

**“THE GATHERING OF THE FORCES”:
WALT WHITMAN AND THE ARTS IN BROOKLYN**

One aspect of the “long foreground” which has received little attention to date, yet which actively engaged Whitman’s critical thinking in the late 1840s and early 1850s and left a discernible mark on both the form and content of *Leaves of Grass* was the poet’s involvement in the visual arts.¹ Whitman himself attached great importance to this aspect of his early life. A few years before his death, he confided to his friend Horace Traubel that he had preferred the company of artists to writers as he composed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He termed the artists “more to my taste”² and must have felt a strong kinship with their struggles to define the nature and purpose of their craft in an essentially indifferent, if not openly hostile, environment. It was in response to an exhibition of the Brooklyn Art Union that Whitman first articulated what was to become one of the central tenets of his artistic philosophy: the potentiality of the arts for moral and spiritual leadership. The catalogues and numerous images in his poetry also had their origins in his early art experiences. It is no wonder, therefore, that Whitman characterized this period of his development as the “big, strong days—our young days—of preparation: the gathering of the forces.”³

During the six years immediately preceding the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman discussed the arts with increasing knowledge and sophistication in his journalistic writings. Of the thirty-seven articles attributed to his pen between 1849 and 1855, roughly one third comment directly on the visual arts. Five of his longer articles are devoted exclusively to discussions of painting and sculpture.⁴ Compared with his sporadic and generally non-critical coverage of the arts during the preceding decade, his treatment of the subject in the 1850s represents a noteworthy departure in both quality and quantity. The coverage is all the more remarkable when one considers that his journalistic writing dwindled to a trickle after 1851 as he devoted his time to carpentry and the writing of his poems. And yet between 1852 and the July 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*, three of the four articles he published devote long passages to discussions of painting and photography.

Friendships with a number of local painters, sculptors and photographers helped shape Whitman’s thinking and strengthen his interest in the visual arts. By the early 1850s Whitman regularly sought out the company of artists and played an active role in furthering the efforts of the newly formed, artist-led Brooklyn Art Union. His friends ranged from painters of modest talent to artists of considerable accomplishment who are today considered major contributors in their fields. Among his friends were the landscape painter Jesse Talbot; the genre painter Walter Libbey; sculptors Henry Kirke Brown and his young apprentice John Quincy Adams Ward; and the photographer Gabriel Harrison. Whitman’s brother-in-law Charles Heyde, with whom he had an openly contentious relationship but who was the only member of his family to demonstrate any interest in his poetry, was also a painter.

Whitman’s discovery of an atmosphere conducive to his needs as an emerging poet within the world of the visual arts underscores what Betsy Erkkila and others have termed Whitman’s “embeddedness” in his culture.⁵ Throughout the century, but particularly during the antebellum period, many of this country’s most respected writers, like their European counterparts, established enduring personal and professional bonds with the leading artists in their midst. Washington Irving’s extended friendship with Washington Allston; James Fenimore Cooper’s close ties to Samuel F. B. Morse and Horatio Greenough; William Cullen Bryant’s well-documented associations with Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand and Henry Kirke Brown; and Henry James’s friendship with John Singer Sargent are just a few of the many writer-artist relationships which flourished throughout the century. Nourished by a lively atmosphere of trust and mutual exchange, these friendships often left a demonstrable mark on the creative output of the participants. William Cullen Bryant spoke for others of his profession when, at a ceremony honoring his seventieth birthday, he hailed his artist friends as “a class of men for whom I cherish a particular regard and esteem” and acknowledged that “in their conversation I have taken great delight, and derived from it much instruction.”⁶

Artists at mid-century were grappling with many of the same problems of direction and self-definition as their literary counterparts and were as involved in the social and political issues of their day as many others in society. What did it mean to be an American artist? How could one best integrate art effectively into the fabric and structure of a democratic and by definition heterogeneous and widely dispersed

society? The increasing popularity of genre and landscape painting corroborated the “Manifest Destiny” spirit of the era.⁷ The close association between literature and the visual arts, particularly among the Knickerbocker writers and artists, resulted in numerous collaborative efforts including the publication of this country’s first art magazine, *The Crayon*, which debuted the same year as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. And although Whitman would reject many of the traditional ways writers had of aligning their work with the visual arts, “Pictures,” one of his earliest and most revealing free-verse poems, which is discussed below, provides striking evidence of the extent to which the arts conditioned his creative thinking. Like the French artist Marcel Duchamp, who more than a century later would confide to an interviewer that he “felt that as a painter it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter,”⁸ Whitman embraced the arts and their lessons while following his own oft-quoted dictum: “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.”⁹

Whitman’s friendship with the photographer Gabriel Harrison and his affiliation with the Brooklyn Art Union, which Harrison enthusiastically backed and where Talbot and Libbey exhibited, illuminate several significant aspects of Whitman’s early involvement in the visual arts. Gabriel Harrison is best known in Whitman circles for having taken the famous daguerreotype which Whitman had engraved and placed opposite the title page in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The image, taken one hot July day in 1854 during an impromptu session at Harrison’s studio,¹⁰ shows the already graying Whitman in a pose which stands as a visual analogue for the lanky lines, conversational manner and general unorthodoxy of the verse. Whitman recalled how the portrait “was much hatchelled” by his artist friends,¹¹ whose standards of judgment were often more conventional than his own. But Harrison, who embodied many of the qualities Whitman admired in an artist and several that would color his own emerging artistic pursuits, no doubt relished the controversy raised by his handiwork.

Whitman and Harrison probably met during the mid-1840s while Harrison served as the principal operator at Plumbe’s Daguerreotype Gallery, in Manhattan.¹² As a photographer Harrison was a leader in the effort to gain recognition for photography as a legitimate art form. Works like the prize-winning 1845 portrait of his son, George Washington Harrison, clinging to the bust of his namesake were at the forefront of the movement to extend the boundaries of

photography beyond the conventional limits of portrait photography by appropriating techniques and ideas from other of the arts.¹³ For his efforts Harrison earned several photographic awards and designation as the “Post Daguerrean” from his contemporaries.

