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The Weir Family, 1820–1920: Expanding the Traditions of American Art

Marian Wardle

Herman du Toit

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Marian Wardle, ed. *The Weir Family, 1820–1920:
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Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Museum of Art,
in association with Hanover: University Press of New England, 2011.

Reviewed by Herman du Toit

Marian Wardle, curator of American art at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art and part-time faculty member at BYU in art history, has assembled a remarkable group of writers from across the country for an anthology that focuses on the lives and artistic production of three of America's most notable artists: Robert Walter Weir (1803–1889) and his sons John Ferguson Weir (1841–1926) and Julian Alden Weir (1852–1919). The BYU Museum of Art became the beneficiary of a collection of the Weirs' artworks when one of Julian Weir's daughters, Dorothy, passed away in 1947, leaving much of her family's extensive collection to her husband, Mahonri Young, who was a grandson of Brigham Young and a respected New York artist and sculptor. The descendants of Mahonri Young were able to pass this vast collection of over eight thousand artworks to Brigham Young University in 1959, providing the impetus for the establishment of the BYU Museum of Art.

Wardle's volume is lavishly illustrated and uses letters, diaries, histories, and paintings to examine the contributions made by the Weir art dynasty in shaping American art during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wardle also curated the exhibition *The Weir Family, 1820–1920: Expanding the Traditions of American Art*, which prompted the publication of this volume. The exhibition showcases many of the paintings by the Weirs that are held in the collection of the BYU Museum of Art. The exhibition opened at the museum in November 2011 and subsequently traveled to the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut, concluding its tour at the Mint Museum of Charlotte, North Carolina, in January 2013. This is the first traveling exhibition organized by the BYU Museum of Art since it first opened to the public twenty years ago.

In addition to Wardle's introductory essay, the substance of the three artists' lives and their artistic production also provides rich material for the

six essayists who contributed to this volume—namely, Hollis Clayson, the Bergen Evans Professor in the Humanities at Northwestern University; Betsy Fahlman, a professor of art history at Arizona State University; Lois Marie Fink, a research curator emerita of the Smithsonian American Art Museum; Heather Belnap Jensen, an assistant professor of art history at Brigham Young University; Leo G. Mazow, an associate professor in the art department at the University of Arkansas; and Robert W. Rydell, the Michael P. Malone Professor of History at Montana State University. Speaking of the Weir family, Wardle describes the scope of the present volume in her introductory essay: “This volume explores [the Weirs’] transatlantic encounters, examining a century of cross-cultural artistic exchanges through the lens of a single family of respected American artists. Their separate European sojourns, their art, their rootedness in America, and their familial ties all come under scrutiny in this study of their joint contributions to transatlantic cultural activity and the expansion of American art traditions” (1).

The Weirs repeatedly crossed the Atlantic to immerse themselves in the European art traditions that they saw as their heritage. However, they never abandoned their American roots and always returned to their homes in New York and New England, where they became leaders of the burgeoning American art movement and where they continued to assert their American uniqueness. In her essay, Wardle traces the European sojourns of Robert, John, and Julian Weir, carefully delineating the differing influences that prevailed upon them—from the lakes of northern Italy to their extended stays at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. When returning from his travels, John would always resume his position at West Point, where he taught art. Julian became a major American impressionist, and John founded the first academic art program at Yale—the first of its kind on an American college campus. Wardle makes the point that these transatlantic encounters were bidirectional, in that the influx of Americans had a profound influence on the production and exhibition of art in Paris, just as American art benefitted from an infusion of European techniques and traditions. These exchanges and assimilations of cultural differences were not without resistance on both sides of the Atlantic. The complex negotiations between a profound American nationalism and the veneration of a centuries-old European tradition were played out in the *cafés*, *garrets*, and *salons* of Paris and Rome. Wardle’s careful analysis of this phenomenon is always supported by examples of the Weirs’ artworks, and her thesis becomes even more poignant when we consider the fact that the artistic exploits and triumphs of the Weirs did not occur in isolation but also reflected the collective experience of their contemporaries. In the end, a remarkable synthesis was achieved, benefiting artists on both sides of the

Atlantic and providing the impetus for the axis of contemporary art to eventually move to New York during the 1960s and 1970s.

The other essayists in this volume focus on various aspects of this complex cross-cultural engagement. Leo Mazow draws our attention to Robert Weir's powerful "sense of place" through his patriotism and his deep attachment to the American landscape—particularly of the Hudson River Valley viewed from his beloved West Point. However, Robert Weir's American landscapes are imbued with a serenity and quietude that can only be attributed to his study of artistic conventions and compositional elements found in Europe. Hollis Clayson examines Julian Alden Weir's student days abroad during the 1870s. Julian benefited from four years of study at the famed *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and gained a predilection for impressionism and for the studio art system of instruction. Lois Fink, a seasoned scholar of American art, emphasizes the importance of the Paris salons to the American artists "for exhibition opportunities, exposure to current trends, and the making of artistic reputations" (24).

Robert Rydell's essay explores the importance of world's fairs from 1851 through the First World War on the increase of internationalism in a modernizing world. Betsy Fahlman looks at the interest that the Weirs had in science and industry through their artwork and concludes that this shift in subject matter "references many changes in the cultural and intellectual life of the nation" (24). Heather Jensen makes a solid contribution to this volume through her exploration of the central role that women and familial bonds played in the development of the Weirs' art production—the first study of its kind. The volume concludes with extensive genealogies of the Weir family compiled by Danielle Hurd and Julianne Gough.

By tackling the subject of the Weir art dynasty and analyzing the complex matrix of events and circumstances surrounding their uniquely American posture during a critical period in the formation of American art, Wardle has made a vital and necessary contribution to the scholarship of American art. This volume stands as a hallmark for future scholars in the field of cross-cultural studies and as a touchstone for all who would like to delve beneath the surface of mainstream art in this country.

Herman du Toit received postgraduate degrees in art history and sociology of education from the former University of Natal and a doctorate in educational leadership from Brigham Young University. Du Toit retired in 2011 as head of museum research at Brigham Young University's Museum of Art. He was also an editor for the BYU Studies publication *Art and Spirituality: The Visual Culture of Christian Faith* (2008).