

George Inness, Jr.'s Art of the Spiritual: *The Only Hope*

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George Inness, Jr. (Figure 1), who was born in 1854 and died in 1926, was the son of the well-known American landscape painter, George Inness (1829-1894). Also an artist, his life and work were strongly influenced by his long and close relationship with his father. He was overshadowed professionally by his father's widespread fame and success in the art market that continued to increase after his father's death. Although Inness, Jr., was a serious practicing artist, his marriage to a wealthy woman relieved him of the necessity of earning a living as an artist. This freedom influenced the direction of his development.

His work developed from early animal and figurative illustrations through a phase of painting influenced by Barbizon. His landscapes demonstrate a growing emphasis upon the spiritual, which he expressed through the illusion of light intended to inspire a transcendental, emotional response in the viewer. The culmination of this development was his painting *The Only Hope*.

George Inness, Jr., made his winter home in Tarpon Springs, Florida, where he belonged to the small Universalist Church (Figure 2). The last eight years of his life he painted a cycle of eight paintings for that church, which were given to the Universalist Church of America immediately after his death, and have remained in the Tarpon Springs church.

In 1918 a hurricane blew out six windows in the sanctuary of the church, three on the north side, and three in the chancel. Inness, Jr., executed three paintings in 1918 (Figure 3) and a triptych for the chancel in 1922 (Figure 4) to replace the windows. Some time after the completion of these six paintings, he claimed to have had a dream that inspired his most famous painting, *The Only Hope*, which he meant for the wall to the left of the chancel (Figure 5). Rather than using beaver board as he had in the window paintings, he stretched a canvas of the finest Belgian linen. He used the same arched, vertical format as the previous paintings, this time enlarging the single painting to 108¼ by 78¼ inches, about 6½ by 9 feet.

A printed pamphlet by the seventy-year-old artist accompanied the painting. In this pamphlet Inness, Jr., wrote that the painting's source was an inspiration which arose from a dream. His statement began:

I dreamed; and as I dreamed the Interpreter came, and by the hand he led me to the mighty city that was good to look upon. He said, Behold this great and beautiful City—it has surpassed all that has gone before. It has attained a culture never before known. In Wealth, in Science, Literature and Art, it stands alone throughout the world.

As the narrative continues the Interpreter takes the dreaming artist into the legislative hall of the city, then into

a beautiful church; but they find no love or peace, only hate and a selfish desire for wealth and power. George Inness, Jr., sees the source of war and destruction, a reenactment of the history of Greece and Rome.

Finally the Interpreter suggests to him, "You shall be the medium, through whom I will arouse an emotion for good. To paint a picture, and point to it as the remedy would be absurd—but can I influence you to paint a picture that while I'm preaching peace on earth good will to men, will hold the attention of my audience and arouse an emotion that will make them receptive to my words?"

The Interpreter describes the picture they will paint:

In our picture, we will let self and greed and hate prevail until they bring a war that with fire and sword shall destroy this wondrous city.

Its grim and battered, blackened walls, shall stand out gaunt against the sky [Figure 6].

No human life remains—the only thing that stirs is the miasmatic-mist that rises from the river; that but a short time since was gay with pleasure-boats...

The Interpreter continues:

I'll have you paint, but in so mysterious a way that at first the viewer sees almost a blank so lacking shall the picture be, in startling effects. But as the gazer looks he will see the sun arising in the east and it will grow and sparkle into life and cast its rays above until the very heavens are aglow! Its light shall be reflected back upon the gaunt and blackened ruins, whose edges lightened by the sun, shine out like sparkling jewels, that proclaim the breaking of another dawn [Figure 7]; and in that *hum* that silence brings, a hymn, is wafted through the air of Peace on Earth, Good Will toward men. As the song goes on, a white dove, spreads his wings, tipped by the rising sun and hovers o'er the city, as though to beckon one to turn unto the light, and by suggestion you shall awaken the imagination and as the light seems to grow, one will discern within the sun, The Christ, spreading the light of love throughout the world [Figure 8]. It is the *Only Hope*!

