

1982

The Kentucky Tradition in Landscape Painting to World War I

Arthur Jones
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>

 Part of the [Painting Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Jones, Arthur (1982) "The Kentucky Tradition in Landscape Painting to World War I," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol3/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

The Kentucky Tradition in Landscape Painting to World War I

Arthur Jones

Prior to the Civil War, no real indigenous landscape painting tradition in Kentucky had developed. This is not to say that no landscape painting was done, but there was little in the way of a market for landscape pictures in comparison to portrait paintings. Therefore, resident painters rarely executed landscapes.

The small quantity of landscape painting known to have been produced by Kentucky resident painters during the ante-bellum era may be divided into five categories, of which the first may be termed "portraits of places." These were topographical views and estate pictures by artists such as Matthew Harris Jouett (1788-1827) who did a view of his homestead, which William Barrow Floyd has dated between c. 1818 and 1827,¹ Esteria Butler Farnum (1814-91) who did a topographical view of Georgetown College in the 1840s (Fig. 1), and the partners, Robert Brammer (act. 1838-53) and Augustus Von Smith (act. 1835-43) who painted *Oakland House and Race Course* in Louisville (Louisville: J. B. Speed Art Museum) in 1840.

A second category of landscape painting was the decorative mural, which was painted directly on plaster walls. The best known examples of this type of work are the primitive murals painted by a French immigrant named Alfred Cohen (1810-67 or later), who settled in Woodford County. These murals depicted imaginary scenes rather than actual landscape views.²

A third form of landscape was the panorama, a spectacular type of painting which was in vogue in Europe as well as in America in the mid-nineteenth century. The popularity of the panorama grew out of the public's desire for travel and its curiosity about exotic places. One type of panorama widely liked was a moving picture which developed from a device used in the theatre: shifting the scenery behind actors on a stage made them appear to be in motion; the scenery was painted on canvas which was rolled on drums hidden in the wings. There were advantages to this form of



Fig. 1 ESTERIA BUTLER FARNUM, *Georgetown College in the 1840s*, c. 1845, oil on canvas, 30 5/8 x 33 3/4", collection of Georgetown College



Fig. 2 ROBERT MOORE, *Cattle in a Landscape*, 1860, oil on canvas, collection of S. Cecil Perry

panorama over the static type. The image was more dynamic due to its actual kinetic quality, and the panorama did not require a permanent exhibition space. It was a portable type of picture which could travel and be reinstalled anywhere.³

One of the most popular subjects of the moving panorama was the banks of the Mississippi River. The Kentucky resident painter, John Banvard (1815-91) exhibited his *Panorama of the Mississippi* in Louisville in 1846.⁴ It was placed on two upright cylinders which revolved to show scenes along the river, perhaps thereby giving the impression that the viewer was glancing at distant scenery while he advanced in a riverboat. The artist claimed that the painting measured three miles in length and four feet in height. Banvard's panorama might suggest that while Kentucky painters may not have produced a great number of landscape pictures during the ante-bellum era, they could claim more square inches of landscape than could the artists of any other state. However, another American artist, John Rawson Smith (1810-64) asserted that his panorama was a mile longer than Banvard's. In all probability the longest may have been a painting by Henry Lewis (1819-1904) which was "merely" about three quarters of a mile in length.⁵

A fourth category of landscape treatment consisted of paintings in which local views served as an adjunct to another main subject. For example, William C. Allen's state-commissioned portrait of Daniel Boone (1838, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort) situates the pioneer in a scene of wild Kentucky woods, and in several portraits by Jouett, sitters were placed in landscape settings. The category also included many of the stock breeding pictures and horse paintings by artists such as Edward Troye (1808-74) and Robert Moore (act. mid-nineteenth century). Troye's *American Eclipse* (private collection) of 1834 features a flat, low horizon landscape in keeping with the English tradition of horse portraiture. *Grand Master* (private collection), an undated painting by Troye, contains three different views of one Scottish Shorthorn Bull within a continuous landscape setting. The hilly landscape here is more individualized, and based less on the English formula than it is in the horse painting *American Eclipse*. A more individual concern for location also appears in Moore's painting *Cattle in a Landscape* (Fig. 2) of 1860. Such paintings by Troye and Moore may represent the nearest thing that Kentucky had to an actual local landscape tradition prior to the Civil War.

