

THE CAPITOL DOME



ARTISTS AND THE CAPITOL: Howard Chandler Christy, Seth Eastman, and Peter Rothermel

SOCIETY NEWS



From the Editor's Desk

With this issue, *The Capitol Dome* casts its spotlight on the fascinating but little-known backstories of some of the Capitol's most significant paintings. The authors' own backgrounds are as varied as the artwork they write about. . . .

. . . **James McElhinney's** insight is driven by the empathy of a fellow painter. His attempt to see what Seth Eastman saw reveals the multiple meanings of seemingly inert landscapes. . .

. . . **Anna Marley**, curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, is informed by a trained academic's professional interest . . .

. . . and **James Head**—a lawyer by day—is doggedly captivated by the simple “Affair with Beauty” he finds in the work of Howard Chandler Christy. Editing their individual articles has reminded me how much the Capitol's artistic legacy is enriched by sharing a variety of perspectives.

Stay tuned for the upcoming issue of *The Capitol Dome*, which will continue to explore how the Capitol's unique place in the public eye is the result of a variety of artists working across time, themes,

and media.

How Congress, the Capitol, and the Library of Congress have been represented in movies is the subject of Michael Canning's article “Through a Dome Darkly: The Capitol as Symbol, Touchstone, and Admonition in American Film.” John Busch, a historian of technology, provides the intriguing geopolitical context behind an overlooked vignette within one of the most widely recognized paintings in the Capitol. Paula Murphy identifies the various strands of Irish influence in the Capitol's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sculptures. And with Daniel Peart's article on John Quincy Adams's relationship to House Speakers during his post-presidential tenure as representative (1831–48), *The Capitol Dome* resumes its periodic scholarship on Congress' political culture, institutional history, and remarkable personalities.

William C. diGiacomantonio

**2018 USCHS
BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

Mitch Bainwol
Hon. Roy Blunt
Jean P. Bordewich
Kenneth Bowling, Ph.D.
Marc Cadin
Sean Callinicos
Donald G. Carlson (chair)
Hon. Bob Casey
Hon. Tom J. Cole
Hon. Gerry Connolly
Jeanne deCervens
Joseph W. Dooley
Andrew Durant
Hon. Virginia Foxx
Mary Moore Hamrick
Betsy Hawkings
Mark Hopkins
Hon. John B. Larson
Brett Loper
Lorraine Miller
Hon. Edward A. Pease
Craig Purser
Michael C. Quinn
David Regan
Cokie Roberts
Robert A. Rusbuldt
Anna Schneider
Jan Schoonmaker
Dr. Robert H. Schwengel
Matthew Shay
Dontai Smalls
James Thurber, Ph.D.
Connie Tipton (vice-chair)
Brig. Gen. Tim White
Mike Zarrelli

Maura Molloy Grant (counsel)

The Capitol Dome is a quarterly publication
of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society,
200 Maryland, Ave., NE,
Washington, DC 20002.
P: (202) 543-8919 F: (202) 525-2790
Catalog Orders: (800) 887-9318
email: uschs@uschs.org
on the web: www.uschs.org

Editor and Chief Historian:
William diGiacomantonio
Managing Editor: Lauren Borchard
Designer: Diana E. Wailes
Printer: HBP Inc.

All uncredited photos are courtesy of the
U.S. Capitol Historical Society.

*The U.S. Capitol Historical Society
is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)3
educational organization. To help
support its public programming,
visit www.uschs.org.*



Contents

The “Barefoot Boy of the Blue Muskingum”: How Howard Chandler Christy Won the 1935 “Battle of the Portraits” in the U.S. Capitol, Leading to Its Largest Painting— <i>The Scene at the Signing of the U.S. Constitution</i> by James Philip Head.....	2
The Principal Fortifications of the United States: The Final Paintings of General Seth Eastman by James Lancel McElhinney.....	16
Painting History in the United States Capitol Rotunda by Anna O. Marley, Ph.D.....	31
Society News.....	48
Marketplace.....	56

Cover: Gen. Seth Eastman painted *Fort Mackinac* between 1870 and 1875. It is part of a series of paintings of U.S. fortifications he was commissioned to paint for the U.S. House. Initially, the paintings hung in the rooms of the Committee on Military Affairs; they have since been dispersed through both wings of the Capitol. For more about Eastman and this series of paintings, see James Lancel McElhinney’s article beginning on page 16. (Courtesy U.S. Senate Collection)

THE “BAREFOOT BOY OF THE BLUE MUSKINGUM”

How Howard Chandler Christy Won the 1935 “Battle of the Portraits”
in the U.S. Capitol, Leading to Its Largest Painting—
The Scene at the Signing of the U.S. Constitution

BY JAMES PHILIP HEAD

“The man who really does the big things breaks every rule under the sun and is himself.”
—Howard Chandler Christy¹

The legendary Henry T. Rainey was dead. A sudden angina attack gripped the chest of the fortieth Speaker of the House of Representatives as he lay in bed recovering from pneumonia on the evening of 19 August 1934. Three physicians, waiting bedside at his sprawling Illinois farm, could not save the chief Democratic leader who had presided over Pres. Franklin Roosevelt’s famous “Hundred Days” and “New Deal.” The following day, the nation mourned as the Capitol’s flag flew at half-mast, for this congressional stalwart of 30 years—described as “picturesque” and “a kindly man”—would never be back.²

Rainey’s wife, Ella, hastily planned a grand funeral in their hometown of Carrollton, nearly quadrupling its population with hundreds of dignitaries and thousands of citizens. Roosevelt paid his respects, arriving aboard his private train from Washington, D.C.³

Meanwhile, in New York City—high atop a duplex studio apartment overlooking Central Park West—a celebrity illustrator turned portrait painter perched his portly body on a simple wooden stool and pulled the laces of his smock tight. In his left hand, he gripped a long sable brush; in his right, a sizable palette smeared with a rainbow of colors. Before him stood a tall easel with a blank canvas reflecting the north light but clouded in a smoky haze billowing from the burlwood pipe he clenched between his teeth (fig. 1). Howard Chandler Christy was about to start his favorite painting—which he always considered to be his next—never envisioning Rainey’s death would soon involve him and lead to his greatest work, the largest painting in



Fig. 1. Christy in his studio apartment in the 1930s working on a portrait of model Mrs. Hobart Cole Ramsey [née Collette Nicks] (1918–2010), who later founded the Health Hearing Foundation. Christy’s finished portrait depicts Collette as a blonde, her natural hair color.

the U.S. Capitol—*The Scene at the Signing of the U.S. Constitution*.⁴

THE “BATTLE OF THE PORTRAITS”

Ella Rainey wasted little time in her quest to immortalize her departed husband. By October 1934, she had travelled to Washington, D.C. and cleaned out his congressional office, assembling decades of bulging files of newspaper clippings and papers for a biography she intended to write. The valuable antiques would be sold.⁵

“Everything we owned had associations,” she lamented. “They mean nothing now.”⁶

Of utmost importance to Mrs. Rainey was the forthcoming commissioned portrait of her husband to be placed in the Capitol’s Speaker’s Lobby, where representatives gather to discuss legislative matters. By sheer luck, Christy was at the Capitol, and the two hit it off.

“She has conferred with Howard Chandler Christy,” newspapers said, and “showed him many pictures—her favorite poses of the Speaker; his favorite home nook among his books, the chair he loved best, made by his grandfather.”⁷

From this chance encounter, Mrs. Rainey left flattered and reassured. Christy walked away with several treasured photographs, imagining his next favorite painting.⁸ In the coming days, eager artists throughout the country—weathering the strains of the Great Depression—read the newspaper accounts. They contacted Mrs. Rainey; she readily listened.

