

Ralph Blakelock and *The Ghost Dance*:

The end of “primitive life in America”

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With the Sioux massacre of 1890 at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the frontier was closed, and the final chapter in Indian subjugation was thus concluded. For an artist like Ralph Blakelock, whose dedication to the Indian spanned his entire career, this was extremely significant.¹ Five years later he painted *The Ghost Dance* (fig. 1) in response to the incident at Wounded Knee. Although recent studies have interpreted the work strictly in terms of its relation to the events leading up to Wounded Knee, they fall short of locating it within the development of Blakelock's iconography.² His mystic scenes have always invoked something of the Indian's romantic accord with nature, and often the Indian is suggested by no more than a few specks of paint. Yet in *The Ghost Dance*, Blakelock distinctly melds the ether of the dancing spirits into the matter of the forest as they disappear into oblivion and are lost forever. If Blakelock's Indian paintings are timeless representations of a primitive idyll, then *The Ghost Dance* marks the temporal end to that "phase of primitive life in America."³

Blakelock was born in 1847 on Christopher Street in New York City. The son of an English-born physician, he enrolled at the Free Academy of New York in 1864 with the intention of becoming a doctor of homeopathy like his father.⁴

There, Blakelock received a liberal education in science, history, literature, and

¹ My interest in Blakelock began in the spring of 2004 while a curatorial assistant at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, New York, where I assisted in the preparation and installation of a temporary exhibition of Blakelock drawings and paintings.

² See Elizabeth Tebow, "The Vision of Life/The Ghost Dance: A Hidden Chronicle," *The Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 16, no. 2 (1990): 166-172.

³ Frederic Fairchild Sherman, "Blakelock's Smaller Landscapes and Figure-Pieces," *Art in America* 4 (1916): 235.

⁴ Abraham A. Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 30.

formal drawing.⁵ Following completion of the two-year curriculum, however, Blakelock ended his studies to pursue a career in painting. Early experiments reveal a strong affinity for the Hudson River School style of landscape painting that was at the time the dominant movement in New York.

Blakelock first began painting scenes of Indian life after his visit to the frontier in 1869. His exact itinerary is unknown, but dated sketches and notes from that year locate the artist at different sites in Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and even as far as Mexico.⁶ Blakelock evidently returned to the frontier in 1872 and continued westward, sketching in California, Washington, and the West Indies (presumably on his return from the West Coast via Panama).⁷

In 1871, the artist painted the large *Indian Encampment Along the Snake River* (fig. 2) in his New York studio. The first Indian painting of Blakelock's career, it is, appropriately, the largest. Stylistically, it is rare for Blakelock, who here is overly concerned with illustrating a highly naturalistic, albeit greatly idealized, and detailed landscape. In the painting, a picturesque group of Uinta Indians⁸ rests beneath a sprawling, fully grown tree that dominates the foreground; behind them a camp of teepees is nestled in the woods along the bank of the meandering river. Further beyond, snow-capped peaks of the Teton

⁵ He is commonly known as an entirely self-taught artist. See Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 30 and 219 n. 9, for a description of the curriculum at the Free Academy.

⁶ See Norman A. Geske, "Ralph Albert Blakelock in the West," *American Art Review* 3, no. 1 (1976): 127, who suggests Blakelock's itinerary might be the product of memory. See Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 50-53, for a transcription of these notes.

⁷ Letter from Cora Blakelock to Robert C. Vose, February 26, 1908 (Collection of Vose Galleries, Boston), quoted in Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 48. For an alternative suggestion, see Vincent, *The Unknown Night* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 110; the author suggests that Blakelock made as many as four separate trips to the West, departing each consecutive summer from New York and returning in the fall.

⁸ Vincent, 117, identifies them as Uinta based on their location—"Snake River"—in comparison with Blakelock's notes.

range meet the sky in a hazy yellow light. It was in this vast and secluded Snake River valley, just north of Jackson, Wyoming, that Blakelock spent at least a month with the Uinta. Judging from his notes, Blakelock moved south with the tribe in the annual migration from their summer hunting grounds, seen here, to the warmer desert climates of northwestern Colorado and southern Utah, where the Uinta spent their winters.⁹

The depiction of expansive panoramic views of the American West that—sometimes, but not always—include domestic views of Indian life is a fashion that was already established by artists like Albert Bierstadt several years before Blakelock painted his *Indian Encampment*. Stylistically, Blakelock's painting fits neatly into this tradition of Hudson River School painters, many of whom had already traveled to the frontier. Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (fig. 3) is a picture Blakelock would have seen in 1864 when it hung at the Sanitary Fair in New York opposite Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes*. Blakelock is certainly engaging in the same theme as Bierstadt, where we see detailed and picturesque Indian encampments set against pristine western mountain ranges.

However, Blakelock departs from a conventional use of the theme to express personal sentiment in *Indian Encampment*. Curiously, there have been no significant academic perusals of the painting. More often, it is considered only briefly as a part of the stylistic progression of Blakelock's Indian paintings and

⁹ Vincent, 117.

landscapes.¹⁰ This is strange considering the painting is regarded as one of Blakelock's finest.¹¹ Furthermore, there has been a failure on the part of art historians to reconcile the clear visual oddities that *Indian Encampment* presents for the viewer. Of this I am speaking primarily of the large sprawling tree in the foreground, an awkward presence in the painting, which not only disrupts what might have otherwise been a rather balanced composition but also blocks the panoramic view that was so beloved of contemporaries in the Hudson River School style of landscape painting. To dismiss the object merely as a compositional error on the part of Blakelock would be to completely overlook one of the most important clues we have in understanding the artist's personal sentiment towards the condition of the Native American on the frontier.