The fifth category consisted of what may be termed "pure



Fig. 3 GEORGE BECK, *Kentucky River*, c. 1805-1812, oil on canvas, 16 1/2 x 22 1/2", collection of Colonial Williamsburg

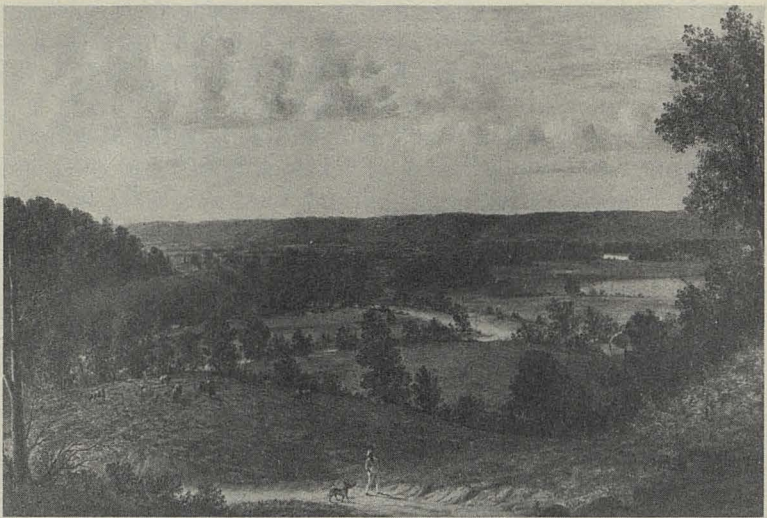


Fig. 4 JOSEPH RUSLING MEEKER, *Kentucky Landscape*, 1858, oil on canvas, 28 x 52", collection of Jay Altmayer

landscapes," most of which compare stylistically to the American Romantic trend called the Hudson River School. These pictures, which may be considered the most progressive type of landscape paintings produced during the ante-bellum period, were intended more specifically to be "works of art" than pictorial records or wall decoration. Pure landscape paintings of Kentucky's wilderness were introduced to central Kentucky possibly as early as 1805 by George Beck (1738/40-1812) (Fig. 3), a native of England who had been primarily a landscape painter prior to his arrival in the Blue Grass. However, Beck advertised his services only as a "portrait painter" in Lexington's first city directory in 1806, which may further support the conclusion that little market existed at that time in Kentucky for landscape painting, or for anything else but portraiture.

Oliver Frazer (1808-64), a native of Fayette County, is known to have done only one landscape, not a painting but a small wash drawing of a wild woodland within which are situated two people tiny in scale in relation to the trees. Working in Kentucky in the 1850s, short-term residents, Joseph Meeker (1827-87) and Alexander Wyant (1836-92) also executed landscape pictures. Their Kentucky paintings, done early in their career as artists, relate to the Hudson River School mode as do the paintings of some other artists such as William Craig (1829-75) and Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910), who visited Kentucky in search of scenery for paintings which were probably intended for marketing outside the Commonwealth. Meeker's *Kentucky Landscape* (Fig. 4) of 1858 is reminiscent of the calm settings found in paintings by Asher B. Durand (1796-1886). The composition and treatment of space in Meeker's piece is similar in style to Durand's approach, which in turn is based on a serene poetical treatment of the landscape derived from a tradition going back to the idyllic landscape paintings of the French artist Claude Lorraine (1600-82).

