

A Fish by John La Farge*

Henry Adams

In 1865, John La Farge executed a colorful little panel, now in the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, depicting an Atlantic bonito and a spray of flowering weigela set against a yellow-gold background (Fig. 1). Because of the painting's strangely unbalanced composition, it is natural to hesitate before deciding how it should be turned. The date and signature clearly indicate, however, which way goes up.¹

The purpose of this essay is to explain the reasons for the panel's eccentric arrangement of forms. I will attempt to show that the painting was not conceived by itself, but was originally intended as an element in a larger decorative ensemble. In the setting for which it was originally intended, its composition would have been complemented by those of the works around it. But even in its original context, the painting would still have looked rather surprising. The deeper reason for its lack of balance is that its composition was modeled after Japanese prints and gold-leaf screens. In fact, it is one of the first Western paintings to exploit Japanese effects, and for this reason it is something of a landmark in American art.

In the year of this painting, 1865, La Farge was commissioned to execute a group of paintings for a dining room. The project is mentioned in passing by early writers on La Farge: in 1882 by George Parsons Lathrop, in *Scribner's Magazine*, and in 1895, with an exact repetition of Lathrop's wording, by Cecilia Waern, in her biography of the artist. The basis of these accounts was apparently an unpublished letter of 1878 from La Farge to Richard Watson Gilder.² These sources tell us that the decorative



1 John La Farge, *Fish*, oil on cradled mahogany panel, 23 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 17 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", 1865. Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum

*This essay was written for a talk delivered at the Frick Symposium on April 15, 1978. I owe particular thanks to Jules Prown for his help in preparing the essay at that time. Thanks are also due to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, who encouraged me to start this venture; to Vincent Scully, who made helpful suggestions; and to Robert Herbert, who made possible some of the research on *Japonisme*.

With regard to the material on John La Farge, I am very deeply indebted to Henry La Farge, who contributed much useful information and allowed me freely to consult his *catalogue raisonné* of John La Farge's work during the final stages of my research. Indispensable information was also provided by Kathleen Foster at Yale University, and by Linnea Wren at the University of Minnesota.

My wife Ann helped me with all aspects of this project.

¹ The signature, which is located just to the left of the body of the fish, does not show in the black-and-white photograph, as it is of intensity equal to the background, although of contrasting color. The painting was given to the Fogg Art Museum by Grenville Winthrop, who acquired it from Mrs. Richard Stokes, New York.

² George Parsons Lathrop, "John La Farge," *Scribner's Monthly*, xxi,

Feb., 1881, 513; and Cecilia Waern, "John La Farge: Artist and Writer," *Portfolio*, New York, 1896, 30. See also, Pauline King, *American Mural Painting*, Boston, 1902, 17. The letter from La Farge to Gilder is in a private collection, Long Island. It was evidently written in 1878 as it takes issue with an article by Clarence Cook on "Recent Church Decoration," which had appeared in *Scribner's Monthly*, xv, Feb., 1878, 569-576. A poet and editor, Gilder was later responsible for publishing La Farge's *An Artist's Letters from Japan*. His wife, Helen de Kay Gilder, had studied painting with La Farge.

La Farge was short of money in 1865: in April of 1864 he had fled secretly from Newport, at night, leaving unpaid bills behind him (see Leon Edel, *Henry James Letters*, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, 1, 52). Shortly afterwards, La Farge settled at Ellis Street in Roxbury, Mass., where he began work on the dining-room commission (his address is given in a letter from T. S. Perry to Margaret La Farge, Feb. 19, 1865, in the Thomas Sergeant Perry papers, Colby College, Me.). The illness that prevented La Farge from completing the dining-room panels came in the fall of 1865. Its date is set by one of La Farge's sketches, showing a woman perched in a tree, which is inscribed, "The date of my illness, Oct. 1865" (private collection, Princeton, N.J.).

scheme was never completed, evidently because La Farge fell ill, but that nonetheless it proved a turning point in his career. Those paintings which were finished were seen in 1867 by the architect H. H. Richardson, who liked them so much that he impulsively promised La Farge the next decorative commission at his disposal. Nine years later, Richardson came through with his offer and La Farge received the commission to decorate the interior of Trinity Church in Boston, which immediately established him as the foremost mural painter in America.³

Despite the significant role of this dining room in bringing La Farge his first major public success, specific information about it has remained hidden. The accounts do not tell the patron's name, the location of the project, or how many paintings La Farge completed. The only clues given for identifying the panels are the date of 1865, the subject matter, which was of fish and flowers, and the information that the panels were eventually all sold separately. Further sources contribute additional clues. Catalogues and reviews of exhibitions, which document four occasions on which La Farge showed the dining-room decorations, reveal that he completed three paintings.⁴ In addition, an unpublished letter of 1871, from La Farge to John Ferguson Weir, refers to the paintings as "the yellow panels."⁵

The suggestion that the *Fish* at the Fogg may have been part of this unidentified dining-room project was first offered tentatively in 1935, in a catalogue compiled by Royal Cortissoz, and by Bancel and Henry La Farge. This

proposal has been repeated in subsequent studies.⁶ The date and subject matter of the panel fit the surviving evidence, and the yellow background, which is almost unique in La Farge's *oeuvre*, is in accord with the description in the previously overlooked letter from La Farge to Weir.

By means of a published letter, which until now has been overlooked, it seems possible to identify the commission for which La Farge made his panels. On February 22, 1866, Albion Bicknell, an artist of Boston, wrote to Elihu Vedder in Rome, boasting that he had just been working for the architect Henry Van Brunt on a commission originally given to La Farge.⁷ Bicknell had just finished a large painting, and six smaller ones of fruit and flowers. There is little doubt that he was referring to the dining-room project that La Farge is known to have abandoned in the previous year.