A symbolic reading of the tree and its context invests it with profound meaning. I would like to show that the large tree is just one part of an allegorical message that Blakelock articulates in the work with respect to the Native Americans that he depicts. As it stands, the tree is one unit in a sequence of trees that moves diagonally in a line from its point of convergence at the Indian camp to its termination at the dead tree trunk in the left hand corner of the foreground. Each of these trees appear in different stages of maturity, beginning with the smallest on the bank of the river and ending with the blasted tree that is closest to the viewer on the left. The large sprawling tree—of which we took

¹⁰ See Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 60, where the author, in his monograph on the artist, hardly makes any comment on the painting, except to call "the grouping and handling of trees...Barbizonesque." Also see Norman Geske, "The Development of the Painter's Style" in *Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919)* [catalogue of an exhibition at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery held 1/14-2/9/1975] (Lincoln: Nebraska Art Association, 1974), 9. Geske gives only a brief description of the work. Only Glyn Vincent, 117-120, gives the painting any significant attention.

¹¹ In May 2000, it sold for \$3.5 million at Sotheby's, the highest amount ever paid for a work by the artist.

particular note because of its awkwardness in the composition—is the last tree in the sequence before death, as represented by the dead trunk in front of the viewer. As such, it is the most mature state of the tree in this progression; and its eventual death is made explicit by the configuration of the blasted remains of the tree in the foreground, whose form—in the size and location of its branches—mirrors exactly that of the mature tree.

Blakelock's symbolic use of the tree as a mode of expressing the passage of time and the natural cycles was by his time an established paradigm. Barbara Novak calls the ravaged tree, as opposed to the man-made tree stump, "a palimpsest of time associations." For Thomas Cole, painting more than thirty years before Blakelock, the decayed tree was "a signature," representing the natural sequence of life and death as determined by divine order.¹² Blakelock makes full use of this model in *Indian Encampment*, not only painting the decayed tree but also illustrating the different stages of its maturity. In this way, he deepens the symbol in order to relate his ideas more directly, and rather explicitly. The sequence of trees effectively becomes a timeline. The significance of this model, however, is found in its use as a metaphor to express the condition of the Uinta.

During Blakelock's travels, the living conditions of the Uinta seem to have been in marked contrast to other tribes that he encountered. On one surviving document are various observations Blakelock made of Indian tribes he met while on the upper Missouri River in 1869. These notes make only minor reference to the Indians in anthropological terms. Rather, they articulate the poverty of the

¹² Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 157-165.

tribes. The Assiniboines, he notes, were “poor, having but few horses, depend on their dogs;” and the Riccarees had “large dirty lodges, savage costumes...disfigured & diseased & lame”(fig. 4). Both the Assiniboines and the Riccarees, who were Arikara Indians, were devastated by white expansion on the frontier. Badly hit by an outbreak of smallpox in 1837, two thousand of their four thousand perished. In 1871, they numbered only 1,650, and by 1885 their population had dwindled tragically to only 500.¹³

In contrast to the areas inhabited by the Arikara, the secluded Snake River valley in 1870 was described by Glyn Vincent as “pure wilderness, the last corner of the United States that was untouched by the white man. For the Uinta,” he continues, “it was a final refuge, a paradisiacal garden where elk still migrated in enormous herds and trout could be lifted from a stream as easily as picking daisies from a meadow.”¹⁴ Indeed, the isolation of the Snake River valley from settlements on the frontier made it difficult for most to reach. Blakelock, who traveled alone, would have relied on traders he met at Fort Pierre, South Dakota, to find the Uinta. During this journey he would have traveled as much as a hundred miles on horseback, camping outdoors at night.¹⁵ In this respect, the idealized, undisturbed existence of the Uinta that Blakelock depicts in *Indian Encampment* may be, to a certain extent, more accurate than one would expect to find on the frontier in the 1870s. Certainly, these people were not yet affected in the same way as the Assiniboines and Riccarees, who were made “poor” by their being exploited and displaced by the expansion of frontier settlements. Yet

¹³ Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 50.

¹⁴ Vincent, 117.

¹⁵ Vincent, 99.

in *Indian Encampment*, Blakelock communicates this as the ultimate fate of the Uinta, too.

The symbolically loaded trees of *Indian Encampment*, in their relation to the Uinta figures, express through allegory the present condition of the Uinta people as being rather precarious. In the painting, groups of Uinta figures appear at different depth ranges in relation to the viewer and the metaphorical timeline established by the trees. In the foreground, Blakelock visually locates the largest grouping of figures within this framework by situating them precisely between the largest tree and the decayed trunk that is behind them. The largest tree, being the most developed, represents the highest maturation of time before the processes of death turn it into a remnant of its former strength—the tree trunk. In its juxtaposition with the Uinta figures, it is a Golden Age of the Uinta people and the height of their livelihood as a civilization. The fact that Blakelock locates the Uinta on the wrong side of this temporal sequence—that is, between maturity (as represented by the largest tree) and death (in the decayed tree)—suggests that the Golden Age has already passed; and the painting instead becomes a sad foreboding of death, one which, as in the case of the Arikara, will ultimately be at the hands of white civilization. That Blakelock takes care here to include a host of people of different age groups suggests that this presage is not related to individuals but to the fate of the Uinta people and their way of life as a collective whole. Behind this group, a lone figure takes shelter under the largest tree as he looks sentimentally towards the encampment on the opposite bank of the river. This foreboding is underscored by the ominous clouds which, approaching from

the left side of the picture above the dead tree, will soon envelop the entire landscape, as they do in *The Ghost Dance*.

