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Aesthetic Self-Reliance: Emersonian Influence on American Art

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Aesthetic Self-Reliance: Emersonian Influence
on the Development of American Art

Adrienne Rumsey

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetic Self-Reliance: Emersonian Influence
On the Development of American Art

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This essay is an examination of the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on the development of American art through his essays, specifically his writings on nature and self-reliance. Through emphasizing individual potential, Emerson also influenced the visual arts. Instead of following the required formula in Europe by attending certain ateliers and seeking prestigious patronage, American artists, namely the Luminists and the Ashcan School, sought to address the issues of their day and portray life as it existed around them. Each of these groups formed during periods of time when American society was shifting and the American identity was evolving. Through addressing the issues at hand, artists formed an American aesthetic separate from the traditional methodologies in Europe, in turn, contributing to a national identity.

After the Civil War, the United States underwent considerable change as different areas of the nation redefined themselves in conjunction to new laws and shifts in social structure. For the Luminists, the writings of Emerson concerning nature were especially applicable during this time since most people in the United States lived in rural circumstances and still struggled to define a national art separate from European tradition. Emerson focused on nature’s ability to uplift and inspire mankind, bringing them closer to the Divine and America’s unique and untamed nature was one aspect that separated it from Europe. The Luminists focused on their surrounding natural environment, portraying the connection between man and nature.

During the Progressive Age, Robert Henri followed Emerson’s instruction to illustrate life as it existed for him in the early twentieth century. By this time, most people had moved to the cities in search of employment and everyone was crammed into small tenements. Henri taught his art students to value and illustrate life in all of its gritty reality. In this way, he followed Emerson to communicate beauty through an honest interpretation of life.

Although diverse in their techniques, the Luminists and Robert Henri both utilized the ideas of Emerson to help define an American aesthetic.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Henri, Luminists, American aesthetic
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Introduction

In the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson recognized in this new country the need for self-value in the face of older civilizations. In elevating the status of the common man, Emerson came forward as a proponent for change in American dependence on European examples of industry, business, and the arts. By examining his influence on the visual arts in America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically on the Luminists and Robert Henri, I will demonstrate how his ideas were used to help further the development of an American aesthetic identity, and helped define the role of the American artist during difficult times in the United States’ progress as a country. In this section, I will introduce the foundation of Emerson’s career and ideas that would go on to inspire American artists to portray the world around them according to Emerson’s philosophy on nature, the artist, and the individual. He accomplished this through what Lawrence Buell terms as being an “anti-mentor”; he gave ideas on life, but gave no instruction on how to implement them. His purpose was not to have followers, but to get each person to understand and follow their own thought and intuition. The following chapters will then expound how Emerson specifically influenced the Luminists of the nineteenth century through his essays on nature. The next century began with Robert Henri teaching his students the writings of Emerson and utilizing these ideas to bring better awareness to the issues surrounding them. This demonstrates how Emerson defined America’s distinctive qualities as a nation as well as set a pattern of bold honesty and individuality in American perspective in art for following generations.

The difficulty surrounding Emersonianism is the absolute impossibility to follow or deny him. Buell first coins the term “anti-mentor” to explain the complexity of Emerson’s relationship with those who attempted to follow him. Many came to him seeking direction, but
came away frustrated because he gave no explicit instruction on how to live. He was an influential figure through his writings, but refused to be followed in a traditional sense. Because of this ambiguity, some perceived him as distant and heartless and tried to go against Emerson, denying that he had any connection with true life. However, by turning counter to him, they actually followed what Emerson wanted for the individual. His own prose invites constant disagreement, but also brings readers deeper into his thoughts. He wanted everyone to go against authority in their search for truth, and if they perceived him as an authority that was wrong, then he invites you to eradicate him if you find no need for him. In his address “American Scholar”, he tells his audience that “each age, it is found, must write its own books...The books of an older period will not fit this”(Emerson 2001, 59). Each era must redefine itself according to the truth they find at that time because with each period of time, man is changing and evolving and need to think for themselves, building on what has been done in the past. According to Emerson, people no longer assert themselves, “man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say ‘I think’, ‘I am’, but quotes some saint or sage”(Emerson 2001, 128). Man needs to throw off past authority to know himself and the world better. To resist Emerson is to start with him and then follow through with what he advocates; whether one goes against him or not does not matter. His purpose was not to bring men to him, but to bring them to themselves; his insights were meant to create independence from the influence of others, including himself. The end result is to find oneself in Emerson’s thought and then build on it.

The nineteenth century was a period of intense literary production in the United States as figures such as Washington Irving, Mark Twain, and James Fenimore Cooper wrote about the American frontier and aspects of American life that contributed to form a unique American style.
F.O. Matthiessen identifies the mid-nineteenth century as America’s renaissance, “not as a re-birth of values that had existed previously in America, but…by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture” (Matthiessen vii).

Emerson was in the midst of this literary movement. He became known for his assertions on the progress and potential of United States’ citizenry. His first publication, *Nature* (1836), established his ideas on the connection between mankind and the divine which would further be developed into the elevated potential of man in later essays such as “Self-Reliance”. These ideas placed him on the forefront of nineteenth century American philosophy and ideology, a position he has maintained despite changes in thought and philosophy over time. The development and elevation of the common man has become an essentially American idea as its society separated itself from the social structure and class systems of Europe; this system of thought would designate Emerson in the minds of most as an essentially American thinker.

Through his elevation and democratization of the common man, Emerson also located the role of the artist in America. In Europe, artists followed a specific academic road, which required them to attend established artists’ ateliers, instructing them on the appropriate material and methods for their art. Artists were dependent on finding the correct teachers who would then lead them to a wealthy patronage on whom they would possibly be dependent for a long period. Finding the right ateliers and patronage was contingent on an artist having a wealthy background and status in society. This follows the social and class structure continually held in Europe, placing artists in a certain role in the societal configuration according to their connections and background. In Emerson’s essays, he celebrated the freedom of citizens in the United States to live without the limitations of established class systems and urged his audiences to implement this freedom through following their current, personal insight, independent of the dictates of the
past or society. In this vein, he further elevates the artist as a democratic prophet, a role anyone could aspire to, but required an especial affinity for portraying truth and addressing contemporary issues. In “The Poet”, he advises writers to address what is happening at the moment and, although he is primarily speaking of literature, his call for a democratic aesthetic resounds within the visual arts as well. Each person sees life, but it is the poet that integrates everything into art, making it beautiful and full of life. To Emerson, “the chief value of the new fact, is to enhance the great and constant fact of Life” (Emerson 2001, 189). By advocating documenting the beautiful in the mundane, Emerson sets a tone for future artists in America to value what is around them as worthy of artistic portrayal as opposed to Europe’s ateliers, which taught to look only at high portraiture and grand historical scenes as worthy of being considered great art.

Despite never having written a full treatise on aesthetics, Emerson’s essays each contain artistic concepts that form an overall push to express individuality and truth, ideas that influenced the development of American art into the twentieth century. These ideas began in his first publication, *Nature*, which explains the aesthetics of incompleteness; that the artist’s role is to suggest truth since “he can only approximate it himself” (Emerson 2001, 47). Truth is the true motivation in all things, but since it is perceived differently in each person, it can only be suggested by an artist to venture near the experience of others in his art. In art, the artist uses fragmented aesthetics, leaving holes in where the viewer may fill in his own ideas, building on his own experience. Emerson’s ideas on art and aesthetics would later build in his essays “Art” and “The Poet”, where he declares that the beauty of form lies within the soul as opposed to the empty knowledge of those who have studied “rules and particulars, or some limited judgment of color or form, which is exercised for amusement or for show” (Emerson 2001, 183). This
connects with *Nature* and “Self-Reliance” in his constant assertion that truth affirmed within oneself is the root and foundation of fulfillment in life and outward beauty.

*Emerson’s Ideological Development*

The root of Emerson’s ideas on aesthetics stems from a liberal Christian background. He was initially connected with the Unitarians who were known for their unorthodox interpretation of Christianity; Unitarians did not agree with the common Calvinist notion of inherent sinfulness and depravity of man. They were also recognized for their secular avocations such as science and philosophy, becoming known for their abilities in essay-writing and literary criticism (Buell 1973, 26) Through their secular pursuits, they saw a connection between the arts and religion, perceiving beauty and truth as inextricably connected, a view Emerson would commonly advocate in his essays. One of the leading Unitarians of the nineteenth century, William Ellery Channing, declared that “There is no such thing as naked truth, at least as far as moral subjects are concerned…truth is warm and living with the impressions and affections which it has produced in the soul from which it issues” (Channing 25). Unitarian clergy, known for their liberal interpretations of doctrine, taught that whatever induced purity of sentiment or changes the heart for good, was divinely inspired. This stemmed from a belief that God was an understanding and loving being whom man should emulate through developing spiritual aspects of the individual, “self-culture”, an idea that would lead to Emerson’s ideas on self-reliance. This theological liberalism would create a climate more conducive to Emerson’s humanistic ideas as well as encourage artistic growth based on humanistic footing.

Upon breaking from organized religion, Emerson became associated with the transcendentalists, a group who focused primarily on philosophy instead of religion, which would expand his understanding and broaden his views beyond just the spiritual. . The most
influential ideas for the transcendentalists came from German Idealism, philosophies advocated by Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Ficht. German Idealism championed the inherent powers of the human mind, opposing Lockean philosophy in that man’s consciousness was primarily formed by what he could materially prove. Along with German Idealism, transcendentalists adhered to ideas from the English Romantics such as Thomas Carlyle and William Wordsworth along with Eastern religions and philosophy. This sampling of world philosophies defined transcendentalism as a way to perceive the world centered on individual consciousness (Gura 8). Looking back on the movement from 1860, Emerson called this period a time when man became aware of his own mind and developed a higher consciousness of himself (Porte 18).

Emerson himself is categorized by an adherence to a transcendentalism that focused on the self before reaching out to the community as opposed to others like Orestes Brownson and George Ripley who advocated a focus on community development before the individual. Emerson was especially influenced by Carlyle and admired Wordworth’s occupation with internal spiritual growth and “his sensitivity to nature as the corresponding mirror to the soul” (Porte 18). Both Carlyle and Wordsworth would be sources for Emerson’s *Nature*. Emerson’s consequent essays applied this idealism to various issues, one of the only transcendentalists to make the connection between personal consciousness and aesthetics.

Much of Emerson’s ideas on visual art are derived from the beauty of the environment and the affects on the soul it induces. His first publication, *Nature*, was a small book, but one of the primary treatises on the affect of nature on the spirit, which was an idea that was being newly developed in contrast to former ideas of nature as an evil and foreboding wilderness (Nash 245). In *Nature*, Emerson derives his ideas on Divine presence among man as well as the importance and impact of surrounding, environmental beauty on the soul. Emerson’s definition of nature
includes not just the environmental element of earth and sky, but everything which is
distinguished “as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must
be ranked under this name, NATURE” (Emerson 2001, 28). During the nineteenth century, the
term “art” had many connotations beyond just the visual arts, but included the arts in all forms.
Emerson’s writings value both the fine arts and folk art, but for the purposes of this essay, I will
focus directly on his application to the visual arts. Emerson elucidates the many functions of
nature, both physical and philosophical, but his section on Beauty he places as nobler than the
simply useful. The world around the actions of human life is pleasurable in and of itself and we
find gratification in nature from its form, color, and motion, not only from what it provides.
Nature is beautiful because these disparate parts become unified and the eye produces
perspective, “which integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well
colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the
landscape which they compose, is round and symmetrical” (Emerson 2001, 31).