Harrison was also a painter, poet, short story writer, actor and committed liberal democrat, which no doubt contributed to his naming his son after the country’s first president. During the Free Soil campaign of 1848-49, Harrison served as a delegate at the Utica convention and as president of Manhattan’s fourteenth ward Free Soil League. Whitman’s liberal democratic tendencies, fostered from a very early age by his father, who named not one but three of his sons after presidents,¹⁴ paralleled Harrison’s. Whitman, too, occupied prominent positions in the Free Soil League, serving as the party’s vice president in Brooklyn’s seventh ward and as editor of the borough’s only Free Soil newspaper, the *Freeman*. Whitman once complimented Harrison for his “large and liberal disposition”¹⁵ and doubtless appreciated his willingness to speak out on sensitive political issues.

After the defeat of the Free Soil party, Harrison immersed himself more and more in his art and in the promotion of various art causes in Brooklyn. In 1852 he opened a photographic studio in the Whitehouse Building at 283 Fulton, just a few blocks from Whitman’s Myrtle Avenue residence and not far from the Fulton Ferry which Whitman often rode to Manhattan. He wrote passionately in support of local art initiatives in *The Photographic Art Journal*, worked diligently to foster a democratic base for the arts in his adopted city of Brooklyn, and, like Whitman, actively endorsed the short-lived Brooklyn Art Union. Harrison was also an actor of recognized talent, who performed with the Park Theatre Company in the 1840s and who organized and acted in the Brooklyn Dramatic Academy, which held performances at the Brooklyn Institute in the 1850s. He later taught painting at the Brooklyn Art Association and managed the new Park Theatre, which introduced English opera to Brooklyn in the 1850s.

Harrison represented for Whitman the successful merger of art and politics and a model of the democratic spirit which motivated all of his later writing. Whitman admired Harrison’s “warm, sensitive, sympathetic heart” and his “quick, mercurial” manner.¹⁶ Among the qualities he appreciated most in his friend were two which characterized his own artistic temperament: Harrison’s “cavalier” appearance¹⁷ and what he termed his “fine artistic soul, wild and unpruned as nature itself,” which

led him “over the line at times,” but which was ultimately “held in check by an organically correct eye for purity in form, color, and the symmetry of things.”¹⁸ Whitman once described Harrison as having “always been a good friend”¹⁹ and in the early 1850s devoted space in four of his newspaper columns to discussions of Harrison’s art.²⁰ He repeatedly praised Harrison for being “one of the best Daguerrean operators probably in the world”²¹ and hailed his daguerreotypes as “perfect works of truth and art.”²²

Whitman shared Harrison’s commitment to the promotion of photography as a fine art and, like Harrison, was dedicated to pushing his chosen medium, both technically and conceptually, beyond the boundaries established by others in the field. Their mutual attraction to opera and the theater no doubt strengthened their friendship, despite Whitman’s preference for Italian rather than British productions. Whitman may even have seen Harrison perform during his association with the Park Theatre in the 1840s, and he greatly admired the actor Edwin Forrest, whom Harrison photographed and on whom he published an early biography.²³

Without abandoning his commitment to the pressing social and political issues which dominated his writings and thinking in the 1840s, Whitman followed Harrison by shifting his focus increasingly toward the arts in the 1850s. The activities of the Brooklyn Art Union, the first artists’ organization ever established in that city, proved a tempting starting point. When it opened in April 1850, the Brooklyn Art Union was one of roughly half a dozen art unions in the United States which had sprung up over the last several years following the lead of New York’s highly successful American Art Union.

The American Art Union, which opened in New York in 1838 as the Apollo Gallery, strove to stimulate interest in a national art expression through changing exhibitions of works devoted to American subjects produced by American artists. Membership entitled one to a free engraving based on one of the exhibited works and the chance to win an original work of art in an annual lottery. By 1847 the organization boasted a membership of just under 10,000, annual receipts of more than \$48,000, the annual distribution of nearly 300 paintings and several hundred bronze and silver medals,²⁴ and a daily attendance of several thousand.²⁵ A year later as the annual attendance climbed to three-quarters of a million,²⁶ *The Knickerbocker* reported that the institution’s “gallery is no longer a superfluity; it has become a necessity.

It is part of the public property as much as the fountains, the parks, or the City-Hall.”²⁷ The journal praised the institution for having brought art to the public “more distinctly, extensively and constantly than it has ever been presented before” and for having “created an interest in regard to it in multitudes who otherwise would have remained unmoved and uninformed.”²⁸ Among the “motley crowds” of regular visitors to the organization’s large annual exhibitions the journal counted the “retired merchant from Fifth Avenue, the scholar from the University, the poor workman, the news-boy, the beau and the belle, [and] the clerk with his bundle.”²⁹

Based on the success of the New York institution, art unions sprang up in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Boston, Newark, and Brooklyn, with two additional art unions, both oriented toward European art, opening in Manhattan.³⁰ Thomas Thompson, a British-born marine painter and Associate at the National Academy of Design, and Robert Hoskins, a miniaturist and drawing instructor at the Brooklyn Institute, spearheaded the Brooklyn effort, the forerunner of the Brooklyn Museum.