Parallel with the foreboding symbolism of *Indian Encampment* is the artist's tendency to paint an idealized, pastoral view of Native American life. The romantic primitiveness that Blakelock depicts in *Indian Encampment* is antithetical to its meaning as a harbinger of death. Yet instead of painting a literal vision of the tribe's plight, Blakelock is holding on to his romantic ideals of Indian life as Paradise—a primitivist Golden Age. However, Blakelock shows that the Uinta are not impervious. Just as the Uinta in the painting stand on unstable ground between Golden Age and death, so it is with this tension that Blakelock expresses his ultimate regret over their fate. Blakelock addresses this tension (between life and death) throughout his career, where we see his longing for idyllic primitivism operating simultaneously with his knowledge that this way of life is inconsistent with modern civilization.

Several years later in *There Was Peace Among the Nations* (fig. 5), Blakelock paints a straightforward scene of Indian primitivism. Inspired by a passage out of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem, *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), the painting embodies Blakelock's longing for peace. Here we see a relatively detailed scene of domestic Indian life. In the foreground, two women in long white robes sit facing the viewer beneath the shade of a tree. Before them are two straw baskets. They are apparently working on something.¹⁶ Behind them are some three-dozen tiny figures made to look like Greeks in their toga-

¹⁶ Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 61, says they are "apparently working with deer and beaver skins," but this is obviously derived from Longfellow's text, which follows.

like costumes as they stroll leisurely among an elaborate Indian camp of teepees that shows no signs of depredation. *The Song of Hiawatha*, immensely popular in its day, was inspired by a series of Ojibwe legends recorded by ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. The real Hiawatha was an Iroquois statesman, yet both Schoolcraft and Longfellow mistook him to be the Ojibwe demigod Nanabozho. By its title, we know *There Was Peace* to be an illustration of Part Thirteen of Longfellow's poem:

Buried was the bloody hatchet,
 Buried was the dreadful war-club,
 Buried was all warlike weapons,
 And the war-cry was forgotten.
 There was peace among the nations;
 Unmolested roved the hunter,
 Built the birch canoe for sailing,
 Caught the fish in lake and river,
 Shot the deer and trapped the beaver;
 Unmolested worked the women,
 Made their sugar from maple.
 Gathered wild rice in the meadows,
 Dressed the skin of deer and beaver.¹⁷

In the poem, Hiawatha is an aboriginal leader who leads his people into a Golden Age of idyllic peace and primitiveness, as described in the passage above. The overall feeling of Blakelock's painting, too, is seductive in its pastoral tranquility, where characters in the foreground work their primitive chores "Unmolested" and at ease. It is a straightforward expression of primitive Indian life. Geske calls it "a white man's image of idyllic primitivism."¹⁸

The Western concept of primitivism embodies the human longing for a way of life that is in marked contrast to the present. By the renaissance, the

¹⁷ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Hiawatha*, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/LonHiaw.html>.

¹⁸ Geske, "Development of the Painter's Style," 15.

Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions of Eden and Arcadia, or Paradise and the Golden Age, had combined to offer a strong counter-example to existing European society.¹⁹ Unlike millennialism, which looks to the future promise of a utopia, primitivism dreams of a mythical paradise *far to the West* whose citizens live in an idealized landscape in harmony with nature and reason. Although savage by their very nature, these people were seen to possess those virtues which many found lacking in their own times: “sexual innocence, equality of condition and status, peaceful simplicity, healthful and handsome bodies, and vigorous minds unsullied by the wiles, complexities, and sophistication of modern civilization.”²⁰ In *There Was Peace Among the Nations*, Blakelock depicts an Ojibwe Golden Age. There is no symbolic foreboding that we saw in *Indian Encampment*, and there is no sign of the future prospect of white dominion. Rather, it is a romantic description of “peaceful simplicity” in Indian Paradise and an uncomplicated view of the Indian in romantic accord with nature.

Ten years later in *Hiawatha (Shooting the Arrow)* (fig. 6), Blakelock offers a radically different interpretation of Longfellow’s poem. Also based loosely on *The Song of Hiawatha*, it departs dramatically from *There Was Peace*. *Shooting the Arrow* is much smaller than the first, being only 8 ¼ x 6 ¼ inches. Here, Blakelock focuses his attention on the lone figure of Hiawatha, who in a moment of action draws an arrow and takes aim with his bow. A primitive being, he is nude but for a small loincloth, moccasins, and a feather in his hair; but he is dignified in his strong posture. The shadowy character of the painting also lends

¹⁹ Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 72.

