

11-1-1930

George H. Yewell

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Recommended Citation

Pelzer, Mildred W. "George H. Yewell." *The Palimpsest* 11 (1930), 483-498.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol11/iss11/3>

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George H. Yewell

Just one hundred years ago (January, 1830) was born in Harve-de-Grace, Maryland, an artist long to be remembered and loved — George H. Yewell. His seventy-five years of active production in the field of art, both in Europe and America, entitle him to serious consideration.

Artists, seldom understood, sometimes neglected, will likely, sooner or later, be explained, usually to their surprise, and perhaps to their dismay. But an artist must first discover himself. How else can he hope to be discovered by others?

In 1841 the village of Iowa City, numbering about nine hundred souls, was at most only a sketch of a capital. But it was a sketch with life. The new capitol building was still unfinished. The Legislative Assembly brought politics and business in the winter, and the occasional steamboat created excitement for the summer. To this prairie metropolis came George H. Yewell, aged about eleven, and his widowed mother from Maryland. Relatives had written them of the good financial prospects of the new town.

We learn very little of George Yewell during the first years in his new home. That he attended school seems certain since he possessed many school books, all of which gave amusing evidence of an extra-

curricular activity. To this boy from the East every blank space of rough brown paper meant an invitation to sketch. He loved to draw, particularly the interesting western characters whom he saw everywhere about him. Indeed, this new capital, teeming with political feuds, violent discussions, and buzzing legislators afforded a rich field to a budding cartoonist. The townsfolk who saw his rough charcoal sketches were amazed at the ability with which, at a single casual glance, he caught the features of a subject. His exaggerations and his pointed ridicule continued to amuse even the subjects of the sketches. The admiration of the legislators for the boy's ability and his friendship with them grew apace.

In 1848 the "Hummer Bell" episode furnished material for sketches which were later to play an important rôle in the life of the artist. Young George Yewell, like almost every one in Iowa City, was familiar with the gossip concerning the mystery surrounding the theft of the bell from the Presbyterian Church. In seven forceful drawings he related the main incidents of the story. Each sketch was given a title, and a story, cleverly detailing the events in Biblical language, appeared below. These sketches give evidence of marked ability in characterization and indicated the yearning of an untrained hand for drawing. To select these particular episodes required a distinct sense of humor.

There may be many of Yewell's early sketches in the older homes of Iowa City. One other, which is

preserved in the library of the State Historical Society, is interesting as a technical example of the cartoons of 1850 and illustrates the influence of training acquired during the year before its execution. It is called "Don Jose and the Knight of the Black Steed". The caricatures of Judge LeGrand Byington and Judge Joseph Williams are striking likenesses, the situations in the picture are full of humor, and the details of accessories are accurate.

In speaking of this period of his life, Yewell explained that "certain rude political and local caricatures, the work of my youthful pencil," attracted the attention of Judge Charles Mason. Some of the "strong exaggerations of character and ridiculous situations" appealed to his native sense of humor.

