

*I am well nigh exhausted, but the scene outspread before me is of such exceeding glory and magnitude, and there is an exultation in the thought that I, a woman unused to privation and fatigue, have reached a height found unattainable by stalwart men because of the difficulties to be encountered by the way, I forget for the moment that I am suffering from pain and thirst and weariness.<sup>1</sup>*



# Women Artists of the Hudson River School

BY JENNIFER C. KRIEGER

These were the candid and elated words of newspaper correspondent Charlotte Ricker when, in 1882, she reached the summit of New Hampshire's South Twin Mountain along with the first group of women ever to ascend the peak. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Ricker was one of a larger group of women who played pioneering roles in the exploration of the American outdoors and lived impressive lives as writers, poets, hikers, and landscape painters. The achievements of these women—who

broke the bounds of imposed gender restrictions to carve out lives of accomplishment, adventure and independence—appear all the more extraordinary when one considers the historical and social context within which they took place.

A confluence of factors made landscape painting a particularly difficult pursuit for even highly talented nineteenth-century women. The vast majority of formal art academies did not admit women and a prevailing Victorian prudishness did not permit females to draw or paint



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**Fig. 1:** Julie Hart Beers (1835–1913),  
*Hudson Valley at Croton Point*, 1869.  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 20 inches.  
Collection of Nicholas V. Bulzacchelli.

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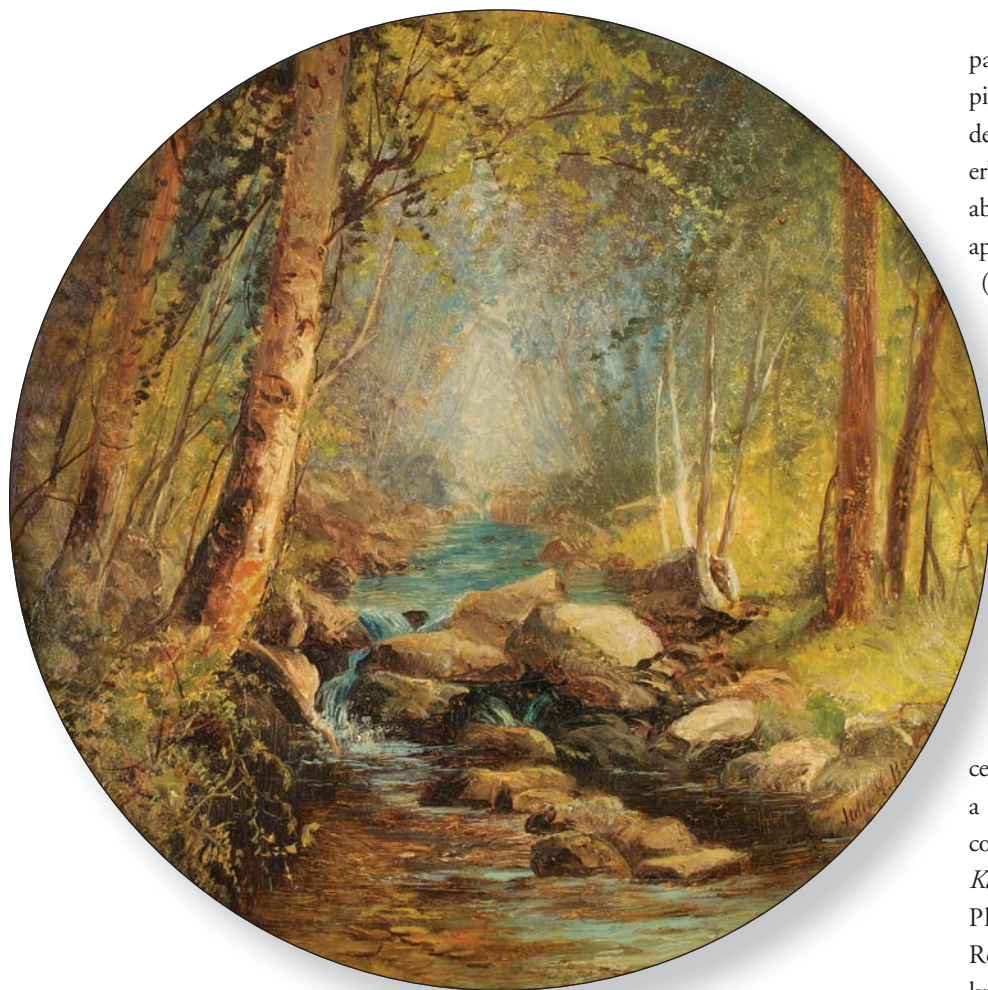
**Fig. 2:** Julie Hart Beers (1835–1913),  
*Summer Landscape*, 1869.  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 20 inches.  
Private collection.

