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An Artist of the American Renaissance
The Letters of Kenyon Cox, 1883-1919

Edited by H. Wayne Morgan

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IN MEMORIAM

The children of Louise and Kenyon Cox

Leonard

Allyn

Caroline

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PREFACE

Kenyon Cox was born in Warren, Ohio, in 1856 and died in New York in 1919. In these years he developed a career as a painter and art critic that made him a national cultural figure. Both sides of his family played prominent roles in the history of his state and nation. His mother was the daughter of the famous evangelist and founder-leader of Oberlin College, Charles Grandison Finney. Cox's father first studied for the ministry, then switched to politics as a liberal Republican when the great sectional crisis of the 1850s prepared to divide the Union. He emerged from the Civil War as a major general, was governor of Ohio in the postwar term, served as secretary of the interior for President Ulysses S. Grant in 186970, and was a member of the national House of Representatives for the 187779 term. He spent the rest of his life as a lawyer, legal educator, and university administrator at the Cincinnati Law School and the University of Cincinnati. Whatever their roles, the family valued intellectual achievement and supported their son Kenyon's desire to be an artist at a time when such a career choice was both unusual and financially hazardous.

Kenyon studied as an adolescent at the McMicken Art School in Cincinnati, for one year at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 187677, then for five years between 1877 and 1882 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He returned to Ohio in the winter of 1882 and moved to New York, the country's art center, in the fall of 1883. Once there, he made a living as an illustrator for magazines and books, showed easelworks in exhibitions, and then became a mural painter, using a personal classical style derived from Renaissance models. He decorated some of the country's major buildings, including state capitols at St. Paul, Des Moines, and Madison; courthouses in New York City, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and Newark, New Jersey; the Library of Congress; and other important structures that, with few exceptions, remain in place today. He reached the height of his prestige and influence in the art world in the decade before World War I as a supporter of a modified classical ideal and an opponent of modernism. He left a large body of critical writing and an equally interesting and important quantity of private correspondence.

Good letters have at least three large attributes. They show the development

of a

personality in an interesting human drama. Cox was an excellent letter writer, who described his own feelings, fears, anxieties, and hopes candidly and well. In them, one senses a real personality doing real things. Letters should also describe developments within an important and interesting enterprise. These letters cover years of great excitement in the American art world. They begin when a new generation of painters studied abroad and then returned home to display their talents at drawing and painting, which they hoped would revolutionize American art and make it and the new country's culture in general an important part of world affairs. And they hoped to broaden the coverage of this new art to include a freshly examined idealism as well as landscape, genre, and portraiture, all drawn from an era that seemed to be on the march to progress in most sectors of human affairs. In short, they hoped to make their art interesting, expansive, and central to the society. Cox's letters comment on many of these developments, on the inner workings of the art scene, and on how artists lived and earned incomes. And last, good letters should show how both the personality and the milieu fitted into the large scheme of things, as Cox's do.

Cox focused on the immediate art scene. He described how artists worked as illustrators in the booming commercial world of the 1880s and 1890s. He dealt with criticism and the politics of art associations. The letters touch on how and why many artists divided their careers between studio and informal works, and the rewards and perils of each. Cox discussed the appeals of new styles and the dangers, as he saw them, of embracing untried ideas. In a more personal, yet generally important manner, his courtship and marriage showed how many people of his class and circumstance entered into matrimony. In the largest sense, his private writing delineated long-term developments in the art world of the time, how one style or idea yielded to or resisted others, and why artists and critics held the views they defended. Above all, his pithy, often acerbic, always interesting style made human many otherwise abstract ideas and events. This selection of Cox's surviving correspondence is a companion volume to my edition of his letters written from Paris, *An American Art Student in Paris: The Letters of Kenyon Cox 1877-1882* (1986). I hope that the two together illuminate not only his life and work, but also the spirit and deeds of the art world in which he lived.

A word about editing is in order. I have provided a general introduction, dealing chiefly with Cox's life as background, but have allowed the letters to speak for themselves wherever possible. Notes for each letter explain internal

references. Added or illegible words are noted in brackets. I have changed spelling and punctuation to conform to modern usage, since this did not alter the meaning of the texts. I have given information on Cox's own works but have only noted dates for others, where these were available. I have not identified groups of works, such as those in museums, which Cox merely mentioned. The source of each letter is indicated at its conclusion with abbreviations, which are keyed to a list of depositories. I have used three dots to indicate where some of Cox's material has been eliminated.

