

Nelson H. White: The Scenic Spirit

By Peter Trippi

From afar, the life of the American painter Nelson H. White (b. 1932) seems an aesthetic idyll. Since the mid-1950s, he has lived in Florence nine months of each year, punctuated with summertime stays along Long Island Sound and winter sojourns in the Bahamas and Swiss Alps, always armed with a brush and ready to record what he sees there. Yet unlike conventional jetsetters pursuing the same charmed itinerary, White is a tireless worker who has produced a large and impressive oeuvre that, had he lived a century ago, would surely have won him fame. It has been the fate of White's generation, however, to live in an era that does not care as much about his modern varietal of tonalism. This is just one of many reasons why his solo exhibition at Connecticut's New Britain Museum of American Art this season is so very welcome.

A Unique Lineage

White's showing in an institution filled with masterworks by earlier American artists is highly appropriate in light of his having grown up in a family of talented painters, primarily of landscapes. For more than a century, the Whites' lives have centered on Waterford, Connecticut, whose picturesque situation overlooking Long Island Sound first inspired Nelson's Hartford-born grandfather, Henry C. White (1861-1952), to commission the great architect Wilson Eyre to build him a fine stone house there. Not surprisingly, all the Whites have loved sailing on the Sound, which is why Henry also built a simpler summer home for the family on Shelter Island, tucked between the north and south forks of Long Island's East End.

Having studied at the Art Students League of New York, Henry was mentored by the renowned painter Dwight W. Tryon (1849-1925), whose biography he later published. As an original member of the art colony at Old Lyme (just 12 miles from Waterford), Henry won acclaim, if not enduring fame, for his poetic oil and pastel scenes of fields and marshes. Steeped in a gentle tonalism that gradually made room for an impressionistic palette, Henry used his independent income to acquire pictures not only by Tryon, but also by Thomas Wilmer Dewing, Eugène Boudin, and other gifted colleagues of his era. As a boy, his grandson Nelson admired these masterworks alongside subtly hued ceramics from China and Japan, a truly Aesthetic experience one can half-seriously compare to living inside what is now the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

From the age of 13, Nelson studied technique with his grandfather, even drawing from plaster casts of iconic sculptures. "In teaching me drawing and painting," he recalls, "he would say that the design and the composition were always the first things to seek. My grandfather said, 'I think the greatest artists were the Japanese, like Hokusai. Observe his sense of design.'" He also fostered patience in the youngster by reminding him that "Drawing is not a trick of the hand; it is observation."

Fortunately, such artistry and determination had not skipped a generation. Henry's son, and Nelson's father, was Nelson C. White (1900-1989), who studied at the National Academy of Design and Yale University. He was similarly inspired by Tryon, but also by Dewing and Childé

Hassam, and he ultimately wrote definitive monographs on his mentor Abbott H. Thayer and J. Frank Currier. Thayer had studied in Paris with the great academician Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), and so the Frenchman's trenchant tips and wisdoms have been passed down through the White line, as if they were channeling the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in its late 19th-century heyday.

His father focused young Nelson on aesthetic decisions, especially on the significance of half tones, which had mattered so much to Tryon. He also introduced him to such leading figures as Frank DuMond (of Old Lyme and the Art Students League), the Long Island Peconic colony's Irving Ramsay Wiles, and even such seriously out-of-fashion classical realists as R.H. Ives Gammell and Richard Lack. In an art historian like myself, young Nelson's privileged observation of America's leading traditionalists (rather than its modernists) inspires pangs of envy, which makes it all the more remarkable that, until he was 25, he planned to become a professional violinist. Indeed, all the Whites have loved and played music, so it was not a cause for concern when Nelson departed Connecticut's Mitchell College after just one year in order to focus intensively on his violin.

When Florence Beckoned

A turning point came in 1954, however, when the family visited Florence. There his father discovered a book on Pietro Annigoni (1910-1988), whom Nelson still considers "the greatest realist painter of our time." Renowned worldwide for his portraits of presidents and royalty, Annigoni invited the young man to help in his studio, promising not to be his teacher but a sort of coach, available to critique his work regularly. Their friendship blossomed, and soon they were traveling widely together. White learned from Annigoni not only how to work hard, but also to further refine his values, especially through drawings in wash. It is values, White believes, that give life to one's drawing, much more so than color. Even today, he is constantly checking his scene with the black mirror his grandfather gave him, a simple device that eliminates color so that he can focus on the darks and lights.

"I was never interested in emulating Annigoni," White explains, and the same could be said about his many years studying under Nerina Simi (1890-1987), the great Florentine teacher whose atelier he joined shortly after starting work for Annigoni. Thanks in part to his close friendships with Simi and Annigoni, White never left Italy, a situation not so surprising when one learns that his American-born mother, Aida Rovetti White, was the daughter of an Italian immigrant skilled in carving stone. Still intimate with his maternal relations in Cremona, Nelson White is now an Italian in many ways, and Florence is truly his home.