By late January 1935, Christy completed Rainey’s portrait (fig. 2), returning to Mrs. Rainey her precious photos. “Last week,” Christy wrote to Mrs. Rainey, “I sent the portrait to Mr. [Bascom] Timmons in Washington. I tried to get a good strong portrait of Mr. Rainey, together with his kindly expression. He was a man who had many friends—everyone has something fine to say of him—so he must have been both strong and kindly.”⁹

Christy’s three-quarter length work, clad in a gilded frame, was placed in a vacant room in the Capitol. Within days, more framed paintings of Rainey in different sizes and styles arrived, giving Congress a “minor headache,” the press reported. What had seemed like a shoe-in for Christy turned into an all-out war among artists. The press called it the “Battle of the Portraits.”¹⁰

By mid-February 1935, four paintings of Henry Rainey glistened in the incandescent light of an obscure committee room. Nailed to a wall or propped up on brass-tacked chairs, the images appeared surreal



Fig. 2. Christy’s portrait of Speaker of the House Henry Thomas Rainey was completed in late January 1935 from photographs the Speaker’s widow gave him.

together.¹¹ Christy’s downy-haired figure of the former leader, taller than the others, gazed upon another by Edward Child of Boston. Nicholas Brewer’s fair likeness spied its doppelgänger by the hand of Los Angeles’s Boris Gordon. Each artist believed he had received Mrs. Rainey’s approval, as it was customary for the Speaker’s family to select the honored painter. Here, no one knew of the stiff competition for the \$2,500 commission—a sizable sum as the average annual American salary was \$1,500.

When an inquiry was made, it was discovered Mrs. Rainey had consented to anyone wishing to capture her husband’s best traits on canvas. She never intended to hurt anyone. Speaker of the House Jo Byrns ordered the Joint Committee on the Library, headed by Rep. Kent Keller of Illinois, to settle the dispute. In the following



Fig. 3. Members of the House's Committee on the Library inspect portraits submitted to the Capitol of Speaker of the House Henry T. Rainey in December 1935. Christy's portrait is to the far right.

months, the committee remained silent. More portraits of Rainey arrived. By some reports, the Capitol received as many as 16 canvases (fig. 3). When Byrns suddenly died in June 1936, a decision still had not been made.¹²

From Rainey's Illinois district, Rep. Scott Lucas accused Keller of "vacillation, indecision and indolence," adding that Rainey's widow was "weary and heartsick over it." Under pressure, Keller convened his committee, believing, "The opinion of most artists seems to be that a man should be painted as he was when in the prime of his life." A decision was made. Christy's portrait of the late Speaker had won and would be placed near the entrance of the Speaker's Lobby. One newspaper astutely commented, "The portrait is an idealization, the usual Christy style."¹³

When Christy heard the good news, he was at "Oak Hill," the Nashville, Tennessee mansion of Maxwell House coffee heir and executive John Cheek. In the

midst of a 110-degree heat wave, the artist mopped the sweat from his brow and finished his portrait of Cheek's beautiful young daughter, Eleanor.¹⁴

The Rainey portrait was Christy's first commissioned work for the Capitol. He would eventually create six more paintings, either displayed in the Capitol or its surrounding buildings. Above all, Christy never forgot Keller's kindness and returned the favor by immortalizing him on canvas.¹⁵

FORGOTTEN

In the mid-1930s, *Time* magazine proclaimed Howard Chandler Christy to be the "most commercially successful U.S. artist," yet not everyone recognized his distinctive face. In the spring of 1937, Christy entered the Capitol's Speaker's Lobby (fig. 4) and asked the doorman, Ed Weikert, if a certain portrait attracted much

attention.¹⁶

“Oh, yes,” said Weikert proudly, “that’s a portrait of the former speaker of the house, Mr. Rainey. It was done by Howard Chandler Christy.”

“Well, what do you think of it?” replied the artist.

“I’ve heard members say that it has too much color in the cheeks” the doorman responded.

“Is that so?” Christy replied. “I’d like to see it closer. Would you let me come into the lobby?”

“Sorry,” Weikert said, “but this is restricted to members and newspaper men.”

The artist turned away, faintly smiling. Christy had won the battle, but more work needed to be done. This Ohio boy may have been 65 years of age then, but he was only just beginning and never wanted to be forgotten.¹⁷

“SMILEY”

Born in a log cabin in Morgan County, Ohio on 10 January 1872, Howard Chandler Christy spent his youth on a farm overlooking the Muskingum River Valley. His close friendship with the river steamboat captains gained him the nickname of “Smiley” because of his perennially happy demeanor, but his childhood custom of not wearing shoes earned him the sobriquet of the “Barefoot Boy of the Blue Muskingum,” a name that stuck with him throughout life. From the bluffs of his boyhood home, the young Christy gazed down at the whistling steamboats, vowing that he would travel farther one day and would “paint big pictures of big things.”¹⁸

At the age of 18, Christy journeyed to New York City with \$200 in his pocket and the dream of becoming a distinguished artist.¹⁹ There, he studied under various painters at the Art Students League until the spring of 1891, when his funds ran out and he returned home. By 1892, he went back to New York, determined to become

a success. William Merritt Chase, the era’s foremost American impressionist, instructed Christy and declared him to be the most brilliant student he ever taught.

During the Spanish-American War in 1898, Christy traveled alongside the U.S. Army to record the battles in visual form in Cuba. On his way there, he met then-Colonel Theodore Roosevelt and witnessed firsthand the bravery of the Colonel and his Rough Riders. Christy’s sketches became the focal point for tens of thousands of American readers whose only glimpse of the crossfire would come from these works (fig. 5).

Upon returning to New York City, Christy made a lucrative living illustrating books and magazines. Ever enterprising, he concentrated on portraying a new emerging figure—the modern American woman. Encouraged by friend and colleague Charles Dana Gibson, Christy invented the “Christy Girl,” an idealized portrayal of feminine perfection intermixed with



Fig. 4. The entrance of the Speaker’s Lobby as it appears today. Christy’s portrait of Rainey is to the far right.

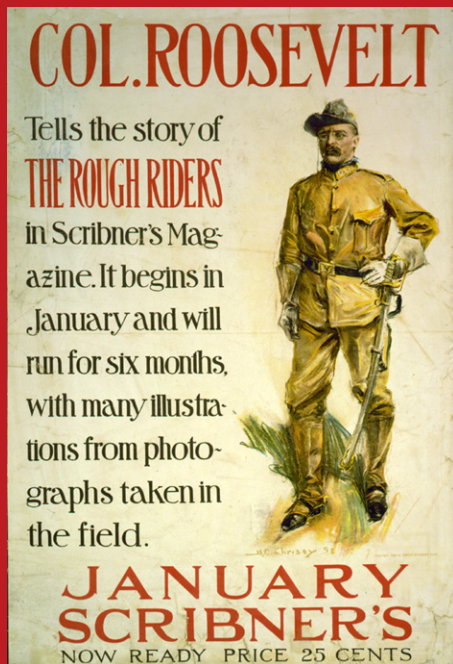


Fig. 5. Christy's 1898 sketch of Col. Theodore Roosevelt advertises Roosevelt's harrowing account of the Rough Riders during the Spanish-America War for the January 1899 Scribner's magazine. Christy claimed to have encouraged the colonel to submit his memoirs to Scribner's.



Fig. 7. Christy's 1917 poster depicts a modernized goddess of liberty, urging the public to fight or help finance America's war effort. Designed for the April 1918 Third Liberty Loan campaign, this poster became a significant tool in a staggering nationwide effort to compel Americans to do their part in the war.



Fig. 6. In the early 1900s, the Bobbs-Merrill Company of Indianapolis published numerous books featuring Christy's illustrations. This advertisement from the December 1906 edition of The Bookman reflects the public's increasing infatuation with the "Christy Girl."



Fig. 8. According to the federal government, these posters prompted over 25,000 men to enlist. This example is one of two versions of Christy's 1918 posters titled Gee!! I Wish I Were a Man—I'd Join the Navy.

independence and confidence. With some of the most beautiful women as his models, Christy borrowed their best qualities to create a romanticized goddess who redefined the concept of feminine beauty and influenced fashion for decades.