The necessary clue to locate this dining room is provided by the terse postscript of an unpublished letter from La Farge to Horace Scudder, dated April 7, 1868. This reads: "The paintings at Mr. Freeland's house are not by me — but are imitations of those I was to put in — part of which I painted and which my illness in 1865 prevented me from finishing."⁸

The *Boston Dictionary* of 1865 lists the residence of Charles Freeland, a prosperous builder, at 117 Beacon Street. The house that Henry Van Brunt designed for him still stands as a private residence, and the dining room, in its walnut-paneled splendor, remains intact (Fig. 2).⁹

This was certainly the room for which La Farge's *Fish*

³ Robert Berkelman, "John La Farge, Leading American Decorator," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Jan., 1957, 27-41; and Helene Barbara Weinberg, "John La Farge and the Decoration of Trinity Church Boston," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Dec., 1974, 323-353.

⁴ In 1867, La Farge exhibited three decorative panels at the National Academy of Design. It is likely that these were the dining-room decorations, and that H. H. Richardson, who was then living in New York, saw them at this exhibition. In 1871, the panels were shown at Yale in the Third Annual Exhibition of the Yale School of Fine Arts. The catalogue notes that they had been intended "to be set into Wall Decoration of a Dining Room" (Nos. 80, 81, 99A and 99B). In the spring of 1875, La Farge took part in an exhibition organized by young artists who were dissatisfied with the National Academy of Design (see Susan Hobbs, "John La Farge and the Genteel Tradition in American Art: 1875-1910," Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1974, 12). The show occurred on Fifth Avenue in New York, at the gallery of Cottier and Company, the firm that later assisted La Farge with the decoration of Trinity Church in Boston. La Farge's *Fish* was exhibited there; a review in *Scribner's Monthly* (x, 1875, 253) praised the painting and noted that it had been intended for a dining room. In 1883, this same painting was shown at the newly formed Society of American Artists, the group that had formed as a consequence of the previous exhibition. Mary Gay Humphries singled it out for praise in an essay in *Art Amateur* ("John La Farge, Artist and Decorator," *Art Amateur*, ix, June, 1883, 12-14).

⁵ John Ferguson Weir papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Sterling Library, Yale University. This letter is dated only "Thursday, June 14," but it clearly refers to the exhibition at Yale in 1871 that is mentioned in the previous note (June 14 did fall on a Thursday in 1871). A

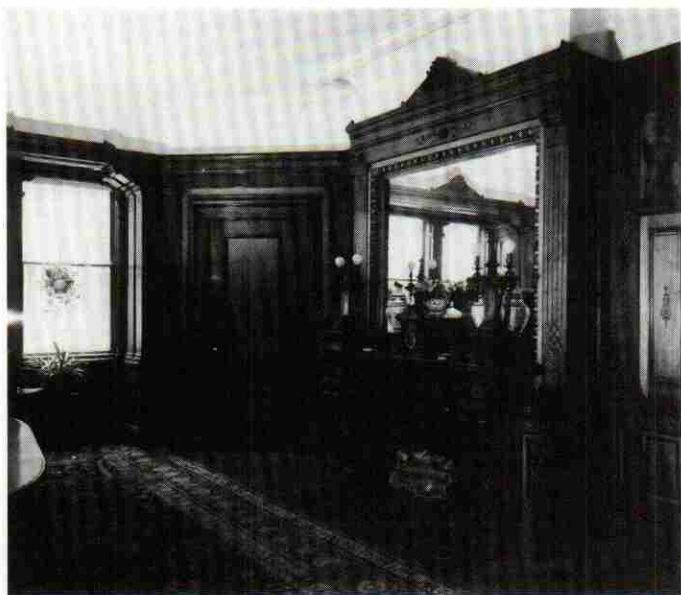
letter by La Farge in the La Farge papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, dated "July 6th, 1871," is only addressed to "Dear sir," but is clearly intended for Weir, and continues this correspondence. It states: "The panels on yellow ground are also for sale even if not salable. Price for these and one more not sent \$550. Perhaps I ought to have stated all this before. Perhaps it is useless."

⁶ Royal Cortissoz, *An Exhibition of the Work of John La Farge*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1936, pl. 17. Followers of this proposal include: Ruth Berenson Katz, "John La Farge as Painter and Critic," Ph.D. diss., Radcliffe College, 1951, 69 and 91, n. 26; Donald K. Wiest, Jr., "John La Farge, American Artist: The Early Years: 1835-1871," thesis, Yale University, 1967 (copy in the possession of Jules Prown), 6-61, 99, nn. 50 and 51; Helene Barbara Weinberg, as cited in n. 3, 323, *idem*, *The Decorative Work of John La Farge*, New York and London, 1977, 41-42. See also Kathleen Foster, "The Still-Life Painting of John La Farge," *American Art Journal*, July, 1979, 5-37.

⁷ Elihu Vedder, *The Digressions of V.*, Boston and New York, 1910, 277. The Bancroft that Bicknell refers to is La Farge's friend, John Chandler Bancroft, son of the historian.

⁸ Houghton Library, Harvard University.