²⁰ Berkhofer, 72.

to the sketchy definition of the edges of the figure. However, his face is remarkably individualized. Yet what distinguishes *Shooting the Arrow* is its placement of Hiawatha in dramatic relief against the “shadowed darkness of the surrounding forest.”²¹ He is depicted visually on the border of a darkness that threatens to subsume him at any moment. In this painting, if anywhere, Blakelock expresses his awareness of the precarious existence of the Indian on the frontier. It is as if the dark clouds we perceived in *Indian Encampment* finally made their way overhead, blurring distinctions between the landscape and its inhabitants. Unlike *There Was Peace*, with its blatant optimism for an Indian Golden Age, *Shooting the Arrow* expresses more symbolically the artist’s personal awareness that his longing for *Peace* this is but fantasy. Geske makes a competent observation when he remarks that Hiawatha, in *Shooting the Arrow*, “is real enough but he is also somewhat unreal, wrapped in the emotion of an ideal concept, very close indeed to the ‘noble savage.’”²²

Indeed, the very story on which Blakelock’s painting is based articulates the incongruity of Indian culture and civilization. Throughout Longfellow’s poem, as in Blakelock’s portrayal of the subject, Hiawatha remains untouched by white civilization—until one day when white missionaries come to meet his tribe. Hiawatha greets the missionaries with warmth; yet the following night, a noble savage who would rather die than assimilate, he departs silently westward in his canoe, where he dies alone. Presumably, white culture soon overcomes Hiawatha’s people. Roy Harvey Pearce explains that *The Song of Hiawatha* was

²¹ Sherman, 235.

²² Geske, “Development of the Painter’s Style,” 15.

the culmination of a group of early nineteenth-century poems that dismiss the plight of the Indian by showing his own savage nobility to be responsible for his death. He continues: “This was a strategy which...made [the Indian’s] destruction intelligible in relation to the progress of American civilization,” and “thus everything would be shown to have gone as planned.”²³ Pearce describes the standard plot:

The Indian is described for what he is, a noble savage. The coming of the white man is described for what it is, the introduction of agrarian civilization. And the Indian is shown dying or moving to the west, often with a vision of the great civilized life which is to come after him...The tone is now bitter, now melancholy. The end is said to be good.²⁴

Similarly in *The Song of Hiawatha*, as endorsed by Hiawatha’s suicide, Longfellow denies the Indian a place in modern civilization. Only those who Hiawatha left behind, who will try to assimilate, have any real chance of survival. But in either case—in Hiawatha’s death or in his tribespeople’s adoption of white custom—the traditional ways of the Indian, of the Ojibwe, are forfeited. Longfellow here conjures up “a comforting vision of American antiquity,” and ultimately he expresses the “general feeling that the Indian belonged nowhere in American life but in dim prehistory.”²⁵

Blakelock’s interest in the teachings of Swedish philosopher, scientist, and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) influenced an interpretation of the Indian that not only had relevance to “prehistory” but also had profound contemporary meaning. Published in eight volumes between 1749 and 1756,

²³ Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Savages of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 188-192.

²⁴ Pearce, 189.

²⁵ Pearce, 192.

Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia* describes the cosmos as consisting of two distinct but interconnected realms: the external (natural world) and the internal (spiritual world). Swedenborg claimed that things in the outside/natural world corresponded to things in the internal/spiritual world. This matching relationship, he says, was not a matter of symbol or allegory but of cause and effect. The two worlds were contiguous and in constant communication. This correspondence forms the basis of Swedenborg's exegesis. Central to this understanding is the difference between spiritual seeing and physical vision. Most men, he claims, can see only natural objects with the physical eye but not spiritual things. The capacity to see both the natural and spiritual realm simultaneously was lost a long time ago. Swedenborg speaks of an originary people who were present at the beginning of time, much like Adam, or "Man." These were members of what he called the "Most Ancient Church," who were able to communicate directly between heaven and earth by way of spiritual sight—to discourse with angels without the need of traditional forms of communication. Over time, however, modern Churches eventually lost this knowledge of direct correspondence and their relationship to the divine:

As the men of the Most Ancient Church in every thing of nature saw something spiritual and celestial... Thus with them natural things were conjoined with spiritual things, and wholly corresponded. But it was otherwise after those times, when evil and falsity began to reign; that is, when after the golden age there commenced the iron age; for then, as there was no longer any correspondence, heaven was closed; insomuch that men were scarcely willing to know that there was anything spiritual.²⁶

²⁶ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, vol. 4, trans. John Clowes (New York: American Swedenborg Printing and Publishing Society, 1909-10), 2995, quoted in Rachel Ziady DeLue, *George Inness and the Science of Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 46.

In order to regain this primal state of unmediated vision, “the golden age,” one had to remember it. By recalling the ways of the Most Ancient Church, of “the way things were at the origin of being and time,” the vision of its people could be reclaimed.²⁷ For Swedenborg, writing was his own personal act of remembering and a means to spiritual sight. “Without this knowledge,” Swedenborg wrote, “scarcely anything of cause [God] can be known, for without it, the objects and subjects of both worlds seem to have but a single meaning, as if there were nothing in them beyond that which meets the eye.”²⁸

For an artist steeped in Swedenborg, there was no prescription as to how the artist should paint. George Inness (1825-94) and William Page (1811-1885), both Swedenborgians, often debated on how to adapt the Swede’s teachings into an aesthetic system. They developed their own separate interpretations of Swedenborg’s spiritual vision as it related to their different styles of painting.²⁹

At a very young age, Blakelock was already well acquainted with the basic tenets of Swedenborg through his father’s profession.³⁰ He officially converted to Swedenborgianism in 1890 in Orange, New Jersey, yet as early as the 1870s he was already well acquainted with spiritual circles. Vincent’s research successfully documents Blakelock’s involvement with Swedenborg during this time, when his philosophy gained a wide following in America. In particular, Vincent notes

²⁷ DeLue, 48.