Founded in 1823 as the Apprentices’ Library Association, the Brooklyn Institute constituted the city’s leading cultural institution. Chartered with the express purpose of providing “a repository of books, maps, drawing apparatus, models of machinery, tools and implements generally, for enlarging the knowledge, and thereby improving the condition of mechanics, manufactures, artisans and others,”³¹ the Institute offered lectures, exhibits and a library devoted to a wide array of cultural and scientific endeavors. In 1842, following a move to newer and larger quarters on Washington Street near Concord, it inaugurated its first art exhibition and three years later considered establishing a permanent gallery “containing specimens of the finest European artists, with productions of the best painters of our own country” as well. However, it was not until 1853, aided by a bequest of \$5,000 from the Institute’s founder, Augustus Graham, that a gallery of fine arts was permanently installed, and then only on a modest scale. The Institute’s decision to host the activities of the Brooklyn Art Union, therefore, provided an interim solution to its lack of a permanent art emphasis.³²

Whitman was well acquainted with the activities of the American Art Union, having visited its gallery and reviewed its exhibitions in the 1840s while editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*. He was particularly supportive of what he described as the organization’s “perpetual free

exhibition” practices.³³ In 1848 while editor of the New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, he wrote favorably of the opening of the Western Art Union in Cincinnati.³⁴ “We think highly of the effect of works of art on the minds and characters of the people,” he commented upon his return to New York, “and warmly hope that both [the American and International] Art Unions, and more associations of the same kind which may come in future, will flourish well.”³⁵ Whitman’s desire to see the arts prosper in his native Brooklyn prompted even bolder sentiments. In 1846 he concluded a review of one of the occasional art exhibitions mounted at the Brooklyn Institute with a plea for the establishment of “the perpetual *free* exhibition of works of art here, which would be open to all classes.”³⁶

The opening of the Brooklyn Art Union just over three years later must have seemed the answer to Whitman’s wish. In support of the undertaking and perhaps to strengthen its chances of success, Whitman wrote two lengthy articles for the local press and a third which appeared in William Cullen Bryant’s New York *Evening Post*.³⁷ Published over a ten-month period in 1850-1851, his articles constitute his first efforts at formulating a comprehensive theory of the arts which placed the artist above the politician as society’s moral and spiritual leader. Compared with his earlier, scattered writings on art, these articles demonstrate a firmer sense of purpose, a growing confidence in aesthetic matter and the emergence of a distinct sensibility which favored American subject matter, “simplicity and boldness” of expression and the direct contemplation of nature.³⁸ On more than one occasion Whitman confessed to spending “[l]ong, long half hours” in front of a single painting.³⁹ His own keen powers of observation, coupled with lively discussions with his artist friends, helped clarify his artistic preferences in ways that would have important ramifications for his later work.

In his reviews, Whitman extrapolated from the exhibited works important philosophical and ideological principles. The work of his friend, the painter Walter Libbey, prompted some of his most inspired and probing comments. Ten years Whitman’s junior and a frequent exhibitor at both the National Academy of Design and the American Art Union, Libbey specialized in portraits and rural genre subjects. In the third of his three articles, a review published in the New York *Evening Post*, Whitman singled out Libbey’s *Boy with a Fife* as an example of the qualities he most admired in the younger man’s art.⁴⁰ Above all Whitman praised the work’s gentle naiveté, its carefully

rendered objects and surfaces, and the “richness of coloring, tamed to that hue of purplish gray, which we see in the summer in the open air.” For all its richness of detail and accuracy of description, however, there was still what Whitman termed “a delicious melting in, so to speak, of object with object,” particularly in the background “and in all the accessories.” Whitman further liked the “character of Americanism about it.” He was convinced that in the hands of a European, the boy would be forever constrained and defined by his lower-class origins, “while in this boy of Walter Libbey’s, there is nothing to prevent his becoming a President, or even an editor of a leading newspaper,”⁴¹ a comment intended, no doubt, as a tribute to his friend, the poet William Cullen Bryant, whose paper published the review.

At a time when the minutely detailed canvases of Dusseldorf-trained artists were enjoying particular vogue in the New York galleries, Whitman cautioned his audience not to equate exactness of presentation with spiritual content. In an article subtitled “A Hint or Two on the Philosophy of Painting,” Whitman anticipated a central tenet of his later poetry. “Whatever the piece may be,” he wrote,

landscape, historical composition, portrait, comic group, even still life, it is the spiritual part of it you want above all the rest. That is its soul, its animose, and makes live art. The rest is but the matter, necessary to give embodiment to the life; but what is matter without life? The most exquisite draughting, the finest coloring, and the minutest truth to the mere forms of nature, are but the cold, dead corpses of art, if they have not the vivifying principle.⁴²

Five years later Whitman reiterated these thoughts in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Speaking now about poetry, he stressed that “folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls.” Continuing in a similar vein, he explained: “The poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things . . . but is the life of these and much else and is in the soul.” (714)

This life-giving quality of a work of art placed the efforts of the artist above those of others in society. On several occasions in the past Whitman had stressed the social significance of the arts and had urged the support of local arts groups. But nowhere had he been so forceful in

his comments as when prompted by the display at the Brooklyn Art Union. "Nearly all intelligent boys and girls have much of the artist in them," Whitman commented, and it was up to organizations like the Brooklyn Art Union to strengthen and encourage that talent for the benefit of all. "What a glorious result it would give," he exclaimed, "to form of these thousands a close phalanx, ardent, radical and progressive. . . . Then, would not the advancing years foster the growth of a grand and true art here, fresh and youthful, worthy this republic, and this greatest of the ages? . . . A sunny blessing, then, say I, on the young artist race! for the thrift and shrewdness that make dollars, are not every thing that we should bow to, or yearn for, or put before our children as the be all and the end all of human ambition."⁴³

Whitman's enthusiastic support of this "young artist race" suggests his studied familiarity with the writings of Emerson, Ruskin, and Charles Edwards Lester, among others. While editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, Whitman had reviewed Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1847) and Lester's *The Artist, the Merchant, and the Statesman* (1845) and was familiar as well with Emerson's *Essays* and lectures.⁴⁴ All three authors emphasized the moral purpose of art and the exalted role of the artist. Whitman must have been particularly entranced by Lester's claim, boldly announced in the opening pages of his book, that his purpose was to encourage a broader understanding of the arts so that one day

the Arts in America shall . . . take the high eminence they held in Greece under Pericles, and, in Florence, under Lorenzo de' Medici—when the Statesman and the Scholar shall again be united as they were in the Councils of the Free States of Antiquity and of the Middle Ages—. ⁴⁵

Strong nationalistic sentiments such as these were echoed in other writings of the period and paralleled the nationalistic tendencies evident in writings about American literature. In support of such beliefs both the *Photographic Art Journal*, to which Harrison contributed, and Lester's *Artists of America* (1846) adorned their title pages with eye-catching depictions of the stars and stripes. No frivolous or superficial undertaking, the arts for Whitman and his fellow observers were as necessary to a healthy and fully functioning society as politics and fresh air.