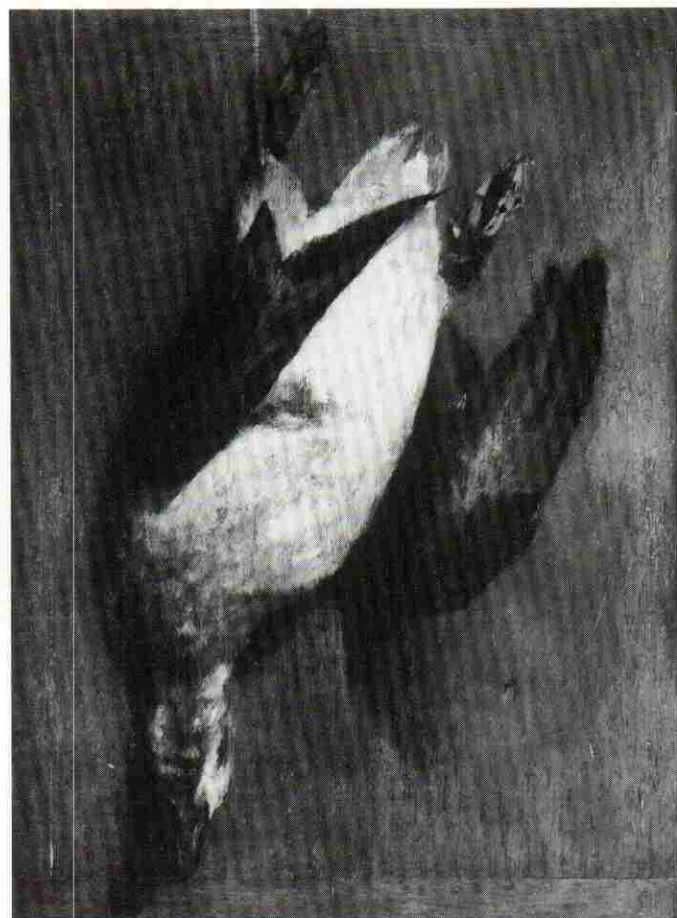
⁹ In the only monograph on Van Brunt, by William A. Coles, this house is not on the list of buildings by or attributed to Van Brunt (*Architecture and Society: Selected Essays of Henry Van Brunt*, ed. and intro. William A. Coles, Cambridge, Mass., 1969, 533, n. 45). The obituary for Van Brunt in *Architectural Review*, x, 1903, 44 (quoted by Coles, 17) notes, however, that Van Brunt designed some distinguished houses on Beacon Street. The exterior of No. 117 is discussed by Bainbridge Bunting in *Houses of Boston's Back Bay*, Cambridge, Mass., 1967, 111-13, 125, and figs. 66 and 67 on pp. 126 and 127. For an obituary of Freeland see the *Boston Evening Transcript*, December 26, 1883, 1.



2 Dining room of Charles Freeland house, Boston, Henry Van Brunt, architect

3 La Farge, *Game Bird*, oil on panel, 18¾ × 14", 1860. Lincoln, University of Nebraska, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

4 Albion Bicknell, *Duck*, oil on panel, 23¾ × 15", 1866. Boston, private collection



was intended. Bicknell's paintings, much yellowed by old varnish, are high on the wall, inset directly into the woodwork (Figs. 4, 6). They are of about the same dimensions as La Farge's *Fish*, have a yellow background, and also are inscribed with a red monogram. Like La Farge's panel, they depict food, as do the carvings of the buffet.

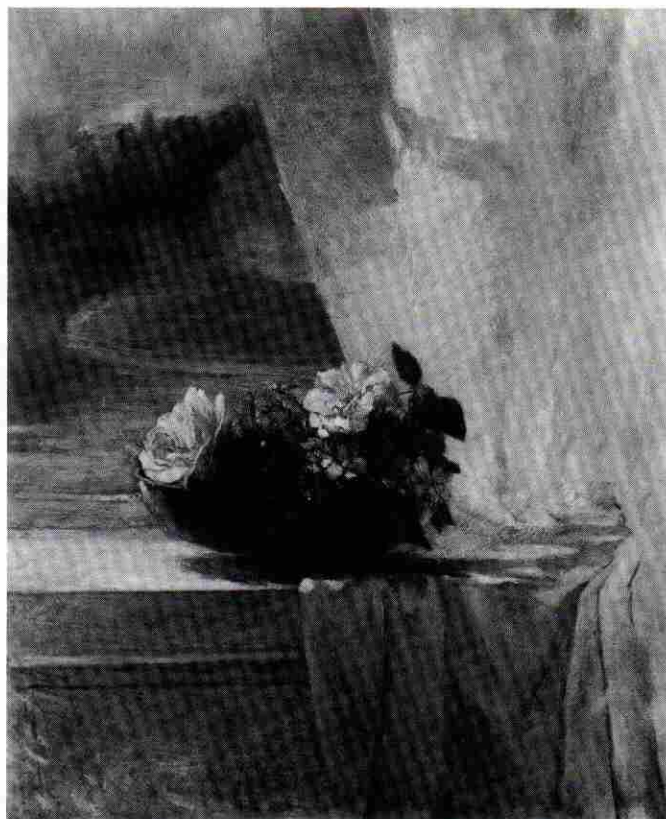
That Bicknell was in a position to know La Farge's work well is suggested by their simultaneous association with William Morris Hunt.¹⁰ Not only are Bicknell's paintings very much influenced by the *Fish* that La Farge started for the room, but they also lift motifs from earlier paintings by La Farge. La Farge's *Game Bird* of 1860 (Fig. 3), in which he cleverly portrayed a wooden background by leaving his mahogany panel unpainted, evidently served as a model for Bicknell's *Duck* (Fig. 4). La Farge's *Wreath* of 1862 (Fig. 5) was the source for Bicknell's *Wreath* (Fig. 6), though in technique Bicknell does not match La Farge's bold use of texture, and in expression he does not equal La Farge's powerful evocation of transience. La Farge's flower-pieces, for example his *Flowers in a Bowl Before a Window* of about 1861 (Fig. 7), with its delicate nuances of color, lighting, and focus, evidently inspired Bicknell's *Flowers in a Vase* (Fig. 8).



¹⁰ Wayne Craven, "Albion Harris Bicknell, 1837-1915," *Antiques*, Sept., 1974, 443-49 (with further bibliography).