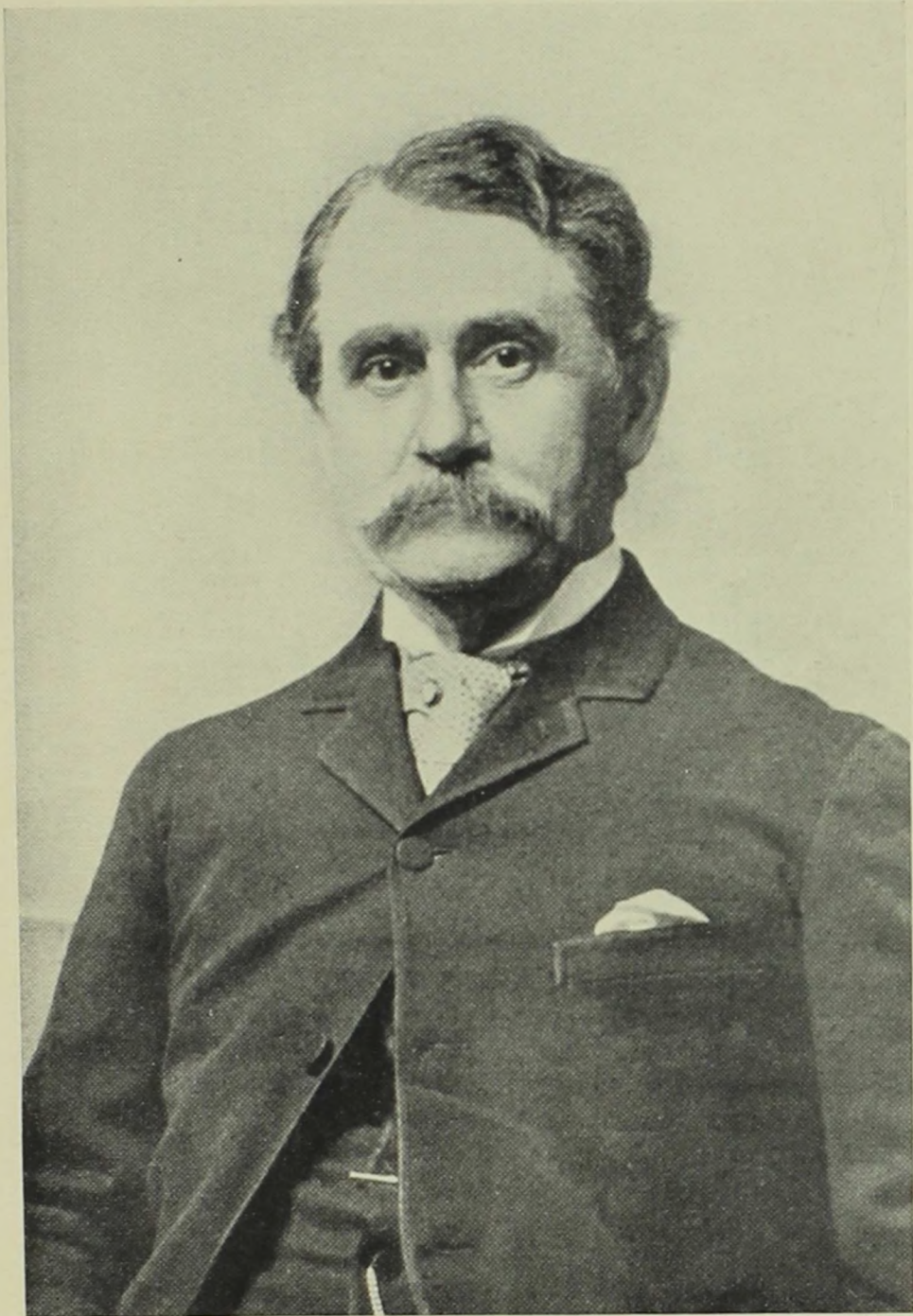
A little later in the same year, 1848, Judge Mason invited the artist to call at his hotel with some of his drawings. If Edison should leave a similar request for an Iowa youth to-day, the boy could not be more thrilled than Yewell was. Possibly it was a commission to do some sketches! Perhaps he was to be invited to Burlington! George Yewell was a product of a pioneer community and, though nearly eighteen, he had none of the self-confidence and sophistication of a youth of that age in 1930.

This lad, still in the rough, but fine and sensitive to the finger tips, waited in wonderment at the appointed hour. With the introduction over, however, he found himself talking at ease with a most friendly and understanding gentleman. To his own surprise

he confessed his secret ambition to become a painter. The Judge was interested. Looking over the sketches, he asked for some more which could be taken to Washington. Artists were to be interviewed and advice obtained on the boy's talent. George Yewell knew that, though months might pass, he would not be forgotten.

Almost two years passed. With no means of support save that which he himself supplied, the lad was kept at work. The long winter evenings and leisure moments were the times in which he really lived. Then he drew and drew, using whatever materials or subjects were available. Every moment was given, he wrote, "to drawing and painting in my erratic and unskilled way." These were years of youthful ambition and hope, criss-crossed with a growing uncertainty, unbelief, and a longing for advice and encouragement.

Then one day an incident changed indecision and doubt to a positive determination that was to carry him far. George Yewell would be a real artist. "In the summer of 1850," he wrote, "the American Art Union of New York appointed Mr. Joseph T. Fales one of the honorary secretaries, and sent him copies of all the engravings they had issued up to that time. These he placed upon the walls of his office in the Capitol Building, he being, at the time State Auditor. I spent many a summer afternoon dreaming over those engravings. The large one, from Coles' "Voyage of Life", where the aspiring youth



GEORGE H. YEWELL

in the boat grasps the rudder in one hand and stretches the other forth eagerly toward the bright cloud-temple in the sky, awoke all the latent love for art in me, and made me resolve to become a painter."

