



# FINE ART CONNOISSEUR

TODAY'S MASTERS™

## Stephen Hannock Taking Landscape to the Next Level

By JASON ROSENFELD



You might call Stephen Hannock (b. 1951) a celebrity artist if he didn't wear his renown so lightly. Celebrity has not exactly fallen in his lap, being the product of hard work, an expansive personality engaged with a growing orbit of friends and associates, and a willingness to take on grand projects. Hannock has become the in-house painter at fashionable restaurants owned by Danny Meyer and Tom Colicchio, and he counts the Lauders, Tisches, Brokaws, Sting, and Trudie Styler as friends and clients.

Of course, such mainstream celebrity differs from the art-world celebrity enjoyed by the likes of Jeff Koons, Julian Schnabel, and Damien Hirst. Hannock has somewhat abjured the latter, perhaps not by choice: His determination to continue painting landscapes has left him in a perplexing position vis-à-vis the contemporary art world, which still holds such subject matter at arm's length. Thus Hannock has been profiled in *Fortune Magazine*, but not yet in *Artforum*. Nor has he mounted a gallery show in New York City since 2005, though he recently exhibited at San Francisco's John Berggruen Gallery.

Now based in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Hannock is constantly at work and generously supports worthy causes, such as supplying the Tribeca Film Festival with paintings to award as prizes. Commissions under way include a painting of southern Colorado's



FIG. 1  
THOMAS COLE (1801-1848)  
VIEW FROM MOUNT HOLYOKE, NORTHAMPTON,  
MASSACHUSETTS, AFTER A THUNDERSTORM - THE OXBOW  
1836, OIL ON CANVAS, 51 1/2 X 76 IN.  
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK



FIG. 2  
THE OXBOW, AFTER CHURCH, AFTER COLE, FLOODED,  
1979-1994 (FLOODED RIVER FOR THE MATRIARCHS,  
E. AND A. MONGAN)  
1994, POLISHED OIL ON CANVAS, 54 X 81 IN.  
SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, NORTHAMPTON,  
MASSACHUSETTS



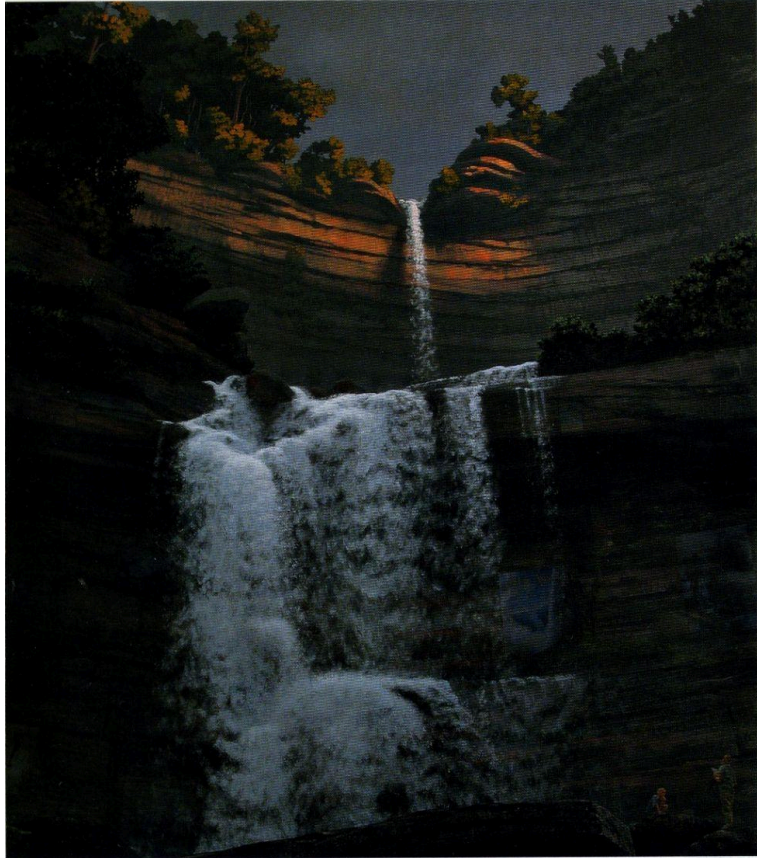


FIG. 3  
*KAATERSKILL FALLS FOR FRANK MOORE AND DAN HODERMARSKY (MASS MOCA #11)*  
 2005, ACRYLIC, ALKYD, AND OIL GLAZES WITH COLLAGE ELEMENTS ON CANVAS  
 108 x 96 IN.  
 METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