Librarians and archivists are among the most overworked people in academic life, but the staffs of every collection I contacted met my requests with a spirit of good cheer and cooperation. I am deeply grateful to them all but owe a special debt to the following people: Angela Ghiral, librarian of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library of Columbia University, and Janet Parks, curator of prints at the same institu-

tion, who efficiently answered many requests; Roland Baumann, archivist of the Oberlin College Archives, who helped me both to find documents and to understand the Cox family; Lydia Dufour of the Frick Art Reference Library; Mary Beth Betts of the Architectural Collections, New-York Historical Society; James H. Hutson, chief, and his excellent staff at the Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress; Emily Clark, Chicago Historical Society; and Susan Brady, Yale University Library.

I wish to thank the following depositories for permission to use manuscript material: McKinney Library, Albany Institute of History and Art (Will H. Low Papers); American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (Kenyon Cox file); Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Papers of Claude Buck, Allyn Cox, Kenyon Cox, and of James Henry Moser, with the consent of his heirs, David G. Griggs, Robert M. Griggs, Ralph Fetherolf, Samuel Fetherolf, and Margaret Longwell); Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York (Kenyon Cox Papers); Bowdoin College, Walker Art Museum Archives (Walker Papers); Dartmouth College Library (Winston Churchill Collection); Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Gardner Papers); Houghton Library, Harvard University (Miscellaneous Manuscripts); Library of Congress (Central Services Division files, Papers of Grover Cleveland, Cass Gilbert, John Sherman, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson); Massachusetts Historical Society (Norcross Autograph Collection); Metropolitan Museum Archives (Kenyon Cox file); New-York Historical Society (Papers of Edwin H. Blashfield and Cass Gilbert); Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations (Century Company records); Oberlin College Archives (Henry Churchill King Papers); Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries (Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Papers, Scribner Archives); Yale University Library (John Ferguson Weir Papers); Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Yale Collection of American Literature (James B. Carrington Papers).

ABBREVIATIONS

AAA- Archives of American Art, Allyn Cox Papers, Smithsonian Institution
AC Washington, D.C.

AAA- Archives of American Art, Claude Buck Papers
CB

AAA- Archives of American Art, James Henry Moser Papers
JHM

AAA- Archives of American Art, miscellaneous manuscripts
MMS

AAFAL- Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Kenyon Cox Papers, Columbia
KC University, New York City

AAIAL- American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Kenyon Cox files
KC New York City

AIHA- Albany Institute of History and Art, Will Hicock Low Papers, Albany
WHL New York

BL-JBC Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, James B. Carrington Papers
Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

DCL- Dartmouth College Library, Winston Churchill Papers, Hanover, New
WC Hampshire

HL- Houghton Library, miscellaneous manuscripts, Harvard University,
MMS Cambridge, Massachusetts

ISGM- Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Gardner Papers, Boston, Massachusetts
GP

LC-CG Library of Congress, Cass Gilbert Papers, manuscripts division,
Washington, D.C.

LC- Library of Congress, Central Services Division Files, manuscripts division
CSDF

LC-GC Library of Congress, Grover Cleveland Papers, manuscripts division

- LC-JS Library of Congress, John Sherman Papers, manuscripts division
- LC-WHT Library of Congress, William Howard Taft Papers, manuscripts division
- LC-WW Library of Congress, Woodrow Wilson Papers, manuscripts division
- MHS- Massachusetts Historical Society, Grenville H. Norcross Autograph
GHNAC Collection, Boston, Massachusetts
- MMA-KC Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kenyon Cox file, New York City
- NYHS- New-York Historical Society, Cass Gilbert Papers, New York City
CG
- NYHS- New-York Historical Society, Edwin H. Blashfield Papers
EHB
- NYPL-CC New York Public Library, Century Collection, manuscripts division
- OCA- Oberlin College Archives, Henry Churchill King Papers, Oberlin, C
HCK
- PUL-FJM Princeton University Library, Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Papers
manuscripts division
- PUL-SA Princeton University Library, Scribner Archives, manuscripts division
- WAM-BC Walker Art Museum, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine
- YUL-JFW Yale University Library, John Ferguson Weir Papers, manuscripts
division

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1882, a young art student named Kenyon Cox prepared to return to the United States after five years of study in Paris. He was among the hundreds of eager, energetic young people of that generation who sought the training and the cultural life of the acknowledged art capital of the world. Like most students, he was eager to master the technical skills of painting and drawing, and studied with outstanding teachers. He worked first with the modernist Carolus-Duran, then with the academician Alexandre Cabanel, and finally with the reknown painter who became a mentor, Jean-Léon Gérôme. He labored hard, especially at drawing and painting the figure, something the Parisian masters emphasized. Though not a brilliant or facile stylist, Cox was a noted draftsman by the time he returned home. And he had shown creditable canvases at each of the prestigious annual Salons between 1879 and 1882. He enjoyed serious studio work but also painted and sketched outdoors in more informal modes, and spent many summer months in the artists' colony of Grez-sur-Loing, south of Paris. He saw the region's famous sites and also traveled several weeks in northern Italy in 1878, for a firsthand encounter with some of that culture's old masters. He was not a mere student grind, however hard he worked in the atelier. He absorbed impressions as well as skills for a lifetime as an artist, which he considered almost a calling.¹

