

Paris-on-Hudson: Artistic Authorship in Victor de Grailly's American Landscapes

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In 1969, a curious picture entered the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, as part of a major bequest by American banker Robert Lehman (1891-1969).¹ Identified as a Hudson River Scene, the painting, undated and unsigned, depicts an idyllic river landscape, surrounded by green hills, indeed reminiscent of the Hudson River School (figure 1).² Yet the attribution devised by the museum for might appear curious at first glance, as it does not rule out the possibility of a work produced by a little-known French painter named Victor de Grailly. Born in Paris in 1804, Grailly died in the same city in 1887.³ Mentioned in several museum collections, his pictures constitute a debatable body of work to this day. But if only a few biographical elements have been saved about the artist, the crux of the debate lies elsewhere. Indeed, Grailly's views of American nature have long been linked to a set of drawings by British artist William Henry Bartlett (1809-1854), turned into engravings in an 1840 two-volume publication on American Scenery authored by Nathaniel Parker Willis (1806-1867). Since Bartlett had completed, in the mid-1830s, a tour of the United States⁴, the conclusion to draw seems to revolve around two options. Either Bartlett had to be the author of both the drawings and oil paintings, or the mysterious painter of the latter, generally identified as Grailly, must have been a copyist of Bartlett's.

The nature of this relationship was at the center of art historian Mary B. Cowdrey's own preoccupations, expressed in a 1941 article in which she intended to debunk the claim

that Bartlett had painted a large number of undocumented oils.⁵ Briefly mentioning Grailly, Cowdrey depicted him as a talentless copyist with no agency of his own.⁶ By contrast, and in a rare 1974 article focused on the artist, historian William Nathaniel Banks Jr. envisioned Grailly's American landscapes as composite images, resulting from a combination of different influences.⁷ To Banks, Grailly's paintings were not copies, but independent reinterpretations of Bartlett's motifs, sometimes altering significant elements.⁸ Though Banks resorted to connoisseurship⁹, his text nevertheless served as basis for the first, and only to date, monographic exhibition devoted to Grailly's works, one year later at the Washburn Gallery, in New York City. Conceiving a leaflet for the show, Banks brought up two new suppositions. One is what he felt to be a genuinely "Gallic" tone in Grailly's views, which he sensed through the figures populating them, "who appear to have strayed from the Bois de Boulogne into the White Mountains."¹⁰ The other is the hypothesis made by Banks about a possible collaborator Grailly could have completed his pictures with.¹¹ Thus, Grailly's single-hand on the debated landscapes was now thought to possibly be multiple ones. Such approaches underline the difficulty to establish authorship in that case, in what has become a natural impulse of art history in the so-called Western tradition.¹² The purpose of this article is to precisely show why

1 "Hudson River Scene – French or American Artist (possibly Victor de Grailly, Paris, 1804–1889) – 1975.1.245," The Metropolitan Museum of Art – Robert Lehman Collection, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/461186>.

2 "Hudson River Scene – French or American Artist (possibly Victor de Grailly, Paris, 1804–1889) – 1975.1.245," The Metropolitan Museum of Art – Robert Lehman Collection, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/461186>.

3 Though American sources often state 1889 as Grailly's death year, Paris Public Records Office documents (or *Archives d'état civil*), now digitized for the most part, indicate that he was indeed born on October 25, 1804 and that he died on September 4, 1887 at the age of eighty-two. For Grailly's birth certificate, see *Archives numérisées, État civil de Paris, Fichiers de l'état civil reconstitué, Naissances, V3E/N 645, DeGrailly*. For Grailly's death certificate, see *Archives numérisées, État civil de Paris, Actes d'état civil, 14^e arrondissement, Décès, V4E 7097, act no. 2919, Degrailly*.

4 Alexander M. Ross, *William Henry Bartlett: Artist, Author, and Traveller* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 41-42. See also Ferber, *The Hudson River School*, 50.

5 Cowdrey's project might have been prompted by a July 1941 New York State Supreme Court ruling about the authorship of a series of paintings attributed to W. H. Bartlett, *U. S. Trust Co. of New York v. Michaelson*, in which Justice Aron Steuer (1898-1985) ruled in favor of a plaintiff who wished to cancel a sale of artworks he had originally purchased as oils from Bartlett's hand, but which had since then been considered doubtful, thus impacting their market value. See transcript of opinion authored by Justice Steuer in Mary Bartlett Cowdrey Papers, Box 3, Folder 50, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.