The “Christy Girl” was virtuous, athletic, secure, graceful, and determined. But, above all, she was undeniably gorgeous, and America could not get enough of her (fig. 6). Countless books, calendars, and prints with her face and figure were sold. Shoes, hats and dresses—and even dances and an entire musical—were named after her. People would frame pictures of the “Christy Girl” and place them throughout their homes. Men would write letters proposing marriage to her. Newspapers held contests in the hope of finding her living personification. She became an American icon.

As World War I escalated, the United States government capitalized on Christy’s success and ability to influence American tastes. To build morale, the government recruited him to paint alluring women for posters to compel thousands of men to join the military and others to help finance the war effort (fig. 7). A captivating Christy girl in a long, Grecian-style toga would command one to “Fight or Buy Bonds!” Another wearing a soldier’s uniform—perhaps one of the first known examples of psychological sexual gender-bending advertising—would challenge men to join the Army, Navy, or Marines (fig. 8).

After portraying glamorous women for two decades, Christy (fig. 9) became renowned as the premier authority on feminine beauty. When the Atlantic City Businessman’s League wanted to produce a fall beauty pageant in 1921, it was only natural Christy would be selected as judge. Christy served as the chairman of the judges’ panel for the annual event, later known as the Miss America Pageant, and would remain in that role for another three years.

At the insistence of Nancy Palmer Christy, Christy’s former model and second wife, he abandoned illustration in late 1921 in favor of portrait painting, which he considered far superior. Christy became the preferred painter for presidents, generals, movie stars, socialites, and famous personalities of the era, including Presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Harry S. Truman; aviators Eddie Rickenbacker and Amelia Earhart; humorist Will Rogers; publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst; and Allied General Douglas MacArthur. He immortalized Europe’s royalty, nobility, and principal leaders, including the Prince of



Fig. 9. Christy as he appeared in February 1918

Wales, Benito Mussolini, Prince Phillip of Hesse, and Crown Prince Umberto of Italy. In the Capitol alone, six legislators are memorialized by Christy’s brush: in addition to Speaker Rainey, they include Speaker William Bankhead of Alabama (painted in 1937), Rep. (and future vice president) John Nance Garner of Texas (1937), and Representatives Sol Bloom of New York (1936), Henry B. Steagall of Alabama (1942), and Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts (1950).

Indeed, the “Barefoot Boy of the Blue Muskingum” had arrived, and America received him as its foremost portraitist.

“WE THE PEOPLE”

On 17 January 1936, while staying at Philadelphia’s Bellevue-Stratford Hotel as a guest of the Poor Richard Club, Christy strolled east to Independence Hall just before the club’s annual banquet celebrating Benjamin Franklin’s 230th birthday. The Hall’s doors were closed for the evening, but the guards recognized the artist and permitted him to enter. Upon walking into the half-darkened Assembly Room where the U.S. Constitution



Fig. 10. Christy's portrait of New York Rep. Sol Bloom, 1936

was signed on 17 September 1787, a jolt of patriotism overcame Christy. In an instant, he envisioned one of the greatest events in American history—the Federal Convention delegates standing before the desk where the Constitution was signed. From a kaleidoscope of colors emerged a symbolic figure of lady Justice rising above everything. Flanking her were misty scenes representing the meaning and spirit of the Constitution.²⁰

Deeply inspired, Christy returned home the next day to sketch the idea.

Throughout the rest of 1936, Christy declined his usual portrait commissions as he concentrated on his new favorite painting, which he called *We the People*.²¹ At his own expense, Christy researched each of the signers of the Constitution and returned to Philadelphia on 17 September 1936 to make a small painting of the Assembly Room, capturing the light and shadows as they appeared exactly 149 years to the day after the Constitution's signing. The next month, he began painting his artistic vision on a large canvas there. As he worked, visitors asked him what his painting was for. He would simply say, "Just a sketch." Yet, he knew that this had much greater significance.²²

That fall, Christy travelled to Washington, D.C., to paint the portrait of Rep. Sol Bloom (fig. 10). The timing was perfect: not only was this a fortuitous commission for the artist, but a golden opportunity for the New York politician. The Democratic congressman, a former entertainment impresario, later called the "Super-Salesman of Patriotism," presided as director general of the U.S. Constitution Sesquicentennial Commission, which was planning a nationwide two-year celebration of the Constitution complete with elaborate activities, programs, and contests. Bloom needed Christy and his Constitution painting. Christy needed Bloom and his political clout for his next favorite work. The two collaborated, conferring and exchanging ideas and material. Bloom's goal was to "have a painting of the Signing of the Constitution that was historically correct." Christy felt the same, stating, "I want the painting to be accurate in every detail because I feel deeply in the meaning the Constitution holds for every American." The artist, however, gravitated towards allegory and symbolism for his larger works to convey a deeper message. "The historian gives dead historic facts and legends," Christy said, "but the artist or poet takes these and puts Life in them, and all accept *that*—as the truth."²³

Christy finished the five-by-seven-foot painting of *We the People* on 15 February 1937. In May, Bloom shipped it to a lithography company in New York for hundreds of posters to be made, a process spanning over eight months.²⁴

By the summer of 1937, *We the People* returned to the Capitol and was placed for viewing in a Senate hallway. Wearing a white, double-breasted suit, Christy escorted congressional leaders to inspect his work (fig. 11). It was a deliberate effort, if not a full-blown marketing campaign. Some people loved Christy's painting so much that they felt entitled to take credit. Col. James Moss of the United States Flag Association claimed that he was the source of Christy's inspiration. He wanted to use it for a booklet to be distributed on Flag Day, and insisted Christy agree that his association had sponsored him. When Bloom heard this, he vehemently objected, dismissing Moss's claim and stealing the inspirational credit for himself. "[N]o one has ever told me or advised me about any of the ideas for paintings I have done or that are being done for me," he wrote to Christy. "Of course," Bloom added, "I do in every way respect your ideas, Howard, because you are the artist."²⁵

At the request of the City of Philadelphia, Christy's painting was exhibited in Independence Hall's Assembly



Fig. 11. Sen. Hattie Caraway and Christy view his *We the People* in a Capitol hallway in July 1937.

Room from January until June 1938. At its unveiling, Christy commented before a crowd, “Two years ago today, Franklin’s birthday, I went into this room and the real spirit of what the Constitution meant revealed itself to me to such an extent that it was impossible for me to resist painting my impression so that others could see how at least one American was affected—today I see that thought expressed and here, where it all happened so many years ago.”²⁶

By early February 1938, a tall stack of colorful *We the People* posters had arrived. Christy busily autographed them, personally hand delivering or mailing each poster to every cabinet member, Supreme Court justice, senator, and representative (fig. 12). By noon on 16 February, the House Office Building’s cabinet maker was flooded with over 100 requests for frames. At the same time, gracious letters of thanks and praise poured in to the Christy studio. Many dignitaries said they would frame and hang his poster in their offices and homes, while some said they would send it to their hometown schools and libraries. Others wanted more posters and would gladly pay for them.²⁷

In Rep. Ulysses Guyer’s letter of gratitude, the

Kansas congressman commented, “I should like to see you given a commission to paint that picture for some conspicuous place in the Capitol; I think it would outclass any of the historical paintings there because of your fidelity to historical backgrounds.”²⁸

Guyer clearly knew the “Barefoot Boy of the Blue Muskingum” and the “Super-Salesman of Patriotism” were already on top of this Herculean task. But their efforts had yet to generate steam.

THE “BIG PAINTING”

In planning the Constitution’s 150th anniversary, Bloom shockingly discovered that none of Washington’s government buildings, including the Capitol, contained a single painting of the Constitution’s signing. Determined, Bloom wanted Christy to paint one, but congressional support and approval were needed. Naturally, Keller, who championed his Rainey portrait two years before, was the logical choice.