In his studio in Cragmoor, New York, his summer residence, Inness, Jr., executed the painting as described in the pamphlet through the words attributed to the Interpreter in the dream. He signed and dated the painting 1924. *The Only Hope* became a painting that assumed many dimensions. It was interpreted not only as a mystical work, but as symbolic of a pertinent contemporary social problem, that of war and peace. Like Emerson, Inness, Jr.,

believed that "the ancestor of every action is a thought"² and that peace and war are effects, the results of right and wrong thinking—that "envy, hate, greed, and lust for power cause war," and "friendship, good will, cooperation" bring about peace.³ The painting became an emblem of peace.

As an emblem of peace *The Only Hope* may be interpreted on several levels. On a personal level, the painting seems to have brought Inness, Jr., to an internal sense of peace and hope. Through his reference to the dream source, he sought to submerge the viewer into the depths of his own unconscious, where he ostensibly experienced a sense of unity with human civilization, and universal consciousness. By relating a visionary dream, the artist sought to integrate the visible world into the universe of the mind, where he witnessed the dissolution of material form as it crumbled into ruins. His personal sense of inner confusion and chaos and the inevitability of his own mortality may have been manifested in the ruins. He wished to communicate a sense of hope and peace emanating from the revitalizing light that penetrated the ruins, and from the soaring dove rising above them. In this way he expressed pictorially his resolution of internal conflict, rising above his own psychological fragmentation to a feeling of wholeness. The artist communicated through visual form the experience of fragmentation and integration at personal, religious, and social levels—a process of overcoming human frailty by the persistence of belief in the ultimate goodness of life.

In both form and content the painting reveals a reconciliation of opposites, a dissolution of the dualism of matter and spirit that had characterized Inness, Jr.'s previous work, so that he might achieve psychological as well as artistic unity. Pictorially he expressed this integration and unity by breaking up all material form, both natural and man-made, represented by the crumbling ruins. All earthly life has disappeared in the work. All horizontal lines are broken; he eliminated the delineation of horizon. The audience enters from a suspended viewpoint. All form floats as does the perspective of the viewer, an effort to replicate transcendence of the material world in the cool, misty diffusion of light that penetrates and vitalizes the entire painting. He placed the spiritual sun in the center of the painting like a mandala. All pictorial light emanates from it. In its center, barely visible in the impasto of the paint, he suggested the form of a small, universal cosmic man, an image common to many religions, and psychologically interpreted as the Self.⁴ He understood the image in terms of his Christian orientation to be the Christ. It may represent the Divine Man of his father's Swedenborgian concepts. The white dove, the peaceful soul, ascends, moving beyond the natural world to Inness, Jr.'s source of all being, the rarified atmosphere of the heavens, a metaphor for the internal human world of the spirit in harmony with the cosmos. The river opens the foreground picture plane vertically to admit the viewer into the space of spiritual light, through which the artist expressed his faith in the Universalist God of love, representing hope for peace and the future of humanity.

With the establishment of the peace treaties ending World War I the League of Nations was formed, to be an international organization the aim of which was to prevent future wars. President Woodrow Wilson unsuccessfully attempted to obtain Senate approval of the treaty calling for the League of Nations after his return from the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. He fell ill later that year, and Warren G. Harding was elected president in 1920. Wilson remained in ill health and died in 1924. The United States

never joined the League of Nations, although it operated from January 10, 1920, to April 18, 1946.