Alexander Wyant's *Kentucky Landscape* (Fig. 5) of c. 1856-57 is also comparable to works in the Hudson River School mode. But this painting is more suggestive of the influence of Thomas Cole (1801-48), who represents a more turbulent view of nature than did Durand in his idyllic landscapes. Cole's and Wyant's depiction of nature's more awe-inspiring aspects derives from a tradition going back to the work of the seventeenth century Italian artist Salvator Rosa (1615-73). The "pure landscape" paintings, executed by artists in mid-nineteenth century Kentucky, were in keeping with the



Fig. 5 ALEXANDER WYANT, *Kentucky Landscape*, c. 1856-1857, oil on paper hatbox cover, 18 1/2" d., collection of Mrs. Louis Cox

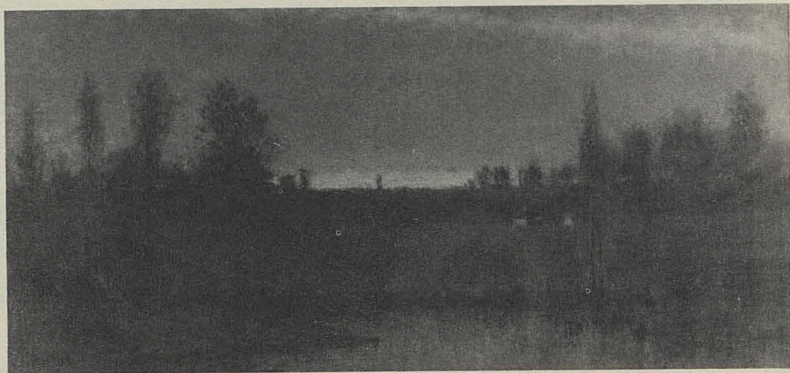


Fig. 6 JOHN B. BOTTO, *The Dark Pool*, oil on canvas, 7 1/4 x 14", collection of the J. B. Speed Art Museum

mainstream trends in the eastern United States. It was out of this Romantic work that the late nineteenth century Kentucky landscape tradition would grow.

After the Civil War a much wider variety of subjects and styles appeared in Kentucky painting. Their development can be explained in part as an artistic response by painters to a more sophisticated public willing to appreciate, and even pay for, non-portrait art. Some artists actually listed themselves in city directories as specialized "landscape painters"⁶ as a Kentucky tradition of landscape painting emerged. Schools of Kentucky landscape painting may be defined during this period, especially in Louisville and in central Kentucky.

The national trend which may best be termed American Tonalism⁷ was evident in the works of a Louisville School of painters of woodland scenes as well as in certain paintings from northern and central Kentucky. When American painters worked as Tonalists, their primary concern was not with realism; that is, they did not seriously attempt to reproduce objectively what they observed. Instead, Tonalist paintings were romantic statements in which dim light was employed in such a way as to elicit connotations of mood. The Louisville painter Harvey Joiner (1852-1932) referred to his own paintings, done in this style, as "sad pictures." Tonalist landscapes and cityscapes were bathed in the half light of dawn, dusk, or rainy days. Often an out-of-focus effect, representing atmospheric distortions, was applied to the composition overall. Unlike the later, more colorful Impressionist paintings, Tonalist pictures incorporated a narrow range of muted colors, usually confined to dull browns, greens, blues and grays; and the colors were often keyed to the dominant tone. Sources for Tonalist painters included the limited color modes of French Barbizon School painters, Jean Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875), the evening scenes or nocturnes of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1830-1903) and the late work of George Inness (1825-94). The Tonalist mode in America pre-dated the development of American Impressionism. Some of the early work of artists who became the better-known American Impressionists displays characteristics of the Tonalist style. For example, Childe Hassam (1859-1935), influenced by Whistler in the mid 1880s, painted landscapes and cityscapes in the darker style.