5 La Farge, *Wreath*, oil on canvas, 23 × 13", 1862. Hamden, Conn., private collection



7 La Farge, *Flowers in a Bowl Before a Window*, oil on canvas, 36 × 32", ca. 1861. Washington, D. C., Corcoran Gallery



6 Bicknell, *Wreath*, oil on panel, 23¼ × 17", 1866. Boston, private collection



8 Bicknell, *Flowers in a Vase*, oil on panel, 23 × 16⅞", 1866. Boston, private collection



9 Drawing room of Charles Freeland house

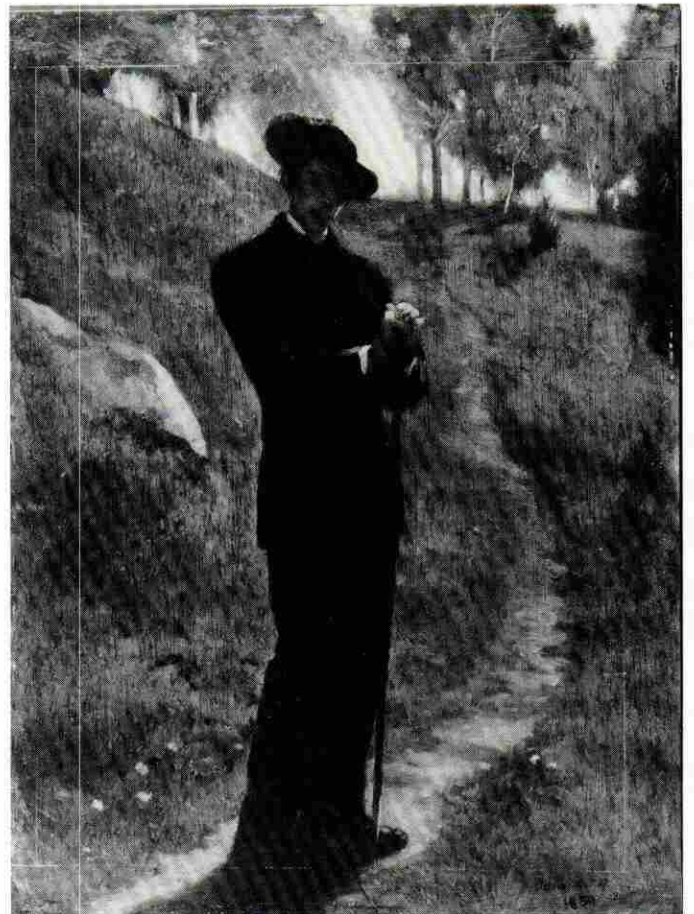
Perhaps the most curious of Bicknell's derivations is his large portrait of *Dante* which decorates the drawing room of the Freeland house (Figs. 9, 10). This is modeled after La Farge's *Self-Portrait* of 1859 (Fig. 11), though it lacks the elegant precision of La Farge's decorative arrangement, and also his skill at conveying a personality through a figure's stance. Altogether, it is surprising to discover that La Farge's work was being so assiduously imitated at this early date.¹¹

As was previously mentioned, La Farge finished three paintings for this room. So far only the *Fish at the Fogg* has been associated with it. The other two paintings, however, can be identified through similarities of size, materials, and style.

A painting in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, titled *Hollyhocks and Corn* (Fig. 12) appears to be a decorative mate to the *Fish*. Although the *Hollyhocks* has been published several times, this direct relationship has not previously been noted.¹² Both paintings contain forms that sweep in a diagonal arc across the composition: thus, when they are placed side by side, the designs complement each other. Both paintings are on mahogany panels of nearly identical dimensions, and both display a yellow-gold background — that of the *Hollyhocks* streaked by bands of simulated sunlight. Both are signed in red, with



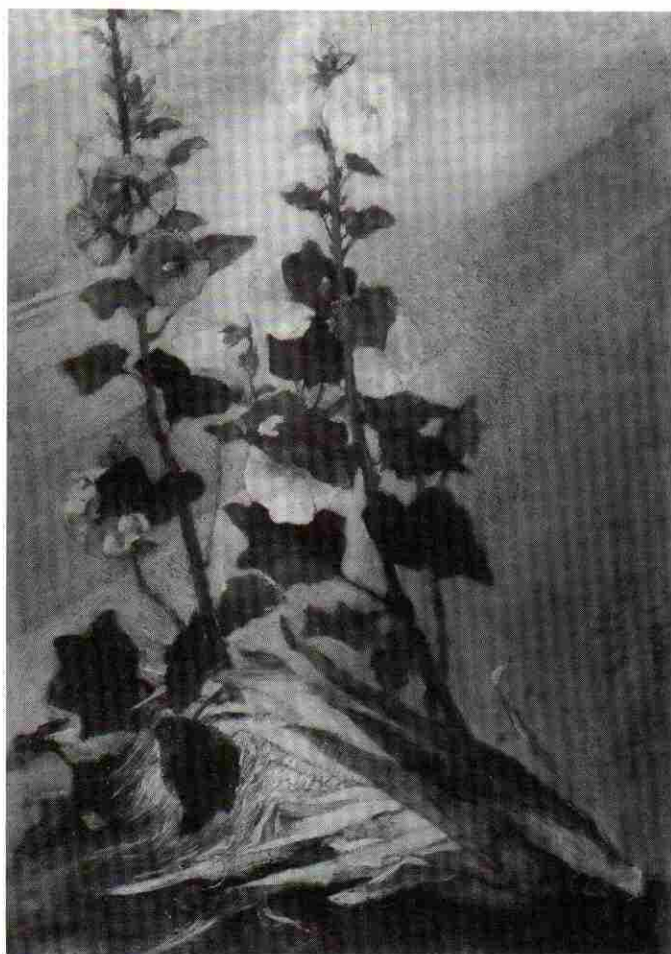
10 Bicknell, *Dante*, oil on canvas, 59¼ × 21¾", 1866. Boston, private collection



11 La Farge, *Self Portrait*, oil on mahogany panel, 16 × 11½", October 25-26, 1859. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

¹¹ Only in painting grapes did Bicknell break free from direct imitation of La Farge — although La Farge had included grapes in *Still Life with Silver Glass and Fruit* of 1859 in the collection of Charles Childs, Stowe, Mass. Bicknell drew on a widespread and rather standardized type of grape painting, exemplified by such a work as *Still Life of Hanging Grapes* by Andrew John Henry Way (repro. in William H. Gerdtz and Russell Burke, *American Still-Life Painting*, New York, 1971, pl. x).

