

A deeper look at Edward Mitchell Bannister, the Black painter who changed Providence  
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Edward Mitchell Bannister's "Hay Gatherers," painted around 1893. WIKIPEDIA

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NEWPORT, R.I. — Making his way through the crowd at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, Edward Mitchell Bannister brushed aside the barbs and the jibes along with the bodies that stood in his way. “As I jostled among them,” he wrote years later, “many resented my presence, some actually commenting within my hearing in the most petulant manner: What is that colored person in here for?”

They would soon see. Bannister’s painting “Under the Oaks,” entered anonymously as “number 54,” landed the exhibition’s most-important prize. Bannister had come to claim it. At the judges’ table, an impatient official waved him away. “I was not an artist to them, simply an inquisitive colored man,” Bannister wrote. When he revealed that he, in fact, was number 54, “[a]n explosion could not have made a more marked impression. Without hesitation he apologized to me, and soon everyone in the room was bowing and scraping to me.”

It wasn’t the first time that Bannister, then in his late 40s, had been undermined or dismissed. Nineteenth-century New England, where he lived and worked, provided ample occasion for that.

But Bannister was made of stern stuff, dedicated to his artistic pursuits with a verve that defied his many social obstacles. (When word got out that Bannister, a Black man, had dared to enter the competition, a group of exhibition affiliates tried to revoke his award; they failed.)

The final 25 years of his life, spent largely in Providence, were devoted to building the city as a New England cultural center. He was one of the founding board members of the Rhode Island School of Design in 1877. He was the driving force in establishing the Providence Art Club in 1880. A house near Brown University was restored by the school and named for him. RISD, which held a large number of Bannister's paintings, drawings, and sketches, donated many to the Frederick Douglass Institute in the 1960s, which later merged with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where 100 of his works are now safeguarded.

But what is Bannister's real legacy, more than a century after his death? It's singular — a Black artist versed in the rigors of 19th-century European landscape painting to the point of besting his white peers — but underexplored. Nobody should be surprised he was largely forgotten while the work of white colleagues like George W. Whitaker and Charles Walter Stetson carried forward. In the evolving story of American art, a Black man was given no place. That's why he's more important now than ever.

I went to Rhode Island with little in mind as to what I might find of Bannister's vision. I saw his house, in Providence, unremarkable but nice enough, its brick façade tidy and well-cared for. As I whizzed along Route 138, I wondered if this stretch of lawns and parkland might have been where he came to paint works like "Herdsman With Cows" and "Untitled (Man With Two Oxen)." (Bannister typically didn't specify locations and, not at all typically for his era, frequently didn't title his works.)



Edward Mitchell Bannister's "Untitled (moon over a harbor, wharf scene with full moon and masts of boats)," painted around 1868. SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF H. ALAN AND MELVIN FRANK

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I don't know if it was his untitled 1868 painting of a moonrise above a small harbor that sent me south to Newport on a day of icy winds and an encroaching polar vortex. I was looking for something specific, as I so often have on these excursions. And I might have found it, had Bannister chosen to be so specific. But in his growing beliefs in German Idealism and the blossoming Modern notion of essence and absolutes over particularities, it just wasn't his way. Arriving at the southern tip of Aquidneck Island, a short drive from the elaborate manors that line its eastern shore, I stood in a stiff gale at Brenton Point. With the dark and roiling sea thundering against stone just a dozen yards away, any pursuit of the specific gave to the broader reality of Bannister's experience.

These were the same indifferent seas that made Rhode Island the principle slaving port of the Americas, a distinction it began to erode in 1774 when it passed a law banning the import of slaves (though the law was largely toothless, with slaves still owned in the colony all the way up to 1842). Even Bannister's founding of the Providence Art Club endured this stain, with its first location in a building infamous for the vicious slave masters who plied their trade there. For Bannister, the barriers to artistic achievement were not abstract; they were in the land and sea all around him, the very buildings in which he lived and worked.

In the years after the Civil War and the bleak failures of Reconstruction Rhode Island teetered between two uncomfortable realities: as a burgeoning industrial center that embraced individual freedom, and the bedrock of its past prosperity as the hub of slave trade. This was the milieu in which Bannister negotiated a place not just for himself, but for the city of Providence as a center of art and culture. The irony, of a city made rich by slaving being built into a center of cultural refinement in no small part by a Black man, is thick indeed.

There's a temptation to stand back and be in awe of Bannister for just that — to allow his extraordinary life to obscure the heights of his artistic achievement. In reading about him, I was as guilty as any of drowning in the exceptionality of the tale. Born in New Brunswick in 1828, Bannister grew up going to integrated schools where he got as good a public education as any child, white or Black. After his mother died when he was an adolescent, he and his brother became wards of a wealthy family whose library of books on philosophy and art sparked his creative interests.