On the strength of Whitman's three published articles in support of

the Brooklyn Art Union, the organization's leadership invited him to present the keynote address at its annual distribution of prizes scheduled for March 31, 1851. For this momentous occasion, Whitman composed his most ambitious statement to date on the nature and importance of the arts. Written in a more formal style than any of his articles and studded with quotes from and indirect references to Emerson, the Bible, Carlyle, Ruskin, Rousseau, Shakespeare, Pope, Bryant, Horace, Socrates, and an unnamed Persian poet, Whitman's lecture presented a compendium of the principal literary, intellectual, and philosophical sources that had so far engaged his thinking. He deemed it the province of the artist to "nourish in the heart of man, the germ of the perception of the truly great, the beautiful and the simple." He reiterated the claim "that all men contain something of the artist in them" and found an exact parallel between the "perfect man" and the "perfect artist," noting "it cannot be otherwise." Perhaps most importantly, his use of the term "artist" was no longer limited to practitioners of the visual arts. He now took a much broader view which demonstrated his growing indebtedness to the ideas of Emerson and Carlyle. Art for them was not limited to the accomplishments of poets, painters, sculptors or musicians. It was seen also in the heroic actions of individuals. "I think of few heroic actions which cannot be traced to the artistical impulse," Whitman asserted. "He who does great deeds, does them from his sensitiveness to moral beauty. Such men are not merely artists, they are artistic material." Echoing popularly held beliefs regarding the sisterhood of the arts, Whitman observed that "the painter, the sculptor, the poet express heroic beauty better in description: for description is their trade, and they have learned it. But the others *are* heroic beauty, the best beloved of art."⁴⁶

Just slightly more than two months after his address, Whitman's friend Walter Libbey placed his name in nomination to be the Brooklyn Art Union's next president. Whitman won the nomination over four other nominees in a stirring testimonial to his efforts on the organization's behalf.⁴⁷ At about this time, however, a complaint filed by a disgruntled artist against the American Art Union prompted the courts to declare the parent organization illegal on the grounds that its lottery constituted a form of gambling. By the end of the year, the American Art Union was defunct. In an effort to prevent the Brooklyn Art Union from meeting the same fate, Gabriel Harrison devised a plan to restructure the organization along the lines of a joint stock association. An outspoken foe of gambling, Harrison termed his

scheme “the best plan ever put forth for the formation of an Art Union.”⁴⁸ Still, the proposal seems to have gotten no further than the planning stages. Within the year Libbey and Thompson both died and at least two others of the association left Brooklyn, perhaps distraught over the group’s inability to push through any permanent solution. Despite its best intentions, the Brooklyn Art Union, too, ceased operations by the end of the year.

Whether Whitman would have accepted the nomination to head the Brooklyn organization is, of course, a moot point. Although temperamentally unsuited for administrative posts, Whitman no doubt relished the knowledge that in accepting the position he would join the ranks of a distinguished community of cultural leaders which included several well-known poets. Two of the five presidents of the American Art Union had been poets;⁴⁹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a supporter of Boston’s New England Art Union; and writers had for decades closely allied themselves with the National Academy of Design and the American Academy of Fine Arts.⁵⁰ For Whitman, who was already beginning to distance himself from journalism and to devote more time to his poetry, knowledge that his friend, the poet William Cullen Bryant, had been president of the American Art Union from 1844 through 1846 no doubt proved the strongest appeal.

Like Harrison, Bryant was a man of varied interests and abilities who was to exert a marked influence on Whitman during these early formative years. Whitman clearly admired the combination of social, political, and artistic involvement that characterized Bryant’s long and productive life as one of the country’s leading poets, as editor and owner of one of its most respected dailies, the *New York Evening Post*, and as a former president of the American Art Union. In later years Whitman recalled how he had regarded Bryant as “a man to become attach’d to.”⁵¹ His decision to quote a passage from Bryant’s “Forest Hymn” as well as from his own “Resurgemus” during his address before the Brooklyn Art Union was perhaps a sign that he was already beginning to envision himself as the William Cullen Bryant of Brooklyn.

Even before they met, probably in the late 1840s, Bryant knew of and admired Whitman’s abilities as a writer and spokesman for the Democratic Party. His newspaper kept its readers apprised of Whitman’s actions on behalf of the Free Soil campaign and earlier in the decade had published two of Whitman’s tales, one of which Bryant lauded as “a very neat and fanciful performance.”⁵² Whitman

expressed similar praise for Bryant’s literary and political achievements. In 1846, while editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, he hailed Bryant as “one of the best poets in the world!” and “an honor and a pride to the Democratic party.”⁵³ A decade later in an article in *Life Illustrated*, Whitman termed

the white-bearded, scrawny, striding old gentleman . . . if not our foremost and noblest poet, abreast with the foremost; and moreover, a strong, valiant, and uncompromising—and, more yet, and rarer—absolutely fair and courteous political newspaper editor.⁵⁴