²⁸ Emanuel Swedenborg, *Angelic Wisdom concerning the Divine Love and Wisdom* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1928), 87-88, quoted in DeLue, 48.

²⁹ See Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 131-133, for a summary of Swedenborg’s influence on Page’s art; see below and DeLue, 42-50, for his influence on Inness.

³⁰ Many homeopathic physicians were also Swedenborgians. Also see letter from Cora Blakelock to Robert C. Vose, March 27, 1906 (Collection of Vose Galleries, Boston), quoted in Davidson, *Ralph Albert Blakelock*, 131: Cora, the artist’s wife, writes that as a “young man [he] became very much interested in the writings of Swedenborg.”

Blakelock's relationship with Dr. John B. Newbrough, a well-known follower of Swedenborg.³¹ A mutual acquaintance of Blakelock and Newbrough, George Inness was also an avid student of the mystic teachings of Swedenborg. Though no documentation exists of their having been close, it seems likely that this was the case. In the 1880s, Inness worked down the hall from Blakelock in the University Building on Washington Square, and they commuted daily on the same Hudson River ferries to their homes in New Jersey.³² Also among their mutual friends was fellow artist and future biographer Elliott Daingerfield. And in 1903 Inness's son, George Inness, Jr., gave a large amount of money to the Blakelock family following his father's death, indicating some affection for the artist.³³

Rachel Ziady DeLue's consideration of Inness's landscapes in relation to the exegesis of Swedenborg draws significant parallels to Blakelock's art. Swedenborg, we remember, provided Inness not only with a particular understanding of spiritual sight but also with a model of seeing around which he could create an aesthetic system for use in exploring spiritual truths.³⁴ "In the mind of Inness," Charles De Kay wrote,

religion, landscape, and human nature mingle so thoroughly that there is no separating the several ideas...[Inness] tries to express his religious opinions under the veil of landscape. Perhaps even that is saying too much. Do his landscapes hint of religion? We should say no. It is rather the methods by which he does them that are governed in his own mind by religious ideas...Let us, then,

³¹ Vincent, 152-53.

³² Vincent, 151.

³³ Vincent, 151.

³⁴ DeLue, 43.

rather say of his religion that he does not express, but hides it, in his art.³⁵

It is not in the representational forms of Inness' painting that the artist reveals the influence of Swedenborgianism. Rather, it is the processes of their conception and the underlying principles of their creation that reveal how Inness internalized Swedenborg's teachings as matched his art.

DeLue argues that Inness believed his painting to constitute an effort of memory, in which by recalling the ways of the Most Ancient Church, he would acquire spiritual vision. Inness often painted on top of old canvases, or over the canvases of his friends. His paintings thus grew by accretion by the application of one layer of paint over another. Each of these separate and superimposed pictures, says DeLue, "stood for the layers of text, symbol, and surface appearance that had to be penetrated and stripped away before comprehensive and unmediated vision was regained, as if, to Inness's mind, to paint was to remember was to see."³⁶ These layers, each one responding to the profile that stood beneath it, also embodied the process of influx, whereby the contiguous layers of the internal and external worlds were in a "correspondential" relationship of cause and effect.³⁷ In this way, Inness's practice of overpainting articulated the relationship between the external and internal, between the natural and the spiritual world. "I can conceive of creation," wrote Inness, "only as something produced from its first cause, God, of whose act I am conscious. As I am a point of consciousness of this movement of the Infinite Being, I can not

³⁵ Charles De Kay, "George Inness," *Century Magazine* 24 (May 1882): 62, quoted in DeLue, 43.

³⁶ DeLue, 48.

³⁷ DeLue, 44.

cease to exist; for my consciousness must be infinitely continuous, as the movement of the Infinite is infinitely continuous.”³⁸

Blakelock developed a unique technical process in his later paintings. As he struggled to eke out a living for his family, he often painted rapidly and in an assembly-line fashion.³⁹ Cora Blakelock, the artist’s wife, remarked, “He could paint a really good picture in less time than anyone else I ever saw.” But more often, Blakelock “would lay in a picture and not touch it again, perhaps for months. But he never forgot it. It had to be in just the right condition to rub down before beginning work on it again. He was always busy as there was always some picture in the right condition.”⁴⁰ Initially with these paintings, the artist would spread a light background on his canvas and roughen the surface with a meat skewer. He would then set the canvas aside for months or even years until the uneven surface had thoroughly hardened. Often, Blakelock would build up thick impasto layers for the dark areas of the picture. Next, he would rub down the surface with a pumice stone in order to reveal the lighter passages, reinforcing them with more impasto and repeating this process until the desired effect was obtained.