6 Mary B. Cowdrey, "William Henry Bartlett and the American Scene," *New York History* 22-4 (1941), 392.

7 William N. Banks Jr., "The French Painter Victor de Grailly and the Production of Nineteenth-Century American Views," *Antiques* 106 (July 1974), 85.

8 Banks, "The French Painter Victor de Grailly," 88.

9 William N. Banks Jr., "A Charmed Life," *Antiques* 182-3 (2015): 76-85.

10 William Nathaniel Banks, *Victor de Grailly: Views of America, April 2-April 26, 1975* (New York: Washburn Gallery, 1975), 1.

11 Banks, *Victor de Grailly*, 5.

12 Donald Preziosi (ed.), *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1998]), 317.

a pattern of narrow authorship might not be the best option to account for the works attributed to Grailly, as well as for their status among American landscape paintings in the early nineteenth century.

Individuality in matters of attribution primarily comes into question around the idea of school or movement. In the case of the Met picture, the possibility of attribution to Grailly raises, most notably, the notion of collective style. First linked to the French Barbizon school of landscape painting¹³, how did Grailly, then, come to be associated with the American Hudson River School? Like most contemporary artists in Paris, Grailly started off learning from an older creator as part of the latter's workshop. His instructor was Jean-Victor Bertin (1767-1842), a proponent of plein-air painting, himself a student of Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes (1750-1819). Both he and Bertin looked back to Italy and neo-classicism in their respective artistic productions.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly so, Grailly's French landscapes reprise numerous elements acquired through contacts with the latter. First participating in the Paris Salon in 1831, Grailly essentially displayed scenes of pastoral life reminiscent of another of Bertin's pupils, Camille Corot (1796-1875).¹⁵ Yet, some of his French pictures seem to employ a different formula. Acquired by the Musée d'Elbeuf, Normandy, an 1831 watercolor of the latter town by Grailly presents an open composition centered on a branch of the river Seine strangely similar to contemporary depictions of the Hudson (Figure 2).¹⁶ The importance granted to the sky and landscape itself places it at odds with many of the principles enunciated by Bertin, which signals a permeability to non-national stylistic influences.

In the case of the Metropolitan Museum oil, one may wonder if an answer to this shift in perception of Grailly may lie in analogies drawn with other works from the Lehman collection, as part of which the work was donated. However, the painting's so-called pedigree does not appear to have had any influence on its attribution. The endeavor of publishing the Lehman collection in a fifteen-volume catalogue eventually helped shed some light on why these works were sidelined. Released in 2009, the third volume of the series namely listed only two American paintings as part of Lehman's bequest, both anonymous. The Hudson River Scene at the origin of this study only seems to have been attributed to Grailly for the first time on that occasion.¹⁷ Faced with such interrogation, it seems necessary to consider

back, at this point, the very source material used by Grailly to produce his paintings. Published by George Virtue in London, *American Scenery, or Land, Lake, and River Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature* took the form of a repository of images of nature, aiming at exciting European imagination about America's wilderness. As such, each picture acted as a miniature promotional advertisement for the country, at a time of transatlantic touristic development.¹⁸ It shall be of no surprise, then, to learn that the publication was quickly translated into three other languages. Working in Paris, Grailly most surely stumbled upon the French version. Its preface made explicit, from the onset, the role of such volume:

The comparison between valleys and rivers, lakes and waterfalls of the New World and these of the old one [...] were advantages only the distant traveler could enjoy. Yet the kind of works among which this one ranks enables he who loves his interior to enjoy the same advantage [...]. Seated next to his fire-place, he who is called to a domestic and secluded life, can without much cost enjoy [...], and every evening on his table, the wild solitudes of America [...]. It is hard to obtain such great enjoyment with so little trouble and expense.¹⁹

An ode to bourgeois domesticity, it is hardly surprising that the French preface to *L'Amérique pittoresque* would sound like an invitation to the ears of an aspiring painter. Travel books offered the opportunity for urbane Europeans to expand their horizons without having to physically face up to the perceived ruggedness of the United States. An opinion applying equally to Britain and France, as the two versions offer the same engravings, some of them indeed corresponding to paintings by Grailly. Yet, behind this apparently straightforward influence, one is actually confronted with no less than five different objects in this case: the original Bartlett drawing, the engraving produced from this drawing, the book circulating this image, Grailly's painting using the publication as its source and finally, multiple painted versions by Grailly himself. Hence, Grailly did not copy Bartlett's

13 Banks, "The French Painter Victor de Grailly," 85.

14 Suzanne Gutwirth, "Jean-Victor Bertin, un paysagiste néo-classique (1767-1842)," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* LXXXIII (May-June 1974), 337-358.

