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Edward Mitchell Bannister and the Aesthetics of Idealism

Traci Lee Costa

Roger Williams University, tcosta126@g.rwu.edu

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Edward Mitchell Bannister and the
Aesthetics of Idealism

Traci Lee Costa
B.A., Emmanuel College, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty
of the Art and Architectural History Program of
the School of Architecture, Art and Historic Preservation
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Traci Lee Costa
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Traci Costa

Sara A. Butler, Advisor

Anne Proctor, Reader

Stephen White, Dean

THIS WORK IS DEDICATED TO

The education department at the RISD Museum and John Hendrix for inspiring my research,

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ABSTRACT

Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828–1901)—a Canadian-born, black painter who enjoyed a thirty-year career in Providence, Rhode Island—experienced racial discrimination throughout his life and historical marginalization following his death. His identity as an African American during the era of Emancipation and Reconstruction has framed the present understanding of his contribution to the American landscape tradition. This one-dimensional approach neglects his varied intellectual and professional endeavors, as well as his unique position as a freeborn, black artist. Bannister’s manuscript, *The Artist and His Critics* (1886), indicates that he developed an artistic theory around the philosophies of German Idealism and American Transcendentalism, inspired by nineteenth-century American authors like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Washington Allston. Considering past interpretations of his work alongside these overlooked ideological connections situates Bannister’s landscapes within a broader cultural context, yielding a more intricate understanding of the motivation and meaning behind his artwork.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828–1901), a Canadian-born, black painter who sustained a thirty-year career in Providence, Rhode Island, was subjected to racial discrimination throughout his life that limited both the trajectory of his career and the impact of his legacy following his death.¹ Persistent prejudice has resulted in the exclusion of Bannister’s name from mainstream accounts of the history of American art, abating the urgency to preserve his artwork and document his career, thereby minimizing his perceived significance beyond the state of Rhode Island. The vast majority of historians who have studied his life and works recognize these gaps in the historical record as problematic to their research.² In fact, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson have acknowledged such historical exclusion as an issue affecting not only Bannister, but African Americans in general, creating what they refer to as a “great blind-spot in American history.”³ This being the case, art historians who have chosen to analyze Bannister have collectively focused their efforts on the compilation of a coherent biographical account of his life, with critical interpretation of his artwork as a secondary concern. With an adequate

¹ Portions of this thesis have been previously published. See Traci Costa, “Edward Mitchell Bannister and the Aesthetics of Idealism.” In *Locating American Art: Finding Art’s Meaning in Museums, Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Cynthia Fowler (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2016), 89-107. Copyright © 2016.

² Juanita Marie Holland and Corrine Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901* (New York: Kenkeleba House and Whitney Museum of Art, 1992), 9; Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), xvii–xiii, 51; Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, “Landscapes of Labor: Race Religion and Rhode Island in the Painting of Edward Mitchell Bannister,” in *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877–1919*, eds. Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 70–71; Lowery S. Sims and Jonathan P. Binstock, *African American Art : 200 Years* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2008), 38; Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11–13; Edward Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist: An Exhibition Organized by the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design for the Museum of African Art, Frederick Douglass Institute, Washington* (Washington: Museum of African Art, 1966), n.p.; and Juanita Marie Holland and Kenneth G. Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister: American Landscape Artist* (North Carolina: The North Carolina Central University Art Museum, 1997), 14. The majority of historians who have studied Bannister acknowledge this problem, citing a lack of both primary and secondary historical sources as a major obstacle to the critical inquiry into Bannister’s life and career.

³ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, xiii.

chronology of his life now in place, it is finally possible to move beyond the facts of his career to consider the motivations underlying his individual artistic expression.

The currently reductive understanding of his artwork—particularly in the case of his vast body of landscape paintings—is a direct consequence of the extensive historical marginalization that he has endured. Because Bannister lived through the extreme racism that defined nineteenth-century America, art historians have continued to rely on the circumstance of his race to frame his artistic choices.⁴ The limited scope of this interpretive lens has oversimplified his significance, leading scholars to identify his landscapes as a reaction to his sociopolitical standing or an expression of his rudimentary admiration for nature.⁵ Though effectively positioning his artwork within the major social, political and aesthetic movements of his time, this approach fails to capture the nuances of his experience as a freeborn, freethinking, and professional black artist.⁶ As it stands, existing scholarship on his life and works has offered little in the way of individualized artistic analysis, favoring instead the connection of his paintings to the general narrative of the African American experience, or the cultural preference for landscape painting in the nineteenth century. In adopting this framework, these accounts—

⁴ For examples of art historical accounts that utilize a racial lens to understand Bannister's work, see Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: 5 Black Artists in 19th Century America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 82; Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 11–21; Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 59–70; and Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 2–9.

⁵ For examples of art historical interpretations that emphasize Bannister's race or appreciation for nature, see Anne Prentice Wagner, "Newspaper Boy" (*Smithsonian American Art Museum*, Last modified January 2012), n.p.; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 75–78; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49–50; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 13–18; Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 59–73; and Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 13–14.

⁶ William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, 2nd ed. (New York: T. Hamilton, 1863), 214; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41. Brown points out that Bannister grew up in New Brunswick, Canada, where the British had abolished slavery shortly after his birth. It was in this setting that Bannister developed, receiving a quality education far better than his peers in the United States, who struggled against pervasive, violent racial oppression in their daily lives.

though successful in remedying the issue of Bannister's exclusion from historical discourse—have inadvertently diminished his importance as an independent, autonomous artist.

Scholars have paid ample attention to the evolution of Bannister's style, a progression that Lawrence F. Sykes refers to as a “stylistic adventure,” but have refrained from examining the cause behind his artistic experimentation and development.⁷ His personal achievements as an artist have been valued to the extent that they illuminate the trends of a larger cultural phenomenon, such as the societal transition from slavery to emancipation, the general trajectory of American landscape painting, or the development of African American art.⁸ This methodology, though necessary to the contextualization of Bannister's career, has failed to draw substantial meaning from his artistic production that is unique to the artist himself. Whether proceeding from a stylistic or sociopolitical interest, studies like these have rested upon the basic facts of his identity to form their artistic analyses. The assertion that racial adversity impacted Bannister's experience as an artist is undeniable, though it is important to bear in mind that this struggle is just one of many factors that shaped his artistic expression. Despite the numerous sources that speak to his varied endeavors in the study of art, literature, poetry, mythology, music, and religion, none has attempted to synthesize this knowledge with his artwork in a

⁷ Bannister Gallery (Rhode Island College) and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *4 From Providence: Bannister, Prophet, Alston, Jennings: Black Artists in the Rhode Island Social Landscape* (Providence: Rhode Island College, 1978), n.p.

⁸ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 17; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 51; Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; and Bannister Gallery (Rhode Island College) and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *4 From Providence*, n.p. Holland views his stylistic progression as a reflection of the evolving practice of American landscape painting throughout the latter half of the 1800s. Bearden and Henderson summarize Bannister's accomplishments as a testament to the capacity of African Americans to enrich their communities and evidence to the fact that nineteenth-century America was not solely defined by overt racism and ignorance. Daniel Robbins argues in *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist* that Bannister's significance derives from the prestige that he achieved despite the adversity that he faced due to his race, ultimately saying more about Providence's culturally progressive environment in the 1880s than Bannister's career as an artist. Sykes asserts in *4 From Providence* that Bannister was a catalyst of cultural life in Providence, playing an active role in the development of the city as a predominant arts center.

meaningful way.⁹ Historians have adequately corroborated his reputation as a well-educated man, but the lack of detail in his recorded history has made it difficult to determine the precise ideological strands that he encountered through these disciplines, as well as the nature of his engagement with such ideas. Extant records of his cultural, academic, and professional interests coupled with an unprecedented analysis of the fundamentals laid out in his unpublished manuscript, however, enable speculation on the sources that informed his perspective on art theory.

The purpose of this research is to place Bannister's landscape paintings within the philosophical framework of German Idealism, a prevalent system of thought in nineteenth-century New England and America at large.¹⁰ Several sources combine to provide insight into Bannister's connection to Idealist philosophy. Most significant is his aforementioned manuscript, *The Artist and His Critics*, written during the height of his career in 1886 and delivered in a speech to fellow members of the Providence Art Club.¹¹ A previously neglected resource, this document offers valuable insight into his personal philosophy on artistic expression and criticism. An analysis of this manuscript alongside the writings of Transcendental Idealists Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) reveals an underlying ideological relationship between Bannister and German Idealist thought. Upon close inspection, this treatise appears to echo a plethora of philosophical

⁹ George W. Whitaker, "Reminiscences of Providence Artists" (Providence: *The Board of Trade Journal*, 1914), 138; Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 31; George W. Whitaker, "Edward M. Bannister" (Edward Mitchell Bannister Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.), 1; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 27–39; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 40–51.

¹⁰ There is ambiguity from scholar to scholar on the capitalization of Idealism and such related terms. For the purposes of this thesis, capitalization will be used when referencing Idealism as a specific and formal set of philosophical ideas connected to the German Idealist school.

¹¹ Edward Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics* (Ann-Eliza Club Manuscript Division, MSS# 26, Box 1, Folder 25, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, RI).

sentiments directly associated with German Idealism, particularly in the areas of metaphysics and spirituality. To affirm the plausibility of this common philosophical thread, I will explore Bannister's documented literary influences, particularly famed American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and American philosopher and artist, Washington Allston. Emerson and Allston were not only authoritative nineteenth-century writers who profoundly shaped the development of American culture, they were each explicitly inspired by German Idealist philosophy in their own work.¹² Critical consideration of these authors as sources of inspiration for Bannister further substantiates the apparent theoretical sympathies between *The Artist and His Critics* and the fundamentals of German Idealist philosophy. While no direct link exists between Bannister and the German Idealist School, an examination of the rhetoric and fundamental beliefs reflected in his manuscript suggests his exposure to this philosophical movement, demonstrating that he sympathized with their theoretical premises.

Within this new framework, I will re-evaluate *Approaching Storm*, one of Bannister's more dynamic landscape scenes, painted concomitantly with his manuscript in 1886. The objective in analyzing this work is twofold. Primarily, this painting represents the state of Bannister's artistic production during the formation of his own philosophy and attitudes on art. As such, this landscape should be considered a visual expression of the concepts that he espoused in his manuscript, each amounting to tangible documentation of his mindset from this

¹² See Rene Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy" (*The New England Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (March 1943)); Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (1980; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Henry A. Brann, "Hegel and His New England Echo" (*The Catholic World*, April 1885); Henry A. Pochmann, *German Culture in America: Philosophical and Literary Influences, 1600–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957); R.A. Yoder, "Emerson's Dialectic" (*Criticism* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1969)); W.T. Harris, "The Dialectic Unity in Emerson's Prose" (*The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (1884)); Regina Soria, "Washington Allston's Lectures on Art: The First American Art Treatise" (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 18, no.3 (March 1960)); and C.P. Seabrook Wilkinson, "Emerson and the Eminent Painter" (*The New England Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (March 1998)).

specific moment in his career. In addition to this, *Approaching Storm* is illustrative of the art historical tendency toward generalized interpretation of his landscape scenes. Several scholars have classified this work as an expression of his reverence for God and nature, refraining from an in-depth analysis of the symbolic or iconographic content within his composition.¹³

Considering Idealist aesthetic principles in relation to this work allows for substantive inference into Bannister's stylistic choices, lending a contextual depth to this composition that is currently lacking in existing evaluations of this scene.

I will also apply this analytical approach to *Hay Gatherers* (c. 1893), one of his later landscape paintings believed by Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw to communicate explicitly racial themes.¹⁴ In this way, *Hay Gatherers* is representative of the predominantly sociopolitical approach to Bannister's work that has framed the art historical understanding of his landscapes to date. This painting is a prime example of how the Idealist lens can reinforce previous scholarship on Bannister, bolstering Shaw's interpretations while adding a new depth of meaning to this compositional arrangement. Together, these analyses will demonstrate the abundance of Idealist techniques, themes and symbols that he carefully embedded in his landscape paintings to communicate his ideas about race and spirituality. Additionally, the interpretations offered here will affirm the value of the Idealist lens as an analytical tool, as well as its potential to enhance our present concept of Bannister as a professional artist. Rather than negate those meanings previously derived from his body of landscapes, this framework fortifies the narratives that so many historians have already applied to his life and career, particularly those that promote the impact of racial adversity on his career, or his characteristic interest in religion, natural

¹³Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49-50; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 78.

¹⁴ Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 59-73.

phenomena, and European artistic tradition.¹⁵ The Idealist perspective reframes the conversation surrounding his work by recognizing his compositions as the result of deliberate aesthetic choices, whereas previous scholarship has dealt largely with the feeling and effects of those choices without necessarily identifying them. Moreover, this approach positions Bannister within the broader cultural milieu of his time, asserting his agency as a freethinking practitioner and promoter of the arts while offering insight into his individual experience of, and response to, racial adversity.

¹⁵ For examples of this narrative frame work, consult Paul F. Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister: The Barbizon School in Providence* (Biographical Files, Edward Bannister Box. The Providence Art Club Archives, Providence, RI, 1965); Terry Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art and Identity: The David C. Driskell Collection* (San Francisco, CA: Pomegranate. 1998); Joan M. Marter, “Bannister, Edward Mitchell (1833),” (*The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*, no. 2 (2011)); George W. Whitaker, “Edward Mitchell Bannister,” (Edward Mitchell Bannister Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C), n.p.; Whitaker, “Edward M. Bannister”; Whitaker, “Reminiscences of Providence Artists”; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*; Patton, *African-American Art*; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*; Shaw, “Landscapes of Labor”; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*; and Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*.

CHAPTER 2: EDWARD MITCHELL BANNISTER

2.1 Introduction to Edward Mitchell Bannister

As the first African American to receive national recognition in the arts, Bannister is renowned for winning the first-place medal in painting at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 for his landscape painting, *Under the Oaks*.¹ Living in Providence at the time, he was the only New England artist honored at the exhibition, his inclusion lending prestige to his and Providence's reputations alike.² Following his Centennial Exhibition win, he became a founding board member of the Rhode Island School of Design and co-founder of the Providence Art Club, two institutions that were essential to the city's development as a notable arts center.³ A celebrated activist in his lifetime, Bannister was also a fixture among anti-slavery organizations throughout his career, participating in an array of capacities from fund raising to advocacy.⁴ Although he was a well-known Rhode Island painter in his day, Bannister, like so many other African American artists throughout history, has fallen victim to obscurity, his name repeatedly excluded from mainstream art historical accounts.

If not for a vested regional interest in his work and the growing national interest in African American culture that developed in the 1960s, art historians may have overlooked

¹ George Leland Miner, *Angell's Lane: The History of a Little Street in Providence*, (Providence: Akermann-Standard Press, 1948), 132; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 31; Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 69–70; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, xii, 44; Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 6; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 29; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 38; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 87–88.

² Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 67–75; Bannister Gallery (Rhode Island College) and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *4 From Providence*, n.p.; and Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.

³ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 40; Bannister Gallery (Rhode Island College) and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *4 From Providence*, n.p.; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 45; and Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 113–66.

⁴ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 21. Bannister actively participated in The Soldier's Relief Fair, The Colored Citizens of Boston, The Crispus Attucks Choir, and the African-American Histrionic Club.

Bannister's contribution to nineteenth-century American Art, altogether. To date, numerous Rhode Island institutions have put forth a concerted effort to conserve his work. These institutions include the Providence Art Club, the library at Brown University, The Bannister Nursing Care Center, and the Rhode Island School of Design Museum (RISD).⁵ The Providence Art Club and the RISD Museum of Art—each indebted to Bannister for his role in their establishment—were responsible for three major exhibitions of his work in Providence between 1901 and 1966.⁶ Altogether, these shows promoted and preserved his achievements as an African American artist from New England, prompting further examination into his life and career. The most comprehensive of these exhibitions, “Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901: Providence Artist,” was mounted in 1966 by RISD for the Museum of African Art and the Frederick Douglass Institute. RISD donated several works from this exhibition to the Frederick Douglass Institute, an organization that later merged with the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., where more than one hundred of his works on canvas and paper are held today.⁷ In 1992, Corrine Jennings coordinated the largest exhibition of Bannister's work since his memorial exhibition at the Providence Art Club in 1901. This show at the Kenkeleba House in New York was pivotal for two reasons: it presented a clear chronology of Bannister's life, and organized his oeuvre for the first time. Jennings' motivation to coordinate this show was threefold, given her interest in the tradition of African American painting, her background as a Providence native, and her identity as the daughter of former Providence Art Club member,

⁵ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 40. The Bannister Nursing Care Center was founded in 1896 as The Home for Aged Colored Women

⁶ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 40–48; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 9–10.

⁷ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 40; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 9–10. Formally the National Museum of American Art, the museum changed its name to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in the year 2000.

Mary Howard Jennings.⁸ The dedication of these individuals and institutions to the preservation of local and African American art, however biased in their motivations, were instrumental in generating continued historical interest in Bannister.

The acclaim and admiration that Bannister received within the Providence community was unprecedented during his time, making his a rather unique case in the history of African American artists.⁹ It is important, however, to acknowledge and consider the social milieu that he navigated. Though socially progressive in many ways, the city was still confronting extremely complex issues of race and class throughout the nineteenth century. Emancipation law was enacted in Rhode Island in the late eighteenth century, following the authorization of black enlistment in the American Revolution, ultimately stipulating that slaves could earn their freedom upon completion of service in the U.S. military.¹⁰ While a marker of social progress, this decision was primarily borne out of necessity, rather than moral conviction. Nationwide, the Emancipation Proclamation would not come to fruition until the latter half of the nineteenth century, taking effect in 1863 with the abolition of slavery as an institution following shortly after in 1865.¹¹ Racist attitudes only intensified with the expansion of free black communities in the North, leaving African Americans in nineteenth-century Providence to cope with the harsh realities of semi-citizenship in a society that was reluctantly transitioning from a seaport town,

⁸ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 9.

⁹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 40–41.

¹⁰ Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival: The Providence Black Community in the 19th Century* (Providence: The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, 1985), 29–30; and Dixie Ray Haggard, ed., *African Americans in the Nineteenth Century: People and Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 8–9. Emancipation law was first enacted in Rhode Island in 1784, following the authorization of black enlistment in the American Revolution in 1778.

¹¹ Junius P Rodriguez, ed., *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 136–42; Valerie J. Mercer and Kirsten Pai Buick, “African American Artists Gain Access to the Fine Art Professions” (*Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 2012), 9; and Haggard, *African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, 95–96.

grounded in the commerce of slavery, to an industrial city built upon the ideals of individual freedom.¹²

The trajectory of Bannister's career as an American landscape painter is typical of his white and black cohorts in many ways. The level of success that he attained in his field, despite the pervasive racial biases that he faced, however, sets his case apart as exceptional. This is especially true considering that few blacks had practiced in the fine arts before him. To his white contemporaries, Bannister was an honor to his entire race, ranking among other "race men" whose professional and social achievements proved that African Americans could positively contribute to their communities.¹³ His Centennial Exhibition win is important to understand in this context, as the jury awarded him this prize with no prior knowledge of his background or skin color. Having received America's highest honor for painting based on aesthetic merit alone, Bannister directly challenged misconceptions held by the white community toward black artists, in turn validating African Americans as serious practitioners of fine art.¹⁴ This award lent crucial momentum to his career, enabling him to impact the Providence arts scene in ways unparalleled by most African American artists during his time.

2.2 Childhood and Adolescence

¹² Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 5-21; Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art and Identity*, 23-28; Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival*, 26-41; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828-1901*, 27-30.

¹³ Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 26; Brown, *The Black Man*, 215-16; Patton, *African-American Art*, 71; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 15; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 2; and Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828-1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.

¹⁴ Mercer and Buick, "African American Artists Gain Access," 9; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 5; Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival*, 26-67. African Americans only began to enter the fine arts profession in the nineteenth century, having previously been relegated to the lowest level jobs available. Bannister's achievement in his field despite his race and prevailing institutionalized racism set him apart in New England as an exceptional artisan who defied predominant stereotypes.