Tonalist landscape painting developed and gained public approval in Louisville in the 1880s just when this style had become

a dominant trend in American art. The major painters of the Louisville School of Tonalism included Carl Brenner (1838–88), Clarence Boyd (1855–83), John Botto (d. 1910) (Fig. 6) and Harvey Joiner. In this case the term “school” is being used only to suggest similarities in style and subject matter, since, though these painters all knew each other, they were not formally organized within a particular group. While some of them were personal friends, others, such as Carl Brenner and John Botto did not get along, nor did either even appreciate the other’s paintings. Most of the Louisville painters focused on woodland scenes, frequently depicting beechwoods in Louisville’s parks. But some Tonalist-styled paintings were figure studies or even portraits. *Newsboy* (Fig. 7) by Aurelius O. Revenaugh (1840–1908) is a good example of such a Tonalist figure painting by a Louisville artist, although here the dimly lit cityscape remains an important feature as well.⁸

Another dark tonal painting style, that of the Munich School, appeared in Kentucky, as it had an effect on the state’s most famous late nineteenth century painter, Frank Duveneck (1848–1919) of Covington, who studied in Munich beginning in 1870. Since Duveneck spent his more productive years abroad during the period from 1870 to 1890, his art should not be assessed in terms of his native region. His European-based style, characterized by bold patches of paint applied directly to a canvas with little preliminary underdrawing, stressed tonal values rather than color. Therefore, it shared some stylistic qualities with American Tonalism. Furthermore, some of Duveneck’s dark Bavarian landscapes painted in the 1870s depicted the Louisville painters’ favorite subject of the beechwoods. In turn, Carl Brenner, the leading Louisville Tonalist painter, shared Duveneck’s Germanic background. Brenner was a German immigrant whose fondness for German art appears to have endured long after he settled in America. Some of Brenner’s work seems to have been influenced by German Romanticism. Brenner’s Tonalist painting *Beeches in Winter* (Fig. 8) of 1885 has an eerie quality that is reminiscent of the work of the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840). The fact that Brenner would send his own son, Carolus Brenner (1865–1929), to the Munich Academy in the 1880s is further evidence of his predisposition to German art, and German art training. In Munich, Carolus would learn to paint in the dark Munich mode. Thus, German influence, if not the Munich School, appears also to be an aspect of Louisville Tonalism.

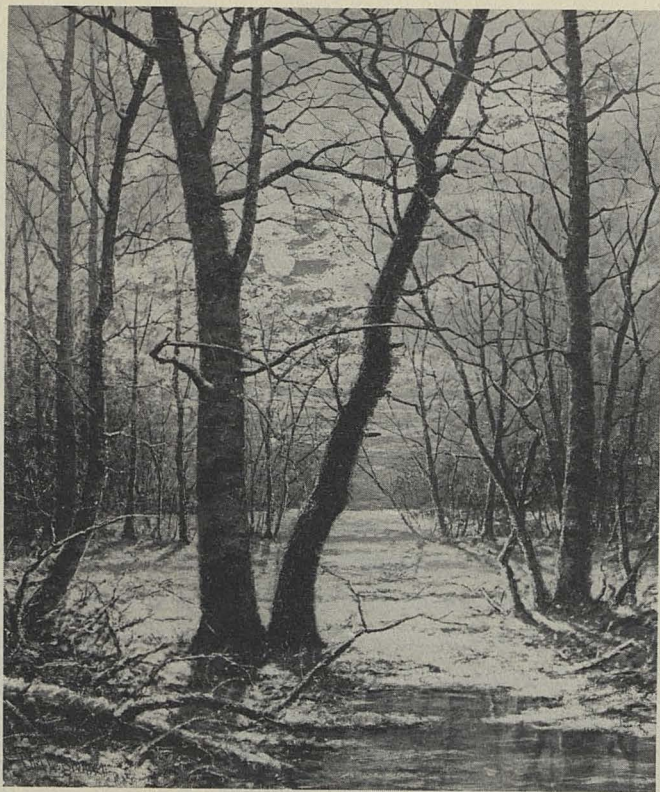


Fig. 7 AURELIUS O. REVENAUGH, *Newsboy*, oil on canvas, 43 x 27", collection of the J. B. Speed Art Museum. Fig. 8 (Left) CARL C. BRENNER, *Beeches in Winter*, 1885, oil on canvas, 25 x 30", owner: The George E. Brooks

