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The Artistic Life and Afterlives of William James Stillman

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William James Stillman (1828–1901) wore many hats over his long life. In 1848, he began a career as a landscape painter and became one of the first American followers of John Ruskin. He worked as an editor and art reviewer. Then in 1855, he founded with John Durand the *Crayon*, the first American periodical devoted entirely to fine art. He was also, at turns, a wilderness explorer, a photographer, an archaeologist, a political activist, a foreign correspondent, and a book author. In 1861 Stillman embarked on a diplomatic career in Europe. Although he continued to write regularly for American newspapers and periodicals, he never again practiced painting professionally in the United States.

Stillman abandoned painting for other occupations for the same reason as did other artists of his time: the difficulty of making a living from selling his work. His subsequent pursuits were all efforts at producing income, although none paid much better than painting. The American novelist and critic William Dean Howells described his friend Stillman as always poor yet virtuous, no matter his endeavors. Howells also saw Stillman as having given up art: "He got back to painting only to convince himself that he was not an artist."¹

Yet during his long life and many pursuits, Stillman never moved very far from the world of art and artists. Art remained a theme in his extensive journalistic career. Stillman's biographer, Stephen Dyson, has identified twelve books and a total of 250 published writings by him, nearly half of which were essays about art.² Stillman befriended artists, married an artist, and even returned to painting later in his life.

That Stillman did not leave the orbit of art reveals something significant not only about him but also about artistic pursuits in his time. He was continually able to express himself artistically without producing painted canvases. Throughout his life, he benefited from two features about the art profession in the nineteenth century: the easy entry and re-entry into art creation and the flexible definition of an artist.

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Stillman was an unlikely candidate to have developed into either a man of letters or a landscape painter, for his sternly religious parents were not worldly, and there had been no professional artists in his family. Born and raised in Schenectady, New York, at the edge of the Adirondack mountains, Stillman credited that environment with instilling in him a love of nature's innate spiritualism and a desire to depict it.³

Stillman attended Union College in his hometown, where he developed facilities in literature, philosophy, and writing. During college he took lessons from a drawing master, studied prints after Thomas Girtin and J. M. W. Turner, and determined to become an artist.⁴ His artistic ambitions benefited from three attitudes promoted through his amateur study: that anyone could learn to draw, that drawing was the basis of painting, and that landscape was his art form of choice.

When Stillman graduated in 1848, he made plans to study in New York under Thomas Cole, but not at the National Academy of Design. These plans were cut short by Cole's death. After Asher B. Durand turned him down, and Frederic E. Church took him as a pupil for just one winter, Stillman studied with amateur artist Edward Ruggles.⁵ Reading Ruskin's *Modern Painters* at Church's studio may have led to Stillman's year of study in London from 1850 to 1851, thanks to financing by his brother Thomas. There, Stillman did not enroll at the Royal Academy, but he took lessons from a drawing teacher, eagerly examined Turner's paintings, and finally met both Turner and Ruskin. The encounter with Ruskin turned into a friendship that continued well after Stillman's return to New York.⁶

Stillman painted small landscapes of American scenery that were marked by close observation. He favored two types of compositions. The first type, such as *Saranac Lake* (1854; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), sets the viewer amid the heavy growth of a wilderness. The second, such as *Mount Chocorua* (fig. 1), favors a broad, uninterrupted view into limitless distance. However, he soon learned that selling such art did not pay well, even in the growing art market of New York in the mid-nineteenth century.



Fig. 1. William James Stillman, *Mount Chocorua*, 1856. Oil on canvas, 12 1/8 x 18 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Richard D. Bullock and Museum Purchase made possible by Walter Beck and Reverend F. Ward Denys, 1999.⁸¹

To develop an alternate source of income, Stillman began working as a journalist and art editor at the *New York Evening Post*, one of several general-interest periodicals in major cities that reported on art. While at that newspaper, whose editor-in-chief was the poet William Cullen Bryant, Stillman overheard Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson mention that no American journal devoted to art existed, even though art topics in literary

journals had become quite popular.⁷ Stillman developed an idea for an art journal, which he cofounded with John Durand, son of Asher B. Durand. The *Crayon* began publication in 1855.