In his countless layering of painted images on the canvas, Blakelock was engaged by the same dialectic as Inness. This is not unusual considering the two were friends (see above). Specifically, in their paintings both were intrigued by

³⁸ “His Art His Religion,” *New York Herald*, August 12, 1894, 9, quoted in DeLue, 49.

³⁹ Elizabeth Ewing Tebow, “Arcadia Reclaimed: Mythology and American Painting, 1860-1920” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1987), 108.

⁴⁰ Letter from Cora Blakelock to Robert C. Vose, Feb. 26, 1908 (Collection of Vose Galleries, Boston), quoted in Lloyd Goodrich, *Ralph Albert Blakelock Centenary Exhibition* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1947), 19.

the symbolic representation of the processes of influx, depicted in the correspondence of superimposed images, each one “a point of consciousness of this movement of the Infinite Being.” However, Blakelock departs from Inness in his correspondence between layers. For Inness, as DeLue argues, the profile of each layer in some way dictated the form of the layer above it, as contiguous realms of internal and external. But just as the ability to cross these distinct but interconnected realms is denied to the natural, external eye, so Inness closes this portal by completely painting over each consecutive layer and hiding the more sacred image below. Blakelock, however, allows his layers to mingle. By grinding with a pumice stone the heavy pigments on the rough and uneven surfaces of his canvases, Blakelock was able to expose tiny glimpses of the light underpainting that was below. In this way, Blakelock conceives of a much less restrictive view of spiritual vision, suggesting the common occurrence and presence of the divine in the natural (external) world.

The implications of this spiritual awareness brings Blakelock to depart even further from Inness when he paints symbolic representations of divinity as already existing in nature. We recall that for Swedenborg, recovery of the spiritual vision of the Most Ancient Church is achieved by “remembering” it. For Blakelock and Inness—just as for Swedenborg, whose writing was his own act of remembrance, “as an archaeologist would the remnants of a lost civilization”—painting served this purpose.⁴¹

The identification of the American Indian with the Most Ancient Church lies primarily in his association with the primitivist tradition of the “golden age.” Here,

⁴¹ DeLue, 48.

the Indian, like the Most Ancient Church, is described as living in romantic harmony with nature and divinity. Within this convention, and like the members of the Most Ancient Church, the Indian is also the primordial inhabitant of an uncorrupted landscape, before “evil and falsity,” as symbolized by white civilization, “began to reign.” As such, in Blakelock’s paintings the Indian becomes a personification of the profoundly spiritual Most Ancient Church, who are in constant communication with God. It is just as plausible, therefore, that for Blakelock, painting Native Americans was just another personal method by which to remember the meaning of spiritual vision and a most appropriate way of visualizing Swedenborg’s Most Ancient Church. This interpretation has been alluded to by Tebow, who dedicates an entire chapter of her dissertation to argue Blakelock’s common equation of the Indian with Greek God.” Her argument is based on the ambiguity of classical references in several of Blakelock’s Indian paintings. She supports her attributions with the assertion that references to classical mythology in American art of the time were widely popular. These allusions represented a private escape for the artist (and his audience), for whom the realities of the Indian’s existence on the frontier were too painful to consider.⁴²

Of these realities Blakelock was well aware. We have already shown how in *Indian Encampment* he expresses great remorse over the eventual disintegration of the Uinta tribe; and we have read Blakelock’s notes on the Arikara, which describe conditions that were extremely poor and depraved. But when he paints *The Ghost Dance*, Blakelock is not thinking of these tribes.

⁴² Tebow, “Arcadia Reclaimed,” 114.

In contrast to his notes on the Assiniboines and Riccarees, Blakelock's observations of the Sioux belie what must have also been difficult times. On the same document where Blakelock records his notes on the Arikara from 1869, we see also that he makes several observations of the Sioux:

Fort [Pierre]...Indians here assembled belong to the [Miniconjou], Two Kettle [Oohenonpa]...bands of the Sioux. Hundreds of lodges were pitched in the vicinity of the fort—& bands of horses were feeding over the prairie. A pretty squaw—wore a dress made from the skin of the big horn, tanned soft & white & lavishly embroidered with beads, on a spirited American horse.

Following this passage, Blakelock makes sure to distinguish—for himself, no doubt—between the Sioux and the Riccarees, this “diseased” tribe of the Arikara being “unlike the Sioux”(fig. 4). These observations are significant because, unlike with the Arikara, they are highly romanticized considerations that dignify the Sioux. One image, of a “pretty squaw...on a spirited American horse,” is a rather vivid description that perhaps embodies the artist's romantic sensibilities of the time. The image produced here is one of a noble savage. Her dress and accessories tell us that she is primitive by nature, but Blakelock here dignifies her character.

