

HUNTIA

A Journal of Botanical History



Volume 6 Number 2
May 1986

Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation
Carnegie-Mellon University

Pittsburgh

Huntia is published irregularly, in one or more numbers per volume of approximately 200 pages, by the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213.

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Subscription rate is \$35.00 per volume. Associates of Hunt Institute may elect to receive *Huntia* as a benefit of membership.

Editorial correspondence, manuscripts and books for review should be addressed to Dr. Kiger at the Institute.

Orders for subscriptions and back issues should be sent to the Institute.

Typeset, printed and bound by Allen Press, Inc., Lawrence, Kansas.

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ISSN 0073-4071

A recently discovered landscape by Benjamin H. Coe

James J. White

"No object in nature is more difficult to represent well than a tree" wrote Benjamin Hutchins Coe (b. Hartford, Connecticut, 1799, d. after 1883)¹ in 1845. Perhaps better known as a drawing teacher than a landscape painter, Coe instructed E. S. Bartholomew, Charles Herbert Moore, and William and Henry James, and was the first teacher of Frederic Church—later a key figure in the luminist movement. Coe taught in many cities of New England, New York and New Jersey. The

National Academy of Design Exhibition Record lists addresses for him in New York City during 1846 (507 Broadway), 1849 (9 Carroll Place) and 1853 and 1860 (New York University). His popular drawing manuals included *Easy lessons in landscape drawing* (1840), *Drawing book of trees* (1841) and *A new drawing book of American scenery* (1845).

Recently, one of Coe's later watercolors (Fig. 1), depicting a beech forest and lake, signed on the reverse "The mountain Lake/



Figure 1. Landscape in watercolor by B. H. Coe dated 1864.



Figure 2. "West River, New Haven." Courtesy The Dietrich Brothers Americana Corporation, Philadelphia.

B. H. Coe 1864" and measuring 19 by 25 inches, came to my attention. In a private collection in Washington, D.C. for 25 years, this work is apparently unrecorded. Coe completed it about the time he closed his New Haven school to devote himself to temperance work. French (1879) reported that Coe gave the school—successful for ten years—to one of his pupils.

The Inventory of American Paintings (National Museum of American Art) lists seven landscapes by Coe. Two of these are in the collection of The Dietrich Brothers Americana Corporation, Philadelphia: "West River, New Haven" and "West Rock, New Haven" (the latter of a scene twice painted by Church early in his career), reproduced in Figures 2

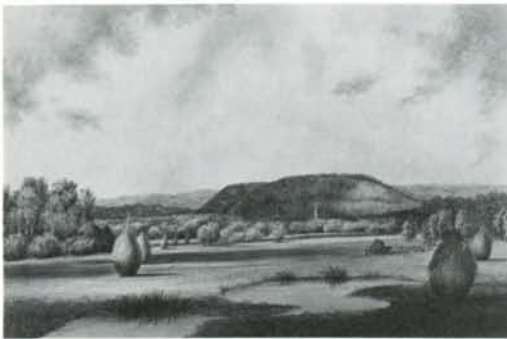


Figure 3. "West Rock, New Haven." Courtesy The Dietrich Brothers Americana Corporation, Philadelphia.



Figure 4. Lithographs from Coe's *Drawing book of trees* (1841). Courtesy Clements Library, University of Michigan.

and 3. Information on five other Coe paintings was submitted by Barbara Morgan of Scarsdale, New York.² Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, New York, has reported a recent gift of 65 pencil and watercolor sketches, approximately 5 by 6 inches, that may be the originals for one of Coe's drawing books.

For drawing trees, Coe (1845) presented six rules: "Sketch lightly the trunk and some of the principal branches; secure the light masses by sketching round them; make with a zigzag touch the darkest shadows, which usually fall under the strongest lights; work towards the edges, and give the outline touch; finish the light masses; put in the branches so as to correspond with the foliage, and shade the trunk."

He advised the beginner to pay close attention to illumination, writing that "the illuminated parts in nature attract the attention," and "in distant woods the tops of the trees catch the light, and go gradually down into shadow."

I take this opportunity to solicit additional information on this particular painting, or any on Coe's drawings.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the assistance of Martha Shipman Andrews, Elizabeth J. Kannan, George J. McDonald, Susan Menconi, Barbara Morgan, Alexandra West Rollins, James Ryan and Richard W. Ryan.

Notes

1. Mallett (1940) reported Coe's birthdate as 1789.
2. One of the entries may be a duplicate.

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