Mount Blanca for the Denver Art Museum, as well as a massive triptych of Yellowstone Falls for the Whitney Gallery of Western Art at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming (to replace an iconic Thomas Moran vista that will return to the Smithsonian).

HOOKED

I first crossed Stephen Hannock's path in 1995 while I was a graduate student at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. I was giving a gallery talk at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Thomas Cole's masterpiece of 1836, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm — The Oxbow* (Fig. 1), one of Hannock's formative influences. After performing for an hour or so, I was approached by a guy who had arrived late, but had been listening avidly in the back. He wore paint-splattered sneakers and sported a backpack and stubbly facial hair. He asked for my address and said he would send me a surprise.

I soon received a catalogue of his solo exhibition at San Diego's Timken Museum of Art, the first project that jewel of a museum had ever devoted to a living artist. Covering it was a note written in the distinctively blocky, all-caps script that now runs and falls in ribbons across the surfaces of his increasingly complex paintings. Suddenly I was in Stephen Hannock's gravitational pull, and have since become both a witness to, and a participant in, the extraordinary alchemy he has perfected in paint.

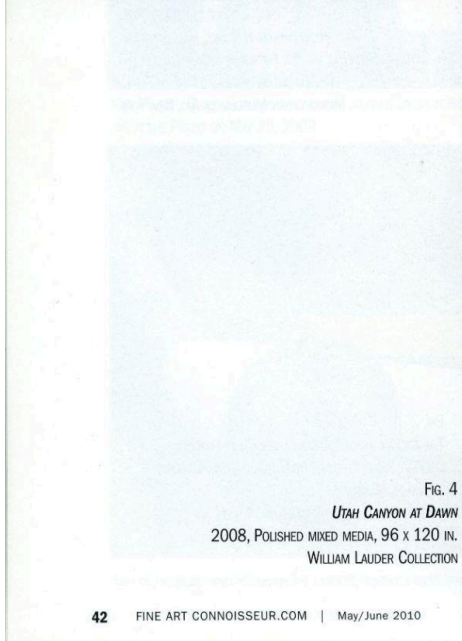


FIG. 4  