Frank Duveneck did not teach art on a steady basis in Cincinnati until the 1890s, long after the Louisville School of Tonalism was established. But, with his Munich style, Duveneck was well-known in America much earlier. By the mid-1870s he had something of a following among a number of painters in Cincinnati, some of whom traveled with him in Europe where they came to be dubbed the "Duveneck Boys." Perhaps further research may reveal a more direct connection between Duveneck's Munich mode and the works of the Louisville Tonalists, whose stylistic sources were quite diverse. Other than such a possible link with Tonalism, Duveneck's Munich School approach exerted little noticeable influence on Kentucky landscape painting for two reasons: it was primarily a style of figure painting and portraiture, with landscapes being the exception rather than the rule, and it was not favored by local taste in regions of the Commonwealth other than northern Kentucky.

In central Kentucky, especially Frankfort, Tonalism was popular with the public, although not as popular as it was in Louisville. This was the major landscape style of Robert Burns Wilson (1850-1916), who had moved to Frankfort from Louisville in 1875. Wilson's oil painting of *Mary Hendricks Swigert as Little Bo Peep* (Frankfort, Kentucky: Kentucky Historical Society), which dates from about 1883 to 1890, contains a dark wooded area to the left of the figure which resembles the woodland scenes of Brenner, Boyd and Joiner. Perhaps Wilson's Tonalist style resulted from his direct importation of the Louisville mode, although his preoccupation with pure landscapes did not occur until the 1880s, several years after he had moved from Louisville. Other artists in Frankfort also worked as Tonalists, following Wilson's lead. Unlike the Louisville Tonalists, who were primarily oil painters, the major painters of the Frankfort School were primarily watercolorists. This situation may be explained largely in terms of economics. Watercolor was a less expensive medium than oil. It enabled painters to work more quickly and to sell their products at a lower price. Therefore, a broader market could be reached by painting in watercolor rather than in oil. This was necessary in central Kentucky, where art did not command as much public attention as it did in Louisville during this period. The best remembered of the central Kentucky painters is Paul Sawyer (1865-1917), a Frankfort artist who worked in a number of styles.⁹ His painting in the Tonalist mode is exemplified by several of his illustrations, which he executed about the turn of the century, from a series of



Fig. 9 BRUNO ALBERTS, *Paul Plaschke Painting Outdoors*, 1918, oil on canvas, 14 5/8 x 11 5/8", collection of Emil Plaschke

watercolors called *The Two Villages*¹⁰ (Frankfort, Kentucky: Kentucky Historical Society) in which Whistler's influence is very obvious.

William T. Hunleigh (1848–1916) of Georgetown, also appears to

have been involved with the Tonalist mode around the turn of the century. However, Hunleigh's watercolors were often more closely related to the earlier American landscape style called Luminism, which was mainly concerned with the modeling of forms in daylight and with luminous reflective surfaces. Luminism was an important American trend in the middle of the nineteenth century. Some of Paul Sawyier's work, such as *Punch Bowl on Benson Creek* (Frankfort, Kentucky: Kentucky Historical Society) with its use of light to emphasize pictorial depth, also displays the influence of earlier American Luminism.

Still other central Kentucky artists were directly influenced by styles of European art. For example, Hattie Hutchcraft Hill (1847-1921) of Paris, Kentucky, traveled to Europe in 1889 where she studied at the Academie Julian in Paris. She also painted scenes in Brittany, Normandy, and Fontainebleau. During her six-year stay abroad, she became aware of the French Romantic Realism of the Barbizon School. Her landscape painting *February in Fontainebleau* (collection of William Dudley) of 1893 uses a narrow color range in a manner similar to American Tonalism. Her style, however, appears to have developed out of a direct French influence and does not relate to the Louisville School.

By the late 1890s, Impressionism had become a fashionable mode of landscape painting in some parts of Kentucky, as it had in the rest of the United States. This style was usually characterized by the use of bright, juxtaposed spots of color, informal composition, and often a practice of painting out of doors. Paul Plaschke (1880-1954), who is best remembered as a Louisville cartoonist, worked as a painter in the Tonalist and Impressionist styles. Bruno Alberts (1888-1970), another Louisville painter, did a little Impressionist oil sketch depicting his friend Plaschke, seated, brush in hand at his portable easel, executing an orthodox Impressionist painting directly from nature. Many artists of the day, including Plaschke, sometimes fused the romantic content of Tonalism with the more brightly colored Impressionist manner.