The two often took long walks together through the streets of Brooklyn during which Whitman particularly enjoyed Bryant’s personal reminiscences on the art and architecture of Europe.⁵⁵ Both in this country and abroad Bryant counted among his friends and personal acquaintances some of the most outstanding artists of the day, including Samuel F. B. Morse and Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School of landscape painters. He owned Asher B. Durand’s *Kindred Spirits*, which commemorated his celebrated visit with Cole to the Catskills in 1841, as well as works by other artist friends. A charter member of The Sketch Club, instructor of mythology at the National Academy of Design and keynote speaker at the dedication of its Gothic-revival building, Bryant wrote numerous editorials in support of the arts in his newspaper and collaborated with Durand, Cole, and others in the publication of two gift books, *The American Landscape* (1830) and *Picturesque America* (1872). During his three-year tenure as president of the American Art Union, the organization moved to new and larger quarters and its membership more than doubled. When he resigned in 1846, he took pride in reporting to the membership that “our artists paint with a freer and happier pencil, they give us more and better pictures, because they know that they have a resource in our Institution.”⁵⁶ It is probably no coincidence that Whitman’s own early writings on art commenced during these years.

Bryant and those in his circle were firm adherents to the *ut pictura poesis* ideal of the sisterhood of the arts. Artists produced numerous paintings and sculptures interpreting individual poems or scenes and characters from specific literary texts. Their paintings were often accompanied by poetic texts, and one of the highest compliments accorded an artist was that which Bryant bestowed on Thomas Cole in his funeral eulogy in 1848. “Cole’s several series of pictures were in

themselves poems—,” Bryant observed, “poems with a lofty epic flow.”⁵⁷ Issues of *The Knickerbocker* contained poems inspired by art objects or visits to an artist’s studio, and contributors to the journal regularly employed art terms and made analogies to particular works of art to demonstrate their profound affinity for the visual arts. As James Callow has written in his very useful study of the Knickerbocker writers and artists, “Washington Irving informed his readers as early as 1819 that he considered his craft akin to the painter’s when he called himself ‘Geoffrey Crayon’ and one of his works *The Sketch-Book*.”⁵⁸

Such art-literature connections were not limited to members of the Knickerbocker circle but were widespread throughout the period. The *New-York Mirror* and *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, both of which Whitman read, contained a similar sampling of prose and poetry featuring images and terms derived from the visual arts. In addition, several of Whitman’s artist friends, including Harrison and the sculptor Henry Kirke Brown, who was friends with a number of the Knickerbockers, repeatedly paid homage to the sisterhood of the arts in their photographs and sculptures. It is not surprising, then, to find Whitman affirming and extending these ideals in his writings.

In 1862 Whitman signed a series of articles written for the *New York Leader* “Velsor Brush.” The name derived from two of his ancestors, but its painterly implications, reinforced throughout the articles with references to their being “sketches” and by his titling the series “City Photographs,” demonstrate his affinity for the art-literature ideals of his contemporaries.⁵⁹ Similar art references punctuate his poetry and other of his prose writings. In “Song of Myself” he wrote of “Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson,” (233) and of placing in his “portfolio . . . Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved.” (233) He likened himself to a painter in “To You” (376), described “what we call poems being merely pictures” in “Spontaneous Me” (250) and in “The Answerer” grouped the artist with the builder, geometer, chemist, anatomist, and phrenologist as those who “underlie the maker of poems, the Answerer.” (318)

Whitman’s fascination with the genre painting of his friend Walter Libbey and the telling correspondence, noted by F. O. Matthiessen and others, between his vividly rendered verbal genre scenes and the genre paintings of his contemporaries, suggest additional ways Whitman incorporated his experiences in the visual arts culture of antebellum America into his writing.⁶⁰ Whitman’s depictions of everyday life share

with the works of the painters a similar uncluttered naiveté, vividness of presentation, and pleasure in the textures, shapes, and colors of material objects. Whitman once commented on the genre potential of his own life experiences, finding in his travels through the Allegheny Mountains en route to New Orleans “first rate scenes for an *American* painter.”⁶¹ His friend, the naturalist John Burroughs, was the first to observe this quality in Whitman’s verse, terming the catalogues “one line genre word paintings” and declaring “every line . . . a picture.”⁶² But Whitman was always on guard to avoid making his poems “in the spirit that comes from the study of pictures of things—and not from the spirit that comes from the contact with real things themselves.”⁶³ His genius lay in his remarkable ability to translate into concise, verbal scenes the vividness and immediacy of the painted image while deriving his scenes from all manner of written, visual and imaginative sources.

Whitman significantly parted company with his contemporaries, however, in rejecting their habit of composing whole poems about individual works of art. Whitman’s interest lay not in describing and interpreting the minutes of individual images. Only rarely and then generally late in his career would Whitman accede to this time-worn formula.⁶⁴ Rather, it was a combination of the individual work of art and its presentation in an exhibition context that stirred Whitman’s creative imagination and provided an important stimulus for his verse. Whitman’s approach to the visual arts was both more daring and more original than that of his contemporaries. And yet even those areas in which he displayed his greatest originality may have had their genesis, in part, in the ideas of his more conservative colleagues.