Woodrow Wilson died the year *The Only Hope* was painted, but the dream of peace lived on as a public moral, religious, and political issue with such writers as Edward Bok, editor of *Ladies Home Journal*. Sensing an increased national dissatisfaction with the lack of government action aimed toward the avoidance of another war and the preservation of world peace, Bok established the American Peace Award. In response to Bok's award, many scholarly plans for proposed national political action directed toward achieving and preserving world peace were submitted, and a winner was selected who received the \$100,000 cash award of its founder in February 1924. Bok considered the American Peace Award a first step toward world peace.⁵ According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, Inness, Jr.'s painting *The Only Hope* was a personal artistic response to Bok's concern for peace.⁶ The two men were acquainted, and Bok owned several Inness, Jr., paintings.⁷

The Universalist denomination had historically involved itself in various social reform movements concerning such issues as peace, abolition of slavery, temperance, prison reform, equality of women, education, and general philanthropy. *The Only Hope* coincided with Universalist interest in the peace movement. It became a means of raising public consciousness in the cause of peace, identifying with Universalism's long and traditional role in social activism.

A warm friendship developed between George Inness, Jr., and the minister of the Tarpon Springs church, Louis J. Richards. They were in contact year-round since the minister maintained a summer residence in Newark, New Jersey, and both spent their winters in Tarpon Springs. Upon completion of *The Only Hope*, the relationship between the Reverend Richards and Inness, Jr., resembled a joint ministry. They functioned together in the complementary roles of artist-minister-healer, now expanded to include the function of social concern. The stature of the artist grew to fulfill his faith in himself and the purpose of his art. He said to the minister:

I do not look upon this art of mine as art for art's sake. Unless there is a greater purpose in it for me, then my work is vain.... Art is for humanity's sake.⁸

Richards added, "He wanted to convey through his use of the brush something that could arouse in his fellowmen the best that was in them and the noblest in life, and suggest that back of all is the spiritual."⁹ *The Only Hope* became an instrument of social outreach and an extension of religious responsibility at a moment in history when the issue of war and peace remained fresh in the minds and memories of the American people.

Inness, Jr., had his Ford truck modified to transport *The Only Hope*. Initial unveiling of the painting took place in the Tarpon Springs church on Christmas Sunday, 1924. Richards and Inness, Jr., then accompanied the painting to St. Petersburg for a Sunday evening program and unveiling at the Sorena Hotel on January 12, 1925. A large audience participated in the service, which included an orchestra and soloists presenting works by Handel, Rubinstein, and Schubert. The Reverend Richards conducted the service, and the Reverend George F. Pratt offered the prayer. As the velvet curtains were drawn to reveal the painting, Richards read a descriptive interpretation of *The Only Hope*.

An address titled "And the New Sun Rose Bringing the New Year" by Professor S. H. Clark of the University of Chicago immediately followed the unveiling. In his address Professor Clark stated,

Great artists have always preceded logicians, the theorists, because, in spite of what we thoughtlessly say, the world is ruled by emotion rather than intellect ... art ... goes direct through the imagination to the soul ... and so it is with this picture....

Here are no corpses of men and horses, no guns and swords ... but sheer and utter desolation—not of one city nor of one war, but all cities, the whole world and all wars ... its uselessness....

As we look on this poetic interpretation in color our imagination traces the ages and we wonder how man has accomplished so much and has been so blind as not to see that in his vast structure of material success smoulders the spark that should one day burst forth into a world conflagration. The great religious teachers ... Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Christ himself have set the truth before us. Hezekiah has cried, 'Not by virtue of material strength and political power shall ye prevail, but by my spirit, saith the Lord' ... And again the artist with his inspired light of beauty blazes the path before us....

Clark continued,

They tell us the League of Nations is dead ... It was [for] this cause our great president laid down his life. Wilson saw the sun rise over the cataclysm of war ... I was at Verdun during the closing days of September 1918. I stood on those hills surrounding the battlefield....