When indeed had such an opportunity been provided? Certainly few works of art had accompanied these brave folk as they trekked across the wind-swept prairies of the Great Valley. The art of reproduction was itself little understood. What an education even this must have been for this rustic, pioneer boy. Others had done, were doing; — perhaps he could do also. The very barrenness of his experience made his faith greater.

Following close on the heels of this inspiring occasion — almost as if to test the decision — came news. Early in 1851, Judge Mason called at the home of young George and told him of his visit to the eastern artists. The months of waiting were rewarded; the decision of the Washington critics was most gratifying. The Judge, assured of talent on the part of his protégé, offered at once to make inquiries in New York concerning schools, costs, and teachers.

"I fully appreciate the difficulties in your way," he wrote, "but they are not insuperable." Besides, "a residence of a few years in the east" would be necessary "to enable you to develop capabilities which I think you possess." Judge Mason's interest was further shown by his many investigations

and talks with prominent men on the subject of art schools. He ascertained for the boy complete details about instruction at the Academy of Design, the possibility of free evening instruction, and how much his other expenses would be.

Now indeed came problems. First of all the ambitious artist had no money, in pocket or in prospect. Neither had many others. Travelling itself, particularly to the inexperienced, was fraught with hazards unknown to-day; besides it was expensive. A saving trait predominated in these pioneer characters, however. Neither old nor young were known to make complaint of privations common to all. Certainly this lad's experience had taught him to regard hardships as unavoidable and to accept them cheerfully. Men were fairly equal socially and the gifted among them were held in great respect. In the spirit of trust and faith young George went unhesitatingly to his many friends for the money necessary for the trip and the first winter. Letters of introduction, small contributions, and promises of more when needed were given him cheerfully on every hand.

By this time Judge Mason had made Yewell his own special protégé. His faith seemed unlimited, and he set his heart upon the complete fulfillment of the boy's ambition. Letters of advice and suggestions were followed by the offer of fifty or a hundred dollars in advance for some "specimens of your skill as an artist after you have attained that

excellence to which you aspire". How sincere was the Judge's concern! Was there anything to do but go and, once there, make good? The trust of his friend depended upon it.

"I left Iowa City", wrote Yewell, "on the morning of October 4, 1851, and traveled by stage coach to within thirty miles of Chicago, making the remainder of the journey by rail, arriving in New York on the morning of the 9th." He was received as a pupil by Thomas Hicks at the same time "entered the antique school of the National Academy of Design," and settled himself down to "a winter of serious study". He found living quarters "in an old-fashioned brick house on the corner of Mulberry Street" where he obtained "good homelike board and lodging for the modest sum of two dollars, sixty-two and one-half cents per week."

To George Yewell the experiences of the first winter were thrilling. He learned how little he knew and what he must first learn before embarking irrevocably upon the career of an artist. He made friends and became acquainted with the work of the popular artists of the day. And always his friend, the Judge, cheered the dark periods with kind, fatherly letters. How subtle was the man's encouragement! He complimented the lad upon his attainments and urged him on by affirming his own belief in a brilliant future for him. Nor was he to concern himself too greatly over expenses, for funds would be secured.

Five years of study in New York under Thomas Hicks gave the student a well-grounded foundation in drawing at a period in American art when good draftsmanship was the first essential. Clever brush work and color emphasis were yet to be realized in American art. The detailed realism of this training never entirely left Yewell's painting. Though he was to live through unbelievable earthquakes in the field of art, he remained a steadfast master of accurate delineation.

At this time study in Paris was regarded as essential for a well rounded education in painting. An artist despaired of attaining rank or recognition without a European experience. The young man worked unceasingly toward this study abroad. In 1856 Judge Mason again evidenced his entire confidence in the artist by sending him abroad and financing his study at the famous atelier of Thomas Couture, an eminent painter of the day.

His tutor was then working upon a large mural painting commissioned by the French government. In his letters to Judge Mason, the youthful student described this picture with considerable enthusiasm. This led to the well meaning but injudicious suggestion that Yewell attempt a similar painting for the national Capitol.

"Not unconscious of my inexperience, yet with my youthful ambition fired by the greatness of the occasion," wrote Yewell afterward of his first great disappointment, "I decided to make a bold attempt

to secure a government commission, if possible, and then make all my studies bend in the direction of the subject I might choose, wisely deferring the painting of the large canvas to a future day. After long deliberation I chose for my subject "The First Prayer in Congress", and wrote to Judge Mason to get for me whatever description there might be of the event".