¹² Wolfgang Born, *Still Life Painting in America*, New York, 1947, 41; Katz, as cited in n. 6, 69-70, 91, n. 28; Susan J. Clarke, "A Chapter in East Meets West: The Japanese Print and the Work of John La Farge, William Morris Hunt, and Winslow Homer, 1858-1870," thesis, University of Michigan, 1973, 5.



12 La Farge, *Hollyhocks and Corn*, wax-based paint on mahogany panel, 23¾ × 16½", 1865. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts

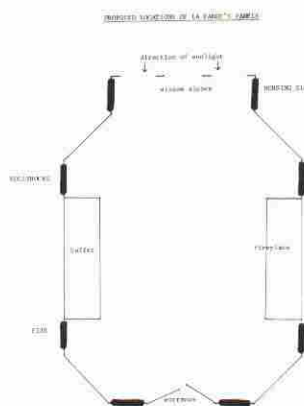


13 La Farge, *Morning Glories and Eggplant*, oil on mahogany panel, 23¾ × 17¼", Norfolk, Chrysler Museum

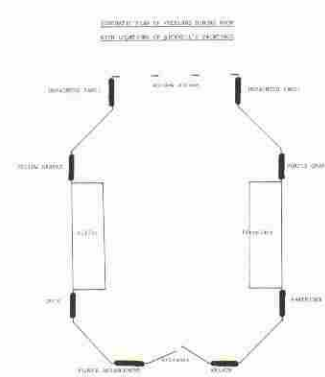
the date 1865 elegantly inscribed in Roman numerals. La Farge tailored his signatures to suit the design and theme of his paintings, and this particular style of signature is unique to these two panels.

La Farge's third panel for this dining room is *Morning Glories and Eggplant* (Fig. 13), a painting that formerly belonged to the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, and is now in the Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia. *Morning Glories* is the only other known work by La Farge with a yellow background — if we discount an unfinished portrait of his son, painted in the same year as these panels, which is executed directly on gold leaf. The dimensions, subject matter, and general appearance of the *Morning Glories* are clearly related to the *Fish and the Hollyhocks*.¹³

It is possible to deduce the intended location of these panels (Fig. 14), for La Farge undoubtedly intended the il-



14 Schematic diagram of dining room of Freeland house, with location of Bicknell's paintings



15 Schematic diagram of dining room of Freeland house, with proposed locations of La Farge's paintings

¹³ (Warren Adelson) *American Still-Life Painting, 1860-1900*, exh. cat., Boston, Mass., Adelson Galleries, Inc., No. 31 (repro. in color on the cover); and Dennis R. Anderson, *Three Hundred Years of American Art in the Chrysler Museum*, exh. cat., Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Va., 1976, 160. The portrait of La Farge's son is repro. in Cortisoz, pl. 13. The documents are ambiguous as to whether La Farge completed three or four dining-room panels. Only three were shown at the National Academy of

Design in 1867, but four are listed at the Third Annual Exhibition of the Yale School of Fine Arts in 1871 (see n. 4). My belief is that La Farge completed only three of the panels. One of the paintings shown at Yale may not have been part of the original set, which would explain the curious numbering of the group; it is also possible that La Farge started but never completed one of the paintings, for in a letter to Weir (see n. 5) he refers to one painting as "not sent."

lumination in his paintings to correspond with the direction of the room's actual light source, a large bay opposite the room's entrance (Fig. 2). The *Fish* and the *Hollyhocks* must have been intended for either side of the buffet. The *Morning Glories*, in which the streaking light is shown coming from the opposite direction, must have been intended for the opposite wall — quite possibly for a spot, never filled by Bicknell, that flanks the window alcove.¹⁴

In its original position, the sweeping movement of the *Fish* would have been balanced by the opposing sweep of the *Hollyhocks*. But the freedom with which forms soar across the gold background is quite remarkable. As suggested earlier, this boldness of composition is largely due to the Japanese influence, of which these paintings give unusually early evidence.

Japanese prints dramatically affected the development of nineteenth-century art, for they liberated artists from the spell of the classical antique, enriched their sense of decorative composition, and established a completely new set of artistic standards. Scholars have generally supposed that *Japonisme* originated in France in the late 1850's and early 1860's. The situation, however, is considerably more complex.¹⁵

Japanese goods were available in Europe from the seventeenth century, particularly in mercantile Holland. Thus Rembrandt printed on Japanese paper and drew models wearing Japanese straw hats; Frans Hals painted a gentleman dressed in a Japanese kimono, and Harmen van Steenwyck often added a Japanese sword to the clutter of his still-life arrangements. By the mid-eighteenth century Japanese prints can be documented throughout Europe and in the United States: by the 1830's a complete assort-

ment of Hokusai's prints was accessible to the public in the Von Sieboldt Museum, then located in The Hague. Although after 1640 Japan closed off trade with all European countries except the Netherlands, Japanese goods continued, to a limited degree, to be available in Europe, and through an agreement with the Dutch, American ships traded directly with Japan from 1797 to 1809.¹⁶

After 1854, when the United States reopened Japan, Japanese prints became much more widely available, first in the United States, and within a few years in successive European countries as well. Nevertheless, for some years, they were relatively rare in the West. Recent writers have probably exaggerated the availability of Japanese prints in France, and the extent to which French artists made early use of them.