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**Fig. 3:** Julie Hart Beers (1835–1913),  
*The Hudson as Seen from Henry Villard's  
House—Tarrytown—Christmas*, 1881.  
Oil on composition board, 12 inches diameter.  
Collection of Jack and Mary Ann Hollihan.



from nude models. Female artists were often excluded from prestigious art clubs and therefore barred from an important means of cultivating patrons. There was also an overarching social prejudice against women painting outdoors. Many did not deem women physically capable of the rigors of plein-air work. Worthington Whittredge (1820–1910), a highly regarded Hudson River School painter, grumbled that women's dress got "in the way of climbing about rocks and over precipices" and, in addition, "they do not know how to stick an umbrella spike into the ground."<sup>2</sup> Whittredge was correct in at least



one respect—corsets, trains, bustles, hoops, and tight bodices were not conducive to freedom of movement.

Fortunately, not everyone shared Whittredge's sentiments. In the case of Julie Hart Beers (1835–1913), it was her brothers, James (1828–1901) and William Hart (1823–1894), two of the most successful landscape painters of their generation, who provided the seeds for her artistic development.<sup>3</sup> In 1853, at the age of eighteen, Julie Hart married George Washington Beers. When he passed away four years later, she and her two daughters moved in with her brother, William, who was then living and working out of his studio in Brooklyn. While William provided support for his sister and her daughters, Julie devoted herself to art, hoping to become financially independent through the sale of her paintings.

Instructed by her brothers, Julie enjoyed the added benefit of their exposure to European painting methods. It would be a

mistake to give her brothers all of the credit, for she was naturally endowed with remarkable gifts that equaled and sometimes exceeded those of William and James. She eventually moved into a studio in New York City and, in what was considered a rather bohemian move, lived there with her two daughters. Beers exhibited widely at the National Academy of Design, the Boston Athenaeum, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Brooklyn Art Association, an institution that at the time was more sympathetic than most to the promotion of female painters.<sup>4</sup> She supplemented her income by taking groups of wealthy young women on summer sketching trips in Vermont and the Adirondacks.<sup>5</sup>

Julie possessed a strong sense of a scene's overall composition, which she balanced with an attention to the smaller details found in the natural world. The compositions of *Hudson Valley at Croton Point* (Fig. 1) and *Summer Landscape* (Fig. 2) both demonstrate a graceful

panoramic expansion paired with a deeply piercing linear perspective. The abundance of delicate flora in the foreground draws the viewer's eye into the scene and testifies to Beers' full absorption of the meticulous Pre-Raphaelite approach. In a unique pair of landscape tondi (round paintings), *The Hudson as Seen from Henry Villard's House—Tarrytown—Christmas* (Fig. 3) and *Woodland Scene* (Fig. 4), Beers employed composition boards that mimicked the shape of china plates, the multiple dimensions of the boards' surfaces enhancing the deepening perspective. Here Beers combines the feminine pastime of china plate painting with the typically masculine art of landscape painting, seamlessly uniting art and craft, masculine and feminine.

