

TODAY'S
MASTERS

BY PETER TRIPPI

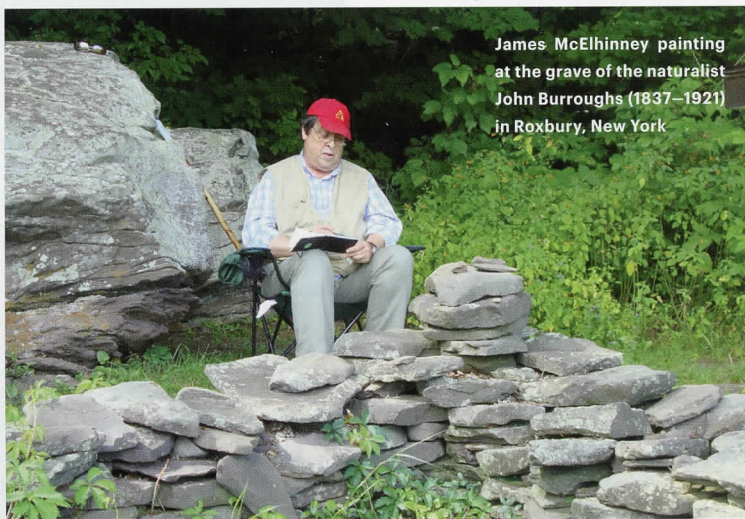
JAMES McELHINNEY'S JOURNAL PAINTINGS: WHEN INTIMATE VISIONS GO DIGITAL

Based in Manhattan with a studio at Haverstraw in New York's scenic Hudson Valley, James Lancel McElhinney (b. 1952) is an artist, author, scholar, oral historian, and art appraiser. This past November he also became a publisher when his new firm, Needlewatcher Editions, launched *Hudson Highlands: North River Suite, Volume One*. This is a handsome set of seven archival digital prints of seven landscape watercolors McElhinney had previously painted in his journals.

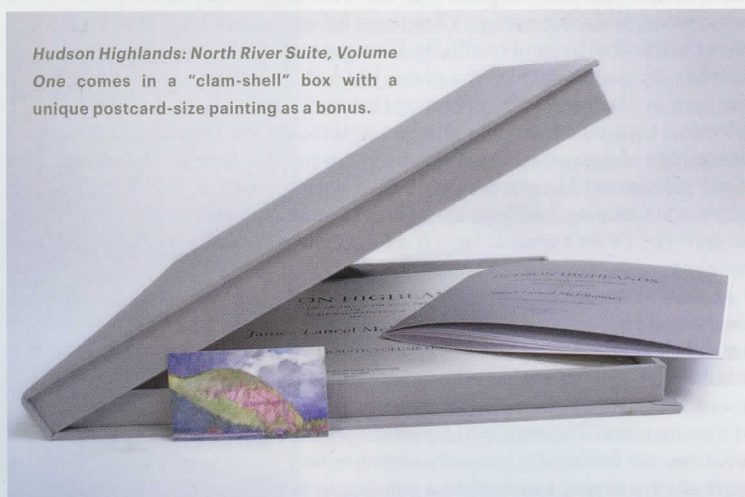
Published as a limited edition of 50 copies, each housed in a cloth-covered box with a title page, colophon, and chapbook, the suite offers its owners a sumptuously old-school viewing experience (complete with white cotton gloves), yet it has sprung to life in a truly 21st-century way. Yes, McElhinney simply scanned the page-spreads of his own journals on a standard flatbed printer he had bought at Staples, then e-mailed the resulting scans to Brilliant Graphics in Exton, Pennsylvania, where the prints were made. "The digital technology used to create these prints did not exist two centuries ago," he explains, "but in other ways this project invokes historic precedents." Given how much we all admire the colorful woodcuts of 19th-century Japan's *ukiyo-e* masters, it's worth remembering that they did not make their own prints either. The lively designs were theirs, not the woodcuts themselves. As ever, great art always centers on the artist's vision, not always on its fabrication.