Inness and Tennyson blare out 'No!' Over Inness' great City of the Dead rises the great sun of hope ... the hope that was in all the great Hebrew prophets and which had its culmination in the Jew carpenter of Nazareth.¹⁰

The painting next went to Southern College at Lakeland, Florida, for another ceremony. In April 1925, it was exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, where it was viewed by President and Mrs. Coolidge, prompting a letter of admiration from the President. He wrote, "The opportunity to see *The Only Hope* is an experience I shall always appreciate ... it is the representation of wrath overcome by love ... It is a gratification to know that this painting is to be exhibited in the principal cities of America ... to the schools and universities. ..."¹¹ Under the auspices of the Tarpon Springs Chamber of Commerce, a body representing mixed religious affiliations, it was taken on a tour of churches of various denominations, schools, and colleges. An unveiling ceremony preceded the Reverend Richards' talk on peace, during which the audience gazed upon the painting before them.

A controversial discussion about *The Only Hope* arose at the annual meeting of the New York State Chamber of Commerce in April of the same year. Member Irving Bush had seen the painting in the South. He and Edward Bok came up with a plan to have it shown in educational institutions throughout the country.¹² Bush asked the artist to

loan it to him while it was in New York to show to the Executive Committee, where he proposed that the New York Chamber of Commerce sponsor a nationwide tour, exhibiting the painting as an inspiration to the nation's youth. Several members objected to the proposal on the basis that the body was composed of 2,000 men who were not all Christians. One member noted that it was impossible for the Chamber of Commerce to sponsor the painting due to the mere fact that it had sparked a religious discussion. Bush's resolution was tabled, with the suggestion that individuals might contribute to the proposed tour.¹³

The painting was exhibited at the National Red Cross building and the office of the Century Company in New York. Many prominent citizens wrote letters of praise regarding the work.¹⁴ While Inness, Jr., was at Cragmoor, New York, he was reminded that the painting had been shown in large cities such as Washington, Pittsburgh, and New York, but not in the nearby town of Ellenville. Inness, Jr., responded by taking it to the Ellenville Methodist Church for an unveiling service by the Reverend Richards during County Fair week in August 1925.¹⁵

The magazine, *Woman's Home Companion*, featured the first color reproduction of the painting in the December 1925 issue. Printed in calligraphy and decorated as an illuminated manuscript was an accompanying tribute to Inness, Jr., and *The Only Hope* in terms of its Christmas message. The feature was titled "A Gospel in Color," by Joseph Fort Newton, who wrote:

... Today, by the grace of God, a great painter, in whom art and vision unite, unveils, in a sacrament of light and shadow and color, the secret of our sorrow and the source of that hope which, surviving centuries of slaughter, still haunts us.¹⁶

Ironically, the painting that the artist attributed to the intimacy of a dream became his most public work. It served as a means through which he could fulfill his sense of outreach to the whole of humanity. To the public it represented the threat of conflict and human self-destruction, taking with it the man-made world. This threat is overpowered and resolved by a persistence of hope projected into the future. Inness, Jr., celebrated the resolution of conflict and portrayed the will to survive by rising above adversity as an aspiration basically inherent in human consciousness. Not only was the artist nearing the end of his own life, but he represents the end of an era in American landscape painting that had begun with the Hudson River painters. This painting may be viewed as an expression of hope for spiritual immortality that would reach not only beyond his own work, but metaphorically extend the era beyond its inevitable finality. The painting symbolized the survival of the infinite over the finite.

The Only Hope represents an expression of George Inness, Jr.'s aspirations concerning the transcendental function of art in contrast to the historical *l'art pour l'art* sensibility and his expanded sense of mission as an artist. His supporters and the Reverend Richards assisted the painter in communicating with his audience through art, and sharing his work for ecumenical, inspirational purposes, a fulfillment of "art for humanity's sake." Ultimately he found in this small Universalist church a place where he was free to express himself at an intuitional level, where the minister supported the artist and shared with him his ministry.