Stephen Alke (1881-1941), a native of Augusta, Kentucky, developed an Impressionist style as a result of study at the Cincinnati Art Academy, where one of his teachers was the local Impressionist Lewis Henry Meakin (1850-1917). Typical of Alke's intensely colored Impressionist work is *Woman Feeding Chickens* (collection of Mrs. Mary Sayers Riley) c. 1906, which is a scene on the Alke family farm in Augusta.



Fig. 10 HEWETT GREEN, *Autumnal Grove*, 1895, oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 31 3/4", collection of the J. B. Speed Art Museum

The major Impressionist painter in central Kentucky was Paul Sawyer, who worked in the manner of William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), Sawyer's teacher at the New York Art Students League from 1889 to 1890. Sawyer's colorful Impressionist style is well represented by the work *Old Elks Club in Frankfort* (collection of Mr. and Mrs. Frank M. Daily), painted about 1912. Oddly, Sawyer's Impressionism did not necessarily involve the plein-air method adopted by most Impressionists, as he was primarily a watercolorist who preferred to paint inside the studio from sketches and from photographs. In fact he sometimes treated vanished subjects; for example, he often depicted Frankfort's covered bridge, long after it was demolished, to please the nostalgia of his patrons. His watercolor paintings, because of their appearance, may be considered "Impressionist" in style, but they are not Impressionist in their method of execution. Sawyer spent most of his active years in central Kentucky where he found just enough patronage for these Impressionist pictures to earn a living. For several years he lived on board a houseboat which he tied up at High Bridge on the



Fig. 11 PAUL PLASCHKE, *Bathers at Silver Creek*, 1919, oil on canvas, 28 x 24", collection of Paul Plaschke Sr. and Dorothy Plaschke

Kentucky River. There he painted spectacular views. During the last four years of his life, Sawyer more frequently did oil paintings in the open air, as would a true Impressionist. This practice is documented by a 1917 photograph that was taken of the artist at work in the Catskills when he was residing in New York State.¹¹ During this late period in his career, Sawyer usually painted local New York scenes, but he also did some Impressionist-styled Kentucky scenes. Added to this last period of his work are some Kentucky scenes done on location during visits to the state in 1914 and 1916. An example is his oil sketch of the old Wilson store at Keene, Kentucky, painted in 1916.

During the late 1890s, there seems to have been some influence of French Post Impressionism in Louisville landscape painting. Hewett Green (1865–1901), a now obscure artist who studied in Paris,¹² displayed Post Impressionist features in his Louisville landscape entitled *Autumnal Grove* of 1895 (fig. 10). Note here Green's Cezannesque treatment in the drawing of the tree and also the bold spots of color that tend to go beyond Impressionism in

their flat, decorative quality. Yet Green does not seem to be very much affected by the varied bright colors of the Impressionists, so the term "Post Impressionism" may not be appropriate to his painting. His dark tonality and his narrow color range, as well as his woodland subject, all reveal his loyalty to Louisville Tonalism. Perhaps Green can be best labeled as a "Louisville Post Tonalist."

Post Impressionist influence on Kentucky painting is more clearly evident in the works of some Louisville artists during the World War I era. Paul Plaschke experimented with Post Impressionism and Symbolism at this time. Plaschke's *Bathers at Silver Creek* (fig. 11) of 1919 suggests the influence of Cezanne, Gauguin, the Nabis, and the American painter Maurice Prendergast with regard to the flat treatment of space and the arbitrary color scheme. The subject, which seems to include an artist sketching alongside imaginary nude figures, perhaps personifications of the arts who go unnoticed by the nearby fishermen, would relate to Symbolism. Another Plaschke landscape painting of 1919, entitled *The Enchanted Tree* (location unknown) featured elves glancing upon a nude sprite hanging from a vine.¹³ Plaschke, at this time was one of several painters influenced by the imaginary themes of the Louisville poet, Madison Cawein. Several years earlier, Cawein's "impressionist" poems may have influenced Kentucky's Impressionist painters also.