ON THE MOVE

So how did McElhinney reach his goal of becoming an independent publisher — of finding a way to retain his precious journals while sharing the paintings inside them with 50 different collectors? His story begins in an arts-minded family living in historic Doylestown, Pennsylvania, 27 miles north of Philadelphia. The artist fondly recalls exploring the rolling hills of Bucks County, as well as family visits to the Revolutionary War encampment site at Valley Forge, where some of his ancestors served under Gen. Washington. From boyhood McElhinney regularly visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and by 14 he was taking classes at Philadelphia College of Art. It was only natural that he should earn a B.F.A. at Tyler School of Art, where he focused on painting figures and still lifes.



James McElhinney painting
at the grave of the naturalist
John Burroughs (1837–1921)
in Roxbury, New York



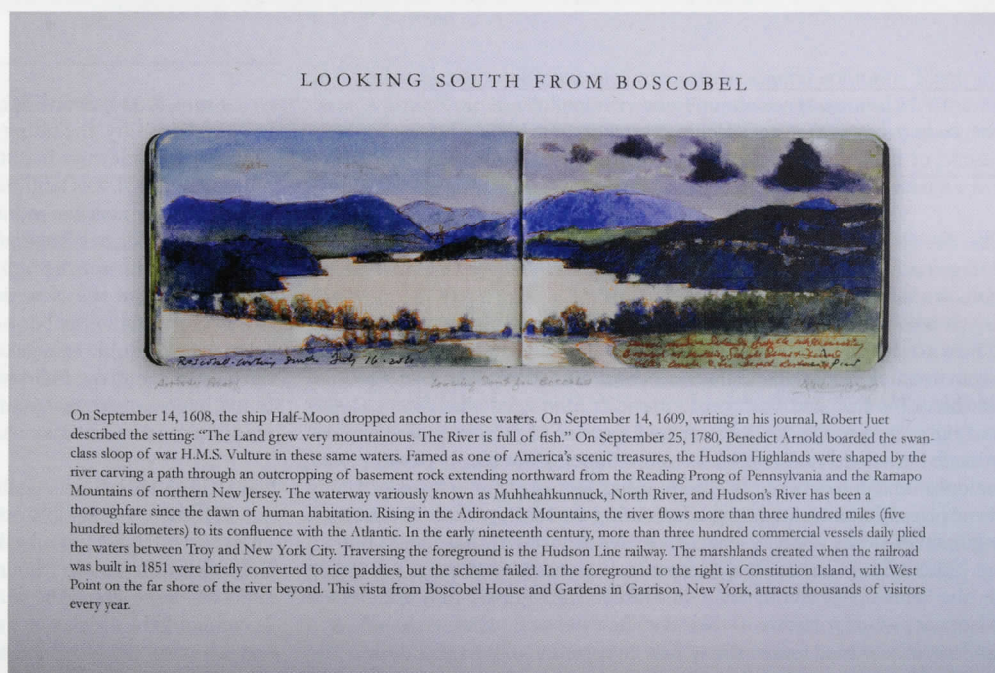
Hudson Highlands: North River Suite, Volume One comes in a "clam-shell" box with a unique postcard-size painting as a bonus.



(TOP) A bird's-eye view of the chapbook (left) and title page (right) with the "clam-shell" box. ■ (LEFT) A typical page from the accompanying chapbook. Each of the seven images is accompanied by a detailed description of the site, its history, and its character. One even features a stanza of poetic verse.

Given his passion for landscape painting today, it seems remarkable that McElhinney did not get hooked on it until the summer of 1973, between his junior and senior years at Tyler, when he attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. There he and his Tyler comrade Frank Hyder were, in his words, the "urban roughnecks" completely astonished by the beauty of Maine's natural scenery. Why, they wondered, should they sit indoors when they could be outside painting nature? (In response to disparaging comments by orthodox abstractionists, they styled themselves "Sunsets Incorporated," mostly to annoy them further.) McElhinney continued working outdoors occasionally while earning an M.F.A. in painting from Yale University, where he focused on figures.