Edward Mitchell Bannister was born in 1828 in the town of St. Andrews in New Brunswick, Canada.¹⁵ His father died when he was six years old, leaving his widowed mother to raise him and his brother by herself.¹⁶ Growing up in New Brunswick, where the British had abolished slavery shortly after his birth, Bannister benefitted from access to a quality education, unlike many of his black contemporaries in the United States.¹⁷ As a young boy, he was afforded the opportunity to explore and cultivate his interests in drawing and nature, taking lessons in art from his mother and spending his leisure time in the scenic outdoors.¹⁸ He recounted of his childhood, “The love of art in some form came to me from my mother, who was born within a stone’s throw of my birthplace on the banks of the St. Croix River. It was she who encouraged and fostered my childish propensities for drawing and coloring. She helped me with my lessons, which I was prone to neglect, for the more congenial work of drawing.”¹⁹ Bannister developed his artistic skill during his youth through the practice of sketching portraits, often turning to his classmates and teachers for inspiration.²⁰

Bannister’s mother died in 1844 when he was an adolescent, leaving him and his brother orphaned.²¹ Following her death, the two of them went to live and work on the estate of Harris Hatch, a wealthy and respected maritime trader and lawyer. During his time at the Hatch estate, Bannister took advantage of the family’s personal library, which granted him access to various

¹⁵ Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 29; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41.

¹⁶ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41. Bannister’s father, also named Edward, descended from Barbados. His mother, Hannah Alexander, was of Scottish descent and was born in St. Andrews.

¹⁷ Brown, *The Black Man*, 214; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, xi, 41.

¹⁸ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41.

¹⁹ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 17; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41.

²⁰ Brown, *The Black Man*, 214.

²¹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41; Brown, *The Black Man*, 214–17; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 17.

literary works as well as two Hatch family portraits that he frequently studied and reproduced.²² In addition to these portraits, Bannister gleaned inspiration from illustrations in the Hatch estate Bible, reportedly spending a great deal of time replicating its engravings to exercise his artistic skills.²³ According to African American author and abolitionist, William Wells Brown, it was during these formative years that “the genius of the embryo artist was struggling for development.”²⁴ Bannister left the Hatch’s farm in his late adolescence, at which time he took up work on fishing boats and coastal schooners, fulfilling the duties of a cook and a sailor.²⁵ These years on the ocean exposed him to the patterns of tides and cloud formations that would later find expression in his landscape scenes, and introduced him to important cultural centers like Boston and New York, where the motivation to perfect his craft grew stronger.²⁶

2.3 Life in Boston

Bannister eventually settled in Boston during the early 1850s, intent on studying the arts and broadening his skill-set through formal classes at the Lowell Institute.²⁷ Like many black citizens in his position, he quickly took up work as a barber to remain in the city and finance his lessons in drawing and painting.²⁸ Barbering, a profession with its roots in slavery, was the most

²² Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 6; and Brown, *The Black Man*, 214–17.

²³ Brown, *The Black Man*, 214–15.

²⁴ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43; and Brown, *The Black Man*, 215. Published in 1863—thirteen years before Bannister’s national recognition at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition—Brown’s *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* is the earliest text to include Bannister’s name, though he is listed as Edwin M. Bannister rather than Edward. This compilation of African American artist biographies was assembled in response to the exclusion of African Americans from high culture, constituting as proof of their ability to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

²⁵ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Marter, “Bannister, Edward Mitchell (1833),” 199; Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 1–3; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 29; 26; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 40; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 3; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 38; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, xi–xii, 40–51; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 89. There is some consensus that Bannister moved to Boston in 1850, though Hartigan, Holland and Rodgers place him there in 1848 and Bearden and Henderson place him there in the 1840s.

²⁸ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41; Brown, *The Black Man*, 214–17; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 21.

common occupation for blacks by the mid-1800s, offering African Americans an opportunity to achieve financial stability and independence, as well as a level of status within their communities.²⁹ Bannister received one of his first portrait commissions after relocating in 1852 from Dr. John V. DeGrasse, a noted abolitionist and Boston's first African American physician.³⁰ By 1853, he was a well-established hairdresser at the salon of Madame Christiana Carteaux, a successful African American businesswoman, whom he later married in 1857.³¹ Bannister began to publicly display and sell his artwork while in the employ of Carteaux, a further indicator of the social opportunities that a stable profession like barbering could offer the African American community.³² DeGrasse approached him again in 1854 with a commission for a seascape, titled *The Ship Outward Bound*, a genre that the painter would return to over the course of his career.³³ Records show that Bannister was able to list himself as an artist in the city directory as early as 1858, suggesting that he was no longer financially dependent on his work as a hairdresser by this time.³⁴ He promoted himself as a portrait painter for the first ten years of his career; allowing him to advance professionally while offering a platform to express his political activism through the depiction of abolitionist and African American subjects.³⁵ Beyond the lucrative nature of portrait painting, nineteenth-century African American artists were also drawn

²⁹ Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival*, 51.

³⁰ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42.

³¹ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 18; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42.

³² Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42.

³³ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 9; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 29; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 18. *The Ship Outward Bound* was the first of many seascape paintings for Bannister. This work received coverage in *The Liberator*, the nation's leading anti-slavery publication, demonstrating its value to the African American community as well as to Bannister's developing career as a professional artist.

³⁴ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 21.

³⁵ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42; Patton, *African-American Art*, 76–86; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 9; and Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 63. Bannister began exhibiting and selling portraits in Boston during the 1850s and enjoyed inclusion in various group exhibitions at the Boston Art Club and Museum.

to this genre for the liberation that it offered from the identity whites had imposed upon blacks, allowing these artists to control the representation of their race through the production of dignified images of African American citizens.³⁶ The participation of free blacks in a field as highly esteemed as the visual arts was imperative to their fight for recognition and mobilization within American society.³⁷ Having just entered the fine arts arena at the start of the century, most African American artists sought first to conform to the cultural norms at their disposal and then to master them, striving toward excellence as a means to legitimize the entire race.³⁸ The genesis of Bannister's career and his early commissions are consistent with the trends of African American art up until this point, with portraiture and landscape painting constituting the most popular genres for black artists during the nineteenth century.³⁹

Seeking additional involvement with the arts, Bannister familiarized himself with daguerreotype and wet-plate photography, eventually becoming skilled in the process of tinting photographs.⁴⁰ This led him to a brief stint in New York in 1862, where he worked under a Broadway photographer for about a year before returning to his life in Boston and officially listing his profession as a photographer in the city directory.⁴¹ As with barbering, he likely turned toward photography out of financial need, a decision also made by some of his African American contemporaries like Robert Scott Duncanson and Henry Ossawa Tanner.⁴² Unfortunately,

³⁶ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25; Patton, *African-American Art*, 76; Mercer and Buick, “African American Artists Gain Access,” 9; and Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 23–27.

³⁷ Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 25–27; and Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 9–15.

³⁸ Mercer and Buick, “African American Artists Gain Access,” 9; Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 24–28; Patton, *African-American Art*, 71; Brown, *The Black Man*, 215–16; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 15; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 2; and Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.

³⁹ Patton, *African-American Art*, 76; and Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 26–28.

⁴⁰ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42.

⁴¹ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 22.

⁴² *Ibid.*

documentation of this phase in Bannister's career is scant, leaving the nature and significance of the work he produced during this time to speculation. During these years, however, Carteaux encouraged Bannister to continue painting and motivated him to give up his work tinting photographs in pursuit of a career as a professional painter.⁴³

While in Boston, Bannister and Carteaux maintained connections to several of the city's most prominent African American abolitionists. The most notable affiliation is to activist Lewis Hayden, whose home once functioned as a stop along the Underground Railroad.⁴⁴ Bannister and his wife spent two years living with Hayden, an experience that undoubtedly influenced and heightened his own political awareness. Bannister, himself, played an active role in his community's anti-slavery movement, participating in such abolitionist organizations as The Colored Citizens of Boston, The Union Progressive Association, The Convention of the Colored People of New England, The Crispus Attucks Choir, and The African American Histrionic Club.⁴⁵ Bannister performed a number of roles within these organizations, quickly becoming a lauded advocate, administrator, speaker, and demonstrator at their public meetings and political events. Most significantly, Bannister and Carteaux organized a fundraising fair to petition for equal pay for blacks serving in the Union army during the Civil War, seeking to correct the disparity in compensation between white and black soldiers.⁴⁶ Held in 1864, the Soldiers' Relief Fair featured a full-length portrait of Robert Gould Shaw—the celebrated Colonel of the 54th Regiment, the first all-black troop in the North —painted and donated by Bannister for auction at

⁴³ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42.

⁴⁴ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 21. The term “Underground Railroad” is capitalized in this instance to remain consistent with my source, which treats it as a proper noun.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

⁴⁶ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 72.

the event.⁴⁷ This portrait was once displayed at the State House in Boston but remains unaccounted for today, leaving historians without a record of its composition.⁴⁸ The majority of Bannister's work created during the 1850s and 1860s suffered a similar fate, therefore much about this stage in his career is left open to question. Standing documentation of his years in Boston, however, evidences Bannister's engagement with racial themes, and his continued experimentation with an array of subject matter, from portraits to religious scenes, seascapes, genre pieces, and landscapes.

2.4 Life in Providence

Bannister and his wife relocated to Providence, Rhode Island sometime between 1869 and 1871.⁴⁹ Considering Carteaux's preexisting personal and professional connections to the state of Rhode Island, it is likely that she prompted their decision to move.⁵⁰ Together they maintained a high level of community involvement in Providence, evidenced by Bannister's founding of the Providence Art Club in 1880, and Carteaux's establishment of the Home for Aged Colored Women in 1896.⁵¹ In the years leading up to these ventures, Bannister received an

⁴⁷ Haggard, *African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, 223; Rodriguez, *Slavery in the United States*, 144; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25. Colonel Shaw was a white abolitionist and leader of the 54th Colored Regiment, the first all-black regiment in the Northeast that was stationed in Boston during the Civil War. Their most noted accomplishment was their assault on the Confederate Fort Wagner, which helped to guard the primary entrance to Charleston Harbor and keep Confederate forces at bay.

⁴⁸ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43.

⁴⁹ Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 2; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 74; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25–27; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 38; Patton, *African-American Art*, 86; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31; Marter, "Bannister, Edward Mitchell (1833)," 199; and Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12. Art historians disagree about the year of Bannister's arrival in Providence, though the majority believes it is either 1869 or 1870.

⁵⁰ Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 27; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 38; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 29–31; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 71–75. In addition to being a Rhode Island native, born in North Kingstown in 1822, Carteaux had also established a hair salon in the city of Providence while still living in Boston.

⁵¹ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 49; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 74–75. Carteaux founded The Home for Aged Colored Women with other African American women in Providence as a social program that would advocate for needs, respect and dignity of the African American community. Today it is called The Bannister Nursing Care Center.

award at the Rhode Island Industrial Exhibition, submitted work to the Boston Art Club, and acquired studio space at the Woods Building in Providence, effectively and steadily advancing his career as an artist.⁵² In 1876, Bannister entered his famed landscape painting, *Under the Oaks*, into the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, winning the bronze medal in painting.⁵³ In addition to being the only New England artist honored at the exhibition, Bannister was the first African American to receive national recognition in the arts.⁵⁴ He enjoyed regional attention as well, receiving a bronze medal in 1878, and two subsequent silver medals in 1881 and 1884 for his entries into the annual Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics exhibition.⁵⁵ Bannister's Centennial Exhibition win enabled his direct participation in the cultural refinement of Providence through the co-founding of The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the Providence Art Club.⁵⁶ As a founding board member, he aided the establishment of RISD in 1878, which helped legitimize Providence as the artistic capital of New England, and lent momentum toward the movement to professionalize the arts in his community.⁵⁷ Several of Bannister's friends and colleagues populated RISD's original teaching staff and school board. Some of these individuals would go on to join the Providence Art Club administration years later.⁵⁸

The same year that RISD was formed, Bannister, along with peers George W. Whitaker and Charles Walter Stetson, organized a meeting in his Woods Building studio that led to the

⁵² Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 29.

⁵³ Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49; Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 69; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 29–34; Patton, *African-American Art*, 86–88; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 69–70.

⁵⁴ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 70–75.

⁵⁵ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49.

⁵⁶ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 46–47; and Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 113–17.

⁵⁷ Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 115–17; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 45.

⁵⁸ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 46.

founding of the Providence Art Club two years later in 1880.⁵⁹ The purpose of this group was to establish a network through which local artists could sell, exhibit, and study fine art by bringing professionals, amateurs, and art collectors together into one comprehensive community.⁶⁰ Their plans came to fruition quickly, with sixteen artists ratifying the Club's original compact, the second to sign being Bannister, himself.⁶¹ The Club achieved immediate success within the community, with some of Providence's most distinguished citizens among its members. Notable founding members included: Whitaker (club co-founder who had worked in France with Barbizon leader, Jean Francois Millet), Stetson (beloved watercolor painter, secretary, and vice president of the club), James Sullivan Lincoln (club president and Norwegian landscapist and portraitist who formerly exhibited at the Salon in Paris), Eimrich Rein (a skilled colorist and former student of the arts in Italy), Rosa Peckham (life drawing specialist), George M. Porter, Governor Royal C. Taft, and Senator Nelson Aldrich.⁶² The Club's founders, each well known to the community, were grounded in European artistic tradition and theory.⁶³ They aimed to cultivate Providence's arts scene around these values, promoting European artistic taste through their exhibitions, classes, and lectures. Thus, the Club and the community at large were instilled

⁵⁹ Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 127.

⁶⁰ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 75; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 45; Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 3; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 46–47; Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31; and Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 127–29.

⁶¹ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 75; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47; Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 132; and Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 3.

⁶² Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47–48; Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 3; and Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 127–42.

⁶³ Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 127–36. Eimrich Rein studied the arts in Paris, showing his work at the Salon. George Whitaker had worked in France, drawing his influence from the Barbizon School. Sydney Burleigh lived in France many years where he studied the arts before returning to join the executive committee of the Club. Burleigh and his strong European taste had a profound influence over the Club's organization.

with a strong preference for the Barbizon style.⁶⁴ This influence is evident in the work produced and supported by the organization, particularly in the instance of Bannister's landscapes.

By the 1880s Bannister was a distinguished and respected New England artist, demonstrated by his increased patronage from white and African American members of his community and the regular inclusion of his work in Providence and Boston Art Club exhibitions.⁶⁵ Through his connections in the Providence Art Club, he assembled the Ann Eliza Club, known colloquially as the "A&E Club." The objective of this group was the intellectual and artistic refinement of its members through the direct exchange of literature, reminiscences, and artwork, both from within their community and abroad.⁶⁶ Whether Bannister encountered German Idealism through these clubs is unclear, although, considering the theoretical make-up of their membership and the breadth of cultural issues they engaged with, it is plausible that his participation in these social circles exposed him to Idealism and other related philosophies, such as Transcendentalism. His manuscript, *The Artist and His Critics*, supports this notion. Bannister first delivered this manuscript in a speech at a meeting of the A&E Club in 1886, detailing his personal philosophy on the respective roles and responsibilities of those who create art, and those who interpret it.⁶⁷ The influences indicated by the content of his manuscript will be examined in the chapter to follow.

⁶⁴Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39-45; Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 1-3; and Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 127-166. As noted above, many of the Club's members were heavily influenced by the teachings of the Barbizon school. Their influence on both the philosophy of the club and the culture of their community is well documented. Examples of this include Club lectures and social events where Millet, Barbizon leader, was a primary topic as well as Club exhibitions which often featured Millet's work, among other masters. Additionally, Vose's role in the importation and distribution of Barbizon art in Providence had a profound effect on the artistic style and preferences of Providence landscape painters and, therefore, the taste of the city's art collectors.

⁶⁵ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 45; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 86.

⁶⁶ Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 47; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47.

⁶⁷ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47

Despite the rapid social and cultural changes that occurred in Providence during the 1870s, racial tensions continued to permeate the city and Rhode Island at large.⁶⁸ Having led the nation in the Atlantic slave trade until 1807, Rhode Island's social and architectural landscape was laden with traces of the slave trade industry.⁶⁹ When Bannister and his wife arrived in Providence, African American citizens were still actively struggling against discrimination and oppression in their daily lives. Though his local community respected and admired him, Bannister contended with the limitations of racial segregation and insensitive stereotypes, as well as frequent reminders of slavery and its exploits.⁷⁰ Prevailing racist attitudes punctuated his struggles and his achievements as an African American artist.⁷¹ A prime example of this is his Centennial Exhibition win, recognition that garnered him equal amounts of criticism and praise from his community. In attempting to claim his award, Bannister was met with overt discrimination from exhibition patrons and officials, who only recanted their insensitive remarks when he revealed his identity as prizewinner.⁷² The backlash continued in the aftermath of his

⁶⁸ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 13–27; Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival*, 26–67; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 74.

⁶⁹ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 10; and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival*, 26–27.

⁷⁰ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 10-13, 27-49; and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival*, 28-67. Bannister succeeded during a time when his skillset was considered an exception to the rule that African Americans were an inferior race. Despite emancipation, black people throughout the nation were regarded as second class citizens, being kept from enjoying the most basic human rights. This attitude permeated the consciousness of society, with racial prejudice surfacing overtly in numerous ways, such as segregation, harmful caricatures and stereotypes, public harassment, and unjust persecution from law enforcement. This treatment was only compounded by the architectural landscape of Providence, which had been designed to accommodate the commerce of slavery in the century prior.

⁷¹ Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 26; Brown, *The Black Man*, 215–16; Patton, *African-American Art*, 71-88; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 15; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 2; Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 69–70; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 29–34; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 45. Racism revealed itself in more benign ways as well, particularly in the face of Bannister's achievements as an artist of color. One example of this includes his designation as one of the "race men" of his day, a classification that sprung from the assumption that black citizens could not positively contribute to their communities.

⁷² See Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 69–70; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 29–34; Patton, *African-American Art*, 86–88; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 45. Several sources include the following well-known anecdote of Bannister's Centennial Exhibition win:

win, when Exhibition affiliates attempted, but failed, to revoke his medal on the grounds of his race alone.⁷³ Despite the adversity that he faced as an African American, Bannister expressed a desire to be judged by the same aesthetic standards as all American artists, stating “I was and am proud to know that the jury of award did not know anything about me, my antecedents, color or race. There was no sentimental sympathy leading to the award of my medal.”⁷⁴

African American citizens confronted subtler forms of racial tension, as well. Evidence of Rhode Island’s seventy-five year participation in the slave trade marked the landscape, statewide.⁷⁵ For example, the Providence Art Club, co-founded by Bannister, resided in a building that once housed an array of infamous slave traders.⁷⁶ Juanita Marie Holland and Corrine Jennings describe nineteenth century Rhode Island as a deeply dichotomous state, founded on the pretense of personal and religious freedom yet reliant upon the economy of oppression, from the enslavement of Native Americans in the seventeenth century to the trade of African Americans in the eighteenth century.⁷⁷ The circumstances of Bannister’s patronage in Providence deserve a closer look in this context. As an artist, Bannister acquired support through

I learned from the newspapers that “54” had received a first-prize medal, so I hurried to the committee rooms to make sure the report was true. There was a great crowd there ahead of me. As I jostled among them, many resented my presence, some actually commenting within my hearing in a most petulant manner: What is that colored person in here for? Finally, when I succeeded in reaching the desk where inquiries were made, I endeavored to gain the attention of the official in charge. He was very insolent. Without raising his eyes, he demanded in the most exasperating tone of voice, ‘Well, what do you want here anyway? Speak lively.’ ‘I want to inquire concerning No. 54. Is it a prize winner?’ ‘What’s that to you?’ said he. In an instance my blood was up; the looks that passed between him and others in the room were unmistakable. I was not an artist to them, simply an inquisitive colored man. Controlling myself, I said deliberately, ‘I am interested in the report that *Under the Oaks* has received a prize. I painted the picture.’ An 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.

⁷³ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 69–70.

⁷⁴ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25.

⁷⁵ Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle*, 5-21. The slave trade was a permanent part of the Rhode Island economy throughout the eighteenth century, offering the most profitable method of selling rum.

⁷⁶ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 10; and Miner, *Angell’s Lane*.