Harriet Cany Peale (ca. 1800–1869) successfully confronted the challenges presented by a heroic landscape subject and a large-format composition with her breathtakingly luminous *Kaaterskill Clove*, 1858 (Fig. 5). Peale shared a Philadelphia studio with her husband, Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860), the well-known portrait and historical genre painter (she was his second wife), and exhibited throughout the 1840s, '50s, and '60s at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Art.<sup>6</sup> Primarily known as a portrait and still-life painter, with *Kaaterskill Clove*, Peale shows herself to have been a masterful landscapist with an interest in iconic subject matter. Kaaterskill Falls had special resonance for Hudson River School painters; the falls played an important role in James Fenimore Cooper's 1823 novel *The Pioneers*, and Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) traveled and painted there soon after. By the time Peale painted her view of Kaaterskill Clove, it had become sym-

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**Fig. 4: Julie Hart Beers (1835–1913), *Woodland Scene*, 1881. Oil on composition board, 12 inches diameter. Collection of Jack and Mary Ann Hollihan.**

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**Fig. 5: Harriet Cany Peale (1800–1869), *Kaaterskill Clove*, 1858. Oil on canvas, 36 x 25 inches. Private collection.**

bolic of the newly articulated American ethos of nature.

By undertaking such expeditions, Peale and her colleagues drew attention to the impracticability of feminine dress and forced modifications to be made. In 1840, early women's rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) wore a shortened dress accompanied by tall boots while hiking in Scotland with her husband.<sup>7</sup> During the 1850s, Queen Victoria further pushed the envelope by wearing shorter skirts, chemises and rugged boots while on her Scottish family vacations. Reacting to these modifications, the famed French designer Charles Frederick Worth introduced a shorter skirt to be worn by women walking at summer resorts.<sup>8</sup>

Such innovations for increased mobility in female dress could not have been timelier. By the mid-nineteenth century, several women had chosen hiking as their predominant activity. Susie M. Barstow (1836–1923) (sometimes erroneously referred to as “Sarah”) and Edith Wilkinson Cook (d. 1902), close friends, were two of them. An article published in an 1889 issue of *The White Mountain Echo*, stated that Barstow had “climbed...all the principal peaks of the Catskills, Adirondacks, and White Mountains, as well as those of the Alps, Tyrol, and Black Forest, often tramping twenty-five miles a day, and sketching as well, often in the midst of a blinding snow-storm.”