Through reflection on viewed beauty, man is able to later reproduce it in his mind, “not
for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (Emerson 2001, 34). In nature, there is an order
that the intellect perceives and through the order of the objects in nature, man is able to see the
mind and workings of God. Nature, therefore, becomes a source for man’s own invention and
creativity. Art is not nature nor is it a soul, but it is the soul expressing itself through imitation of
nature. Nature “refers to essences unchanged by man, space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is
applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture”
(Emerson 2001, 28). Any manifestation of the creative powers of the soul, therefore, becomes art
whether fine or useful.
From *Nature* Emerson develops the idea of fragmented aesthetics, which continues in his later essays. It is this perception of the whole through its parts, that Buell identifies as Emerson’s foundational idea of poetics “to underscore the most basic theme of Nature as a whole: physical nature’s potential to energize the powers of the human mind once we awaken fully to their inherent interdependence” (Buell 2003, 112). Emerson begins the essay with a mandate for the public to stop looking retrospectively, building up the events and accomplishments of the past. Each man should accomplish his own feats and establish his own relationship with the world. It is through developing this relationship that man is able to understand himself; “In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature” (Emerson 2001, 29). Nature is the fundamental context in which we live our lives and therefore we integrate elements of nature into our own character and the way we think. Instead of always looking to the past for direction, Emerson refers to nature as a source to energize the mind and provide the true context and understanding of the world in which we live.

Years after publishing *Nature*, Emerson wrote more specifically on fragmented aesthetics in his essay “Art”. Here, Emerson explains that, although art is a vehicle with which man expresses himself, to be fully clear in his expression he relies on well established symbolism; “Thus the new in art is always formed out of the old”, furthering the ideas that the past is necessary as a resource, but should be used sparingly (Emerson 2001, 124). However, it takes a special kind of perception in the artist to create, the ability to see parts as a whole and to read literal details symbolically. This symbolism was important as he urged others to “avoid flabby abstraction and ‘fasten words again to visible things’” (Buell 2003, 110). This does not necessarily mean an exact replica or representation of an object, but what is communicated
through the composition of a work. Although Emerson’s definition of true beauty lay in the unity of a surface variety, he was attracted to fragment aesthetics because of its ability to transcend words and go beyond a literal translation, leaving holes to be filled by the viewer. In this way, unity is defined by the viewer and the artist develops his own soul as well as the soul of the audience. In Emerson’s words, “the soul becomes” with an emphasis on the transition. The soul, and therefore the man, is not a static object, but a malleable state of being that can be influenced by the world around him and even further by seeing that world illustrated through someone else’s view. For Emerson, there was multiple ways to understand the world and each individual should not stop with only one understanding, but continue to find new ways to perceive and understand the world.

Emerson’s discussion of aesthetics continued in “The Poet”, but this time he focused on the role of the artist as a communicator of higher truths, a prophet. Although directed to literature, the application of his ideas fits within the visual arts as well. The writer, and artist, is a unique individual that stands out from others because of his ability to see life through this lens of truth, but then the real importance of his character comes in his ability to convey these truths accurately to the rest of the world. Previous to this time, many had demeaned intuition and emotion, relying more on a Lockean philosophy that relied mainly on the use of logic. In “The Poet”, Emerson repudiates this and declares that form is the vehicle for all beauty, which originates in the soul; no beauty can exist independent of the soul and “beauty is the creator of the universe” (Emerson 2001, 185). It is imperative that the artist be true to his own experience to accurately express truth in its purest form.

Above all, Emerson never loses sight of the individual. Although art may portray the beautiful and intellectual, it can never transcend the importance of man itself, that “a great man is
a new statue in every attitude and action. A beautiful woman is a picture which drives all beholders nobly mad” (Emerson 438), and art cannot do anything except by an inspired character. As wonderful as art is, it cannot be forgotten that the idea originated from an inspired nature, the picture itself cannot transcend the subject itself, nor can the end result promise more than the intended aim. In the end, it is what ideas come from the art itself that is the ultimate achievement; what ideas it inspires in the individual that makes art worthwhile. Art’s ultimate achievement is to convey inspired truth observed from the outside world.

This search for truth is the most important and fundamental motivation for Emerson and initializes his break from tradition, which appears in many of Emerson’s essays as the primary step towards truth. He begins Nature by stating that it is imperative that the present break from the sepulchers of the past, and to do otherwise stunts the progression and abilities of man as well as the divinity of which the individual is capable. Society is built on tradition as people know what they are taught and, unless they are taught to follow their own impulses, they will simply follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before, missing the opportunity to find their true self and what they have to offer to change the world. According to Emerson, it is the tradition of conformity in the guise of general society that squelches the individual. He cautions against becoming too involved in society and losing the vision of one’s own direction. Society has the potential to wash out a person’s individual character in favor of what’s popular. The opposite of living for truth is to live to please others.

Although Emerson is not particularly known for his view on aesthetics, he recognized the importance of literature and the visual art’s contributions as a manifestation of the soul. According to Joel Porte, in a time when industry was beginning to expand and infiltrate the personal life of every member of society, Emerson believed that “trade and government will not
alone be the favored aims of mankind, but every useful, every elegant art, every exercise of the imagination, the height of reason, the noblest affection, the purest religion will find their home in our institutions, and write our laws for the benefit of men” (Porte 11). Art is important, whether in words or objects for its ability to express the soul of man for “the man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (Buell 2003, 119). This is a broad application of the term “art” as Emerson uses it to describe any person’s creative work. However, for the purposes of this essay, it is especially applied to the effects his ideas had on the visual arts.

*Emerson’s Influence on American Artists*

As Emerson became more renown, his subjects broadened to include ideas ranging from the divinity of nature to activist issues including abolitionism and the suffrage movement. His voice carried over to the visual arts, explaining the role of the artist and poet as prophets of truth whose responsibility was to convey the world clearly to those around them. These ideas grounded artists like the Luminists and Robert Henri along with the Ashcan School in their own periods of American society. As the United States regrouped after the Civil War, the Luminists, a group of individuals painting separately along the East Coast, each found inspiration in the natural landscape, unique to America for its uncharted wilderness. They specialized in calm seascapes and horizontal landscapes, focusing on luminescent qualities of light. Later, Robert Henri documented the growing cultural city centers like Philadelphia and New York as immigrants and new wealth changed the dynamics of a nation shifting according to new demands of fast development. Through these periods of national instability, these individuals, diverse in their focus and subject matter, were guided in their artistic progress through the ideas of Emerson in his essays *Nature*, “Art”, “Self-Reliance”, and “The Poet”. Their artistic achievements would
begin as personal endeavors, later expanding through intellectual exchanges with other writers and artists to define the art of their time.

Both groups contributed to define America’s aesthetic by breaking from European tradition and emphasizing individual perception as well as a focus on truth in life, ideas spurred by Emerson’s writings. The Luminists and the Ashcan School developed during a time when America needed an identity separate from Europe and they acted as a reaction against European artistic methods to further America’s artistic individuality separate from Old World influence. The Luminists applied this specifically to their depictions of America’s unique landscapes while Henri depicted cityscapes and portraits, illustrating America’s growing urban population in the beginning of the 20th century. It is important to make this connection since Ralph Waldo Emerson is an important contributor to American ideology, and his influence on the translation of American art influences how we can perceive the progress of our nation’s expressive character.

Although Emerson advocated personal thought and endeavor, he left little indication on how his ideas were to be implemented. This lead to many being influenced by him, but expressing this influence in diverse ways. Thus, although the Luminists and the Ashcan school were both part of Emerson’s legacy, there is little else to connect them. Although this discordance in Emerson’s legacy continues, he has become a reliable source of inspiration in American art through the twentieth century as photographers and others continued to use Henri’s ideas, and therefore Emerson, as a basis for ideological composition in their art.

Much of this argument stands on the issue of influence, how Emerson influenced generations of American artists. The issue of influence is a difficult one to address, however,
because of the tendency to simplify the process of drawing a direct line from one figure to another. There is little to indicate that one person is ever fully influenced by another even in the few cases that person directly quotes or acknowledges being influenced by them. With Emerson, the issue of influence actually increases in difficulty since he never wanted to be emulated, but consistently urged his audience to follow their own predilections. This refers back to his role as an anti-mentor. To strictly follow him is the only way to actually defy him, but here again, this is impossible because he never gave any indication of how his ideas were to be followed. On top of Emerson’s role as an anti-mentor, the issue of influence also involves pinning down what is actually a product of his influence. Merely observing an association, no matter how substantial, between his ideas and an artists’ execution does not guarantee an actual thread of connection. To state that there is a specific influence on another implies that there is a “right reading” of a text or work of art, but “no ‘right readings’ of a text [or work of art] can occur since its ‘meaning’ always involves a motivated (mis)interpretation of other texts” (Renza 188). To establish one influence is to willfully count out other possible meanings of a text since to classify an influence on a work is to define the author’s direction and implications. Identifying an influence limits the breadth of a text or work of art, but, at the same time, can enhance the meaning, tying it to other sources of inspiration. Despite the possibilities of limitation in establishing a line of influence, it is still possible and necessary to explore the possibilities of Emerson’s influence beyond the literary. It is a line of thought that has been suggested in the past and is worth revisiting to new depths for its potential to reveal new veins of understanding concerning Emerson and the development of the American aesthetic.

With this in mind, I will attempt to examine the influence, direct and indirect, of Ralph Waldo Emerson on the specific art movements of the Luminists in the nineteenth century and the
works of Robert Henri in the twentieth century. Although diverse in their treatment of the visual arts, Emerson acted as a tie that bound these two eras of art because of their impact on the development of American art through implementing his ideas, addressing the world around them directly, independent of Europe’s methodologies and subject matter. Through these observations I hope to show how Emerson’s aesthetics were influential in the visual arts as a response to the need for an American aesthetic during times when the identity of the nation as a whole was called into question. This also contributed to the American conception of artistic genius. This will also illustrate how Emerson’s influence changed according to the period of time in which his ideas were applied, identifying him as an anti-mentor figure, someone who advocated ideas, but did not give specific methods to implement them.
Chapter Two- Luminist Landscapes

In 1844, Emerson stressed the need to develop an American culture through an emphasis on its wilderness and natural landscape. To the Mercantile Library Association in Boston, he identified America’s potential and opportunities and named it “the country of the Future” (Altemus 275), calling for the next generation to stop looking at Europe as an ultimate authority. America revered Europe, sending their artists and others to learn its structure and systems, considering this to be the optimum method to better operate as a society. There was a constant downplay of America’s qualities due to its youth, and so Emerson urges his listeners to focus more on the ways America differs from its European counterpart and appreciate those things this new country has to offer. He declared,

let us live in America, too thankful for our want of feudal institutions. Our houses and towns are like mosses and lichens, so slight and new; but youth is a fault of which we shall daily mend. This land, too, is as old as the Flood, and wants no ornament or privilege which nature could bestow. Here stars, here woods, here hills, here animals, here men abound, and the vast tendencies concur of a new order (Altemus 294).