By December 1882, Cox had packed his clothes and books and shipped drawings and paintings home. By early 1883, he was back in Cincinnati, ready for the next steps in an artistic career. The family that welcomed him was well known. His father had fought for the Union in the Civil War, rising to the rank of major general. He was then governor of Ohio from 1866 to 1868, was secretary of the interior for President Ulysses S. Grant from 1869 to 1870, and served a single term in the House of Representatives

¹ The basic biography of Cox is H. Wayne Morgan, *Kenyon Cox, 1856-1919: A Life in American Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994). The same author edited Cox's student letters in *An American Art Student in Paris: The Letters of Kenyon Cox, 1877-1882* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986), and analyzed his ideas in *Keepers of Culture: The Art-Thought of Kenyon Cox, Royal Cortissoz, and Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989).

from 1877 to 1879. A noted lawyer, he was dean of the Cincinnati Law School from 1880 to 1897, with a concurrent term as president of the University of Cincinnati from 1885 to 1889. The elder Cox was a well-rounded man, who combined public service and a flourishing law practice with an interest in education, science, and letters. Kenyon's mother, Helen Finney Cox, was the daughter of Charles Grandison Finney, the famous evangelist who was a founding father of Oberlin College. Both parents typified the sober, high-minded, industrious bourgeois who valued probity and ideals in all sectors of life. They imbued their children with a sense of being special and of being responsible for something beyond material success. Kenyon adopted this serious mien and, like the other family members, was outspoken about a wide range of issues. As a young man, he was intellectually precocious and emotionally immature. He was always somewhat prickly in demeanor and was more easy to admire than to like.

Cox had mixed feelings about returning home. He had been born in Warren, Ohio, in 1856, lived in Columbus as a child while his father was governor, and spent his adolescence in Cincinnati. Ohio was developing but was hardly on the edge of cultural innovation. Five years in Paris had made Cox a modern in both artistic approaches and in sensibilities. He was hardly radical, but at that point liked a personally interpreted realism that reflected and added to traditional methods and ideas. He belonged in New York, the country's cultural capital, where he could hope to earn at least a modest living as a member of a vital art community, with access to significant collections and the latest news from Europe. Cox considered himself thoroughly American and had no desire to be an expatriate.

Despite some hesitation and ambivalence, Cox saw himself as part of the new generation of artists who were determined to change their country's taste and level of aesthetic consciousness. There were grounds for both optimism and pessimism on that score. Americans generally had little apparent interest in the fine arts, yet they usually welcomed or at least examined innovation in all walks of life. Industrialism had begun to produce the wealth and consciousness among certain groups necessary to support new endeavors in the arts. The levels of education and income were rising, and communications systems allowed interested persons to become aware of changes in the world's arts.

Most potential art patrons had matured on various kinds of realism in

painting, which seemed fitting in a democratic society that prized the tangible and practical. Patrons were familiar with various kinds of landscape painting, whether it treated calm scenes in the Hudson River Valley or the more romanticized and awesome West. They generally expected a portrait to be an accurate likeness, genre to be a fair record as well as an expression of a painter's taste and talent, and heroic painting to depict people and events in understandable ways. Cox and his peers understood these general emphases but rejected any literal realism. They thought it time to focus on motion, rich but harmonious color, accurate and energetic drawing, and a sense of change through the act of painting, all of course within prescribed rules.

By the late 1870s, many American patrons and critics had accepted the Munich style, which emphasized rich coloration, attention to building masses instead of literal drawing, and energy and expression in the artist's gesture. The look and emotional mood of these works recalled old masters yet seemed modern in emphasizing change, richness, and sometimes a sense of the unfinished aspects of both art and life. A school of luminists

used sky and water to depict the effects of light in carefully modulated tones that helped interpret but did not overwhelm objective reality. There was also some interest in heroic or allegorical works, chiefly those treating American history.

Impressionism had fractured the art scene everywhere by the late 1880s and provoked lengthy debates about both the forms and meanings of painting. Cox had not commented much on this new approach while a student in Paris but clearly disliked the impressionists' rejection of traditional drawing and academic methods. Above all, it was to him a perceptual rather than a conceptual approach, based on transitory rather than enduring effects and often on odd personal interpretations. And he simply disliked the style's apparent lack of finish and cohesion. Yet he sympathized with the desire to let light and color into art; he only feared that they would overwhelm the scene. Although he accepted many impressionist works, he always thought the Barbizon painters had interpreted light and color best because of their attention to fine painting and to creating a reflective mood.