On June 16, 1851, William Cullen Bryant wrote to thank his friend Charles Sedgwick “for some of the finest landscapes in the picture-gallery of my memory, collected during our late pleasant visit to Berkshire.”⁶⁵ Bryant’s remark was probably made during the height of his friendship with Whitman.⁶⁶ Whether Whitman ever heard Bryant refer to his mind in such a fashion is, of course, impossible to verify. The trope is consistent with the Knickerbockers’ penchant for the arts and art galleries, and doubtless would have appealed to Whitman who was at the time spending much of his own time scrutinizing the contents of local art exhibitions. Whether arrived at through his own experiences or through contact with his contemporaries, the image provided an important point of departure for Whitman’s early poem “Pictures,” written in the early 1850s.⁶⁷

The poem and notes discovered in an undated notebook are signifi-

cant for several reasons: they record his first attempt to treat the subject of art in his poetry; they reveal Whitman's continued fascination with the exhibition experience; and they provide striking evidence of his transformation of that experience into one of his most distinctive poetic strategies. In the notes Whitman considered the possibility of creating what he called a "Poem of Pictures. Each verse presenting a picture of some characteristic scene, event, group or personage—old or new, other countries or our own country."⁶⁸ In the poem, which remained unpublished until this century but which contains the germ of many of his well-known poems, Whitman described "a little house" with "many pictures hanging suspended." The house was "round" and it was

. . . but a few inches from one side of it to the
other side,

But behold! it has room enough—in it, [for] hundreds and
thousands [of pictures], all the varieties[.] (642)

The remainder of the poem describes a great variety of pictures, ranging from historical scenes, to portraits of famous and unknown personages, to still lifes, to bucolic landscapes to urban and rural genre scenes. As in Whitman's later poems, the scenes are described in the present tense and with only the most essential details provided. Thus we have:

. . .this black portrait—this head, huge, frowning,
sorrowful—it is Lucifer's portrait—the denied
God's portraits, . . . (645)

And there hang scenes painted from my Kansas life—. . . (646)
And here, (for I have all kinds,) here is Columbus setting
sail from Spain on his voyage of discovery; (644)

The emphasis on the present tense and the frequent use of present participles to describe even historic scenes approximates the way the eye "reads" a painting. Paintings present themselves to us whole and complete at one sitting. Their impact is nearly instantaneous, and their subjects, whether contemporary or historical in nature, unfold before our eyes as if in the present tense.

Of added importance is the fact that the scenes described throughout the poem approximate the range and types of subjects commonly found in large nineteenth-century exhibitions like those sponsored by the Brooklyn Art Union and the National Academy of Design. A glance through the catalogues of these exhibitors reveals a similar range of historic, landscape, genre and portrait themes. Even more

important than the correspondence between the images in Whitman's poem and those depicted in the New York galleries, however, is the way the exhibition environment underlies the poet's conceptual framework. Panoramic townscapes and landscapes, intimate still lifes and portraits, historical subjects and evocative tales of the imagination filled the walls of these exhibition halls in displays which, like the images in Whitman's poem, spanned continents, centuries and the open road. Elaborately framed works of widely varying dimensions hung one above the other, completely filling the wall surface from floor to ceiling. With very little space separating one from another, the painted images physically surrounded the spectator to create a cacophony of visual and intellectual stimuli. A similar situation prevailed in the daguerreotype galleries of the period. Whitman was clearly captivated by the plethora of stimuli and the potency of the juxtapositions engendered by such arrangements, and in his journalistic reviews often paid as much attention to the details of the viewing experience as to the specifics of the images themselves. Once, while reviewing an exhibition at Plumbe's Daguerreotype Gallery, he described with glee the fascination of seeing so many images together in one space. "What a spectacle!" he exclaimed.

In whatever direction you turn your peering gaze, you see naught
but human faces! There they stretch, from floor to ceiling—
hundreds of them. Ah! what tales might those pictures tell if their
mute lips had the power of speech! How romance then, would be
infinitely outdone by *fact*.⁶⁹

The poetic strategy Whitman devised to approximate the excitement and stimulation of the exhibition experience did not end with this early free-verse poem, but became the organizational model for the whole of *Leaves of Grass*. Its effects are particularly apparent in the famous catalogues, which juxtapose as many as one hundred unlike images of contemporary, historical and imaginary scenes in sharply realized, quickly drawn dramatic vignettes. Like the painted images Whitman studied on the walls of the Brooklyn Institute, these descriptive scenes are rendered in clear, graphic terms, which arrest the reader's attention by the force and immediacy of their presentation.

Scholars focused on the printed word have long overlooked Whitman's fondness for the visual arts and their contribution to the character and structure of his verse. Whitman embraced the arts as he embraced other aspects of his culture as part of his resolve to effect a voice and manner appropriate to evoking the breadth, character and

intensity of a country whose inhabitants, as he wrote, "too are unrhymed poetry." (710) For Whitman as for many ante-bellum poets and writers, the visual arts proved an exciting reservoir of images and ideas which challenged the power of the pen while supplying it with some of its most striking metaphors. Whitman's friendships with artists, his studies of their work in the local art galleries, and his association with the Brooklyn Art Union strengthened his already keen visual acuity and provided him with important philosophical and procedural tools for challenging the ideas of his contemporaries. Compared with his contemporaries, Whitman's borrowings from the visual arts were more subtle, his intentions more original and his focus more diffuse, but for both the lure of the visual arts was not to be denied. "Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it," (32) Whitman built on but also greatly extended the art-literature connections of his day. His genius lay in his ability to embed himself in his culture while simultaneously working to broaden and transform that culture. The visual arts proved one of his most effective vehicles for change.

NOTES

¹ In *American Renaissance* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), F. O. Matthiessen noted several intriguing parallels between Whitman's verse and the genre painting of fellow Long Islander William Sidney Mount, but carried the matter no further. Joseph Jay Rubin's *The Historic Whitman* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973) was the first to examine some of Whitman's early journalistic writings on art and to identify several of his artist friends. Drawing on Rubin's work, Justin Kaplan has presented the fullest picture to date of Whitman's associations with Brooklyn artists in *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1980).

² Whitman, quoted in Horace L. Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2 (1907; New York: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 1961), p. 502.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

⁴ Four of these were written in response to the Brooklyn Art Union and are discussed below. The fifth is Whitman, "American Art—Jesse Talbot," *New York Sunday Dispatch*, 19 May 1850.

⁵ Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 10. See also, David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred J. Knopf, 1988).

⁶ William Cullen Bryant, quoted in *The Bryant Festival at 'The Century' November 5, M.DCCC.LXIV* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1865), p. 42.

⁷ See especially, Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd. 1980).