The drawings for the mural were made and submitted to the American committee in Washington. But Yewell was inexperienced in mural painting; he was very young for such a project. Besides, he must have met competition with well-known and mature artists. Failure was certain. He himself quaintly remarked later, "Too presumptuous, I had sailed high, and the sun, for which I had aimed, had melted my waxen wings and let me down."

But his benefactor in Iowa bridged the hour of discouragement by placing the failure upon the choice of subject rather than on ability. "You would do better with a wilder, western subject", he wrote, and suggested the first treaty for the Black Hawk Purchase.

The art students of Paris in the middle of the last century were required to do a great deal of copying from famous masters at the Louvre. There they absorbed color theories and technique in painting which, in some cases, remained with them always. The influence is distinctly traceable for many years in the work of George Yewell. Seven of the

copies made "from very beautiful paintings by modern French masters", in 1858, found their way to Iowa. They seem to have been passed proudly around among friends and displayed at Davenport, Iowa City, and Burlington. One, a copy of a new and popular picture by his master, Couture, "The Falconer", was enthusiastically admired everywhere. Judge Mason wrote, "I am very much pleased with your paintings. They show great improvement."

A little over ten years from the time the youthful pioneer had left the prairie, he was given the coveted honor of a "position in the Salon of Paris". In 1862 this honor was followed by his election as associate of the National Academy. He had definitely arrived. At thirty-two George Yewell had become one of America's foremost artists in Paris, and, what was equally important, he had given abundant proof that the faith of his friend was not misplaced.

Six years passed, leaving in their wake little or no information of the activities of the artist. America was torn by war. Judge Mason was in deep trouble and frail health. His other friends were lost in war and politics. Occasionally Yewell visited America, and on one of these trips he married Miss Louise Coast. Some paintings of very fine caliber were done in Iowa during these years.

In 1867 Italy rivalled Paris in the interest it held for the art students of the world. The element of color was coming to the fore. Rome and Venice had

produced great colorists. George Yewell was not one to be satisfied to have his hopes only partly realized. Thus he ensconced himself in a studio in Rome with friends from Europe and America almost constantly with him for eleven years. Art was passing through tremendous changes. The very foundations of the old school were being shaken. The new colorists in their fury shocked the older members. The marked indifference to form—the “dots” and “commas” and “splashes” in the technique of the new element—caused comment far and wide. Violent discussions occurred, but the artist from Iowa remained impervious to it all, painting reverently, serenely, honestly, as he had learned. Was he not to live long, to see many strange, disturbing influences in art arise high only to crash to oblivion?

The paintings made in Italy during those eleven years present a definite period in the art of Mr. Yewell. They were strongly realistic at first, showing stronger brush work and more color and atmosphere with the passing years. Perhaps the influence of Titian and Turner is traceable. It would seem not unlikely, since Yewell painted much from these works, making some very noteworthy canvases. The numerous sketches done around Perugia in the summers show a strong freedom of handling and simplicity of composition. They throb with an unobtrusive beauty of warm sunlight and rich bronze shadows. One of the finest of his many carefully

executed and highly finished interiors is now treasured in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. It is "The Interior of St. Mark's, Venice." The picture "Santa Maria della Salute, Venice," has a position of honor in the Louisville Art Gallery, while a second "Interior of St. Mark's" is owned by the Wordsworth Athenaeum at Hartford, Connecticut. Mr. Yewell has caught with superb sensitiveness the spirit of mystery and reverence and woven into its details of a beautiful architectural tracery.

At this time (1867), etching in the field of art was making a worthy plea for recognition. One would expect to find some nice work from the hand of one so well trained in draftsmanship. One is not disappointed. There are many privately owned etchings, particularly of buildings, which rank well with the works of later artists. Old doorways, shadowy entrances, and porticos have furnished the subjects for works of a fine and poetic touch.

In 1875 Yewell visited Egypt, spending the entire year in and around Cairo. Again, he made sketches that sang with the dry, hot atmosphere of the desert. Large paintings were also accomplished, and the two examples shown at the Iowa Memorial Union in Iowa City present street scenes in Cairo. The warm light falling on the perfectly drawn buildings and the shadowed streets, rich in dark blues and wine reds, remind one of Venetian painters of early times.