In his remarks, Emerson uses natural epistemology to demonstrate that it is the land that singles America out from the rest of the world. The land in America was still untamed, rough, mysterious, uncultivated, and unexplored. This contrasted sharply with Europe where people were packed into urban centers and what space existed was owned exclusively by the upper classes and cultivated by the lower. The mystery of the natural world had vanished in the face of centuries of population while in America the connection with the natural world was renewed.
This connection was important because nature became a source of aesthetic inspiration, being one of the first unique identifying factors of the United States that separated it from other cultures. Emerson’s influence on the aesthetic identity in America began with his push to connect with nature. Although he did not explicitly instruct painters of his generation to focus on nature as their subject, he did instruct his listeners to focus on the world around them and to appreciate the potential of their environment to inspire and uplift as well as separate them from Europe. The Luminists were not an established group of artists who shared common goals, but individually connected with the landscape as their focus, using similar techniques that indicate and Emersonian influence. Because of Emerson’s lack of explicit instruction, however, it is inconclusive how extensive his influence may have been on this group of artists. Despite this, the connection still exists and is worth exploring.

**Beginnings of American Identity in Art**

Until this point, American art had been limited by its lack of trained artists who defined American culture in art using the standards Europe had set with little or no European training. Portraiture was restricted to limner art, two dimensional and simplistic in its rendering. This began to change with John Singleton Copley and John Trumbull among others of the eighteenth century, who set a standard for obtaining European training, but most stayed in Europe and forsook their American background. Some of this occurred because of the conflict of interests in the Revolutionary War (Pohl, 85). It was not until the early nineteenth century that American artists began to enter the international stage with Washington Allston, Samuel Morse, and the Peale family. These were exceptions in American art of the time, but still served to introduce America’s potential in the artistic world and began to define an American aesthetic. This potential expanded with Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School’s landscapes which
emphasized the unique qualities of the American landscape, displaying an artistic skill and focus that had been lacking previously. The emphasis on the grandeur of America’s nature increased the interest in these paintings since little had been seen to match prior to this time.

In Emerson’s *Nature*, this connection with the natural world is especially valued for its spiritual qualities. Instead of being perceived as a loathsome wilderness, nature began to be seen as a direct manifestation of the divine in the world. Although this connection with the divine was lost in Europe, Americans began to see nature as something that set them apart and, in some ways, put them above the pretensions of the Old World. While many sought a place for the American citizen in the world through various approaches, Emerson urged Americans to be shaped by their environment and take advantage of its resources and opportunities for exploration and beauty instead of envying European development. In doing this, he demonstrated how the land embodied the new democratic man by showing the endless opportunities this new country offered in its uncultured horizons. This contrasted with the Old World, which was built on centuries of class structure. The Luminist artists responded to this want of an American identity through their contributions to the American aesthetic, primarily depicting scenes from their native landscape.

*The Luminists*

The Luminist painters, namely Martin Johnson Heade, John Frederick Kensett, Sanford Gifford and Fitz Henry Lane, emerged in the mid and late nineteenth century along the east coast. Although independent from each other, they each used similar methods to break from established European traditional landscapes in their depictions of the East Coast. The tradition of tying the Luminists to Emerson begins in the 1950’s when I.M. Baur established them as a group through observing specific characteristics they shared. These features not only tied them
together, but attached them to a period in which Emerson was well-known, prompting Baur to make the association between them. In their first exhibition as a Luminist group, most of the paintings were coupled with a quote from Emerson, forming a certain perception of their paintings. The tradition of associating the Luminists with Emerson continued in Barbara Novak’s work, and as Novak explains, although these artists did not associate with each other directly, their paintings “[are] so similar in mood, feeling, and style…that it further substantiates the idea of Luminism as an indigenous mode of seeing that characterized much pre-Civil War art without, however, taking on the communal aspects of an acknowledged school or movement” (Novak 103). Although this connection does give new depth to Luminist scholarship, it has become difficult to break Luminism away from this association and explore other sources of possible influence.

Through their break from European tradition and their emphasis on light and the tranquility and familiarity of nature, the Luminists are thought to embody as a group many of the ideas about light and the transparent eyeball that Emerson’s aesthetics broadly postulated in his essays concerning nature and art. Although Emerson was not addressing them directly, his emphasis on nature’s ability to enlighten the human mind and soul raises the same kind of points the Luminists illustrated in their depictions of man in nature. These did not show man dwarfed by their environment, as did the Hudson River School, but rather, benefiting from it through its resources and light.

Scholars I.M. Baur and Barbara Novak have become known as the leading scholars on the Luminists and originally connected them with Emerson’s thought, but neither defined the complete difference between the sublime aspects of the Hudson River school and the work of the Luminists, both of which have been connected with Emerson. They classified them together as
one artistic movement when their differences are what invoke Emersonian thought in the Luminists specifically. As opposed to the Hudson River School’s grand and sublime nature, drawing attention with dramatic skies and craggy rock faces, the Luminists emphasized the quietly spiritual and unique aspects of their native environment and the connection between man and nature. In this way, they broke away from traditional European artistry and previous landscape trends in the United States. This perspective on nature brings to mind Emerson’s focus on observing nature, blending well with the Luminists call to look at light.

*The Need for the Luminists*

It is important to show the previous trends and reasons for landscape to illustrate the Luminists as a product of their time. They were a disconnected group that focused on similar methods and subjects because of what was happening in the United States concurrently, particularly with the publications of Emerson’s essays and lectures. The United States was a small community with close circles of artists who regularly communicated and exchanged ideas, a trend that continued in the literary sphere. Emerson himself associated with many leading figures such as the artist and teacher Robert Weir, whose family illustrates this bridge among academics and artists. The collection of the Weirs is a sampling of nineteenth century artists as they associated with various prominent figures and exchanged works. Meetings were held, like Margaret Fuller’s conversations for women that spread literary and artistic ideas that were growing at the time. Because of these active and influential exchanges, it is plausible, to suppose that Emerson’s well-publicized writings would have reached and, therefore influenced the arts of the time, including the Luminist artists.

By demonstrating the trends of landscape before and contemporarily with the luminists, it is possible to see how they broke from Europe to address America’s need for a separate identity,
a need Emerson was foremost in advocating. The Luminists embodied the words of Emerson on nature and aesthetic autonomy to show what was specifically unique about this new country and they did this by turning directly to the natural landscape for their artistic material.

Upon returning from Europe in 1859, the American artist Worthington Whittredge observed the problem in the United States at the time: “We are looking and hoping for something distinctive in the art of our country, something which shall receive a new tinge from our peculiar form of Government, from our position on the globe, or something peculiar to our people, to distinguish it from the art of the other nations and to enable us to pronounce without shame the oft repeated phrase, ‘American Art’” (Worthington 40). As this indicates, along with Emerson’s injunction to the group of businessmen as quoted above, this was a common concern of the period. Because of the nature of America’s development as a colony, its primary development in the arts was heavily influenced by European trends, especially since most American artists spent an extended time in Europe to study its art. As the United States entered the 19th century, many saw this as a weakness that needed to be remedied with a native art singular and unique to American culture and landscape. Through identifying America in art, this new nation could communicate its unique qualities to the world as well as to its own citizens. Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the foremost voices for this change as he told his audience in “The American Scholar” to move away from the past to establish individual identity through action; the past is a record that is “for nothing but to inspire”(Emerson 2001, 59). He applied this same concept to the United States as a nation, urging them to know and understand the past and what the Old World has to offer, but to focus on the present in their new nation.

*Emerson and the Luminists*
Connections between Emerson and the Luminists are largely a product of twentieth century scholarship. Anxious to identify an American “school”, scholars needed Emerson to fit it all together. Although the connection is not as strong as we would like, it is still present and worth investigating for its ability to broaden understanding of art at that time. Even though we do not know the precise impact Emerson had on the Luminists, his broad influence on American thought during that time compels further search into his impact of contemporary American art.

We can particularly point to the way Emerson referred to nature as the bridge between man and the Divine. In his renowned declaration, he invokes Divine presence in nature when he says “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (Emerson 2001, 29).

This theme was important to the Luminists as they worked to erase any individual brushstroke that would distort the audience’s experience of true nature. They used detail and extreme realism to be a glass through which the audience could see the beauty of nature (Novak 75). Novak followed Baur in her assertion of their “impersonal expressionism” (Novak 75). Her emphasis was on the Luminists’ absence from their paintings and their ability to create a moment when time stops “because of the absence of the stroke…and a strong horizontal organization, by an almost mathematical ordering of planes in space”(Novak 76). She parallels this with Emerson’s emphasis on seeing nature clearly and, through seeing nature, seeing the divine.

Gayle Smith challenges this idea, by saying that “it is difficult to draw cogent comparisons between the content of Emerson’s propositions and the style of luminist painting” (Smith 195). Instead, Smith draws a parallel between the composition of Luminist paintings and Emerson’s composition of his prose. Her connections seem tenuous at best because it is difficult
to imagine the luminists would be directly influenced by Emerson’s prose construction rather than the prose itself. Some of Emerson’s reading would influence his writing style, such as the nomenclature and gradation of Goethe or the aphorisms of Confucius. Although his compositional style would reflect some of these influences, his writing is characterized overall by his ideas. According to Richardson, “to know Emerson is to know not only what he was reading, but what he was getting out of it and what stayed with him over time” (Richardson 220).

To Emerson, the content of his reading and, therefore, his writing was centered on content and not structure, as Smith would argue. My own position is to see the influence of Emerson on the Luminists as one of a certain mood. It is his ideas that are conveyed in the art of the Luminists, the feel of his connection with nature and the Divine that these artists portray in their illuminated landscapes.

Despite the lack of a direct tie connecting Emerson with the Luminists, I believe it is reasonable to suggest that these artists would have heard of Emerson’s ideas because he was such a prominent figure at the time of their artistic production and therefore he would have been influential to their works. Emerson spoke at lyceums, toured the east coast, and was already famous because of his publication of Nature. Although other books were published that same year, expostulating on nature as a religious phenomenon, Emerson’s essay stood out for its emphasis on the transcendent power of nature as observed by human eyes. It was neither emphatically religious nor scientific, but stood self-evident and self-validated in Emerson’s own observations (Richardson 226). This would appeal to broader audiences who sought a more fundamental view of the world aside from core principles of Christianity. It is this emphasis on the transcendent power of nature that connects the Luminists to Emerson as opposed to other writers of the time.
The construction of the Luminist paintings reflects more of Emerson’s ideologies, if not to the extent that Novak describes, rather than his compositional techniques. His essays were published and distributed across the country as well as across the Atlantic and his lyceum tours were consistently well attended. Because of their divergence from European traditional landscapes and rendering of a native American landscape, we may suppose that the Luminists were familiar with the notion of a need for a native aesthetic and identity, if not Emerson’s actual declaration along with his perspective on man’s connection with nature and the power of its influence.

Before the Luminists, landscapes focused on the dramatic and awe-inspiring nature or the pastoral, gentle nature of Claude Lorrain, which had always emphasized an especial attention to detail and the portrayal of nature idealized and dramatized. Landscapes were traditionally praised for their focus on the objects in nature and the artists’ ability to accurately illustrate every feature of the countryside. The emphasis on the Claudian pastoral shifted in the eighteenth century with the introduction of Edmund Burke’s ideas on the Sublime. The Sublime introduced the type of nature that was larger than man and inspired awe instead of existing solely for beauty’s sake.

This was carried into the nineteenth century, culminating in the drama of the Hudson River School, commonly acknowledged by many academics as a direct predecessor to the Luminist movement in America. Scholars, like James Thomas Flexner, see Luminism as an offshoot of the Hudson River School or a second generation of the art movement because of their overlapping interest in light and plein-air observation of nature (Flexner 280). However, there is little else to recommend this correlation. The use of color and composition differ and while the Hudson River landscapes center their compositions on dramatic depictions of nature and the
insignificance of man, the Luminists emphasize the quiet communication of man and nature. This communication between man and nature is a relationship that Emerson advocated when he wrote on nature’s potential to influence the human mind and disposition in *Nature*.