*UTAH CANYON AT DAWN*  
 2008, POLISHED MIXED MEDIA, 96 x 120 IN.  
 WILLIAM LAUDER COLLECTION

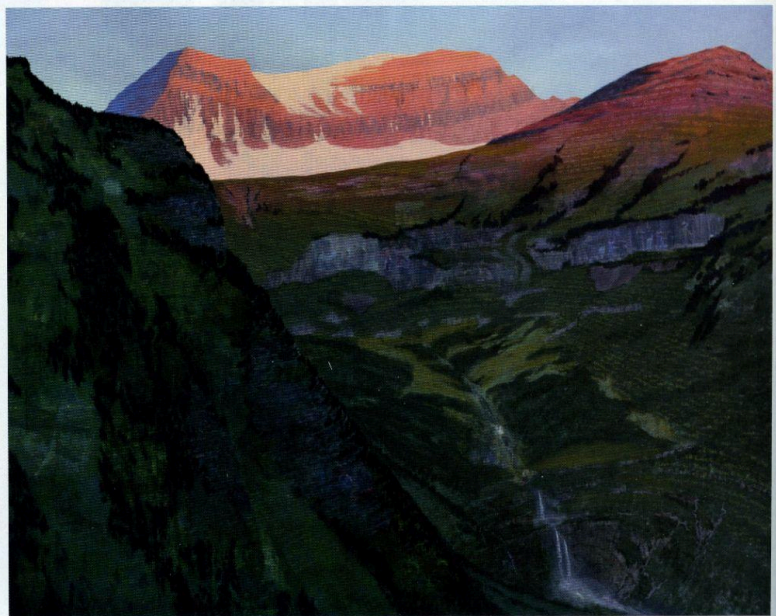






FIG. 5  
*RIVER GLARE THROUGH CLEARING FOG*  
2002, POLISHED OIL OVER CHUCK CLOSE DAGUERRETYPE ON PAPER ENVELOPE, 4 1/2 x 9 1/2 IN.  
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

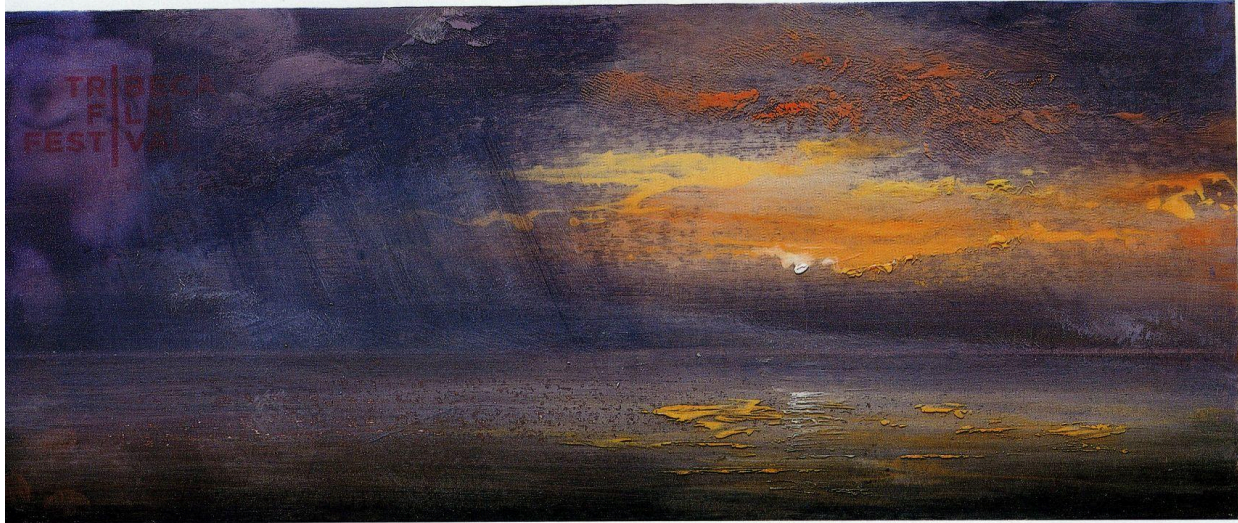


FIG. 6  
*FLOODED RIVER WITH DAWN FLARE (MASS MOCA #19)*  
2005, POLISHED OIL ON CANVAS, 12 x 22 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



#### BRIDGING NEW ENGLAND AND DOWNTOWN

Born in Albany, New York, Hannock got his first taste of art education at Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, then during stints at three New England colleges (Bowdoin, Hampshire, and Smith). At the latter, he apprenticed with the noted sculptor-printmaker Leonard Baskin (1922-2000; see the August 2009 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*). Baskin opened up a world of connections, and soon Hannock was exhibiting at colleges throughout New England. His early works were boldly experimental, yet, in retrospect, we see in them the elements that determined his subsequent aesthetic path. Hannock painted these imaginary landscapes on large supports in highly unstable phosphorescent acrylics, then illuminated them with

black light in order to endow the highlights with a (literal) glow. Some were even used in multi-media installations as backdrops for avant-garde musical performances.