In fact, it is not until 1864 that two European paintings, the *Lange Lijzen* and *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* show Japanese influence that is immediately and clearly recognizable (Figs. 16, 17). These were not executed in France but in England, by the American expatriate James McNeil Whistler. Whistler surely knew of Japanese art before 1864, and there is evidence that other artists were also aware of it before that date. Theodore Rousseau was an early admirer of the Japanese, and Manet may possibly have been thinking of Japanese prints in 1863 when he conceived the bold flatness of his *Olympia*. Whistler's two paintings, however, are the first in which Japanese influence is indisputable: although the arrangement of space and of the figures is still almost entirely Western, the kimonos and fans are indisputably Japanese. Not until after Whistler's work did any French artist begin to make consistent and open use of Japanese motifs.¹⁷

Although John La Farge has not been mentioned in any

¹⁴ It is also possible that the *Morning Glories* was intended for the space to the left of the fireplace. In this case its outward-curving forms would have counterbalanced the inward-curving forms of the *Fish*.

¹⁵ I will discuss the phenomenon of *Japonisme* more extensively in a forthcoming article on "John La Farge's Discovery of Japanese Art." Recently, several useful accounts of *Japonisme* have appeared. These include, Frank Whitford, *Japanese Prints and Western Painters*, London, 1977; Gabriel Weisberg, et al., *Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art, 1854-1910*, exh. cat., Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975; and Colta Feller Ives, *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1974. Elizabeth Aslin provides a good discussion of Japanese influence in England in "E. W. Godwin and the Japanese Taste," *Apollo*, Dec., 1962, 779-784. *Japonisme* in the United States has been less well treated. Benjamin Rowland's essay on "The Interplay between American and Japanese Art" in *The Shaping of Art and Architecture in Nineteenth Century America*, New York, 1963, is superficial and inaccurate. Clay Lancaster's *The Japanese Influence in America*, New York, 1963, is useful for architecture rather than for painting. Wiest, and Katz (Chap. v on "Japanism," 60-95) brought together some interesting information on La Farge's enthusiasm for Japanese prints. The most recent study on this subject is that of Patricia Joan Lefor, "John La Farge and Japan," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1978. The only general study of *Japonisme* in America in the 1850's and early 1860's is that of Clarke.

¹⁶ For 17th-century Dutch artistic references to Japan see: Otto Benesch, *The Drawings of Rembrandt*, London, 1973, v, No. 1123, pl. 1419; Christopher White, *Rembrandt as an Etcher*, London, 1969, 15; Seymour

Slive, *Frans Hals*, New York, 1979, 1, 208-09; *Art in Seventeenth Century Holland*, exh. cat., National Gallery, London, 1976, 87-88. The references given in n. 14 discuss the diffusion of Japanese art in the West at an early date. See also: William L. Langer, *An Encyclopedia of World History*, Boston, 1972, 918-19; James Michener, *The Floating World*, New York, 1954; and Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, London, 1973 (esp. p. 92).

¹⁷ Although the French etcher Felix Bracquemond is often considered a pioneer of *Japonisme*, he did not make an explicitly Japanese work until the Rousseau dinner service of 1867 (see *Japonisme*, 30-33, 35 and 157-58). Gabriel Weisberg's attempt to detect Japanese traits in Bracquemond's earlier work is not entirely persuasive, for the so-called "Japanese" characteristics of these works have direct precedents within the Western tradition. In my forthcoming article, I will consider more fully the complex question of the first French painting to make explicit use of Japanese prints. Manet and Tissot were both innovators in this regard. Also of significance was Théodore Rousseau, who was among the earliest French artists to make use of Japanese prints, but who has been almost completely neglected in recent literature. See Alfred Sensier, *Souvenirs sur Th. Rousseau*, Paris, 1872, 271-73; John La Farge, *The Higher Life in Art*, New York, 1908, 137-38; and Robert Herbert, *Jean Francois Millet*, exh. cat., Arts Council of Great Britain, 1974, 27. Bernard Dorival in "Ukiyo-e and European Painting" (in *Dialogue in Art: Japan and the West*, ed. Chisaburoh Yamada, Tokyo and New York, 1976, 33) is one of the few writers on *Japonisme* to draw attention to Rousseau's work. Regrettably, his account contains many inaccuracies on other points.



16 Whistler, *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine*, oil on canvas, 78 X 45", 1864. Washington, D. C., Freer Gallery of Art

17 Whistler, *Purple and Rose: The Lange Lijzen of the Six Marks*, oil on canvas, 36 X 24 1/4", 1864. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection

previous account of *Japonisme*, he was undoubtedly in advance of his European contemporaries in the discovery and appreciation of Japanese modes of design: by 1865, the year of the dining-room project, he had long been acquainted with Japanese art.

La Farge's interest in the Orient was an outgrowth of the centuries-old enthusiasm for *Chinoiserie*: while still a schoolboy he composed a magazine in French with his brothers titled "Le Chinois."¹⁸ He acquired his first volume of Hokusai in 1856; by about 1858 he had a collection of Japanese items, and when he started painting in 1859, Japanese influence is immediately apparent in his

work.¹⁹ A painting dated 1861, executed on a Japanese tea tray, provides quite tangible proof of this influence (Fig. 18);²⁰ but stylistic evidence is available even earlier, as for example in a drawing of April 25, 1860, which, though drawn from nature, is distinctly Japanese in its arrangement of space, and is closely related to a design by Hokusai, whose landscape prints La Farge was then collecting (Figs. 19, 20).

In 1864, the year before the dining-room panels, La Farge made two Japanese-inspired illustrations for Tennyson's poem *Enoch Arden*.²¹ One of these was based on Hokusai's print, *Mount Fuji Seen Over Ocean* (Figs.

¹⁸ See John La Farge, S. J., *The Manner is Ordinary*, New York, 1954, 17. The De Goncourt brothers in France, who were European pioneers of *Japonisme*, were also devotees of *Chinoiserie*. Victor Hugo, in his enthusiasm for *Chinoiserie*, anticipated many of the later effects of *Japonisme*. The "Chinese Dining Room" which he constructed at Guernsey for his mistress Juliette Drouet (now in the Victor Hugo Museum in Paris) has interesting affinities with this dining-room project by La Farge. It is even possible that Hugo was directly influenced by Japanese prints. See Raymond Escholier, *Victor Hugo, artiste*, Paris, 1936, 53; and Gaeton Picon, Roger Corraille, and Georges Herscher, *Victor Hugo, Dessinateur*, Paris, 1963, text p. 95 and figs. 212-18. For a consideration of *Japonisme* in the context of *Chinoiserie*, see Hugh Honour, *Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay*, New York, 1961.

