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*Untitled (Figures in a Landscape)*: Influenced by Impressionism

J. H. Witt, *Untitled (Figures in Landscape)*, N.D. Oil on Gray-Board. 14 ¼ x 20 ¼ in.

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John Henry Harrison Witt was born in Dublin, Indiana, in 1840 and died in New York City in 1901. Witt's piece at the Maier Museum of Art, *Untitled (Figures in Landscape)*, (fig. 1), is not dated, and there is little information available on the latter part of Witt's career (Maier Museum of Art). Despite this lack of material, I would argue that Witt painted this work under the influence of Impressionism and the works of William Merritt Chase, due to his change in style and his proximity to Chase and the Impressionists later in his career.

Witt started his artistic career as a machinist at his uncle's agricultural supply firm and as a painter of "wagons and ornamented buggies" (Magazine of Western History Co., 317). He then traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he studied under J. O. Eaton, one of the most prominent regional artists of the time (Maier Museum of Art). Witt moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 1862, and began painting portraits for families; it was here that he had his first great success, *Rebecca at the Well*, which was lauded in the *Ohio State Journal* and immediately sold for five hundred dollars (Magazine of Western History Co., 317). In addition to this, his time in Ohio is most notable for his having painted as many as thirteen portraits of Ohio governors (Ohio Statehouse). Witt also built a reputation as a teacher, having taught prominent regional artists such as Silas Martin and James Henry Moser (Vance, Meggitt, and Haverstock). In 1873, Witt moved to Washington, D.C., where he completed portraits of leaders such as General Sherman, Charles Sumner, Senator Sherman, and Judge Swayne (Ohio Statehouse). During this time, Witt also

became a member of the Literary Club of Washington, D.C. (Ohio Statehouse). He then moved to New York in 1878 to open his own studio (National Academy of Design). He became an associate member of the New York Academy of Art in 1887, where his “oeuvre included landscapes and genre scenes (Maier Museum of Art; National Academy of Design). Witt exhibited annually at the National Academy of Design until 1899, and, as detailed in the *Magazine of Western History*, “for some years his genre pictures were all shipped to Chicago” (Vance et al.; *Magazine of Western History Co.*, 318). From 1877 to 1887, Witt exhibited as many as sixteen paintings, most which were genre/landscape paintings, at the *Art Gallery at the Chicago Interstate Industrial Exposition* (Jensen). Witt also exhibited genre/landscape paintings with the Art Institute of Chicago’s *Exhibition of American Pictures*. The first exhibition catalog, from 1888, can be found online and cites Witt’s involvement, along with other prominent American landscape painters such as George Inness and William Merritt Chase (Art Institute of Chicago). Despite his successes with landscape and genre scenes, information on and images of these works are near impossible to find.

The emergence of genre and landscape paintings in the United States can be traced through the development and change of the country’s culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; artists at the time were interested in documenting these changes. In the beginning of the century, the lucrative art market shifted from portrait painting, which had previously been dominant, to “depictions of courtship, families, and community life in rural settings that were associated positively with fundamental national values (Weinberg and Barratt). According to the curators Weinberg and Barratt, by the 1850s, artists had moved to outdoor scenes, and after the Civil War, there was “such turmoil that many artists chose to examine only small, reassuring slices of the human experience” (“American Scenes of Everyday Life”). Thus came a national artistic focus on

landscape and genre paintings. Witt's *Untitled (Figures in Landscape)* is undoubtedly one of these paintings, as it depicts a very tranquil scene of a group of everyday people. The painting also fits Weinberg and Barratt's description because Witt, like many of these genre painters, "lived, studied, worked, and exhibited their paintings in thriving cities [and therefore] looked to the countryside for their subjects ("American Scenes..."). In addition, Witt's *Untitled* is undoubtedly a later piece because, according to Weinberg and Barratt, by the 1870s, artists' outdoor scenes became "ambiguous and... elusive in their content" ("American Scenes..."). In an early example of a genre painting, *Cider Making* (1840-1), (fig. 2), by William Sidney Mount, the subject would have been obvious to viewers, as well as perhaps the location, as Mount often focused on his hometown (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). In contrast, in Witt's *Untitled*, while it is obvious that this group of people is relaxing by a riverbank, it is impossible to tell where they are in relation to any known places or landmarks. Similarly, a later work of Witt's, a painting called *Canoeing* mentioned in the *Magazine of Western History* in 1886, "represents two beautiful ladies in a birch canoe upon a vast and placid expanse of water," but does not mention any specific location (Magazine of Western History Co.). Despite being heralded as "an example of the best modern art," no image seems to exist today of *Canoeing* (Magazine of Western History Co.).