⁷⁷ Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle*, 5-21; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 10; and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival*, 28-67.

the city's most affluent members, many of whom earned their wealth through the economy of slavery.⁷⁸ Though he found financial support within the Providence community, he received only limited regional recognition, in comparison to his Caucasian contemporaries like Whitaker or Stetson.⁷⁹ In fact, his success was often framed as an exception to racial stereotypes rather than a negation of the validity of such beliefs. It was within this conflicting social milieu that Bannister developed his craft, a fact that undoubtedly influenced the nature of his artistic expression and the subsequent reception of his work.

Bannister continued to exhibit and sell artwork through the late nineteenth century, mounting thirty-three of his works at the spring Providence Art Club exhibition in 1891.⁸⁰ Tastes began to shift in Providence in the years following this show, making it increasingly difficult for Bannister to sell and display landscape paintings toward the end of his career.⁸¹ As he grew older his health deteriorated and his financial struggles limited his ability to participate in the fine arts community.⁸² On January 8, 1901, Bannister suffered a fatal heart attack while attending a prayer meeting at the Elmwood Avenue Free Baptist Church.⁸³ Within five months of his death, the Providence Art Club coordinated a memorial exhibition in Bannister's honor, showcasing 101 of his works on canvas.⁸⁴ In July of that same year, artists in Providence gathered to erect an eight-

⁷⁸ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 10–13; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 86.

⁷⁹ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p. In this catalogue, Daniel Robbins asserts that if Bannister had studied in Europe like many of his peers, he may have developed into a more sophisticated painter and may have been acknowledged differently by historians.

⁸⁰ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 49.

⁸¹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 50.

⁸² Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 50; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 49–57.

⁸³ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 50; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 53.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 32; Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 53.

foot-tall boulder, complete with a bronze palette and tobacco pipe, to serve as the marker for his gravesite.⁸⁵

2.5 Works on Canvas: Portraiture

Bannister's earliest recorded portraits were of Dr. John V. DeGrasse and his wife, Cordelia Howard-DeGrasse—completed in 1854 and 1852 respectively.⁸⁶ The patronage of DeGrasse, an African American middle-class professional and antislavery activist, attests to the solidarity that defined Boston's African American social system during the 1800s.⁸⁷ Among his other documented portraits are those of abolitionist *Prudence Nelson Bell* (1864), martyred war hero *Robert Gould Shaw* (1864), abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison titled *Portrait of Garrison* (ca. 1869), anonymous African American subject titled *Newspaper Boy* (ca. 1869), and his wife *Christiana Cardeaux* (ca. 1870) (fig. 1-3).⁸⁸ Collectively, these portraits demonstrate Bannister's personal engagement with abolitionist issues and his growing interest in the articulation and improvement of the African American experience during his last years in Boston.

2.6 Works on Canvas: Seascapes

Bannister's first seascape commission, *The Ship Outward Bound* (1854), captured a meaningful symbol for African Americans, given the allusion of this subject to the realities of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the ramifications of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which mandated the return of escaped slaves to their owners.⁸⁹ Holland elaborates on the meaning of this painting, considering its abolitionist patronage and profound symbolism:

⁸⁵ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 50–51; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 53.

⁸⁶ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42; and Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 63.

⁸⁷ Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 63.

⁸⁸ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25–27; Patton, *African-American Art*, 86; Wagner, "Newspaper Boy," n.p.; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43.

⁸⁹ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 18–21; and Rodriguez, *Slavery in the United States*, 301–3. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was the most controversial legislation of the antebellum era, fanning the flames of the sectional crisis

These “ships outward bound” [*sic*] were often floating prisons, visible reminders of the valiant efforts of Boston’s Black community to save escaping slaves. Conversely, for some of these fugitives, the image could also represent escape to England, where slavery had been outlawed in 1808. Emotionally resonant on so many levels to African Americans, Bannister’s seascapes must be read as more than compositional studies of ships, sky, and sea.⁹⁰

Through her analysis, she persuasively argues an underlying key point: Bannister was both personally and politically invested in his painting. Holland’s distinction establishes an intellectual framework for the interpretation of his art, reinforcing an otherwise uncommon notion that his compositions are infused with complex ideas, as well as his own unique point of view. This perspective advances the narrative surrounding Bannister’s life and career by moving beyond the aesthetic experience of his work to address its conceptual content— an approach that has been critical to the development of the interpretations offered in this thesis.

Two surviving paintings from this period provide a clear understanding of Bannister’s stylistic development throughout the 1850s. The first of which, titled *Dorchester 1856*, depicts a seascape with a small landmass in the distance, dotted by clusters of homes along its coastline (fig.4). Lynda Roscoe Hartigan describes this painting as a schematic composition that “demonstrates his unresolved handling of spatial recession and aerial perspective.”⁹¹ Within this same year, Bannister painted *Untitled (Rhode Island Seascape)*, the organization and rendering of which marked a perspectival, atmospheric, and stylistic progression in his work that coincided with the evolving aesthetic preferences of his time (fig. 5).⁹² His artistic production

between North and South. This law was much harsher than previous versions, not only sanctioning the recapture of slaves, but specifically forbidding states from interfering while authorizing federal intervention in the removal of suspected slaves from their residences. While this act made recapture of slaves much easier, it ultimately fortified the abolitionist movement in their resistance to slavery.

⁹⁰ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 21.

⁹¹ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 72–73.

⁹² Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 18. Holland and Jennings make the point that Bannister’s work was consistent with that of his contemporaries, namely Fitz Hugh Lane, Martin John Heade and John Frederick Kensett. They also compare his work to anonymous folk art paintings of the era, such as *Meditation by the Sea* painted circa 1860 and held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

increased rapidly between the late 1860s and early 1880s, perhaps due to his increased recognition, formal training in art, and financial security.⁹³ Among his few surviving paintings of this era, *Moon Over Harbor* (ca. 1868) further elucidates his shifting sensibilities and growth as an artist during this phase in his career (fig. 6). Bannister's loose, expressive brush strokes lend an atmospheric quality to this painting while simultaneously revealing his interest in natural phenomena such as the interplay of light, water, and cloud formations. This artistic sensibility is reiterated in his painting titled *Sunset*, created c. 1875–80 (fig. 7). At times, Bannister deviated from this atmospheric quality to favor a more linear style, as in *Landscape Near Newport, Rhode Island*, completed between 1877 and 1878 (fig. 8). In this composition, Bannister shows restraint in his range of color and form, employing a palette of deep browns and subtle greys that characterized the lot of his work during this period. A direct comparison of his late nineteenth-century seascapes demonstrates his continued experimentation with style and technique.

2.7 Works on Canvas: Landscapes

During his early years in Providence, Bannister gravitated toward landscape paintings that included figures of people and animals. Such is the case for three extant works from 1869 titled *Governor Sprague's White Horse*, *Untitled (Man with Two Oxen)*, and *Herdsman with Cows* (fig. 9-11). Together these paintings reveal Bannister's tendency toward stylistic experimentation, given their large scale and tight compositional arrangements. Reaching beyond the atmospheric mood evoked by scenes like *Moon Over Harbor*, these works achieve a highly finished, linear style, yielding compositions rich in both detail and color (see fig. 6). By 1876, the year of his Centennial exhibition win for *Under the Oaks*, he had developed a

⁹³ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 73.

straightforward, tranquil style in his landscapes that elicited a sense of balance and harmony.⁹⁴ Insight into his award winning work—lost since the turn of the twentieth century—is possible through a single sketch and a painting titled *Oak Trees* (1876), each thought to resemble *Under the Oaks* in style and compositional arrangement (fig. 12-13).⁹⁵ Hartigan summarizes the significance of this momentous work, stating: “The painting’s bucolic subject, expressive naturalism, and subdued colors suggest that Bannister was moving away from the earlier realistic and detailed style toward more emotional, suggestive studies of nature.”⁹⁶ The subtext of this analysis is that his work was becoming much more subjective at this point in his career, based more upon his own interpretations of nature rather than strict imitation.

One of his earlier paintings of this decade, *Driving Home the Cows* (1881), exemplifies Bannister’s interest in the picturesque, given the simplicity and intimacy of the composition (fig. 14). A departure from his more atmospheric landscapes, this work emphasizes subject over visual effect. This kind of pastoral subject matter recurs in many of his works, such as *Woman Walking Down Path* (1882), a landscape which demonstrates the unity among God’s creations, according to Holland and Jennings (fig. 15).⁹⁷ Another motif that emerges in his landscapes—present in both *Driving Home the Cows* and *Woman Walking Down Path*—is the solitary traveler navigating a winding road, passing through the wonder of God’s handiwork.⁹⁸ Bannister engaged this theme in various ways throughout his career, evidenced by his more dramatized composition, *Approaching Storm* (1886) (fig. 16). Typically, when Bannister included human figures in his landscapes, he placed them unassumingly in the center of his compositions as

⁹⁴ Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49.

⁹⁵ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 69; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 34.

⁹⁶ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 69.

⁹⁷ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

observers, striking a balance between man and nature where neither dominates nor overpowers the other.⁹⁹ In *Approaching Storm*, Bannister captures a sublime image of nature that Sharon F. Patton posits as a metaphor for the uncertainty of life's struggles, a theme that was very common in American painting at the time.¹⁰⁰ Bearden and Henderson take a more formal approach in their analysis of this work, contrasting Bannister's style with the meticulously detailed paintings of the Hudson River School to underscore his tendency toward generalized masses defined by light and shadow.¹⁰¹ His mature style deviated from that of the Hudson River painters, whose work emphasized nature's mystical, uncivilized qualities as well as artistic compositions that were carefully conceived, detailed, and created within a studio environment.¹⁰² Like Bannister, the Hudson River artists were grounded in European theories of art and took an interest in the moral, invisible meanings in nature.¹⁰³ Bannister's ethereal, sentimental observations of nature suggest that, while they may have been motivated by a similar ideology, he held a different set of aesthetic values.

2.8 Works on Canvas: Late Works

Bannister maintained a high level of artistic activity throughout the end of the nineteenth century, producing at least twenty-seven works in a variety of styles and themes over the last decade of his life.¹⁰⁴ Painted in 1893, *Hay Gatherers* and *People Near Boat* each reflect his interest in depicting the African American, working-class experience, much like his earlier

⁹⁹ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49.

¹⁰⁰ Patton, *African-American Art*, 89.

¹⁰¹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49.

¹⁰² Patton, *African-American Art*, 84–91.

¹⁰³ Angela L. Miller, Janet C. Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008), 253–54; Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 33–38; Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41–58; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 84.

¹⁰⁴ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 79; Marter, "Bannister, Edward Mitchell (1833)," 199; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 53.

portrait, *Newspaper Boy* (1869) (fig. 17-18, see fig. 2).¹⁰⁵ Elevating perceptions of the rituals and realities of everyday life, *Hay Gatherers* reiterates Bannister's interest in the harmonious relationship between man and nature. His genre scene, *People Near Boat*, offers viewers a different glimpse of the African American experience in New England. As opposed to the industrious scenes that he typically painted, this work captures a leisurely moment of two couples returning from a day out on the water. In the foreground, two men haul a small boat ashore while two women stand back, looking on. The African American man on the left facing the viewer bears resemblance to Bannister himself, though this likeness remains unconfirmed.¹⁰⁶

Collectively, Bannister's works of the 1890s reveal an increasing lightening of his color palette, as well as his propensity toward formal and stylistic experimentation during the end of his career. This is true of Bannister's 1898 painting, *Seaweed Gatherers*, in which he employs a unique perspective and brightened palette to capture the up-close image of a working-class man pushing a wheelbarrow (fig. 19). Unlike his earlier landscapes, this work eschews the panoramic view in favor of a more restricted composition, allowing the human figure to fill the canvas as the primary subject of this work. What he achieves is an intimate, subjective portrayal of the American farmer that is consistent with the harmonious feeling of his earlier works, though unconventional for Bannister in his approach to subject matter. His later works of this decade, *Street Scene* (1895–99) and *The Old Home* (1899), indicate an inclination toward the abstraction of form and color as well as his increasingly textural treatment of the canvas' surface (fig. 20-21). Although Bannister expressed an indifference toward impressionism to his beloved

¹⁰⁵ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 53.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 45–53. Holland and Jennings suggest that this male figure shares characteristics with Bannister, though they offer no concrete evidence to support the theory. Their observation is plausible, however, considering that Bannister had extensive experience with boating throughout his life, coming to own his own sloop yacht in the 1880s.

colleague, Stetson, his color palette and the quality of his brushstrokes in *Street Scene* reflect the impressionist style.¹⁰⁷ Completed just before his death, this painting appears to be a stylistic departure for him, given the formal and thematic leap it makes from the expressive naturalism that typically characterized his bucolic landscape scenes. While these late works seem anomalous in the context of Bannister's oeuvre, it is reasonable to argue that they are consistent with his interest in the effects of light and color that he sustained throughout his career. This considered, one could assert that this late artistic shift was, in fact, a natural progression for him as an artist.

2.9 Artistic Influences

As the prior survey of his paintings has evidenced, Bannister chose to explore a variety of genres and themes throughout his career. His eclectic approach to art captures the general, encompassing values of all nineteenth-century American art and reflects the conventional aesthetic preferences of his era. Like all American artists of this period, African American painters adhered to European artistic traditions, holding landscape painting in particularly high esteem; Bannister was no exception to this.¹⁰⁸ Previous scholarship has persuasively shown that he drew his primary inspiration from the French Barbizon School, a group whose serene landscapes and idealized representations of the working class aligned with his own harmonious

¹⁰⁷ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 53; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12-14; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 78–79. Each author cited here attributes this shift in Bannister's style to the influence of Impressionism. Holland and Rodgers attribute this likeness to the general societal acceptance of European Post Impressionism, which promoted the importance of technique over subject matter as well as the primacy of moral spirituality in painting. Though plausible, this stylistic evolution also theoretically parallels the German Idealist movement which advocated the same values in painting, particularly the democratization of landscape, the deep reverence toward nature, pictorial unity, and the preference for non-meticulous renderings of nature.

¹⁰⁸ F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1941), 157–66; Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41–58; Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1–20; Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 24–28; Mercer and Buick, "African American Artists Gain Access," 9; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, xiii.

renderings of nature in both style and theme.¹⁰⁹ He became acquainted with the Barbizon style in Boston through William Morris Hunt, following Hunt's return from France in 1856 where he befriended French Barbizon leader, Jean-François Millet.¹¹⁰ Though the details of Bannister and Hunt's relationship are unknown, it is likely that the two crossed paths at the Studio Building in Boston where each artist rented studio space.¹¹¹ With both men regularly exhibiting their work in the city throughout the 1860s, Bannister would have also had ample exposure to French Barbizon sensibilities through Hunt's paintings.¹¹² During this time, Bannister studied anatomical drawing at the Lowell Institute under William Rimmer, allowing him to develop his technical skill and network with other Barbizon artists in the community.¹¹³ His preference for this style was reinforced when he relocated to Providence to focus on his career as an artist. By the time of his arrival, Providence's artistic taste was predominantly Barbizon due to the influence of art dealer Seth Vose, who began importing European Barbizon paintings into New England as early as 1850.¹¹⁴ George Leland Miner regarded Vose's gallery as a center of the arts, noting the instrumental role of this institution in shaping the city's culture, by creating an environment where artists could gather professionally and thrive.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49; Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 1–5; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; Shaw, “Landscapes of Labor,” 59; Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 26–27; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 38; and Marter, “Bannister, Edward Mitchell (1833),” 199.

¹¹⁰ Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 6; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 71; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 41–43; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 17; Shaw, “Landscapes of Labor,” 59; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 29; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 91.

¹¹¹ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 25.

¹¹² Bannister Gallery (Rhode Island College) and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *4 From Providence*, n.p.

¹¹³ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 72.

¹¹⁴ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 75. By 1870, Barbizon works dominated Providence's local collections and profoundly influenced landscape painting. Bannister's career coincided with the city's growing taste for pastoral, harmonic landscapes. Though his primary market was in Boston, Vose made an indelible mark on the taste of Rhode Island artists through his large-scale importation of European works.

¹¹⁵ Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 114–116.

Holland and Jennings described Bannister as a “painter-recorder” who projected his own unique vision of nature onto the canvas, anchoring his vantage point at the edge of a vista rather than its center, a perspective that he likely grew accustomed to during his time working on the ocean.¹¹⁶ Overall, he favored the picturesque over the sensational in his work, selecting simple subject matter like cattle and cottages.¹¹⁷ Bannister often sought tranquility in nature through various effects of light and color, rather than the evocation of drama. His work was based on the reality of what he observed, as opposed to the dream-like or imagined scenes painted by some of his cohorts.¹¹⁸ Foregoing precise detail, Bannister prioritized loose, sketchy brushwork to establish mood or emotion within his paintings, versus striving toward a highly finished, romanticized image of nature.¹¹⁹ This modest and straightforward style came to define his body of work and gained him brief, but widespread, appreciation among audiences in Rhode Island.¹²⁰

Bannister proceeded from a spiritual philosophy and poetic sensibility, both in his life and his art-making practice.¹²¹ Some art historians have connected him to Transcendentalist philosophy, noting his familiarity with Emerson’s writing and their shared belief in nature as the catalyst for artistic production.¹²² Holland and Jennings proposed that Bannister first encountered this philosophy in Boston, where Emerson frequently lectured on art and the abolitionist movement.¹²³ Beyond the influence of Emerson, he maintained a close relationship with inventor

¹¹⁶ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 13; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47–48.

¹¹⁷ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.

¹¹⁸ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47–49. Bearden and Henderson contrast Bannister’s work with the dreamlike landscapes of Robert S. Duncanson and Frederick E. Church or the highly-constructed landscapes of Claude Loraine and Paul Cezanne as well as the meticulous style of the Hudson River School in New York, represented by artists like Asher B. Durand.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹²⁰ Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*, n.p.

¹²¹ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 82; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; and Whitaker, “Edward M. Bannister,” 1–6.

¹²² Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39.

¹²³ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39.

and scientist, William H. Channing, the nephew of William Ellery Channing, famed New England theologian who profoundly influenced the Transcendentalist movement.¹²⁴ Additionally, Bannister's manuscript details his definition of the artist as a spiritual conduit and deliverer of God's messages, an attitude that resonates with the Transcendentalist concept of the artist as interpreter of the universal spirit.¹²⁵ Like most American landscape artists in the nineteenth century, he was motivated by this philosophy to capture God's presence in nature and communicate spiritual and moral sentiments through his compositions.¹²⁶

Historians have noted that Bannister was committed to interdisciplinary academic study as a means of personal and professional development.¹²⁷ Well-educated and eloquent, his contemporaries within the Providence community and beyond considered him a genius, and an honor to the African American community.¹²⁸ In a similar vein, close friend and co-founder of the Providence Art Club, Whitaker, described Bannister in the following way:

Edward Mitchell Bannister was a man whose gentle, childlike spirit was an inspiration to all who knew him; whose modesty was only equaled by his truthfulness as manifested in his life and works. . . Always of gentlemanly bearing, he could enter and leave a room with grace, while his conversation was more than ordinarily intelligent, so that it was a privilege to be in his company. His opinions were of a decided nature, for they were invariably well grounded.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 82, 241. William Ellery Channing was the first of the Transcendentalists in America. He was an avid reader of Kant, Fichte and Schelling, gaining exposure to their philosophies through an array of German philosophers and enthusiasts like Coleridge, Carlyle, and Madame de Stael.

¹²⁵ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 4–6.

¹²⁶ For more information on the American landscape tradition, see. Miller, Berlo, Wolf and Roberts, *American Encounters*; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49. Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 195–231; Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41–58; Miller, *The Empire of the Eye*, 1–20, 209–88; and Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*.

¹²⁷ See chapter 1, note 8.

¹²⁸ Brown, *The Black Man*, 216–17; Whitaker, “Reminiscences of Providence Artists,” 139; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43, 46–47; and Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 6. Examples of this include Brown's inclusion of Bannister in his book on outstanding African Americans, Bannister's regard as an “Artist Laureate” within the Providence Art Club, the respect he earned among leaders of the fine arts community in Providence following his Centennial Exhibition win, and the acknowledgment of his accomplishments by African American writers in the *A.M.E. Christian Record* as significant to the black community.