¹⁹ John La Farge, "Letter to Samuel Bing" (typescript dated January 1894), Yale University, Sterling Memorial Library, Manuscripts and Archives, La Farge Family Papers, Box 7, folder 4, 1-2; John La Farge, *Hokusai*, New York, 1897, 5-6; John La Farge, "Hokusai," in *Great Masters*, New York, 1903, 222; letter of 1908 from La Farge to James

Huneker, quoted in Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge, A Memoir and A Study*, Boston and New York, 1911; letter to Richard Watson Gilder, private collection, Long Island; Waern, p. 15; letter from J. Bancel La Farge to J. C. Cazin, May 2 (written in 1896 since it refers to La Farge's exhibition in Paris at the Champs du Mars), Beinecke Library, Yale University; *Catalogue of Oriental Art Objects, the Property of John La Farge*, New York, Anderson Galleries, 1909, 51, p. 13, No. 76, p. 32, No. 266, p. 49, No. 448, p. 51, No. 482, p. 55, No. 521, and letter pp. 3-4; and Russell Sturgis, "John La Farge," *Scribner's Magazine*, xxvi, July, 1899, 10. Japanese influence has often been suggested in La Farge's early paintings. Ruth Katz, for example, proposes that the pose of La Farge's *Self-Portrait* of 1859, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is based on a figure in Hokusai's *Mangwa* (Katz, 62).

²⁰ La Farge executed several additional paintings on Japanese tea trays at about this time. One is discussed by Cortissoz, 1911, 118.

²¹ Charles F. Richardson, "A Book of Beginnings" (letter to the editor) *The Nation*, xci, 2370, Dec. 1, 1910; Katz, 77-79.



18 La Farge, *Water-Lilies*, oil on Japanese lacquered tray, 7 × 12¼", 1861. Chattanooga, private collection (photo: Metropolitan Museum, 1936)



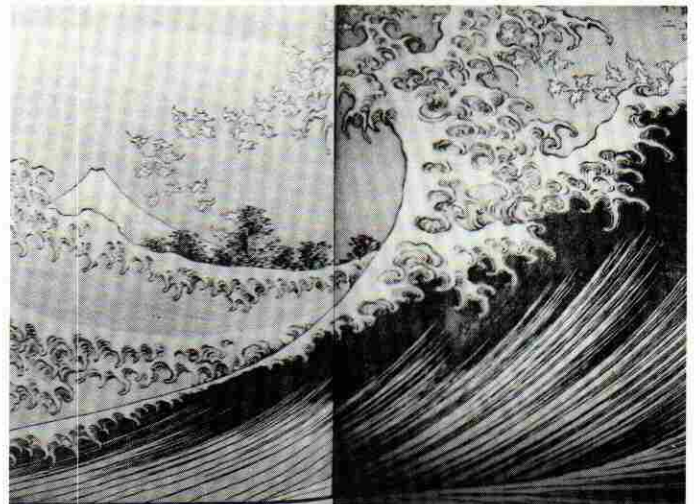
19 La Farge, *View of the Bayou Teche*, pencil on page from sketchbook, 2¹³/₁₆ × 5³/₁₆", April 25, 1860. Present location unknown (from *Scribner's Magazine*, July, 1899, 9)



20 Katsushika Hokusai, *Gathering Horsetails*, from ill. of Chinese and Japanese poems, color print, 19½ × 8⅞", ca. 1830



21 La Farge, *Shipwrecked*, drawn in 1864, wood-engraved in 1865 by Henry Marsh for *Enoch Arden*, Ticknor and Fields, Boston, facing p. 35, 3⅜ × 3¹⁴/₁₆"



22 Katsushika Hokusai, *Mount Fuji Seen Over Ocean*, from series *One Hundred Views of Fuji*, each panel 7⅞ × 5", ca. 1830

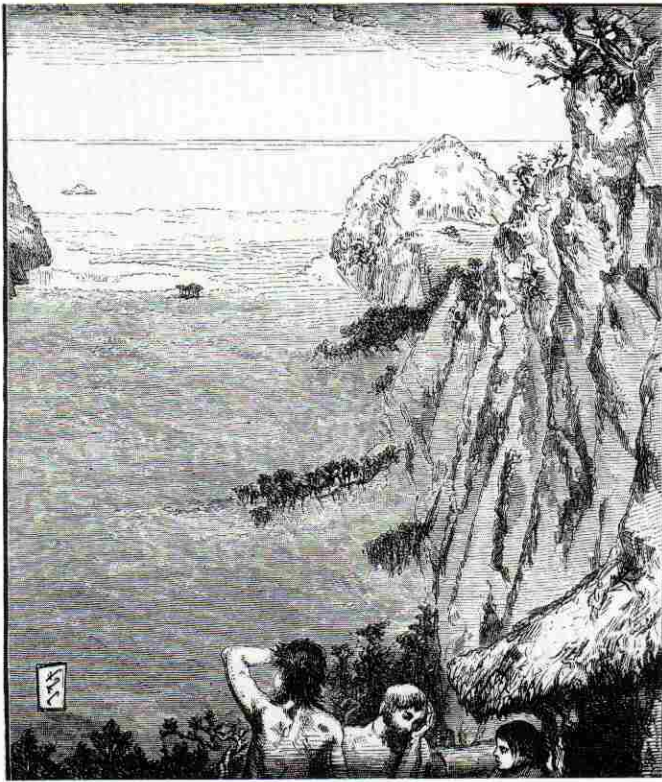
21, 22). Another is a mountainous landscape which employs completely Japanese spatial effects (Fig. 23). The dining-room panels, in fact, are not even La Farge's first use of Oriental effects in a decorative scheme, for in 1860

he is reported to have decorated a window alcove in a Japanese style.²²

I would propose that La Farge could hardly have developed his interest in Japanese art from the example of

²² John La Farge, "Letter to Samuel Bing," p. 2; "The Art of John La Farge," *Review of Reviews*, xi, May, 1895, 535-541; letter from J. Bancel La Farge to J. C. Cazin, 1, Beinecke Library. *Mount Fuji Seen Over Ocean* is considerably closer to La Farge's illustration than the two

prints by Hokusai previously proposed as La Farge's source (see Katz, 77-78, and Lefor, 98, figs. 26, 27). Tetsugi Yura gives a useful summary of Hokusai's depictions of waves in "The Pedigree of Waves by Hokusai," *Ukiyo-e Art*, xvi, 1967, 9-12.



