Charles Ethan Porter

1847?–1923

For Colleen—
a fellow seeker
of the truth
Hildy Cummings

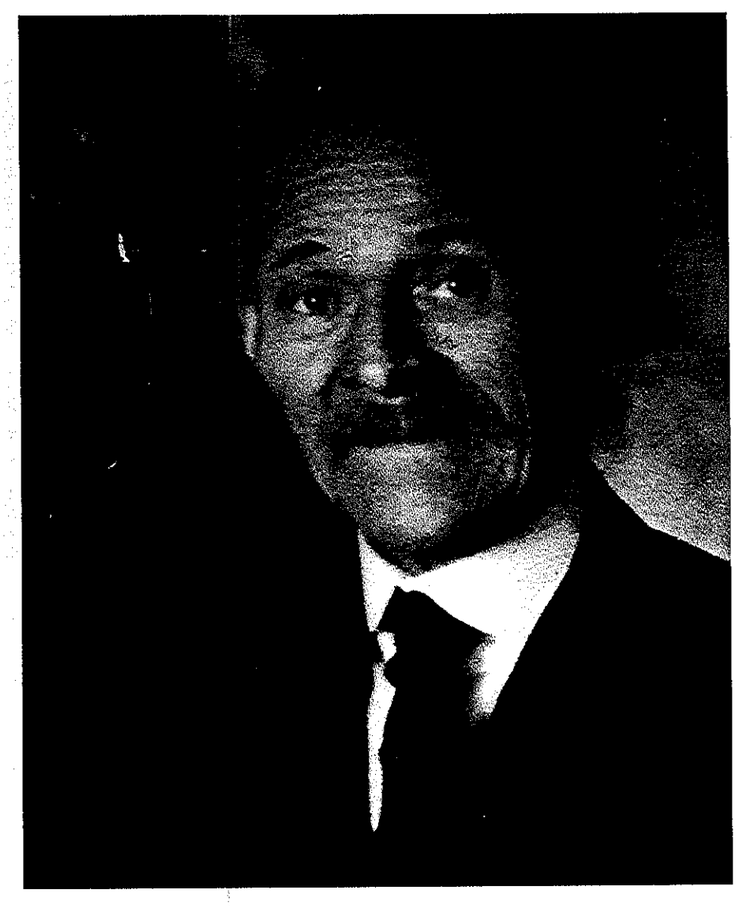
THE CONNECTICUT GALLERY, INC.

Foreword

There is to be observed in American still-life painting of the nineteenth century a lively passion for clarity of form and a convincing way of making a visual statement that shows how well nature and related objects were seen by the artist and also felt and understood. Nowhere is this observation more astutely adhered to than in the work of Charles Ethan Porter, a Rockville, Connecticut painter. The competency of Porter's style and the profound way he saw nature, particularly in the form of still-life painting, set him apart as an artist of fine sensibilities. It is in still-life painting that Porter joins the ranks of black artists Duncanson, Bannister, Tanner, and Lewis, by pursuing with commensurate skill the arrangement of flowers and fruits in the same manner that these artists understood nature as revealed in landscape painting or in the use of the human figure in religious or heroic subjects. Although Porter was born in the same era as these artists, his art has not received the critical attention given to their work. His relative obscurity until recent years is perhaps due in part to the fact that his work had little exposure outside the Springfield, Hartford, and Rockville communities, where he lived during the most productive years of his life. It is also due in part to the fact that Porter, like Bannister, Lewis, and Tanner, experienced racial prejudice in his day. Artists of color were often neglected because of their race and more often were rebuffed when they tried to exhibit their work in the exhibition halls of the nation. Although his art was seldom exhibited and relatively unknown until recent years, there now has occurred a lively interest in the life and work of Charles Ethan Porter, one of Connecticut's black artists. This healthy revival of interest, though long overdue, will add immeasurably to our appreciation and understanding of the role that artists of African ancestry have played in American art.

DAVID C. DRISKELL
Professor of Studio Art and Art History
University of Maryland

passion for
nature and
ration more
painter. The
n of still-life
er joins the
nsurate skill
d nature as
ic subjects.
al attention
fact that his
ere he lived
e Bannister,
n neglected
work in the
known until
Porter, one
l immeasur-
ve played in



Charles Ethan Porter

Acknowledgements

My interest in Charles Ethan Porter began three years ago when my attention was caught by a small still-life painting by an artist whose name I had never heard. The quality of the painting was superb, and I initiated inquiries. Charles Ethan Porter proved to be an obscure, almost unknown, artist whose name was known to very few. Those few, however, valued his work highly. For the next three years I scoured the Hartford area, gathering information, documents, records, the Mark Twain and Hoadly correspondence, and oral histories. I visited dozens of paintings in public collections and private homes, took photographs and histories. By spring of 1987, I realized that I would need help to complete the research and analysis of the material I had found. Hildegard Cummings, Curator of Education at The William Benton Museum of Art, was enlisted. She undertook a study of ten years of daily newspapers from Hartford, including the *Courant*, the *Post* and the *Times*, from which she noted most artistic activity and all references to Porter. She is grateful for the wonderful cooperation of the Interlibrary Loan Department of the Homer Babbidge Library of the University of Connecticut. We photocopied our massive research to date as a single group and shared it with David Driskell, James Miller, Thomas Riggio, and Barbara Brown, each of whom undertook to review the Porter material and relate it to his or her own areas of scholarship and expertise through individual contributions to the book. The result was the group of essays gathered here. I would like to express my deep appreciation to each of these authors, whose tremendous talents and unexpected dedication resulted in the successful completion of this book within the remarkably short time available.

I would also like to thank a number of people who contributed essentially to this project. Mrs. Dorothy Archibald, the only person to have previously mounted a one-man show of Porter's work (at the Town and County Club in Hartford in 1978), was exceptionally generous with information, which made early research easy and fruitful. Mr. Lamont McEvitt, who has long loved and collected works by Porter, also provided key information and devoted many hours of his time to the pursuit of Porter paintings on behalf of the project. I would particularly like to thank Mrs. Myrtle Loftus of Rockville, who has been devoted to the effort to uncover the Porter story. She arranged interviews with Rockville citizens, allowed her phone to be used for responses to advertising campaigns, and used her lifelong knowledge of Rockville and its citizens to help locate information, records, and paintings without ever betraying a confidence from her friends and neighbors. Most of all, I would like to thank those many wonderful people who opened their houses and family histories to me in these times when it is so dangerous to trust a stranger. Their information was important and their generosity deeply felt.

The production of this book was abnormally difficult due to the very short time available. Michael Sundra devoted hours to photographing paintings in people's homes at odd times and under difficult circumstances. David Cole, who designed the book; Sandy Neumann, who supervised the printing; Eric, Dana and Gloria at CT Graphics, who did the typesetting; and Robin Zella, who organized the photographs and did the leg work: all contributed long hours at impossible times and did their jobs superbly well. My thanks to all. Lastly, I would like to thank again Hildegard Cummings, whose brilliant research, outstanding editing, and warm friendship have helped to make this the satisfying and enriching project that it has been.

HELEN K. FUSSCAS

Table of Contents

Foreword • David C. Driskell 4

Chronology 8

The Paintings of Charles Ethan Porter • Helen K. Fusscas 9

"The Hartford Artist" • Hildegard Cummings 58

Charles Ethan Porter and Mark Twain • Thomas P. Riggio 76

Charles Ethan Porter and the Hartford Black Community • James A. Miller 88

Porter and his Rockville Family • Barbara Brown, Hildegard Cummings, Helen K. Fusscas 96

List of Color Illustrations 109

List of Black and White Illustrations 110

Charles Ethan Porter
Chronology

1847 Born in this year or 1848. In Hartford, East Hartford, or Rockville, Ct.

1857 Father buys land in Rockville and builds own house.

1862 First art lessons—discontinued because of poverty.

1864 Continues art lessons.

1865 Graduates from high school in Rockville.

1869 Begins studies at the National Academy of Design.

1871 First picture exhibited at the National Academy of Design: *Autumn Leaves.*

1873 First picture exhibited at the American Society of Painters in Watercolor: *Fruit.*

1875 Second painting at the American Society of Painters in Watercolor: *Moss Study.*

1876 Second picture at the National Academy of Design: *Fruit.*

1878 Moves to Hartford. Opens studio in the new Cheney building in Hartford. Moves to the Goodwin building in the fall.

1879 Back in Cheney building. Frederick Church visits his studio and purchases work.

1880 Goes on sketching trip to Adirondacks in the late summer.

1881 Auctions work to raise money for a trip to Europe. Sketches with Dwight Tryon in late summer. Leaves for Europe in November, first visiting London, then Paris. Takes with him letter of introduction written by Samuel Clemens, warmly recommending him.

1882 Writes to Clemens that he is doing well and is inspired by his Paris experience.

1883 Writes Clemens that his money is running out and that he needs commissions if he is to stay much longer.

1884 Returns to Hartford in March. Takes a studio in the tower of the Cheney building. Holds sale of his work.

1885 Removes to New York. Exhibits at the National Academy of Design.

1886 Continues in New York.

1887 Returns to Hartford and opens studio in the Cheney building. Has first sale with Daniel Wentworth. Moves studio to Waverly block.

1888 Holds second sale with Wentworth. Studio now in Goodwin building.

1889 Returns to Rockville and lives with his parents on Fox Hill. Opens studio in the new Fitch block. Participates in auction with others at Vorce's gallery, Hartford.

1890 Opens studio in the base of the tower on Fox Hill.

1891 Maintains studio in New York at least part of the year.

1896 Maintains studio in New York at least part of the year.

1910 Charter member of the Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts. Becomes a Christian Scientist about this time.

1923 Dies March 6th in Rockville and is buried there in the Grove Hill Cemetery.

76 yrs old

The Paintings of Charles Ethan Porter

Charles Ethan Porter was a nineteenth-century still-life artist. He painted quiet groupings of ordinary fruit in natural settings and unarranged flowers in simple containers like those in any kitchen. In his paintings these subjects were isolated, focused upon, and set aside from the confusion of external experience. They were bathed in a quiet crystalline light and suffused with rich, incandescent colors. The result is an art in which each humble object is comfortingly familiar yet breathtakingly more beautiful than expected. The simplicity that Porter achieved in these paintings is deceptive. It is the product of sophisticated artistic knowledge learned at great art centers in Europe and America. Had Porter's art flourished in New York, where his professional career began, he might eventually have undertaken more elaborate subject matter. As it happened, he worked for most of his life in Hartford, Connecticut, and nearby Rockville, where conservative patrons virtually leashed his great talents to their decided preference for his fruit and flower paintings. The result is a group of simple pictures that are minor masterpieces of American still-life painting.

Porter's paintings were forthrightly American in expressing love of unembellished nature. They lacked the reference to European subjects and the self-conscious bravura of style that was so prevalent in American art of the period. Instead, these paintings have an unassuming beauty that renewed an awareness of the informal, straightforward values that were at the heart of American culture. Porter offered plain American fruit and flowers with a conviction that verged on a religious statement. His paintings were part of the same impulse as the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson or the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Each simple subject revealed the special perfections of the world around it and became an object of reverence. Porter's patrons responded to his still-life painting with passion. They called him a genius, the best still-life painter in America, and all but refused to look at the work he did in other areas, such as landscape. In the end, his creativity was stifled by their demand for repetition. Porter's still lifes, however, became talismans that reassured their owners that beauty and goodness were near at hand. From that day to this, his paintings have been cherished by their owners. While his work went unnoticed in the big centers of art in America, Porter's paintings reflected the sensibilities of his time and contributed to the richness of American art.