- 1 George Inness, Jr., *The Only Hope*, n.d., 2-7. This pamphlet accompanied the painting wherever it appeared, to serve as the artist's description of the painting. There is a copy of it at the Montclair Art Museum Library, Montclair, New Jersey.
- 2 Mrs. Louis J. Richards, *Interpretations of the Paintings of George Inness, Junior: Promise, Realization, Fulfillment, The Triptych, The Only Hope, The Lord is in His Holy Temple*, n.d., 15.
- 3 Louis J. Richards, *George Inness, Jr., Man and Artist: An Appreciation* (Reprinted by permission of The Century Co., n.d.), 11.
- 4 For Carl Jung's theories concerning the circle and Cosmic Man as symbols of the Self, or the psychic nucleus, see Carl G. Jung and others, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1974), 161-164, 207-216, 230-236, 266-285.
- 5 Edward Bok, Esther Everett Lape, *Ways to Peace* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), viii-xvi. This volume consists of twenty of the most representative plans for the American Peace Award for the best practicable plan by which the United States might cooperate with other nations to achieve and preserve world peace. The winning plan submitted by Charles H. Levermore is titled, "Progressive Cooperation with the Organized World, Sustained by the Moral Force of Public Opinion and by Developing Law," 445-460.
- 6 "First Presentation of 'The Only Hope' Draws Art Lovers," *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 Jan. 1925: 1-2.
- 7 Edward Bok is listed as the owner of six paintings in "Index of Owners of Paintings by George Inness, Jr.," n.d., Frick Art Reference Library, New York.
- 8 Louis J. Richards, *Funeral Service for George Inness, Jr.*, Cragmoor, New York, July 30, 1926.
- 9 Richards, *Funeral Service*.
- 10 "First Presentation of 'The Only Hope' Draws Art Lovers" (note 6).
- 11 Letter by Calvin Coolidge is included in a pamphlet by the Rev. Louis J. Richards, *The Only Hope: A Painting by Mr. George Inness, Jr., N.A.*, n.d.
- 12 Estelle H. Ries, "The Mantle of Genius: In Tarpon Springs with George Inness, Jr., An Interview," *The American Magazine of Art*, vol. 16, June 1925: 288-296.
- 13 *New York Times*, May 29, 1925: 19.
- 14 Six letters including that from President Calvin Coolidge appear in Richards' pamphlet (note 11).
- 15 "The Only Hope," *Ellenville Journal*, 15 Aug. 1925.
- 16 Joseph Fort Newton, "A Gospel in Color," *Woman's Home Companion* Dec. 1925: 24-25.

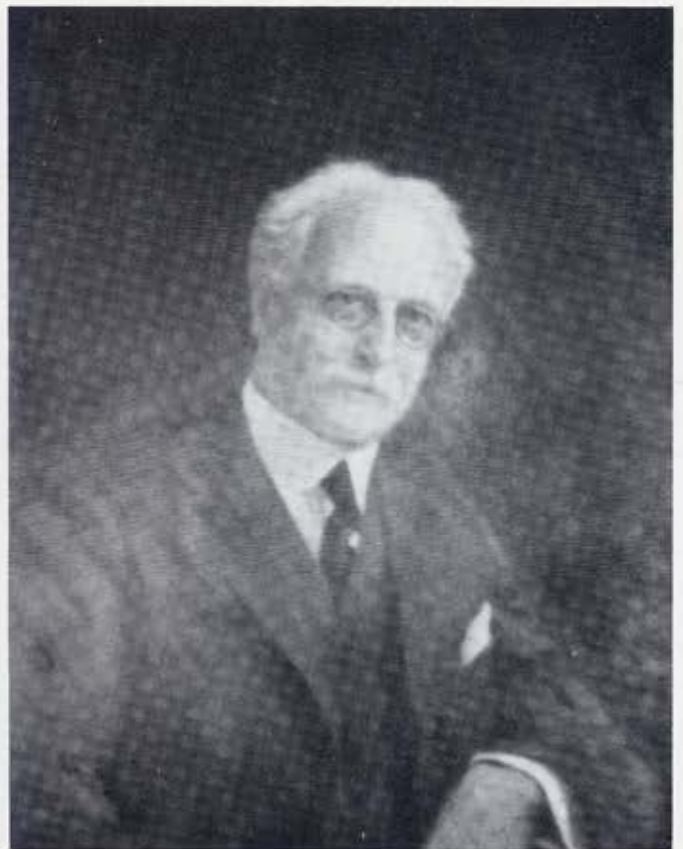


Figure 1. Portrait of George Inness, Jr., Tarpon Springs, Florida, Universalist Church.