What caused Mr. Yewell to leave these inspiring

fields in 1878 and return to New York can only be surmised. History reveals that New York realized in 1876 an unprecedented appreciation of fine art, stimulated perhaps by the Centennial Exhibition. Artists in the city with foreign training were reaping rich benefits. There was a renaissance in religious and mural painting. The group of painters who startled the world with their color and technique had withdrawn from the old academy and formed the new "Society of American Artists". Most important, the field of portraiture in New York had a rich and powerful clientele.

The old brick building at 51 West Tenth Street could tell a thrilling story. It still stands almost within sight of Greenwich Village. The bleak, cold walls and the dark, silent halls of the old building gave no hint of the life behind the closed doors. There, however, studios of famous painters, hung with rich tapestries from far lands and deep-toned paintings in elaborate frames of gold, old silver, and lustre, made the visitor forget. There, too, throbbed an existence — unconscious of time, of food, of life itself — dedicated to painting. In some rooms the atmosphere teemed with emotion: success had come, and recognition.

For over twenty years following 1878 visitors found in one of these studios a quiet, cultured gentleman with friendly eyes and a welcoming smile, an artist recognized at home and abroad, the friend and confidant of many fellow craftsmen. He was

George Yewell, the prairie youth, chiseled, sand-papered, and polished for forty years in some of the world's most exacting workshops. With the ripened judgment of years, he discussed, and quite likely dismissed in calm disgust, the "New Society" men, the new schools and techniques. The memory of his generous afternoon teas in his studio lingered long for many. In 1880 came a crowning honor in his career: he was elected to the rank of "Master of the National Academy".

The distant prairie State was to do its part in honoring one of its own. By 1900 the State of Iowa owned nine portraits of its illustrious characters by George Yewell. The paintings of Governors Chambers, Lowe, and Kirkwood; General G. M. Dodge, Theodore S. Parvin, Judge Charles Mason, Judge John F. Dillon, and Judge George G. Wright may be seen at the Historical, Memorial and Art Department Building in Des Moines. A portrait of Governor Lucas, a clean, direct, and forceful piece of work, hangs in the library of the State Historical Society.

When the General Assembly of Iowa appropriated \$800 in 1892 for a portrait of Kirkwood, Governor Boies selected George H. Yewell to execute the painting. "Mr. Yewell spent considerable time during the summer of 1892 in Iowa City," wrote H. W. Lathrop in his biography of Kirkwood, and the old war Governor "sat for his picture in the little office at his own home that contained his library and where he had prepared many of his best State pa-

pers. The painting received its finishing touches in Mr. Yewell's studio in New York City, and when completed it was sent to Iowa City and was exhibited for a couple of weeks in the rooms of Close Hall, where it was seen by Gov. Kirkwood's old friends and neighbors who had known him for a third of a century and who pronounced it a perfect likeness of him whom they had known so long and so well." And Yewell himself wrote of the work, "I regard the head and face purely as a work of art, in many respects the best I have ever painted."

The last twenty-five years of Yewell's life were largely spent in the painting of portraits. Famous men honored him with their commissions. Rest from the winter's arduous labors was found during the summers on Lake George. There, when over seventy years of age, the master painted some of his most delightful sketches. But at last came trouble: the close and painstaking work of so many years began to harm his sight. Even then, for ten years, he continued to paint, though almost totally blind. He died in 1923, at the age of ninety-two, revered and honored.

Over forty of Yewell's paintings have been presented to the University of Iowa. The list is impressive, and representative of all of his years of original painting. And among the pictures are some excellent copies from Paul Veronese, Titian, and Van Dyke. The complete collection is valued at approximately \$18,000.

All of Yewell's painting shows adherence to the standard of Realism. All of it shows skilled draftsmanship. With few exceptions it is low in color tone. Warm, rich shadows are contrasted with mellow, distant lights. His small landscapes express more individuality, are broader, and climb higher in key. His portraits are true examples of the older school. Always, it is claimed, they are perfect likenesses. They are never sharp, hard, or over-done in technique, and have a quiet dignity, with force and character.

No one should overlook his small sketches and landscapes. They rank high in poetic feeling and quality of painting. A very interesting early picture shows the west campus of the Old Stone Capitol in winter. One other picture, a sketch of "Terrill's Mill" painted in 1862 or 1863, is one of the most beautiful of the collection. The quaint old building caught in western sunlight, the delightfully rendered autumnal foliage, the river, and near-by human figure make a bit of lovely poetry in color. A visit to these paintings will cling in the memory like haunting strains of organ music heard at the hour of sunset.

MILDRED W. PELZER