

All Things Perish: Joseph Biays Ord and the Plight of Antebellum American Still-Life Painting

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In 1861, Philadelphia ornithologist George Ord wrote to his friend, Charles Waterton,

the world appears to be topsy-turvy; and for a long while we, the most enlightened and the freest people upon the face of the earth, consoled ourselves with the reflection that the insurrection and war which was desolating Europe, was far remote from our shores. But the devil of discord has at length made his appearance in our flourishing lands; and God knows what will be the ultimate result of his infernal incantations!¹

All Things Perish, painted by his son Joseph Ord a year earlier, visually conveys this worry and despair that plagued the nation in the years prior to the Civil War (Figure 1). A grassy bank, teeming with fruits, vegetables, flowers, and animals contrasts with the cultural detritus of a learned civilization as a female statue meditates on the rising sun. This large painting reflects the poignant dilemma faced by a traditional still-life painter on the threshold of Civil War, when the iconographic conventions of that established genre became strained by urgent modern realities. *All Things Perish* illustrates the artist's nimble, although ultimately ambiguous, adaptation of the still life to these new historical conditions in order to reference America's sectional crisis.

In *Important Information Inside*, his 1983 catalogue on John F. Peto, John Wilmerding lamented that the "discussion of American still-life painting has for the most part taken place in a vacuum," hermetically isolated from cultural context.² As if in response, several studies of American still-life painting have emerged in the past few decades, attempting to ground the subject within the nation's social, economic,

and political history and uncover layers of meaning beneath deceptively simple compositions of fruit and flowers.³ Most of this new research has focused on two disparate periods and groups of artists: early national still life in the circle of the Peales, particularly Raphaelle, and post-Civil War *trompe l'oeil* painting by William Harnett, John F. Peto, and their contemporaries. Scholars have largely ignored still life painting during the middle of the century, which served as a stylistic bridge. In particular, the oeuvre of Joseph Ord (1805-1866) illustrates an arc of change from the simplified, stark tabletop compositions of the Peales to the lush, riotous displays of Victorian abundance before the Civil War. These dramatic stylistic shifts relate to the antebellum period's tumultuous social, political, and economic changes as well as the lingering influence of European aesthetics.

Joseph Ord's biography has yet to be reconstructed by art historians. What little we know about him comes from a few remaining public documents: his will, city directories, and exhibition records. Evidently his artistic career was successful, for he exhibited frequently from 1824 until the early 1860s in Philadelphia and New York, leaving an estate of \$24,000 when he passed away in April of 1865.⁴ According to city directories, Joseph Ord never married and lived with his father, George Ord (1781-1866), a wealthy businessman best known for his avocation as an ornithologist and his involvement within the closely knit scientific community in nineteenth-century Philadelphia. George Ord rarely mentioned Joseph in his extensive correspondence, but an obituary in the *North American* suggested a close relationship between father and son, for it reads "Mr. Ord's last surviving child, Joseph B. Ord, an artist of high merit, died a few months ago and he never recovered from this blow."⁵ In the absence of thorough documentation about Joseph Ord, fur-

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¹ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 10 March 1861, 1-2. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

² John Wilmerding, *Important Information Inside: The Art of John F. Peto and the Idea of Still-life Painting in Nineteenth Century America* (Washington, DC: Harper & Row, 1983), 37.

³ Examples include Wendy Ann Bellion, "Likeness and Deception in Early American Art" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2001); Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson and John Wilmerding, eds., *William M. Harnett*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992); Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Alexander Nemerov, *The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood, 1812-1824* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴ Joseph B. Ord, Will registered April 14, 1865, George Ord, executor, Register of Wills, City Hall, Philadelphia, PA (W 207-1865).

⁵ *North American*, January 26, 1866, 2.

ther consideration of his father's life helps us to understand the world he inhabited. George Ord's fiery and opinionated personality also would have provided a powerful touchstone for his son. In correspondence, George displayed a Whiggish elitism, Protestant morality, and scientific conservatism, condemning practices he deemed frivolous, immoral, and unethical.