On 10 August 1937, Keller introduced in the House a Joint Resolution authorizing the Architect of the Capitol to employ Christy to paint the largest painting in the Capitol, measuring an astonishing 30 feet wide and 20 feet high, to be called *The Signing of the Constitution*. The price was not to exceed \$35,000. Three days later, he amended the resolution, requiring the approval of the Joint Committee on the Library. In the Senate, Sen. Hattie Caraway introduced an identical joint resolution two days later. The Library Committee issued a report that same day, heaping praise on Christy’s talent and research, along with his allegorical painting *We the People* which, as the report stated, “attests the quality of Mr. Christy’s genius.” “To see the painting is an unforgettable experience,” the report continued, “and one who sees it lingers to study, to ponder, and admire—and finally leaves with an exalted sense of having been in communion with the very spirit of the Constitution.”³⁰

Christy seemed like a sure shot for the job, but when the Senate resolution was raised on 19 August 1937, it was passed over—the major objection being that a single artist was nominated without any competitive selection. Sen. Elmer Thomas quickly amended it, cleverly removing Christy’s name, and referring simply to an artist to be employed by the Architect of the Capitol. No objection was made. Caraway later confided to Christy, “In the face of very great odds I feel that I have won a real victory.”³¹



Fig. 12. Christy inscribed this poster of his *We the People* painting to New York Rep. Ralph Gamble.

In the House of Representatives, the persuasive arguments of Bloom and Keller failed to save the joint resolution on 6 June 1938. Rep. Robert Luce of Massachusetts, who declared Christy to be “a painter of magazine covers,” found his pictures “charming,” but his portrait at the White House of Grace Coolidge “flamboyant” and “ornate.” Rep. Thomas Amlie of Wisconsin called the Rainey portrait a “picture of a movie star” and not of the man who served. Keller’s motion to suspend the rules and proceed with a unanimous consent generated much discussion, and although it garnered 56 of the 108 votes cast, the vote fell well short of the two-thirds necessary to suspend the rules—effectively killing the resolution. Keller was incensed. Bloom later told Christy, “I never dreamt that Congress had so many experts on art.”³²

Despite the loss, the vigorous discourse was instructive, prompting Christy’s steadfast proponents to take a different tack. To appease certain Members, Christy’s name had to be removed from all resolutions; the Commission on the Fine Arts included in the process; and the purchase price reduced. After all, it was the Great Depression. For good measure, a few more judges needed to be added to the selection process.

On 22 March 1939, Rep. Robert Secrest of Ohio introduced a joint resolution in the House creating a commission consisting of the vice president of the United States, the Speaker of the House, and the Architect of the Capitol, to authorize and employ an artist to paint the signing of the Constitution.³³ The price was not to exceed \$30,000, and the Commission of the Fine Arts was to be consulted. A similar resolution was introduced in the Senate.³⁴ The legislation passed and Roosevelt signed it into law.³⁵ It was an ingenious plan. Two years before, Christy had painted the portraits of two of the three judges: Vice President



Fig. 13. On 10 March 1937, Christy stands next to his portraits of Vice President John Nance Garner and Speaker of the House William Bankhead as his sitters admire his handiwork.



Fig. 14. In the spring of 1940, Christy proudly stands before his painting, The Scene at the Signing of the U.S. Constitution with his model, Elise Ford, viewing from the right.



Fig. 15. Howard Chandler Christy's *The Scene at the Signing of the U.S. Constitution*, 1940

John Nance Garner and Speaker of the House William Bankhead (fig. 13). In fact, Christy had painted a flattering portrait of Bankhead's wife, Florence. He was friends with Architect of the Capitol David Lynn and had painted the likeness of Roosevelt no less than three times for posters of the president's annual Birthday Ball celebration.

The Fine Arts Commission was of little help, prompting Keller to lament to Bankhead, "This body moves so slowly that it is impossible for me to suggest longer waiting in the matter. I therefore suggest unhesitatingly that you proceed . . ." That same day, the commission convened. The choice was unanimous: Christy got the commission to paint *The Scene at the Signing of the U.S. Constitution*.³⁶

That summer, Christy traveled to Washington, D.C. and began work on the "big painting," as he called it, on 1 September 1939. By day, he worked in the sail loft of Washington's Navy Yard where, at the opposite end, a 290-piece Navy band rehearsed Sousa marches—his favorite. At night, he resided at the elegant Mayflower Hotel. When not painting, he would travel to the White

House, Mount Vernon, and other places to conduct additional research so that every detail would be right. Christy claimed that he finished the painting in only seven months, even while occasionally painting portraits of local Washingtonians during the same period (fig. 14).³⁸

For the painting's dedication on 31 May 1940, 20 muscular men worked eight hours to temporarily display the 1,700-pound work in the Capitol Rotunda. Its monstrous size obscured the two colossal paintings on the wall behind it. With both houses of Congress in attendance, there were over 500 people in the Rotunda to witness the event. The audience applauded as two American flags were drawn aside to reveal the canvas, while the Navy Band performed the National Anthem from the Capitol portico. In formally accepting the painting, Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley of Kentucky used it as a rallying cry against "all corrosive influence from within and from any brutal juggernaut that may assail them from without." Barkley's reference to a juggernaut could not have been accidental: nothing better described the Nazi spearhead that had overrun

everything before it and even at that moment was bearing down on the Allied beachhead at Dunkirk. Roosevelt's message, read on the occasion by Bankhead, left no doubt that Roosevelt was, like Barkley, using the unveiling as a gauntlet thrown down before isolationists: "It [the Signing] was truly a momentous scene," wrote the president:

It marked the culmination of a prodigious, unparalleled and amazingly successful effort to express in a charter of government the eternal spirit of a just and humane society. God grant that the day is not far distant when the spirit will be free to assert itself in the councils of all mankind.

That day, Christy claimed to have signed over 2,500 autograph books and had finally fulfilled his boyhood dream of painting big pictures of big things.³⁹

For over 15 months, Christy's "big painting" was the main attraction in the Capitol's Rotunda until it was moved in September 1941 to the marble staircase of the Capitol's House of Representatives, where it hangs today (fig. 15).⁴⁰

Although Christy's painting is considered the most accurate depiction of the signing of the Constitution in existence, he nonetheless employed some of his trademark artistic illusion to create the scene. For example, no one is precisely certain where every signer was situated or what they wore on that fateful day. Indeed, three delegates who refused to sign are simply not depicted. Two who did sign (Thomas FitzSimons and Jacob Broom)

are obscured because no likenesses of them were known to exist. One pictured delegate, John Dickinson, was not there, but signed by proxy.

There is a bit more illusion, too.

Christy never wished to be forgotten, so at times he would employ a simple trick from his illustration days. Ever resourceful, he might draw or paint himself into a work.⁴¹ Some have said that, if one looks closely at *The Scene at the Signing of the U.S. Constitution*, the aged face of the "Barefoot Boy of the Blue Muskingum" can be clearly seen in the Assembly Room, sitting among the Constitutional delegates much as was envisioned in 1936, when the artist conceived of his masterpiece on Ben Franklin's birthday. One does not need to look too far, only front and center to the face of Franklin himself.⁴²



JAMES PHILIP HEAD is a law partner at Williams Mullen, P.C., in Tysons Corner, Virginia, where he concentrates on estate planning and trust and estate litigation in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. He is listed in *The Best Lawyers in America*® for trusts and estates law and tax law. *The Magic of Youth*, Head's first book in a planned biographical trilogy on the artist, *An Affair with Beauty—The Mystique of Howard Chandler Christy*, was published in 2016 (Northloop Books). *Romantic Illusions*, his second book in the trilogy, will be published in spring 2019.

NOTES

1. Regina Armstrong, "Howard Chandler Christy," *The Book Buyer*, Oct. 1899, p. 167.

2. "Nation Mourns Passing of Rainey, Picturesque Speaker of the House," *Thomasville [Georgia] Times-Enterprise*, 20 Aug. 1934, p. 1.

3. "Nation Honors Henry T. Rainey," *Beckley [West Virginia] Post-Herald*, 23 Aug. 1934, p. 1.