The *Crayon* relied heavily on Stillman as a journalist, as he largely wrote the first two volumes himself. Topics of art and travel set the tone for each issue, which also regularly featured nature poetry, including verses by William Cullen Bryant and James Russell Lowell. Each issue began with an editorial about art. A regular column called "Sketchings" was a continuing series of commentaries that included art criticism, advice on how to sketch, visits to private collections, travel accounts, and philosophical musings, all configured much as an artist gathers material but presented to the *Crayon's* general readership. The first volume of the *Crayon* included an extended essay by Asher Durand, then president of the National Academy of Design, titled "Letters on Landscape Painting." Its premise was to explain that artists could learn all they need by studying nature directly. Alongside Durand's "Letters," Stillman serialized his own thinly fictionalized story, "Wilderness and Its Waters," which chronicles a canoe trip up the Hudson River. The observed detail along the trip—along with the philosophical insights induced by the natural world—correspond with Durand's precepts.⁸ "Wilderness and Its Waters" reinforces the idea that observing nature closely is the key to artistic experience as well as the bond between artists and non-artists.

It might seem that Stillman's work on the *Crayon* would displace his painting of landscapes, but such was not the case; his editorship coincided with his peak activity as a practicing artist. Between 1848 (when Stillman arrived in New York City) and 1861 (when he left), he showed work at the American Art-Union, the National Academy of Design, and Boston Athenaeum every year of his residence in the United States, exhibiting between one and eight paintings per year. His total of thirty-nine works exhibited over that interval compared favorably to that of his peers. During the same period, Jervis McEntee and James McDougal Hart, both Stillman's age, exhibited thirty-nine and thirty-two canvases, respectively, while William Sontag, six years older than Stillman, exhibited twenty-two.

At the conclusion of the journal's third volume in 1856, Stillman surrendered his share of the *Crayon* to John Durand for two reasons: the writing had proved to be too exhausting, and the journal did not provide a living wage, despite its circulation.⁹ Stillman placed the blame for its lack of profitability on his financially reckless decision to offer the *Crayon's* advertisements gratis.¹⁰ Those free notices, which ranged from advertisements for professional artists' supplies to offers of instruction for amateurs, did have a signal benefit: they fostered a community in which the boundaries between artists, writers, and readers became permeable.

Stillman wrote about art differently from college-educated artist-writers and other authors devoting themselves to American art. He never attempted a formal treatise, like Washington Allston's *Lectures on Art* or Samuel F. B. Morse's *Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts*. He likewise avoided producing biographies of artists, such as C. Edwards Lester's *The Artists of America* (1846) or Louis Legrand Noble's *Life and Works of Thomas Cole* (1853). Instead, through his journalism, Stillman shared the sensibilities of an artist by placing readers into the artist's shoes.

Stillman predicted his own identity as an ex-artist by developing in the *Crayon* a prescription through which one could participate in the artistic process without producing art. In "What Makes an Artist?" he makes the point that art is not merely an exercise of the hand. Perceptiveness, a "pictorial mind," is also always necessary.¹¹ If we have a liking for art, an ability to perceive, we will have the mind of an artist, he asserts. The ability to look inquisitively joined forces with painting and sketching. "It is the brain that sees, not the eye," he writes.¹²

After two years in his venture with the *Crayon*, and despite his election as an associate member of the National Academy of Design, Stillman turned to other endeavors. Between 1857 and 1859, he organized three excursions at Camp Maple in the Adirondacks.¹³ Nicknamed the "Philosophers' Camp," the venture became widely known because of the stature of the campers. There, a group of Bostonian intellectuals including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louis Agassiz, Alexander Binney, and James Russell Lowell hunted, fished, and explored the environs with Stillman as their guide.¹⁴ Stillman, who already had acquaintances in Cambridge, Massachusetts, contacted all the prospective campers and made all the travel arrangements. At the camp, he organized the group's daily activities. For Stillman, Camp Maple became a restorative venture during which he produced a handful of landscapes. For Stillman's fellow campers, the trips became an intellectual and spiritual exercise in probing the mysteries of the wilderness; Emerson turned the experience into much poetry.¹⁵

Stillman took up photography while running Camp Maple. In 1859, he produced an album of twelve albumen photographs titled *Photographic Studies*. Photography was very different technically from landscape sketching or painting. Despite the medium's cumbersome equipment, Stillman was able to place his viewers close to trees and thick underbrush, with every unruly branch in clear view, while simultaneously capturing a viewpoint past the forest overgrowth into a deep distance. His photography, like his sketches, involves an almost scientific inquiry into the natural world. Stillman's use of photography to reveal the details of nature, free of preconceptions, resembles Henry Fox Talbot's experimental subscription album *Sun Pictures in Scotland* (1845), except applied to the American wilderness.

