

Truth in Nature: An Artist Looks Anew at Landscape

**A Noted New York Artist Summers in
Northampton, Massachusetts in 1865**

By

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In 1865, the artist Thomas Farrer and his wife Annie decided to spend a quiet summer in Northampton away from the bustle of New York City. During their stay, the couple boarded in the home of Colonel J.B. Parsons.

At the age of 27 Farrer was well known among New York's art community as the spiritual head of what was known as the Pre-Raphaelite movement in American art. It was a short-lived movement that lasted only about 10 years, from 1857 to 1867. In that short time, however, the movement made a significant impact. Yet little is known about it today.

What most defined this movement was the desire to revolutionize art in America and establish an aesthetic that was based on the principle of "truth in nature" as found in the writings of John Ruskin, the mid-19th century British critic, writer and artist.

These artists saw their cause as similar to that of the Pre-Raphaelite artists in England, who also wanted to change the course of art, in their case rejecting the traditional and rigid standards of the Royal Academy. The British artists, too, had been strongly influenced by the writings of Ruskin and took the name Pre-Raphaelite because they believed that true art existed only in Italian painting prior to Raphael.

One difference between the British and American movements was the fact that the British had a preference for figural painting, whereas the Americans focused more on landscape, still-life and what was called the nature study. A meticulous attention to detail was required for an artist to follow Ruskin's principles.

Thomas Charles Farrer was 19 when he arrived in New York City in 1857 from London. His formal training began at the Working Men's College in London where he took landscape classes with John Ruskin and figural drawing with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who helped found the British Pre-Raphaelite movement in 1848.

In 1863, Farrer and a group of like-minded artists founded The Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art, with the main

objective to inform the public about its work and influence other artists. To facilitate this goal, the Association established the journal *The New Path*.

Public response to the Pre-Raphaelite art was mixed. On the positive side, critics praised the exquisitely rendered details found in landscapes and life-like rendering of flowers and plants. Regarding its literary magazine, a newspaper wrote that *The New Path* “is the only periodical in the country that ventures to have an independent opinion about art.”

A common criticism, however, was that the Pre-Raphaelites relied too much on “exactitude of representation” and too little on “the sentiment of nature.” In practice, producing these meticulously crafted works was so time-consuming that it was simply difficult to make a living.

In the end, the demise of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was due in large part to a perceived “lack of emotional expressivity, heightened by obsessive detailing in landscape and still-life.” There was also the fact that while many of these works were stunning examples of truth to nature, they were often small in size and lacked the dramatic quality of larger, more conventional paintings.

Over the decades, many of Farrer’s works, like those of his contemporaries, have been lost. Of the 246 that have been attributed to him, only 40 can be located today.

During his time in Northampton, Farrer painted eight landscapes in oil. We are fortunate that two can be seen in local art museums. One is *A View of Northampton from the Dome of the Hospital*, which hangs in the Smith College Museum of Art.

A local critic was highly complimentary even though he thought the composition was problematic. When seen later in New York, reviews were varied.

On the other hand, a scholar of Farrer’s work has written that this painting is “arguably the masterpiece of his career...It is the largest and most complex picture Farrer undertook...It is the quintessential Pre-Raphaelite painting in its faithful transcript of what Northampton looked like...” The writer goes on to say that in looking at Farrer’s landscapes today, what one finds appealing “is precisely the naïve and static quality that contemporary critics disliked...This two-dimensional and almost decorative sensibility remained a characteristic of Farrer’s painting throughout the 1860s.”

The second painting, titled *Mount Holyoke*, can be seen at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. During much of the 19th century, Mount Holyoke (locally known as Skinner State Park), was the second most popular tourist attraction in America after the Niagara Falls. Less than 1,000 feet in height, the mountain is unique for the panoramic view from its summit, which has been an inspiration for artists for over two hundred years. One of the most widely known images is the dramatic 1836 painting by Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In contrast, Farrer depicted Mount Holyoke from below. *Mount Holyoke* is one of Farrer's finest works. In addition to the carefully executed details of a boat, a train and the mountain house hotel, the soft blues and whites of the sky, together with the browns and greens of the foliage that are reflected in the mirror-like water, create a tranquil and emotionally satisfying scene that perfectly exemplifies the American Pre-Raphaelite tradition.

Thomas and Annie Farrer returned to live in London 1872. He died there in 1891 at the age of 53.

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