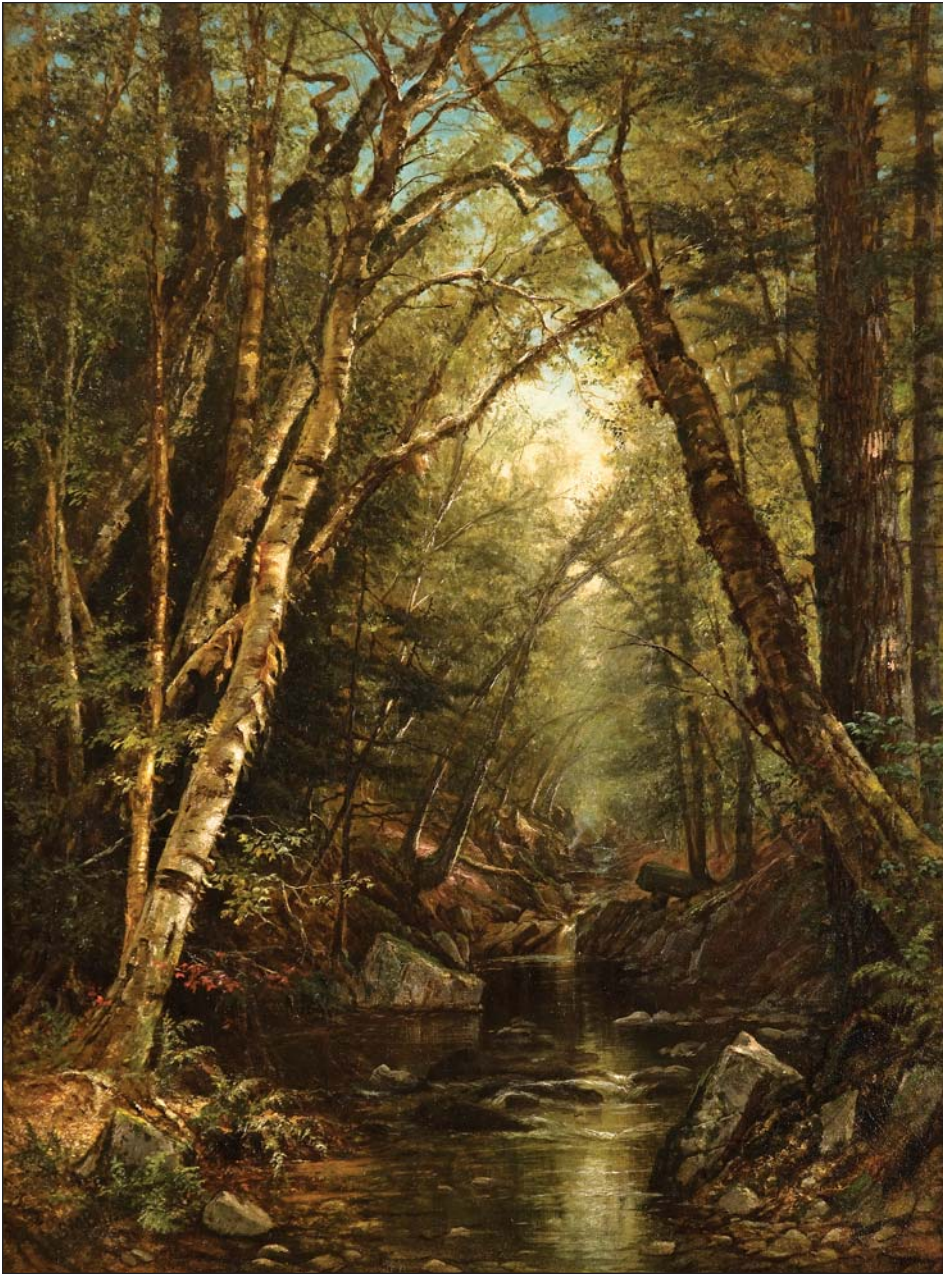
Barstow's physical feats paralleled her artistic achievements. Based primarily in Brooklyn, Barstow, the daughter of a New York tea merchant, studied at the Rutgers Female Institute in New York. For many years she also served as secretary and teacher at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. She exhibited over seventy-five paintings at the Brooklyn Art Association as well as at the National Academy of Design and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In *Landscape* (Fig. 6) Barstow painted a forest filled with white birches as though it was a lofty apse of a cathedral. She took cues from the spiritual character with which her predecessor, Asher B. Durand, endowed his landscape subjects. Her painting radiates a



sense of solitude and the silent relationship between man and nature, something Barstow would have experienced while on her rambling outdoor exploits.

The concept of Manifest Destiny is rarely associated with women, but they had a hand in expanding into new frontiers and documenting exotic lands through their art. Elizabeth Gilbert Jerome (1824–1910) painted several large-scale views of South America, highlighting its bountiful beauty. Jerome was born in New Haven, Connecticut, but was primarily active in Hartford. Forbidden to pursue art by her

family.<sup>9</sup> Jerome was twenty-seven when she was finally able to begin seriously studying painting, becoming a pupil of Julius T. Busch in Hartford. She also studied with Emanuel Leutze in New York City and enrolled in classes at the National Academy of Design. As a portrait, figure, and landscape painter, she exhibited at the National Academy (1866–1875) and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1869).<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that she may have been directly influenced by Frederic Church, who had a home quite near her Hartford one, but whether or not she actually




knew him personally is unknown. The resemblance, however, is uncanny—painted on a dramatic scale, *Tropical Landscape* (Fig. 7) is infused with the barometric subtlety of Church's evanescent panoramas, and Jerome's affinity for lush botanical flourishes is also similar to Church's.