The 1860s marked the decade when Stillman embarked on a peripatetic yet permanent residence in Europe, leaving his American painting career behind. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Stillman applied to join the Union army but was rejected on health grounds. That same year, he was offered and accepted an appointment as United States consul in Rome, where he served until 1865. From 1865 to 1868, he served as the consul in Crete. As an administrative functionary, he collected fees and issued licenses. This type of work was attractive to writers because it offered time to write; previous consuls include Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

For Stillman, who at age thirty-five now faced the challenges of supporting a young family, an assured if small diplomatic salary along with an opportunity to supplement it with freelance writing, not to mention lower living expenses, were all reasons to leave behind the uncertainties of an artist's life in New York for Europe. Stillman's abandonment of New York meant that, after 1860, he was no longer listed as a member of the National Academy of Design. In 1867, Henry Tuckerman, in his *Book of the Artists*, supplied a roster of the

present generation of American landscape painters, which did not include Stillman's name.¹⁶

After his consular appointments ended, Stillman continued to live abroad, in Crete, Athens, and Rome, with intermittent trips to London and New York. His activities between 1868 and 1898 included a brief stint as editor of *Scribner's* magazine and longer-term appointments as a correspondent in Athens (1877–83) and Rome (1886–98) for the London *Times* newspaper. He wrote art criticism for the *Times* and worked as a freelance contributor to American monthly periodicals, particularly the *Nation*. Such career moves struck Howells as remarkable. "In our modern conditions," he wrote, "it will be increasingly difficult for a man to leave being a painter to become the editor of an art journal, and then to leave that and become a consul with diplomatic duties of delicacy and importance, and then represent different great newspapers at high events."¹⁷ To Howells, such versatility represented an ideal that was no longer feasible by 1901.

During the 1870s, Stillman turned to writing books. The most important among these—*The Cretan Insurrection of 1866* (1874), *Herzegovina and the Late Uprising* (1877), and *The Union of Italy* (1898)—reflect his long-held interest in independence movements in Europe. In 1898, at age seventy-two, he retired with his wife to Surrey, England, where he collected and republished some of his previous writings and penned his autobiography.

What is interesting about the writing that Stillman pursued beginning in the 1870s is the degree to which his sensibilities as a landscape painter reveal themselves. Stillman had a remarkable capacity to recall in detail his natural surroundings, even after many years. Vivid word pictures of landscapes can be found throughout his writings.

For example, during the insurrection in Crete against the Turks, Stillman accompanied Turkish officials and other consuls to the mountainous glen of Samaria along the plain of Omalos, which he saw from a height that reminded him of the Alps. He vibrantly describes the vista in *The Cretan Insurrection of 1866*:

In front of me were bare stone peaks 7,000 to 8,000 feet high, whose precipitous slopes plunged down unbrokenly, the pines venturing to show themselves in increasing number as the slope ascended and ended in a narrow gorge. At the side, the rock rose like the aiguilles of Chamouny [*sic*], cloven and guttered with the snow still lying in its clefts. . . . I looked down through the pines and cedars that clung in the crevices of the rocks below me, and the bottom of the glen looked blue and faint. . . . As I watched, the flame of the sunlight crept up the peaks across the glen, the purple shadow following it up, changing the snow-fields from rosy to blue, and the peaks of pale gray rock to russet, as the day died away.¹⁸

The passage resembles a landscape painting by defining the view, myriad details, light, shade, colors, the focal point, and the progression from foreground to the distance. Stillman gives similar treatments to landscapes in his *The Old Rome and the New*. After recounting how artists have braved the elements to depict Rome's poetic vistas, he launches into his own description of the hills, setting sun, and clouds over the city, showing that he thought and wrote about landscape like a painter.¹⁹

From the 1860s to the 1880s, Stillman continued with his photographic endeavors. He concentrated on outdoor images, which he published as travelogues with accompanying text. These undertakings include views taken on a return trip to the United States, published as *Poetic Localities of Cambridge* (1876), an artfully bound book of Massachusetts scenes and recollections that play off one another.

Stillman's principal photographic work, however, documented sites of classical antiquity in Greece, Crete, and Italy. He twice photographed the Acropolis in Athens, in 1869 and 1882. Those photographs were published as two books, *Antiquities of Athens* (1870) and *On the Track of Ulysses* (1888), which describe the excavation of the Venus of Melos. Aside from their stark visual majesty, his photographs are important for the great care that Stillman took in documenting the sites as they existed. For example, in the later 1860s, he photographed Akrotiri, a Bronze-Age Cycladic site on Santorini, one of the southernmost Greek Islands (fig. 2). Capturing the locale's wilderness, Stillman gives the image a breadth and specificity redolent of the landscapes he had made as a young artist in New York.