On the sage advice of the prominent Massachusetts art historians Elizabeth and Agnes Mongan, Hannock moved in 1982 to New York City, where he immersed himself in the post-modernist/neo-expressionist/graffiti scene downtown. These trends did not crop up in his art, with the exception of a series of paintings of alienated blob-like figures on subway platforms. Rather, the edgy spirit of the 1980s emerged in the strategies Hannock developed while turning his attention to New England landscapes. It was then that he settled on what is still his best-known subject, a series of variations on Cole's

May/June 2010 | FINE ART CONNOISSEUR.COM





famed *Oxbow*. Dated 1994 and dedicated to the Mongans, the version now in Smith College's museum (Fig. 2) features a glowing sky with a *contre-jour* mountain (invented), a shelf of clouds skidding forward at upper right, and the whipping form of the calm, glassy Connecticut River. This is a truly sublime vision of pure expanse, the serenity of which conveys the audible hum of all nature.

Hannock's modification of the actual landscape — while retaining its most recognizable features — was and is the most crucial gambit of his art. To complicate matters, he began to scribble words on his painted surfaces, in lines mimicking the topographical elements. Sometimes these texts refer to landmarks or events that have occurred at the site depicted. At other times they function as non-sequiturs — unrelated ideas that pop into Hannock's mind as he works.

In the *Oxbow* series, Hannock's artistry found its bite. On the one hand, he chose a tried-and-true postcard view of western Massachusetts, a vista that had

FIG. 8  
DETAIL OF *NORTHERN CITY RENAISSANCE* (NEWCASTLE, ENGLAND, MASS MoCA #53)



FIG. 7  
*NORTHERN CITY RENAISSANCE* (NEWCASTLE, ENGLAND, MASS MoCA #53)  
2008, POLISHED MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, 96 x 144 IN.  
COLLECTION OF STING, ON LOAN TO THE LAING ART GALLERY, NEWCASTLE





attained prestige in the 19th century. On the other hand, Hannock disavowed this lineage by inserting surplus mountains and bridges, reshaping the river's bend (now permanently disfigured by erosion and human intervention), and eliminating some signs of modern development. Initially he worked from the simple drawings he had made from the slope of Mount Holyoke in the 1980s, but now he operates from memory, never painting before the motif (as Cole showed himself doing in the original *Oxbow*). Now that Hannock has painted more than 20 versions of the Oxbow, his inscriptions have become self-referential, restating or reworking lines from earlier versions. Essentially, his pictures now converse among themselves.

Hannock, then, engages in multiple kinds of appropriation — of earlier images associated with this famous site, and now of his own *oeuvre*. This transgressive strategy points back to the type of contemporary art he imbibed in lower Manhattan during the 1980s. It is an approach he has since applied to many different landscapes, from *Kaaterskill Falls* (Fig. 3) to Utah's canyons.

#### EVER INNOVATING

*Utah Canyon at Dawn* (Fig. 4) is a spectacular picture whose trajectory epitomizes Hannock's present approach. It originated as a commission celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Sundance Institute, with the intention of selling it to raise funds for this innovative institution founded by Robert Redford. Hannock spent time with Redford in Utah, taking in the scenery around Park City and the Wasatch range. With its seemingly irreconcilable blend of a vertiginous canyon (lower right) and the distant, sun-splashed bulk of Mount Timpanogos, *Utah Canyon at Dawn* was painted rapidly and unveiled at Sundance's 2006 gala. The following year it was exhibited at PaceWildenstein (New York) and in a Hannock retrospective at the Albany Institute of History and Art.

Upon each showing, Hannock could see his picture in a new light and milieu, which led him to tinker repeatedly with its surface in order to resolve what he has called a "fundamental issue of luminosity." At Pace he noticed a problem with the sky, but in Utah he perceived a lack of sufficient contrast in the left foreground's escarpment. (He has since bolstered its silhouette.) There is historical precedent for such tinkering: The Pre-Raphaelites John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt revisited their pictures at owners' bidding, often decades later, to retouch (or "restore") areas, sometimes with disastrous, history-rewriting results. Hannock admits that his modifications are difficult to perceive. Yet he claims to have a vivid idea of the finished image in his mind even before beginning the work; thus the subsequent tinkering, even if it takes a few years, is all part of the process of approaching his own Platonic ideal of the painting.