Mary Blood Mellen (1819–1886), was one of the few female artists to specialize in maritime subjects. She was long thought to be only a student of Fitz Henry Lane (1804–1865), but recent research points to evidence that she was more of an apprentice to and even a collaborator with Lane.<sup>11</sup> A tondo painting, titled *Coast of Maine*, circa 1850s (Cape Ann

Museum), signed by both painters proves that Lane and Mellen collaborated in at least one instance and begs exploration of what the true nature of their working relationship may have been. Her *Field Beach* (Fig. 8) reflects the influence of Lane in the elliptical grace of the composition, the upright poise of the gliding vessels, and the smooth interwoven union of water and land. The strong yellow of the evanescent horizon points to one of the noted coloristic differences between Lane and Mellen, namely her greater use of this pigment in capturing sunsets.<sup>12</sup>

These artists managed to make their way through vast, unexplored stretches of the

American landscape and to shimmy up trees (for better views) in spite of their long skirts. Rather than complain about all that society had placed in their way, artists like Cook, Barstow, Beers, Peale, Jerome, Mellen, as well as Laura Woodward (1834–1926), Eliza Greatorex (1819–1897), Evelina Mount (1837–1920), Jane Stuart (1812–1888), Josephine Chamberlin Ellis (1842–1912), and Sarah Cole (1805–1857) were all intent on honoring the beauty of the natural world they had experienced so directly. Rather than to complain about all that society had placed in their way, women artists pushed forward to accomplish their goals. As a result of their determination, our own cultural topography has been immeasurably enriched.

*Remember the Ladies: Women of the Hudson River School* will be on view from May 1 through October 30, 2010 at Cedar Grove, The Thomas Cole National Historic Site, Catskill, New York. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue will focus on women landscape painters of the Hudson River School and will include approximately twenty-five works of art by a wide variety of female artists. The exhibition is co-curated by Nancy Siegel, Associate Professor, Towson University, and Jennifer C. Krieger, Managing Partner, Hawthorne Fine Art, New York, City. For more information call 518.943.7465 or visit [www.thomascole.org](http://www.thomascole.org). 

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1. Charlotte Ricker, "The Wilderness: Wild Places and Rugged Peaks First Visited by a Woman," *The White Mountain Echo*, August 16, 1882; September 2, 1882; September 9, 1882.
2. Worthington Whittredge Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
3. Sources on Beers include Paul E. Sternberg, *Art by American Women: Selections from the Collection of Louise and Alan Sellars* (Marietta, Georgia: Louise and Alan Sellars Collection of Art by American Women, 1991); Peter Hastings Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art, 1564-1975: 400 Years of Artists in America*, vol. 1 (Madison, Conn.: Sound View Press, 1999).
4. April F. Masten, *Art Work: Women Artists and Democracy in Mid-Nineteenth Century New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 141.

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**Fig. 6:** Susie M. Barstow (1836–1923),  
*Landscape*, 1865.  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 22 inches.  
Collection of Elizabeth and Alfred Scott.

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**Fig. 7:** Elizabeth Jerome (1824–1910),  
*Tropical Landscape*, 1871.  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 48 inches.  
Collection of Jack and Mary Ann Hollihan.

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**Fig. 8.** Mary Blood Mellen (1819–1886),  
*Field Beach*, ca. 1850s.  
Oil on canvas on board, 24¼ x 33⅞ inches.  
Cape Ann Museum.  
Gift of Jean Stanley Dise (1970.2019-2).



5. Biographical notes compiled by Marianne Brush (Mrs. Walton Brush), the great-great-granddaughter of the artist, 2008.
6. Falk, *Who Was Who in American Art*, vol. 3; Wolfgang Born, "Female Peales: Their Art and its Tradition," *American Collector* 15 (August 1946): 12-14.
7. Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health and Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent

State University Press, 2003), 60.

8. Lois W. Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 98.
9. H.W. French, *Art and Artists in Connecticut* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1879), 169.
10. Falk, *Who Was Who in American Art*, vol. 2.
11. See John Wilmerding and Stephanie Buck, *Fitz Henry Lane & Mary Blood Mellen: Old Mysteries and New*

*Discoveries* (New York: Spanierman Gallery, in cooperation with the Cape Ann Historical Museum, Gloucester, Mass., 2007) for discussion of the topic and first chronology of Mary Blood Mellen, compiled by Gloucester archivist Stephanie Buck. See also *Report on Scholars' Gathering in Association with the Exhibition* at [www.capeannhistoricalmuseum.org/Lane\\_Report.pdf](http://www.capeannhistoricalmuseum.org/Lane_Report.pdf).

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