I argue that Witt's painting was done near the end of his career for another reason: it does not resemble other landscape paintings done by artists in the time of his early career, specifically before the mid 1880s. These differences can be seen in comparison to works by Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and even early works by George Inness. For example, Church's *View of Cotopaxi* (1867), (fig. 3), like many landscape works at this time, is a grand scene showcasing the splendor of nature and minimizing the presence of man (Yale Center for British Art).

Although much of the brushstrokes are visible in Church's painting, the work is executed so that in the foreground, the vegetation is conveyed with an exactness that is not present in Witt's work. Witt's *Untitled* is quite different; he does not show a majestic scene but zeroes in on this group of people enjoying nature. Likewise, his brushwork is highly visible and conveys a much vaguer image than Church's does. This loose and indistinct brushwork is certainly the product of Impressionist influence.

Impressionism gained popularity in the United States in the mid-1880s, with working artists concentrated in New York, and was "firmly established as a valid style of painting by the early 1890s" (Weinberg). As previously stated, Witt opened a studio in New York in 1878, so he would have been among Impressionist artists and works. These influences can be most clearly seen in Witt's change in style; *Young Lady in a Landscape*, (fig. 4), a painting Witt completed in 1880, arguably before the Impressionists could have had a major influence on him, does not show the elements of Impressionism that *Untitled* does (Invaluable). The paintings have almost the same subjects: figure(s) sitting by a riverbank. However, in *Young Lady in a Landscape*, the major difference lies in the handling of the figure and the tactile elements in the work. The woman, her clothes, the blanket, and the papers next to her are all depicted fairly realistically. The brushstrokes are not overtly visible, and Witt faithfully renders the smoothness and overall surface quality of the fabrics. *Untitled* appears quite Impressionistic in comparison. The brushstrokes are more visible and expressive throughout the work; the only areas of smoothness are in the river. Witt is therefore much more inexact in his depiction of the figures' fabrics and even in their facial features. The figures here are all described softly in comparison to the way Witt delineated the figure in *Young Lady in a Landscape*. Another example of stylistic change is the lighting of the works; in the earlier work, the lighting is consistent throughout the

composition. In contrast, *Untitled* shows Witt's interest in the play of light on the water, the woman's dress, and on the grass. The light dapples through the trees, giving different values throughout the painting. The emphasis on the effects of light is one of the pillars of Impressionism, which Witt would have encountered more extensively after he completed *Young Lady in a Landscape*.

As mentioned, after opening his studio in New York, Witt exhibited works in Chicago along with Impressionist artist William Merritt Chase. In fact, Witt's studio on West 55<sup>th</sup> street was just a short walk from Chase's 10<sup>th</sup> street studio (Art Institute of Chicago). Although I could not find any other information on Witt's time in New York, it seems undeniable that Chase's works would have had influence on Witt's style. This influence is evident in the comparison of Witt's *Untitled* and Chase's *Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park* (1886), (fig. 5) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). The two paintings show similar handling of the surface of the water, with visible brushstrokes and vague renderings of reflections. Although the landscape in the upper right corner of Chase's work is much more indistinct, Witt's riverbank closely resembles the area of landscape behind and to the left of Chase's figure. Both works in these areas show feathery brushwork in the grasses and indistinct renderings of rocks and reflections. In addition, while Witt's figures do not resemble the figure in his 1880 work, *Young Lady in a Landscape*, they do resemble the figure in *Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park*. Chase's figure is rendered softly, without the sculptural modeling seen in *Young Lady in a Landscape*. Witt executes his figures in *Untitled* in a similar manner, with softer lines and less modeling. The fabrics, too, show Chase's influence. Like in Chase's painting, brushstrokes are visible on Witt's fabrics, and there is less focus on rendering the quality of fabric faithfully than there is on capturing the effects of light and texture.

The timing of Witt's move to New York combined with the subject and execution of *Untitled (Figures in Landscape)* as a genre/landscape painting places the work later than Witt's time in Ohio. Furthermore, while there is little information on Witt during his time in New York, in comparison to earlier works, it appears definite that Impressionism and William Merritt Chase had an influence on Witt's style and artwork.



**Fig. 1.** J.H. Witt, *Untitled*

*(Figures in Landscape, N.D. Oil on Gray-Board. 14 ¼ x 20 ¼ in. Maier Museum of Art, Lynchburg, VA.*



**Fig. 2.** William Sydney Mount, *Cider Making*,

1840-1. Oil on canvas. 27 x 34 1/8 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York, NY.



**Fig. 3.** Frederic Edwin

Church, *View of Cotopaxi*, 1867. Oil on canvas. 11 x 18 in. Yale University Art Gallery.





**Fig. 4.** J.H. Witt, *Young Lady in a Landscape*, 1880.

Oil on Panel. 17 x 12 in. Private Collection.



**Fig. 5.** William Merritt Chase, *Mrs. Chase in Prospect Park*, 1886.

Oil on panel. 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 19  $\frac{5}{8}$  in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

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