

Basic Detail Report



Title: Shad Fishing on the Hudson

Date: 1846

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3edf6

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: In 1846, ten years after his return from the war for Texas' independence, William Ranney painted his first western genre paintings, "Hunting Wild Horses" (Enron Art Foundation/Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha) and "The Lasso" (private collection). His depictions of trappers, cowboys, horses, and pioneers were to bring him his greatest fame, even though he never returned to the West. With his friend and fellow easterner Arthur F. Tait, Ranney helped establish a romantic armchair view of the western experience. In 1846 Ranney's western scenes were an experiment, one of various topics he tackled in his search for subjects that would pique his audience's interest. That year he also painted "Crossing the Ferry--Scene on the Peedee" (Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Ga.), "Shad Fishing on the Hudson", and several other subjects. Apparently the young Ranney sought inspiration from all the places he had lived: along the lower Hudson River, near the border of North and South Carolina, and on the prairies of Texas. Although Ranney's father had been a sea captain, Ranney himself had only a passing interest

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in the world of boats, though he did paint a few marine scenes in his early career. "Shad Fishing on the Hudson", with its dramatic waves, suggests the ocean but is in fact a view of river life. While one man steers a shallow-bottom boat with a rear oar, three others work at hauling a net suspended between poles. A shad has been caught by its gills in the net. In the distance to the left and right are the bluffs along the Hudson, and various boats dot the farther reaches of the river. Shad is a river-born fish that matures in the ocean and then returns to the river to spawn in the spring. The first warm weather and the breakup of the ice signal the beginning of shad season, a major spring event along the lower Hudson in the nineteenth century. The all-time record catch of 4,332,000 pounds in 1889 guaranteed that shad was a plentiful, cheap food source in the New York and New Jersey region. (1) But by the early twentieth century, pollution and development along the river had severely reduced the shad population. While drift nets and seines were frequently used to catch shad, the fishermen in Ranney's painting employ a method that depended on the tides. A net up to six hundred feet long was suspended on the downstream side of poles driven into the mud and set across the current of the river. As the tide came in, the gills of the large shad swimming upstream would catch in the net. At the turning of the tide, fishermen would retrieve the nets and remove the fish. Every six hours during shad season, the men would race to set or pull in the nets, making it hard but profitable work. (2) The New Britain picture captures the pale light of April and cool gray-green water tossed by blustery winds. The water is beautifully painted, while the figures are somewhat sketchy, particularly for Ranney. As in most of his paintings, there is a bold patch of red, on the man in the bow, and the figures are well balanced. Unlike just about every other work he did, there are no attending animals (dogs, horses, cows, oxen). The sketch "Three Fishermen in a Skiff" (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) could be a study for "Shad Fishing on the Hudson". The boat is similarly positioned, but the men are all seated, concentrating on the actions of the bowman who wields a gaff. Ranney was a good friend of William Sidney Mount (3) and it is possible that he had seen Mount's "Eel Spearing at Setauket" (1845; New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, N.Y.), completed the previous year. While Ranney's painting feels agitated and rough, especially compared to the monumental calm of Mount's eel spearer, both paintings employ long poles as diagonals to structure a fishing scene. Ranney would soon become a master of "frozen mobility" (4) in his paintings of duck hunters and western trappers alike, perhaps as a result of studying Mount's work. LW

Bibliography: Francis S. Grubar, "William Ranney, Painter of the Early West", exhib. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1962); Linda Ayres, "William Ranney," in "American Frontier Life: Early Western Painting and Prints", ed. Ron Tyler (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), pp. 78-107; Mark Thistlethwaite, "William Tylee Ranney: East of the Mississippi", exhib. cat. (Chadds Ford, Penn.: Brandywine River Museum, 1991); Estill Curtis Pennington, "Passage and Progress in the Works of William Tylee Ranney", exhib. cat. (Augusta, Ga.: Morris Museum of

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Art, 1993). Notes: 1 . Jeffrey Simpson, "The Hudson River 1850-1918". "A Photographic Portrait" (Tarrytown, N.Y.: Sleepy Hollow Restoration, 1898), p. 56. 2. Clifton Johnson, "The Picturesque Hudson" (New York: Macmillan, 1915), p. 78. 3. Ranney's widow asked Mount, who thought Ranney "a glorious fellow," to complete Ranney's last painting after his death (Thistlethwaite, "William Tylee Ranney", pp. 35-36). 4. Grubar, "William Ranney", p. 16.
Dimensions: Frame: 32 7/8 x 42 1/2 x 2 3/4 in. (83.5 x 108 x 7 cm) Image: 25 1/2 x 35 in. (64.8 x 88.9 cm)