Figure 2. Universalist Church, Tarpon Springs, Florida, ca. 1924.

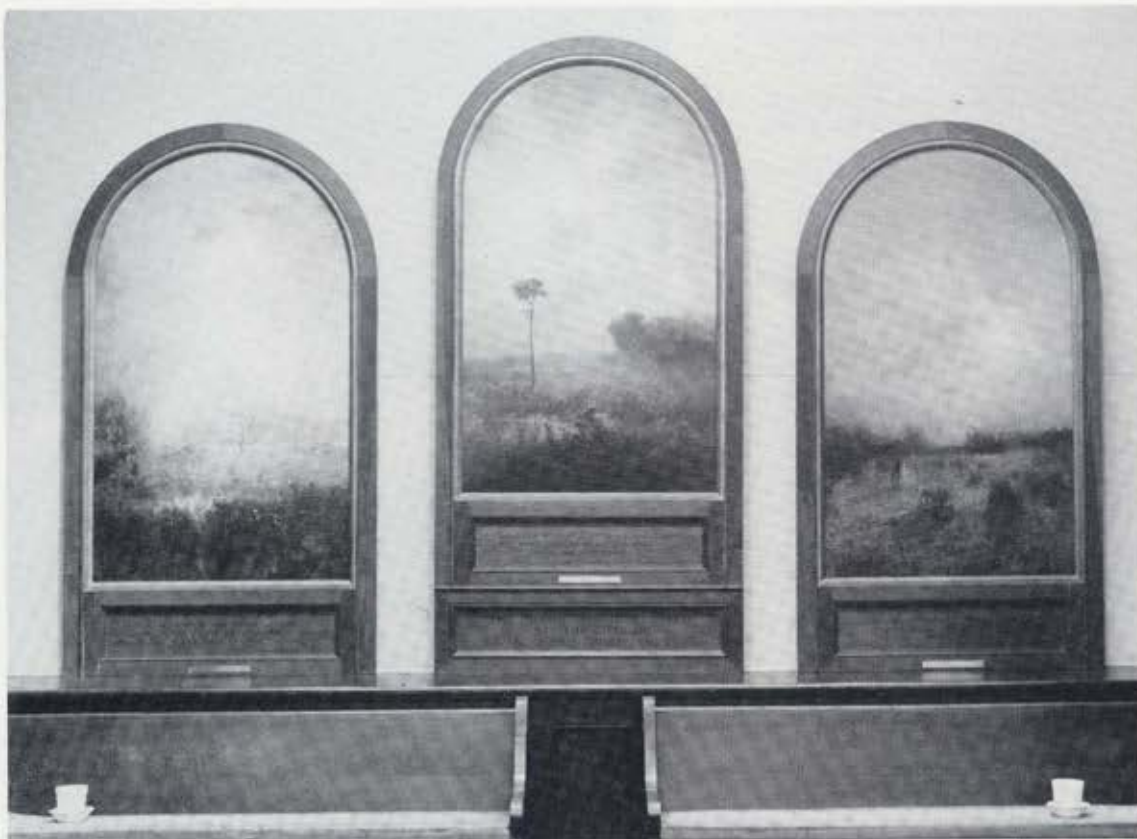


Figure 3. George Inness, Jr., *Promise, Realization, Fulfillment*, 1918, Tarpon Springs, Florida, Universalist Church.



Figure 4. George Inness, Jr., *Triptych, Twenty-Third Psalm: He Leadeth Me, In Green Pastures, Beside Still Waters*, 1922, Tarpon Springs, Florida, Universalist Church.