In addition to serving as president of the Academy of Natural Sciences for seven years and as a prominent member of the American Philosophical Society, George Ord was a particularly good friend and promoter of the Scottish-American ornithologist Alexander O. Wilson.⁶ When the latter died in 1813, Ord completed and published the final volume of Wilson's *American Ornithology* (1808-14), which set the standard for its subject until the publication of John James Audubon's *Birds of America* (1826-38). George Ord's searing critique of *Birds of America* is well documented. George expressed unequivocal disgust for Audubon's scholarship, methods, and particularly his illustrations, branding him as an "impudent pretender" and declaring his double elephant folio plates "so vile, that I wonder how anyone, possessing the least taste or knowledge in the fine arts, can endure them."⁷

This ornithological context undoubtedly helps explain the recurring appearance of birds in the work of Joseph Ord, including the prominent inclusion of a female tanager and cardinal grosbeak in *All Things Perish*.⁸ These two distinctly American birds, which appear in the tree above the grassy bank, accord with the other national elements in Ord's painting and provide a contrast between modest simplicity and showy spectacle. In his *American Ornithology*, Alexander Wilson warns that despite their sweet voice and attractive coloring, cardinals "fight violently" when two males are near each other and "the male, when both occupy the same cage, very often destroys the female."⁹ In *All Things Perish*, the tanager and cardinal are portrayed in profile, in the Wilson style of natural illustration that was championed by George Ord. The tanager and cardinal even appear within the same plate in *American Ornithology* (Figure 2). Therefore, within his last-dated work, Joseph Ord may be subtly alluding to his father's work and generation of naturalists who continued to dominate the Philadelphia scientific community.

Based on George Ord's close connections with the Philadelphia scientific community, particularly Titian Ramsay Peale and his family, Bruce Chambers has suggested that Joseph Ord studied painting with Raphaelle Peale.¹⁰ Many of Joseph's early still-life paintings, in fact, exactly copy Peale compositions. For example, an early work titled *Still Life — Oranges, Nuts and Wine* (Figure 3) reproduces Raphaelle Peale's *A Dessert* (1814, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.).¹¹ By the 1840s, however, Ord's still-life paintings had become more elaborate, eschewing the isolated, tabletop format in favor of grander compositions. An 1841 work titled *Still-Life Painting with Parrot and Vase* depicts a lavish array of objects, including a parrot, an exotic Chinese vase, various American fruits, and a distant landscape in the background (Figure 4). This stylistic shift reflects Ord's exposure to European painting, for he exhibited multiple copies of Old Masters titled "from the Louvre" during the 1830s, suggesting that he spent time abroad. George Ord also owned several European still-life paintings, including works by the Italian Baroque painter, Michele Pace del Campidoglio (c. 1610 - c. 1670) and the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jacob Van Es (c. 1596-1666).¹² An example of Campidoglio's work—a *Still Life with Grapes* at the Hermitage (Figure 5)—shows a bounty of fruit displayed in a landscape, a composition that Ord appears to emulate in *Still-Life Painting with Parrot and Vase*. Through collecting and copying Old Master paintings from Europe, George and Joseph Ord betray a Europhilic sensibility that was still prevalent in America during the antebellum period.

All Things Perish is the largest and most complex of all Joseph Ord's compositions as well as the last dated work in his oeuvre. Painted two years before he died, the picture contains multiple references to antiquity and symbols of Vanitas. In the middle ground appears a grassy bank laden with a bountiful harvest of colorful fruits and vegetables. Most of the produce depicted—including maize, potatoes, peaches, plums and melons—were native American species that grew abundantly in the Ord family garden, as reported by George in his letters.¹³ Only the tropical pineapple and bananas, luxury imports from South America, disrupt this otherwise national cornucopia. Above the bank, ephemeral morning

⁶ Robert McCracken Peck, "George Ord," *American National Biography* 16 (1999): 755-756.

⁷ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 23 April 1832, 5-6. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

⁸ To identify these birds, the author contacted Paul A. Guris, president of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club.

⁹ Alexander Wilson, *Wilson's American Ornithology* (1840; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1970), 125.

¹⁰ Bruce Chambers, "Joseph Biays Ord," in *150 Years of Philadelphia Still-life Painting*, ed. Robert Devlin Schwarz (Philadelphia: Schwarz Gallery, 1997), 30.