It was in Simi's atelier that White met his fellow American Daniel Graves (b. 1949), who went on to found the Florence Academy of Art in 1991. Dedicated to teaching traditional techniques (in English) to students drawn from around the world, the Academy inspired White to join its board before he began studying there in 2002. At age 70, White could easily have taught his own course there, yet he perceived in Graves's innovative curriculum a range of skills, especially in drawing, that his own generation had been denied in American art schools. Ever modest, White now says that when he needs an opinion about his work, he consults Graves, as well as the head of the Academy's painting program, Angel Ramiro Sanchez (b. 1974), and his wife Melissa Franklin Sanchez. (b. 1984)

Perhaps more than any place on earth, the Florence Academy of Art is a magnet for those who share White's inherited, and passionately felt, beliefs that "the essential objective of art is to render beauty," and also that painting is "supposed to say something," to communicate a mood or emotion that no photograph can. Almost inevitably, a community of kindred spirits has formed not only around Graves, but also around White, an international network of students and instructors who consider him a knowledgeable, and enthusiastic, connector between the present and the not-so-distant heritage of traditional art almost erased late in the 20th century.

Capturing Nature in All Its Moods

On weekdays in Florence, White usually focuses on the portraits, self-portraits, figures, and still lifes for which the Academy's painters are best known, and indeed the New Britain exhibition duly contains superb examples of his efforts in these genres. But on Friday afternoons, White heads to Viareggio or Torre del Lago on the Tuscan coast to pursue his true passion, paintings that consider nature's ever-changing intersections of water, earth, and sky. Thus the greater part of the exhibition offers an array of dunes, marshes, canals, ponds, and streams, and also broad sandy beaches dotted with brightly hued umbrellas or folding chairs.

White recalls that he "got into painting beach scenes with parasols after a trip to Saint Tropez on the French Mediterranean coast. I found the views there particularly inspiring. Since then I think my approach to outdoor painting has evolved significantly. At first I was still finding my subject, developing a feel for the objects before me. Now I am more intent on the atmosphere, to render a feel for the moisture, the humidity in the air. I want to produce a complete scene, where everything is connected." Indeed, it is this comprehensive connectivity that makes White's land-and-sea-scapes so successful, that allows them to convey nature's moods and light effects.

Usually working *alla prima*, he accomplishes this with lusciously textured brushstrokes of oil paint that coalesce from a distance and delight the eye when studied up close. Particularly dynamic is his bold application of whites for sand or whipping water, though the past decade has witnessed the appearance of bolder color, including an almost abstract sunset of 2010 that would make Turner proud. White's tonalist inheritance, flowing smoothly from the Barbizon school toward Whistler and Tryon and onward through his own family, is particularly apparent in the Long Island Sound scenes, and also in his less familiar works in pastel, at which his grandfather particularly excelled.

The scenes on view at New Britain confirm White's identity as an inveterate traveler, an inheritor of John Singer Sargent's peripatetic lifestyle, which also tied in closely with Florence (where he was born in 1856). Though he prefers to work outdoors, White will happily paint in the car if it is raining, or at his hotel window in severely cold weather. This last scenario applies particularly to his explorations of snowy landscapes created during the skiing trips in Switzerland. Snow is ultimately just another form of water, and it is hard to imagine a more dramatic intersection of sky and earth than the Alps.

A survey of White's oeuvre underscores his ongoing passion for the low-key colors of Waterford and Shelter Island, interspersed with less numerous depictions of such scenic places as

Nantucket, Ogunquit, California, Sweden (where the Florence Academy of Art has a second location), and even Brooklyn. More brilliantly colored are the scenes from Nassau in the Bahamas, which members of the White family have visited regularly since 1915.

Setting aside this diversity of subjects and settings, it is worth considering a thread that might tie all of White's art together, an interdisciplinary one often neglected in our overly specialized world. There is, I believe, something crucial in Nelson White's early experiences in music, in his family's longstanding love of music, and in the Whistlerian legacy of art's emotional interconnections with music. White does not bother to name his pictures nocturnes or symphonies, as Whistler did, yet I, for one, can discern the light touch of a composer in their subtle placement of elements and masterful management of values and half tones. Quiet as they seem at first glance, White's scenes of shore and marsh can also be imagined with soundtracks—the crash of waves, the squawking of gulls, the ebbing of tidal waters—not so remote from music itself.

Looking Forward

Finally, what of Nelson White's own legacy? Though he has no children, one can be certain that White has impacted the artworks and lives of hundreds of Florence Academy students. He has taken on only a few students in a formal way, perhaps most significantly Laura Grenning, who now represents his work through her own Grenning Gallery in Sag Harbor on Long Island.

More broadly, the exhibition at New Britain affords us the privilege of considering a living master's work in the context of his American forerunners, whose works the museum has gathered so cannily since 1903. It's an ideal fit, and I particularly hope that students from Connecticut's many art schools will take advantage of this rare opportunity. Then let's see where that encounter might take them next.

Peter Trippi is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur* magazine.