It is possible that some Kentucky landscape painting of the World War I era went beyond Post Impressionism. Fauvism and Cubism were known about in Kentucky. In 1915 some local "futurists" exhibited paintings at the Lexington Public Library, and it is therefore possible that some local landscape paintings may have displayed features related to contemporary European Modernism.¹⁴ Unfortunately, no examples of this progressive type of painting from the early twentieth century have been found. Future research may lead to such exciting new discoveries and more will be learned about Kentucky's place in American art history.

NOTES

¹William Barrow Floyd, *Jouett-Bush-Frazer: Early Kentucky Artists* (Lexington, Kentucky: Pub. the author, 1968), p. 79.

²Clay Lancaster, "Primitive Mural Painter of Kentucky: Alfred Cohen," *American Collector*, Dec. 1948, pp. 6-8, 19.

³James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), pp. 248-49.

⁴For a brief account of Banvard's activity in Louisville, see Bruce Weber's essay "In Pursuit of Success: Kentucky and the Visiting Artist, 1805-1865," in Arthur F. Jones and Bruce Weber, *The Kentucky Painter: From the Frontier Era to the Great War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Art Museum, 1981), p. 28.

⁵Flexner, *That Wilder Image*, p. 249.

⁶Such as the Louisville painter John Botto who advertised his services as a "landscape painter" in the 1880s.

⁷The terms tone, tonal, tonalists, tonalistic, and tony appear in earlier literature on art. "Tonalism" was coined by Wanda Corn and used in *The Color of Mood: American Tonalism 1880-1910* (San Francisco: M. H. De Young Memorial Museum and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1972). The term "Tonalists" is used in Samuel Isham, *The History of American Painting*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1927), p. 449, originally published in 1905. Donelson F. Hoopes, unlike Isham and Corn, defines Tonalism as a type of Impressionism (*The American Impressionists* [New York: Watson-Guption, 1972], pp. 72 and 80. E. P. Richardson credits the label "tonalist" to Christian Britton's catalogue of a 1910 American painting exhibition that was sent to Berlin. He defines the trend, much as Isham and Corn do, as an "opposite direction" from Impressionism in which artists sought "deeper tone rather than brighter hue" (*Painting in America*, p. 368, n. 5). John K. Howat and Dianne H. Pilgrim describe "tonalism" as "a particularly American offshoot of impressionism" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, *American Impressionist and Realist Paintings and Drawings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz* [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974], p. 11). Richard J. Boyle distinguishes between the "tonalists" and the "impressionists," but he also states his preference for Richardson's term "quietism"—rather than "tonalism"—and he applies this term in a broader way to include impressionist works (*American Impressionism* [Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974], pp. 12, 57, and 76-78).

⁸Information concerning many of the Louisville artists discussed in this paragraph is found in the "Kentucky Artists Scrapbook" and in the vertical files at the Louisville Free Public Library.

⁹For more information on Sawyer, see my book, *The Art of Paul Sawyer* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976).

¹⁰See *The Art of Paul Sawyer*, pp. 46-47.

¹¹This photograph is located at the Margaret M. Bridwell Art Library, Allen R. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville.

¹²For more information on Green, see Jones and Weber, *The Kentucky Painter*, p. 52.

¹³This painting is reproduced in Otto Rothert, *The Story of a Poet: Madison Cavein* (Louisville: Filson Club, 1921).

¹⁴*Lexington Herald*, 18 May 1915. Beginning in 1913, the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs proposed study courses on art. One course outline included "Post Impressionists, Futurists, Cubists, etc." This would indicate an awareness of recent trends in European Modernism. See *Kentucky Federation of Women's Club Report for the Year 1917-1918*, p. 38.