Oddly, these romantic descriptions of the Sioux belie what must have been unfavorable living conditions for them. Through Blakelock's notes, we can both physically and temporally locate him in relation to actual historical conflicts on the frontier. Blakelock's travels on the Missouri in 1869 coincided with a temporary break in hostilities between the Sioux and white settlers (mostly concerning disputes over rights to the Black Hills) in what is present-day South

Dakota. With the second Treaty of Laramie in 1868, several Sioux bands—including the Oglalla and Miniconjou—agreed to settle peacefully on reservations in exchange for annuities, which included clothing and, more importantly, food. However, government aid—to be distributed at Fort Pierre—was slow in being released, and as conditions on the reservations worsened the Sioux began mounting sporadic raids. The agent at Crow Creek Reservation reported that, “This cannot be complained of from the fact that they are in a starving condition and are driven to desperate remedies. They are anticipating and talking of war as being more profitable to them than peace and starvation.”⁴³ The “hundreds of lodges” Blakelock observed at Fort Pierre were these very tribes of the Lakota Sioux in the Big Cheyenne Agency as they anxiously awaited on the dispersal of promised annuities. Twenty years later, these same bands of the Oglalla and Miniconjou Sioux would be the victims of the horrid massacre at Wounded Knee.⁴⁴

Although abstract and possessed of a vague title, *The Ghost Dance* has long been assumed to be a depiction of Indian subject matter. In the painting, shadowy figures move under an orange haze that permeates the crowd and connects them collectively to the soil below. The golden mass is silhouetted against a dark forest, with instances of foliage reflecting the light that radiates from the group and glimpses of blue sky far in the distance. Writing for the

⁴³ Agent of Crow Creek Agency, letter, 5/17/1869, Dakota superintendancy, military records, roll M251, U.S. National Archives, quoted in Vincent, 99.

⁴⁴ It is not unlikely that Blakelock looked back to these notes from time to time, perhaps in order to stir his memories of the West. In the last line of the document, Blakelock writes: “Cottonwood bark is sometimes used for feeding horses.” In his painting *Indian Encampment Along the Snake River*, Blakelock paints three horses enjoying a meal of some cottonwood bark.

Chicago Tribune in 1913, Harriet Monroe described the work as a scene of ethereal resurgence: “[Blakelock] raises up out of the very earth pale nudes and shadowy savages to dance our cares away and make us forget that we are mortal.”⁴⁵

Music often served as inspiration for Blakelock’s Indian paintings. One anecdote, described in a 1913 article from the *New York Herald*, is important to our understanding of the development of a painting like *The Ghost Dance*. In the article, Blakelock’s close friend Henry Watrous describes a visit he made to the artist’s studio in the early 1890s as he worked on a similar painting, *The Pipe Dance* (fig. 7). There, he saw Blakelock dashing back and forth between his easel and piano, playing strange “aboriginal” melodies while simultaneously painting on his canvas. The *Herald* described their conversation:

“Do they dance? Do they dance?” asked the artist, as he continued playing the queer little tune with its abrupt aboriginal rhythm.

“Does who dance?” asked Mr. Watrous.

“Do those Indians dance?”—pointing to the canvas.

“Why they’re jumping out of the picture!” exclaimed Mr. Watrous.

“That’s what I want.”⁴⁶

Blakelock uses music to evoke the underlying spirituality and mystical implications of dancing in a painting like *The Ghost Dance*. Just like the “abrupt aboriginal” tune he creates, Blakelock infuses *The Ghost Dance* with a fleeting, temporal rhythm. This ephemeral moment is captured in the generalized treatment of his figures, who writhe and twist under a glowing light.

⁴⁵ Harriet Monroe, *Chicago Tribune* (Nov. 1, 1913), quoted in Tebow, “*The Vision of Life/The Ghost Dance*,” 167.

⁴⁶ Gustave Kobbe, *The New York Herald*, May 4, 1913, 2, quoted in Tebow, “*The Vision of Life/The Ghost Dance*,” 170.

Although it was originally known as *The Ghost Dance*, Elliott Daingerfield—Blakelock’s early biographer, friend, and fellow artist—renamed the painting to *The Vision of Life* in 1914, citing what he thought he saw was a Madonna and Child and a “processional, a vague vision of life,—His life perhaps.”⁴⁷ Both Daingerfield and Monroe’s descriptions of the painting, while in disagreement on the subject, agree in their sense of some sort of spiritual awakening taking place. Monroe perceives “shadowy savages” revived from the “very earth” to commence in a supernatural dance. Daingerfield, in the luminous “light” he would call divine, sees the birth of a religious canon.⁴⁸

Indeed, the actual Ghost Dance Society—a pseudo-Christian movement launched in 1889 by the Paiute prophet named Wovoka—promised the resurrection of Native ancestors who would join the Indian nations in a Second Coming free from white persecution. Many of the members hoped to be returned to the nomadic ways of their forbearer’s ancestral lands. However, Wovoka declared that this prophecy could only be ensured if his followers took part in a special dance that lasted for days on end, called the Ghost Dance.

Wovoka’s movement called for dedication to the Ghost Dance but not for aggression against whites. What was extraordinary about the Ghost Dance Society was its ability to transcend and unify diverse groups of tribes under a single movement. A large following accumulated all over the frontier in Nevada (where Wovoka resided), Wyoming, and the Dakotas. However, this was seen as

⁴⁷ Elliott Daingerfield, *Ralph Albert Blakelock* (New York: Privately Printed, 1914), 25.