An Overview

Charles Porter was an active artist from 1865 until about 1915, a period of fifty years. The body of his work must have been extensive, yet few of his documented paintings are known today. Only one of the paintings so lavishly praised in the newspapers has been identified with reasonable certainty. None accepted in the National Academy of Design's Annual Exhibitions in New York can be identified. No sketchbooks have been uncovered, and only one drawing. Furthermore, entire categories of Porter's artistic production are lost. He was recognized in his lifetime for pictures of dead game, strings of trout, interiors, portraits, nudes, and studies of insects. Not a single painting with these subjects has been located. Nevertheless, some one hundred and twenty paintings were available for study. The vast majority of these were not useful, since they were painted in the very last years of Porter's life when his abilities had seriously deteriorated. A core of work does remain, however, that is significant and interesting. Five and possibly six paintings bear dates from 1876 to 1893 and offer insight into the critical years of his production. Twenty other outstanding examples, which can be dated on the basis of stylistic similarity, help to round out a general survey of Porter's accomplishments.

A chronology of Porter's paintings may be organized into six periods:

The Beginning: 1862-1869. Porter developed his basic skills in these years, which mark the time between his first serious interest in art and his departure for New York to study at the National Academy of Design. No paintings are known from this period.

Experimentation: 1869-1881. Porter experimented with the styles and discoveries of the acknowledged masters of his era.

Study Abroad: 1881-1884. The artist absorbed the new concepts prevailing in the French art world, particularly those of the Barbizon School.

Maturity: 1884-1890. Porter developed a personal signature style and subject matter. His masterworks date from this period.

Continuation: 1890(?)-1900(?). Porter painted "format" works that became predictable and increasingly pedestrian, lacking new inspiration.

Decline: 1900(?)-1915(?). The work deteriorated, proceeding slowly to incompetence.

A definitive analysis of Porter's work will not be possible until more of his paintings have been located. Enough paintings were seen, however, to provide a firm basis for evaluating the extent and quality of Porter's art until such time as a *catalogue raisonné* can be produced.

Still Life—An Early Choice

Early in his career, Porter decided to paint still-life subjects. This choice was noteworthy.[1] Since the eighteenth century, still-life painting had been regarded as one of the lowest forms of art. It was only one step above copying another artist's work because it was itself only a copy of real things. People believed that the appeal of still life was essentially that of astonishment at the accuracy with which a subject had been depicted. They did not think it could appeal to the mind or elevate mankind as other subjects could. Although it had experienced a revival in America around the middle of the nineteenth century, still life was still not in high esteem in the 1870's. A decade earlier, when Porter was beginning to paint, it was a most uncommon choice.

It is interesting to speculate on what there was in Hartford or its vicinity that might have inspired Porter to make the decision to paint still life. Certainly as a young man enthusiastic about art he would have been familiar with the paintings in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, the nation's first permanent public art museum. In the 1860's these paintings still consisted primarily of the private art collection of Daniel Wadsworth, together with a collection that the museum had purchased in its early years. The best works were landscapes by Thomas Cole and Frederick E. Church, the Revolutionary War series by John Trumbull, a Vanderlyn history piece, and a number of portraits. The only painting that could possibly have been a source of inspiration to Porter was a "A Fruit Piece, the painter unknown."[2] Still on view in 1863, this painting depicted cherries, peaches, and white grapes on a table.[3] An American still life of such an early date would have been rare anywhere, and it was unique in the Atheneum collection.

An exhibition of Mr. Batterson's collection at the Atheneum in 1864 would have provided another opportunity for Charles Porter to see still-life painting. This collection of mostly European works included fruit pieces by Italian artist Antonio Galli, Dutch dead-game pieces by Hondekoeter and Jan Weenix, and a

flower, fruit, and game piece by David de Noter of Belgium.[4]

Porter would surely have known chromolithography, the color printing technique that began to be popular in the 1860's and 1870's. Both the Currier and Ives firm and that of Louis Prang produced numbers of inexpensive still-life prints. About eighty flower and sixty-five fruit pieces, for example, are listed in Currier and Ives catalogues of the early 1870's.[5] Artists of the smaller pieces were generally not acknowledged, although occasionally Fanny Palmer, a prolific Currier and Ives fruit and flower specialist, signed her name (Fig. 1). At Prang's, the Granberry sisters were also active, Henrietta doing the flowers and Virginia the fruit. Once in a while a popular still-life painting by a well-known artist was chosen for translation into a chromolithograph by other firms, and its sale to a wide public not only strengthened an artist's reputation but improved his financial prospects.[6] One can only wonder whether Porter saw much fruit or flower art before he left for New York in 1869. He may have gone to the city with nothing more specific in mind than to be a competent and successful artist.

Still life was not taught when Porter was accepted into the school of the National Academy of Design in 1869. He and the other students would have been set to studying plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculpture in order to improve their drawing skills and to inspire them to choose similarly elevated subjects. Yet a number of Porter's fellow students—William Merritt Chase, Morston Ream, and William Harnett among them—submitted still-life pieces to the Academy's juried exhibitions.[7] These young men may have felt that only "humble" subjects were appropriate for beginners or they may have seen signs that the public's renewed interest in still life was opening new market opportunities for artists.

A story about William Merritt Chase suggests how popular still-life subjects were becoming. Chase's father had run into financial difficulties and was no longer able to support his son's art studies in New

Fig. 1 Frances Flora Bond Palmer, *Garden, Orchard and Vine*



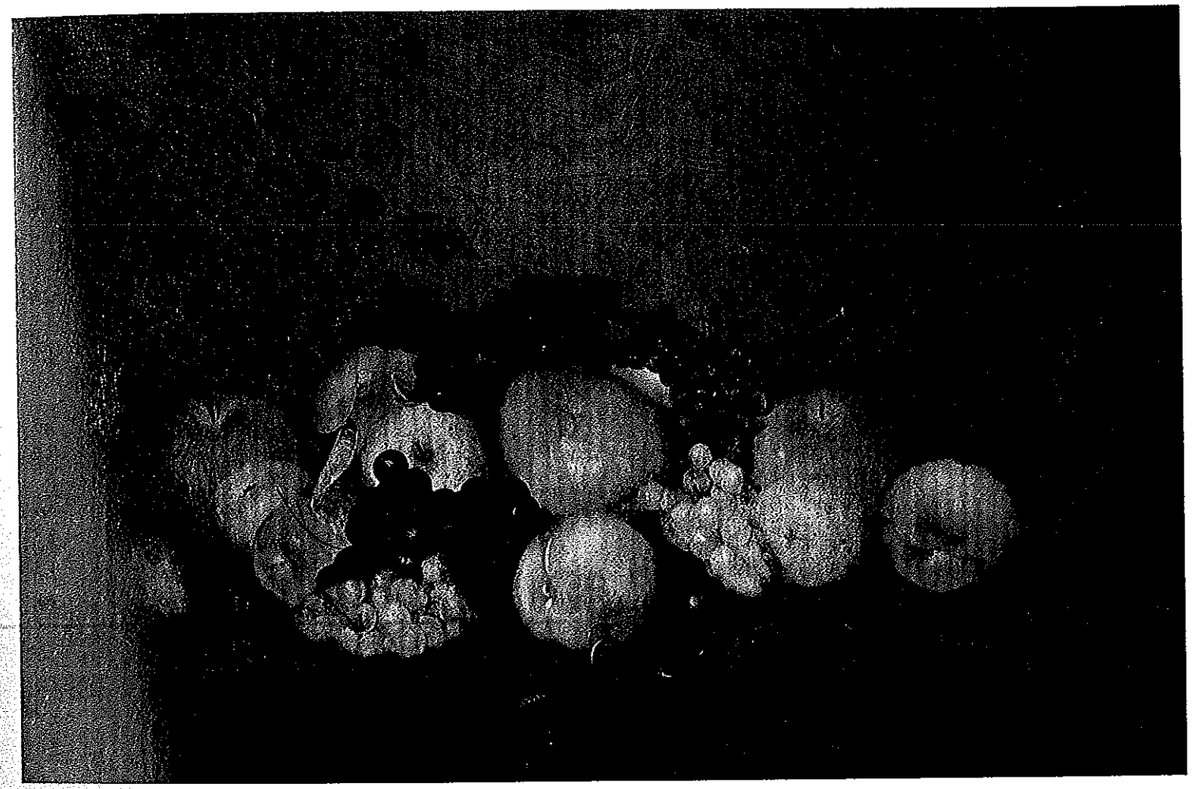


Plate I *Still Life—Fruit: Apples, Peaches and Pears*

York. In desperation, Chase went to his teacher, Joseph Oriel Eaton, who was also Porter's teacher for a year in the early 1870's. "I laid the matter before Mr. Eaton," Chase wrote, "and he advised me to paint flowers and fruits, in which line of work I had been moderately successful. Through his influence I was able to sell some of these. I was so successful that by Christmas I had saved up enough money to go to St. Louis."[8] Perhaps Eaton had made a similar recommendation to Porter.

Why Porter chose still life as the major thrust of his career will probably never be known. That he did establish his early career with still-life subjects is certain. In 1871 his first National Academy Annual Exhibition painting was entitled *Autumn Leaves*. In 1876 his second entry was *Fruit*.[9] For the rest of his life, fruit and flower still life was the main arena where Porter sought to perfect his artistic vision.

The Experimental Period

Porter's earliest documented paintings are dated between 1876 and 1881. This period was one of experimentation and learning. Porter had completed four years of study at the National Academy and a year with J. O. Eaton.[10] His own abilities had developed well. His paintings of these years reflect his interest in absorbing the lessons of the major styles in still life, either from earlier generations or from his own contemporaries. Three developments within the field of still life can be documented as having caught his attention. The first is the still-life style of the Philadelphia Peale family, who painted in the first half of the nineteenth century. The second is the influence of the Düsseldorf School, imported from Germany and in vogue in New York at the time. The third is the influence of the English philosopher John Ruskin, through the American Pre-Raphaelite movement. Each played an important role in the formation of Porter's mature style.

Porter's earliest known painting, dated 1876, might at first appear to be a masterwork by James Peale from the 1820's or 1830's (Plate I). It is bafflingly pure in its adherence to the Peale tradition, with no anachronisms to indicate its much later date (Fig. 2). There are none of the frills of the city, no delight in fancy dishes, silver, and the other accoutrements of the wealthy that were so popular with master still-life artists in Porter's time. There is none of the flash and glitter of light that was common in the 1870's and none of the era's sensual delight in paint for itself. Rather, the painting is characterized by a beautifully rendered study of each individual piece of fruit. Each surface and texture is recreated with a rare and exquisite richness of color. Fidelity to nature, the careful recording of even the imperfections of the fruit, its bruises and spoiled spots, is absolute. Porter has retained James Peale's interest in the curls and tendrils of the grape leaves. He has given Peale-like attention to depicting the greatest variety of shapes possible when grape leaves are severely foreshortened. This foreshortening should achieve the illusion of a three-dimensional picture space, but here it does not. Instead, space is still primarily expressed, as in the time of the Peales, by the overlapping of forms. Also lacking is a unifying sense of exterior light. Each object seems to exist independently, isolated and perfect, glowing with interior illumination. The color, more intense than in real fruit, adds its own fascination. Beautiful but with little sense of unity, the overall visual effect is fractured, demanding examination of every inch of the canvas. Porter's still life appears to be a masterpiece from the time of the Peales, a surprising throwback to an earlier age.

It is quite possible that Porter would have been familiar with the Peale family tradition. The Peales had been the great pioneers of American still-life painting. They were the first to popularize the still life as an independent subject for a picture. Still lifes by the



Fig. 2 James Peale, *Still Life with Grapes*

Peales had been exhibited widely in America during the first quarter of the nineteenth century and had resulted in a style that was pervasive until the end of the century.[11] That Hartford artists were aware of this style is seen in a primitive still life by C. Dodge (probably Clarissa Dodge) of Hartford, painted in 1828 (Fig. 3). Her painting is remarkably large and complex and seems to relate particularly to the work of the women artists of the Peale family. Perhaps the Wadsworth Atheneum's anonymous still life was also in the Peale tradition. In any case, it is more than likely that excellent examples of this tradition were available for Porter to study.

