

# The Boston Globe

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FRAME BY FRAME

## Poised between earth and poetry

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MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE ART MUSEUM

### **“Saco Ford, Conway Meadows” by George Inness**

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley

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SOUTH HADLEY — The American painter George Inness (1825-94) painted this intensely atmospheric view in his Boston studio in 1876. The painting, which hangs in the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, shows a slice of the meandering Saco River in New Hampshire and, in the distance, Moat Mountain, heavily shrouded in cloud.

It’s a large picture — big enough, certainly, to compete for wall space and all-round impact with works by the Hudson River School painters, whose popularity was just then peaking. Inness’s approach to landscape was softer and more subdued than the grandiloquent,

expansionist designs of Church, Bierstadt, and Durand. He was a master of nature's more intimate moods.

As his career advanced beyond the 1870s, he succumbed more and more to the poetry of approximation and blur. This painting came before that shift had really kicked in. It reveals Inness delicately poised between his earlier, earthy style, inspired by the Barbizon painters of France, and his later, picturesque style, which became gradually more poetic, more unanchored, more freely imagined.

Oh, it's beautiful.

Inness had spent four months the previous summer admiring this view. The same view had already inspired paintings by John Frederick Kensett and Albert Bierstadt. But Inness brought to the motif a freshness of feeling and a fantastically subtle way with color.

Using the second story of an abandoned schoolhouse — Kearsage House, in North Conway — as his studio, he made at least three small studies of the view in oil, and early the next year, back in Boston, he worked up the final picture.

Linger in front of the picture, and you begin to note the varieties of tone and color in the menacing clouds, and the nuanced relations between the blue of the water, the tawny gold of the riverbanks, and the green of the trees. These trees, and the valley grasses, take on their own rich array of tints in the shifting, silvery light.

There is pleasure, too — of the kind John Constable always affords — in noting the dirt tracks that meander down to the river and alongside the stand of trees; the farmhouses off in the distance (not quite Salisbury Cathedral, but they'll do fine: This is America!), the couple taking in the view, and the grazing animals. These all merge in the mind with the cloud shadow covering the foreground, the light that licks one side of the trunk of the lone tree just beyond, and the streak of mist — or is it a steam engine's smoke? Could it possibly be anything so abrasive, so up-to-the-minute? — in the middle distance.

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