



“BANNISTER’S LANDSCAPES”

A Wall Projection by William Allen

The English painter Joseph Turner wrote poems on the backs of his luminous canvases. Words were never far from his hundreds of furiously created inscapes and seascapes of the Atlantic. Our own Edward Bannister, painting in Providence about the same time, accomplished something similar with the titles of his landscapes. The more I look at his beautiful paintings--and the titles of those works--the more I note his interest in not only what he was painting, but also the world just beyond the corners of his canvases. His titles are touchstones to the social dimension of a body of work often seen to be an inward view of grazing cattle, grottoes, marsh, and coves.

EDWARD MITCHELL BANNISTER was among the earliest Rhode Island landscape painters, the first African-American artist to win national recognition, and a founding member of the Providence Art Club. His landscapes showed the influence of the Barbizon style, an awareness of the Hudson River School, and the developing Impressionist movement. His work was steeped in a Romantic spirit and an emotional response to nature.

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Bannister’s words provide a link between his private vision and the streets of bustling Providence, the Art Club, and the soon-to-be Pen and Pencil Club. They provide a gloss on his bucolic scenes of harmony and quiet. Bannister was not a wordsmith, but he was an active member of Providence public life as well as an accomplished and well-known painter. The titles of his landscapes create a simple and beautiful narrative that underscores a need to ‘capture’ the disappearing agrarian life of Southern New England but also recognize the growth of cities and industry. For the booming mills that changed the face of 19th century life throbbed just upriver from his favorite ponds and pastures.

“Bannister’s Landscapes,” commissioned by the Providence Art Club (upholding the dialogue between the city’s vital culture and business), commemorates the spirit of Bannister’s paintings as seen through his words. There’s a poem inscribed on his grave in North Burial Ground, Providence: “This pure and lofty soul . . . while he portrayed nature, walked with God.” When I stood there several weeks ago, other words echoed through my head: while he portrayed nature, he hinted at social and technological changes afoot, his paintings preserving the old world story and his words hinting at an image of the new.