¹¹ Raphaelle Peale, *A Dessert*, 1814, oil on panel, 13 3/8 x 19 inches, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

¹² In several letters to Charles Waterton, George Ord discussed a collection of paintings he sent to London to sell "on account of the room they occupied in our house," which included a "Fruit Piece by the celebrated Campidoglio of Rome," a "fruit and flowers" piece by Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer, and two still lifes by Jacob Foppens van Es. George Ord to Charles Waterton, 18 September 1841, 4. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society. See also George Ord to Charles Waterton, 30 September 1841. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

¹³ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 13 October 1851. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

glories symbolize the transience of time as well as denote the time of day as morning. Hidden amidst this agricultural and botanical bounty lurk various symbols of death and decay, including mushrooms, a snake, a toad, and a black bird foraging among the grapes. An inscription in stone—"Sic Omnia Pereunt" or "Thus All Things Perish"—further underscores the overarching theme of Vanitas. Below the grassy bank, we see additional symbols consistent with that theme: books, a set of scales, an hourglass, and musical instruments, all carelessly strewn about as casualties of Time's passage. As in *Still-Life Painting with Parrot and Vase*, a painter's palette appears, here positioned underneath a scroll and pen, amid an array of objects symbolizing the destruction of the arts. The inclusion of antique armor in the bottom left corner of *All Things Perish* invokes a traditional reference to Mars, the god of war. A skull, hidden in a shadowy niche to the right, just below the snake, serves as a *memento mori*, foreshadowing the human, and national, death that would occur in a civil conflict.

Accompanying the aforementioned cultural detritus in the lower portion of the canvas is a statue of a classical figure meditating on the rising sun in the center of the painting. Small, butterfly-like wings behind the female nude's bare shoulders indicate that she represents Psyche, since butterflies, which also appear in the surrounding trees depicted by Ord, have been associated with Psyche since antiquity. A new English translation of the story of Cupid and Psyche, first told by Lucius Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*, was published in London in 1799 and became widely disseminated on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁴ Although most nineteenth-century artists chose to portray Psyche as intertwined with Cupid, her immortal lover, Ord depicted Psyche as alone and vulnerable. Although his Psyche appears to be modeled after the famous Venus de Milo, Ord might also have seen *Psyche Abandoned* by Augustin Pajou (1730-1809) at the Louvre, which similarly illustrates the moment after Psyche betrayed her lover Cupid by attempting to determine his identity (Figure 6).¹⁵ In both versions by Pajou and Ord, Psyche is mostly undressed and clutching herself, as she mourns the loss of love.

This clutter of items from antiquity was not unprecedented in American still-life painting. Charles Bird King's *The Vanity of an Artist's Dream*, from 1830, includes a cast head of *Apollo Belvedere*, a collection of worn and tattered books, and a painter's palette within the confines of a small

cupboard (Figure 7). Andrew Cosentino writes that while an earlier still life by King highlighted the plight of the individual artist, struggling to find success in Philadelphia, in *Vanity* "Art itself, personified in the head of Apollo, is rejected by society."¹⁶ In the background, the personification of Plenty is emptying a horn of coins, symbolizing the artistic plight of America.

The themes of Vanitas and morality were prevalent in antebellum America. A poem attributed to Thomas Powers, entitled "All Things Perish Save Virtue," was circulating in American periodicals in 1843.¹⁷ The poem begins "Sweet morn—so cool, so calm, so bright / The bridal of the earth and sky / The dew shall weep thy fall to-night / For thou must die."¹⁸ It goes on to lament the eventual death of flowers, Spring, music, stars, the landscape, love, and man, "frail form of senseless clay." The soul, a "quenchless light in mortal form," alone will continue on into the afterlife.¹⁹ *All Things Perish* serves as a type of illustration for this earlier, and similarly named poem. Published in Philadelphia's *North American and Daily Advertiser*, "All Things Perish Save Virtue" was later reprinted in *Emancipator and Free American* directly underneath "A Song for the Abolitionists."²⁰ The use of this poem by an abolitionist paper further underscores the inherent connection antebellum Americans perceived between Vanitas themes and the current debates between the North and South.

By contrasting the detritus of a distinctly European civilization with the agricultural bounty of the Americas, Ord intended to compare the older culture with the young nation of the United States. Controversies during the 1850s over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott decision, and especially John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry drew clear lines between the North and South. In 1856, American lawyer and diarist George Templeton Strong wrote, "this alienation of the North and South is an unquestionable fact, and a grave one."²¹ As George Ord lamented in his correspondence, during the 1848 revolutions in Europe, Americans were consoled "with the reflection that the insurrection... was far remote from our shores."²² In 1860, however, America faced a similar plight and Ord's painting conveys this distress. The discarded material objects which clutter the foreground of the painting serve as a warning of the consequences of allowing European-style conflict to disrupt America's exceptional democracy. In his five-part *Course of the Empire*, painted from 1833-1836,

¹⁴ Lucius Apuleius, *Cupid and Psyche: A Mythological Tale, from the Golden Ass of Apuleius*, trans. Hudson Gurney (London: J. Wright, 1799).