Sometime in the late 1840s, the brothers emigrated to the United States, settling in Boston. They were a rarity in the free north — Black men who, coming from Canada, had never known slavery. Bannister found work as a barber; he would meet his wife, Christiana Carteaux, when he applied to work in her salon. The job allowed him to take art classes in his off-time, and he and Carteaux were active in the local abolitionist movement.

Bannister's activism led him to some of his first portrait commissions; one of them was of Dr. John V. DeGrasse, the city's first Black doctor. In 1864, with the war grinding toward its end, he and Carteaux organized a fund-raiser to petition for equal pay for Black soldiers in the Union

Army. Using his burgeoning reputation as an artist to advance his political views, Bannister donated a portrait of Robert Gould Shaw, the general whose Black regiment is famously cast in resplendent bronze outside the Massachusetts State House.



Edward Mitchell Bannister's "Untitled (man with two oxen)," from 1869. SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF DR. PETER A. PIZZARELLO

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By the time the couple moved to Rhode Island around 1869, Bannister was well-established as a painter. Following his story, I became aware of the gap between his remarkable narrative and the work he produced. Diving deeper, I found a thesis written by Traci Lee Costa at Roger Williams University in 2017. Costa's paper, "Edward Mitchell Bannister and the Aesthetics of Idealism," was based on the very idea that Bannister's biography had subsumed his work, thus shortchanging his achievement.

The paper opens a world of marvel and sophistication centered on an artist whose depth of thought has been too long overlooked. It reveals Bannister to be as erudite and philosophical a painter as there was in America at the time. He was miles beyond the cloying Romanticism of the Hudson River School, pushing toward the beginnings of Modernism with his deep interest in the French Barbizon School. He was profoundly influenced by the philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Washington Allston; Bannister's 1886 manuscript, "The Artist and His Critics,"

reflects a deep understanding of not only their ideas, but how they relate to German Transcendental Idealists and their break with the classical beauty standards of realism.

In other words, so much has been made of Bannister as a Black painter, too little has been made of him as a painter, full stop. A case in point: "Under the Oaks," a work that bested all comers in 1876 Philadelphia, has been lost; only a preparatory sketch remains. So Costa steers us toward a pair of surviving works that underpin Bannister as a mature artist: "Approaching Storm," from 1886, with its figure bent double against a stiff gale, is usually taken as an expression of Bannister's love of the pastoral. "Hay Gatherers," from 1893, has often been cited as a sympathetic depiction of Black Americans struggling with the failed promise of Reconstruction.



Edward Mitchell Bannister's "Approaching Storm," from 1886. SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, GIFT OF G. WILLIAM MILLER

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Neither reading is wrong, especially the latter — Bannister was acutely aware of the false hopes wrought by Emancipation. But both paintings are as much about idea and form as they are content — the definition, really, of art. "Approaching Storm" is indistinct and threatening, a proto-Modern break with simplistic ideas of the sublime you get with crowd-pleasing Romantic realists, like Bannister's contemporaries from the Hudson River School. In its elemental, simmering fury, Bannister captures the tensions inherent in a young nation unreconciled with its past and uncertain of its future. It's not a stretch to consider the figure at its heart, a white man

clutching an ax, to be at war with the moment, and at the mercy of forces his forebears unleashed. It's beautiful and powerful and terrifying, a bundle of anxieties waiting to burst.

"Hay Gatherers," with its Black laborers adrift in a sea of long grasses, is evocative of something grander than grinding farm work. Costa observes that "artmaking provided Bannister ... a space to synthesize the disparity between their ideal existence and their lived reality." For an idealist painter, realism was no means of expression for the profound rift between what was said and what was done. In Bannister's time, slavery had been abolished, but Black Americans hadn't escaped the daily rites of discrimination and condescension. They were at sea, lost between houses; look less at what's in the picture and what the picture is, and you'll see what I mean. It's compositionally claustrophobic, a pictorial prison. Costa observes that the horizon — the way out, the future — is walled off by tree and shrub, aggressively resistant to clarity.

It is painting as allegory, truth in form — an uncomfortable truth Bannister was uniquely positioned to offer. It remains a truth if not outright denied, then tamped down and muffled, reduced to a whisper. So I'll just say it out loud: A Bannister retrospective hasn't been seen since 1992, and then in the cozy confines of New York's nonprofit Kenkeleba House. So major museums should consider this a formal request. It's not time for Bannister to ascend to his place at the heights of 19th-century American art. It's far past time, but never too late.