¹²⁹ Whitaker, “Reminiscences of Providence Artists,” 138.

Though these characterizations of Bannister as a race-man and an inspiration are somewhat polarized in their motivation—the former framed by widespread racial stereotypes and the latter by Whitaker’s personal affection—these historical accounts have objectively supported his intellectual engagement with art-making. Setting the obvious biases of these sources aside, such recollections, at the very least, indicate that Bannister’s conceptual approach to painting directly informed his artistic theory and expression. Several art historians have agreed that Bannister formed an individual philosophical and religious perspective that inspired his approach to landscape painting, above all else.¹³⁰ Bearden and Henderson dubbed him an “artist-thinker,” regarding his artwork as a vehicle through which he communicated and clarified his personal vision of art.¹³¹ In fact, Bannister even elucidated his perspective in his 1886 manuscript, *The Artist and His Critics*, that he delivered in a formal speech to the Ann-Eliza Club. This manuscript, the only surviving record of his philosophical foundation, provides an in-depth view of the principles that he supported in his art-making practice. This document is invaluable to the contemporary interpretation of his artwork, providing historians with direct insight into his beliefs on art and, in turn, a sound starting point for critical inquiry into his work.

¹³⁰ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 45; Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31–33; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 82; Marter, “Bannister, Edward Mitchell (1833),” 199; Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; Sims and Binstock, *African American Art: 200 Years*, 38; Whitaker, “Reminiscences of Providence Artists,” 138–39; Whitaker, “Edward M. Bannister,” 1–6; and Whitaker, “Edward Mitchell Bannister,” n.p.

¹³¹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47.

CHAPTER 3: BANNISTER, THE AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISTS AND THEIR CONNECTION TO GERMAN IDEALISM

3.1 An Overview of German Idealism

To properly analyze the ideas addressed by nineteenth-century American landscapists, it is necessary to note the developments in art theory that shaped their discipline. The formal study of art history emerged during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in Germany, coinciding with the scientific and historic thinking of the Enlightenment.¹ This ideological shift was a marked departure from the rigid formalism that shaped art criticism in the centuries prior, characterized by unyielding, universally held aesthetic norms.² The Enlightenment era ushered in the theory of “aesthetics,” propagated by philosophers like Immanuel Kant, who was among the first to equate science with philosophy and recognize sensory knowledge as a universal mode of cognition that is distinct from, but equivalent to, logical comprehension.³ In doing so, Kant directly engaged the concept and psychology of perception, two topics that remained contested throughout the nineteenth century.⁴ According to his aesthetic philosophy, one experiences the world as chaos and projects order and meaning onto it through mediation of the senses.⁵ Underpinning his theory is the presumption that perception is a faculty of the mind, in other words: our experience of the sensible world is a product of thought.⁶ This framework entails the denial of reality as such, positing that nothing truly exists outside of our minds. The relationship

¹ John Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit: from Plotinus to Schelling and Hegel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 8–9, 206; Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 21–22; and Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 55.

² Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 21

³ Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 2, 55–58; Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 45; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 195.

⁴ Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 67.

⁵ Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 67–68, 99; and Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 56.

⁶ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 47, 162; Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 99; and Brann, “Hegel and His New England Echo,” 56.

between cognition and perception—the intellectual and the material—was the focus of German Idealists to follow.

Hegel and Schelling proceeded from this Kantian understanding, each offering his own philosophy of mind, spirit, and artistic expression. They each sought to reconcile philosophy with science by applying logic to the philosophical process. The result was a systematic, metaphysical philosophy designed to resolve life's questions that lay beyond the limitations of scientific study.⁷ Countering Kant, they proposed a dialectical relationship between the thinking subject and objects of perception, asserting that the differentiation of “the self” from “the other” produces self-consciousness.⁸ The concept of an external reality independent from the self was novel, considering conventional wisdom dictated that nature, as a product of the mind, operated according to principles of human reason.⁹ Hegel and Schelling also diverged from Kant on the topic of aesthetics. In short, Kant regarded the aesthetic as a mode of cognition while Hegel and Schelling used the term simply to refer to works of art, framing the aesthetic as a vehicle to express ideas.¹⁰ They understood art as the product of a Universal Spirit (the Absolute)—the unequivocal force identified as the ideal blueprint and essence of all beings.¹¹ By establishing artistic production as a reflection of man's relationship to the Absolute, Schelling and Hegel

⁷ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 165–66.

⁸ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 5–9, 166; and Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 80–88.

⁹ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 166.

¹⁰ Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 3; Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 58; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 1, 56.

¹¹ Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 21–25, 45; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 7–8. Hegel and Schelling use several different terms interchangeably for the Absolute. These include the Universal Spirit, Universal Idea, Absolute Spirit, Absolute Idea and Zeitgeist. Each of these refer to the collective spirit and universal soul of a culture which manifests itself in individual works of art. When used to reference this specific entity, the metaphysical basis for the material, these terms will be capitalized as a proper noun unless included within a quotation from a source that refrained from capitalizing these terms.

effectively placed classical and modern art on the same continuum, accounted for changes in artistic expression over time, and posited the end of classical art and its tenets.¹²

Most notably, Hegel and Schelling broke with the classical standards of beauty. Kant instigated this change, stating, "...what is beautiful is not merely the material image of some singular inner truth or rational essence in nature, but is related to a freedom of the imagination that constitutes the defining characteristic of humanity as a finite creature capable of thinking of the infinite."¹³ His aesthetic philosophy asserted a relative concept of beauty, based upon individual aesthetic judgments rather than a fixed standard of beauty.¹⁴ Hegel and Schelling hold a conditional definition of beauty, defining it as the revelation of the Absolute in the sensible world through the harmonic synthesis of the real (sensible) and the ideal (intellectual).¹⁵ Their metaphysical premise for German Idealism fundamentally countered British empiricism and materialism, making it an attractive philosophy to American Transcendentalists—particularly New England theologians—during the nineteenth century.¹⁶ To grasp the paradigms that nineteenth-century artists responded to, it is important to understand what Hegel and Schelling contributed to Idealist theory and how their ideas shaped Transcendentalist philosophy.

3.2 The Idealist Principles of Hegel and Schelling

Hegel and Schelling identified as Transcendental Idealists, believing the material world could be transcended through an understanding of the eternal concepts that shape it.¹⁷ Moreover,

¹² Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 9-10,52; Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 58; Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 22–25.

¹³ Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 57.

¹⁴ Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 56–57; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 192–94.

¹⁵ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 37–39.

¹⁶ For an in-depth explanation of German Idealism and its influence in America, consult Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy;" Rene Wellek, "The Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy" (*The New England Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Dec., 1942)); Pochmann, *German Culture in America*; and Henry A. Pochmann, *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism: Phases in the History of American Idealism*, (Philadelphia: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, 1948).

¹⁷ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 4–9, 40–41, 205.

these philosophers grounded themselves in the notion that the mind fulfills itself through its relation to sensuous forms.¹⁸ This attitude set them apart from other Idealists, like Kant, who maintained that objects in the material world are predetermined by our minds.¹⁹ Hegel's philosophy of mind and spirit addressed the effect of perception on self-consciousness, or the dichotomous relationship between the self and the other, where nature represents the other as the manifestation of the Universal or Absolute Spirit.²⁰ Hegel's Absolute Spirit is analogous to God, understood as the metaphysical foundation of all things in the real.²¹ The fixed antithesis of spirit (ideal) and form (real) is the premise of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and *Philosophy of Mind* (1830) which later informed his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835–38) and *The Philosophy of Fine Art* (1886).²²

For Hegel, artistic production synthesizes mind with form, permitting the Universal Spirit (Zeitgeist) of a culture to transcend the ideal realm and find expression in the material world.²³ In other words, art is the external expression and realization of the Universal Idea, making universal concepts, or philosophy, the true content of art.²⁴ He believed the “Romantic arts”—such as painting—possessed the greatest capacity to reveal the Absolute Spirit with clarity.²⁵ Hegel's reason for holding painting in such high regard is twofold. First, he argued, as a medium that reduces the three-dimensional world to a two-dimensional representation, painting withdraws

¹⁸ Ibid., 194.

¹⁹ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 42.

²⁰ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 3–4, 198.

²¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. Michael Inwood (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 51–61; Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 7; and Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 25.

²² Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 165; and Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 22.

²³ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 9–11; and Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 25.

²⁴ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 48–55; Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 165; and Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 58.

²⁵ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 203.

from reality, thus asserting inwardness and subjectivity.²⁶ Second, as an art form shaped by line, light, shadow, and color, painting abstracts the material world to emphasize the Universal Idea and its independence from the sensuous realm.²⁷ John Hendrix summarizes Hegel's perspective on beauty in painting in the following way, "In Romantic art, beauty is the result of the recognition of the self-alienation of the subject in the world, and the desire to reconcile the divided state in a harmonious synthesis."²⁸ According to Hegel, beauty is a product of the mind rather than a purely sensory effect.²⁹ The aim of art is didactic, each work bringing spiritual content before the viewer's consciousness and giving universal concepts tangible expression.³⁰ Art also serves a moral end, inspiring contemplation of the duality that characterizes man's existence.³¹

Schelling published *The Philosophy of Art* in 1859, affirming Hegel's belief that art is an expression of philosophy which illustrates the negotiation between the ideal and real realms.³² Philosophy, in this sense, does not imply a rigid system of thought, rather a pure and spiritual activity.³³ Mildred Galland-Szymkowiak summarizes Schelling's concept of philosophy as "the 'absolute science of reason' or 'the principle of resolution of all powers/potenc(i)es' hence not a science contrasting with human action or with art but including both in itself."³⁴ She expands on this, noting:

Therefore, it would be irrelevant to understand the relation of art to philosophy as the bare opposition of a material reality to a conceptual knowledge, for art is not simply real (it is the supreme synthesis in the ideal world) and philosophy is not simply ideal (it

²⁶ Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Hatt and Klonk, *Art History*, 170; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 170.

²⁹ Hendrix, *Aesthetics & the Philosophy of Spirit*, 163.

³⁰ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

³² Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 45–50; and Mildred Galland-Szymkowiak, "Philosophy and the History of Art: Reconsidering Schelling's Philosophy of Art from the Perspective of Works of Art," (*Critical Horizons* 14, no. 3 (2013)), 300–301.

³³ Galland-Szymkowiak, "Philosophy and the History of Art," 300.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 300.

exceeds the opposition between real and ideal). Only the ‘magic and symbolic mirror’ of art allows the philosopher to see what he is himself doing (it is only in this relative meaning that art relates to philosophy as a real to an ideal); yet only philosophy can formulate this visibility and therefore reveals that art itself is the highest presentation of the spirit.³⁵

This reflects Hegel’s “double-view” of the universe, characterized by the dialectical relationship between the infinite and particular.³⁶ Both philosophers believed artists expressed the Absolute Idea (the ideal) through the manipulation of objects in the material world (the real).³⁷ Like Hegel, Schelling favored painting for its two-dimensionality and emphasis on the effects of light.³⁸ He defined beauty as “an absolute synthesis or mutual interpretation of freedom and necessity,” meaning the most beautiful artistic forms are those that express the greatest freedom of mind while adhering to the universal laws of nature.³⁹ Taking Hegel’s philosophy one step further, Schelling applied these ideas directly to art in order to codify Idealist aesthetic guidelines. His philosophy moves beyond the analysis of art’s underlying essence, to address the significance of artistic form and, most importantly, how to communicate these concepts through composition.

Schelling described the relationship between idea and form in the following way:

Those unities or eternal ideas as such can become truly objective by becoming their own symbol *in their particularity*, as particular forms. That which appears *through them* is merely the absolute unity, the idea in and for itself. The form is only the body with which it clothes itself and in which it becomes objective.⁴⁰

If art is a representation of objects in the sensible world which, in turn, represent the Absolute Idea, then art is thrice removed from reality by its very nature, and as such is a mere symbol of a symbol of the Absolute Idea itself.⁴¹ Schelling identified specific elements and geometries that

³⁵ Ibid., 300–301.

³⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. Douglas W. Scott (Reprint; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 34–37.

³⁷ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 37–45; and Hegel, *Introductory Lecture on Aesthetics*, 51.

³⁸ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 128; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 50.

³⁹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 118. The emphasis in this quote is Schelling’s, appearing in his original text as it does above.

⁴¹ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 84.

make the Absolute objective in painting, such as light, color, contrast, the human figure, the sublime, and the triangle.⁴² Each of these elements relates to one of three universal principles of painting: drawing, chiaroscuro, and color. Hendrix summarizes these elements, respectively, as the real, the ideal, and the separation of the two—with drawing as the initial framing of the Absolute in the particular, chiaroscuro as the juxtaposition of the ideal and particular via light, and color as the distinction of the two.⁴³

Per Schelling, the representation of the Absolute in art takes three forms: the schematic, the allegorical, and the symbolic. The schematic is an image of the mind, understood as a universal form that indicates a particular form, whereas the allegorical exists in the real as a particular form that evokes a universal concept.⁴⁴ The symbolic is also of the real, combining the schematic and allegorical to represent the Absolute through a particular form.⁴⁵ For Schelling, light is unique because it is both schematic in the ideal and symbolic in the real as the essence of the Absolute which reveals itself through nature.⁴⁶ The sun is the closest object in nature to the Absolute, describing space without filling it, and illuminating material objects as the Absolute illuminates the mind and soul.⁴⁷ Schelling considered light the absolute synthesis of idea (ideal) and matter (real), and as such a symbol of the infinite becoming finite.⁴⁸ While the body cannot participate in light, it can strive toward it and become color (i.e. obscured light), or the division

⁴² Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 128.

⁴³ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 83.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 64–72.

⁴⁵ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 64–72; Galland-Szymkowiak, “Philosophy and the History of Art,” 309.

⁴⁶ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 119–20; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 66–83.

⁴⁷ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 119–20; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 98, 103.

⁴⁸ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 82–3.

between light and matter.⁴⁹ Schelling and Hegel believed that painting symbolized the contrast of light and non-light with the most clarity.⁵⁰

Color, the purely symbolic principle of painting, demonstrates the mutually transformative relationship between matter and light in the real.⁵¹ Color separates the body from light, allowing it to emerge independently from its environment.⁵² A transparent body exists in perfect identity with light by incorporating it into itself, while non-transparent bodies reflect light, thus producing color.⁵³ Light (the element of the Absolute) is incomplete without participation in form in the same way that the ideal is incomplete without its relationship to the real.⁵⁴ Schelling cited Titian's painting *The Annunciation*, located in San Salvatore, Venice, as an example of light in perfect identification with matter, commending Titian for his ability to synthesize these two elements so seamlessly (fig. 22).⁵⁵ Schelling believed color should derive from nature and operate in a self-enclosed system, organized around the polarity of warm and cool tones.⁵⁶ The eye desires totality of color in every painting, taking great pleasure in a harmonious color palette.⁵⁷ In lieu of harmony, the eye seeks correspondence of color, as in the case of blue and yellow, red and green, or even green and purple.⁵⁸ Schelling identified the combination of green and purple as especially unique, eliciting the utmost satisfaction through

⁴⁹Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 121–22; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 82.

⁵⁰ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 126; Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 50; and Galland-Szymkowiak, "Philosophy and the History of Art," 311.

⁵¹ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 84–94.

⁵² Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 121–26.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 84.

⁵⁵ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 142; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 92.

⁵⁶ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 124.

⁵⁷ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 121–26; and Galland-Szymkowiak, "Philosophy and the History of Art," 311. Harmonious here means analogous, consisting of colors adjacent on the color wheel that are well matched and evoke serenity,

⁵⁸ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 121–26. Corresponding colors are complementary, creating vibrancy through their contrast.

their exclusion of one another, thus compelling the eye to demand their pairing.⁵⁹ This particular distinction is relevant to the analysis of Bannister's work, as many of his compositions were structured around this vibrant color combination, such as *Sunset*, *Woman Walking Down Path*, *Approaching Storm*, and *Hay Gatherers* (see fig.7, 15-17).

Of the three universal principles of painting, Schelling deemed drawing the primary component, as all form in art is dependent upon it.⁶⁰ While light reveals the Absolute in the real, drawing enables the Absolute to participate in it, by allowing the artist to translate universal concepts into particular forms.⁶¹ Schelling argued that certain geometries possessed a greater capacity to symbolize the Absolute. He believed elliptical forms expressed variety within identity, preferring the triangle for its unequal angles and absence of parallel lines, whereas regular shapes (circles, squares, right angles, and parallel lines) reinforced monotony, appearing the same regardless of vantage point, thus permitting the least variance in form.⁶² In terms of line quality, Schelling states: "One cannot deny that for the eye, too, the straight line is the symbol of hardness, of inflexible dimensions, just as the bent line is a symbol of flexibility the elliptical one—placed horizontally—gentleness and transiency, the wavy line of life, and so on."⁶³ These geometrical preferences are consistently reflected in Bannister's work, defining compositions like *Approaching Storm* and *Hay Gatherers*, as the interpretations in this thesis will prove (see fig. 16-17).

Though all forms can actualize universal concepts, Schelling deemed the human figure the most worthy form of artistic depiction due to its inherent capacity to mirror the Absolute,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 126.

⁶⁰ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 84; and Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 128.

⁶¹ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 83–84.

⁶² Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 130–31.

⁶³ Ibid.

especially when shown at rest.⁶⁴ He advised against the depiction of figures in activity, as this would suspend the character of a painting by fixing the figure to a particular moment in time, unless the activity is quintessential to the figure's essence, as in the case of a musician.⁶⁵ Like all forms, the artist must show only what is necessary of the figure, eliminate anything superfluous to its character, and avoid the strict imitation of its appearance in reality.⁶⁶ The more focused an artist is on rendering an object's essential elements, the closer that object will come to its absolute essence.⁶⁷ Schelling elaborates:

Within the human figure it will thus focus the greatest energy into the essential parts. It will allow the bones to show through more clearly than the small folds of flesh, the sinews of the muscles more than the flesh, the active muscles more than the stationary ones... For example, in a historical painting the architecture and so on may not be worked out as thoroughly as the main figures themselves, since in that case the observer's eye would necessarily be distracted from what is essential. Clothing stands in a closer relationship to the object and stands fully in identity with what is essential, namely the figure itself, which that clothing is sometimes to conceal, sometimes to reveal, and sometimes to elevate. If, however, clothing is made into an end in itself, one may well find oneself in the same situation as that painter who asked Apelles to evaluate his painting of Helen and received the answer: because you did not know how to make her beautiful, you at least tried to make her rich.⁶⁸

Perspective becomes integral to an adequate rendering of the human figure, organizing shapes to reveal only what is necessary of the whole.⁶⁹ Schelling believed the torso of Hercules epitomized his prescription for proper form, as each component of this sculpture contributes to the communication of the subject's identity in its wholeness and absolute essence (fig. 23).⁷⁰ He also praised Michelangelo for his excellence in the two-dimensional arts, citing his *Last Judgment* as

⁶⁴ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 98; and Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 130–54.

⁶⁵ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 147.

⁶⁶ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 133; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 83–85.

⁶⁷ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 133.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 132. In his treatise, Schelling cites the “famous torso of Hercules” as an example of truth of form, not specifying an artist or location. He refers, however, to Winckelmann's written description of this sculpture to evidence his point. Winckelmann's full description can be found in a translated article in which he identifies the torso as that of Hercules of Belvedere in Rome. For Winckelmann's full description, see Thos Davidson, “Winckelmann's Description of the Torso: of the Hercules of Belvedere in Rome,” (*The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1868)), 187–89.

an example of pure drawing, demonstrating a profound understanding of human anatomy and the underlying mechanisms of the body (fig. 24).⁷¹ Beyond form, an object can express the Absolute through its transparency, as transparency symbolizes complete spirit and the presence of the idea.⁷² Conversely, complete opacity symbolizes complete corporeality, highlighting the differentiation of materiality from light, or the finite from the infinite.⁷³ Hendrix points to Paul Cezanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* as an exploration of this concept, noting the juxtaposition of luminosity and density in his work, which evokes the dialectic between real and ideal (fig. 25).⁷⁴ It appears that Bannister also explored this concept, subtly evidenced by the brushstrokes in *Haygatherers* and overtly expressed in later works like *Street Scene* and *The Old Home* (see fig. 17, 20-21).