4. "Born in Morgan Co. Log Cabin, Christy Becomes World Famous Artist," *The Zanesville [Ohio] Signal*, 4 March 1952, p. 14.

5. "Mrs. Rainey Plans to Desert Secretarial Files for Farm," *The Baltimore Sun*, 27 Oct. 1934, p. 3.

6. Ibid.; "Mrs. Rainey Sets Plans," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Nov. 1934, p. 22.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Howard Chandler Christy (hereafter, HCC) to Ella Rainey, 2 Feb. 1935, collection of author.

10. "Four Rainey Pictures Giving Minor Headache to Congress When Artists Demand Action," *Arizona Daily Star*, 11 Feb. 1935, p. 1; "Artistic Battle Rages Over Rainey Portraits," *Wilkes Barre [Pennsylvania] Times Leader*, 13 Feb. 1935, p. 3; "Battle of Portraits Vexes Legislator," *East Liverpool [Ohio]*

Review, 15 Feb. 1935, p. 12.

11. “Four Rainey Pictures...,” [Tuscon] *Arizona Daily Star*, 11 Feb. 1935, p. 1.

12. Ibid.; “Ninth Painting of Rainey Placed in House Gallery,” *Alton [Illinois] House Telegraph*, 10 Oct. 1935, p. 2; “In Washington,” *The Decatur [Illinois] Review*, 24 Sept. 1935, p. 8 (12 Rainey portraits); “Famous Artist Shown at His Work Here,” unknown newspaper, 1935, scrapbooks of Nancy Palmer Christy (hereafter, NPC) at the Skillman Library, Lafayette College, Easton, PA (hereafter, SLLC) (16 Rainey portraits); “Don’t Quote Me,” *Green Bay [Wisconsin] Press Gazette*, 23 Sept. 1935, p. 10.

13. “Christy Work of H.T. Rainey Made Official,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 21 Jun. 1936, p. 5; “Don’t Quote Me,” *Green Bay [Wisconsin] Press Gazette*, 23 Sept. 1935, p. 10; *ibid.*; David V. Felts, “Second Thoughts,” *The Decatur [Illinois] Herald*, 23 Jun. 1936, p. 6. Keller received from a close relative of Rainey a “photograph study” of the late Speaker smoking a pipe and a letter suggesting that a portrait should be made from the picture. Keller considered it a possibility but found that other members of the Library Committee decided this representation would be too informal to hang as the official portrait in the Speaker’s Lobby.

14. “Famous Artist Shown at His Work Here,” unknown newspaper, 1935, scrapbooks of NPC at SLLC; NPC’s unpublished journal manuscript of HCC, SLLC (hereafter, NPCJ), pp. 291–292.

15. SLLC has a photograph of HCC with Kent Keller. Keller inscribed the photo of Christy next to the congressman’s portrait with the following: “To Howard Chandler Christy—He who with colors paints a head—set forth as though a marble bust endowed with life were sitting there contemplating a world. Who sees the twins of man and canvas—one living the short span of life—the other to continue on. Only a divine soul can perpetuate a soul gone. Hence—that is a gift of God. Kent E. Keller.”

16. “Congress Critics,” *Time*, 20 June 1938; Drew Pearson and Robert S. Allen, “The Daily Washington Merry-Go-Round,” *Waterloo [Iowa] Daily Courier*, 16 Mar. 1937, p. 4.

17. Pearson and Allen, “The Daily Washington Merry-Go-Round,” p. 4.

18. Record #1131 of Vol. 1, p. 76, *Birth Records of the Court of Common Pleas of Morgan County, Ohio*; NPCJ, pp. 4, 5.

19. See generally James Philip Head, *An Affair with Beauty—The Mystique of Howard Chandler Christy: The Magic of Youth* (Minneapolis, MN, 2016), pp. xvi–xviii.

20. NPCJ, p. 289; Elise Ford’s Memoirs of HCC (unpublished dictated), SLLC (hereafter, EFM), p. 151.

21. NPCJ, p. 292. *We the People* is sometimes referred to as *The Signing of the Constitution*. The Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma owns the original.

22. H.R. Rep. No. 75-1569, p. 3 (1937); EFM, p. 153.

23. NPCJ, p. 292; Oliver McKee, Jr., “Super-Salesman of Patriotism: Sol Bloom, Promoter of Washington’s Bicentennial,” *Outlook and Independent*, 3 Feb. 1932; “Christy Girl Comes Out of the Closet for the Bicentennial,” *National Park Service Courier*, Jul. 1987, p. 11; Sol Bloom to HCC, 31 May 1937, SLLC; EFM, pp. 151, 157.

24. EFM, p. 157; Sol Bloom to HCC, 31 May 1937, SLLC.

25. Sol Bloom to HCC, 31 May 1937, SLLC.

26. EFM, p. 162.

27. Ibid. See William Smathers to HCC, 26 Feb. 1938, SLLC (suggesting that HCC hand-delivered each poster); John H. Tolan to HCC, 16 Feb. 1938, SLLC.

28. U.S. Guyer to HCC, 1 Mar. 1938, SLLC.

29. “Historical Whopper,” *Time*, 29 Sept. 1941, p. 49.

30. H.R.J. Res. 486, 75th Cong. (1937); H.R.J. Res. 487, 75th Cong. (1937); S.J. Res. 206, 75th Cong. (1937); H.R. Rep. No. 75-1569, p. 4 (1937); S. Rep. 75-1235, p. 4 (1937).

31. 81 Cong. Rec. S9326–9327 (1937) (statement of Sen. Clark); 81 Cong. Rec. S9330–9331 (1937); Hattie Caraway to HCC, 23 Aug. 1938, SLLC.

32. 83 Cong. Rec. 4665–4666, 5489, 8235–8239 (1938); NPCJ, p. 294.

33. H.R.J. Res. 224, 76th Cong. (1939).

34. S.J. Res. 87, 76th Cong. (1939).

35. Pub. L. No. 11, 76th Cong. (1939).

36. Kent Keller to William Bankhead, 19 May 1939, Joint Committee Book #1; “Contract with Howard Chandler Christy,” 24 Jul. 1939 (Office of the Architect of the Capitol).

37. HCC to Collette Ramsey, 10 Oct. 1939, private collection as of 2007 (“I’ve been here in Washington since first of September working hard on the big painting”); “Art,” *Newsweek*, 17 Jun. 1940, p. 49; EFM, pp. 184, 194–200.

38. HCC to Collette Ramsey, 19 Feb. 1940, private collection as of 2007 (referencing a wedding portrait for Joseph Davies’s daughter, Emlen). In my research, I found it interesting that HCC had quite a bit of time to spare and was painting portraits and traveling to and from New York at times during the period he was working on the painting. Before my research, I was under the mistaken impression that HCC was working five days a week for eight months straight on the painting, primarily because of the sparse newspaper reports noting the duration of his work, and because many had incorrectly assumed that he started work on the painting in late September 1939 and continued up until the day the painting was unveiled—which would mean it would be a wet painting at the time of the unveiling! Elise Ford claimed that it only took him seven months. Through his correspondence with one of his models, Collette Ramsey (whom I interviewed in 2007), I was able to learn specifically when he started (Sept. 1), and what he did while he was working on it.

39. “Senator Barkley Accepts \$30,000 Canvas for Capitol,” *Washington Post*, 30 May 1940; “Colossal Christy Painting Puts Capitol Architect in Quandary,” *Washington Post*, 31 May 1940.

40. “Work of Moving Two Big Paintings at Capitol Starts,” *Washington Star*, 9 Sept. 1941.

41. See, e.g., Head, *An Affair with Beauty*, p. 94; HCC is the model for his illustration *Why He Missed the Aeroplane*.

42. According to Holly Longuski, HCC’s purported daughter, and noted art conservator James Hamm, Ben Franklin’s face was modeled upon that

of HCC’s; EFM, p. 162 (“While he was painting the head of Franklin . . . [a] man called out, ‘I believe Old Ben is right here in this room helping you on this—he fairly lives.’ They all thought it was inspired.”)