The treatment of nature sets the Luminists apart from other artistic movements as their depiction of man’s communion with nature emulates the type of relationship with nature, and therefore the Divine, that Emerson sought and promoted. This concept of the soul’s relation to the world around it, and especially the Divine, was an important issue that preoccupied Emerson his whole life and presented itself in many of his essays. He first expressed his concern in his sermon *The Lord’s Supper* (1832), giving his reasons why he would not administer the communion to his congregation. One of these reasons was “that the use of this ordinance tends to produce confusion in our views of the relation of the soul to God” (Emerson 23). Later, in *Nature*, he explains the current state of mankind’s search for truth, accusing religious teachers especially for their disputations based on the immaterial. He states that everyone should return to nature as the original teacher because in its pure existence, it is evidence of its own truth (Emerson 2001, 27).

*Luminist Influences*

Rather than credit the Hudson River Landscape painters, Novak refers to the Dutch landscapes as a more suitable precursor to the Luminists, emphasizing the affinity of their paintings as well as the similarities in the social situations of the Dutch and American republics. Novak draws her parallel between the Dutch artists of the seventeenth century and American artists in the nineteenth century from their similar compositions and treatments of nature. The Dutch landscapes were generally categorized as inferior until the Romantic Age, around 1850, when quiet realism in nature became more appreciated and generally preferred. They gained
popularity and could be found in many prominent American patrons’ collections (Novak 200). Specifically, artists Van de Capelle, Aelbert Cuyp, van Goyen, Hobbema, Potter, Jacob and Salomon van Ruysdael have similarities with Americans Fitz Hugh Lane and Martin Johnson Heade. Novak observes commonality in their treatment of marine landscapes and soft lines as seen in Fig.1 by Cuyp and Fig.2 by Lane. The most prominent affinities occur in the two groups’ composition. Dutch artists have an open composition, lacking the framing devices so common in Claudian landscapes and this is echoed in Luminists’ treatments. Both groups emphasize subtle, softer shades of colors, contrasting with the dramatic and intense use of color in other schools such as the Hudson River Landscapes. These colors blur into one another, presenting subtle changes within the atmosphere and the same neutrals are carried over into the landscape itself.

Obvious affinities between these two eras of art are present, but the Luminists created a different sphere of art in their application of these methods to the American landscape, which intrinsically differs in its picturesque quality from the Dutch painters. To Novak, this connection is an important one that may clarify the aesthetic link between America and Europe as America has traditionally been influenced by Europe broadly, but this link may also serve to narrow down the ideas of influence in specific American art. Although Novak’s observations are interesting and important, the main direction in American visual art is to see how America translated its European influence and affinities to a native art, a focus that should not be lost in tracing American art’s lineage.

Although the style and approach to nature in art are similar between the Dutch and the Luminists, the cultured picturesque of the Dutch does not completely translate to the American landscape because of America’s continuing progress of civilization during this period while
Dutch painting illustrate a culture already well established. Wilderness was still dominant at this time and while the Hudson River School constructed their paintings to emphasize this dominance, adding mountains and other elements to scenes completely distanced from society to increase the dramatic effect, Luminists emphasized what was naturally occurring around growing civilization. Through their depictions of local and accessible nature, the Luminists were finding the picturesque and poetic in the common, emphasizing those elements that could be seen in almost any part of American civilization at that point--namely sea, sky, and fields.

Unlike most artists who moved to New York looking for patrons and broader opportunities, the Luminists generally stayed in smaller towns. Fitz Henry Lane was encouraged to enter the national stage, but remained staunchly local and only occasionally traveled to New York to sell his paintings (Burns 307).

Novak quotes the contemporary critic, John Neal, who “recognized the early American taste for the picturesque in 1829 when he wrote that in landscape painting the public preferred poetry to prose” (Novak 203). According to Novak, the Luminists can be classified as a more prosaic approach to landscape, but with a poetic quality because “the poetry is an implied extension of the prose. The distinction here probably hinges on the degree of artificiality present in the earlier poetry. This is not artful poetry imposed on nature, but nature whose poetry has been delicately floated to the surface” (Novak 203). Although prose-like in their realistic representation of subjects, they draw out a refined poetry through their infusion of light and clarity.

In Emerson’s “Art”, he states that “in our fine arts, not imitation, but creation is the aim” (Emerson 2001, 31). Although the Luminists depicted their landscapes realistically, their especial emphasis on light gives a soft glow to the landscape, enhancing the peaceful and
tranquil quality of an ordinary situation. The painting, *Eaton’s Neck, Long Island* by Kensett (Fig. 3) portrays nature as serene and calm, a contrast to the excitement of the Hudson River School. Most of the space is taken up by the sky, bringing the focus to the subtle color variations and the reflections in the water. Unlike the Hudson River School, the contrasts in color are so subtle as to be barely noticeable, causing differentiation between the sky and water to be almost imperceptible. The whole painting has a certain luminescent quality as opposed to the stormy skies of Thomas Cole, or the vivid drama of Edwin Church’s skies. The sky is neutral in tone, but because of understated gradations and layering of color, the scene glows with an undercurrent of energy and life. Heade continues to experiment with his skies as can be seen in *Sunlight and Shadow: The Newbury Marshes* (Fig. 4). These clouds have been tinted and shaped and seem to parallel the skies in Church’s *Twilight in the Wilderness* (Fig. 5). The sky in both of these paintings is the main focus, taking up most of the canvas and displaying bright and bold pinks and oranges that vary dramatically from the surrounding landscape; but the effect on the surrounding landscape separates these two into their separate classifications.

According to Emerson’s ideas on aesthetics, the art cannot transcend the actual object, but is meant to bring focus to an idea conveyed through the art. This is the ultimate aim of art, to initiate deeper thought. The landscapes of the Luminists lack the traditional framing of most landscapes through trees or mountains and leave the mind’s eye free to contemplate beyond what is seen on the canvas. The art inspires the imagination to go beyond what is presented to greater expanses. Because of this lack of framing and inhibition on the canvas, the grandeur of nature is more implied through its ability to extend beyond what we can imagine; there is the implication that there is always more humankind does not see or comprehend about the world around them and this is something that can be derived from the simplicity and horizontal breadth of Luminist
paintings. Heade’s sky is still soft and brings the mind’s eye upwards beyond the edge of the painting to the infinite expanse beyond what is on the canvas while all of the drama is held in Church’s sky within the bounds of his frame. The audience does not think beyond what is on the canvas because what is illustrated is at the center of the drama; the colors peter out at the edges, containing the drama within the frame given.

Unlike the craggy cliffs and ominous skies in Cole’s *Kaaterskill Falls* (Fig. 6), Kensett’s cliff is curved and worn, covered with vegetation and slopes to level with the ground around it. This maintains the horizontal orientation of the landscape, giving the sky priority without interruption. The lines of other landscapes are sharp and vertically oriented, giving sharp contrasts in the situations and lines of horizon. The Luminists have few contrasting angles, but are composed of sloping, horizontal curves. While the viewer feels precarious in his or her positioning in Cole’s works, full of drama and angles, Kensett has the viewer standing in the water, leveling the view between land and water as he does with water and sky through color. This has the effect of uniting all the elements of nature, one flowing into the next. In Lane’s work, *Brace’s Rock, Brace’s Cove* (Fig. 7), he positions the viewer on a flat expanse of beach, protected by low, unimposing barriers of rocks. This leads the viewer to feel safe in their arrangement, allowing them to meditate more peacefully on the view before them. There are no impending dangers in this scene. This contrasts with *Kaaterskill Falls* and Church’s *Twilight in the Wilderness*; both position the viewer in an open expanse of wilderness, surrounded by trees and jagged mountains, leading the audience to a greater sense of awe and insignificance in the face of nature.

Within the Hudson River School, the Sublime puts man in an insignificant position in comparison to the power and grandeur of nature. The Luminists, however, acknowledge the
presence of man, but his secondary role is conveyed, not in size, but in his lack of individuality,
with his back turned to the viewer as he also contemplates the scene before him. This does not,
however, advocate a general lack of individuality, but encourages the viewer to project himself
on the subject. As in Heade’s *Approaching Thunderstorm* (Fig. 8), the figure in the foreground
faces away from the audience, directing the gaze away from him to the scene he is contemplating
himself. Like Emerson, the Luminists did not completely leave behind society or the presence of
mankind, but depicted his personal interaction with the environment around him. Emerson never
forsook society completely, like Thoreau’s sabbatical in the woods or his cousin George Ripley’s
community Brooks Farm, but maintained a direct relationship with his community (Gura 25).
This he did while still promoting meditation and contemplation in accessible nature.

The existence of man’s influence in Luminist paintings may also be seen in the
production of his hands as in boats that frequent many luminist paintings. These structures
coincide with the landscape in color and shape—the curves of the bow and neutral colors as in
Lane’s *Brace’s Rock, Brace’s Cove*. They also add to the grandeur and emphasize the scale of
the sky as in *Boston Harbor at Sunset*. To Emerson, the works of man do not detract from the
natural scene because “nature adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the [boats and
ships] she loves like her own” (Emerson 2001, 189). It is the poet that incorporates all things
into the landscape because “readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy
that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet
consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the
beehive, or the spider’s geometrical web” (Emerson 2001, 189). Poets and painters are able to
show the beauty of all parts and to the Luminists, the presence of man is not a main focus of
these works. His role serves to enhance the scene and help those viewing it to feel the familiarity of this type of nature that many did not have to travel to national parks to see.

Along with their characteristic glow and curvilinear shapes and lines, Luminism’s canvases are smooth with little indication of individual brushstrokes. There has been some academic debate as to the application of Emerson’s ideas to this aspect of the Luminist art. Novak credits this to the artists’ connection with Emerson’s metaphor of the “transparent eyeball”, but Smith disagrees, citing Emerson as posturing individuality above all else and the lack of brushstrokes as an indication of an invisible hand goes counter with Emerson’s stance. In addition to his individualism, Smith states, “when Emerson celebrated the ecstatic oneness of seer and seen, artist and nature, he always depicted the singular process he went through to experience that merging. We do not get the finished, ‘transparent’ canvas of the luminist painter, but a text that traces the movements of his own mind as it interacted with reality” (Smith 195).

However, as she states herself, “the impression gained from reading entire Emerson essays is quite different from that created by any series of passages” (Emerson 2001, 194), and the same may be said for his body of work. In his essay “The Poet”, Emerson identifies the artist as a type of prophet, distinctive in his abilities to communicate truth to a seeing audience. This stance could possibly cancel the individualism postured in other essays as the luminists fall under the poetic category.

Although the Luminists’ clarity of detail and smooth canvases may not be responding to Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” passage, they still fall under Emerson’s classification of artist who uses his powers of creation to bring the viewer back to nature and truth. In “The Poet”, Emerson credits the writer, and artist, as a figure “who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole” (Emerson 2001, 189), as ugliness stems from a person’s dislocation from nature and,
therefore, the Divine. To Emerson, the artist uses his talent and has the “office of announcement and affirming, namely, by the beauty of things, which becomes a new, and higher beauty, when expressed” (Emerson 2001, 187). The artist sees clearly from the soul, unaffected by others’ opinions, which consequently gives form to the beauty surrounding him in his art, the embodiment of his view, that others may see and transform their perspectives of their worlds.