Even though the still life of 1876 refers back to the style of an earlier era, it should not be misunderstood as a student work. It is very likely that this is the painting accepted by the National Academy for its spring exhibition that year. The painting has a complex and confident composition combining pears, grapes, apples, and peaches on a cloth-covered table. It is very unlike the simple work of so many of Porter's young contemporaries. The maturity with which he was able to explore other men's ideas is typical of his experimentation over the next several years.

A fruit piece that probably dates from 1877 reveals Porter's interest in the Düsseldorf style of painting (Plate II).[12] More a sketch than a finished exhibition picture, this painting adds a new dimension to Porter's early explorations. The fruit is on a white marble slab, along with a *trompe l'oeil* housefly. Slab and fly are both hallmarks of the Düsseldorf School. John Preyer,

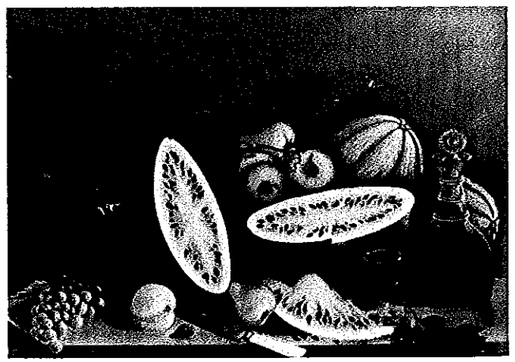


Fig. 3 Clarissa Dodge, *Still Life*

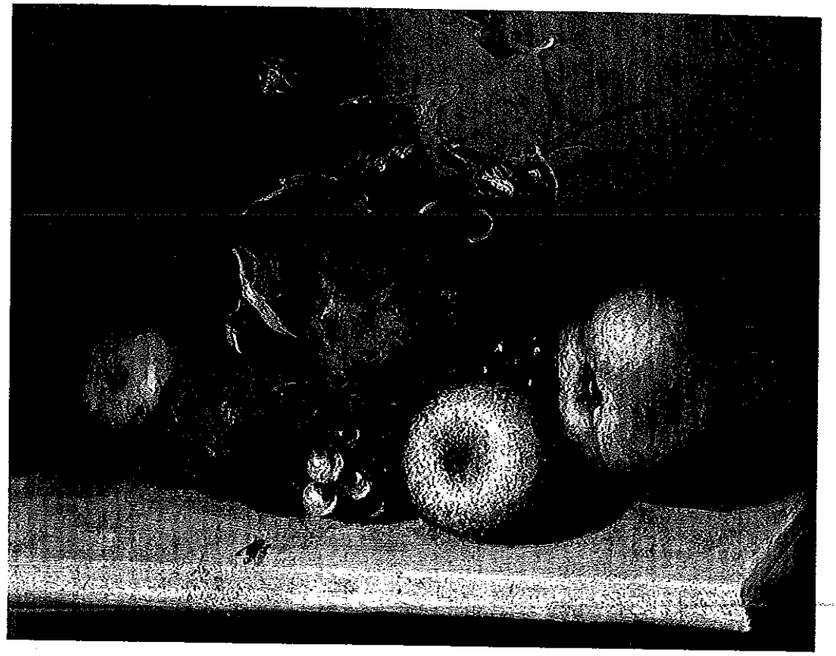


Plate II *Still Life: Apple with Fly*

a Düsseldorf artist whose work reflected the Dutch Baroque schools of painting, did still lifes characterized by white marble ledges and the presence of a fly or other insect that served to remind his viewers of how quickly perfection fades (Fig. 4). Preyer had an undoubted influence on Severin Roesen, a German artist who emigrated to America in 1848 and whose still lifes in the Preyer format were extemely influential in the development of American still life over the next twenty years. Preyer's own work, however, was known in New York, where it was exhibited at the Düsseldorf Gallery, which was, besides the National Academy, one of the few important exhibition spaces in the city.[13] Preyer's work was also made popular through a chromolithograph published by Knoedler and Company. William Gerdts has succinctly summed up this artist's importance: "A whole 'school' of artists began to create similar paintings, partially because of Roesen and other German immigrant artists and, in all probability, partially because of the direct influence of Preyer."[14]

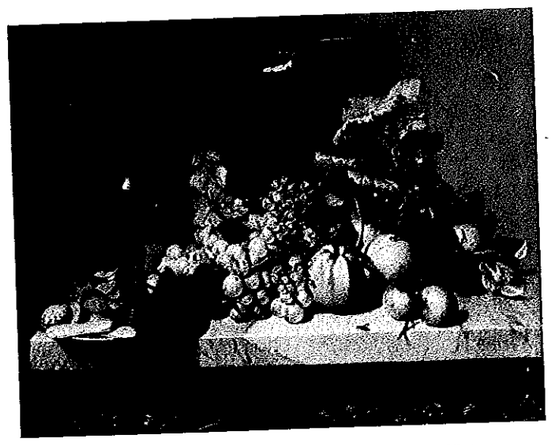


Fig. 4 Johann Wilhelm Preyer, *Still Life 1841*

Preyer's work, already simplified by Roesen, was further simplified and reduced by Porter in his 1877 fruit piece. Porter's painting has a plain white marble slab, without the usual veining or carved wooden support. The marble itself seems to have held little interest for him and was, so far as can be determined, never repeated in another painting. The prominent placement of the housefly, however, indicates a keen interest in this subject. Although it is the only example of an insect in the known paintings, it can be associated with a long fascination with the painting of insects for which Porter became famous after his arrival in Hartford. The fly not only gives life and temporality to the fruit subject, but it also leads the eye into the painting, a problem that the earlier 1876 painting had not approached.

More important, however, than the new content are the advances Porter has made as an artist in this painting. Two advances in technique are significant. The first is the notable experimentation with the perspective. Porter has pulled grape leaves out from the background of the painting and extended them like a canopy over the fruit. The foreshortening of one of the leaves is very effective. A second leaf was made to curl around the central apple in a similar way. This is the first appearance of experimentation with a *trompe l'oeil* effect of space that is frequently found in Porter's later work. The second advance is in the use of light. This light is strong and raking. It clearly comes from an exterior source located to the left of the subject. It not only casts abstract shadows on the marble, but it also polishes the fruit and highlights the leaves. The local colors of the grapes change when the light touches them, and the fruit in shadow is softened and obscured. The result is a much improved sense of reality and visual unity.

This is the only painting by Porter that shows the influence of the Düsseldorf School. Possibly Porter learned

this style from Morston Ream, who was a celebrated fruit painter in his day (Fig. 5). Ream's small *Still Life with Wine Glass*, in the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts, features the same white marble slab, the fly, and the half light, half dark background so obvious in Porter's piece. It also shares the unusual characteristic of a strongly brushed background. Ream lived at No. 31 Union Square in New York in 1876 when Porter lived at No. 35. When Porter left New York for Hartford, Ream moved into Porter's building, perhaps into Porter's old rooms.[15] It is unlikely that the two still-life artists were unaware of each other. Even so, other young artists were also showing the Düsseldorf influence. It might simply have been one of the primary ingredients in the learning process of a young still-life artist of the day.

Other Fruit Pieces of the 1870's

Porter moved from New York to Hartford in late 1877 or early 1878. The Hartford newspapers, claiming him as their own, began at once to take serious notice of his work. Most often it was apple paintings that attracted attention. A December 18, 1877 article in the *Hartford Daily Times* was entitled "A New Painter, A Colored Man" and said this:

> Some very fine oil paintings, chiefly fruit pieces, have been produced by Mr. Charles Porter, of Rockville, a colored man, who proposes to have a studio in this city. His touch, in painting fruit, evinces an extraordinary eye for color. Apples, especially, are so closely reproduced, that when viewed in the best light, they seem to be the real thing instead of its painted representation. There is the faithful color; there are the golden or ruddy "specks" on the green skin; there, on other kinds, are the deep red cheeks of the fruit, that deepened in August noon on the side next to the sun....Our opinion of him is that his sense of color is his strong point, and that as a colorist he is without a rival in the field he has selected.

Three years later, on December 6, 1880, the *Times* commented again on the apple pictures in an article entitled "The Work of a Growing Artist":

> To a number of persons in this city the art productions in still life of one of our young men have given a great deal of pleasure...He has gathered fruit no less, and piled his apples of rare green and deep reds in bonny contrast, and in nests of leaves that look fresh and cool and embower them with charming grace. All these pictures of still life, fruit and flowers, are beautiful, and testify to a sensuous appreciation of color and luxuriousness of outline; the grace of grouping and a careful treatment of details are also apparent in all.

Again and again the newspapers praise Porter's apple pictures in which green and red fruit are mixed in a natural setting. Not surprisingly, therefore, three fine apple paintings fitting this description have survived. The first and undoubtedly most beautiful (in part because of the fine condition in which it has survived) is in a private collection in Hartford (Plate III). It con-

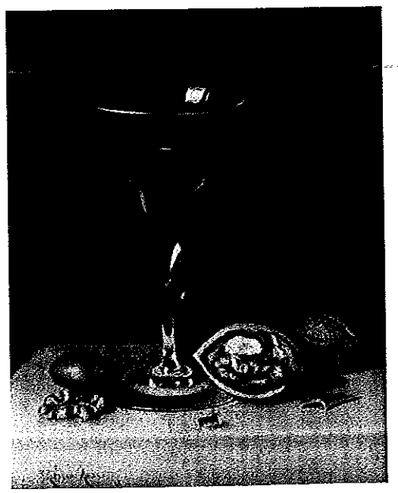


Fig. 5 Morston Ream,
Still Life With Wineglass

sists of three green and three red apples laid out on a ledge covered with wheat straw. A small stem of leaves is silhouetted against a partly dark, textured backdrop. This painting is of exceptional quality. The color glows. The surface of the apples is minutely rendered. The texture and imperfections of the skins are convincing. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the painting, however, is the convincing reality of tangible measurable space. The sense of space is achieved by an unusual device. There is an opening in the center of the composition, where one most expects solidity. Here a sprig of straw sparkles with light cast between the apples at a raking angle. This device forces the eye into the central area of the composition and demands recognition of the spatial success. It is a daring effort to resolve the problem of reproducing tangible three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, something Porter had not attempted in the 1876 picture. Spatial experimentation continued to interest him for many years, and a central excavation of empty space became a hallmark of his work.

The most significant feature of this apple painting, however, is the suggestion of an exterior natural setting

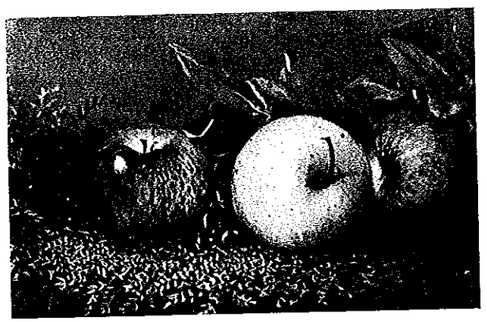


Fig. 6 Charles Ethan Porter, *Apples*

that is used here for the first time in Porter's known work. The previous constant of a table corner set on a slant to draw the eye into the painting has been abandoned for the wheat straw, with a faint suggestion of woodland ferns underneath. A second version of this still life, featuring the same green apple with its three-dimensional, upswept stem and an identical signature, is even more suggestive of the outdoors (Fig. 6). Any hint of ledge or table is totally gone, and more leaves are set into the background to shelter the fruit. Here is a clear indication of that dominant influence in American still life, the philosophy of John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites.

The American Pre-Raphaelite movement began in the 1840's when the American edition of Ruskin's book *Modern Painters* became known. Ruskin believed that true inspiration was to be found in nature, not in artifice, and advocated still-life paintings in which the natural object was scrutinized in its proper setting. Flowers should be seen growing in the field, not cut and arranged in a vase. Fruit should be nestled among leaves and grasses or hang from the branch. The study of a single leaf or insect was of greater merit than the grandest subjects with all their marvels. Ruskinian theories were rigidly adhered to by only a handful of American artists, most of whom were relatively insignificant in the history of American art. The theories themselves, however, were promulgated through articles in America's first art magazine, *The Crayon*. They were seen at work in an influential exhibition of British art in New York in 1857. In the 1860's they culminated in an American Pre-Raphaelite organization called The Society for the Advancement of Truth in Art, whose periodical was *The New Path*.[16] Pre-Raphaelitism never became a major force in American art. A more generalized version of Ruskin's theories, however, was felt for many years.