15 "Exposant – Victor de Grailly – Salon de 1831," Base Salons – Musée d'Orsay, accessed October 15, 2018, <http://salons.musee-orsay.fr/index/exposant/67776>.

16 "Vue d'Elbeuf – Victor de Grailly," Joconde – Portail des collections des musées de France, accessed October 15, 2017, http://www2.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/joconde_fr.

17 Richard R. Brettell, Paul Hayes Tucker and Natalie H. Lee, *The Robert Lehman Collection III, Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Paintings* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 405-406.

18 The first steamship to cross the Atlantic was the SS Savannah, completing the journey in 29 days between May 24 and June 20, 1819. See National Museum of American History, "Logbook for First Transatlantic Steamship Savannah, 1819," accessed October 15, 2018, http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_842432. For a recent study on the emergence of tourism in the early American Republic, see Will B. Macintosh, *Selling the Sights: The Invention of the Tourist in American Culture* (New York City: NYU Press, 2019).

19 "La comparaison des vallées et des rivières, des lacs et des cascades du Nouveau Monde avec ceux de l'ancien [...] étaient des avantages dont pouvait seul jouir le voyageur lointain. Mais le genre d'ouvrages, parmi lesquels vient se placer celui-ci, permet à celui qui aime son intérieur de jouir [...] du même avantage. Assis près de son foyer, celui qui est appelé à une vie domestique et retirée, peut sans beaucoup de frais jouir [...], et le soir sur sa table, des solitudes sauvages de l'Amérique [...]. Il est difficile de se procurer une aussi grande jouissance avec si peu de peine et de dépense." Nathaniel P. Willis and William H. Bartlett, *L'Amérique pittoresque ou vues des terres, des lacs et des fleuves des États-Unis d'Amérique. Ouvrage enrichi de gravures faites sur les dessins de M. W. H. Bartlett...*, vol. I, trans. L. de Bauclas (Paris: Ferrier, 1840), V-VI.

drawings. He copied singular reproductions of engravings after Bartlett's drawings, even further removed from the originals that Bartlett himself did not pursue close relationships with the six engravers responsible for the transition.²⁰ Thus, Grailly's pictures could totally be considered original objects, as William Banks himself did in his 1974 article.²¹

The Met picture linked to Grailly renders this interrogation even harder to disentangle. Flipping through both the English and French versions of American Scenery, no similar image appears as possible source for the disputed painting. Another parameter to consider then is the significant popularity enjoyed by Bartlett prints.²² The sheer number of copies made of his designs even prompted the organization of a 1966 exhibition devoted to Bartlett "and his imitators", held at the Arnot Gallery in Elmira, New York.²³ The show assembled loaned works by numerous painters having based some of their productions on Bartlett, "pirating" him, to use the catalog's own words.²⁴ Included in the exhibition, The Connecticut River from Mount Holyoke, completed in 1855 by American painter Edmund C. Coates (1816-1871) and inspired by a different Bartlett engraving, underlines how important the degree of subversion of an original design can be. This example is all the more remarkable that Grailly too had produced a painting based on the same source ten years earlier.²⁵ This set proves unsettling in the sheer liberties taken by both painters (Figures 3-5).²⁶ Yet, while Coates was acknowledged as having "adapted" a design by Bartlett, Grailly remained a mere "imitator."²⁷

The ambiguity at play between recognizing an artist's individuality and defining a group known as "Bartlett's imitators" highlights the difficulty to grant each of these artists a proper identity.²⁸ This intricate process may also explain why a picture like the Entrance to the Highlands on the Hudson (c. 1845) held at the Albany Institute of History and Art and inspired by another Bartlett engraving, has not been linked to Grailly, though presenting similar characteristics (Figure 6).

²⁹ The possible attribution to another French painter, Hippolyte Louis Garnier (1802-1855), illustrates the art historical tension between the safe option of anonymity and a riskier individual authorship. It also highlights the widespread nature of such paintings. The artistic practice of reprising known American landscape designs seems to have been common in early 19th-century Paris.³⁰ And if artists like Grailly and Garnier focused on this type of works, one could suggest that they might, in return, have been aware of each other's productions. By the same token, the earliest mention of Grailly's name on a painting put up for sale in the U.S., in January 1962, seems to be a View Near Elizabethtown, New Jersey (c. 1850). Yet, the work in question has since then been reattributed to painter Régis Gignoux (1814-1882), expressing, once again, the complexity of distinction between different French hands at work on American landscapes.³¹