Following Emerson’s perspective on the role of the artist and the establishment of America’s aesthetic identity separate from Europe, the Luminists broke from past landscapes in their democratic appeal, responding to Emerson’s advocacy of a socially unrestricted aesthetic. The pastoral landscapes of the past were produced for an aristocratic audience who would appreciate scenes of leisure or idyllic portrayals of agricultural activities that could satisfy the aristocrats’ understanding of the quaint lives of lower classes. The Luminists were bought and collected mainly by middle class patrons. These patrons sought paintings for their homes that were familiar and, contrasting with previous movements, luminists showed nature in an almost generic form to place emphasis on the play of light on a common natural landscape. Their scenes were not fantasy pastorals that displayed Europe’s class distinctions, but situations that did not impose on any specific occupation, showing nature appreciated by anyone. The titles of many of these paintings are the actual name of the place, but if they were not, it would be difficult to pinpoint exactly where these were done because of the lack of telling landmarks. The Luminists did not paint great events or grand landscapes, but focused on the familiar, bringing focus to the beauty that was present in all nature and not just the landscape that had been set aside as national parks because of their particular uniqueness or splendor. Their emphasis is not on the man-made or the spectacular, but on finding the spectacular in the seemingly mundane, something Emerson wrote about repeatedly.
According to Emerson, “great works of art…teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side” (Emerson 2001, 121). His opening of Nature directly accuses society of always looking elsewhere for its inspiration, especially to the past and asks “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe...Let us demand our own works and laws and worship” (Emerson 2001, 27). The idea of landscape as an object of national identity is not a novel one; in his introduction to his book The American Landscape Tradition, Joseph Czestochowski credits the Bicentennial of the United States for a resurgence of interest in American landscape art and parallels the effect of landscape art with that of Abstract Expressionism for “successfully challenging European aesthetic supremacy” (Czestochowski 1). When the attitudes towards nature and landscapes changed in the nineteenth century from indifference to reverence, the United States “began to view the painted landscape as an integral part of their cultural and aesthetic history. Nature was considered a source of virtue, a setting for contemplation, and an avenue to spiritual sustenance” (Czestochowski 1). Because Americans lacked a cultural past equal to Europe, their identity became linked to the profuse and powerful environment that surrounded them, unlike Europe, which had little untamed wilderness. This would be an initial step towards breaking from traditional European academic art.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Europe was moving towards modernism simultaneously with the Hudson River School and the Luminists. The move towards impressionism had begun earlier in the century with J.M.W. Turner’s dramatic landscapes emphasizing the effects of natural phenomena, especially the combination of fire and water and the effects of light. Although he concentrated his pieces on actual events and places, he focused on the power of natural phenomena to give drama to his subjects. This emphasis on the dramatic
aspects of nature and the effects of light took on an abstract quality especially in his later works such as in *The Slave Ship* (1840). The wash of intense color almost obscures the shape of the ship as well as the figures in the foreground. Although generally categorized as a Romantic artist for his focus on the relationship of man to his environment, he is commonly attributed as the forefather of European Impressionism.

Turner was followed by artists like Whistler who advocated “art for art’s sake”; this methodology takes away the importance of the actual object being illustrated in favor of the form, line and color used by the artist (Pohl 284). Although Whistler was American by birth, he spent most of his life in Europe associating with European artists. The ideas of Emerson’s *Nature* are depicted literally in the art of the Luminists with their emphasis on representing the world honestly, never losing focus on art’s responsibility to convey truth in its. Novak identifies this emphasis on representation as an American trait that, although maintains an emphasis on painting plein air, it diverges from Europe and, especially France where it would eventually “lead to the erosion of the object, the abstract apotheosis of paint, and ultimately to the autonomy of art. In America…the fundamental respect for the object as a vessel for the ideal had to yield different results” (Novak 208). This divergence from European treatment maintains Americans connection to what they depict while European art moves farther away.

The problem of an American aesthetic autonomous from Europe came to the attention of society in the nineteenth century and Emerson’s emphasis on this break identified him as a figure that defined the period of Romanticism in America. This was a prolific time in American art as movements like the Hudson River School drew upon an American aesthetic tied to its natural environment, an environment Emerson himself advocated for its unique and raw qualities. Cultures have always been defined by their art--it is a tangible message sent to the rest of the
world of a nation’s talents, standards, and cultural quality. The landscapes of the Luminists and others were the first to establish an American visual art unique to the rest of the world, forever tying the American aesthetic to its natural landscape.

These artists came forward as a response to this call for an American identity separate from Europe and followed Emerson’s ideas on nature and aesthetics through their depictions of a democratic and familiar nature. Contrasting with the Hudson River School and other predecessors, the Luminists used subtle color layering and gradations to truthfully represent real landscapes beautifully poetic in their common and almost generic qualities. This truthful depiction of nature and the emphasis on the beautiful in the common aligned the Luminists with Emerson and defined them differently from their European counterparts, making them contributors ultimately to the American cultural character. It is telling that these artists never stayed in Europe or even New York, but connected with their local surroundings, creating fine art from what they connected with every day, furthering the democratic and independent situation of the American artist within society encouraged by Emerson. While many in future generations would continue the tradition of training and living in Europe, many, including the Ashcan School, would follow the Luminists and stay in the United States to observe and illustrated America’s locally unique qualities.
Chapter Three-Emerson and Henri

At the end of the Romantic age, the United States entered a new period that would become known as the Progressive Era (1895-1917) during which the focus of American life shifted from rural settlements to urban centers with an influx of new immigrants and new industry and wealth. New York had grown to be the second largest city in the world due to its annexation of nearby boroughs and its startling increase in immigration; out of the nearly five million residents of the city, more than seventy-eight percent were foreign or children of immigrants while many more had moved from other parts of the country (Zurier 24). In the midst of this development, the subjects of American art shifted away from the polished landscapes of the Luminists to focus on the developing cultural centers of the cities. Methods became more painterly and less exact, following the trends of French Impressionism and Tonalism brought home by American artists traveling abroad. One of the most recognized artists of this changing atmosphere was Robert Henri, a dynamic art teacher of the early twentieth century characterized by his ability to inspire those he mentored including the group of painters known as the Ashcan School. These artists were key figures in propelling American art forward by documenting urban developments in American life.

Henri and Whitman

Henri attributed many of his artistic methods to other artists he admired like Goya and Manet, and his reading of writers like Tolstoy and Browning enhanced and broadened his approach to art in a philosophical sense (Henri 75, 94). Henri himself often quoted Walt Whitman as a source of insight on individuality, as when he said, “The one great cry of Whitman was for a man to find himself, to understand the fine thing he really is if liberated” (Henri 134). Scholars like Rebecca Zurier and Joseph Kwiat stress Whitman as the sole influence on Henri’s
idealism. Zurier cites Whitman as the source of Henri’s democratic, socially progressive stance on art. His students in the Ashcan group contributed to *The Masses*, which Zurier uses as an example of their use of “Whitman’s concept of a democratic poetry of demotic speech” which placed the artists’ works “widely beyond the prestigious sorts of venues where the French Impressionists made their mark” (Zurier 14). This separation from the prestigious international venues centers Henri and his students more in the midst of society rather than just artistic circles. This connection advocates the symbiotic relationship Whitman believed in having with one’s surroundings.

Kwiat acknowledges Emerson’s influence on Henri, but attributes Whitman as a more lasting authority for Henri in his later years. According to Kwiat, Henri attributes a “spiritual kinship to the poet, whose words on his own poetry suggest what Henri proposes the ‘real art student’ should be…For Henri, like Whitman, strongly believed that every aspect of the artist, his emotions as well as his intelligence, is necessary for the creation of significant work” (Kwiat 623). Kwiat also attributes Whitman with Henri’s dedication to seeking a democratic, American art that would bring out an intellectual art spirit in the United States. Kwiat acknowledges that Henri would have disagreed with Whitman’s assertion that the American artist need a direct connection solely with his own country, asserting that the artist should be a citizen of the world. This echoes Emerson’s own endeavors to understand and incorporate international philosophies and literatures.

Although Whitman certainly was a significant influence on Henri, these scholars overlook the significance of Emerson’s influence on Henri’s art. As already stated, Emerson was an influential figure in the nineteenth century, becoming a type of mentor for writers Thoreau and Whitman among others. Matthiessen cites this Emerson’s era as a period of change, but that
Emerson was the initiating force “on which Thoreau built, to which Whitman gave extension, and to which Hawthorne and Melville were indebted” (Matthiessen xii). In fact, much of Whitman’s writings are derived from his association with Emerson; his ideas on nature and the state of man are echoes of Emerson’s work. Whitman himself stated “I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil” (Reynolds 82). Like others of those Emerson mentored, Whitman denied Emerson, but later realized his prickly legacy that, although he might try to throw off his mentor, in the end, he was always returning to Emerson. Those ideas of Henri that Kwiat attributes to Whitman such as his “rejecting the inference that since the American heritage is younger it is therefore inferior to the European heritage” are ideas originally linked with Emerson (Kwiat 621). It is important, therefore, to acknowledge this lineage and the foundation Emerson was for Whitman, and subsequently for Henri even though he quotes Whitman far more than Emerson. We also know that Henri encouraged his students to particularly read Emerson to develop ideas on self-realization and self-confidence (Baigell 197). Specifically, I will look at Henri’s use of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and its emphasis on seeking internal truth before the consensus of the populace and how this translated onto Henri’s canvas through his depictions of life and people. These ideas formed the foundation of much of Whitman’s writings so it makes sense to draw a straight line of influence between Henri and Whitman, but Emerson is the starting point for both men.

**Transitioning from the Romantic to the Progressive**

The country as a whole changed dramatically between Emerson’s era of writing, the Luminists’ landscapes, and Henri’s era of painting. Cities became centers of industry, art, and culture with an influx of foreign immigration to the United States. By the early twentieth century, art had undergone many changes and alterations of methods and motivations. It is
interesting, therefore, to note how Emerson is a converging point for two diverse artistic movements. Henri used Emerson’s influence in his painting and passed his teachings on to the next generation of American artists. Although Emerson was an internationally recognized figure, his ideas about aesthetics rarely reached beyond the borders of his native country. With the change of social and cultural dynamics around the country, more people were packed into tenements in the major cities and the countryside was mowed down in the face of railroads and new industry. These developments would make it more difficult to apply the ideas of Emerson to the individual’s situation.

Being in the city surrounded by people, the individual would have little opportunity to connect with the divine in nature, as Emerson advocated in *Nature*, and they would have little time by themselves, making it more difficult to enact the push against society to follow one’s own inclinations. These ideas in “Self-Reliance” are the key to the foundation of Emersonian thought. He himself stated that “In all [his] lectures, [he] taught one doctrine…the infinitude of the private man” (Journals 342). It is a philosophy that has been labeled egocentric since its publication, but, true to Emersonian writing, guards against that very egocentrism it seems to recommend. As Emerson himself writes, “The Soul’s emphasis is always right, but ‘the individual is always mistaken’, insofar as ‘the individual always craves a private benefit’” (Buell 65)

Emerson looked upon it more as a life practice rather than just a philosophy of thought. Like *Nature*, Emerson’s subsequent essays about the state of the mind and soul defied classification as either a religious, political, scientific, or romantic idea (Buell 63). Because they did not subscribe to any one area of expertise, but were a more holistic idea of general living, they stood out among similar contemporary publications.

*Self-Reliance*
These ideas on self-reliance would play a large role in shaping Henri’s illustrations of the city and formed the basis for his teaching methods as he encouraged each student to illustrate life as they personally perceived it. Emerson’s essay begins with the announcement that “Great works of art have no more affecting lesson than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good humored inflexibility than most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side” (Emerson 121). For Henri, this meant distancing himself, and his students, from the pressures of the art world and the dictates of society to produce the great works Emerson defines. It is this idea that leads the process Lawrence Buell describes as a corrective practice for the whole of mankind who are taught to conform to the limitations society has set. According to Buell, Emerson explains a process of individuation, the first step being to extricate oneself from the influences of society that each man is brought up to follow. For Emerson, “society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members…The virtue in most request is conformity” (Emerson 2001, 122). Speaking in extremes, it would be better to be completely alone than to conform to society’s limitations and succumb to imitation.