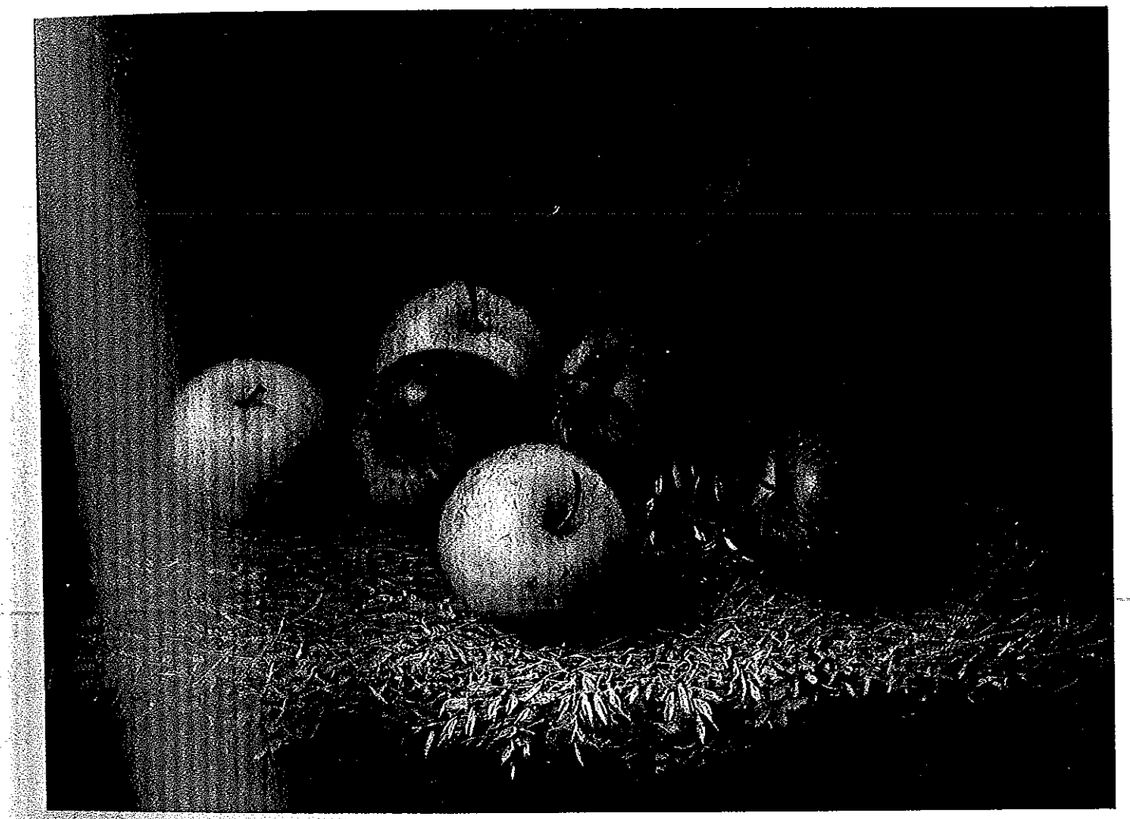


Plate III *Still Life: Apples*

The informal natural setting for still life instantly appealed to Americans, with their love of the land and their own relatively informal culture. It fit well with the general romanticizing of nature that was prevalent in landscape art of the time. Careful study of the details of nature, and the close-up view that allowed better appreciation of those details, in some instances seemed almost devoid of aesthetic qualities, but unsophisticated Americans who recognized and admired accuracy in reproduction gave their full approval. Paintings of this type were readily marketable and proliferated rapidly. William Gerdts has pointed out that from the 1850's on, natural still-life subjects appeared frequently in the records of the National Academy. Porter's first painting there in the spring exhibit of 1871 was entitled *Autumn Leaves*. It would certainly have been one of that group.

When Porter went to New York in 1869, the leader there of American still-life painting was William Mason Brown. Brown began to paint still life in the early 1860's and frequently exhibited still-life subjects at the National Academy: in 1871 his entry was *Pansies;* in 1876 he exhibited three fruit pieces; and in 1877 his entries were a fruit piece and a study of peaches and melon.[17] Brown achieved notoriety when a painting of his called *A Basket of Peaches Upset* was purchased by a New York dealer for two thousand dollars.[18]

Other fruit paintings of his, including some of raspberries, strawberries, and apples, were chromolithographed. Such proof of the commercial viability of this type of subject matter encouraged many young artists to attempt it. Although George Hall and Martin Johnson Heade were also in New York when Porter was, it is Brown's work that most closely relates to Porter's.

A painting by Brown entitled *Upturned Cherry Basket* of about 1870 is a case in point (Fig. 7). Here is a spill



Fig. 7 William Mason Brown, *Upturned Cherry Basket*

of the most realistic cherries in several stages of ripeness. Each is depicted with clarity against the natural earth and the open mouth of a carefully foreshortened basket. Close behind the basket is a backdrop of cherry leaves with fruit still dangling among them. The lightness of the ground, the closed-in space contained by the mass of large leaves, and the careful, almost scientific rendering of every leaf and fruit is the epitome of the generalized Pre-Raphaelite style. A wide range of Porter paintings have similar characteristics. A number of them are simple, familiar groupings of apples and grapes but with a neutral, undefined ground and leaves behind, constituting only a slight departure from Porter's tabletop still lifes (Fig. 8). Other paintings have a more developed canopy of leaves that replaces the dark backdrop of the traditional still life (Plate IV). But in a few, such as *Two*

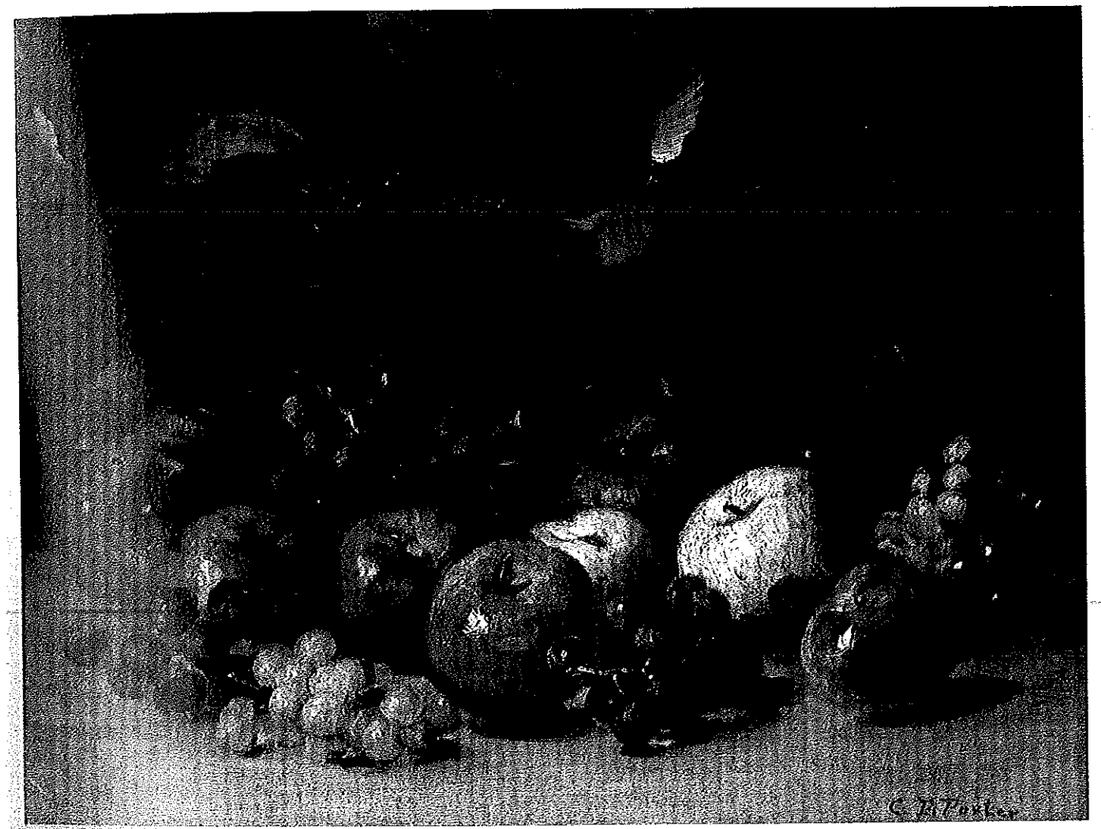


Plate IV *Still Life: Apples and Grapes*

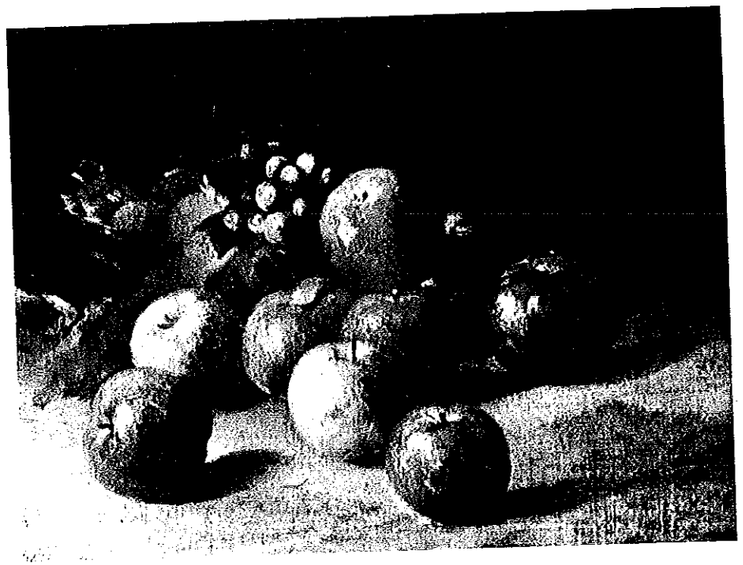


Fig. 8 Charles Ethan Porter, *Apples and Grapes*

Baskets of Strawberries (Plate V), the comparison with Brown is very close. Both artists use an unmistakably natural setting of dirt, straw, and leaves, with a tangled backdrop of dense foliage. The fruit in all its stages of ripeness, from small white undeveloped berries to fully mature fruit, is also characteristic of the paintings of both. Two things are not, however. Porter's brushstroke is much more relaxed than Brown's stiff precision. The texture of Porter's berries is also more realistic. In fact, on close inspection it appears that Porter actually mixed sand into the paint to create the texture. This is an example of a *trompe l'oeil* reality that plays a minor role in Porter's paintings. Again, too, there is that touch of the experimental, that interest in special effects, which is generally apparent in Porter's work of the 1870's and 1880's. An oddity in this painting, however, is the fact that the leaves behind the strawberries, while similar to the real thing, do not have the toothed edge of the strawberry plant. Another oddity is that the painting has been signed twice, with clearly identifiable Porter signatures but from two time-periods. Possibly the artist repainted parts of this work at a considerably later date. In any event, a favorite Porter subject was certainly the fruit piece in a natural setting. Six paintings of strawberries, five of cherries, and at least a dozen of apples and grapes have surfaced, demonstrating all degrees of complexity and all the periods of Porter's development. It suggests that this subject was commercially successful, a bread-and-butter work in his repertoire.

Flower Still Lifes

Another major area of experimentation that interested Charles Porter in his pre-Paris years was still life that featured flowers. Flower paintings attracted national attention somewhat later than did fruit pieces, and so it was natural that Porter's interest would develop later.

