

INTRODUCTION

Prelude to an Odyssey

Judith A. Curtis

The Mississippi River, called 'Father of Waters' by the Algonquin people, is North America's most important waterway and ecological river system, contributing to the economy of local inhabitants, and the migratory patterns of fish and birds, along its considerable length. It is so central to the life and geography of the continent, it has been called 'America's river.'

At the outset, Thomas Paquette, having lived and worked in several places along the upper and middle sections of the Mississippi, envisioned a tightly focused exhibition celebrating the centenary of the National Park Service. However, his original idea of selecting locations along the 72-mile stretch running from north of Minneapolis to well beyond St Paul – designated the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area in 1988 – blossomed into a much larger endeavor when he began to ask himself whether his subject matter might be expanded, rationally, to include the entire river. Surely limiting himself to one stretch would hardly scratch the surface of what might be possible.

With a main stream in excess of 2300 miles and covering the gamut from northern forest terrain to subtropical bayou, the mighty Mississippi widens and rolls through, and alongside, ten states. How could he hope to capture so much material, so many transformations? Paquette spent three years working on *America's River Re-Explored*. Besides his painting, he made sojourns in all four seasons to experience the river's many moods: intense study and observation of the subtle nuances of this immense river road, which has played a major role in this country's history.

In selecting his subjects, which portray everything from the clear headwaters of Lake Itasca down to the roiling watercourse in New Orleans, Paquette has imbued his work with a personal viewpoint, as well as a pictorial one. *Itasca Night* (page 13), for instance, heralds what might be viewed as our allegorical beginnings out of the darkness. His superb handling of a subordinated neutral foreground, acts as a contraposition to the immensity of endless sky with the promise of a new dawn breaking through in lighter notes, and the intriguing outlining

of cloud edges, which many an artist would tend to soften, but are exaggerated for effect by Paquette, perhaps reminiscing on his student days when he would camp beneath the stars with friends. Similarly, *Veritas Caput* (p. 15), "the true source" of the Mississippi, depicts one of the most popular spots on the river, a series of stepping stones across the narrow neck at the outflow of Lake Itasca. There are many who claim to have walked across the Mississippi here at its narrowest point, but Paquette chooses to show a quieter mood, sans humankind, to emphasize the natural world in ephemeral light.

Observe the brushwork close up, and the expressive use of color and texture. These works are sophisticated in their execution as befits an artist of Paquette's stature and maturity. Perhaps it his working method of studying his location, making sketches, recording images, and then working up larger canvases in the studio that allows Paquette to recreate a scene in his mind's eye and thus distill the essential mood of his composition; sharing with the viewer what he saw himself and felt at that moment, and translating that personal perception to canvas. It

is the essential elements that the artist seeks, eliminating detritus, and concentrating on incandescent, harmonious concepts.

As a landscape painter, Paquette often seeks the solitude and beauty of pure nature, but he does not shy away from urban grittiness, or man's danger to the environment, and presents strong images of what he finds along the river on the outskirts of ever expanding suburban sprawl. Take *Atmospheric Changes* (p. 20), where the artist captured to perfection what he saw as "plumes of superheated smoke and steam from a coal-fired plant billowing up into the cool air of an autumn morning before reaching the atmospheric ceiling and creating a lateral drift over the land." Here the large masses of harmonious color were created in an abstract approach, with a surface finish reminiscent of Lucian Freud (1922-2011). Freud applied layers of paint that varied in texture, creating visually intriguing surfaces for his subject. Similarly, Paquette uses color and brushwork to explore the diversity of his subject with aesthetically modernist overtones.

Parallel to his own task of following the Mississippi from beginning to end, we can see Paquette was drawing on the influences of Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) and Thomas Moran (1837-1926) both keen painters of glorious, sweeping vistas discovered during America's Westward Expansion, a spiritual view perhaps of God's bounty to humanity. However, Paquette is no mere imitator. His concept was to look for grandeur "in his own backyard"—locales he knew and yet could still look at with fresh eyes. Paquette took the theme of the endless vista, and bent it to his own will, creating large canvases of intimate scenes, and smaller canvases depicting fragments of larger subjects. The bridge paintings, for instance, do not have to feature the entire structure for us to feel the solidity and stability of these engineered forms. *Claim* (p. 26), especially, emphasizes man's imprint on nature.

Another unique facet of Paquette's armory of skills is his fascinating approach to color. "Color," he says, "is a relative thing, something I find endlessly interesting in its own right" And so we find him playing with color, substituting a blue sky for

green, or white-gray clouds for pink. Of course, those colors do exist in nature, however they are generally elusive tones, but Paquette, in finding those subtle nuances, exaggerates them to create a bolder statement.

Ultimately, this collection of paintings gives us a fascinating overview, seen through the eyes of a worthy talent, of America's greatest river as well as the land it passes through and the people who live there. There are "quickshifts," says Paquette, "from urban centers on one shore, to open land on the other...[and]...uninhabited woods, to the hard geometry of factories and tangle-piped refineries...." Paquette's paintings are far more eloquent than words, sharing pictorial visions of present day civilization and timeless nature. *America's River Re-Explored* is a revelation worth sharing.

Judith A. Curtis is an art historian, author, and art writer for American Art Review.