Schelling also emphasized the importance of formlessness as a means of conveying the Absolute in painting. He defined formlessness as the dissolution of the sensible into light, an effect that expresses the infinite and evokes the sublime.⁷⁵ In art, the sublime portrays the dialectic between the real and the ideal, intuited by the artist whom has recognized the limitations of his existence in relation to the infinite.⁷⁶ The sublime is a product of the fear and apprehension that one experiences in grappling with their alienation from the Absolute. A material form must harness its own sublimity to convey the utter chaos of the Absolute — the intangible, infinite quality that lies beyond the perception, reason, and control of man. Ambiguity of form, or the dissolution of an object into light or other forms, allows the artist to suggest the infinite through the simultaneous presentation of universal and particular.⁷⁷ Hendrix finds the

⁷¹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 135; and Galland-Szymkowiak, "Philosophy and the History of Art," 309.

⁷² Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 104–5; and Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 121–26.

⁷³ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 104–5; and Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 121–26.

⁷⁴ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 104–5.

⁷⁵ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 69–70; and Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 85–90.

⁷⁶ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 110–11; and Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 33–36.

⁷⁷ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 70; and Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 84–154.

quality of the sublime in Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Observing the Moon* (1819–20) and Man Ray's *Minotaur* (1933) (fig.26-27). In the former, the threatening elements of nature (e.g. a gnarled and falling tree, jagged rock faces, the ledge of an overhang) dissolve from shadow into ambient moonlight, lending the landscape an element of formlessness and ambiguity. In the latter, the black and white torso of a man blends amorously into the background, obscuring perception of the subject and its identity, thereby evoking a sense of chaos in the viewer. As with formlessness, black also symbolizes the chaos of the Absolute by representing the negation of the ideal through the absence of color and light, dissolving all colors and forms into universal form.⁷⁸ This effect is not possible without the last universal principle of painting, chiaroscuro, which Schelling deemed the medium of the effect of the sublime.⁷⁹

Chiaroscuro is a condition of contrast caused by the effect that light and dark colors have on one another when juxtaposed.⁸⁰ Colors elevate and neutralize one another through chiaroscuro while reinforcing perspective as the intensity of this effect decreases with the recession of space.⁸¹ Ultimately, chiaroscuro symbolizes the dialectic between the universal and particular by way of contrast, wherein light represents the ideal and dark represents its negation.⁸² Where color enters composition to demonstrate the synthesis of ideal and real, chiaroscuro enters to distinguish the two, suspending each in a state of difference.⁸³ The goal of chiaroscuro, however, is not to break the continuity between these realms but rather draw these opposing forces into a distinct relation. The artist should strive to render light and dark as though they share the same origin, utilizing gradations of light and color to convey the nature of their relationship.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 72–86.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 84–85.

⁸⁰ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 137; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 82–86.

⁸¹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 137.

⁸² Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 85.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

Chiaroscuro is the magical element of painting that transforms the appearance of matter and produces a wide range of lighting effects.⁸⁵ Through chiaroscuro, the artist can place his light source within the painting itself, allowing pictures to become truly independent from the outside world.⁸⁶ Beyond its atmospheric effects, chiaroscuro also structures composition by combining with the artist's subjective intuition to yield a clear, perspectival description of space.⁸⁷ Schelling identified Antonio Correggio as the most superior artist in regards to chiaroscuro.⁸⁸ Hendrix cites Correggio's *Holy Night* as an illustration of the artist's aptitude for synthesizing light with dark (fig. 28). In this work, light emanates from the Christ child as a symbol of the Absolute, illuminating the darkness while maintaining its relationship to the absolute light of Christ through masterful gradations of light.⁸⁹ Moreover, Correggio's handling of chiaroscuro in this painting symbolizes the entrance of the ideal into the real, or the idea into form, serving as a catechism for Idealist philosophy. Historians tend to connect Bannister's interest in light, dark, and shadow to his experience tinting photographs.⁹⁰ Idealist aesthetic fundamentals, however, may offer an alternative explanation.

The effect of chiaroscuro is enhanced by symmetry and grouping, two subsets of drawing that Schelling deemed the primary components of painting. Symmetry refers to two halves of a painting in relative balance, which, when disturbed results in the suspension of identity.⁹¹ Schelling explains his concept of identity, adding:

Identity is the predominating element of painting. Identity is suspended if, for example, one side of the painting is filled with figures, while the other is left relatively empty. This

⁸⁵ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 137; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 84–85.

⁸⁶ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 137.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 137; and Galland-Szymkowiak, "Philosophy and the History of Art," 309.

⁸⁹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 137; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 85–86.

⁹⁰ Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 6; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 21–25; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 42. For work that demonstrate his interest in chiaroscuro, see *Christiana Carteaux Bannister* or *Newspaper Boy* (fig. 2-3).

⁹¹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 134–36.

disturbs the symmetrical balance. This kind of balance without any real antithesis is an enduring norm of all products of nature. All antithesis is expurgated in the individual. There is no more true polarity, but rather balance, for example, in the dual nature of the primary appendages.⁹²

The concept of symmetrical duality naturally implies a middle ground. According to Schelling, the artist ought to arrange compositional halves around this middle ground, as this is where the essential element in painting falls.⁹³ Because Schelling's definition of symmetry does not require identical halves—rather an approximate inner balance of compositional components—the essential element may fall to the left or right of the canvas' true center and still occupy the interstitial space of the picture plane. This is consistent with Bannister's approach to the inclusion of figures in his landscapes, which he consistently placed in the center of his compositions, as in *Herdsman with Cows*, *Woman Walking Down Path*, and *Approaching Storm* (see fig. 11,15-16).⁹⁴

Grouping refers to the collection of autonomous parts related through a larger system.⁹⁵ Schelling regarded grouping as the highest relationship among things, imperative to the achievement of excellence in painting. The establishment of proper depth is essential to adequate grouping, thus artists should avoid arranging figures into a single row, as their extremities would fall on the same perspectival axis, limiting their differentiation from one another.⁹⁶ Pyramidal arrangements unify figures while preserving variety within grouping.⁹⁷ Schelling noted a tendency toward triangular grouping among artists of the antiquity, lauding Correggio for his utilization of pyramidal arrangements, as in *Holy Night*, where the composition and its elements

⁹² Ibid., 134.

⁹³ Ibid., 134–36.

⁹⁴ See chapter 2, note 103.

⁹⁵ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 134–36.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

conform to this shape.⁹⁸ The most desirable groupings proceed from multiples of three, allowing the whole to precede its individual parts in perception.⁹⁹ Schelling elaborates on this, stating: “Even though one is free to compose them from both even and uneven numbers, the double even ones, for example, 4, 8, 12, and so on, are excluded; only those composed of uneven ones are tolerable, for example 6, 10, 14, and so on, even though the uneven ones are always the most appropriate.”¹⁰⁰ By respecting these principles, the artist can ensure the adequate synthesis of object and space, a necessary condition to the symbolization of the Absolute in art. Surveying his oeuvre, it appears that Bannister relied on this geometry for compositional structure, evidence by paintings like *Sunset*, *Herdsmen with Cows*, *Haygatherers*, *People Near Boat*, and *Seaweed Gatherers* (see fig. 7, 11, 17-19).

Schelling argued that landscape painting best enacts the aesthetic principles of Transcendental Idealism, particularly those concerning light, color, shadow, chiaroscuro, subjectivity, and the human figure. He considered landscape painting a truly empirical art form for its focus on observation and experience in the portrayal of space.¹⁰¹ Schelling regarded this genre as a subjective endeavor, each work amounting to an autobiography of its creator’s soul.¹⁰² Because landscape painting depicts the external iterations of the Absolute, it prompts the viewer to discover the Idea lying just below the surface. If an artist renders his scene in respect to Schelling’s Idealist aesthetic guidelines, he can inspire such contemplation, lifting “the veil that conceals the invisible world from us.”¹⁰³ To accomplish this, the landscape painter must resist preoccupation with nature’s appearance and incidental effects as this only inspires objective

⁹⁸ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 135; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 85–87.

⁹⁹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 134.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 144–46.

¹⁰² Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 144–46; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 109.

¹⁰³ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 144–46; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 113.

imitation.¹⁰⁴ The artist can also overcome this mundanity by diversifying his subject matter through inclusion of the human figure. Schelling states: “Hence, the people in a landscape either must be portrayed as indigenous, as autochthonous, or they must be portrayed as strangers or wanderers recognizable as such by their general disposition, appearance, or even clothing, all of which is alien in relationship to the landscape itself.”¹⁰⁵ In effect, the figure energizes the composition, imbuing it with meaning while remaining the secondary subject of the painting. Landscape painting unites and elevates Schelling’s Idealist aesthetic principles, explaining why he held the genre in such high esteem. His philosophical and aesthetic fundamentals are reflected in the art of nineteenth-century American landscapists, from prominent practitioners to lesser known artists, like Bannister.¹⁰⁶ Bannister’s manuscript makes his case unique, offering rare insight into his fundamentals and, therefore, key evidence of the ideas symbolized in his artwork.

3.3 The Idealist Premise of Bannister's Manuscript

The Artist and His Critics, held at the Rhode Island Historical Society, is the only surviving record of Bannister’s philosophy on artistic production and criticism. As mentioned previously, he delivered this manuscript in a speech to the Ann-Eliza Club, a group comprised of members of the Providence Art Club, dedicated to cultural and philosophical discourse.¹⁰⁷ Despite being well preserved and accessible, scholars have continually underutilized this primary source in their interpretations of Bannister’s paintings. Art historians including Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, Kenneth Rodgers, Sharon F. Patton, Holland, Jennings, Bearden, and Henderson have used this essay to confirm Bannister’s reputation as an exceptional African American, or

¹⁰⁴ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 144–46; and Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 109.

¹⁰⁵ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 144–46.

¹⁰⁶ Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41–58

¹⁰⁷ Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 49; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 75; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47. Bannister was an important member of the A&E Club, having been dubbed “Artist Laureate” by his cohorts for his intellectual and artistic contributions to the group.

demonstrate his oft cited affinity toward French Barbizon sensibilities.¹⁰⁸ In such instances, his manuscript has been adapted to suit a conventional narrative, incidentally limiting the potential for critical interpretation of its contents. Considering the intellectual implications of his writing, however, reveals an overlooked philosophical influence. Upon close analysis, the language in his treatise echoes a plethora of German Idealist terms and concepts, such as “the absolute idea,” “perfect harmony,” “the universal law of limitations,” “the finite mind,” and “the spiritual idea.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, his ideas regarding art’s purpose and content mirror Schelling’s and Hegel’s philosophies of mind, spirit, and art, as well as the general fundamentals of Transcendental Idealism.

Bannister seemingly referenced the Enlightenment in the opening of his manuscript, addressing his era as “between the period of knowing nothing of Art and an awakening appreciation of its value as a teacher and its importance as a means toward lifting us out of the low atmosphere of sordid gain and narrow selfish ambition into one more ethereal and spiritual.”¹¹⁰ The perspectival shift in art theory that he described in this passage is the direct product of Idealist thought and the concept of aesthetics that this philosophical movement ushered in, taking hold of American landscape artists in the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹¹ Aligning Bannister with this larger group of painters unveils the broader cultural ideas to which he responded. What once appeared as vaguely religious rhetoric can now be read as a pointed

¹⁰⁸ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 82; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 1–31.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹¹ Miller, *The Empire of the Eye*, 253–88. Miller suggests that the feminization of the sublime that occurred in mid-nineteenth century American art was the result of increased scientific thinking that spurred an interest in the underlying laws of nature. The result was a wave of sentimental landscapes which conveyed the quiet power of nature versus threatening, dramatic effects. Miller references several of Bannister’s cohorts who reflect this theoretical and artistic shift, such as Jasper Cropsey, Sanford Gifford, Samuel Lancaster Gerry and John Frederick Kensett.

reference to a pivotal era in art history. In this vein, his introduction takes on a new purpose, effectively orienting his readers—and more importantly for Bannister, his critics—to the philosophical framework that guided his artistic theory and production. Though subtle to a general audience, his semantic choices within this opening paragraph carefully advocate the basic values of all practitioners of his genre. From the outset, Bannister decisively positioned art as didactic and ethereal, simultaneously implying the role of the artist as an intermediary between the spiritual and the material world.

In the same manner as the Transcendental Idealists before him, Bannister sought to redefine the goal of the artist and the content of the arts through his manuscript, injecting his own ideas about the responsibility of art critics to reinforce his perspective. In short, he believed that the purpose of the artist is to interpret and present the subtle qualities of “the central Spiritual Idea of subjective truth involved in material being”, and the task of the critic is to account for an artist’s motivations within the context of his or her time.¹¹² Bannister reiterates the artist’s motivation in certain terms throughout his manuscript, relying upon this description to reflexively define the art critic. For example, in elaborating upon the relationship between critic and artist, he writes:

...aside from his recognition of good or bad technical qualities in the artists’ work, the critic in order to be fully up to the demands of his assumed position, should we repeat, so be able to place himself in rapport with the artist as to know if he had in any degree succeeded in expressing what he intended, in formulating the central idea that possessed him, understanding that idea, and the limitations of art expression.¹¹³

In establishing the content of art as the central spiritual idea, he frames the artist as beholden to this concept and insists upon a critic’s ability to recognize this idea as motivation for artistic expression. Bannister’s definitions of these roles were structured around four key Idealist

¹¹² Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 3–21.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 22–24.

principles: the metaphysical basis of the material world, the interconnectedness of all beings through their shared origin in the Absolute, the role of the *Zeitgeist* or Spirit of a culture in shaping artistic production, and the instructive value of the arts. Beyond the fundamentally Idealist nature of his argument, Bannister relies upon key Idealist terms, such as the “Spiritual Idea” and the inherent “limitations” naturally placed upon the artist. By embracing the vocabulary and paradigms of Idealist thinkers, he positioned himself among German philosophers like Schelling, who asserted that art reflected philosophical ideas (i.e. the divine), and Hegel, who believed that art served an instructive and moral purpose in bringing spiritual content before the consciousness of man.

The previous excerpt from Bannister’s introduction to his manuscript resonates closely with the following passage from Hegel’s *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*:

Of course, we may often hear those favourite phrases about man’s duty being to remain in immediate oneness with nature, but such oneness in its abstraction is simply and solely coarseness and savage and art, in the very process of dissolving this oneness for man, is raising him with gentle hand above and away from mere sunkness [*sic*] in nature... Such a purpose in relation to teaching could only consist in bringing before consciousness, by help of the work of art, a really and explicitly significant spiritual content.¹¹⁴

A direct comparison of these passages reveals a profound ideological affinity between these men, showing that they shared in their fundamental beliefs about art, nature, and the human spirit. Bannister and Hegel sought transcendence through art, each describing its ability to raise man above a solely sensuous relationship to nature toward one more spiritual. Hegel’s advisory against “sunkness” and “oneness” with nature is reflected in Bannister’s condemnation of the “low atmosphere” of material existence. Likewise, Hegel’s valuation of art as a teacher that “dissolves oneness” for man, “raising him gently away” from nature’s forms toward significant

¹¹⁴ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, 55-56.

spiritual concepts is echoed in Bannister's description of art's role in teaching and "lifting" man out of the mundane into the "ethereal and spiritual." In their writing, both men directly address the separation between idea and form, thus underscoring the duality that defines humanity. Bannister brings this duality into his definition of the artist as well, recalling his perception of artists as interpreters of "the infinite, subtle qualities of the spiritual idea, centering in all created things, expounding for us the laws of beauty and so far as the finite mind and executive ability can, revealing to us glimpses of the absolute idea of perfect harmony."¹¹⁵ Beyond reinforcing the spiritual content of art described by Transcendental Idealism, his description of the artist's purpose also evokes the dichotomies that shape Idealism, such as the infinite and finite, the universal and particular, the spiritual and physical, and freedom and necessity. Articulating himself in undeniably Idealist rhetoric throughout his manuscript, Bannister borrows both the vocabulary and philosophical leanings of Hegel and Schelling, alike.

Bannister, admittedly biased in his opinions, stressed the importance of responsible critique in his writing, which entails the consideration of an artist's "underlying motives," "the social, religious, and political conditions under which they labored," and their "deeper dependence on the character of their time."¹¹⁶ He described at length his dissatisfaction with the critical handling of Millet's work to illustrate his point, rejecting the popular conception that Millet's landscapes were merely reactions against the Industrial Revolution.¹¹⁷ On the contrary, Bannister maintained that Millet's rural landscape scenes were affirmations of the harmony among all living things and expressions of his individual, poetic sentiments, referencing Millet's

¹¹⁵ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 4–5; and Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39.

¹¹⁶ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 11–19, 31.

¹¹⁷ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47; and Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 6.

letters as evidence of this attitude.¹¹⁸ He went on to praise Millet, characterizing him as “the profoundest, tenderest [*sic*], most sympathetic and deeply religious artistic spirit” of his time who revealed most clearly “the qualities of the true artistic nature than any other example we can recall at present.”¹¹⁹ Through his assessment of Millet and his paintings as “individual” and “poetic,” Bannister emphasized two cornerstones of Transcendental Idealism: subjectivity and perception. In effect, his understanding of French Barbizon work was filtered through an Idealist lens, suggesting that he saw a strong thematic link between the two schools of thought. At face value, his focus on Millet conveys an interest in the Barbizon school, which reasonably justifies the art historical tendency to relate his work to this movement. Taken in the greater context of his manuscript and the philosophical influences implied by its content, his evaluation of Millet may amount to more than a profession of admiration, included instead as an example to illustrate Bannister’s Idealist values.

For Bannister and the Idealists, the individuality of a work of art is synonymous with that of its creator, the former presenting the genius of the latter, where genius is equivalent to an artist’s ability to synthesize universal ideas with specific forms.¹²⁰ This belief comes across in his writing on Millet’s paintings, which he believed reflected Millet’s genius and profoundly expressed the harmony and spirituality connecting all beings. Bannister’s beliefs about Millet match the definition of genius in art put forth by Schelling, who stated that the “indwelling element of divinity in human beings” is the immediate cause for their genius—in other words, a man’s genius, as expressed through his art, is proportional to his apprehension of the Absolute

¹¹⁸ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47; and Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 6.

¹¹⁹ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 6; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 89.

¹²⁰ Galland-Szymkowiak, “Philosophy and the History of Art,” 308–9; and Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 6.

that lies within himself.¹²¹ In effect, this theory frames artmaking as a reflection of intellectual activity, both of the culture it belongs to and of the individual creator as he perceives and intuits it. Bannister's evaluation of Millet's artistic genius thereby affirms his concept of the artist who transforms objects in nature through the intellection of an underlying Spiritual Idea. For several scholars, his perspective is resonant with American Transcendentalist thinkers, like Allston and Emerson, who shared his deep reverence for nature and embraced fundamental Idealist dichotomies such as the subjective and objective, the finite and infinite, and the physical and spiritual.¹²² In relating Bannister to the Transcendentalists, historians have opened the conversation regarding his artistic and ideological influences, eliciting questions about the nature of this influence, as well as that of the philosophy itself, and the cultural trends that shaped it.

In his prescription for appropriate art criticism, Bannister also asserted the existence of the *Zeitgeist* or Spirit of a culture that informs all artistic expression, a concept embraced and promoted by German Idealists. He writes of the critic:

He will learn also, or should, learn this, not to expect or demand of artists work analogous to Greek, Italian, or any other ancient art, produced under other conditions, but rather to look for and encourage an artistic expression in harmony with the present development of thought, and social conditions.¹²³

His concept of the subjective artist, autonomous yet a product of his or her culture, reiterates Hegel and Schelling's concept of the artist-interpreter who makes the Absolute Spirit tangible through his or her work. Like the Transcendental Idealists before him, Bannister understands man as a microcosm of his culture, demonstrating on an individual level the constant exchange between man and the universal, or freedom and necessity.¹²⁴ He returns to the significance of the

¹²¹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 84.