Second, the self-reliant individual trusts instinct more than reasoned judgment. To trust reasoned judgment, a person brings in the opinions and structures of thought from others, and it is better to abide by what comes intrinsically to a person. This could result in acting in ways that seem selfish; Emerson’s most condemning statement concerns giving to the poor, declaring he would begrudge every cent “[he gives] to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong” (Emerson 2001, 123). It is not so simple as to only begrudge giving money, but that each person should be connected to people and not to states of being. If a person gives money to someone in need, it should be because he has a personal drive and care for that individual and not just to address a stranger who has been labeled a certain way—“truth is handsomer than the
affectation of love” (Emerson 2001,123). To act without instinct is a betrayal of oneself and a denial of truth. Emerson explains that “to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men,--that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense…” (Emerson 2001,121). Trusting in one’s own instinct will ultimately lead to correct judgment, but one has to begin with instinct. Applying this to art, Henri told his students that they must follow their heart as to the material of their works and then the mind to enforce its execution. For him, “the man who wants to produce art must have the emotional side first, and this must be reinforced by the practical” (Henri 118).

And third, once the individual has separated himself from society and honed in on his own instinct, Emerson then urges a person to differentiate between low and high instinct, to go beyond surface desire to what the soul actually craves. It is in the soul that a person finds direction and connection with the world around him despite pressures from self and society. To Emerson, the universe and society are separate entities as are the surface self and the soul. To connect with the soul is to ascend and connect with a universe higher than mere society which connection develops when one “[speaks their] latent conviction and it [becomes] the universal sense…” (Emerson 2001,121).

These ideas in “Self-Reliance” would eventually become the main tenets of Henri’s art theory that he himself executed as well as taught to his students. At the time, these ideas would have seemed out of place in the burgeoning society of early twentieth century America’s bustling cities. During Emerson’s era, the separation between the individual and society was more defined as more of the population lived a rural lifestyle and were generally more geographically distant from crowds. This system of thought would have seemed plausible; the accessibility of nature and the ability to recognize its subsequent effects would have made sense to most who
had had those experiences available to them. As the nation moved forward and progressed in its industry, however, more people were distanced from nature and rarely had time away from a society that surrounded them on all sides. Due to the wave of new inhabitants in the cities, people were forced to live side by side in cramped quarters. To defy society’s influence in favor of personal instinct would have been more difficult, as society was more omnipresent than ever before. Although many still recognized Emerson’s status as an influential figure, the implementation of his ideas would have changed.

**Henri as an Artist**

In the midst of this change, Robert Henri grew up in the West in the town of Cozad, Nebraska, distanced from this rapid urban development. Despite being away from any urban centers, his education was seen to by his devoted mother who stressed the importance of books. His father gave him his own printing press at the age of twelve, with which Henri published his own stories and plays. Although he was interested in art and would often accompany his writing with sketches, his first priority was storytelling. This would change as he grew up and began helping his father’s business ventures by creating advertisements. Each birthday he received a scrapbook, much like those his mother would keep, and in them he would record his own endeavors. By the age of eighteen, his scrapbooks were filled more and more with his own illustrations. It is remarkable that Henri became an artist of such renown with a background that few artists would rise from. With the encouragement of a local artist and newspaper illustrator, Henri attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Although arriving a year after Thomas Eakins left his professorship, Eakins’ legacy remained and contributed to Henri’s artistic development (Perlman 8).
Eakins played an important role in changing the direction of American art through his emphasis on realism. The context of American art until this point had closely followed European trends with the United States producing few internationally prolific artists. Eakins came forward unrivaled in his observations and depictions of the new professional male. This generation in America was concerned with celebrating “reason, order, and self-discipline” as well as balancing that with a determined emphasis on masculinity, showing men doing athletic or strenuous exercise (Pohl 268). Eakins became famous for his realistic depictions of anatomy and professional life, never illustrating city life, but suggesting the new developments through the professional world. He was succeeded by Thomas Anschutz who continued his methods and ideologies concerning artistic treatments. Anschutz and Eakins ushered in a period of realism in American art that was continued by their students at the Pennsylvania Academy. Realism was less concerned with artistic composition and more centered on realistic depictions of life especially during a time so extreme in its political and social development. It was at this time that unions were forming and strikes swept through the country, bringing new awareness to the situations of lower classes and the chaos of the cities.

After finishing his education at the Academy, Henri followed the examples of American artists before him and traveled to Europe, touring its cities and museums from 1888-1891. It was during this time that he became most affected by Emerson. There, Henri studied in Paris at the Academie Julian and then continued to Italy where he formulated his ideas on the artists’ relationship to artistic tradition, specifically focusing on the impact of European ideas on the American artist. Henri sought intellectual stimulation to supplement his artistic endeavors by reading prominent writers and philosophers. Emerson, however, was most influential, consistently appearing in Henri’s personal journals through which Joseph Kwiat is able to make
public the direct influence of Emerson on Henri. Before his point, Henri had been exposed to Emerson through his mother who quoted him in her personal journals and scrapbooks (Perlman 3). The admiration for Emerson’s writings continued in Henri who wrote that “Emerson does not try to bring people to reason by disproving the Bible, but looks clear of everything straight at truth and lets facts speak for themselves” (Journals 195). This direct focus on truth is one of the driving forces of Henri’s art and a philosophy he passed on to his students. Also, it is during his stay in Europe that he sees the need for a revolt against the established European tradition. He builds on Emerson’s declaration in *Nature*, to separate from past generations and the “sepulchers of the fathers” (Emerson 27). To Henri, one meaning of this meant a separation from academic tradition in favor of simply practicing good artistic theory.

The main tenets of this art theory involved an intellectual attitude, honest expression of emotions, communication of individuality, and an effort to achieve the vitality of life. These ideas of who the artist should be as a person and what he should portray in his art are echoes found originally in Emerson’s essays “Art” and “The Poet”. In these essays, Emerson emphasizes the artist’s unique role to see and convey truth through his art. It is interesting to note how these ideas are translated onto canvas as Henri portrayed members of the lower classes and cityscapes of Philadelphia and New York.

Upon finishing his artistic tour of Europe, Henri resolved on his own code of aesthetics, a code he passed on to the next generation of American artists. This code went against many of the new and modern artistic applications of the time including the movement advocated by James McNeill Whistler of “art for art’s sake”. To Henri, the artist should have an intellectual attitude and use his art as a means for honest expression of his emotions. By expressing himself through his art, the artist communicates his individuality and the vitality of life around him. Henri
perceived that America lacked an artistic identity and, through his efforts as a teacher, he worked to address this issue and fill this need.

According to Henri, the artist could not be ignorant, but needed an intellectual foundation upon which he could base his understanding of the world around him. This intellectual basis would give the artist the tools to see greater depths in the mundane or commonplace, those things that make up daily life and which most see as unworthy of recording. Education is not a matter of making, but a matter of collecting; the artist must build his education upon what he sees, collects, and stores from the world around him. According to Henri, there are two types of people: students and non-students and this status changes from moment to moment. The artist must be a constant student that will “put himself as far as possible in the way of knowing what is known and he must make his choices” (Henri 120).

It is through education that the artist finds his way through life. He takes what is taught him with no effort at forcing his life’s direction. In this way, he is able to explore all avenues and opportunities as opposed to forcing a direction that would limit his vision. As the artist moves through his education, he can judge his path and his choices as well as advice given to him to enhance his perception of the world around him. Formal education is only a beginning, but to Henri, real education is self-education, what the individual derives from his experiences. Henri taught that life is full of opportunities that enhance personal understanding and “the artist should not be afraid to know” (Henri 51). Then, through his knowledge, the artist opens the way for better understanding in others and he will find pleasure and profit from his work.

By developing an intellectual attitude, the artist is able to understand the world to a greater depth. To be interesting, the artist must have, not only intellectual ability, but also the
experience in life, experiences that force emotional exploration and contemplation. The artist must be connected to life and humanity through expressing his personal emotions in his art. Through this expression, he is able to reach out to an audience that relates to these emotions on some level. Henri admonished his students to be informed by their emotions, to trust and value them, allowing them to direct their art. Art is a physical manifestation of the internal workings of a man, but this man must be in tune to his personal development and tastes to be able to properly and honestly reach an audience. Many pass by their own sensations to fit in with traditions and find those things that would be accepted as objects of good taste. Henri encouraged his students to be constantly informed by themselves so be better able to recognize those sensations that inform their perceptions of life. To know oneself, the artist is able to differentiate what is personally important and paints for himself. Henri told his students to never paint for others because they don’t know “what we have to give” (Henri 48). Through an intellectual seeking and expression of his emotions, the artist is able to build on his experiences to form his own personal individuality.

To do this, however, he must first know what has been done in the past. Henri used the past as an aid; artists of the past have experimented and established techniques that work, techniques with which all artists should be familiar. He warned them, however, to not fall into conventions because “[they] are not here to do what has already been done” (Henri 12). There is value in studying the old masters, but the needs of the modern man are different and therefore his methods must also stray from established methods of the past. To merely imitate what has already been done stunts the sensibilities and imagination and keeps the artist from progressing as an artist, but also as person. This is exactly what Emerson himself wrote.

*Henri and Emerson*
Emerson explained the importance of maintaining a small connection to the past, understanding the ideas and movements that have already occurred so as to be better able to understand oneself without completely relying on what has already been done as the only way. This becomes a precarious balance to reconcile individuality with tradition. Everyone is influenced by their predecessors and new art is formed out of the old, but it is a constant forward progression as each artist should strive to maintain their character through their art. It is this progression rooted in the past that Kwiat attributes to Henri’s development of an artistic theory that grows out of traditional artistry to express the vitality of life as it happens each day. Kwiat credits Emerson as the starting point for Henri’s search for an American art, “that a major justification for the development of an American art is that the people might learn to express themselves in their own time and in their own land” (Kwiat 627). These are ideas that Emerson continually emphasized in “The American Scholar” and “Self-Reliance”.

To this end, this process of development brings attention to the vitality of life around the artist. He is able to see the beauty of the world around him, not just in what has been established as good taste in Europe, but in daily life in America. When American artists portray the life happening around them, they fill the need for an American identity distinct and separate from the influence of Europe. Henri taught that the routine and monotonous aspects of life contain beauty because “things are not done beautifully. The beauty is an integral part of their being done” (Henri 53).

Most of Henri’s works lacked the artistic finish many had come to expect in painting, but to him a work of art is not finished when it looks finished, but when the artist is able to convey his message, a message that may spring from any aspect of life. This approach contrasts with the movement that had begun a few years previously as artists in Europe began to execute art for
art’s sake, forcing art to exist within itself with no consideration of the life it portrayed. This art also lacked traditional finish, but the goal was not to have a connection with the vitality of everyday life, but to emphasize form, line, and color that was in life. They were not working to communicate emotional or intellectual understanding derived from experiences, but to simply experiment with elements of art. While Henri and his school worked to portray beauty through the beauty of life, Whistler and others focused on art based on the beauty of artistic outcome. They did not strive to communicate truth, but for form and line. Theirs is beautiful solely for artistic technique while Henri and his students strived for beauty in truth.