Since Yale, McElhinney has pursued a distinguished, if peripatetic, career teaching art at institutions nationwide, from Maine to Colorado, from North Carolina to Wisconsin. In 1977, while teaching at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, he visited the New-York Historical



LOOKING SOUTH FROM BOSCOBEL

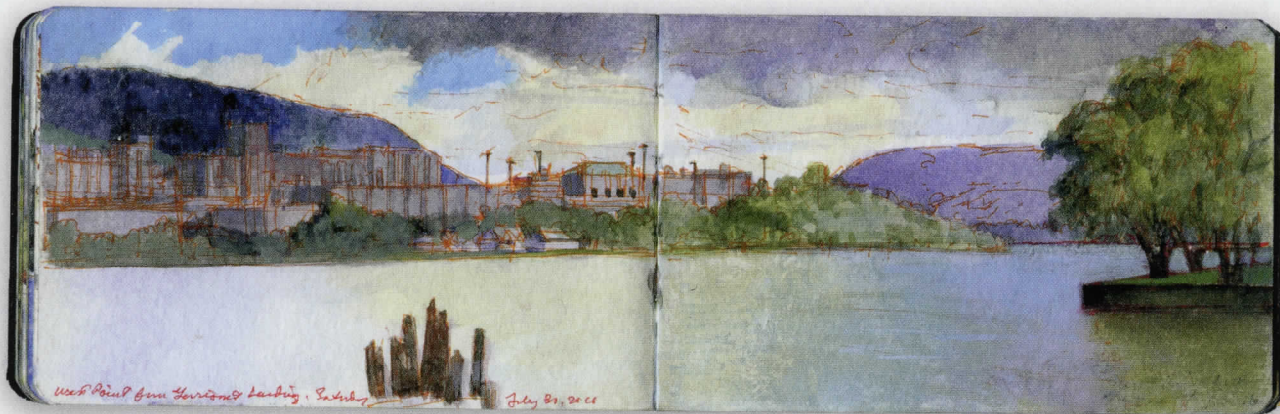
On September 14, 1608, the ship Half-Moon dropped anchor in these waters. On September 14, 1609, writing in his journal, Robert Juet described the setting: "The Land grew very mountainous. The River is full of fish." On September 25, 1780, Benedict Arnold boarded the swan-class sloop of war H.M.S. Vulture in these same waters. Famed as one of America's scenic treasures, the Hudson Highlands were shaped by the river carving a path through an outcropping of basement rock extending northward from the Reading Prong of Pennsylvania and the Ramapo Mountains of northern New Jersey. The waterway variously known as Muhheahkunnuck, North River, and Hudson's River has been a thoroughfare since the dawn of human habitation. Rising in the Adirondack Mountains, the river flows more than three hundred miles (five hundred kilometers) to its confluence with the Atlantic. In the early nineteenth century, more than three hundred commercial vessels daily plied the waters between Troy and New York City. Traversing the foreground is the Hudson Line railway. The marshlands created when the railroad was built in 1851 were briefly converted to rice paddies, but the scheme failed. In the foreground to the right is Constitution Island, with West Point on the far shore of the river beyond. This vista from Boscobel House and Gardens in Garrison, New York, attracts thousands of visitors every year.

Society to see an exhibition of Hudson River School paintings. Though he was not overcome by what he saw that day, he was inspired to spend more time painting outdoors near Saratoga. One day he stumbled upon a striking view from a hilltop, a view flooded with light that would have thrilled Frederic Edwin Church, whose passion for both travel and science has always impressed McElhinney. That unexpected vista deepened his zeal for elevated perspectives, so he roamed further afield, exploring the Berkshire



South Gate from Bear Mountain

McElhinney 2017



Artists Proof

West Point from Garrison's Landing

McElhinney 2017

(TOP) South Gate from Bear Mountain ■ (BELOW) West Point from Garrison's Landing

hills, the Helderberg Escarpment, and sites closer to Skidmore, like the cottage on Mount McGregor where President Ulysses S. Grant wrote his memoirs and died.