Fig. 2. William James Stillman, *Akrotiry*, 1860s. Albumen silver print, 6 5/16 x 9 3/16 in. Getty Museum Collection

It is clear that Stillman's career outside the art world was marked by various returns to the orbit of art. Those included not only a steady production of art criticism for journals and photography as allied fields but also repeated avowals that he would one day take up painting again. Stillman's arrival in Rome as consul in 1861 had plunged him into a large community of American expatriate artists. Within a year, he began telling others that he hoped to return to landscape painting.²⁰ After marrying artist Marie Spartali in 1871, he wrote how he longed to paint alongside his wife.²¹ In the spring of 1878, in Florence, he resolved to "gather up the threads of habit" and resume the painting of landscapes.²²

Indeed, by the 1880s, Stillman was exhibiting his paintings again. In 1884, while residing briefly in Brooklyn, he exhibited *Study from Nature, Austrian Tyrol* at the National Academy of Design. Around the same time, he showed a number of landscapes at the

Society of British Artists, whose non-juried policy enabled him easily to place his work on public view.²³

Accompanying Stillman's reentry as a painter was the attention he gave to his personal aesthetic development. He voices his evolving views about art in several essays he wrote on Ruskin between 1868 and 1900, which explore the rift between realism and idealism and document his break from Ruskin's philosophy of art. In a long critique published in 1898, Stillman expresses distain for what he had come to see as empty realism and advocates for more spirituality and a greater emphasis on subjective beauty in art.²⁴

The range of Stillman's ventures outside the world of painting—specifically his photography, art criticism, and archaeological interests—can be seen as extensions of a landscape painter's sensibilities, and they are not so different from one another. In 1898, he stated that he had been studying art for the past fifty years. He suggested that the contribution of his younger life were his paintings and that the practice of painting was essential to his later pursuits in writing.²⁵ He insisted that his experience as a visual artist informed his literary efforts, writing: "There is no possibility of being a competent critic of art without something of that technical training which, when successful in a high degree, makes the artist of distinction."²⁶

That Stillman was able to enter the practice of painting, leave it, and return to it with relative ease had much to do with the attitudes of the time in which he lived. Foremost was a relaxed definition of art and who was considered an artist. Practicing art, when that meant the sketching and painting of small landscapes, was something that necessitated minimal equipment. Landscape sketching required no large studio to set up or maintain; the equipment was portable. The painting of small landscapes could be done for personal satisfaction and enjoyed throughout a lifetime. Because an experience of natural surroundings was key to the art of landscape, it was something easily transferred to photography, to writing, or to shared social experience.

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Notes

¹ William Dean Howells, "An Earlier American," *North American Review* 172, no. 535 (June 1901): 935.

² Stephen L. Dyson, *The Last Amateur: The Life of William J. Stillman* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 355–62.

³ William James Stillman, *The Autobiography of a Journalist*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901), 1:1, 32, 71–73, 100.

⁴ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:109, 112–13.

⁵ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:113–14, 116.

⁶ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:117–22, 127–38.

⁷ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:217, 221.

⁸ Diana Strazdes, "Wilderness and Its Waters: A Professional Identity for the Hudson River School," *Early American Studies* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 333–62.

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- ⁹ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:229–30.
- ¹⁰ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:230.
- ¹¹ William James Stillman, "What Makes an Artist?," *Crayon* 3, no. 2 (July 1856): 218–20.
- ¹² Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:224.
- ¹³ The Philosopher's Camp was located about 115 miles north of Saratoga Springs. James Schlett, *A Not Too Greatly Changed Eden: The Story of the Philosophers' Camp in the Adirondacks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 97–110.
- ¹⁴ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:239–48.
- ¹⁵ Paul F. Jamieson, "Emerson in the Adirondacks," *New York History* 39, no. 3 (July 1958): 215–37.
- ¹⁶ Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Son, 1867), 506–69.
- ¹⁷ Howells, "Earlier American," 939–40.
- ¹⁸ William James Stillman, *The Cretan Insurrection of 1866* (New York: Henry Holt, 1874), 79.
- ¹⁹ William James Stillman, *The Old Rome and The New, and Other Studies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898), 12–13.
- ²⁰ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:359.
- ²¹ David B. Elliott, *A Pre-Raphaelite Marriage: The Lives and Works of Marie Spartali Stillman and William James Stillman* (New York: ACC Group, 2007), 86.
- ²² Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 2:209.
- ²³ Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist*, 1:308. The Society of British Artists, founded as an alternative exhibiting organization in London, did not keep exhibition records of non-members, such as Stillman. Maurice Bradshaw, *Royal Society of British Artists: Members Exhibiting 1824–1892* (Leigh-on-Sea: F. Lewis, 1973), 5.
- ²⁴ William James Stillman, "John Ruskin," in *Old Rome and The New*, 92–127.
- ²⁵ Stillman, *Old Rome and The New*, {ii}.
- ²⁶ Stillman, *Old Rome and The New*, 178.