⁸ Marcel Duchamp, *Salt Seller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 126.

⁹ Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), p. 84. Subsequent reference will be cited in the text with page numbers only.

¹⁰ *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2, p. 506.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

¹² Whitman frequented New York's daguerreotype galleries in the 1840s and 1850s and often commented on them in his writings. For his observations of Plumbe's Daguerreotype Galley, see "Visit to Plumbe's Gallery," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 2 July 1846; rpt. in Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, eds., *The Gathering of the Forces*, vol. 2 (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), p. 114. For biographical information on Harrison, see: S. J. Burr, "Gabriel Harrison and the Daguerrean Art," *The Photographic Art-Journal* 1 (March 1851), 169-177; Virginia Chandler, "Gabriel Harrison," in Henry R. Stiles, ed., *The Civil, Political, Professional and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, N. Y. from 1883 to 1884* (New York: W. W. Munsell & Co., 1884), pp. 1151-1158; and Grant B. Romer, "Gabriel Harrison: The Poet Daguerrean," *Image* 22 (September 1979), 8-18.

¹³ Whitman mentions having seen this daguerreotype at New York's Crystal Palace exhibition. W., "A Brooklyn Daguerreotypist and his Pictures at the Crystal Palace," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 27 August 1853. The International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, owns a collection of Harrison's daguerreotypes, including this portrait of his son.

¹⁴ The three were Andrew Jackson (b. 1827), George Washington (b. 1829), and Thomas Jefferson (b. 1833).

¹⁵ Whitman, "A Brooklyn Daguerreotypist and his Pictures at the Crystal Palace."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Whitman, "April Afternoon Ramble," *Brooklyn Evening Star*, 30 April 1850.

¹⁸ Whitman, "A Brooklyn Daguerreotypist and his Pictures at the Crystal Palace."

¹⁹ Whitman in *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2, p. 506.

²⁰ Whitman discussed Harrison in: "April Afternoon Ramble"; Paumanok, "Letters from New York," *National Era*. Washington DC, 14 November 1850, rpt. in Rollo S. Silver, "Whitman in 1850: Three Uncollected Articles," *American Literature* 19 (January 1948), 310; "An Afternoon Lounge About Brooklyn," *Brooklyn Evening Star*, 24 May 1852; and "A Brooklyn Daguerreotypist and his Pictures at the Crystal Palace."

²¹ Whitman, "April Afternoon Ramble."

²² Whitman, "Letters from New York."

²³ For Whitman's enthusiasm for the Park Theatre, see *Prose Works 1892*, vol. 1, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), pp. 19-21. Harrison's photograph of Edwin Forrest as Damon is reproduced in Romer, "Gabriel Harrison," 17. Gabriel Harrison, *Edwin Forrest: The Actor and the Man* (Brooklyn, 1889). Harrison also wrote *The Life and Writings of John Howard Payne* (Albany: J. Munsell, 1875) and *A History of the Progress of the Drama, Music and the Fine Arts in the City of Brooklyn* (Brooklyn, 1884).

- ²⁴ "The American Art-Union," *The Knickerbocker*, 32 (November 1848), 443.
- ²⁵ Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, *American Academy of Fine Arts and American Art-Union* (New York: The New-York Historical Society, 1953), I, p. 209. For additional information on the American Art Union, see: Lillian B. Miller, *Patrons and Patriotism* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 160-172.
- ²⁶ Cowdrey, p. 216.
- ²⁷ "The American Art-Union," 446.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 445.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 446.
- ³⁰ These were the Dusseldorf Art-Union and the International Art-Union.
- ³¹ Henry R. Stiles, *A History of the City of Brooklyn*, vol. 3 (Brooklyn: Joel Munsell Printer, 1870), p. 889.
- ³² Records of the Brooklyn Institute, 1823-1873, Brooklyn Museum Records, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC, Roll Br-2, frames 341-342. Rebecca Hooper Eastman, *The Story of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1824-1914* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1924), pp. 6-7. Ground was broken in 1895 for the Brooklyn Museum's present building.
- ³³ W.W. "Matters Which Were Seen and Done in An Afternoon Ramble," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 19 November 1846; rpt. in Emory Holloway, ed., *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman* vol. 1 (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1972), p. 142. Subsequent references to this volume will be abbreviated *UPP*.
- ³⁴ Whitman, "Fine Arts at the West," *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, 28 April 1848.
- ³⁵ Paumanok, "About Some Matters Nearer Home," *New York Sunday Dispatch*, 25 November 1849; rpt. in Rubin, *The Historic Whitman*, p. 341.
- ³⁶ Whitman, "About Pictures, etc." *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 21 November 1846; rpt. in *The Gathering of the Forces*, vol. 2, p. 365.
- ³⁷ W.W., "Works of Beauty and Talent—The New Art Union of Brooklyn," *Brooklyn Daily Advertiser*, 4 April 1850; W.W., "Brooklyn Art Union—Walter Libbey—A Hint or Two on the Philosophy of Painting," *Brooklyn Daily Advertiser*, 21 December 1850; "Something About Art and Brooklyn Artists," *New York Evening Post*, 1 February 1851; rpt. in *UPP*, vol. 1, pp. 236-238.
- ³⁸ Whitman, "Brooklyn Art Union—Walter Libbey—A Hint or Two on the Philosophy of Painting."
- ³⁹ Whitman, "About Some Matters Nearer Home," p. 339.
- ⁴⁰ Very few of Libbey's paintings are currently known. The Brooklyn Museum owns two, a self-portrait and a portrait of Alexander Brown.
- ⁴¹ Whitman, "Something About Art and Brooklyn Artist," pp. 237-38.
- ⁴² Whitman, "Brooklyn Art Union—Walter Libbey—A Hint or Two on the Philosophy of Painting."
- ⁴³ Whitman, "Something About Art and Brooklyn Artists," pp. 236-237.

