Charles Warren Eaton & the Tonalist Movement

by David A. Cleveland

Charles Warren Eaton (1857-1937) is one of the most important yet least known landscape painters to explore the Tonalist aesthetic, which infused American art during the years circa 1880 to 1920. Highly regarded in his day and a ubiquitous name in major exhibitions for over forty years, Eaton produced a prodigious number of characteristically low-toned atmospheric views. Known as the "pine tree painter" for his serial depictions of white pines in his Connecticut haunts of Colebrook and Thompson, Eaton filled major juried exhibitions in America and abroad with prizewinning oils, watercolors, and pastels.


All illustrations are by Charles Warren Eaton and are from private collections.

LEFT: Forest Brook, c. 1885, o/c, 16 x 20.
RIGHT: Winter Stream, c. 1885, o/c, 8 x 11.
BELOW RIGHT: Rocks in a Field, c. 1895, watercolor, 11 x 14.

As recently as twenty years ago, Eaton, like many of his contemporaries who had eschewed Impressionism's bright chromaticism, or subjects with social and narrative content, in favor of a quietist landscape art, was relatively unknown to the American art world outside a small circle of connoisseurs and dealers. Eaton's life, like the Tonalist style of which he was a master, was clouded in obscurity and misapprehension.

Charles Warren Eaton was born in Albany, New York, in 1857. The family, though an old one going back to Francis Eaton who sailed on the Mayflower in 1620, was not wealthy and Eaton began work at the age of nine as a cash boy. He eventually moved up to the position of clerk in a dry-goods store in Albany, where he remained until 1879. When he was twenty-two, a painting done by a friend caught his eye and he became determined to do better. With no art training or even exposure to art, Eaton moved to New York in 1879 to work in the dry-goods firm while taking classes in the evenings at the National Academy and the Art Students League. Eaton would use his free time in the evenings and on weekends to attend art classes and make day trips along the Hudson River and to Staten Island to work up sketches for watercolors and paintings.

One of Eaton's early oils, Forest Brook most likely dates from the mid-1880s and
may represent a scene along the Bronx River, which would have been within easy reach for the artist's weekend sojourns in search of subject matter. The painting displays Eaton's strong feeling for natural shapes and harmonious modulations of subtle color.

By the time Eaton was settled in New York, the transition from the older Hudson River style to a highly expressive Tonalism was well underway. Eaton was able to see exhibitions of paintings by first-generation Tonalists such as George Inness, Alexander Wyant, and Robert Swain Gifford—all of whose he admired in various exhibitions in New York after 1879. It is remarkable, too, that nowhere in his letters from this period does Eaton mention the works of artists of the older Hudson River school generation, which were still on display at the National Academy and elsewhere—as if they no longer mattered.

Tonalism as a distinctive style developed a sizable following in the 1880s. Many streams of influence fed into the growing taste for tonal painting. Initially influenced by French Barbizon painting by way of American exponents George Inness, William Morris Hunt, and John La Farge, American Tonalist painters tended to use a neutral palette of predominantly
cool colors: green, blue, mauve, violet, and a delicate range of intervening grays, carefully modulated to produce a dominant tone. Preferred subjects were scenes of dawn or dusk, rising mist and moonlight in which the enveloping atmosphere is both palpable and evocative of poetic and meditative states.

The technique of glazing, the layering of thin layers of pigment suspended in oil or varnish, came to play an important part in the Tonalist repertoire of effects. Light penetrating these thin washes of color to an undercoat of more solid color was reflected back to the surface, producing a jewel-like quality of scintillating, bewitching hues.

The smoky quality or sfumato also achieved by such methods was considered part of the Tonalist tradition of craftsmanship going back to sources in the Venetian Renaissance. Thus a certain vibrancy of contour and blurring of forms came to characterize many Tonalist landscapes.

Eaton's birth date, 1857, puts him near the epicenter of his generation—the second or core generation—of Tonalist artists. Never before or since has a generation of painters, working in a similar style, often sharing studios in New York or its environs, exhibiting together, serving on exhibition juries, and belonging to the same clubs and societies (The Lotus Club, Salmagundi Club, Society of American Artists, and the New York Water Color Club), formed such a coherent and tightly knit group. As a group of young ambitious artists, many with extensive foreign train-
ing, this core generation of Tonalists first infiltrated and then stormed the ramparts of the older Hudson River school of painters in the 1880s and 1890s, and proceeded to establish the defining style in American art at the turn of the century before flickering out as a force during World War I and the immediate postwar years. Eaton’s entry into the New York art scene of the early 1880s and the speed of his success, the surprising quality and sophistication of his earliest work, and the fully realized Tonalist character of his painting highlights the completeness of his generation’s triumph. Dramatic changes in taste and patronage would follow in the decade ahead.

Even as Impressionism was making inroads into American art circles in the late 1890s, the prevailing currents of Tonalism, which attempted to capture mystery and sentiment in haunting moonlights and autumnal reveries, were reaching a maturity of form and style. By the second half of the decade, brooding, lowering skies with strong, horizontal patterning began appearing in Eaton’s watercolors as he challenged his audience with more abstraction and unusual compositions.