⁴⁸ Daingerfield, 24, was unaware of the significance of the original title: “It has been called, ‘The Ghost Dance,’ merely, it would seem, because of the indefinite, shadowy character of the group of faintly indicated figures moving into the picture from the right.”

threatening to white communities, where tensions rose and they became increasingly apprehensive of another Indian outbreak. Numerous articles appeared in journals and papers over the course of the next two years, announcing fears about a possible Indian uprising.⁴⁹ Tensions culminated first on December 15, 1890, in a botched attempt to arrest the influential Sioux chief Sitting Bull, a proponent of the Ghost Dance religion, during which he and several family members were killed. Two weeks later, a company of U.S. troops was dispatched to the Pine Ridge reservation to apprehend the remaining followers of Sitting Bull. The troops caught up with the band of Sioux Ghost Dancers on December 29, 1890. While disarming the band, a shot rang out and the troops fired on the group. More than one hundred and fifty Sioux—including women and children—were killed in this sad and shameful event, which became known as the Battle of Wounded Knee after the creek where it took place. The incident concluded not only the Ghost Dance movement but also Indian resistance to white dominion on the frontier. For sure, the romantic visions which Blakelock beheld of the Sioux more than two decades earlier was shattered.

Indeed, *The Ghost Dance* had profound meaning for Blakelock. In its relation to actual historical events, *The Ghost Dance* is the first and only instance where Blakelock allows history to penetrate into the eternally romantic and mystical world of his Indian paintings. More often, as seen in the primitivism of *The Story of Hiawatha* or Blakelock's preoccupation with Swedenborg, the artist developed his Indians around an existence that, unable to survive at present,

⁴⁹ For example, see *The New York Times*, "The Indian Messiah Delusion: Outbreak Probable," (Nov. 20, 1890), 4.

was resigned to the past. However foreboding Blakelock's *Indian Encampment Along the Snake River*, the small Uinta figures at least seemed to be of flesh and blood. Now in *The Ghost Dance*, Blakelock's Indians become more shadow than substance as they dissolve into the canvas and are lost forever.

The Ghost Dance is the last Indian painting Blakelock ever completed. So close was Blakelock's identification with Native spirituality that in these later years, as his mental condition deteriorated, Blakelock adopted the dress of an Indian tribesman. In addition to letting his hair and beard grow long, he wore sashes and belts to which he attached long strings of beads and Indian trinkets. He also wore an old dagger, which he sported in public.⁵⁰ However, following his confinement to Middletown State Asylum in upstate New York in 1897—and rather telling of his new attitude towards the Indian—Blakelock finally stopped signing his paintings with the Indian arrowhead around his name.

⁵⁰ Abraham A. Davidson, "The Wretched Life and Death of an American Van Gogh," *Smithsonian* 18 (1987): 80-91.

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Figures

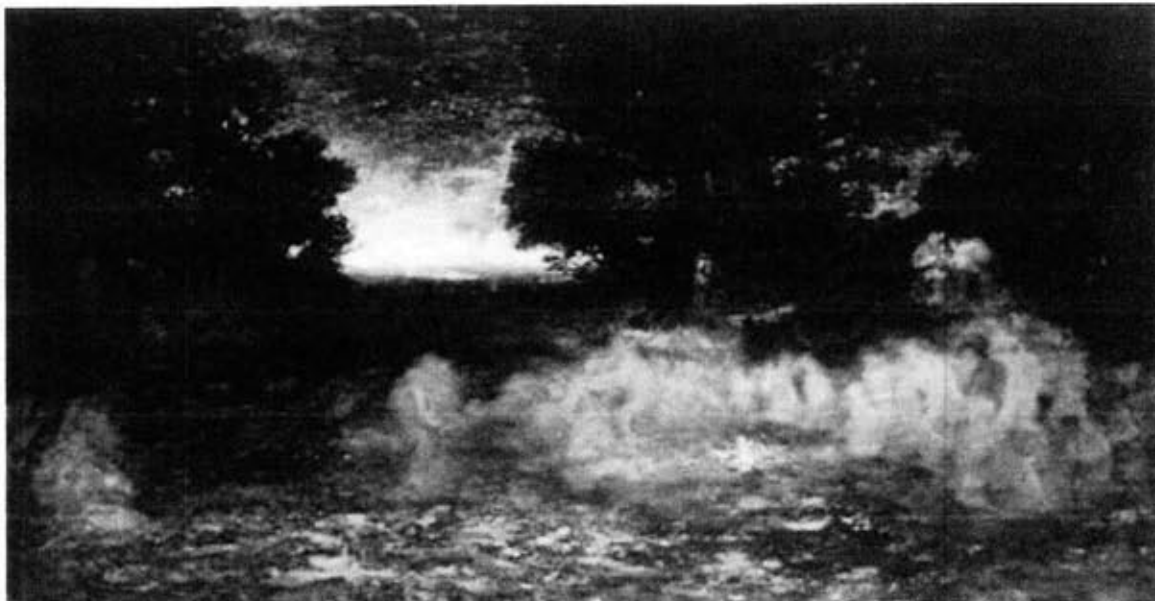


Figure 1. *The Ghost Dance*, c. 1895-97. Oil on canvas, 21 1/8 x 39 3/8 in. The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 2. *Indian Encampment Along the Snake River*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 48 x 92 in. The Anschutz Collection.



Figure 3. Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863, 73 1/2 x 120 3/4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 5. *There Was Peace Among the Nations*, c. 1873-74. Oil on canvas, 20 x 36 in. Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa Oklahoma.



Figure 6. *Hiawatha (Shooting the Arrow)*, 1880-85. Oil on canvas, 8 ¾ x 6 1/8 in. Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.