



13: John Frederick Kensett *A Showery Day, Lake George* (ca. 1860s)

Caroline M. Welsh

Running almost due north-south, Lake George, the largest lake in the Adirondack mountain region of upstate New York, has been a major thoroughfare for centuries. It has long been praised for its natural beauty and historic significance. Extraordinary geologic and glacial forces along with abundant springs and subterranean water sources combine with a limited watershed to make the water unusually transparent and the terrain picturesque.

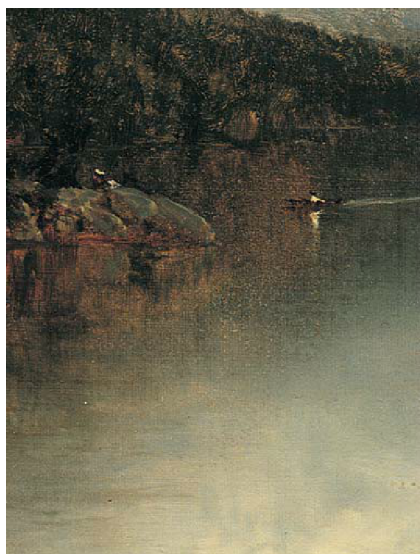
The earliest visitors were amateur and professional naturalists, members of religious orders, and sportsmen. Isaac Jogues, Jesuit martyr and the first European to see the lake (in 1646), called it Lac du Saint Sacrement. Swedish naturalist Peter Kalm detailed the topography, flora, and fauna in 1749. Jacques Gérard Milbert, French naturalist and artist, collected natural history specimens between 1815 and 1818 and made innumerable drawings of Lake George, the Adirondacks, and other places in New York State for his *Itinéraire Pittoresque du Fleuve Hudson* (Paris, 1828). Milbert was but the first of many artists to be attracted to the lake.

In 1826 English-born artist Thomas Cole visited Lake George and the ruins of Fort Ticonderoga, important in the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. Engravings after Cole's sketches of these sites were published in several editions of John H. Hinton's *History and Topography of the United States* beginning with the London edition of 1830.¹ Another Englishman, William Henry Bartlett, traveled to Lake George at this time to make illustrations for Nathaniel P. Willis's book *American Scenery*.² Two years later Cole returned to the Adirondacks with his wife and his friend Asher B. Durand. They went to Schroon Lake, northwest of Lake George. Cole's and Durand's pioneering forays in search of the picturesque along the Hudson River and in the Adirondacks drew other artists to the northern wilderness by 1837.³

Commercial steamboats had begun trafficking the lake in 1817, inaugurating Lake George's heyday as a summer resort. The first of Winslow Homer's many Adirondack subjects was a wood engraving, *On the Road to Lake George*, published as the cover of the July 24, 1869, issue of *Appleton's Journal of Literature, Science and Art*. The editor noted: "These little summer scenes, like that of Mr. Homer's sketch, are necessarily abundant all through the season. Everywhere—by the lake-side, on the mountain, at the sea-shore—the country is dotted with pleasure-seekers, and artists find no lack of pleasing groups for their sketch-book."⁴

Yet few artists found Lake George as felicitous a subject as John Frederick Kensett. Durand's letters to his son on June 22 and July 2, 1848, record Kensett's first visit to the region: "Despite difficulties with baggage left behind, Kensett, [John William] Casilear and Durand took a steamer to Albany, a stage to Whitehall, a boat up Lake Champlain and finally debarked at Essex. From here they journey [sic] to Elizabethtown where despite extremely hot weather they made some good sketches, did some 'trouting' and after a week went on to New Russia, a few miles to the south. Plans, as of July 2, were to spend another week or two in Elizabethtown and then go to Keene to finish the month of July."⁵ The next year Kensett was again "touring in the Adirondacks" with Casilear,⁶ and in 1853 he visited Lake George for the first time, and other sites in the region. Lake George, like Narragansett and Newport, Rhode Island, was a repeated theme for Kensett. Each time he painted the lake he captured different views at different seasons and times of day, always sensitive to the mood produced by the effects of light, color, and atmosphere. He wrote to his uncle, J. R. Kensett, about his experience:

John Frederick Kensett,
1816–1872
A Showery Day, Lake George,
ca. 1860s
Oil on canvas, 14 1/8 x 24 1/8 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
74.29



John Frederick Kensett,
1816–1872
A Showery Day, Lake George
(detail), ca. 1860s
Oil on canvas, 14¹/₈ x 24¹/₈ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
74.29

I directed my course towards that sheet of water which has a name par excellence among our American inland seas—Lake George....I selected a little unobtrusive spot called Bolton where there was a quiet inn upon the lake...where green hills swept boldly down to the water's edge. Twenty or thirty islands of varying size lay around....It was among these islands with a light boat fortified with my basket of provisions & my painting materials that I spent the greater part of the day....I had some of the most delightful and unobtrusive hours of the summer.⁷

A Showery Day, Lake George is an unsigned study sold with the contents of the artist's studio in 1873 and is related by site and format to his masterpiece, *Lake George* (1869, The Metropolitan Museum of Art).⁸ Kensett's characteristic spare and precise delineation reveals the textures and forms of rocks, pine-covered slopes, and water in this atmospheric view of the entrance to the Narrows with Black Mountain in the distance to the north. The artist's allegiance to the picturesque is seen in the framing of the scene with the natural elements of rocks and trees; to the dramatic or sublime, in the wildness of the mountains and weather; and to the beautiful, in the quiet harmony of the scene. The rocks are rendered in the detailed manner of truth to nature pro-

moted by Durand and John Ruskin, while the atmospheric treatment of the mountains and sky presages the luminism and abstraction seen in Kensett's later work.

During the 1860s Kensett based himself in Elizabethtown, in the eastern Adirondacks, and took trips to the Saranacs, Lake Placid, and Keene Valley to sketch and paint with his artist friends.⁹ He is recorded at Lake George again in the fall of 1869 and in his last summer, 1872. The large number of paintings and drawings with Adirondack or Lake George titles suggests that Kensett was in the region more times than can be documented.¹⁰

When Kensett died at fifty-six in December 1872, his art was considered by many of his contemporaries to epitomize landscape painting with religious and moral content. Kensett's paintings, like Cole's and Durand's, were influenced by the transcendentalist belief in the unity of all creation. As George W. Curtis, Kensett's friend and editor of *Harper's Magazine*, said at his funeral: "His love of nature was as simple as it was deep, and his interpretation was pure and reverend and beautiful."¹¹ *A Showery Day, Lake George* is one of Kensett's reverend interpretations.



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Jacob Ward,
1809–1891
Outlet of Lake George,
before 1840
Oil on canvas, 21³/₄ x 30 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
47.19

Caroline M. Welsh is Chief Curator, Curator of Art, and Director of Operations at The Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, New York.