Working up close is one thing, but pictures change when viewed from a distance. To see Hannock's large canvases from afar is to be awed by their vistas and light effects. Curiosity draws us closer, however, and only then do the scrawls of words — and more recently, submerged pasted elements — reveal themselves slowly. Indeed, Hannock has increasingly pasted in such materials as photographs, magazine articles, letters, and envelopes. He submerges them in heavily worked layers of semi-translucent acrylic or oil glazes; sometimes they are immediately visible, and at other times they require careful searching.

This strategy seems to come partially from Hannock's longstanding practice of reusing the envelopes of letters sent to him as supports

for paintings, as in *River Glare through Clearing Fog* (Fig. 5). This is painted on a Tribeca Film Festival envelope: The postal franking is barely perceptible at top right, the addressee's name is occluded at center, and over the return address floats a ghostly overlay of a reproduction of Chuck Close's daguerreotype of Hannock's wife Bridget, then pregnant with their daughter Georgia. Her headless form hovers in the rain-swept sky like a deity aloft. Toward the right the sun smolders through a grey scrim, in clear emulation of J.M.W. Turner, one of Hannock's heroes. The sun's reflection, scraped and impastoed on the steely band of sea below, is particularly exquisite. At the top, its rose-colored glow has been formed with Hannock's fingerprints: Essentially, he has applied his own stamp to this letter.

Low and wide, miniature yet monumental, the envelopes' panoramas have been expanded in Hannock's most traditional series, *Flooded Rivers*. Since 1994 he has returned to this motif again and again — uninhabited waterways with overflowed banks, stranded trees, and glistening light effects. Here we see visual affinities with Turner, the so-called "Luminist" landscapes of Kensett, Lane, and Heade, the nocturnes of Whistler, as well as Monet's Seine riverscapes of the 1890s. Hannock often uses a transfer Rorschach effect to create certain elements, such as the sun in *Flooded River with Dawn Flare* (Mass MoCA #19), Fig. 6. He paints the image onto a loose piece of paper, folds it in half onto itself, then presses the mirror forms onto the canvas's surface. This particular passage was then glazed with resin and polished until the bilateral solar form carries a startlingly intense glow without the disfiguring effect of surface glare. This is how Hannock has honed his techniques to achieve levels of luminosity rarely seen in traditional oil painting — to approximate the radiance of his early phosphorescent acrylics without the need for black light.

Nowhere has this been accomplished more dramatically than in Hannock's most recent large work, *Northern City Renaissance* (Newcastle, England, Mass MoCA #53), Fig. 7. Ostensibly a bird's-eye view of this industrial city in northeastern England, it surveys the history of the region through imagery and the admixture of text and pasted materials. Yet the treatment of light here makes the earlier *Oxbow* pictures seem conventional. Through preparatory sketches tweaked over six years with digital retouching, as well as his astonishing expertise in oils and gels, Hannock has somehow managed to evoke a near-blinding phosphorescence with traditional materials, at last approaching his long-sought alchemical goal. Up close (Fig. 8), the shimmering lights that pepper this scene appear almost as miniature light-emitting diodes (LEDs). These stand in for Newcastle's abandoned shipyards and industrial sites, rendered as twinkling ectoplasmic bursts.

The spectacle of such effects makes Hannock the James Cameron of contemporary art. The possibilities of the medium continue to expand in his work, as does the potential for landscape painting, a genre still regarded by the international art elite as unworthy. There is an obsolete prejudice, however, one that Hannock, in his complex and totally contemporary approach to landscape, has put firmly to rest. ■

JASON ROSENFELD is distinguished chair and associate professor of art history at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City. He contributed an essay to the monograph *Stephen Hannock* (2009, Hudson Hills Press) and co-curated the Millais retrospective that toured the world in 2007–2008. He is now co-curating the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood exhibition to be mounted in London, Washington, and Moscow in 2012–2013.