This absolute adherence to truth by Henri corresponded with Emerson’s approach to the processing of life around us, and how it ultimately affects the external’s connection with the personal and internal. In *Nature*, Emerson explained that much of nature’s importance lies in its influence on language. Its symbolic aspect dictates the way we think and therefore the external is indicative and symbolic of the internal. To lose the representative of the external in exchange for conveying purely the internal is to lose the communication of the self with the world around it. Artists have this as their function, to make that connection and recognition of the beauty in the world around it.

Although Emerson has been recognized for his emphasis on the communication of pure truth, this does not necessarily denote a purely representational truth as only the eye perceives the world. When he discusses the concept of the Transparent Eyeball, the truth he sees goes beyond what is directly before him and reaches into the very depths of life and his connection to the people and nature around him. This is not solely a superficial connection through his viewing the world, but a deeper sense of the world through every aspect of his being.
Henri saw this and interpreted Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” as the deeper communication of truth, placing importance on catching what is before the artist in a moment because once he dwells too long on one subject, the moment is gone and, therefore, the truth of that moment has also dissipated. He explained this same concept as moments of revelation when one sees the whole, resulting in comprehension and happiness; the individual has entered a “great order and [has] been carried into greater knowledge by it” (Henri 28). It is these moments when a person sees beyond the mundane and becomes clairvoyant to a fuller reality. This reality does not necessarily come to life through a finished work. The ultimate goal for Henri was to not represent truth through representational art, but to create art that conveys ideas and emotion. An artist should be “willing to sacrifice artistic finish for vitality” (Kwiat 619). The truth of the world around the individual should impress the artist to paint above simply visual facts.

In his *Laughing Gypsy Girl* (Fig. 9), Henri has painted not only a common girl, but a gypsy, which would have had many social implications. Gypsies were not only a poor people, but generally perceived as lower in status because of their nomadic lifestyle and inability to blend or belong to any society. In painting this girl, he shows her imperfect teeth and dirty clothes, but has captured her smile that goes beyond her teeth to her eyes. He brings attention to her face through using lighter colors, contrasting with the grays and blacks of her clothes and background. The painting as a whole has an unfinished quality; the background is just a wash of dark neutrals while the girl’s clothes are a dark and heavy mass from which the girl’s face emerges, bright and happy. Even her face is a collection of paint splotches that convey the general shape and complexion, but the details are in her eyes. It is here that the viewer is drawn because, unlike the rest of the painting, her eyes are perfectly shaped and realistically composed.
Although this painting lacks the refined detail and finish of traditional portraits of the 18th and 19th centuries, the truth of subject’s humanity and individuality is indelibly expressed.

Emerson’s Legacy through Henri

Henri is recognized as a great advocate in the development of visual art in the United States because of his own art, but especially for what he taught to others. Other artists and idealists inspired many of his ideas, but as always, Emerson’s influence is especially difficult to pin down. It is possible, and likely, that Henri relied on Whitman and others more than Emerson, but that is the nature of Emersonianism. Emerson was an anti-mentor that advocated his own demise in favor of individual thought. Therefore, if Henri ever did turn away from Emerson, it would be in keeping with Emerson’s own desires.

Despite this, Henri is a foremost example of how Emerson’s ideals continued, especially as he continually taught a native art, unique to the individual. Emerson did not advocate a national art, but he did continually teach that each person should be honest with himself and compose according to the dictates of his own personality and character. To Henri, this applied to a national art as the individual contributed to the product of the nation. He explained that many have advocated that a national art would naturally grow out of only subject matter and technique, but to him “a national art is not limited to a question of subject or of technique, but is a real understanding of the fundamental conditions personal to a country, and then the relation of the individual to these conditions” (Henri “Progress” 388).

To have this native art, artists need to stop imitating the past. Only when an individual is developed and cultivates his own ideas and educates himself in the world around him can he
fully express himself and then is the art he produces work that is native to his surroundings.

When someone educates a painter “the American painter, with brain and brush liberated by the greatest possible self-development, is just as certain to express the quality of his country as he is in himself to present an American type or speak the language of his native land” (Hills 8). What this native aesthetic of America was, Henri did not explicitly state, but left it open for each person to define in his own way individually. To announce characteristics that are specifically American would limit the artist, the opposite end that Henri sought.

In this way Henri followed Emerson’s example of leadership, an anti-mentor that gave little indication of how his ideas were to be implemented. Both left their foundational ideas and instructions open to the interpretation of his listeners to be applied as they personally saw fit. Although many times seen as ambiguous, for Emerson to go any further in his instructions on living would go against his own attitudes of living according to one’s own conscience. In Henri’s writings, he also emphasized the importance of individuality, not only for an individuals’ wellbeing, but also to help develop the aesthetic ideas intrinsic to the nation. To Henri, as each person expressed himself honestly, a general idea of the characteristics native to America would appear which would give the nation a greater stability in knowing and understanding itself.

This is especially noticeable as artists raised in the United States clung to many of his ideas while those living abroad preferred European trends in art, especially the developing methods of modernism. Simultaneously with Henri’s teaching, modern art was coming into its earliest stages in America. Although it had already enjoyed considerable development in Europe, modern art in America was generally not accepted as it strayed from traditional and genteel forms of art. In 1916, Arthur Wesley Dow gave a paper, “Modernism in Art” to the College Art Association in which he states the main premises and motivations behind modern art to give a
better understanding to an art misunderstood by the general population. He begins by defining modern art as any type of “rebellion against the accepted and the traditional” (Hills 12). Under this definition, Henri and his followers would seem to be in line with the movement of modern art, but as Dow continues, the motivations seem to divert from those philosophies espoused by Henri to his students. One of the main divergences is the thought that modern art pays “less attention to subject, more to form. Line, mass, and color have pure aesthetic value whether they represent anything or not. Ceasing to make representation a standard…” (Hills 12). Although Henri routinely taught the importance of color, line, and form, it was all to contribute to the true representation and communication of life as the artist perceived it. To Dow, it was important to understand the rising importance of modern art and its meanings, to study and differentiate what was truly good as opposed to what was lower quality.

Those who advocated modern art looked for new styles and new forms of expression from contemporary writers such as Nietzsche and Kandinsky as well as exotic cultures separate from traditional western thought. These were seen as primitive and truer to the basic human condition. It would seem that modernists sought the same destination as those, like Henri, who advocated Emersonian thought, but the divergence lies in their source of inspiration. While modernists sought inspiration from exotic cultures and abstract thought, Emerson advocated looking to the true self and what was familiar and unique to the individual. To Emerson, the artist’s role was to see truth in the world around him as a prophet, and convey this in his art. Henri taught this to his students who then went out and painted the city in all of its dirt and pollution. Although this may not have been the most beautiful aspect of life, they found the beauty in every aspect of life in its raw and true form. At its most basic level, Emerson advocated the interaction between the artist and the world around him to communicate truth.
Modernism advocates individuality separate from the dictates of the external world, only paying attention to his own consciousness and his interaction with art.

In doing the exhibition of “The Eight”, Henri took a step away from the established tradition of art to show a fresh and raw look at the state of society, furthering the democratized status of the artist away from Europe’s ateliers and socially directed art exhibits. Although Henri himself was never pinpointed as a social critic, he maintained that part of the artist’s role is to see a need and produce a reaction enough to fill it and perhaps change it. One example of this is his portraits, like *Laughing Gypsy Girl*, that show the humanity of the poor who are mistreated. His cityscapes, like *Snow in New York* (Fig. 10), show the darkness and dirt of the poverty stricken areas of the city. Art becomes successful when the artist identifies with the masses and their struggles. To display the “spirit” of the artist and the people and environment around him would naturally go against genteel and accepted subjects and methods of academic painting. These were distanced from raw experience and only displayed those objects that provided an escape for the viewer.

As in the Hudson River School and other artistic movements before this time, viewers were given more than just art, but a view at a world where they would want to be, whether in sublime nature, exotic lands, or a comfortable wealthy portrait. Henri gave a view of the world directly in front of him. Moving away from established classic art, the audience is able to see truth through one person’s eyes. John Dewey explains that much of the experience of painting is lost in academic and established classic painting. This is art that has been processed through multiple academics’ eyes; “the prestige they possess because of a long history of unquestioned admiration, creates conventions that get in the way of fresh insight” (Dewey 3). When a work of art attains a certain academic status, it becomes distant and isolated from the actual human
condition. To Emerson, this would be a loss of the entire purpose of art, to convey the beauty of the familiar in the world around them.

Rebecca Zurier denies that Henri’s influence continued after members of the Ashcan School began to experiment with other forms and methods in visual art. Her observations are rooted in how cityscapes were portrayed, but Henri and Emerson’s legacies continued beyond what was only in urban art. Zurier’s approach looks at how art’s depictions of urban spaces changed after Henri and the Ashcan school, pointing out that because of changes within the society, the precepts of Henri’s art no longer applied. After World War I, the interplay of the city’s populations changed. With an increase of crime and isolation between individuals, the social scene illustrated in works by Henri’s earlier students such as Luks and Shinn no longer existed. Zurier emphasizes the lack of urban centrality in American art after the Ashcan artists and that this change proved the end of the Henri group in favor of more modern European techniques. The next generation of painters, namely Reginald Marsh and Edward Hopper, showed people disconnected from each other, no longer joined in a social camaraderie. Hopper, one of Henri’s later students, became known for his scenes of isolated individuals in urban situations where there is no physical contact or connection between models. Although contrasting in obvious subject matter, the loneliness of individuals, seen in Hopper’s *Automat* (fig. 11) reflects a similar loneliness in William Glackens’ *Chez Mouquin* (fig.12). Although Glackens’ female is surrounded by people in a busy café, the expression on her face reflects a solitude similar to Hopper’s subject who is actually alone. Zurier’s point, that the urban illustration changed, is well-founded, but her assertion that this proves a lack of a Henri legacy does not naturally follow.
Like the literary inheritance of Emerson, those that inherited Henri’s teachings distanced themselves from their original platform to explore further developments in their personal careers. Also like Emerson, Henri had an exchange with his students; he was officially the teacher, but he taught to bring out individual talent and expression, not to be merely followed. To Henri, the subject matter was not the central tenet in art, but how the artist felt about it. For students of Henri, it would be more important to progress in the truthful expression of life around them instead of continually depicting the city. Being primarily newspaper illustrators, city scenes were the focus of their lives and they could use their artistic background to catch the speed and emotion of the moment. With World War I, art changed in response to a new type of warfare that was more violent and de-humanizing than anything experienced before. Techniques became more streamlined and artists like Henri introduced a darker aspect to their paintings. This does not indicate that their position about art changed, just the techniques that they used to portray it.

Amidst the wave of developing technology, photography and film took the place of sketches to portray everyday happenings in newspapers. Zurier perceives this as a displacement of art; that photography edged illustrators out of the business and took over portraying the city and that the techniques and subjects of the Ashcan group was no longer novel nor needed. However, I see that photography became more of a continuation of the Henri’s legacy, portraying true life with realism and depth of feeling. Although Henri gave instruction on painterly techniques, the core of his teachings involved catching the emotion and humanity of a moment according to the artists’ individual perception. This is a continuation of Emerson’s explication on the role of the artist to portray truth as closely as possible and convey it in such a way as to make the rest of the world feel and understand that truth.
Photography grew in its ability to capture this spirit during the Great Depression when the government’s Farm Security Administration employed various photographers to capture images of the devastation around the country, centering on farmers and their families. Photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans captured real moments with a humanity parallel to the portraits of Henri. Lange’s *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, shot in 1936, is a poignant documentation of the ruin caused by the Great Depression and the individuals who suffered. Lange caught a seemingly candid shot of a mother comforting her children, finding no comfort herself. The image is a study in shadow and light with high definition delineating the lines of worry and hopelessness in her face while also bringing the shabbiness of their clothes into full focus. Although highly defined and contrasting with the painterly techniques of Henri, the subject’s eyes immediately catch the viewer’s gaze. These photographers and Henri both emphasize the individuality and life of the subject through their focus on the face and especially the eyes in a portrait. Henri wanted his art to make a change in the world and he did this through his depictions of people. These photographers traveled around the country using their art to make a change in a dire situation by focusing on the individuals and families so horribly affected.