¹²² Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43; Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 226–30; Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 41–62; and Soria, "Washington Allston's Lectures on Art," 333–34.

¹²³ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 11–12.

¹²⁴ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 207, 251.

meaning and feeling of an artist throughout his manuscript, emphasizing the contemplation of art's content alongside its formal elements.¹²⁵ He writes, "If we consider the differing culture and aspirations of those engaged in the wide field of art, its many and varied phases, it seems the art critic should be a person of the broadest cultivation, not only in matters to art, but to ethics as well! As art is a moral power!"¹²⁶ Noting that the critics of his day tended toward "according errors," an indiscriminate approach that is ultimately a disservice to art, artists, and the public alike, Bannister pleaded for criticism with sensitivity to the "natural limitations to finite accomplishment," asserting that the artist is merely human and, as such, "subject to the universal law of limitations."¹²⁷ In his definition of the artist and his guidelines for art criticism, Bannister asserts the metaphysical foundation of art and, more importantly, of the material world at large. By expressing these views, Bannister implicitly aligned himself with German Idealist ideology, and philosophers like Hegel and Schelling, as well as the American Transcendentalists whom they influenced, such as Allston and Emerson, whose philosophies fundamentally shaped the development of American landscape painting in nineteenth-century New England.

3.4 The Transcendentalists, Bannister and German Idealism: Avenues of Exposure

Art historian Barbara Novak has written extensively on Emerson's engagement with German philosophy as well as the Transcendentalist affinity toward Idealism in general.¹²⁸ Henry A. Pochmann, F.O. Matthiessen, Rene Wellek, and Henry A. Brann have corroborated

¹²⁵ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 6–20; and Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 1–31. Bannister uses the artistic criticism of Jean Francois Millet to exemplify this point, asserting that his works are "unjustly accused of endeavoring to ferment strife, of insulting national pride..." For Bannister, this attribution neglects the artist's motive and feeling; the tender, sympathetic and deep seeded religiousness that is his true artistic nature.

¹²⁶ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 3.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3–4, 16–24.

¹²⁸ Novak notes that American Transcendentalists were exposed to German philosophy early on. Comparisons of these philosophies indicate a plethora of congruent ideas, such as the erasure of the ego, the entry into the infinite and the search for universal quietism. See Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41–58; and Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 218–31.

Emerson's connection to Idealist thought, each describing a strong Idealist tradition in America that was established as early as the seventeenth century, gaining momentum from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries.¹²⁹ Emerson explicitly acknowledged the relevance of identity philosophy to mid-nineteenth century culture by defining his era as the Age of Swedenborg, meaning that American culture as a whole had openly embraced Emmanuel Swedenborg's subjective philosophy that the "soul makes its own world."¹³⁰ He took this idea further in a lecture on Transcendentalism, stating "What is properly called Transcendentalism among us is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842."¹³¹ These ideas gave shape to the *Zeitgeist* of his era, influencing the whole of cultural expression throughout the nineteenth century. Like many of his contemporaries who were producing art and literature, Emerson was drawn to European cultural tradition and found inspiration in the steadily developing pulse of German Idealism that overtook America, finding clear expression in New England culture.¹³²

Among the German philosophers that Emerson reportedly consulted (a list including S.T. Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, Jakob Böhme, Lorenz Oken, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Kant and Swedenborg) he confessed to being most impressed with the writings of Schelling and Hegel.¹³³ Emerson had a complex relationship with Idealism, expressing simultaneous appreciation and mistrust for Schelling and Hegel alike.¹³⁴ Wellek

¹²⁹ For a detailed background on the dissemination of German philosophy in America and Emerson's role in the propagation of this philosophy, consult Pochmann, *New England Transcendentalism*; Pochmann, *German Culture in America*; Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*; Wellek, "The Minor Transcendentalists," 652–55; Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 41–16; and Brann, "Hegel and His New England Echo," 56–60.

¹³⁰ Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, viii.

¹³¹ Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 79.

¹³² Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, vii–xvi, 157–66; Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 195–231; Gips and University of Maryland, College Park, *Narratives of African American Art*, 25–27; Mercer and Buick, "African American Artists Gain Access," 9; Wellek, "The Minor Transcendentalists," 653; Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, xxviii; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 79–85.

¹³³ Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 41–57; Brann, "Hegel and His New England Echo," 56–60; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 161–207.

¹³⁴ Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 50–52; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 196–205.

summarizes Emerson's interest in Schelling with a quote from his letters to his student John F. Heath: "To hear Schelling might well tempt the firmest rooted philosopher from his home and I confess to more curiosity in respect of Schelling's opinions than to those of any living psychologist. There is grandeur in the attempt to unite natural and moral philosophy which makes him a sort of hero."¹³⁵ In a letter to James E. Cabot, his cohort and fellow enthusiast of Idealism, Emerson adds, "This admirable Schelling, which I have never fairly engaged with until last week, demands the 'lamp' and the 'lonely tower' and a lustrum of silence."¹³⁶ Emerson certainly embraced Schelling's fundamentals, namely the identification between subject and object, the notion of a "world-soul", and the belief that nature is the art of God.¹³⁷ Focusing on the religious, mystical, and poetic aspects of his philosophy, Emerson saw in Schelling a way to unite his own natural and moral philosophies, eventually disposing of the nuanced elements of his philosophical system like his dialectical methodology and overarching emphasis on introspective self-analysis.¹³⁸ This affection for Schelling naturally led him to Hegel's philosophy, opening him up to accept his ideas in the last phase of his career.¹³⁹

As regards Hegel, Emerson respected his historic theory, his concept of nature as the "Idea in its otherness," and his dialectical logic, accepting the synthesis of something and nothing as the basic "paradox of being."¹⁴⁰ Like Schelling, he embraced Hegel's principles but

¹³⁵ Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 50. Emerson wrote this letter to Heath, an American student in Berlin, in 1842.

¹³⁶ Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 50; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 197–8. This letter was written in 1845 during the height of Emerson's interest in Schelling, following his reading of Schelling's *Philosophical Enquiries into the Nature of Freedom*, which Cabot had translated for him. Finding something poetic and inspiring in Schelling's philosophy, Emerson's enthusiasm to study his theories grew.

¹³⁷ Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 52–53; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 181–98.

¹³⁸ Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 52–53; Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 196–98; and Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 227–29.

¹³⁹ Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 202.

¹⁴⁰ Harris, "The Dialectic Unity in Emerson's Prose," 195–202; Yoder, "Emerson's Dialectic," 314–17; Pochmann, *New England Transcendentalism*, 54–64; Brann, "Hegel and His New England Echo," 56–60; and Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," 56–58.

shied away from the depth of his metaphysics, writing in a letter to Cabot in 1855: “I did not find my way into Hegel as readily as I hoped, nor was I as richly rewarded as probably better scholars have been.”¹⁴¹ Despite finding Hegel challenging, Emerson accepted the core tenets of his philosophy. R.A. Yoder and W.T. Harris attest to this, noting a recurring dialectic structure throughout Emerson’s prose that came to characterize his writing.¹⁴² Harris argues that Emerson’s first book, *Nature*, boasts a dialectical system of logic and promotes the existence of an “over-soul” that reveals itself through nature, while ultimately presiding over the material world.¹⁴³ Yoder, examining Emerson’s writing from the 1840s, analyzes his reliance upon dual rhetoric as an organizational structure for his essays, concluding that Emerson’s fundamentally dialectical philosophy is revealed in all of his literary productions.¹⁴⁴ Art historians agree that Emerson was more interested in the conclusions of German Idealism than the technical details of the philosophical system, integrating Idealist ideas into his own writing to the extent that they confirmed his own pre-existing beliefs about nature and spirituality.¹⁴⁵ German philosophy served to validate the beliefs of many Transcendentalists who treated its theories similarly, parsing out ideas to retain only the most favorable.¹⁴⁶

It is clear that Emerson valued Idealist principles and sympathized with the philosophy’s metaphysical foundation.¹⁴⁷ He found inspiration and confirmation in Idealist theory, forming his own Transcendentalist philosophy around it. It is impossible to discuss his contributions to American art without first acknowledging this connection and the direct influence that

¹⁴¹ Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 204.

¹⁴² Yoder, “Emerson’s Dialectic,” 314–15; and Harris, “The Dialectic Unity in Emerson’s Prose,” 200–202.

¹⁴³ Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 227–31; and Harris, “Dialectic Unity in Emerson’s Prose,” 200–201.

¹⁴⁴ Yoder, “*Emerson’s Dialectic*,” 313–28.

¹⁴⁵ Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 226–27; Yoder, “Emerson’s Dialectic,” 313–28; Wellek, “Emerson and German Philosophy,” 53–60; and Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 200.

¹⁴⁶ Wellek, “Emerson and German Philosophy,” 61; and Wellek, “The Minor Transcendentalists,” 661–80.

¹⁴⁷ Wellek, “Emerson and German Philosophy,” 62.

philosophers like Schelling and Hegel had on his perspective. His ideas regarding the moral capacity and value of nature are both indebted to Transcendental Idealism and essential to a truly accurate understanding of the character of landscape painting in early nineteenth-century America.¹⁴⁸ In fact, Novak has coined Emerson the “unofficial spokesman for American landscapists,” articulating just how influential a position he held in nineteenth-century American culture, as well as his ability to shape artistic taste and theory through his writing.¹⁴⁹ Patton has echoed this sentiment, asserting that American landscape painting is the embodiment of Emerson’s romantic ideas, and crediting him with the rise of this genre to the dominant art form in America from 1830 through 1900.¹⁵⁰ Pochmann reiterates this in broader terms, stating of his four most popular publications (i.e. *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, *Address before the Divinity College*, and *Essays, First Series*):

Quite possibly, if the matter were determinable or measurable, it would be found that German thought gained through these four books of Emerson's its most effective means of diffusion in America, for the manner and means by which Emersonian idealism insinuated itself into the intellectual consciousness of America were as subtle as they were various and pervasive.¹⁵¹

Though abundant in Bannister’s landscapes and writing, evidence of this influence has yet to be explored by art historians with critical depth. Holland, Jennings, Bearden, and Henderson have, however, thematically linked Bannister to Transcendentalism, citing his description of the artist as a “spiritual conduit” and of art as the reflection of the Absolute Spirit as proof of his exposure

¹⁴⁸ Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41–58; Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 227; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 79.

¹⁴⁹ Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 227.

¹⁵⁰ Patton, *African-American Art*, 79.

¹⁵¹ Pochmann, *German Culture in America*, 207. The four texts that Pochmann refers to are as follows: *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, *Address before the Divinity College*, and *Essays, First Series*.

to Transcendentalism through Emerson, whom they believe he encountered in Boston where Emerson frequently lectured on art and abolitionism.¹⁵²

Like Bannister, Allston was also among those New England artists inspired by Idealism and the Transcendentalist movement.¹⁵³ Among his personal and professional affiliations, Allston's connection to Coleridge, renowned Idealist philosopher, is particularly notable. Italian scholar Regina Soria has argued that Coleridge validated Allston's beliefs about faith and spirituality, spurring his interest in Schelling among other German thinkers.¹⁵⁴ Though Allston never formally proclaimed himself an Idealist, he openly incorporated their principles into his writings on art.¹⁵⁵ C.P. Seabrook Wilkinson describes Allston's *Lectures on Art* (1850) as a "swansong of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory" and Allston as the "Laureate of the Ideal."¹⁵⁶ As the first author and only Romantic painter in nineteenth-century America to publish an art treatise in English based in part on Idealist principles, Allston profoundly influenced artistic theory in and beyond New England.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, having been educated in Rhode Island and a Boston resident upon his death in 1843, he left an indelible Idealist mark on the cultural milieu of the very region where Bannister cultivated his own artistic career.¹⁵⁸

Art historians presume that Bannister became familiar with Allston's treatise while living in Boston, which he later referenced in his own manuscript, *The Artist and His Critics*.¹⁵⁹

Allston's ideas were also cited by Emerson, a close friend and admirer who recounted Allston's

¹⁵² Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 4–5; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39; and Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43.

¹⁵³ Soria, "Washington Allston's Lectures on Art," 329. Washington Allston was an established author, painter and poet. He was born in South Carolina in 1779. He received his education in Rhode Island and was a resident of Boston at the time of his death in 1843.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 331–32.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁵⁶ Wilkinson, "Emerson and the Eminent Painter", 122–26.

¹⁵⁷ Soria, "Washington Allston's Lectures on Art," 332–38.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁵⁹ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39.

philosophy to clarify his own perspective.¹⁶⁰ Together, these men informed Bannister's concept of artistic expression and introduced him to the principles of German Idealism that were embraced by American Transcendentalist thinkers. Considering Allston and Emerson's role in shaping nineteenth-century American culture, along with their demonstrable connection to German Idealist thought, and Bannister's documented appreciation for their publications, it is plausible to argue that Bannister, too, engaged with Idealist concepts.¹⁶¹ This philosophical influence becomes increasingly clear upon a close analytical reading of his manuscript, which reveals an array of Idealist connections, both in the vocabulary and concepts that he upholds. Considering the clear reiteration of Idealist principles in his writing, it is reasonable to argue that these concepts informed his art-making process as well, surfacing in his paintings as they did in his manuscript.

Like his contemporaries, Bannister was an enthusiastic participant in cultural conversation whose artistic expression reflected the *Zeitgeist* of his era. Art historians have inferred the influence of Idealism from the American landscape tradition in general, singling out several artists who bear a striking resemblance to Bannister in their attitudes and approach to artistic production. An example of this is the case of landscapist Thomas Cole (1801–48), founder of the Hudson River School in New York, whom Novak and Patton have acknowledged explicitly as an Idealist painter and a product of Emerson's influence.¹⁶² As an artist, Cole adopted an openly Idealist attitude, arguing for the precedence of ideas over form, the high moral

¹⁶⁰ Soria, "Washington Allston's Lectures on Art," 329; and Wilkinson, "Emerson and the Eminent Painter," 121–26.

¹⁶¹ Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 43; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39. Bearden and Henderson assert that Bannister read Emerson's work, while Holland and Jennings state that it was probable that he attended Emerson's lectures in Boston and read Emerson's "Thoughts on Art". Holland, Jennings, and Patton cite Bannister's manuscript for its references to Allston, and Holland and Jennings state that Emerson owned a copy of Allston's *Lectures on Art and Poetry*.

¹⁶² Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 43–58; and Patton, *African-American Art*, 84.

content of the arts, the task of the artist to synthesize his internal and external experiences, and the belief in an essential truth or spirit that is revealed through the sublimity of nature.¹⁶³ Though Bannister embraced and articulated these very fundamentals in his own artistic philosophy, his remarks have received an underwhelming amount of attention from art historians in comparison to those of his white contemporary. It is imperative to step back from the racial narrative that has so poignantly framed his career to include other art historical perspectives, enabling consideration of his work within the general scope of American landscape painting in the 1800s. In doing so, the relationship of his written and visual work to the larger cultural and artistic trends of nineteenth-century landscape tradition becomes abundantly clear, revealing that he is not exactly an anomaly of his time, as he is so often portrayed. Rather, his career and artistic expression is consistent with those of his white cohorts and, as such, deserves the same depth of criticism and philosophical analysis as those who painted contemporaneously with him.

¹⁶³ Miller, Berlo, Wolf, and Roberts, *American Encounters*, 253-54; Novak, *Nature and Culture*, 33-38; and Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century*, 41-58.

CHAPTER 4: AN ANALYSIS OF *APPROACHING STORM* AND *HAY GATHERERS*: A GERMAN IDEALIST PERSPECTIVE

4.1 Bannister and the Idealist Lens

As the prior analysis of *The Artist and His Critics* has demonstrated, a correlation exists between the fundamentals of German Idealism—as associated with philosophers like Hegel and Schelling—and the ideas and rhetoric adopted by Bannister in his manuscript. It is evident that these philosophical concepts informed his perspectives on art and spirituality, finding clear expression in his literary and artistic productions. Upon initial impression, it appears that many of his landscape paintings lend themselves to analysis through the Idealist lens. This new interpretive treatment is a valuable supplement to past evaluations of his work, yielding new insights into the significance and symbolism embedded in his compositions. This marks an important advancement in the critical assessment of his paintings, which, as mentioned previously, has been consistently and overwhelmingly restricted in focus. The application of the Idealist lens adds dimension to Bannister’s identity as an artist, and establishes his artistic expression as deliberate and complex. More importantly, this framework affords him recognition as an active contributor to both a nationwide artistic movement and an international cultural conversation.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus my interpretations on two of Bannister’s later works, *Approaching Storm* (1886) and *Hay Gatherers* (1893). Each of these paintings represent a critical moment in Bannister’s career, following his professionalization as an artist and coinciding with his foray into philosophical writing and art theory. Moreover, these works epitomize the presently limited art historical approach to Bannister’s landscapes. The former, *Approaching Storm*, though often identified as a product of Bannister’s basic love for nature, demonstrates the oversimplified approach to interpretation that so many scholars have

brought to his work. The latter, *Hay Gatherers*, has been conventionally understood as an exploration of the African American struggle during the Reconstruction era, exemplifying the trend toward racially biased analysis of his work. The German Idealist context adds depth to the widely-accepted assessments of his work and reveals the specific methods by which Bannister communicated his ideas through his paintings.

4.2 *Approaching Storm*

Bannister painted *Approaching Storm* in 1886, the same year that he delivered his manuscript as a speech to the Providence Art Club (see fig. 16). This painting captures the image of a lone traveler, pushing across the canvas through a windswept field along a lightly trodden path. This composition diverges from the generally harmonious disposition of his earlier landscapes. Unlike such paintings as *Woman Walking Down Path* or *Driving Home the Cows*, Bannister presents his subject in confrontation with the elements. Recalling Schelling's aesthetic theory, the human form only mirrors the Universal Idea when shown at peace and rest.¹ Considering this, Bannister's active figure in *Approaching Storm* implies that man is not an expression of the Absolute in this scene, instead highlighting nature's role as the embodiment of the Universal Spirit. This decision shapes the thematic emphasis of his work in a significant way. By putting man at odds with nature, Bannister moves away from advocating the shared origin of all beings in the Absolute, promoting instead the fundamental dichotomy between the spiritual and physical realms at the very heart of Idealism. This work effectively captures the negotiation between the self and the other (the subjective and objective), glimpsing the very moment when individual will and universal necessity meet in reconciliation. In doing so, Bannister brings man into an ideal relation with nature where neither overpowers nor subdues the other, but reaffirms

¹ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 154.

one another's existence. Bearden and Henderson have previously interpreted this painting as an expression of Bannister's interest in the accidental and conflicting effects in nature. In the context of Idealism, their assessment of Bannister's motive could be alternately phrased as an interest in the dialectical process of the synthesis of opposites, or the dichotomy between the particular and universal. The theme that Bannister engages in this image, understood by Patton as a metaphor for the uncertainty of life's struggles, embodies the very essence of Hegel and Schelling's Idealist world view.²

Bannister commonly placed his subjects in the center of his compositions, resonating with Schelling's belief that man is the worthiest form in art and that the essential element of a painting should occupy its midpoint.³ In framing the figure in *Approaching Storm* as the essential element of the composition, the focus is shifted toward his subjective experience of the scene at hand. Subsequently, the finitude of his being is brought to the forefront as he faces the objectivity and infinitude of nature. Rather than show the subjective and objective in full identification with one another, as in *Woman Walking Down Path*, this image highlights the very tension that characterizes their relationship. In addition to this, Bannister's subject also reinforces the Idealist concept of man as an interpreter of the Spiritual or Absolute Idea, positioned between the sensuous and ideal realm by way of his self-consciousness.⁴ The presentation of his subject recalls Schelling's requirement that a figure appear as either indigenous or a wanderer in relation to the landscape. In this instance, his figure captures the essence of a wanderer through his dress and action. Shown mid-stride, his subject is clothed in modern attire with an axe over his shoulder as he ascends a narrow path away from the viewer. This rendering communicates his

² Patton, *African-American Art*, 89.

³ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 130–34. For more examples of compositions with a figure at its center see, *Governor Sprague's White Horse*, *Herdsmen with Cows*, *Woman Walking Down Path*, or *People Near Boat*.