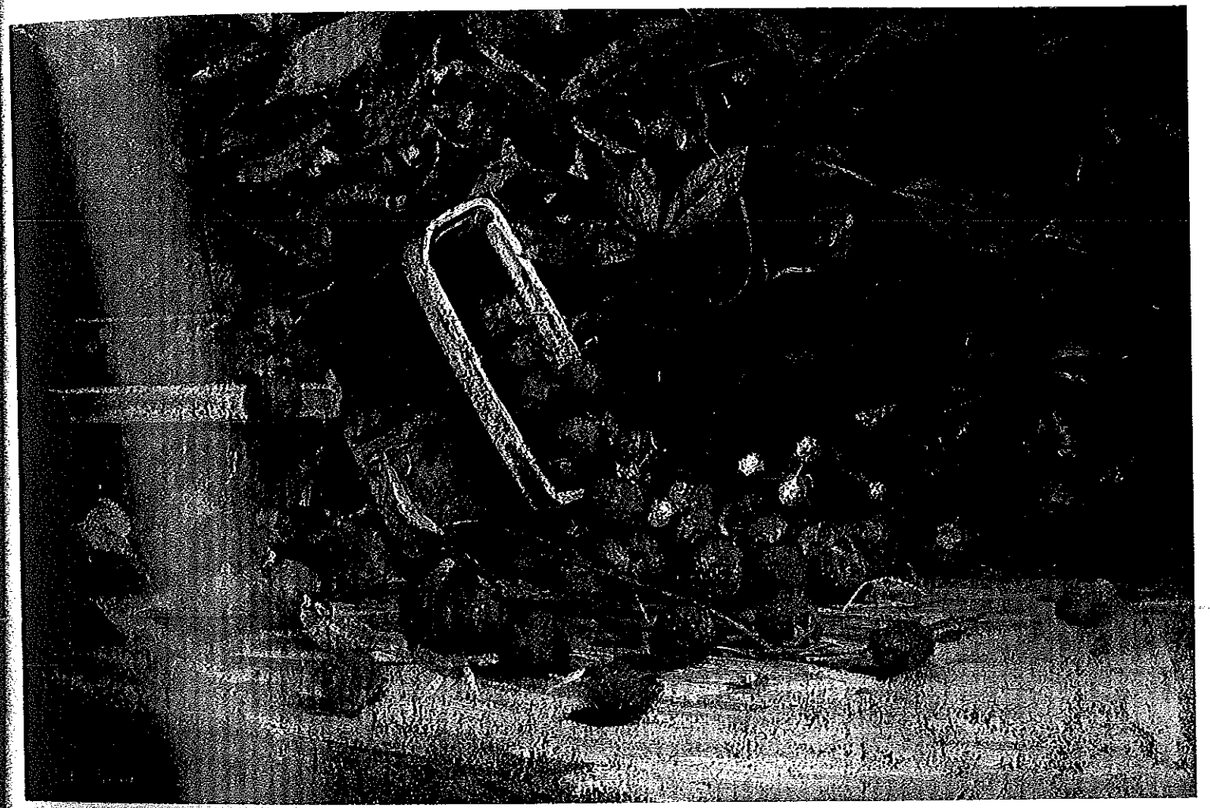


Plate V *Still Life: Two Baskets of Strawberries*

Although the newspapers mention Porter's flower paintings from as early as 1877, the first datable painting was done in 1881. This painting is unusually important in Porter's work because it is one of a surviving pair representing variations on a theme. The differences between the two paintings, while minor, are carefully thought-out changes that alter the impact of each work. These alterations offer more insight into Porter's creative process and artistic concerns than is possible through the examination of a single painting.

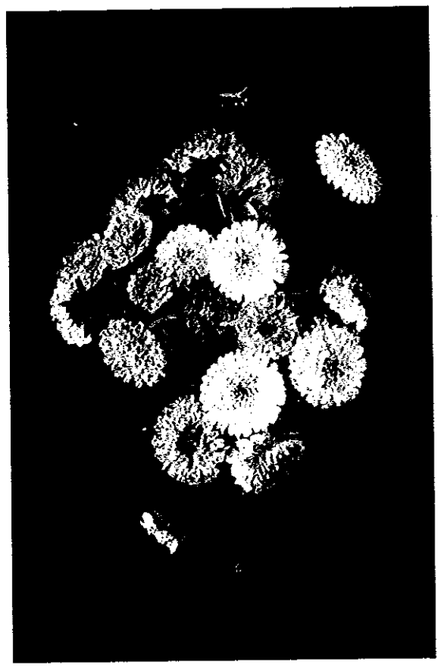


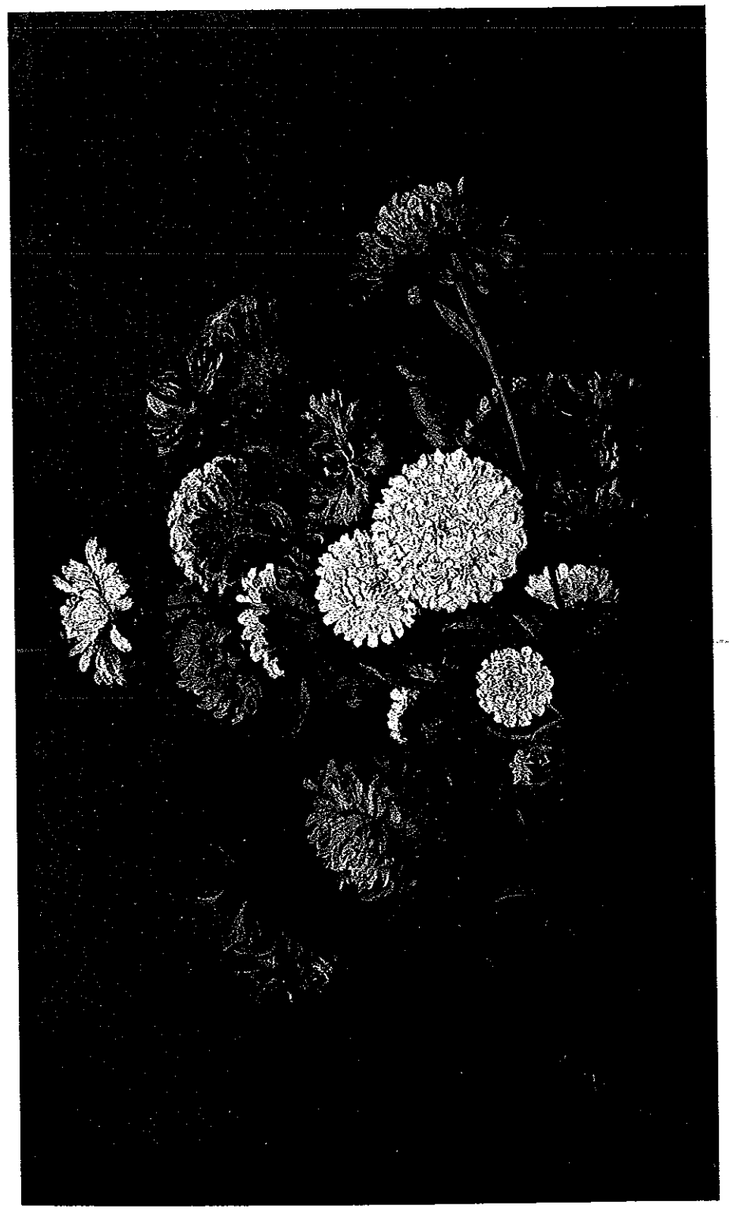
Fig. 9 Charles Ethan Porter, *Asters*

The aster paintings of 1881 are very similar. Both are vertical in format and approximately the same in size and style. Both feature colored asters informally bunched and silhouetted against a dark ground. The stems are cut but are not contained in a vase of any kind — another sign of the generalized Pre-Raphaelite principles so prevalent in Porter's time. In the broad points, the paintings are identical.

The earlier of the two, which is initialed only, has a most unusual composition (Plate VI). The stalks of the cut flowers are grouped in the lower right corner. Entry into the painting is by a simple stalk of stem that shoots to the upper center and is topped by a rose-colored bloom. This stem establishes the front plane of space and is the active diagonal of the picture. The top flower is balanced by another rose-colored bloom in the lower left center. Suspended between them on a slightly deeper plane is a rectangular mass of rose, white, and blue blooms containing a strong horizontal band of whites that are seen from every angle of foreshortening. The flowers are scrutinized in great detail but do not have the invisible finish of the apple pictures. Instead, there is a strong feeling for the thickness of the paint and the texture of the surface. Again the light, which does not seem to come from an outside source, creates an unnatural clarity of vision and isolates these flowers in such a way that they seem more important than they would be in a natural context. Although there is no overall unity, the painting is a characteristic success of this early period.

The second version is a complete reworking of the original painting (Fig. 9). The concept of suspending a block of blooms between two isolated flowers has been retained, but the odd stalk in the foreground that had been used to create a diagonal has been rejected. In order to regain the diagonal, Porter has taken a section of the central block of flowers and the two lone flowers and brought them closer to the surface

Plate VI *Asters*



of the space so that they read together and create an artificial diagonal of similar scale. Porter has made the remaining blooms in the block smaller, and he has reduced their colors by removing the blue and de-emphasizing the details of their structure. The result is a composition of greater unity, which has been achieved by more traditional means. What has been lost, however, is the individuality that characterizes Porter's best work of this period. The importance of this pair of paintings, and of the other known pairs, is that they reveal Porter to be a clear-minded experimenter searching for the perfect vehicle for his artistic vision.

Early Landscape

Porter's final area of experimentation in the late 1870's was in landscape painting. According to the newspapers, Porter did not attempt landscape until 1879. The reason for his new interest is probably suggested by this *Courant* notice of November 11, 1879: "Some landscape pieces which he has recently finished show that his capabilities are not confined to narrow limits." Once again the notion that still life was a lower form of painting had been implied. Porter began to study landscape aggressively, even going so far as to say, in December, 1880, that he would no longer paint anything but landscape except by commission.[19] He seemed to realize that his opportunity to achieve an important reputation as an artist depended on his ability to move away from the stigma of being "just" a still-life painter. Although he continued to paint still lifes because of the relatively higher prices they brought at auction, he devoted a great deal of effort to landscape for the rest of his life.

Porter's earliest landscape style is represented by a painting in the collection of the Connecticut Bank and Trust Company in Hartford (Plate VII). The subject is a small pond surrounded by woodland, painted in rich earth colors of great intensity. Careful details of rock and vegetation move around the pond in fascinating sequence. The reflections on the silvery water of the pond are equally intense. Only the sky appears dull and uninteresting. It is some time before one is aware that there could be no basis in natural experience for this painting. As in the fruit painting of 1876, there is neither natural light nor natural space. A feeling of light is created by the local color of each brushstroke but is not related to exterior sunshine falling from an observable source. A sense of space is completely missing. There is no path into the picture by which the eye can move easily toward a distant horizon. There is also no atmospheric perspective where the colors and clarity fade as the objects move farther from the eye. There is not even a sense that sketches of plants or trees were made outdoors and incorporated into the final painting, since none of the vegetation is identifiable. The conclusion must be drawn that this landscape represents what Porter thought a landscape should look like, not a landscape that he observed from nature. It was a painting conceived in the studio from his imagination and from his awareness of the style of other landscape artists.

Porter's landscape work drew a great deal of comment from the press in the years before his departure for France. Frederick Church's interest in it was reported in 1879[20] and must certainly have inspired Porter. A sketching trip to the Adirondacks was announced soon after.[21] Porter was also said to have spent time sketching with Dwight Tryon during the summer of 1881.[22] Small influences from both these artists may be seen in the Connecticut Bank and Trust painting. The treatment of vines and plants in the foreground, for example, is somewhat similar to the early Church. The intimate closed-in feeling and the use of the brush relate somewhat to the work of Tryon. Porter's landscape as a whole, however, has no obvious source. It has that air of individuality so typical of Porter's work in other areas, and so important to his still life.