In conclusion, the very nature of Victor de Grailly's works seems to resist the need to apply a single authorship pattern to them. Most museums now in possession of the ambivalent works don't seem to have settled over a single way to express their attribution. If engravings produced after Bartlett's landscapes had indeed been stripped of their original authorship upon publication, their status might have equaled that of anonymity to artists encountering them, like Grailly. And if his own versions of the landscapes contained subtle variations, one might also be tempted to witness his own artistic agency at play in their creation. In a similar way, attempts at devising a strict attribution for the Met river landscape at the origin of this study reaches a dead-end. The seemingly widespread nature of the practice of landscape painting copying in the early 19th century invites to consider the possibility of a non-professional or even a collective artwork. But what may sound, at first glance, rather frustrating may actually be beneficial. The intricate case of Victor de Grailly's American pictures might indeed, in the end, compel art historians to reconsider the nature of authorship, whether in design, circulation, reproduction or reception of a given artistic object.

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²⁰ Ross, *William Henry Bartlett*, 27.

²¹ Banks, "The French Painter Victor de Grailly," 85.

²² Kenneth Myers (ed.), *The Catskills: Painters, Writers, and Tourists in the Mountains, 1820-1895* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University of Press New England, 1987), 99-101.

²³ *William H. Bartlett and His Imitators, A Loan Exhibition Comparing Original Works by Bartlett With Copies of His Work by His Contemporaries*, October 23-December 4, 1966 (Elmira, New York: Arnot Art Gallery, 1966).

²⁴ Letter from Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, Passaic (New Jersey), to Mary-Ellen Earl, Elmira (New York), March 7, 1966. MSS 0556, Mary Bartlett Cowdrey Papers, Box 3, Folder 50, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.

²⁵ *William H. Bartlett and His Imitators*, 32.

²⁶ Willis and Bartlett, *American Scenery*, vol. I, 117.

²⁷ Marianne Doezema (ed.), *Changing Prospects: The View from Mount Holyoke*, September 3-December 8, 2002 (South Hadley, Mass.: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2002), 36-37.

²⁸ On this note, see also another essay by Martha Hoppin, "Arcadian Vales: The Connecticut Valley in Art," in *A Place Called Paradise: Culture and Community in Northampton, Massachusetts, 1654-2004*, ed. Kerry Wayne Buckley (Amherst-Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 237.

²⁹ Willis and Bartlett, *American Scenery*, vol. I, 37. The Winterthur painting was formerly part of the Henry Francis du Pont (1880-1969) collection, later donated to the museum in 1959. See "United States Capitol, Washington," The Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, accessed October 30, 2018, <http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/>.

³⁰ On that note, see Kathleen A. Foster, *Thomas Chambers: American Marine and Landscape Painter, 1808-1869* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2008), 98-99. On the institutionalization and importance of copying in nineteenth-century artistic practice, particularly in France, see also Albert Boime, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 122-127, and Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985 [1981]), 167.

³¹ The painting has been part of the collections of the Honolulu Museum of Art, in Hawai'i, since 1972.



Figure 1. French or American Artist (possibly Victor de Grailly, 1804-1887), *Hudson River Scene* (ca. 1830–50), Oil on wood, 10 x 12 in (25.4 x 30.5 cm), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 3 [facing page, bottom]. William Henry Bartlett (1809-1854) (after), *The Connecticut Valley, from Mount Holyoke* (c. 1840), Lithograph Print, Published in *American Scenery*, vol. I, 117 (London: George Virtue, 1840).



Figure 2 [above]. Victor de Grailly (1804-1887), *View of Elbeuf* [Vue d'Elbeuf] (1831), Watercolor on canvas, 11.8 x 20.5 in (30 x 52 cm), Elbeuf-sur-Seine (France), Musée d'Elbeuf.





Figure 4.
Victor de Grailly
(1804-1887),
*The Valley of the
Connecticut from
Mount Holyoke*
(c. 1845), Oil
on canvas, 17
 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in
(44.4 x 59.7 cm),
Amherst (Mas-
sachusetts), Mead
Art Museum at
Amherst College.





Figure 6. Hippolyte-Louis Garnier (1802-1855) (attributed to), *Entrance to the Highlands on the Hudson* (c. 1845), Oil on canvas, 21 x 25 ¼ in (53.3 x 64.1 cm), Albany (New York), Albany Institute of History & Art.

Figure 5 [facing page, bottom]. Edmund C. Coates (1816-1871), *The Connecticut River from Mount Holyoke* (1855), Oil on canvas, 33 ¾ x 48 in (85.7 x 121.9 cm), Amherst (Massachusetts), Mead Art Museum at Amherst College.