IMAGE CREDITS:

Fig. 1. Collette Ramsey Baker

Fig. 2. Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Fig. 3. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Harris & Ewing, [LC-DIG-hec-39690]

Fig. 4. Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives

Fig. 5. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-USZC4-5844]

Fig. 6. Author

Fig. 7. Author

Fig. 8. Author

Fig. 9. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Arnold Genthe Collection: Negatives and Transparencies, [LC-G432-2253]

Fig. 10. Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Fig. 11. Author

Fig. 12. Author

Fig. 13. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Harris & Ewing, [LC-DIG-hec-22354]

Fig. 14. Courtesy of Holly Longuski

Fig. 15. Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

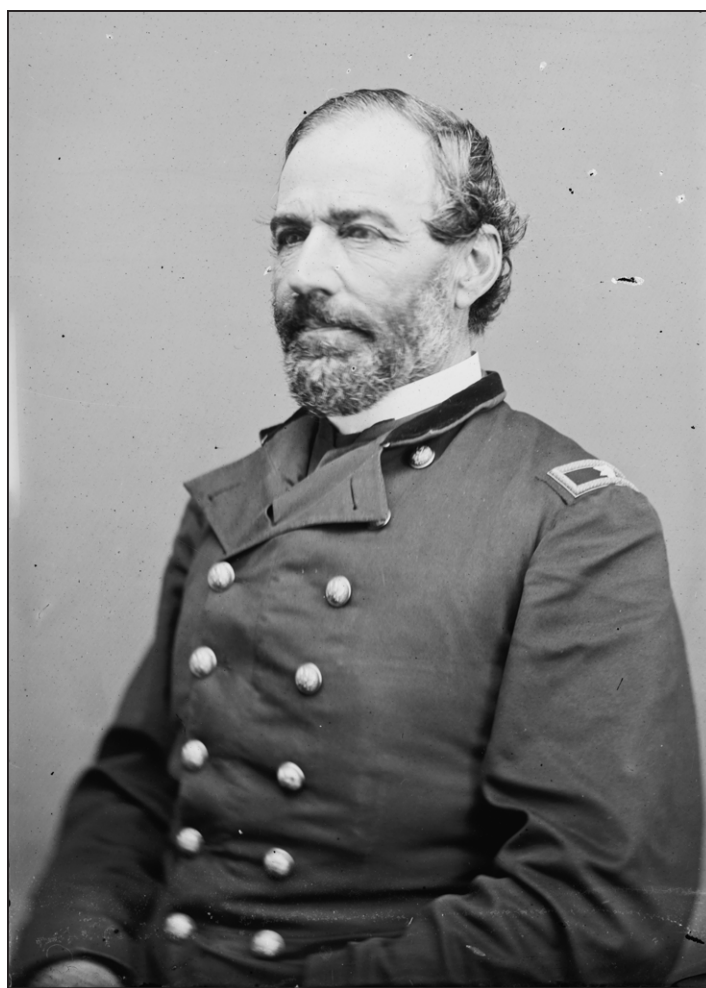
THE PRINCIPAL FORTIFICATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES: THE FINAL PAINTINGS OF GENERAL SETH EASTMAN

BY JAMES LANCEL MCELHINNEY

During the summer of 1875, in a small room, in a small house at 1221 K Street in Washington, D.C., work commenced on a canvas for which the artist bore great hope. The painting was part of a series, preceded by 16 others. Laying out the composition, a majestic vision began to take shape, which many Americans would have recognized as the Hudson Highlands viewed from West Point. Seth Eastman (fig. 1) had first beheld the vista in 1824, when the diffident 16-year-old cadet from Maine could not have foreseen the course his life would take. He sat down at his easel and began to work. It would be his masterpiece, he assured Edward Townsend, a friend and fellow West Point graduate who had studied drawing with Eastman during his Yuck and Cow years at the academy.¹

Having already completed nine genre-pictures of indigenous life for the House Committee on Indian Affairs, Eastman was engaged to produce a new group of paintings for the House depicting the principal fortifications of the United States. Installed first in rooms occupied by the Committee on Military Affairs, the 17 works Eastman produced were moved into the Cannon House Office Building and later returned to the Capitol, where they hang today. I will endeavor to show why these final works, by this under-recognized artist, are worthy of deeper study and more serious attention.

My bias in unfolding these arguments is that of a working artist (fig. 2). More than 25 years ago, seeking to reprise George Catlin's travels from Saint Louis to Fort Union, I researched expeditionary American artists such as William Bartram, John-James Audubon, Samuel Seymour, and Titian Ramsay Peale II. Brian W. Dippie's remarkable book *Catlin and His Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage* first introduced me



SEE NOTES FOR IMAGE CREDITS.

Fig. 1. In this Civil War-era portrait photograph, Seth Eastman wears his uniform frock-coat and brigadier general's straps.

to Eastman and his collaboration with Henry Rowe Schoolcraft on several massive tomes on indigenous ethnography and archaeology.²

When funds could not be raised to support the Catlin project, I took some time to regroup. Playwright Arthur

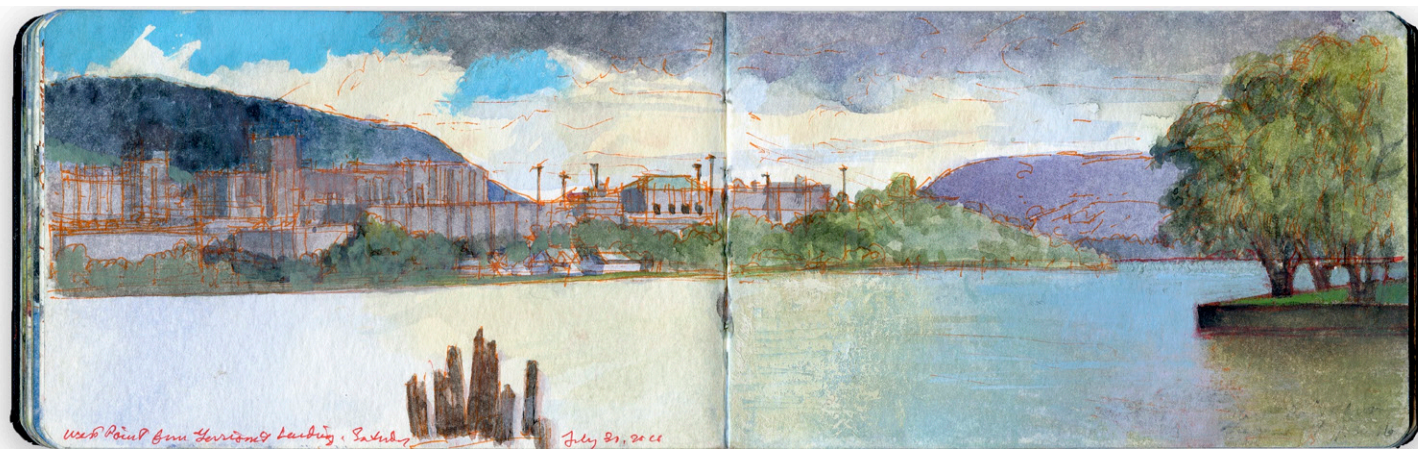


Fig. 2. The author painted this landscape, West Point from Garrison's Landing.

Miller invited me to look after his house and dogs while he and his wife, photographer Inge Morath, traveled to South Africa to meet Nelson Mandela, recently released from Robben Island. Before they left, Arthur handed me a box of VHS tapes of a television show for which he had done some of the narration. It was a new film by Ken Burns on the Civil War, due to be aired the following spring on PBS. At the same time a story was unfolding in Manassas, Virginia as preservationists worked to prevent Beltway developer John "Til" Hazel from building a shopping center on an historic battlefield. I decided to shift my attention to Civil War sites under threat from real estate developers and property-rights activists, and relocated from Philadelphia to Richmond, Virginia. There in a used book shop I came upon a portfolio of prints reproducing Eastman's *Principal Fortifications of the United States*, published by the U.S. Army Center for Military History. Eastman had come to light during my preparations for the Catlin project. Here he was again, painting subjects I was likely to encounter, such as Forts Sumter, Delaware, and Mifflin.