By 1900, when Eaton embarked on his signature Connecticut pines and Bruges poplars, he had mastered a critical range of tonal strategies—working broadly or delicately, with energetic, painterly surfaces or calm, modulated applications of pigment—
to suit the particular mood or mode of expression he wished to impart. In this, Eaton joins the ranks of the most talented Tonalist artists at the turn of the century, which include J. Francis Murphy, Dwight Tryon, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Birge Harrison, who, while working in a relatively narrow range of chosen subject matter, were able to use diverse stylistic approaches to keep their subtle landscapes (which in ordinary hands might have turned into sentimental kitsch) fresh and surprising. The timeless, archetypical imagery of these artists seems, in retrospect, to serve as a kind of counterweight to the disorientation and complexities experienced during an era of rapid social change.

From the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago (World’s Fair)—which showcased Tonalist artists, including Eaton who was represented by four paintings—Eaton and other like-minded artists began a two-decade rise to critical acclaim, wide popularity, and commercial success. Eaton would be represented by the Macbeth Gallery in New York, which opened in 1892 and went on to become a veritable bastion of major tonalist artists. In 1900, the American exhibition at the Exposition Universelle in Paris enshrined the triumvirate of the first-generation Tonalists George Inness, Alexander Wyant, and Homer Dodge Martin as standard-bearers of American art. Tonalist landscapes predominated and won a majority of the 114 medals awarded to Americans. Inness in particular was canonized for his landscape painting in the press and art circles as the
patron saint of American art. Eaton had three works exhibited and won an honorable mention. Although most of the medaLED Americans had studied in Paris, Tonalists like Inness and Martin, who had never studied abroad, were singled out by writers and critics as forming a distinctive national style.

Eaton's career and reputation—like the tonalist style the artist had championed since the early 1880s, reached its peak during these years. Following his honorable mention at the Paris exposition in 1900, he went on to win a number of major prizes for his oils. In 1901, at the Salmagundi Club he won the Proctor Prize, in 1902 the George Inness Jr. Award, and in 1903 the Samuel T. Shaw Prize. In 1903 he was awarded the gold medal given by the Philadelphia Art Club. He won the Inness prize at the National Academy in 1904, and in the same year a silver medal at the St. Louis Exposition. A "médaillé troisième classe," at the Paris Salon of 1906 was followed by a silver medal at the Pan-American Exposition in 1910 in Buenos Aires.

Unlike Monet and some of his American Impressionist followers who made serial paintings of a single subject, studying the light effects from the same vantage point at different times of day, Eaton, shifted his perspective and style with equal alacrity in his pine series. Eaton's pine groves are viewed close-up and at a distance, from below, above, and inside the sheltering boughs gazing out. The artist's paint application varies from canvas to canvas, as if demonstrating that observation is merely an excuse for a more expressionistic mode.

In Sunset Pines Eaton has transformed his trees into almost pure decorative abstraction. From inside the hilltop grove, the silhouetted trunks and branches form a flattened aperture into glittering space; the pines appear emblematic—an intoning of a supranatural metaphor that translates the organic world into symbols.

Eaton's frequent visits to Europe from 1886 on reinforced his early cutting-edge
as 1890. Although Eaton never studied or worked in Paris, he exhibited frequently in the salons and must have viewed the galleries and exhibitions on his frequent European trips. The works of Whistler, the Impressionists, and Post-Impressionists would have been familiar to him.

Around 1905, Eaton painted *Environ of Bruges*, a work that at first glance might appear to be a fairly standard picturesque rendition of a road along a canal with the lovely medieval Belgian town of Bruges in the distance. Eaton, however, seems to have been intent on illuminating a certain state of mind by drawing the viewer in to focus on the patterning of various shades of green along the pathway and the way the poplar boughs shape the intervening space. There are no travelers, and no human narrative to disturb the quiet—only the stirring of a breeze in the blur of leafy boughs. The atmosphere of shimmering Delft blue, the stillness, invokes a place remembered, a place to which Eaton had habitually returned over at least ten summers between 1900 and 1914.

The triumph of Tonalism in the first decade of the twentieth century resulted in a steadily rising market for these painters. Almost all the major collectors of American art—still a rarity at the turn of the century since most wealthy American collectors tended to buy European masters—formed their collections around works of the best Tonalist painters. By 1910 and into the 1920s, Eaton was asking and getting $2,500 for his biggest and best canvases. In contrast to earlier days, when artists were forced to rely on exhibitions for sales, or encouraging patrons to visit their studios to make a purchase, by 1900 there were seven galleries in New York specializing in American art and many more galleries across the country selling tonal landscapes. The case can be made that the modern American art market developed and in fact took its present-day shape around the selling of these popular landscapes.

Tonalism prospered and coexisted with various modernist movements right...
through the 1920s. But by the thirties, with the onset of the Great Depression and the flourishing of the art of Social Realism, many of the artists were dead and their work disparaged. It is ironic that Eaton and his contemporaries—artists in the forefront of their time—instead of being regaled as old masters of the Whistlerian wing of the modern movement, were mostly forgotten and faded into obscurity. Already by the late thirties and forties they were often dismissed as backward-looking effusions of the Gilded Age.

Within the last twenty years that perspective has changed. The underlying features of Eaton’s art and that of Eaton’s contemporaries are now appreciated as the essential qualities embraced by the Stieglitz Circle and artists as diverse as John Marin, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, and Georgia O’Keeffe. These same preoccupations would in turn be taken up by the next generation of modernists including Milton Avery, and Abstract Expressionists like Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock. Tonalists like Eaton established a benchmark in the continuum of American modernism, which was characterized by a quest for the ideal reflected in the real, a respect and joy in the primacy of individual vision, and a love for visceral, deeply felt expression that connects the viewer to a spiritual truth inherent in the world around us.

—for annotation see the accompanying exhibition catalogue from which this article is adapted.