¹⁵ James David Draper, *Augustin Pajou: Royal Sculptor, 1730-1809* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997).

¹⁶ Andrew J. Cosentino, "Charles Bird King: An Appreciation," *American Art Journal* 6, no. 1 (May 1974): 56.

¹⁷ Originally published in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, January 31, 1843.

¹⁸ Thomas Powers, "All Things Perish Save Virtue," *North American and Daily Advertiser*, March 4, 1843.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *North American and Daily Advertiser*, March 4, 1843; and *Emancipator and Free American*, April 20, 1843.

²¹ Entry for July 8, 1856, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Hasley (New York: Macmillan Co., 1952), 2:284.

²² George Ord to Charles Waterton, 10 March 1861, 1-2. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

landscape painter Thomas Cole (1801-1848) also utilized antiquity to refer to issues facing American society. Jacksonian Americans upheld ancient Rome as a cultural precedent for the combination of republican institutions and vigorous growth seen as characteristic of America's exceptionalism. As Angela Miller argues in *Empire of the Eye*, Cole chose an ancient Roman setting for his allegorical series in order to remind Americans "that the imperial analogy they drew between themselves and the second great republic of the Old World was double-edged."²³ After cycling through *The Savage State*, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, *The Consummation* and *The Destruction*, the viewer is confronted with Cole's final painting in the series, *Desolation* (Figure 8), which illustrates the outcome of greed, arrogance, and political unrest, as nature begins to reclaim the architectural ruins of a great civilization. Cole's pupil, Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), provided his own version of *Desolation* on the eve of the Civil War. Painted the same year as *All Things Perish*, Church's *Twilight in the Wilderness* portrays an American wilderness in the struggle for survival, as dead branches and decay replace Cole's architectural ruins (Figure 9). There is a great tension between the quiet landscape and the ominous, approaching clouds, signifying the transition from light to darkness. The inclusion of a lone eagle, the symbolic bird of the United States, sitting upon a stark limb, stands as a sign of spiritual life amidst nature's struggle and underscores the allusion to the approaching civil conflict. Franklin Kelly has successfully related *Twilight* to a national anxiety regarding the survival of American democracy in the years prior to the Civil War.²⁴ This melancholy sense of foreboding would have been evident to Church, who was interested in contemporary politics, as well as to his audience. Using different genres—landscape and still life—Church and Ord created moral allegories of nature with national significance as the United States prepared to enter the Civil War.

Not unlike Church's *Twilight*, Joseph Ord's *All Things Perish* eschewed overt war propaganda in favor of vague allegorical language that left his work open to interpretation. By avoiding an explicit position on highly charged issues in contemporary science and politics, Ord's work remained roughly consistent with the conservative position dominating Philadelphia's scientific community at the time—a position epitomized by his father. Although we have no written testi-

mony from the artist, his father's letters reveal mixed feelings about the issues dividing the North and South. George Ord initially mocked the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, describing him as "a man, selected from the mob...seated in the hall of the national palace, in his shirt-sleeves, with a cigar in his wry mouth, and his spindle shanks upon a table!"²⁵ One year later, however, he declared his support for the Union president, despite not voting for him.²⁶

Despite his opposition to slavery, George Ord firmly believed in racial hierarchy. In that respect, his position differed little from that of leading American racial scientists at the time such as Louis Agassiz and Samuel G. Morton, the latter a colleague of Ord's at the Academy of Natural Sciences. When discussing the reasoning power of animals in one of his letters, Ord directed Waterton to "look at the immense difference in the mental powers of the various human races. The Caucasian, from which the white populations of Europe have sprung, have [sic] contributed most to the advancement of civilization, the Ethiopian least."²⁷ This comparison of "Caucasian" and "Ethiopian" is directly taken from Morton's 1839 *Crania Americana*, in which the author argued that the Caucasian possessed the greatest cranial capacity, or intelligence, while the Ethiopian possessed the least.²⁸ George Ord condemned racial and social equality, warning that they were "dangerous fallacies... In no country can the lower orders be safely entrusted with political power: their habits, their education, render them unfit for it."²⁹