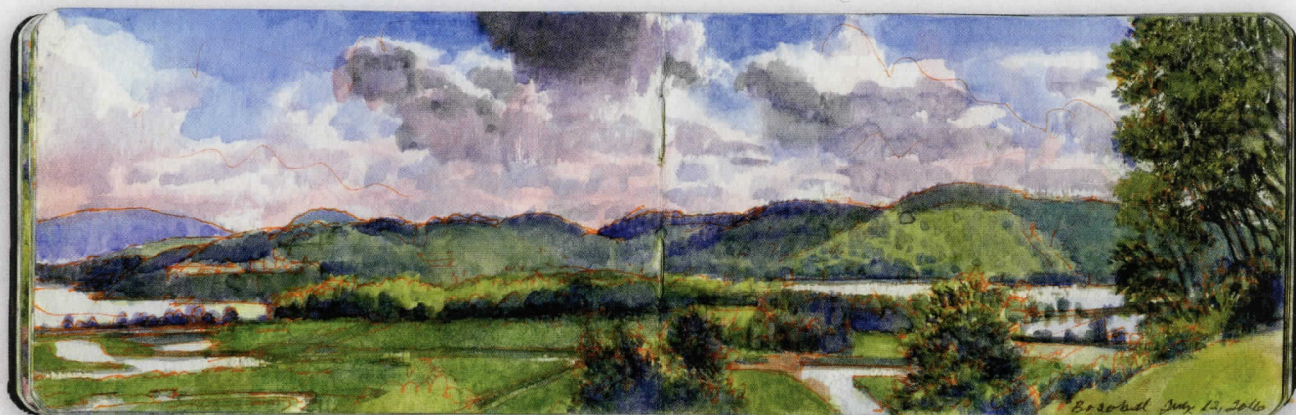
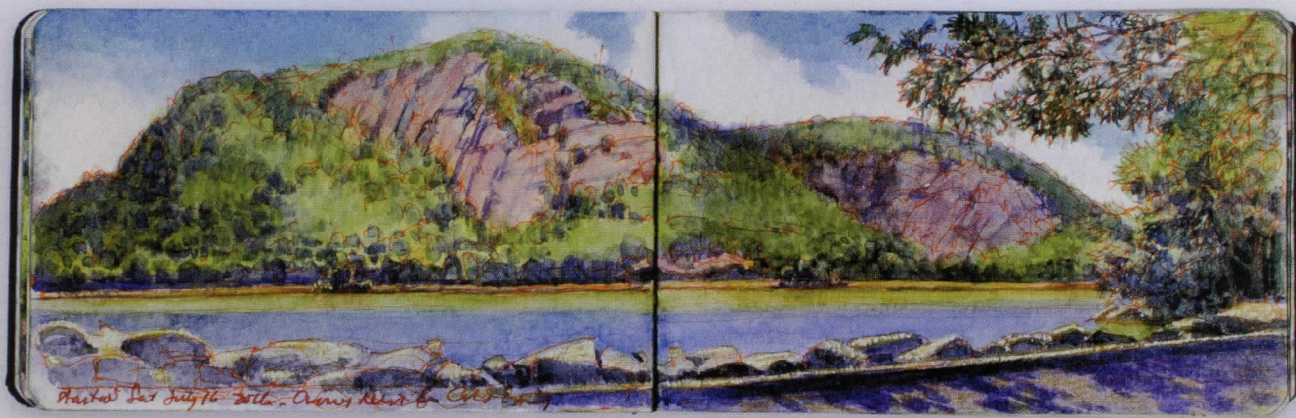
It was relocating to Richmond, Virginia, that fully awakened McElhinney to the powerful connections between landscape and history. He began reading books like James Howard Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (1993), and right up through 2003 he created a series of paintings that explore historic battlefields as flashpoints in the ongoing conflict between preservationists and developers. McElhinney dug deeper not only by researching these places' backstories, but also by joining the 1st New York Engineers, a regiment of Union Army re-enactors active at Virginia's battlefield parks.

McElhinney writes: "Landscapes do not occur in nature. According to [the landscape theoretician] J. B. Jackson [1909–1996], they are created when people adapt terrain to their use. By extension, what we behold as a landscape is nothing more or less than a projection of personal desire. The visual echoes we receive, as pictures of terrain, are thus our own reflection." McElhinney notes, for example, how Native Americans' trails — literally their paths of least resistance through rugged wilderness — often became colonial post roads, which were then widened into highways and ultimately interstates. The interstate did not fall from the sky fully formed: it is only the next step in a long chain of human engagements with nature. For McElhinney, what we call landscape is actually "a palimpsest of simultaneous narratives and memories, conditioned by topography, climate, and the forces of nature."

From 2004 onward, McElhinney began teaching at major art schools in New York City, including Pratt Institute and the Art Students League. Things went sideways in 2005, however: "Stricken with a mysterious pulmonary illness, I was admitted to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where I remained for nearly a month. My future wife, [Prof.] Kathie Manthorne [see page 119 for her latest project], brought me a set of watercolors and a New York Central Art Supply linen sketchbook. A lounge afforded spectacular views of the New Jersey Palisades and the George Washington Bridge. Painting in the book for the first time, I suddenly realized that an open spread could replace a stretched canvas as the substratum for a fully developed painting. Following my discharge from the hospital, a newfound hypersensitivity to spirit vapors and oil paint caused me to shift my painting practice to aqueous media."