Any new way of painting usually appealed to some new painters and patrons because it matched their suspicion of or weariness with received wisdom. Yet in all the disorder of the art world there was always some interest in traditional ideals and the symbolic among both artists and collectors. Painters as diverse as Albert Pinkham Ryder, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, John La Farge, and Cox himself desired to move beyond the observable and mundane to what they considered a higher plane of depiction and interpretation that joined them with the great tradition of western European art. They thought these forms and interpretations perfectly applicable to the United States, which was now part of that ongoing cultural order. The audience for an ideal nude or an allegorical scene was always smaller than for a realistic landscape or a genre study, but it was there, feeding Cox's hopes that he could gain attention for such work.

Above all, the often bewildering, dynamic, eclectic American art scene offered greater possibilities for success than did the one in Europe. The energy and curiosity of both painter and patron fed the growing belief that American culture was coming of age and would produce an art suitable to the nation's experience, yet be part of a world order. The new generation of artists did not wish to alter the variety in American art but to insist that works be well conceived and technically skillful within the reigning canons of modern

training and taste. Cox did not yet analyze these ideals or ambitions in any formal way, yet such aspirations were part and parcel of any young artist's cultural baggage. He had the training and the ideas to create a niche for himself in the art world. Would hard work and good fortune bring success?

The prospect of going to New York was alternately exciting and unnerving. Cox, who had never earned a living, wanted to be independent from the family, to use his new skills and fulfill his ambitions, yet shrank from the ruthless competition of art life. So he drifted for a year in Ohio, studying with a group of pleasant young people in Cleveland, sketching and painting while visiting various relatives, reading and practicing draftsmanship at home. His parents realized that he needed to become independent and urged him to go east. By the fall of 1883, they provided a small loan and introductions to some of their friends in New York. Cox's close friend Theodore Robinson, who had studied in Paris and who had toured Italy with him in 1878, was making a precarious living assisting building decorators at several eastern sites. He urged Cox to strike out, come east, and make a living as best he could at similar work

and at illustrating for magazines. Cox also apparently had met the fledgling painter Will Hicock Low while both were in Paris. The genial, outgoing Low was something of an operator and came to know almost everyone in the new generation of American and French painters. He was working at illustration in New York while trying to attract attention in exhibitions. He knew only too well how hard it was to get started in the art world and offered to help. At the end of September, Cox accepted. "You may be called upon very soon to fulfill rash promises," he warned Low, and left Cincinnati on October 3.²

New York was threatening in its rush and impersonality, but Cox had coped with Paris and other European cities and understood urban ways. He lived briefly in a room in lower Manhattan, then moved to new studio space at 145 West Fifty-fifth Street in proximity to the city's cultural centers. He showed considerable self-reliance and quickly made the rounds of publishers' offices and art dealers, portfolio under one arm, eager to sell himself as a promising newcomer, equipped with suitable ambition as well as impressive foreign training.

The expansive industrial growth that was transforming nearly all of America was as evident in the world of art as in that of business and commerce. A new affluent, educated middle class supported numerous quality magazines that used artwork to illustrate fiction, travel writing, biographical studies, and topical reports. Editors were style conscious, eager for unusual modern design, and wished to make their magazines part of the higher art scene. They paid close attention to covers, to story illustrations, and to designs for colophons and ornaments. Publications such as *Scribner's Monthly* and *Century Magazine* graced the bookshelves and parlor tables of thousands of households whose members wanted to keep abreast of cultural as well as political and economic issues. Since photography was expensive and technically difficult, publishers generally commissioned artists to produce drawings or sketches, which were then engraved on metal or wood plates for reproduction.³

Public interest in and patronage of the arts were at an all time high, but most artists lived on the edge of poverty. Major collectors still patronized dealers in foreign works, and it was always hard to tell what current American work would become fashionable and salable. Most artists struggled both for esteem among compatriots and for financial security, winning more of the former than the latter. Cox knew that his family would not let him starve, yet he was

determined not only to do quality illustration but also to "make a living this winter," as he wrote home.⁴

Cox's energy and talent paid dividends. He quickly became a noted illustrator, whose signature was familiar to readers well into the 1890s. Like any other artist, he had to produce what publishers wanted but never knowingly altered his aesthetic or technical standards, however slight the job. A small numeral or a device separating paragraphs in a story were as important to him as a full-page illustration. He worked hard and gained a welcome reputation among publishers for meeting deadlines. There was a

2 Robinson to Cox, December 19, 1882, February 26, April 15, May 1, June 20, 1883, AAFAL-KC; and Cox to Low, September 30, 1883, AIHA-WHL.

3 See Arthur John, *The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder, Scribner's Monthly, and the Century Magazine, 1870-1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 7691; and H. Wayne Morgan, *New Muses: Art In American Culture, 1865-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 2325.

4 Cox to Jacob D. Cox, October 19, 1883, AAFAL-KC.