Despite his strong feelings about the "natural" inferiority of certain races, Ord still supported the Union army and believed the North would easily overpower the South, thanks to its greater wealth and population, if not its moral superiority.³⁰ George Ord certainly was not the only pro-Union, Northern scientist to believe in racial hierarchy. Agassiz declared himself a staunch abolitionist and Morton, a Quaker, also attempted to divorce his scientific theories from political debate.³¹ Agassiz, Morton, and Ord all lived behind Union lines and publicly opposed slavery, but they never embraced the idea of racial equality.

In this tension-fraught historical and intellectual context, it hardly seems surprising that Joseph Ord's *All Things Perish* projected a vague ambiguity consistent with his father's conflicting beliefs. Unlike his father, Joseph avoided making incendiary statements on slavery and racial inferiority, nor

²³ Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 34.

²⁴ Franklin Kelly, *Frederic Edwin Church and the National Landscape* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 117-122.

²⁵ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 29 November 1860, 4. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

²⁶ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 10 March 1861. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

²⁷ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 23 September 1848, 2-3. George

Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

²⁸ Samuel G. Morton, *Crania Americana, or, a Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839).

²⁹ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 23 July 1848, 3. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

³⁰ George Ord to Charles Waterton, 2 June 1861, 4. George Ord Papers, American Philosophical Society.

³¹ Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art* 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 44.

did he use his artistic work to challenge such conservative views. As a work that attempted to invest classical allegory with contemporary meaning, *All Things Perish* embodied the vagaries of still-life painting in an era of dramatic cultural and political change. The painting demonstrates how that genre strained to address urgent modern realities, albeit ambiguously. Although the painting alluded symbolically to the war and its potential dire consequences, it did not offer an explicit political perspective on the approaching conflict. The depicted fruits, vegetables, and birds include species native to the North as well as the South. The landscape evokes no

particular region. We cannot detect which side the painting's allegorical warning addresses or even the exact nature of the warning, apart from a general foreboding about war. Painted in Philadelphia—a Union city in a border state with close economic ties to the South—*All Things Perish* aptly embodies the ambiguity of its time, place, and maker. For Joseph Ord, an artist with direct family connections to Philadelphia's conservative scientific community, such ambiguity may have been the only aesthetic option available.

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Figure 1. Joseph Biays Ord, *All Things Perish*, 1860, oil on canvas, 62 x 53 inches. Turak Gallery, Nottingham, Pennsylvania. Photo credit: Julie Melton.



[left] Figure 2. Alexander Wilson, "Cardinal Brosbeak and female, Red Tanager, female and egg," from *American Ornithology* (1808-14), vol. 2, plate 2.

[below] Figure 3. Joseph Biays Ord, *Still Life—Oranges, Nuts, and Wine*, after Raphaelle Peale's *A Dessert*, 1823, oil on panel, 12 3/4 x 19 1/4 inches. Private Collection. Photo courtesy of The Schwarz Gallery, Philadelphia.





[above] Figure 4. Joseph Biays Ord, *Still-Life Painting with Parrot and Vase*, 1841-44, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 inches. Current location unknown. Photo courtesy of William H. Gerdt.



[right] Figure 5. Michele Pace del Campidoglio, *Still Life with Grapes*, 1650-70, oil on canvas, 38 3/5 x 52 4/5 inches, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin, Leonard Kheifets, Yuri Molodkovets.



Figure 6. Augustin Pajou, *Psyche Abandoned*, 1790, marble, 70 x 34 x 34 inches. Louvre Museum, Paris. Photo by Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

[facing page, top] Figure 8. Thomas Cole, *The Course of the Empire: Desolation*, 1833-36, oil on canvas, 39 ¼ x 63 ¼ inches. Collection of The New-York Historical Society (1858.5).

[facing page, bottom] Figure 9. Frederic Edwin Church (American, 1826-1900), *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860, oil on canvas, 40 x 64 inches. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Mr. and Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund (1965.233).

Figure 7. Charles Bird King, *The Vanity of an Artist's Dream*, c. 1830, oil on canvas, 35 ¼ x 29 ½ inches. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.