⁴ Hendrix, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Spirit*, 203.

passage through nature as colonizer of his landscape rather than a native. His action is quintessential to his character as well, thus reinforcing his position as an intermediary between the sensuous and spiritual, in accordance with Schelling's standards of depiction.

As noted by Bearden and Henderson, *Approaching Storm* deviates from the then popularized style of the Hudson River School in its lack of precision and realism.⁵ Here, Bannister captures a generalized image of man and nature, offering viewers only what is necessary to the essence of his subjects. This stylistic choice not only eliminates superfluous detail from Bannister's forms, it also introduces formlessness into his composition. This is particularly relevant for the landscape, rendered with soft lines and loose brushstrokes, thereby recalling Schelling's assertion that formlessness symbolizes the power of the Absolute. His aesthetic treatment of his subjects, along with the painting's title, reinforces the universal power and sublimity that nature embodies in Idealism. Regarding the overall composition, Bannister clusters his forms into elliptical masses that lead the eye throughout the picture plane. Examples of this geometric organization include the formations of clouds, trees, rocks, and shrubs that define the composition. His employment of the horizontally oriented ellipse is consistent with Schelling's evaluation of this shape as an indicator of impermanence and variety within identity. This symbolism is appropriate to the painting's overall theme and feeling, especially considering the interpretations offered by Samella Lewis, Patton, and Bearden and Henderson, each of whom concluded that this landscape captures the unpredictability and supremacy of nature.⁶ Overall, this image is free of straight lines, regular shapes, and right angles, thus avoiding the rigidity and monotony that such shapes would elicit. Instead, Bannister defines his scene with bent and

⁵ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49.

⁶ Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 49-50; and Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, 31.

curved lines, evidenced by the jagged fence that cuts across his field, the bowed path, or the rounded tree line. Reflecting on Schelling's aesthetics, this treatment communicates flexibility and variance within his landscape.⁷ In featuring nature as powerful yet ephemeral, *Approaching Storm* captures the sublime element of nature. This sublimity accentuates the dialectic of real and ideal, conveying the sheer chaos of the Absolute that lies beyond the perception and control of man. Bannister's treatment of line and shape evokes Hegel and Schelling's belief that the material world is the Absolute Spirit manifested, symbolizing universal concepts through carefully constructed forms. Considering the quality of these forms in the context of Schelling's theory on art, his stylistic choices indicate an awareness and appreciation of the Idealist aesthetic.

Bannister's palette in this painting is also indicative of his tendency toward Idealist symbolism. Cool shades of corresponding blues and greens dominate the canvas, lending an overall subdued tone to the scene. Bannister establishes distinct color relationships within a tertiary palette, resulting in a unified and harmonious system of color. His careful coordination of this color scheme is most evident between the sky—where shades of blue and grey dissolve into purple—and the lush landscape below that consists of corresponding hues of yellow and bluish-green. These colors complement and accentuate one another, the greens pulling out the purples in the sky and the yellows of the field drawing out the blues above. Vivid, blue patches of paint peek through the density of trees in the foreground and background, giving these masses definition and further enhancing the sense of depth throughout the picture plane. Bannister also relied upon color temperature to arrange his composition, creating polarities within his palette to divide the space of the composition. The canvas's lower half, rendered in warm variations of yellow-green, contrasts with the sky's cool grey and purple tones above. The landscape becomes

⁷ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 130–31.

progressively cooler from the canvas's bottom register to the top, lending weight to the densely-clouded sky above that promises the viewer an atmospheric turn. This carefully balanced system of color epitomizes Schelling's aesthetic principles, which demand that colors proceed from nature, operate in a harmonious totality, and organize around the polarity of warm and cool tones.⁸

Bannister's rendering of light in this canvas also communicates a fundamentally Idealist perspective. Upon initial impressions, *Approaching Storm* is strikingly dim, lacking the atmospheric light that defines many of his earlier compositions.⁹ The heavily clouded sky above casts the scene in shadow and mutes the overall tone and feeling of the work. Openings in the clouds above allow light to shine through, indicating that this composition is backlit. As the Idealist symbol of the Absolute, light is an underlying presence in this image, in the same way that the Absolute is an underlying presence in the natural world. Like the Absolute Spirit that reveals itself through nature, light asserts its presence through the looming density of clouds in *Approaching Storm*. Thus, the light source in this work resides within the composition itself, tucked out of sight. Like the Christ child in Correggio's *Holy Night*, Bannister's depiction of sunlight in this work symbolizes the entrance of the Absolute into the real. Similarly, the complete opacity of his forms asserts their differentiation from the light of the Ideal, grounding these objects firmly in the real to assert their nature as finite in relation to light, which is infinite. His juxtaposition of light and dark throughout the canvas, or use of chiaroscuro, draws these opposed forces into relation and situates his light source within the canvas, itself, while enhancing the sense of depth in the landscape. Bannister's treatment of form, composition, and

⁸ Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, 124.

⁹ *Approaching Storm* emphasizes shadow as a compositional element as opposed to most his landscapes, which emphasize light. C.f. to his brighter paintings, *Sunset* (1875–80), *Woman Walking Down Path* (1882) or *Oak Trees* (1876).

light in this work collectively function as a catechism for Idealist philosophy, illustrating the dichotomous relationship between the Absolute Spirit and the physical world, the metaphysical foundation of the material realm, and the artist's position as a subjective intermediary within this dynamic.

4.3 *Hay Gatherers*

Painted circa 1893, *Hay Gatherers* is representative of Bannister's maturing style that he developed over the last decade of his career (see fig. 17). Like *Approaching Storm*, *Hay Gatherers* is considered characteristic of late nineteenth-century landscape painting, each work capturing the image of a "rural Arcadia."¹⁰ Compared to his body of extant works, this painting has received some of the most critical attention from art historians due to its inclusion of African American subjects and themes. In the foreground of the canvas two African American women traverse a field of tall grasses while a group of figures and cows gather around a hay bale in the middle-distance. The overall industrious tone of this work is consistent with Bannister's earlier landscape scenes, such as *Driving Home the Cows* or *Herdsmen with Cows*, in which he included pastures, farm animals, and laborers as his primary subjects. In *Hay Gatherers*, however, he chose to glimpse the experience of otherwise marginalized African American field laborers.¹¹ In doing so, he acknowledges members of his own community, who had been largely excluded from representation in the fine arts arena.

Shaw has carefully considered the racial context of religious symbols embedded in this composition. By her assessment, Bannister's landscape serves to elevate the perception of

¹⁰ Patton, *African-American Art*, 89. The term "rural Arcadia" is borrowed from Patton's essay on landscape painting in *African-American Art*. This terminology captures the mood of American Landscape painting in the Romantic era, highlighting the cultural influence of European thought and style during this time as well as the reverence toward nature felt throughout America and New England especially.

¹¹ Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 59–71.

working-class African Americans while simultaneously alluding to Rhode Island's direct participation in the slave-trade industry.¹² Relating this scene to a biblical narrative, she likens Bannister's figures to the Israelites who, within the reach of the system that enslaved their ancestors, trudged through the wilderness in pursuit of the Promised Land.¹³ She writes:

He renders a world in which crossing over, the action of moving from one reality to another, from labor to leisure can be achieved by fording a river of grass as though it were the River Jordan. He shows these black bodies as analogous to the Israelites, who wandered in the wilderness for forty years waiting for the ultimate reward of the Promised Land, yet still within the control of the plantation system that had enslaved their ancestors, still within Pharaoh's reach.¹⁴

Consideration of this painting's narrative in the context of Idealist philosophy and aesthetics only reinforces Shaw's interpretation of *Hay Gatherers* as an exploration of racial oppression in a post-emancipation world. The Idealist concepts of the ideal and real would have been extremely poignant for African Americans in the nineteenth century who were struggling to find security within a society that had previously oppressed them. Compounding this, emancipation promised more than society was then prepared to deliver, forcing African Americans to navigate through a culture that ostensibly recognized them as equals, yet afforded minimal societal acceptance. The abolition of slavery was an ideal that stood in opposition to the reality of segregation and other forms of systemic racism, two facts that the black community were continually made to reconcile. Artmaking provided Bannister and his peers a space to synthesize the disparity between their ideal existence and their lived reality.

Shaw concurs with this notion, arguing that *Hay Gatherers* was a vehicle for Bannister to explore the realities of racial oppression that he, and so many like him, had endured. As a genre, she believed that landscape painting lent itself to this purpose, serving as both a means of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 61.

transcendence for the artist and an idyllic, contemplative retreat for the viewer. Schelling held the same attitude toward landscape painting, regarding it as the purest expression of both the subjectivity of the artist and the essence of the Absolute Idea. Shaw's interpretation reflects Hegel's beliefs as well, affirming the concept of the artist-interpreter and the supremely moral and instructive purpose of the arts. Though her assessment touches upon several German Idealist concepts, she refrains from making this philosophical attribution. In epitomizing these values described by Shaw, however, *Hay Gatherers* satisfies both the approach to, and effect of, painting prescribed by Schelling and Hegel. Through this composition, Bannister brings the dialectics or contradictions of his own reality—the gap between his ideal and real existence—into a harmonious relation on the canvas, directly engaging the premise of Idealism. The aesthetic unity that Bannister achieves through this synthesis serves to elevate his subject matter, his audience, and himself above the otherwise mundane and unpleasant reality that he captures in this painting. In navigating the complex issues of race and class in nineteenth-century America, Bannister addressed the dichotomy of African American identity, suspended between painful reminders of a trying past and indicators of a hopeful future. The result is an unequivocally Idealist representation of the African American experience during this time.

Bannister's subjects are engaged in the task of harvesting and loading hay, an image that recalls his earlier pastoral scenes of farmers.¹⁵ Considering Schelling's theory on art, the choice to portray this activity is significant, indicating that it is integral to the character of each figure. By selecting this moment for depiction, Bannister communicated the specific societal position of his subjects, capturing the essence of their identity as African American laborers. The restraint that he brings to the rendering of his figures only bolsters this portrayal, resonating with

¹⁵ In style, subject matter and theme, *Hay Gatherers* (1893) remains consistent with Bannister's earlier landscapes, such as *Herdsman with Cows* (1869), *Driving Home the Cows* (1881) and *Woman Walking Down Path* (1882).

Schelling's ideas on the elimination of the superfluous in form. In the collective appearance of his subjects, Bannister avoids the inclusion of any detail that would distract from their identity and their relationship to their surroundings. The viewer is only provided with the necessary amount of visual information to grasp the context of the scene before them. Recalling Schelling and Hegel's philosophies, this minimalistic approach creates a sense of formlessness that extends throughout the composition and evokes the power of the Absolute, as in the case of *Approaching Storm*.

Bannister's approach to symmetry, geometry, and grouping in this work also reflects the standards of Idealist aesthetics. He divides his picture-plane into two imbalanced halves; the left side densely populated with trees and underbrush and the right side dotted more sparsely with trees and figures. As Schelling believed, such compositional asymmetry elicits the suspension of identity. This concept of asymmetry enhances Shaw's perception of these figures, identified as vacillating between defined spaces of labor and leisure. Shaw described Bannister's subjects as caught between the promises of the future, signified in part by the open pastures of the foreground, and the reminders of a difficult past, signified by the bale of hay and surrounding landscape which collectively connote the unsavory history of slave labor in New England. If the right of the canvas symbolizes labor and Rhode Island's plantation history as Shaw states, then the left could be posited as a representation of the future for African Americans in a post-emancipation society. This left half, characterized by a density of shrubs and trees, offers the viewer an impeded view of the distant horizon. Coupled with Bannister's asymmetry, this obstructed sightline visually symbolizes the uncertainty felt by former slaves and their descendants, who were coping with new issues of class and race during the end of the nineteenth century.

An overlooked detail on the right of the canvas further substantiates the identification of this half of the composition with the past. Magnifying the rightmost edge of the canvas reveals two additional figures, paused and facing one another (fig. 29). Bannister renders these figures abstractly; their only distinguishing feature being the white apron worn by the woman on the right. This distant pair of women has a ghostlike presence, lacking the opacity and distinction of the two women trudging across the field in the foreground. In fact, and as scholarship on this work has proven, it is easy to entirely miss the inclusion of these women, as they nearly blend into the grasses of the field around them. Noting the overall progressive abstraction of Bannister's figures from foreground to background, one could argue that this representational choice is intended to symbolize the fading memory and evidence of Rhode Island's plantation history—a meaning that Shaw previously inferred from this work based upon subject matter alone (fig. 30). Bannister's application of paint in these instances also evokes Schelling's theory on transparency of form. With this abstraction comes a natural progression in transparency from the weighted figures in the foreground to the airy figures in the distance. Transparency, for Schelling, symbolizes the presence of the idea, suggesting for this scene that these distant women, representing the fading tradition of slavery in their abstraction, also symbolize this ideal through the lightness of their form. Reciprocally, the opacity of the figures in the foreground symbolizes their differentiation from light or the Absolute, grounding them in the real by accentuating their separation from that ideal. In turn, the corporeality of these subjects expresses the profound contradictions that African Americans experienced at the time, being granted their freedom while contending with pervasive racial oppression throughout their daily lives. An understanding of Idealist aesthetic principles adds depth to Shaw's interpretation of the racial themes in this painting, suggesting Bannister's methods for evoking these ideas.

The role of triangular geometry within *Hay Gatherers* is also relevant to the organization of this composition. Bannister's employment of the triangle in this canvas characterizes his spatial division of the picture plane, as well as his grouping of figures throughout. His landscape is broken down into a series of triangles, each oriented with its apex to the sky and its base parallel to the ground. This shape clearly defines the masses of treetops and shrubs in this image, creating a compositional rhythm that leads the eye from the foreground to the background of the canvas. He treats his figures similarly, breaking them into two groups that are related through pyramidal arrangements. The first of these groups is in the middle distance, gathered around the bale of hay. Two figures stand in front of the hay wain while one sits on top, glancing down on the figures below. The second grouping includes the figure to the right of the hay bale, the women in the foreground, and the women in the right distance of the canvas. Shaw, however, neglects these rightmost women, identifying a distant cluster of trees as the apex of this of this last pyramidal group.

As Schelling states in *The Philosophy of Art*, triangular grouping indicates an interconnectedness among figures while allowing the whole of the group to precede its parts in perception. Shaw takes a pointed interest in the compositional arrangement of this image, emphasizing Bannister's approach to grouping and his predominantly geometrical organization of elements throughout the canvas. She notes a tendency in this work toward the numbers two and three, evidenced by the two women at the forefront whose presence reiterates the pair of trees in the far distance, the three trees in the left foreground that anchor the composition, and the three masses of trees clustered throughout the field.¹⁶ One could take this further, noting the three figures gathered around the hay bale, the two neglected figures paused on the rightmost

¹⁶ Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor," 60.

edge of the canvas, the two cows grazing beside the hay wain, and the solitary figure between the cows and women in the foreground whose presence could complete either of the previously mentioned pairs. Considering the entirety of the composition, it becomes clear that a plethora of these pairings and triangular relationships exist among the elements in this work, from the painting's most minute details to its primary subjects. Bannister's choice to reiterate these groupings throughout his canvas resonates with Schelling's preference for duality and triangular arrangements, respecting the numerical symbolism that he described in his treatise on Idealist aesthetics. In doing so, per Schelling's philosophy, Bannister achieved an adequate synthesis of object and space, allowing him to symbolize the whole of the Absolute through the collectivity of parts in his composition.

Bannister's geometrical treatment of this scene brings his subjects directly into dialogue with one another, communicating an overarching sense of unity among man and nature. As Schelling explained, beyond contributing to the evocation of harmony, an emphasis on triangular geometries helps to evade monotony by avoiding the repetition of shape and line. This point is particularly relevant to Shaw's understanding of *Hay Gatherers* as an image that elevates the perception of African American, middle-class labor. Through the reiteration of the triangle, Bannister lifts the viewer out of the monotonous rituals of everyday life and emphasizes the variety and interconnectedness of God's creations. His placement of the human figure—the single worthiest form of artistic depiction for Schelling—further evokes the sense of unity that this work conveys. As in many of his landscape scenes, and in keeping with the Idealist aesthetic, the human figure occupies the approximate midpoint of this composition. In fact, the midpoint of *Hay Gatherers* contains three figures with two cows, situated around a bale of hay just below a cluster of trees. The grouping and placement of these subjects may indicate that the

essential element of this composition is the harmonious relationship between man and nature. Focusing on the human figures alone, the solidarity of the group comes to prominence, suggesting the importance of unity among African Americans during this time. It is important to note that Bannister renders these figures in a relatively leisurely manner, the state of being that mirrors the Absolute or Universal Idea, according to Schelling. Compared to the figures in the foreground, this group takes on a more peaceful presence that lends to the general sense of harmony in this work, asserting the connection of Bannister's subjects to God, or the Universal Spirit. These figures also reinforce the dichotomous identity of African Americans at the time, contrasting the action of the women in the foreground, while still directly related to them through their dress and position as the apex of a larger triangular group that includes the remaining figures of the canvas as its base.

The last topics of relevance to an idealist consideration of this image are the matters of light and color. Bannister's palette in *Hay Gatherers* is bright, lending a sense of lightness and breathability to the scene, overall. The sky is composed of light hues of blue, purple, and white as opposed to the dark and ominous greys of *Approaching Storm*. Once again, the backlit sky indicates that the light source is emanating from within the image itself, symbolizing the relationship of the Absolute to the physical realm, or the Ideal to the real. The light in this work evokes a peacefulness that highlights the synthesis of real and Ideal, lacking the dramatic impact of the light featured in *Approaching Storm*, which emphasized the dialectic between these two realms. Bannister's color scheme in this work is also consistent with Schelling's ideas regarding the content and form of art. As with *Approaching Storm*, *Hay Gatherers* proceeds from an enclosed system of corresponding, tertiary colors. The upper half of the image is predominantly light purple while the lower half dissolves into shades of green; the most pleasing color

combination in Schelling's opinion. When juxtaposed, the array of light and dark tertiary tones within the lower half of the composition establishes a sense of depth and space within the picture plane. Where Bannister applies a yellow-green, a bluish-green or reddish-purple is placed nearby. This correspondence occurs in the sky as well, evidenced in the subtle interchanging of violet and orange tones that define the puffs of clouds. Through his sensitivity to chiaroscuro and the careful coordination of his color palette, Bannister creates a unified space within his canvas that contributes to the overall theme and peaceful mood of his work. Combining Shaw's interpretation with the Idealist lens yields the clearest insight into Bannister's artistic intentions for this image, allowing for a more rounded, critical analysis of the social and historical significance of this landscape painting. The analytical framework applied here also creates an opportunity to concretely assess his methods and fundamentals, an element that recent scholarship has only begun to explore in relation to his artwork. Employing the Idealist lens synthesizes the key components of his identity in an unprecedented way, accounting for his experience as an intellectual and professional African American artist, of lower social standing than his Caucasian cohorts, who succeeded despite practicing in a whitewashed field.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Presently, there is a limited art historical understanding of Bannister's individual perspective and contribution to the tradition of American landscape painting. Overall, scholars have focused primarily on his racial identity as the cause for his artistic expression. This one-dimensional approach fails to account for the range and depth of his interests, as well as his unique position as a freeborn, black artist. Additionally, this narrow framework underestimates his role in the development of Providence's major cultural institutions, neglecting the level of intellectual engagement that these undertakings entailed. The reexamination of Bannister's manuscript, *The Artist and His Critics*, indicates that he held a fully formed artistic theory grounded in the philosophical traditions of German Idealism and American Transcendentalism, which undoubtedly informed his approach to art. An understanding of these connections resituates Bannister's landscapes within a broader cultural context, allowing for the inference of more complex meanings from his compositions. Most importantly, the theoretical framework established in this thesis integrates Bannister's intellect into the discussion of his aesthetic principles, paintings, and race in a manner unparalleled by previous scholarship. To fully understand the significance of his artwork and its relevance to his time, one must consider past interpretations of his artwork in conjunction with this philosophical lens.