⁴⁴ Whitman, Review of *Modern Painters*, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 22 July 1847; Rubin, *The Historic Whitman*, p. 261; Jerome Loving, *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Whitman also reviewed Lester's *Sam Houston and His Republic* (1846), see *UPP*, vol. 1, p. 128.

⁴⁵ Charles Edwards Lester, *The Artist, the Merchant, and the Statesman* (New York: Paine & Burgess, 1845), vii-viii.

⁴⁶ Whitman, "Art and Artists: Remarks of Walt Whitman, Before the Brooklyn Art Union, on the Evening of March 31, 1851," *Brooklyn Daily Advertiser*, 3 April 1851; rpt. in *UPP*, vol. 1, pp. 241-247.

⁴⁷ The other nominees were Daniel P. Barnard, Dr. Dudley, J. A. Webb and Walter Beman. Minutes of the Brooklyn Art Union, Brooklyn Art Union Papers, Brooklyn Historical Society, Brooklyn, NY. 1978.141.

⁴⁸ Harrison, "Brooklyn Art-Union," *The Photographic Art Journal* 2 (November 1851), 296-297.

⁴⁹ The two were William Cullen Bryant and Prosper M. Wetmore.

⁵⁰ Among the best known of these were Bryant and James Fenimore Cooper.

⁵¹ Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, vol. 1, p. 166.

⁵² Bryant, quoted in Charles I. Glicksberg, "Whitman and Bryant," *Fantasy* (1935), 31.

⁵³ Whitman, "Mr. Bryant," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1 September 1846; rpt. in *The Gathering of the Forces*, vol. 2, pp. 260-261.

⁵⁴ Whitman, "Street Yarn," *Life Illustrated*, 16 August 1856; rpt. in Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari, eds. *New York Dissected* (New York: R. R. Wilson, 1936), p. 132.

⁵⁵ Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, vol. 1, p. 166.

⁵⁶ Bryant in "Proceedings at the Annual Meeting, December 18, 1846," *Transactions of the American Art-Union for the Year 1846* (New York: G. F. Nesbitt, 1847), 6. See also, David Shapiro, "William Cullen Bryant and the American Art Union," *William Cullen Bryant and His America* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1983), pp. 85-95. For Bryant's relationships with artists, see: Holly Joan Pinto, *William Cullen Bryant and the Hudson River School of Landscape Painting* (Roslyn, NY: Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, 1981) and *William Cullen Bryant, The Weirs and American Impressionism* (Roslyn, NY: Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, 1983); and William Cullen Bryant, II, "Poetry and Painting: A Love Affair of Long Ago," *American Quarterly* 22 (Winter 1970), 859-882. See also: Donald A. Ringe, "Bryant's Criticism of the Fine Arts," *College Art Journal*, 17 (Fall 1957), 43-54 and "Bryant and Whitman: A Study in Artistic Affinities," *Boston University Studies in English*, II (Summer 1956), 85-94.

⁵⁷ Bryant, "A Funeral Oration, Occasioned by the Death of Thomas Cole," *The Knickerbocker*, 32 (July 1848), 71.

⁵⁸ James Callow, *Kindred Spirits: Knickerbocker Writers and American Artists, 1807-1855* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. v.

⁵⁹ Charles I. Glicksberg, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933) reprints the seven articles which appeared between March 15 and May 17, 1862.

⁶⁰ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, pp. 596-601; Henry B. Rule, "Walt Whitman and George Caleb Bingham," *Walt Whitman Review*, 15 (December 1969), 248-253; Kent Blaser, "Walt Whitman and American Art," *Walt Whitman Review*, 24 (September 1978), 108-118; Max Kozloff, "Walt Whitman and American Art," in Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 29-53.

⁶¹ Whitman, "Excerpts from a Traveller's Note Book — Crossing the Alleghenies," *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, 5 March 1848, rpt. *UPP*, vol. 1, pp. 185-186.

⁶² John Burroughs, *The Writings of John Burroughs*, vol. 10: *Whitman: A Study* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1904), pp. 143, 139.

⁶³ Whitman, "Notes on the Meaning and Intention of 'Leaves of Grass,'" *The Complete Prose Works of Walt Whitman*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, vol. 9 (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), p. 10.

⁶⁴ See for example: "Out from Behind This Mask" (381), "The Diamond Ship" (534) and "Death's Valley" (580).

⁶⁵ Bryant, quoted in Parke Godwin, *A Biography of William Cullen Bryant*, vol. 2 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1883), p. 55.

⁶⁶ The year before Bryant's newspaper had published two of Whitman's recent poems, "Song for Certain Congressmen" and "Blood-Money," and in 1851, in addition to Whitman's review of the Brooklyn Art Union, it published three of his travel pieces and a letter: "A Letter from Brooklyn," 21 March 1851 and "Letters from Paumanok," 27 June 1851, 28 June 1851, 14 August 1851, rpt. in *UPP*, vol. 1, pp. 239-41, 247-259. Published within a 17-month period, these five articles and two poems mark the first appearance of Whitman's writing in the *New York Evening Post* in almost a decade and the last time the newspaper would carry his work.

⁶⁷ Whitman was also doubtless aware that in "Art" Emerson likened his fellow human beings to the statuary in an art gallery. Emerson, "Art," *Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 251.

⁶⁸ Whitman in *Pictures: An Unpublished Poem of Walt Whitman* (New York: The June House, and London: Faber & Guyer, Ltd., 1927), pp. 8-9.

⁶⁹ Whitman, "Visit to Plumbe's Gallery," p. 114. Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (1989) and Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life*, have suggested that it was these daguerreotype galleries and not the fine art displays which Whitman also frequented which provided the inspiration for "Pictures." Surely, these displays contributed to Whitman's fascination with the exhibition phenomenon, but daguerreotypes were not capable of producing the range of contemporary and historical imagery described in "Pictures."