. He liked to begin in the studio with a special wood panel, made with five thin veneers laid at right angles to one another and surfaced with mahogany or whitewood, on which he put a pure white ground in order to make his paintings luminous. (5) He laid out the composition with brilliant colors before painting a more detailed but still brightly colored picture over the outline. After a period of gestation, he painted a more refined picture over the first, and then he began the long process, often deliberately interrupted, of creating atmospheric effects with tone after tone and color upon color. (6) Art historian Linda Merrill has aptly called the result a layering of impressions. (7) Tryon's landscapes celebrate the New England fields and meadows that he loved, especially those near his summer home in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, but his paintings are more synthetic than real. "The less imitation the more suggestion," he explained, "and hence more poetry." Subtle gradations of tone tend to diminish spatial depth in the works of the Tonalists, and these painters often flattened their canvases further by such means as simplification of form and a high horizon line. Tryon, however, generally kept the horizon low, as in Autumn Day, and he emphasized, even stretched, the horizontality of an open-ended landscape by arranging it in bands.

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Autumn Day is not without depth-trees and hills in the background are smaller than elements in the foreground-but nothing plunges the viewer into deep space. Rather, the horizontal strips invite an awareness of the picture surface itself, from the richly worked bottom, up one band after another, to the somewhat thinly painted sky, where the indistinct and lacy treetops, airy and evanescent, with what Tryon called "the wonderful anatomy" of the trees showing through, stop the eye much as a high horizon would. (9) Tryon's tender trees seem to connect earth and sky. With their harmony of composition, form, and color, landscapes like "Autumn Day" depict what Tryon himself called an "ideal country." (10) At the very least, a work like this one is meant to evoke an emotional response in the viewer that is akin to the deep feelings of the artist. HCC Bibliography: Frederic F. Sherman, "The Landscapes of Dwight W. Tryon," "Art in America 7" (December 1918): 31-38; Charles H. Caffin, "The Art of Dwight W. Tryon-An Appreciation" (New York: Forest Press, 1919); Henry C. White, "The Life and Art of Dwight William Tryon" (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1930); Linda Merrill, "An Ideal Country: Paintings by Dwight William Tryon in the Freer Gallery of Art" (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 1990). Notes: 1. On Tonalism, see Wanda M. Corn, "The Color of Mood: American Tonalism, 1880-1910," exhib. cat. (San Francisco: M. H. De Young Memorial Museum and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1972); and William H. Gerdts, Diana Dimodica Sweet, and Robert R. Preato, "Tonalism: An American Experience," exhib. cat. (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1982). 2. Merrill, "Ideal Country," p. 155. 3. Quoted in White, "Life and Art," p. 181. The italics are Tryon's. 4. Ibid., p. 180. 5. Ibid., p. 177. 6. Merrill, "An Ideal Country," p. 75. 7. Ibid. 8. Notes by Tryon on p. 2 of his copy of "W. M. Hunt's Talks on Art," (Helen M. Knowlton, comp. Boston: Houghton and Co., 1875), Hillyer Art Library, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. 9. Quoted in Merrill, "Ideal Country," p. 71. 10. Merrill ("Ideal Country," p. 74) reports Tryon once saying that if he could have lived year round in South Dartmouth rather than New York City, he would not have had to create an ideal country. Dimensions: 10 7/8 x 15 3/4 in. (1/8" in. thick)