Porter's work during the years between the end of his studies at the National Academy of Design and his residency in Europe was the work of a mature but not a master artist. Although he was thirty-three years old in 1881 and had created fine paintings, he had not yet discovered the style that would characterize his best art. He had spent the early years of his career studying the work of more famous men and absorbing what seemed relevant. He had also explored the means by which his own art could be strengthened and had made serious improvement in his understanding of space, light, composition, and color. At the end of 1881 he had still not found what he was searching for, either in artistic expression or in recognition and position. He set off for Europe determined to complete his education and find the success that he had already been pursuing for so many years.

Paris

Porter left for Paris in November of 1881 and returned early in 1884. He went with a letter of introduction from Mark Twain that should have given him access to the American art community and thus to knowledge of how to go about achieving his goals. Those goals must have been to study still life and landscape with the best masters in Paris and to have work accepted at the prestigious French Salon exhibitions. He probably wanted at least as much success as he had had in New York, where he had attended the National Academy and exhibited at its juried exhibitions. His early address on the Rue des Beaux Arts,[23] named for the École des Beaux Arts that was on this street, strongly suggests that this was, in fact, what he planned. He was near the best art school in France, the equivalent of America's National Academy. Classes were supervised by the masters whose paintings were hung annually at the Salon and who were the acknowledged leaders of the French art establishment. There is no indication that Porter achieved his goals. His name is not on the rolls of the École des Beaux Arts, and he never had a painting at the Salon.[24] Only those few paintings datable to the Paris period and the paintings created shortly after Porter's return offer any clue as to what sources of inspiration Porter found during the two undocumented years of his French experience.

The only painting that can be identified with certainty from the Paris years is that of a vase of roses in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum (Plate VIII). "Paris" is inscribed in the lower right corner under the signature. This painting indicates that Porter's art had not only been influenced by the new styles of Paris, it had been revolutionized by them. The flowers are not isolated against a dark ground. Instead, they are united with a bright background by the flow of exterior light playing over them. There is the familiar diagonal of blooms and the love of leaves silhouetted against the backdrop. But Porter's tendency before Paris toward a somewhat thick paint application and to visible texture has been intensified. The flowers are now created with a loaded brush and with a broad fluid stroke. The vase is not carefully formed but is rough and heavily highlighted with a splash of paint. Furthermore, the palette has changed from concentrated colors to soft pastels in green and pink. The asters of 1881 are more than an ocean away.

The paintings Porter might have used as a source of inspiration for the Paris *Roses* are unknown. He was certainly not influenced by the usual Salon painting with its invisible brush strokes and classical style. He was equally unlikely to have been influenced by the French Impressionists, who were exhibiting in 1882 and 1883. They were being discussed in the French papers as if they were fools and incompetents, and they were selling few if any of their paintings. Porter, who would have been conservative and particularly anxious for official approval, would probably not have been attracted to such a group.

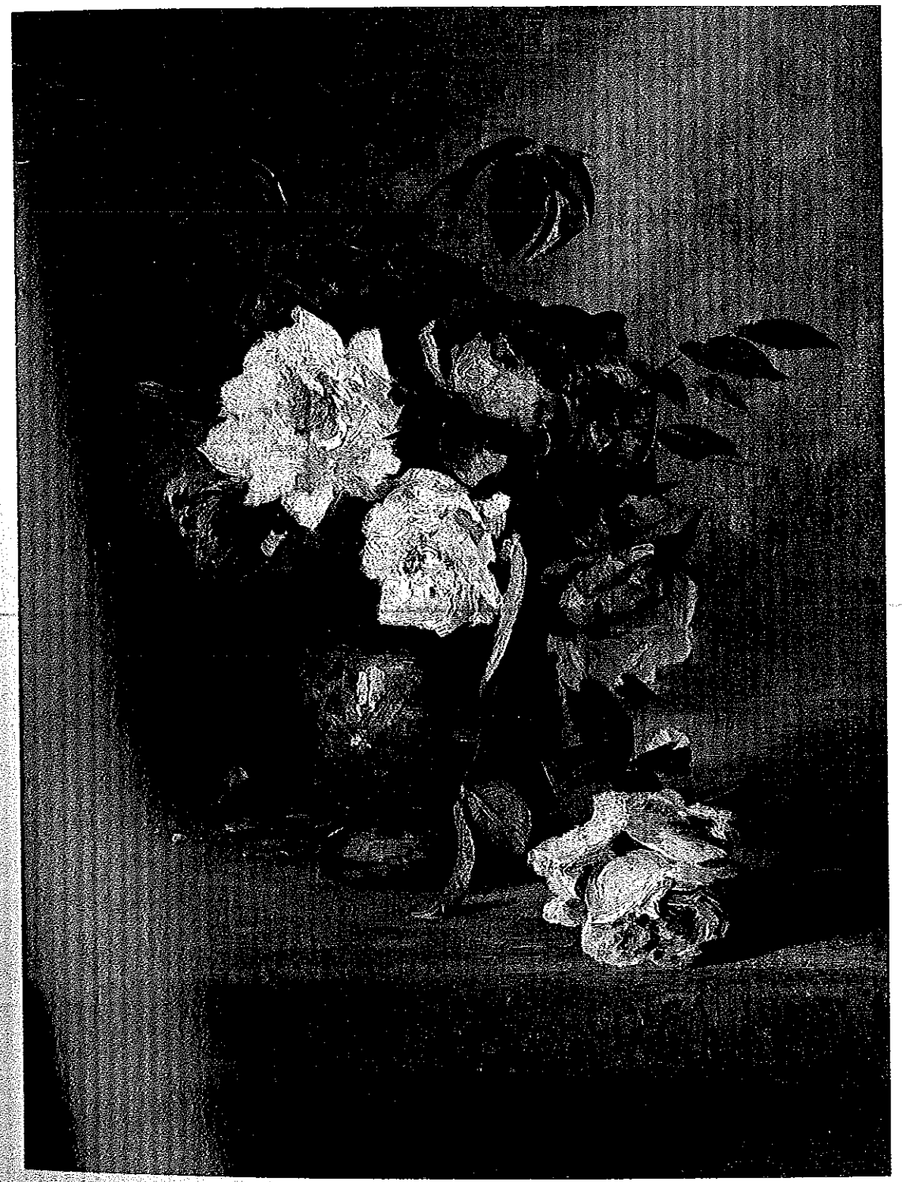


Plate VIII *Still Life of Flowers*

There is the possibility that Porter was aware of the work of Fantin-Latour, a well-established flower painter who exhibited regularly at the Salon and who had been awarded the Legion of Honor in 1879. There is a strong similarity between many of his compositions and subjects from 1875 to 1885 and Porter's work during his Paris period and following. Fantin-Latour painted simple flowers in unpretentious arrangements. He was known to paint flowers that appeared to be growing against a neutral background. He painted flowers dropped casually on a table. He painted bouquets of chrysanthemums in which his favored color combination of pink, white, and yellow was featured. Porter did all these things, too. A comparison between a late Porter painting of chrysanthemums and a Fantin-Latour painting of the same subject, dated 1875, makes this similarity intriguingly clear (Figs. 10 and 11). Fantin-Latour was somewhat of a recluse by the early 1880's, but his address was near Porter's on the Rue des Beaux Arts.[25] Without further information, however, Porter's masters in Paris must remain unidentified.

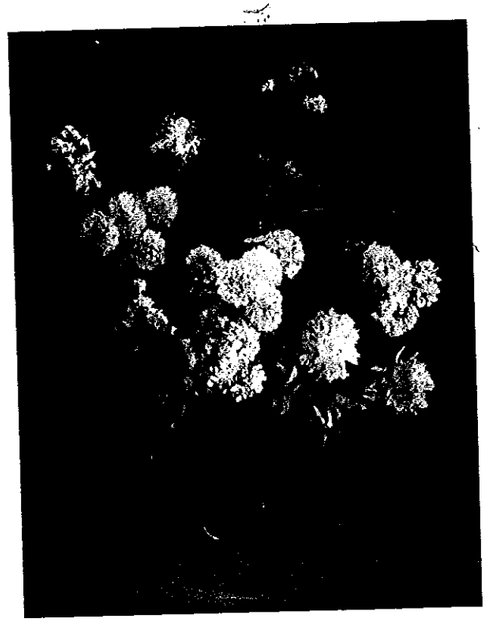


Fig. 10 Charles Ethan Porter, *Chrysanthemums*

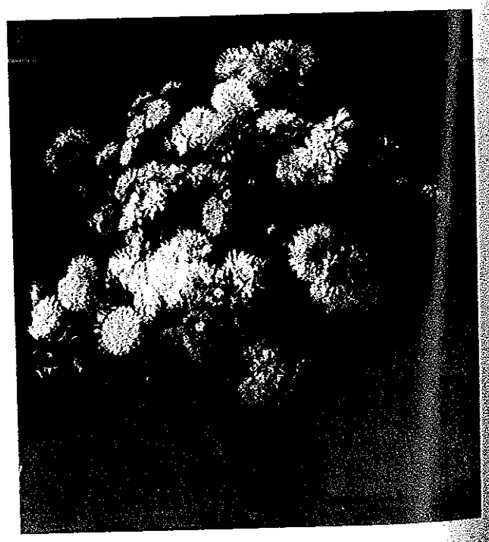


Fig. 11 Henri Fantin-Latour, *Chrysanthemums*

The Masterpieces

Charles Porter created many of his finest paintings between 1884, the year he returned from Paris, and 1890. At first his painting incorporated the brilliant fluid brushwork and light natural palette of his French experience, while continuing experiments involving spatial and compositional devices. The resulting paint-