SHARING HIS JOURNEYS

Ultimately, McElhinney explains, his "paintings migrated off the easel and into sketchbooks during trips to Europe, Hawaii, Ecuador, Peru, California, the Rocky Mountains, and the American Southwest." Over time, he has reversed the conventional order of art-making: his studio has become a kind of laboratory, where he tests ideas while painting in oils. But it is outdoors where he makes the finished work in a journal, usually — as we can see in the illustrations here — annotating the image with his own words. These small paintings are not preparatory at all. Instead, McElhinney notes, "journal paintings treat the open page as equal to the canvas, a complete work in its own right that might be read as a pocket diptych, its halves divided by the binding." Making them is an intervention, an opportunity to probe the vista — what am I really looking at? What happened here? This is essentially an "excavation of visual and written narratives from firsthand experience, travel, and observation."



(TOP) *Crow's Nest Mountain from Cold Spring Landing* ■ (BOTTOM) *Western Highlands from Boscobel*

Not surprisingly, McElhinney identifies intensely with such expeditionary traveler-artists as John James Audubon, George Catlin, and Seth Eastman, people who operated at the “nexus of art, science, and history.” Years ago, he visited Roy Goodman, a curator at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, to examine the expedition journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (1804–06). He wanted to see them because he was considering a project to retrace George Catlin’s 1830 journey up the Missouri River. Ultimately he eliminated figures so as not to create “history paintings,” secure in the knowledge that the land itself conveys what we need to know.

Turning to his more recent Hudson Valley subjects, he recalls: “Following in the footsteps of Charles Willson Peale, William Guy Wall, Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Parker Willis, Washington Irving, and John Burroughs, I traveled up and down the Hudson Valley. Learning the names of its mountains, hills, and streams such as Anthony’s Nose, Storm King, and Treason Creek, which flows behind my studio, I became absorbed in its history. Muhheahkunnuck to the Lenni-Lenape, North River to the Dutch, the Hudson remains a major thoroughfare linking the port of New York to a chain of inland seas, the Saint Lawrence River, and the interior of North America. Informed by historic narratives such as Robert Juet’s 1609 journal about the journey of Henry Hudson’s ship, the *Half-Moon*, and Benson J. Lossing’s *The Hudson from the Wilderness to the Sea*, I completed roughly 200 journal paintings in the Hudson River Valley.”

So, what to do with 200 journal paintings, McElhinney wondered? He turned for advice to Dick Solomon, the legendary head of Pace Prints

in Manhattan, who pointed him toward the digital solutions illustrated here. A grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation reassured McElhinney that its jurors also believed this was a viable way to proceed, and so, after e-mailing those seven scans to Brilliant Graphics, he headed to London, where the cloth-covered boxes were fabricated by Wyvern Bindery, a firm founded in the 18th century.

Hudson Highlands: North River Suite, Volume One is not actually classified as an artwork, but rather as a book with its own ISBN number (978-0-9993673-0-8). Always a fan of Audubon, McElhinney decided to fund the project partly through subscriptions; half of the 50 copies have already been sold in this way, and sales are continuing via mcelhinneyart.com. The renowned conservationist Barnabas McHenry donated one set to Boscobel House and Gardens, set on a hill overlooking the Hudson from which several of these scenes were painted. McHenry also underwrote the purchase of another set by the West Point Museum, which collects material related to the U.S. Military Academy and its environs. (It is meaningful to McElhinney that Seth Eastman and Robert W. Weir both taught drawing at the academy.) This coming March 8–11, one of McElhinney’s journals will be exhibited at the 58th Annual *New York International Antiquarian Book Fair* by David and Cathy Lilburne of Antipodean Books (Garrison, New York).

Fortunately, *Hudson Highlands: North River Suite, Volume One* is only the first in what will be a series of such publications from Needlewatcher Editions. We look forward to seeing more, and we encourage other artists to consider whether McElhinney’s approach — a blend of tradition and the cutting-edge — may serve their purposes as well. ●

PETER TRIPPI is editor-in-chief of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

Photos: Amanda Weber