Bannister's friend and cohort, Whitaker, dubbed him "The Idealist" in a 1914 article titled "Reminiscences of Providence Artists."¹ He expanded upon this identification in an undated article, likely written before the artist's death in 1901:

He is as purely an ideal painter as any we have among us—his ideals are realities... he gives us what his "mind's eye" beholds, and in facing nature he first gets his "picture" by twisting and turning objects in his composition to suit his fancy, digesting well what he

¹ Whitaker, "Reminiscences of Providence Artists," 138.

appropriates, thus obtaining the best results. The idealist sees most with closed eyes, and our friend is an active member of this class.²

Beyond the mere use of the term “ideal,” Whitaker makes concrete reference to core Idealist beliefs in this excerpt. Particularly, his summation of the artist—digesting what he perceives in his “mind’s eye,” seeing the world with eyes closed—reflects the fundamental concepts of Idealism. What he describes through this definition is the basic dichotomy of being, firmly positioning the artist between the sensuous and spiritual realms, or the real and the ideal, as a subjective interpreter. Whitaker returns to the connection between Bannister and Idealism throughout his writings on the artist, presenting his insights in a more assertive than suggestive manner. In an article likely written after the artist’s death, he writes:

Our friend was a spiritually minded man and from the beginning of his art career to its close, he felt deeply that the Ideal was the real. This ideality obtains in all his canvases making them poems of peace. Mr. Bannister’s thoughtful contemplation embraced the beautiful, the fanciful and the weird. He ultimated [*sic*] most beautiful examples of color in the tertiary pallet, which hold their own with the best artists [*sic*] work of our time. He draws us from the hard realities of life, and by his deep interpretation, touches the soul, clearly representing the invisible in the visible.³

Once again, Whitaker addresses the tenets of Idealism through his colorful recollections, highlighting the didactic function of the arts, the role of the artist as an interpreter, the metaphysical basis of the material world, and the dichotomy of the real and ideal realms of being. Though Whitaker is one of the most cited sources for accounts of Bannister’s life, art historians have entirely overlooked this element of his writing.⁴ Instead, scholars continue to consult his articles for confirmation of their pre-existing perceptions of Bannister, an African American landscape painter of limited means and skill, who was driven by an appreciation for

² Whitaker, “Edward Mitchell Bannister,” n.p.

³ Whitaker, “Edward M. Bannister,” 1–6.

⁴ Whitaker’s firsthand accounts of Bannister’s character have been cited in the following sources: Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*; Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*; Shaw, “Landscapes of Labor;” Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *4 From Providence*; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*; and Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*.

nature and an affinity toward the French Barbizon style.⁵ In this way, Whitaker's accounts have been broken down into simplistic summations of Bannister's reputation as an educated, spiritual, and sentimental man, reinforcing his established identity as one of the "race men" of his day.

Whitaker offered several enthusiastic, firsthand recollections of Bannister's character in the aftermath of the artist's death, making him an especially appealing source to scholars. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Whitaker's writings proceeded from a personal interest in preserving the memory of his dear friend and respected colleague, whose legacy was at risk of being forgotten. His bias is apparent throughout his articles, which lauded Bannister's life and career in the arts. For example, he writes of Bannister in an undated article, "He conversed with more than ordinary intelligence on the principal topics of his day, and all deemed it a privilege to be in his company. His opinions were of a decided nature."⁶ The deep admiration that he had for Bannister ultimately led to a collection of nostalgic, romanticized remembrances of his life. This theme dominates the tone of his writing, while the more analytical elements remain subtle. Bearing the Idealist framework in mind, however, makes it possible to infer more about the context of Bannister's career from Whitaker's writing, moving beyond the characterizations of his manner.

An equally neglected resource, Bannister's manuscript makes several allusions to the core concepts of German Idealism, borrowing both the ideas and verbiage of philosophers like Hegel and Schelling. Previously, historians have referenced this document to evidence his role in the Providence Art Club, his connection to the French Barbizon School, his general attitude on

⁵ For examples of sources that rely on Whitaker's articles to evidence Bannister's reputation, see Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*; Thompson, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*; Shaw, "Landscapes of Labor;" Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *4 From Providence*; Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*; and Bannister, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901, Providence Artist*.

⁶ Whitaker, "Edward M. Bannister," 1–6.

artistic expression, or to suggest a theoretical sympathy with Transcendentalists like Emerson and Allston.⁷ While art historians have adequately summarized *The Artist and His Critics*, no one has ventured to critically analyze its contents within the wider scope of nineteenth-century American culture. A closer look at Bannister's manuscript reveals that he grounded himself in philosophical thought, much like his white contemporaries who practiced in the American landscape tradition. His writing reflects more than a mere layman's admiration for God, nature, and the arts. Several scholars have noted the depth of his rhetoric and theoretical foundation, noting this as evidence of his familiarity with Transcendentalist principles. To grasp the philosophical sympathies revealed through his manuscript, it is essential to acquire a deeper knowledge of Transcendentalism as a direct product of German Idealism. Likewise, the comprehension of Bannister's visual artwork entails an adequate understanding of the developments in American landscape painting during his time as well as the direct links between this genre and Transcendental—therefore Idealist—thought. Tracing Bannister's ideas to their source places his career within the trajectory of nineteenth-century philosophical tradition, indicating an ideological artistic inspiration that goes well beyond the facts of his socio-political status.

Contemporary scholarship on Bannister has been largely documentary, only recently approaching the analysis of his work by questioning the connection between his race and artistic production. While these sources resist critical interpretation, they provide a cohesive history of Bannister's life that is essential to the meaningful assessment of his artwork. Additionally, in their descriptions of the artist and his paintings, these sources have suggested a deeper meaning

⁷ For examples of this historical treatment, see Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47; Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39–45; Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 12; Patton, *African-American Art*, 89; and Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 82.

to his compositions, often indicating Transcendentalist influences, thus providing a key point of departure for further research and scholarship on Bannister's life. RISD's exhibition catalogue *Edward Mitchell Bannister: Providence Artist* and Hartigan's text *Sharing Traditions: Five Black Artists in Nineteenth Century America*—among the earliest published sources on Bannister—follow this trend of restrained interpretation. The former of these, published in 1966, sought a racial and regional context for Bannister's career. This catalogue was a direct response to the marginalization he has endured and a commemoration of Bannister's importance within the bustling cultural environment of Rhode Island, refraining from any substantive critique of his work but acknowledging a need for such analysis. Hartigan's essay on Bannister in *Sharing Traditions* offers a similarly generalized interpretation of his artwork, asserting that he operated from a "spiritual philosophy and individually expressive style which represented harmony and liberty on a more universal plane."⁸ This description evokes some of the cornerstones of Idealist philosophy, particularly the notions of a spiritual philosophy and universal harmony. Such analytical depth, however, is beyond the parameters of his research and is therefore avoided. Hartigan's essay is ultimately a celebration of Bannister and Providence, an exceptional artist worthy of art historical recognition and the unique city center whose environment enabled him to advance his career. For these authors who were reacting to the exclusion of African Americans from art history, the mere fact that Bannister succeeded as an artist during the nineteenth century took precedence over the potential motivations behind his artistic productions. In addition to this, each of these sources utilized Bannister's career to emphasize the greater point that Providence was unique and progressive in its willingness to foster the career of an African American during the 1800s.

⁸ Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions*, 82.

Bearden and Henderson's seminal text, *A History of African-American Artists*, is another prime example of such historical treatment. Published in 1993, their essay on the artist describes him as someone who painted what he knew personally, injecting his own poetic sentiments into his renderings of nature.⁹ In doing so, they indirectly characterize Bannister's work as a synthesis of his objective and subjective experience, evoking the Idealist dichotomy of real and ideal. They also suggest that *Approaching Storm* is an expression of Bannister's interest in nature's accidental, conflicting effects. Describing this work as a representation of nature's beauty and supremacy over man, they assert that Bannister sought to evoke God and present his moral convictions through his landscape. In making this point, they align his beliefs to Emerson's, as well as nineteenth-century American landscapists in general, establishing their shared philosophies but abstaining from drawing concrete connections. Furthermore, through this brief analysis they acknowledge Bannister's deviation from the pure realism of the Hudson River School, noting his tendency toward generalized images of nature, rendered in minimal detail. Their description resonates with that of the Idealist aesthetic, though they neglect to classify his style beyond its distinction from that of the Hudson River painters. Their interest in his work is largely formal, with an emphasis placed on composition and style over thematic or conceptual content. Due to the nature and scope of this text as a survey of African American art, their description of Bannister's career and works is only cursory. As a result, Bearden and Henderson describe the effects of Idealist aesthetics without identifying this philosophy as a cause for his expression.

Published the year prior by Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, an exhibition catalogue for the 1992 show of Bannister's work, is a much more

⁹ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, 47–48.

comprehensive examination of the artist. This text moves beyond a racially based interpretation of his career to account for Bannister's known interests and beliefs, which reflected "a philosophy that had much in common with Transcendentalism."¹⁰ Here, they allude to Bannister's philosophical influence, but avoid drawing any definitive conclusions beyond his known engagement with the writings of Emerson and Allston. Though they describe Bannister as an "artist-thinker" who used his paintings to clarify his philosophical and religious perspective, the biographical aim of this text ultimately takes precedence over the analysis of his artistic motivations. This catalogue, however, offers some of the most critical interpretations of Bannister's work to date, suggesting an underlying geometry in his compositions, as well as the presence of metaphor in his work.¹¹ In addition to this, Jennings addressed his affinity for skies and seascapes that reflect the surrounding scene, proposing that this compositional feature was a tactic to convey the "universal oneness of all things."¹² While their interpretations are compelling, they are also brief, just skimming the surface of what one can glean from his paintings. Jennings directly addresses the limitations of their research in her introduction, identifying the need for further analysis of Bannister's attitudes toward God and nature.¹³

In a 1997 exhibition catalogue, *Edward Mitchell Bannister: American Landscape Artist*, Holland and Rodgers acknowledge Bannister's art as a vehicle for God's ideas and a visual

¹⁰ Holland and Jennings, *Edward Mitchell Bannister, 1828–1901*, 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13–14. Jennings argues this metaphor is in the form of a circle, often presented as a golden ring of light, a motif that he utilized continuously in his work and presented in several ways. She also concludes that Bannister's earlier compositions likely derived from the proportions and progressions of the Golden Rectangle, a device utilized by Ancient Egyptians and Greeks to replicate the underlying structure of living things. Upon maturity in his career, this painting device seemed to be replaced by another Ancient method, the Harmonic Grid, which provided Bannister an underlying pattern on which to arrange his images. This approach provided an arithmetic structure composed by the intersections of geometrical shapes, namely squares and rectangles. These compositional sections were characterized by light or shadow and accompanied by a winding space running along a diagonal in the lower register of his canvases.

¹² *Ibid.* 13.

¹³ *Ibid.* Jennings recognizes a spiritual quality in Bannister's art, suggesting his affinity to Native American thought as a possible starting point for further research into his work.

record of “nature’s force and his own feeling about it.”¹⁴ Throughout this catalogue, they address the omission of the superfluous in his style, his brilliant application of color and light, and his ability to synthesize the human figure with nature in his canvases.¹⁵ Their characterization of Bannister’s work between the 1880s and 1890s is also worth noting. Summarizing his artistic development over the course of this time, they underscore the “dual attributes” of his poetic and spiritual work of the 1880s that developed clearly into an interest in morality, technique, natural phenomena, and pictorial unity in the 1890s.¹⁶ Though they assert that his paintings “theoretically paralleled the European phenomenon” with their style, feeling, and natural subject matter, they avoid any further elaboration on European philosophy and art theory during this era. In the end, they define Bannister as “the template of the neglected African American artist who triumphs against considerable odds and, in a truly Herculean manner, wins the grandest prize of all.”¹⁷ This is the dominating narrative of this catalogue, qualifying Bannister’s life and career as “a remarkable illustration of one aspect of the 19th [sic] century black experience”.¹⁸

In describing the quality of his work, these art historians have approached Idealist fundamentals without philosophical specificity. In this way, previous scholarship on Bannister’s career has indirectly connected his work to German Idealist concepts and aesthetics, stopping short of overtly naming it as such. Instead, Bannister’s racial identity has provided the framework for historical interest in his artwork, subverting his unique contribution to American art to emphasize the overarching narrative of African American history. This fixed narrative has shaped his inclusion in art history, as seen in the subsequent chronological surveys published by

¹⁴ Holland and Rodgers, *Edward Mitchell Bannister*, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6–14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

Patton and Lewis, titled *African American Art* (1998) and *African American Art and Artists* (2003), respectively. These texts mount a similar task, the overdue canonization of African American artists. Though focused on a thematic, cultural, and social analysis, these authors were limited in their ability to critically analyze individual works due to the narrowness of their aim and the sheer breadth of their research. In consequence, Bannister has become a sort of trope for the exceptional black artist. This framework has served as a starting point in the art historical recognition of Bannister, but it is now time to move beyond this limited interpretive lens to one more multifaceted – one that considers Bannister’s relationship to the issues and ideas that impacted the development of nineteenth-century American culture, in general.

Anne Prentice Wagner has begun to engage this kind of analysis in her 2012 article, “Newspaper Boy,” in which she assessed the varied implications behind this portrait’s subject matter.¹⁹ In her article, Wagner investigates the social and economic position of newsboys in the late-nineteenth century, moving beyond the facts of Bannister’s interest in activism to carefully consider the artistic choices he made in representing this specific figure. Her isolation of a single work and close interrogation of Bannister’s subject is unprecedented in previous scholarship, marking an important departure from the otherwise static approach to his portraits. Most notably, Wagner addresses how he communicated his beliefs through his composition, rather than simply identifying themes relevant to his work. Trending in this direction, it is only natural that such consideration be extended to his body of landscapes, as well. Shaw’s 2006 essay, “Landscapes of Labor: Race, Religion and Rhode Island in the Painting of Edward Mitchell Bannister,” comes closest to this while adhering firmly to a racial lens.²⁰ Isolating several thematically linked landscapes, she analyzes how his subjects and stylistic choices reflect his experience as an

¹⁹ Wagner, “Newspaper Boy,” n.p.

²⁰ Shaw, “Landscapes of Labor,” 59–73.

African American in Rhode Island during the 1800s. Like Wagner, Shaw approaches Bannister's compositions critically, thus acknowledging his agency as an individual artist who made specific choices to symbolize his ideas.

As the analysis of his manuscript has demonstrated, a correlation exists between Bannister's rhetoric and that of German Idealists, such as Hegel and Schelling. Considering the circulation of German Idealism in nineteenth-century New England, the various contacts that Bannister had with proponents of this philosophy, and the reiteration of Idealist concepts throughout his manuscript, it is plausible to argue that Idealist principles also surfaced in his landscape scenes, as in the case of *Approaching Storm* and *Hay Gatherers*. As Bannister himself stated in the *Artist and His Critics*, the critic who fails to consider an artist's motive within the character of his time will fail to apprehend the true character and accomplishment of their work.²¹ In the case of Bannister, this entails an understanding of New England Transcendentalism, its philosophical origins in Idealism, and the direct impact that Transcendentalism had on the development of American landscape painting during the 1800s. Employing the Idealist lens illuminates these ideological connections, both enhancing past interpretations of his artwork and allowing for a well-rounded, substantive evaluation of his artistic inspiration and motivation. Moreover, this consideration places Bannister within the larger philosophical dialogue of his era, contextualizing his career in a way that significantly distinguishes his legacy from the general narrative of African American life in the nineteenth century. This intellectual approach reframes his artistic expression as individualistic, advancing the understanding of his paintings in a novel way by classifying his compositions as reflections

²¹ Bannister, *The Artist and His Critics*, 11.

of his own complex identity, rather than the collective identity of the African American community.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Prudence Nelson Bell*, 1864, Oil on Canvas, 63.5 cm x 53.34 cm. Private Collection, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 2 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Newspaper Boy*, 1869, Oil on Canvas, 76.6 cm x 63.7 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu/> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 3 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Christiana Carteaux Bannister*, 1870, Oil on Canvas, 90.17 cm x 71.12 cm. Newport Art Museum, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 4 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Dorchester 1856*, 1856, Oil on Canvas, 35.9 cm x 51.1 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu/> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 5 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Untitled (Rhode Island Seascape)*, 1856, Oil on Canvas, 18.45 cm x 34.29 cm. Kenkeleba House, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 6 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Moon Over Harbor*, ca. 1868, Oil on Canvas, 24.5 cm x 38.7 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu/> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 7 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Sunset*, ca. 1875–80, Oil on Canvas, 50.3 cm x 71.5 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu/> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 8 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Landscape Near Newport, Rhode Island*, ca. 1877–78, Oil on Canvas, 30.9 cm x 65.9 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu/> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 9 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Governor Sprague's White Horse*, 1869, Oil on Canvas, 58.42 cm x 76.2 cm. Rhode Island Historical Society, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 10 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Untitled (Man with Two Oxen)*, 1869, Oil on Canvas, 40.6 cm x 61.6 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu/> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 11 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Herdsman with Cows*, 1869, Oil on Canvas, 79.4 cm x 131.2 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 12 Edward Mitchell Bannister, Bannister's sketch after *Under the Oaks*, 1876, Ink on paper. Reproduced from Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Sharing Traditions: 5 Black Artists in 19th Century America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985)



Fig. 13 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Oak Trees*, 1876, Oil on Canvas, 86.0 cm x 153.0 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 14 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Driving Home the Cows*, 1881, Oil on Canvas, 81.9 cm x 127.3 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 15 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Woman Walking Down Path*, 1882, Oil on Canvas, 51.0 cm x 76.0 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 16 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Approaching Storm*, 1886, Oil on Canvas, 102.0 cm x 152.4 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 17 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Hay Gatherers*, 1893, Tempera on panel, 45.72 cm x 60.96 cm. Private Collection, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 18 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *People Near Boat*, 1893, Oil on Canvas, 35.6 cm x 50.4 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 19 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Seaweed Gatherers*, 1898, Oil on Canvas, 65.7 cm x 50.6 cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Reproduced from The Smithsonian American Art Museum, <http://americanart.si.edu> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 20 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *Street Scene*, ca. 1895–99, Tempera on panel, 21.75 cm x 14.61 cm. Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 21 Edward Mitchell Bannister, *The Old Home*, 1899, Tempera on canvas, 45.72 cm x 60.96 cm. Private Collection, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 22 Titian, *Annunciation*, ca. 1488–1576, Oil on canvas, 402.91 cm x 234.95 cm. Venice, San Salvatore, Reproduced from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org/> (accessed April 14, 2016)



Fig. 23 Apollonios, *Belvedere Torso*, ca. 1st century B.C, Sculpture. Hall of the Muses, Vatican, Reproduced from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org/> (accessed June 10, 2016)



Fig. 24 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Last Judgment*, ca. 1534–41, Fresco, 1460 cm x 1341 cm. Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Reproduced from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org/> (accessed April 14, 2016)



Fig. 25 Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, ca. 1904–1906, Oil on canvas, 65 cm x 81 cm. Private Collection, Reproduced from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org/> (accessed April 14, 2016)



Fig. 26 Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men Observing the Moon*, ca. 1819–1820, Painting, 35 cm x 44.5 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Reproduced from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org/> (accessed April 14, 2016)



Fig. 27 Man Ray, *Minotaur*, 1935, Gelatin Silver Print. Roger Williams University Image Collection, Reproduced from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org/> (accessed April 14, 2016)



Fig. 28 Antonio Correggio, *Holy Night (Adoration of the Shepherds)*, ca. 1522–1530, Oil on panel, 256 cm x 188 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Reproduced from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org/> (accessed April 14, 2016)



Fig. 29 Edward Mitchell Bannister, Detail of rightmost distant figures in *Hay Gatherers*, 1893, Tempera on panel, 45.72 cm x 60.96 cm. Private Collection, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)



Fig. 30 Edward Mitchell Bannister, Detail of all figures in *Hay Gatherers*, 1893, Tempera on panel, 45.72 cm x 60.96 cm. Private Collection, Reproduced from The Athenaeum, <http://www.the-athenaeum.org> (accessed March 22, 2014)