Plate VII *Landscape*

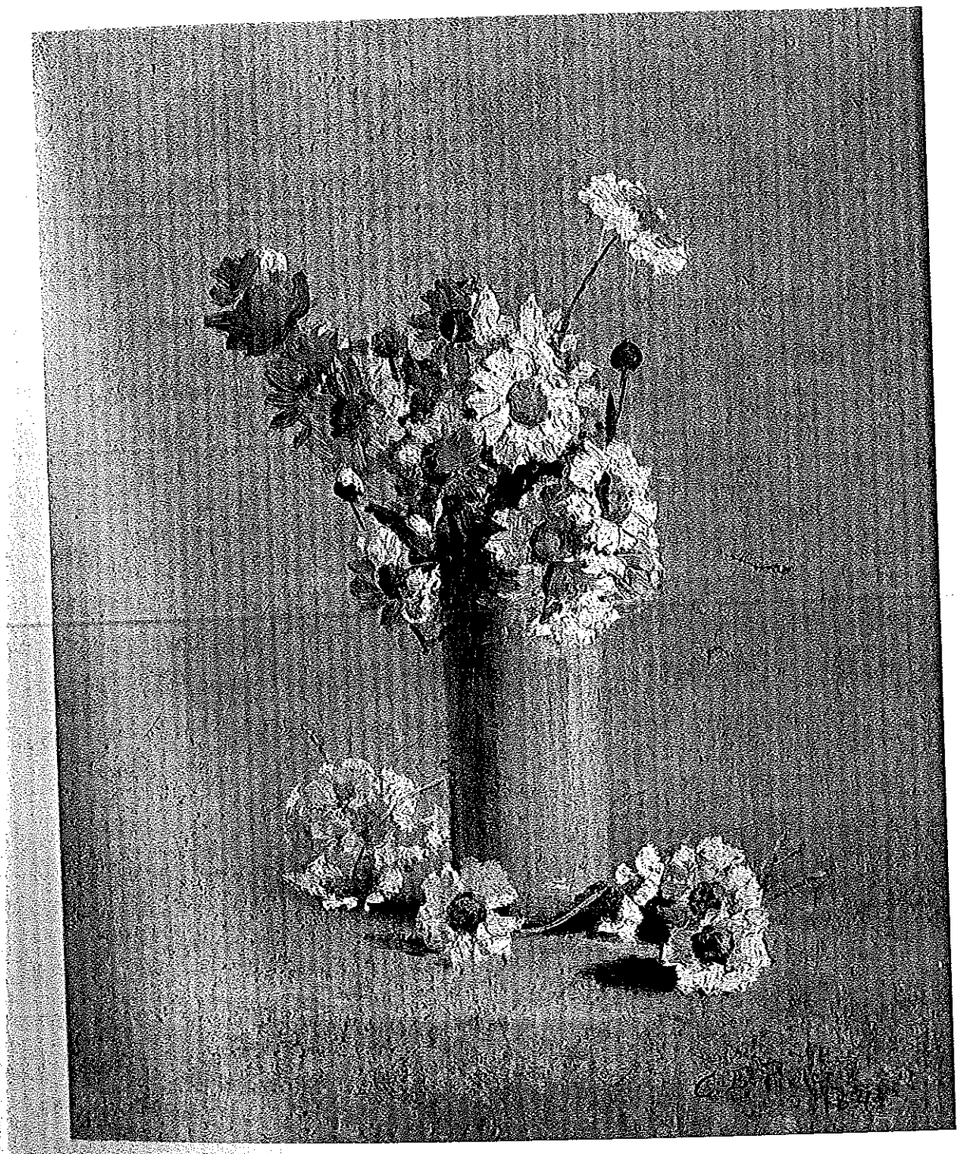


Plate IX *Daisies*

Porter and His Rockville Family

Were it not for the festoons and paper lanterns above their heads, the seven men who look at us from a seventy-five-year-old photograph might seem to have gathered for a business lunch (Fig. 51). The tablecloth does have frayed edges that are curiously at odds with the nice dishes and food arranged on it, and the paintings behind the men are somewhat casually hung. More interesting than any such oddities, however, is that this photograph includes a rare likeness of the black American artist Charles Ethan Porter. He is the man with the mustache, second from the right. The setting is his studio at the summit of Fox Hill in Rockville, Connecticut, a small city about twenty miles east of Hartford, and the occasion is his birthday, perhaps his sixty-fourth birthday in 1911.

Porter was a remarkable man. He was an artist. Not one of the world's greatest painters but a very competent one. He brought many people a great deal of pleasure by creating art that crystallized the beauty of



Fig. 51 Porter and his students, c. 1911

ar fruits and of ordinary garden flowers. In his
s they became delicate and fine, seen freshly for
selves without being either grand or fancy.
r's art is just that: *art*. It is part of the great trad-
of American art, coming from great American
cedents and adding its own poetic and charming
ribution to the field of still life. There is no sugges-
that the artist was black or white, no apology, no
se, nor is there need. Charles E. Porter is an artist
hy of respect.

pect and love are what the birthday photograph is
ut. Porter is with his students, who must have
nized this birthday celebration as a surprise.
rles Porter was too poor for party-giving and was,
des, the kind of man who would have found it
barrassing to honor himself.

might also have thought he had little to celebrate.
ough his students were devoted to him, he had
g ago lost the fine reputation he had had as an
st, even in Hartford, scene of his greatest success.
had been a favorite of the Hartford press in the
1870's and for most of the 1880's, and in 1887,
en he had returned to the city after a two-year stay
New York, he was treated as though he had never
en away. Yet for unknown reasons, in 1892, just three
ars after he had left Hartford for good, no one
ought to invite him to become a founding member
the Society of Hartford Artists, an organization that
as meant to include every artist who had spent time
the city.[1] Moreover, he had been almost entirely
nored the year before, when he had held a special
hibition of his work in Hartford. And he had not
een noticed by the Hartford press since.

orter had returned to his hometown of Rockville in
889, and he lived and worked there most of the rest
f his life, dying March 6, 1923, at the age of seventy-
ix. Some residents remember or have heard that

Porter carried his paintings from door to door in the long, final phase of his career, bartering them for food or for flowers to paint, looking for odd jobs when no one wanted a painting. In Porter's day, when art galleries were scarce, it was not altogether uncommon for art to be sold in this manner, but most artists tried to market their work to a different public than to the working-class citizens of a mill town like Rockville. For example, Gustave Hoffman, whose first art lessons had been from Porter many years before, took the train from Rockville to Hartford every Christmas season, where he had a good deal of success selling his etchings to employees of the local insurance companies. Other times he would dress up in a white suit and go to New England or Florida resorts, where he sold tourists enough of his works to keep him solvent between portrait commissions.[2] Porter seems not to have tried at this time of his life to sell his paintings far outside of Rockville. It is as though he had given up, had accepted the reality of a shattered dream. Nonetheless, for many more years his need to paint stayed strong. He resorted to painting over earlier paintings, to using cheap barn paint, to painting on the back side of oil cloth. His skills deterioriated. Finally, three or four years after the birthday party of the photograph, he stopped painting altogether. He died in poverty.

But if the Charles Ethan Porter story ends badly, it is one of triumph as well as tragedy. For many years this nineteenth-century black American artist braved more than his share of currents, rocks, and rapids to swim in the mainstream of American art. Neither his art nor his struggles and successes deserve the oblivion that has been his lot. Although his story is far from complete, aspects of it have recently been uncovered. Some of them have been discussed in previous chapters. This one goes back to the beginning—his remarkable family.

Charles Ethan Porter was born in Connecticut, probably in 1847 and possibly in Hartford.[3] By 1850 two-year-old Charles and his family were living in East Hartford, where they were the only black residents. His father was William Henry Porter, born in Belchertown, Massachusetts, but living in Vernon, Connecticut at the time of his marriage to Mary Dolphin in that town on September 2, 1838. Nothing is known of the history of William Porter's family. William himself was born a free man and may have been of mixed black and white ancestry. He appears to have been illiterate,[4] and his occupation is sometimes listed in a census or city directory as farmer, sometimes as laborer. He is known to have worked briefly as a night watchman for a railroad line. Mary Dolphin was a Connecticut native, daughter of Ethan and Cynthia (Pottage) Dolphin and granddaughter of Edward/Ned Dolphin of Hartford. She had both black and white ancestors, and her maternal lineage appears to have been Indian. Her grandfather was probably Jabez Pottage, a Revolutionary War veteran who was living in Ellington in 1820. Mary was herself a resident of Ellington at the time of her marriage to Porter in 1838, and she had already had a son by a white man, who would be called Edwin Blake Porter and raised with the other Porter children. (Years later, Ella Porter, one of Edwin's two daughters, would also live for a time with the William Porters.) Before her marriage, Mary Dolphin Porter was sometimes listed as a servant in city directories. She was not only literate but may have been an avid reader.[5]

Sometime in the 1850's, perhaps as late as 1857 when he bought land on Fox Hill in Rockville and built a house on it, William Porter moved his growing family to the township of Vernon, which includes Rockville. There is no clue as to why the Porters made this move, although William Porter had lived in Vernon before.[6] In 1850 there were only two black families in Vernon, and in 1860 the Porters made three. All the black men were listed as laborers, and it is most likely that they supported themselves through a variety of farm chores and other odd jobs. It may be significant, however, that none of the men were servants, as was commonly the case with blacks in larger communities. Vernon was almost entirely rural, and although textile factories were being established in the area that would become known as Rockville, there is no indication that the senior Porter ever worked in one. At that time blacks were seldom employed in the mills of Connecticut. Some years later, Ella Porter would work at Belding's silk mill in Rockville, but that seems yet another of the Porter family's achievements.

No matter why William Porter brought his family to Rockville—nor how he managed to buy land and the construction materials for a house there—the family liked the place well enough to remain for half a century. Because so few blacks were in town, those who were long-term residents could probably mingle more freely with the general population. Charles Porter, and presumably others in his family, were so light-skinned that other Rockvilleans often forgot to think of them as "colored."[7] That in itself would have caused problems had the family lived in a community with many dark-skinned Afro-Americans, and it must have caused pain of a different sort in Rockville, for William and Mary Porter themselves never forgot nor wanted to forget their black heritage. Nor did Charles Ethan Porter. It seemed to make them especially determined to prove that the American dream of happiness and prosperity through hard work, patriotism, and piety could be theirs if the family pulled together and worked harder than most people.

In Rockville, the Porters could live with dignity on little money. The land they owned on Fox Hill may have seemed undesirable to some, since it was near the textile factories, but their house on the hill offered a



Plate XXI *Peonies*

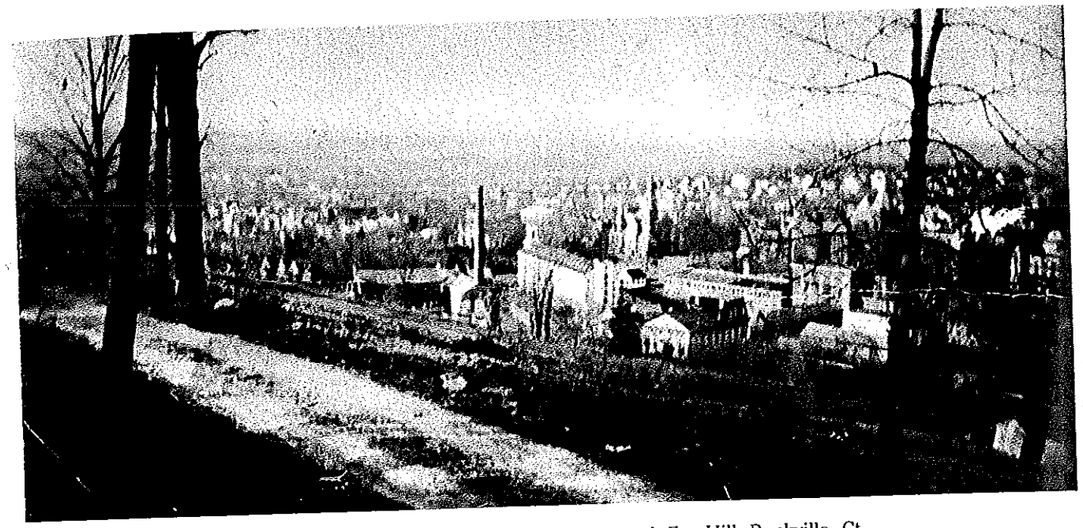


Fig. 52 The view from the Porter homestead, Fox Hill, Rockville, Ct.

spectacular view (Fig. 52). Their children attended the same local schools as other Rockville children. They became voters after passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. The tragedies they suffered were of a kind painfully familiar to parents in the nineteenth century, no matter what their ancestry. William and Mary Porter had fourteen children, only seven of whom lived beyond childhood. Charles Ethan was the sixth of these. Six small children died during the decade marked by the Civil War. Two grown sons, William Jr. and Joseph, enlisted in the Union Army, and eighteen-year-old Joseph met his death on a Virginia battlefield.[8] A grief-stricken Mary Porter, according to a persistent Rockville legend, insisted that son Charles attend the local high school rather than go off to war. He did so, at the "upper school" of Vernon's Center School District, which served as the high school for the entire town. Porter graduated in 1865, just as the Civil War reached its conclusion, after a course of study that emphasized English composition and elocution and included studies in algebra and geometry, philosophy, and possibly chemistry.[9] Had the family lived in Hartford, the future artist would probably have been denied a higher education, because the high school in that city, as in New England cities generally, was very selective, charged tuition, and had difficult entrance examinations that required knowledge of Latin and Greek.

Charles Porter's artistic bent is said to have been apparent from early boyhood. He himself said that his talent for picture-making made him popular at school.[10] Apparently there were no art lessons at that school, and yet Porter managed somehow to get a few drawing lessons when he was fourteen and more when he was sixteen. He probably did odd jobs to earn the money to pay for them. Surely, however, it must have occurred to him and to his family that he was aiming for a career that was risky for anyone but almost inconceivable for a black man of humble origins. Did he not realize that black people of his time simply were not artists? His parents, whose financial



Plate XXII *Chrysanthemums*

circumstances were such that they could have justifiably demanded of this son that he get a job and contribute to the family, allowed him to spend money on art lessons and materials. Perhaps, despite his ache for a brother lost, when Connecticut's two black regiments came marching home after the war and he saw them feted and honored by the state, Charles Porter came to believe that these were new times for men of color.