I received a pass to visit Eastman's paintings in the hallways of the Capitol. For several hours, I studied and made drawings of them in my sketchbook, puzzled at why so little had been written about Eastman compared to his contemporaries in the Hudson River School. Over the years I have assembled a collection of secondary sources on Eastman. When traveling, I make a point to seek out his work in museums. The life and work of Seth Eastman (1808–1875) intersects with several major themes within the narrative of nineteenth-century American art, such as drawing instruction in relation to universal education, Hudson River School landscape painting, military exploration, and indigenous ethnography. Eastman's forts stand apart, as the epilogue to a life full of promise, hard service, and artistic achievement. His life is certainly worthy of a sprawling biography beyond the

length and scope of this article.

ASSISTANT DRAWING MASTER

In 1829 Seth Eastman graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he excelled at drawing. Thomas Gimbrede had taken over the drawing department in 1819, when superintendent Sylvanus Thayer rewrote the academy curriculum to make two hours of drawing per day mandatory for second- and third-year cadets. The course covered mechanical drawing, working from nature, and cartography and observational drawing, which included drawing from prints and plaster casts. Gimbrede was a strong advocate of drawing as part of a universal education and known for saying that "Drawing is all curved lines and straight lines. Anyone can draw a curved line. Anyone can draw a straight line. Therefore, anyone can draw." His words echo those of art crusaders like Rembrandt Peale and John Gadsby Chapman.³

Eastman excelled at drawing during his years as a cadet and continued to develop his skills by sketching the upper Mississippi Valley. Returning to the academy after Gimbrede's untimely death in 1832, Eastman became acting drawing-master and then assistant to Charles Robert Leslie, who was succeeded by Hudson River School painter Robert Walter Weir (fig. 3). Both as a student and later as a teacher, Eastman was in the midst of a revolution in American learning, a push for universal education that promoted drawing not just as an artistic skill but as a path to visual learning and literacy. West Point also was the epicenter of a revolution in American painting. Thomas Cole's *View of Fort Putnam* (1825) is generally accepted as the seed from which the Hudson River School had grown (fig. 4). The Revolutionary War fort, which had been laid out by Tadeusz Kosciuszko, became a magnet for landscape



Fig. 3. View of the Hudson River, Robert W. Weir, 1864.



Fig. 4. View of Fort Putnam, Thomas Cole, 1825.



Fig. 5. Eastman included this “Map of Fort Putnam” in his *Treatise on Topographical Drawing*.

painters and a bucket-list destination for steamboat tourists. Through his brief contact with Leslie, and under the mentorship of Robert Weir, Eastman developed a broad knowledge of the history of art.

In 1836 Eastman published a treatise on topographical drawing⁴ that was adopted as a textbook for the academy. In it he describes a method for projecting map data into pictorial form (fig. 5). He certainly would have known of Thomas Cole and seen William Guy Wall’s *Hudson River Portfolio*. Eastman would have met many of the prominent artists who visited Weir at West Point between 1833 and 1841. Eastman was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1838, so he must have made a favorable impression on New York City cultural elites. To merit such an honor required more than skill and technique. Eastman must also have known the works of Claude Lorrain, Canaletto, Joseph M. W. Turner, and John Constable, whose studio and legacy had been entrusted to the care of Eastman’s former superior, Charles Robert Leslie. He would have encountered compositions by these artists, mostly in the form of prints. During his years as a teacher at West

Point, Eastman also would have had access to popular books on drawing, such as Fielding Lucas’s *Progressive Drawing-Book* (1825) and Rembrandt Peale’s *Graphics* (1834).

The practice of drawing in the nineteenth century was regarded very differently than it is in the twenty-first. Today drawing is presumed to be confined to creative activity by those possessing an extraordinary talent for visual art. In the years preceding the invention of photography and computer-assisted design and texting, the famous education reformer Horace Mann argued that drawing was “an essential Industrial Skill” and even “a moral force.”⁵ It was a central component in a universal education. In the words of Rembrandt Peale, “Writing is nothing else than drawing the forms of letters. Drawing is little more than writing the forms of objects . . . only a few peculiarly talented, may succeed in becoming proficient in the higher departments of drawing or painting, yet every one, without any genius but application, may learn the simple elements of this art in a degree sufficient for the most useful purposes.”⁶ During the nineteenth century, most literate people could draw as well as they could write. Seth Eastman is an extraordinary figure, even in his own time, because his work spans the divide between science and poetry, engineering and the fine arts. Having mastered mechanical drawing, architectural rendering, and cartography, he also excelled in the fine arts of drawing and painting.

EASTMAN, THE INDIANS, AND THE ARMY

In the fall of 1839 Eastman exhibited his work at the Apollo Gallery in New York City. Early the next year he was shipped off to fight Seminoles in Florida, where he contracted malaria. After recovering in Norfolk, Virginia, he was assigned to Fort Snelling as post commandant. During his first tour of duty there, a decade earlier (1830–32), Eastman had married “Stands Sacred,” the teenage daughter of “Cloud Man,” a Dakota chief. Their union produced a daughter. When Eastman was recalled to West Point in 1833, the marriage was dissolved, but he arranged for the support of his indigenous family. In 1835, Eastman married the 17-year-old daughter of an army surgeon at West Point. When they moved to Fort Snelling, he and his new bride had special access to the Native American community. Mary Henderson Eastman gathered stories and wrote a popular book about Dacotah myths, customs, and folkways, which Seth Eastman illustrated. *Dacotah, or Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling*, first published in 1849, is cited as one of the principal sources for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem, *The*



Fig. 6. Seth Eastman, *The Alamo*, 1848.



Fig. 7. Seth Eastman's "*Ruins of Old Fort Mackinac, 1763*" is engraved bookplate no. 53 in Schoolcraft's volume.

Song of Hiawatha, published in 1855.

In 1848, Eastman was ordered to Texas, to participate in the establishment of a chain of new army posts. Traveling the length of the Mississippi River to New Orleans, then by sea to Matagorda, Texas and overland to San Antonio, Eastman filled several sketch books with drawings of sites along the way (fig. 6).⁷ The following year he was reassigned to the Office of Indian Affairs to produce more than 300 illustrations for a massive compendium on Native tribes being assembled by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (fig. 7). Along with these duties, in 1853 Eastman created a series of watercolors based on drawings produced by John Russell Bartlett while conducting a survey of the new boundary between the United States and Mexico.

From 1855 until 1867, Eastman shuttled from one army post to another: from Texas, back to Washington, from Minnesota to Utah, and Washington again. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Eastman was sent to muster new troops into the military in Maine and New Hampshire, where he was felled by sunstroke. Eastman's health was never robust; he suffered from numerous complaints related to active service along the frontier. Promoted to lieutenant colonel, Eastman was given light duty during the war. After nearly a year as military governor of Cincinnati, Eastman retired but remained on the active list. After a brief respite, he was put in charge of the notorious military prison in Elmira, New York. From November 1864 to August 1865, Eastman served as commandant at Fort Mifflin on the Delaware, closer to his wife and family in Washington, D.C. In August 1866, Eastman departed Philadelphia and was given the rank of brevet brigadier-general. Later that year he was given command of the Western Military Asylum

in Harrodsburg, Kentucky, a forerunner to today's Veterans Affairs hospitals. On 26 March 1867, in recognition of his long service and renown as a painter and illustrator, Congress passed a joint resolution engaging Eastman to produce a series of artworks for the Capitol while continuing to draw his army salary. It was preferable, argued the bill's sponsors, to engage an American artist rather than to spend exorbitant sums on European artists.