Henri was a pivotal figure in American intellectual thought because of his ability to convey ideas, not just about art, but also about life. He sought students with the potential and desire for artistic greatness because these would be the students that would dive into a deeper intellectual knowledge as well as an emotional understanding of themselves. These internal developments would be translated onto canvas through their perceptions of daily life, perceptions that would convey truth and experience. In the end, Henri was an anti-mentor, teaching them not
to follow only what he said but always pushing his followers towards independent thought and the stimulation to act as they thought fit.

Conclusion

Emerson saw art as highly influential to the general populace to communicate the truths of the human experience. His introduction to “Self-Reliance” touches on the life of an unnamed painter, later identified as Washington Allston, one of the first recognized American painters of the nineteenth century. To Emerson, Allston exemplified the tenets of self-reliance, implying that self-reliance is especially important in those that have the ability and responsibility to communicate truth to those around them through the visual arts.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Emerson’s influence on the American aesthetic emerged during periods of artistic invention when many were seeking new and more effective methods of self-expression as they dealt with trials of social change and conflict. This was especially true during the early twentieth century as Henri focused on Emerson’s ideas that truth lay within individual people and continued to pass this emphasis to those he taught. As the twentieth century progressed, many artists combined the machine with the human, showing man as only a worker or a cog in an assembly line, losing their individuality. Henri maintained a focus on the human condition and the natural connection between individuals and the world around them whatever that world might entail without losing the humanity of the individual. He
continually emphasized truth and the importance of the artist to communicate the truth that he saw in the moments passing around him.

Robert Henri is recognized as a prominent figure in American art for his ability to paint, but also to mentor those artists around him. Because of his connection and study of Emerson, his methods of teaching reflected that of Emerson in his ability to develop individual thought and talent in his students. His teachings were an exchange centered on the artists’ obligation to communicate truth and making a difference in the world through his art. Those students closest to him were described as “rebels against conformity, deeply humanitarian, committed to confronting the genteel tradition with ‘real life’ and thereby revolutionizing American art” (Zurier 23). These ideas were rooted in Emerson’s writings who, because of Henri, would ultimately influence the direction and focus of American art. Without completely discounting the past, Henri taught a new generation of artists, as well as influenced generations to come, urging them to connect the ideas and intellectual breadth of America’s past to a new generation, inspiring them with old ideas filled with new life.
Conclusion

Through exploring the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on the American aesthetic, the foundational ideology behind the development of American art is expanded. During his life, Emerson’s ideas reached along the east coast of the United States and his influence only spread after his death. Since his death in 1882, his writings have maintained a place in American academic study, influencing many through his spiritual leanings and observations on life and the soul. His writings were characteristic of the time, but have lasted the test of time for their perspective that defied then-current ideas in both Christianity and science. It is this timeless quality and his pursuit of truth that maintained his grip of influence on future generations from all walks of life. Specifically on the arts, Emerson’s views on aesthetics and the ability of art to convey messages beyond just the pursuit of beauty influenced those artists who helped develop an aesthetic that became definitive in American art. These were periods of time when the American identity would be tested and developed. The Luminists were instrumental in their depictions of the quiet and unique American landscape while Henri and his students in the Ashcan School focused on the developing culture of a mixed population in America’s city centers. Emerson can be seen as a crossroads between both groups of artists who would exemplify Emerson’s ideas on nature and individualism, but always with an emphasis on truth; not attempting to be a part of Europe or to idealize the world around them, but to maintain that beauty is to be found in its truthful depiction.

The Luminists came to be defined by scholars as a group founded on ideas Emerson advocated during their artistic development. Although it is possible they were individually exploring their local environments using their own personal motivations, it is evident through their similar methodologies and environmental focal points that they followed comparable veins
of thought. Because of Emerson’s national reputation during this time, it is plausible to make a connection between his ideas on nature and the national identity and the Luminists emphasis on portraying local landscapes. Their execution of landscape painting echoes Emerson’s approach to man’s relationship with nature, invoking the calm and contemplative aspects of this connection. This contrasts with the Hudson River School who was primarily known for its emphasis on the sublime and awe-inspiring portrayals of nature, which placed man as insignificant compared to divine creation. Their paintings were also defined by an illustration of nature that worked in harmony with the progress of civilization. Their depictions of the progress of man as well as the divine aspects of nature fit within the scope of Emerson’s writings. However, because Emerson never fully defined implementation of his ideas, it remains inconclusive as to how his philosophy would be depicted in art. Each artist within the Luminist category exercised his own methods for depicting his local landscape, but in each of these pieces, Emerson’s views on nature and man can be identified as far as Emerson’s influence allows.

American society shifted in the early twentieth century because of increases in immigration and an influx of new wealth and industry. With these changes, Emerson’s ideas on nature were less immediately applicable, as most of the population had moved to urban centers in search of employment. The landscapes of the previous generation were replaced with cityscapes that implemented more modern methodology. Although it would seem that Emerson would fall to the wayside in the wake of such change, his ideas became just as important to a Henri and a new generation of artists who would use his words to inspire individuality and personal development in the visual arts. Henri became one of the foremost artists of the early twentieth century and taught many artists such as John Sloan, George Luks, and William Glackens who each contributed to artistic growth in the United States. Henri taught the importance of breaking
away from Europe to establish self-expression and focus on the individual. He stressed the importance of the artist to understand beauty through a primary understanding of truth. Henri and his students were known for their honest depictions of city life and its inhabitants, finding beauty in the dirty and mundane around them. The influence of Henri would continue even as artists moved away from urban centers as their subjects and developing technologies such as photography replaced much of Ashcan portraiture. Within the subjects of this new art, the ideas of Emerson through the legacy of Henri can be identified in the focus on the individual and each artists’ ability to express the issues of the world around him truthfully.

After Henri, the Ashcan group, among others who credited Henri as their mentor, continued their depictions of social realism even as the world around them continued to shift and change. New forms of media changed the perceptions of art as photography and film caught more realistic illustrations of life. Meanwhile, the lines defining fine art began to blur. Sketches and paintings were more accepted in all forms and were no longer used as a medium in newspapers and periodicals. Those who had made their careers doing newspaper illustrations experimented with more modern techniques, not having to be as precise in their representation since they were no longer employed in their careers.

According to Zurier, this new development in technology and shift in fine art would bring an end to the Ashcan School and make it difficult to trace any legacy they left behind. Changing life conditions combined with a “growing awareness of European modernism…suggested alternatives to an art based on ‘real life’ at exactly the time that the increasing importance of photography was severing the connections between drawings and news”(Zurier 306). She traces the various artists routes that lead them to enact new visual illustrations of life that were “safer, less socially charged forms of looking”(Zurier 306). She focuses on how their techniques
changed to experimenting with color and form. Zurier claims that tracing the legacy of Henri and the Ashcan school is difficult because artistic trends shifted so dramatically in the 1920’s to follow more modernist ideals. She claims that this is a pull away from their original techniques and motivations in their art. Although there is a shift, I do not see that it is not a complete abandonment of those ideas that first identified them as the Ashcan group. To be able to trace Henri’s legacy, it is important to first recognize Emerson’s intrinsic value and contribution to Henri’s art.

Although Emerson would be influential to following generations, his advocacy was formed in such a way that Whitman would later comment that “the best part of Emersonianism is, it breeds the giant that destroys itself” (Buell 290). Emerson acted as an anti-mentor whose teachings defied exact prescribed thought or action. Buell explains that even with the denunciation of this mentor, the problem with shaking off Emerson is that you have to begin with him and he himself “invites you to kill him off if you don’t find him useful” (Buell 292). To do otherwise would contradict his assertions to build on your own sense of things, not to take history’s thoughts and words as the ultimate authority.

After his death, Emerson’s name went through a sort of deification—everything he had advocated was the ultimate authority on any subject. After a few years, however, his name’s patina began to tarnish and those who used more modern methodologies like Ralph Waldo Ellison, T.S. Eliot, and Walt Whitman used him in their writings “as a symbol of a culturally homogenous moralistic elite” (Buell 289). None of their uses of him coincided directly with each other, but they all were a variation on this same idea. The legacy Emerson left gave no instructions on how to be used because he didn’t want to be used, but only wanted to encourage
individual creation. Therefore the traces of his influence range over multiple and seemingly contrasting disciplines.

Buell traces a literary inheritance that resisted Emerson, but inevitably acceded to his influence. In the end, each of their careers showed “the persistence of Emersonianism as a sustaining force” (Buell 325). Although Emerson is not as prominent and recognized a figure in other disciplines, his influence remains intact, if understated. Emerson’s interests stretched over an assortment of topics, like the arts, and his legacy continues in those disciplines as well. Like his literary posterity, Emerson’s influence manifests itself in a variety of aspects, but all demonstrate his advocacy of self-expression with fidelity to the true self. This was difficult for many of his associates to understand since most would go to him for counsel and advice. In accordance with his philosophy, Emerson gave little direction and maintained a serene reticence to direct their paths. This provoked many to declare that Emerson’s influence lay in his temperament instead of his ideas.

His influence was especially evident during times of trial in American history. During these times, the population responded to Emerson for his ability to focus on transcendental truths that define the human race and could bring their focus back to their individuality as well as their connection to the world around them. He also helped to define the American aesthetic as he democratized the American artist, pulling away from the ateliers of Europe and the fixed academic approach to art. His ideas were manifested early through the art of the Luminists who defined the United States through its unique and quiet landscapes. Henri and his students in the Ashcan group focused on the developing culture of a mixed population in America’s city centers. As this population grew, the country underwent more major changes in social and technological aspects and these changes were reflected in new artistic techniques in painting and sketching as
well as photography. These groups of artists would exemplify Emerson’s ideas on nature and individualism, but always with an emphasis on truth; they were not attempting to be a part of Europe or to idealize the world around them, but to maintain that beauty is to be found in its truthful depiction.
Figures

Figure 1 Aelbert Cuyp, *View of Dordrecht*, c.1655

Figure 2 Fitz Hugh Lane, *Boston Harbor at Sunset*, 1850-1855
Figure 3 John Frederick Kensett, *Eaton’s Neck, Long Island*, 1872

Figure 4 Martin Johnson Heade, *Sunlight and Shadow: The Newbury Marshes*, c. 1871-1875
Figure 5 Frederic Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860

Figure 6 Thomas Cole, *Kaaterskill Falls*, 1826
Figure 7 Fitz Henry Lane, *Brace’s Rock, Brace’s Cove*, 1864

Figure 8 Martin Johnson Heade, *Approaching Thunderstorm*, 1859
Figure 9 Robert Henri, *Laughing Gypsy Girl*, 1915

Figure 10 Robert Henri, *Snow In New York*, 1902
Figure 11 Edward Hopper, Automat, 1927

Figure 12 William Glackens, Chez Mouquin, 190
Bibliography


“Progress in Our National Art Must Spring from the Development of
Individuality of Ideas and Freedom of Expression: A Suggestion for a