Figure 5. George Inness, Jr., *The Only Hope*, 1924, Tarpon Springs, Florida, Universalist Church.

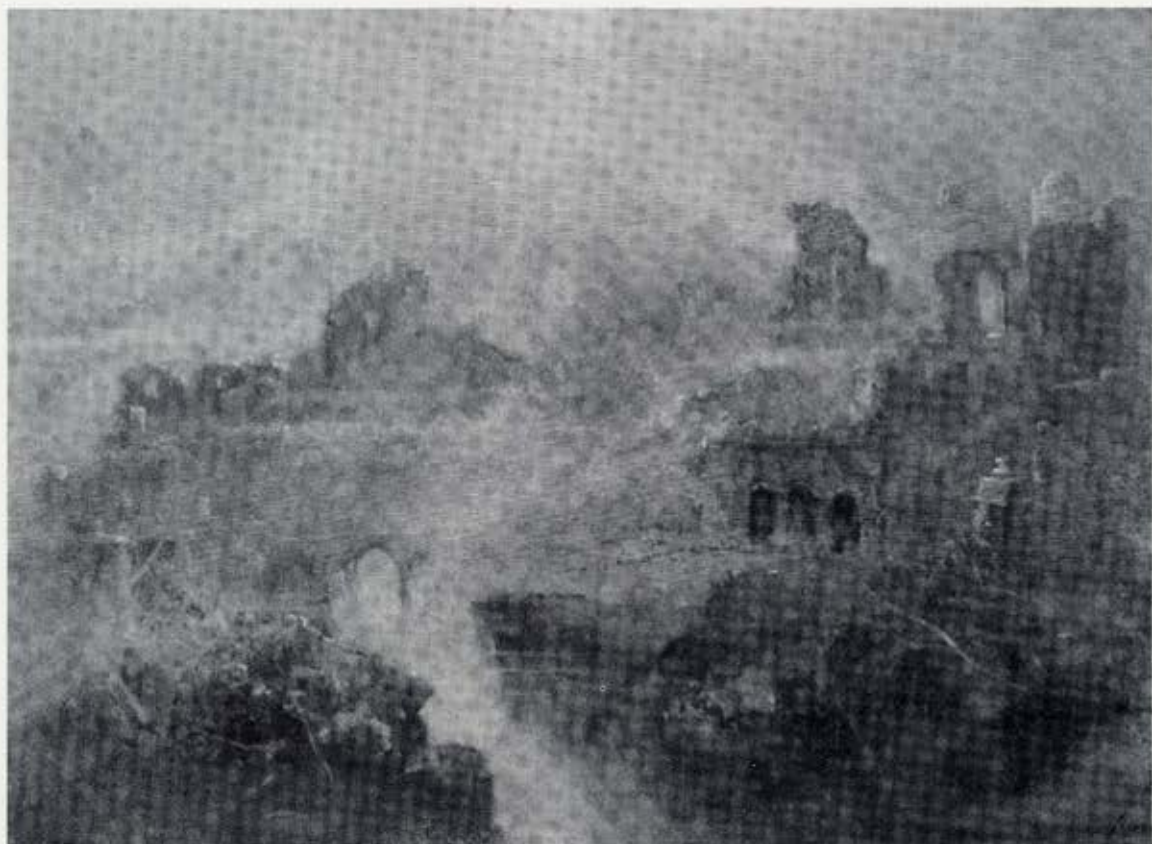


Figure 6. George Inness, Jr., *The Only Hope*, 1924, detail, foreground, Tarpon Springs, Florida, Universalist Church.



Figure 7. George Inness, Jr., *The Only Hope*, 1924, detail, dove over ruins, Tarpon Springs, Florida, Universalist Church.



Figure 8. George Inness, Jr., *The Only Hope*, 1924, detail, sun, Tarpon Springs, Florida, Universalist Church. (A figure in the sun appears with arms outstretched.)