In 1869, when he was twenty-two years old, he set off for New York, determined to study at the National Academy of Design, one of the two most prestigious art academies in America. Not only was he accepted (probably the first of his race to be), but he taught art to support himself.[11] His students could not have been anything but white. In 1871 he had a picture accepted at the Academy's annual spring exhibition, a fine achievement for a student. The address he gave the Academy then was "Desk of Y.M.C.A.,"[12] so specific a designation that one suspects he picked up mail there but did not live in this building, where many well-known artists had studios. More likely, Porter stayed with relatives or friends in one of New York's tightly bounded "colored" sections. "We find it so difficult to persuade anyone to rent us a decent place to live on account of our color," a black man told a reporter in New York in 1869, and often restaurants and theaters, too, would not allow black people inside their doors.[13] One wonders how Porter managed in New York. Who were his friends? Did he sell his paintings? How did he finance a year of private study with the artist Joseph Oriel Eaton? How often could he visit his family in Rockville? Could they help him when he ran short of money? There are rumors in Rockville that some local mill owners provided funds. Some say that members of the Cheney family, famous for the paternalism they initiated in their mills in South Manchester and sympathetic to art because of Seth Cheney's fame as a crayon artist, gave Charles Porter financial aid. Judge Dwight Loomis of Rockville, a buyer of some Porter paintings, became a benefactor of Porter's student Gustave Hoffman. Had he helped Porter too? What does seem clear is that Charles Porter was not the sort of person to accept handouts. If mill owners or other people helped him to get art training, they would eventually have had paintings from him in return.

The Porter family seems to have given Charles unfailing emotional support in his daring quest for a career in art and would certainly have offered any necessary financial support it could have. It is just possible that some family members were actually in a position to do so. Charles Porter's sister Mary was married to Henry Vanness, a black man who had come to Vernon in 1864 to work on the railroad. They lived next door to William and Mary Porter. By the time Charles Porter was in New York, Henry Vanness was a brakeman and soon he would become Conductor Vanness, reportedly the only black railroad conductor in the nation then. A conductor's position was so important in those days that trains were referred to by their conductors' names ("Conductor Vanness's train was thirty minutes late yesterday because of a brake malfunction"), and newspapers reported when conductors were sick or on vacation. The Vernon-Rockville line changed ownership from time to time, but while others lost their jobs as a result of such sales, Vanness did not. When on one run he asked even the new manager for his fare, the *Hartford Times* ran a story praising the scrupulous attention Vanness always paid to his duties.[14] His photograph was in a Hartford newspaper when he retired in 1907. Vanness may have used his considerable influence with the railroad owners to get jobs for some of his Porter relatives: a position as baggage master for William Jr., one at the freight depot for Henry Porter, perhaps even a night watchman's job on another line for William Sr.[15] A warm and generous man, he and his wife raised several white and mulatto orphans and officially adopted some of them. Some-

time after the turn of the century, after Porter's parents had died, he invited Charles Porter to move in with him. Vanness's character and success must have been inspiring to Porter. And the Conductor was not the only remarkable brother-in-law.

In 1860 Porter's older sister Cynthia had married Richard A. ("Al") Jeffrey of Middletown, Connecticut, a black man who eventually settled in nearby Meriden. Like Vanness, Jeffrey was close to the Porters. He and his wife often hosted Thanksgiving dinners in Meriden for the entire family. They visited Rockville frequently and even celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with a large party at William Porter's Fox Hill home.[16] Jeffrey was an entrepeneur. At some point he ran an express company in Meriden. His death certificate said he was a teamster. He had had enough money in 1878 to buy the land at the summit of three-hundred-foot-high Fox Hill and build a sixty-foot tower there with a telescope on top.[17] It was probably modeled after the Talcott Mountain Tower near Hartford, where people flocked every summer to picnic and enjoy the view. "Jeffrey's Tower" was opened to the public on May 29, 1878. Admission was fifteen cents, and ice cream and other refreshments were served at the base in a room that was twenty feet square. Jeffrey produced fireworks, music, and illuminations on the Fourth of July that year, and business was brisk both that summer and the next, but the tower was sheared by the blizzard of 1880. Jeffrey did not sell the land nor the ground-level room that was left but eventually allowed Charles Porter to use the "tower house" as a studio.

Not only were the Vannesses and the Jeffreys well known and respected in Rockville, but other Porters besides Charles won local fame. Ella Porter was an elocutionist so much in demand that she was asked to read at city-wide celebrations, which she did so affectingly that on at least one occasion she brought tears to the eyes of most people in the crowd.[18] She gave readings in Rockville even after she married Robert Pulley and moved to Meriden. Other family members were known because they provided Rockville with special services, such as managing the local skating rink or running an express service.[19]

Members of the Porter family were often mentioned in the social notes of Rockville newspapers in the last decades of the nineteenth century. When William and Mary Porter celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary in 1888, the Rockville correspondent to the *Hartford Times* reported that more than one hundred guests had crowded into the family home on Fox Hill.[20] When Charles Porter went to Paris to study art in 1881, letters he wrote about his impressions of Paris and London were published in a local newspaper.[21] Perhaps the best evidence of the Porters' acceptance in Rockville, even of their prominence, is a poem written in 1902 by Frank D. Maine entitled "Early Reminiscences of Rockville, Conn., in Rhyme." Among Rockville's early residents that he recollects and labors to fit into verse are these:

> William and Mrs. Root, and daughter and
> Father Metcalf's only living son—
> His wife, Mr. and Mrs. Porter, Vanness and
> Wife are there, each and every one.[22]

Such a family had the courage to reach for a dream and the backbone to stand up to disappointment. Charles Porter did not wallow in self-pity when he moved back to his parents' home in 1889. He set up a studio the first year in the Fitch Block on Rockville's Main Street and soon discovered that he need not have gone to the expense.[23] He had students who were eager to climb the steep hill to "Professor" Porter's tower studio at the pinnacle of Fox Hill. Rockville children regularly trekked up the hill to see Mr. Porter. They loved to watch him paint and to talk with him. Gustave Hoffman was often there, too, alone

or with his sister Martha, who was, some say, the love of Porter's life.[24]

When Porter left his Fox Hill home and the tower studio, it was for sketching trips or to visit galleries or the Metropolitan Museum in New York. He had a studio in New York in 1891 and (again? still?) in 1896.[25] He and Hoffman tramped through New England, making studies of flowers, debating as they went the "modernistic" method of painting in complementary colors that Hoffman had taken up in Munich and that Porter rejected.[26] They made autumnal painting expeditions to the Connecticut shore towns of Old Hamburg and Essex. Porter went sketching with students, often to Snipsic Lake near Rockville, a popular spot with local citizens, who might have wondered what the white umbrellas were for (Fig. 53).

Porter also continued to exhibit his paintings—in Rockville, in Springfield, Massachusetts, and from 1910–14 in Hartford at the annual exhibitions of the new Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts.[27] Porter was a life member of the Connecticut Academy.



Fig. 53 Porter and Otto Lietz on a hunting and painting trip to Snipsic Lake, Rockville, Ct.

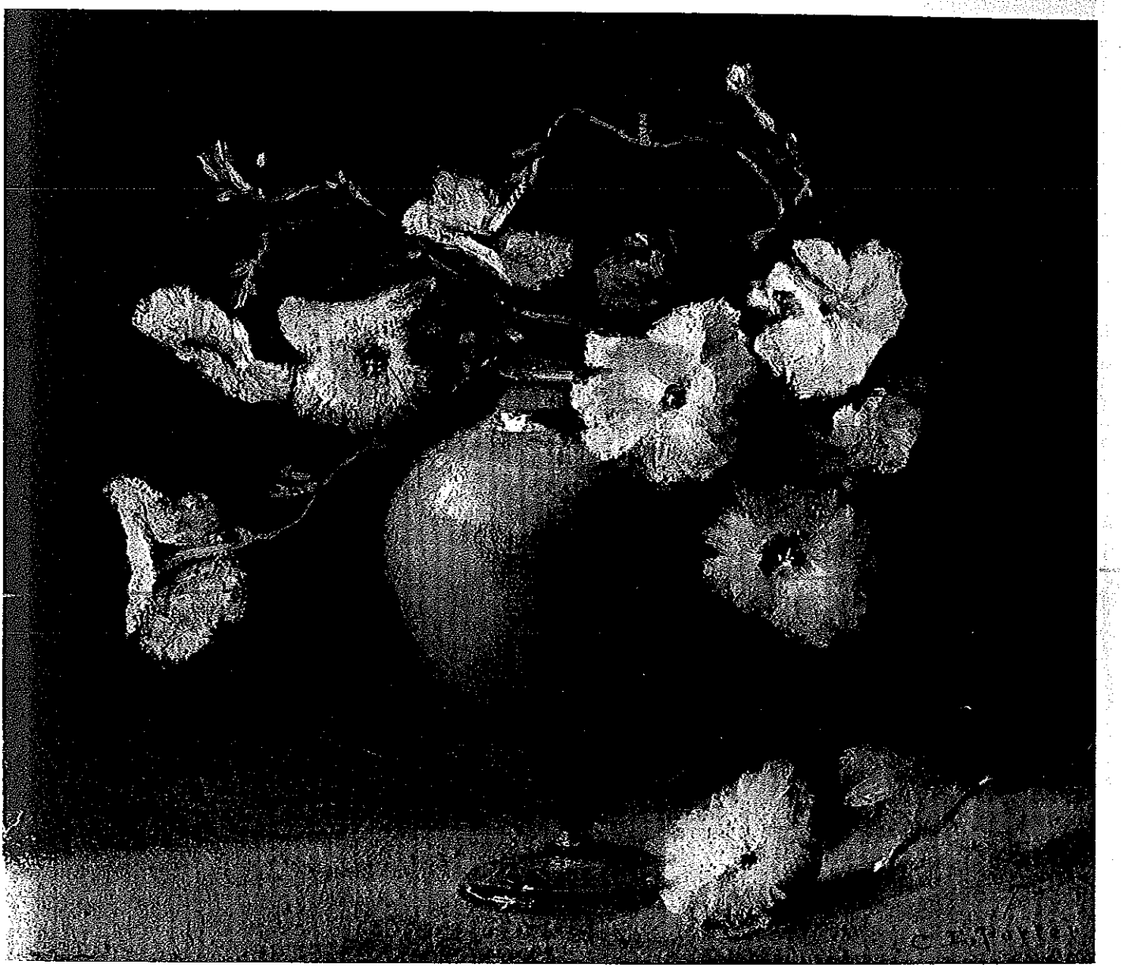


Plate XXIII *Morning Glories*



Fig. 54 Gustave Adolph Hoffman, *Home of Porter, the Floral Painter*

A number of Rockville people in their seventies and eighties remember Charles Porter. He is said to have had many friends. A former neighbor on Fox Hill calls him a true gentleman. She visited him not only at his studio but at his house (Fig. 54). "He was very kind to us children, always greeting us with a smile, always welcoming. We were very poor, but nothing like Mr. Porter. The inside of his house was barren with almost no furniture. But his paintings were on the wall and I remember them." He was by other accounts stooped and slight of build. He had a tiny beard "with only a few hairs" that intrigued another lady who was only six when she knew him. Mr. Porter was a gentle, humble man, remembers yet another Rockville resident, whose uncle was one of Porter's students. He would do anything to help a talented young person get started in art, she says. *Gentle, humble, helpful:* these are the words one hears again and again from people who remember Porter or who have heard first-hand accounts of him. And when they call him "Mr. Porter," as they mostly do, it sounds sweetly affectionate and deeply respectful.

Charles Ethan Porter is buried in the Grove Hill Cemetery in Rockville, not far from his Fox Hill home (Fig. 55). The monument is on a path in the center of