PAINTINGS FOR THE CAPITOL

By 1869, Eastman had completed nine genre scenes of Native American life, which hung in the chambers used by the House Committee on Indian Affairs. In 1870 he set to work on a new series of pictures, for the House Committee on Military Affairs, depicting the principal fortifications of the United States. This second series will be the focus of what follows.

Responding to improvements in the art of war, artillery in particular, military engineering had been revolutionized by Comte de Vauban during the reign of Louis XIV.⁸ His new system of fortification employed complex geometries that compelled the cities they defended to reconfigure their street-plans (fig. 8). One can muse about the influence of Vauban on city planning, or how construction methods he developed for building with earthworks and masonry revolutionized formal gardens in ways that made possible high-speed motorways centuries later. Returning to the military nature of permanent fortifications, we might consider that, in theory, the most successful fortifications would be those no enemy would ever dream of attacking. West Point cadets were required to study the art of fortification in relation to

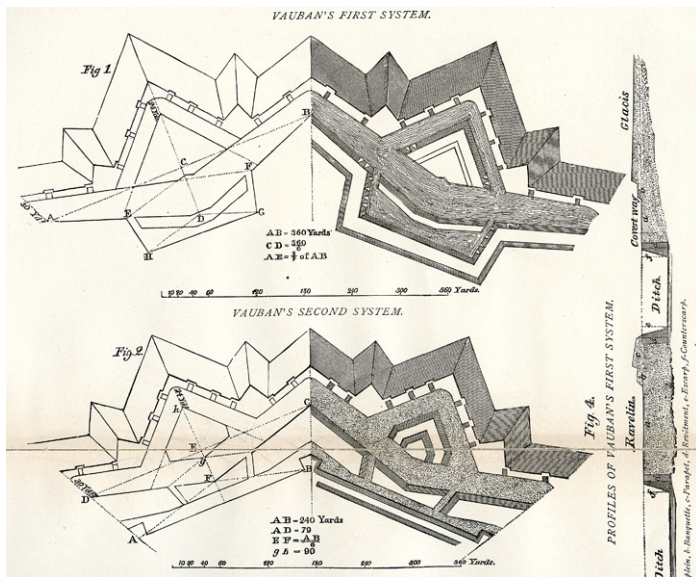


Fig. 8. This nineteenth-century bookplate shows two of Vauban's systems of fortification.

both cartography and engineering. In his *Treatise on Topographical Drawing*, Eastman employs the same graphic language devised by Vauban for mapping fortifications.

When Eastman embarked on these works in 1870, permanent fortifications represented national security and freedom of mobility. Castles and fortresses were firmly embedded in the popular imagination by Sir Walter Scott and Alfred Lord Tennyson as places of enchantment and chivalric romance or as dire venues of tragic violence. Fortifications often appeared as prisons in popular fiction, such as Chateau d'If in Alexandre Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo* or the Bastille in his *Man in the Iron Mask* and Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*. Honeycomb casemates and precarious stairways behind the walls of Eastman forts evoke the looming vaults of Piranesi's umbrageous *Carcere*. One can only imagine what torments Eastman had witnessed, or even ordained, as commandant at "Hellmira" (Elmira, New York), the Andersonville of the north. One wonders with what wry regard the sensitive, taciturn down-easter had addressed his easel, and who decided which structures he would portray, and in what order. Eastman's chorographic approach was entirely in line with precedents set by British military officer-draftsmen like Thomas Davies, William Popharm, and Joshua Rowley Watson, who traveled extensively in the Hudson Valley.

As art-historical precedents for Eastman's *Principal Fortifications of the United States*, British engineer-artists' depictions of the fortified cities of India are as sound as any. While his esthetic values were less in harmony with the self-expressive Bohemianism of contemporary artists of his time, Eastman was very much

in step with the conservative tastes of his youth. One can easily find company for Eastman with eighteenth-century artists like Claude-Joseph Vernet or William Hodges and nineteenth-century expeditionary artists like Carl Rottmann, Frederick Catherwood, or Baron Waldeck. Familiar both with scientific imperatives and artistic priorities, Eastman expanded expeditionary art beyond simple reportage into a refined art-form. The subject matter is a complete non-sequitur to his previous oeuvre, which represents a significant departure that a less confident individual might not have undertaken. Not all 17 paintings of his American forts may be masterpieces. In some, Eastman approaches a more personal vision.

Military subjects have always faced a chilly reception from the fashionable art world in America, which tends to associate such subjects with weapons, war, and suffering. As previously stated, fortifications were well-established as literary tropes, brooding and solitary, monuments to duty and forbearance, sentinels marking the boundary between life and death. Eastman's forts are neither truculent nor combative. They are patient, ready, and sure. The protagonist of Dino Buzzatti's novel *The Tartar Steppe* is a young officer who reports to a fortress on the eponymous frontier. Scanning the horizon day after day, cleaning his weapons, polishing his buttons, he prepares for the glorious moment when he will be called to defend his post. When the enemy finally arrives, the young officer has grown old, broken, and grey, too infirm to join the fight. One might also consider J.B. Jackson's essay *The Necessity for Ruins*, which considers how derelict structures testify to the impermanence of human endeavor, reminders of our need for constant improvement.¹¹ Twenty-first century landscape architects, urban planners, and artists like Colorado painter Don Stinson, myself, and others, have been deeply influenced by Jackson's writings. In the late 1990s Stinson reprised the expeditionary spirit by seeking out modern ruins like abandoned drive-in theaters. Societies engaged in constant improvement do so by leaving ruins along the road to progress. Perhaps in some sense, Eastman's forts are prayers for peace.

A number of questions surround these works. Apart from the final painting in the series, I have been unable to find a record of which was the first, or in what sequence these pictures were produced. Ownership of these works today is divided between the House of Representatives and the United States Senate, which seems to have acquired eight of the 17 paintings purely by right of possession. To provide some sense of order, I will divide them into four groups. The first category is Fort Sumter, a stirring testament to the ordeal suffered by former foes recently reunited. It is the only single

site of which Eastman produced three paintings. Artistically speaking, these three paintings anchor the collection. The other groups fall under the headings of coastal defenses, frontier forts, and sites which Eastman would have known from firsthand knowledge.

FORT SUMTER

Anticipating imminent hostilities, Maj. Robert Anderson evacuated Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, guarding the entry to Charleston, South Carolina, on 26 December 1860 and moved his command into the island fortress of Fort Sumter. On 12 April 1861 Confederate batteries opened fire on the fort, sustaining a bombardment that ended with Anderson's surrender the following day. As the nation embarked on a war to decide its future, some artists rushed to the front, while others conjured the conflict in pictorial terms. An imagined aerial view of the bombardment of Fort Sumter, long attributed to Albert Bierstadt (who did not witness the attack), demonstrates both a keen interest by Hudson River School artists in topographical accuracy, and their ability to construct a pictorial composition based on extant map-works. In April 1861 Eastman was in New England, raising an army. In none of the records I have found is there any mention of Eastman having visited Charleston or Fort Sumter. Like Bierstadt, Eastman relied primarily on secondary sources, photographs, and drawings on file with the Corps of Engineers and other sources.

John Gadsby Chapman's *Marriage of Pocahontas* hangs in the Capitol Rotunda. One of his sons enlisted in the Confederate army and was wounded at Shiloh. When his unit was transferred to Charleston in 1863, his uncle Henry A. Wise, governor of Virginia, requested



Fig. 9. Seth Eastman, *Fort Sumter, After the Bombardment, 1870–1875*.



Fig. 10. Conrad Wise Chapman, *Fort Sumter Interior Sunrise, December 9, 1863, 1864*.

that Conrad Wise Chapman be given light duty. Assigned to depict the defenses of Charleston, “Cooney” Chapman produced the most significant visual record of the seaport during the blockade. His best-known work may be his painting of the submarine *CSS Hunley*, resting on its dockside cradle beside two Confederate sentries. In 1864 Chapman was given leave to visit his family in Rome, where most of these paintings were completed, with the help of his father. In all, he completed 31 views of Charleston, which were exhibited in 1898 at the Union