23 La Farge, *The Island Home*, drawn in 1864, wood-engraved in 1864 by P. F. Annin for *Enoch Arden*, Ticknor and Fields, Boston, facing p. 36, 3¹³/₁₆ × 3³/₁₆"

European artists: from the late 1850's until the mid-1860's, his use of Japanese motifs was consistently earlier, more daring, and more inventive than anything comparable in France or England. Contrary to previous assertions, French artists were not the pioneers in discovering

²³ See the references given in nn. 5, 11, and 12. These all give slightly different Japanese sources for La Farge's works. The illustrations I have chosen do not necessarily represent La Farge's specific sources, but merely their generic type. The records of La Farge's collection do confirm that he collected Hiroshige's still-life prints, and was particularly attracted to the work of the Rimpa school. The Oriental feeling of *Hollyhocks and Corn* was doubtless one reason for its appeal to its first owner, the noted collector of Japanese art, William Sturges Bigelow.

La Farge combined Eastern and Western features in all of these paintings. The depiction of *Hollyhocks* and *Morning Glories* against a gold background has a direct precedent in Japanese gold-leaf screens; La Farge's spatial treatment, however, is relatively Western, as a foreshortened vegetable provides an implied ground plane in each. In *Fish* La Farge's spatial treatment is flatter and more Eastern; however, while hanging fish are common in Japanese art, they do not, to my knowledge, ever appear against gold backgrounds.

In this period, incidentally, Japanese gold-leaf screens were probably more widely available in the West than Japanese prints. Large numbers, for example, were given by the Japanese to Commodore Perry's expedition. La Farge owned several dozen such screens at the time of his death.

La Farge was certainly aware when he painted his *Fish* that asymmetry was common in Western hanging game pieces. Since he sought a synthesis of Western and Eastern modes of painting, it was logical to use an asymmetrical mode of Western painting as a starting point for an exploration of asymmetrical Japanese modes of design. By the same token,

Japanese prints: if there is any general principle of development, it is possibly that the maritime nations, first the United States, and then England, were the earliest to assimilate the conceptions of Japanese art.

Previous writers on La Farge's yellow panels have invariably commented on their Oriental effect. The bold arrangement of flowers against a gold background recalls Japanese gold leaf screens (Figs. 24, 26); and the freedom of compositional arrangement recalls the still-life prints of Hiroshige, which La Farge was then collecting (Figs. 25, 27).²³ The significance, however, of La Farge's *Fish*, and of the other two paintings associated with it, is not simply that they reveal knowledge of Japanese sources, but that they employ Japanese principles of design to revitalize and reform the conventions of Western painting.

In an essay on Japanese art, without doubt the most penetrating of its period, that La Farge wrote three years after he painted these panels, he noted that:

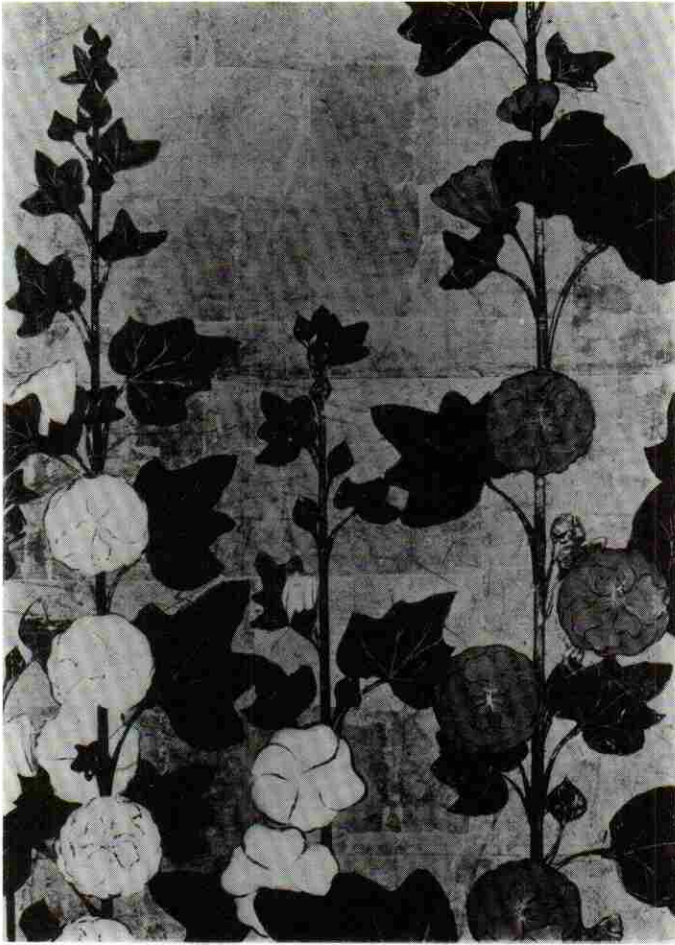
A Western designer, in ornamenting a given surface, would look for some fixed points from which to start, and would mark the places where his mind had rested by exact and symmetrical divisions. These would be supposed by the Japanese, and his design would float over them, while they, though invisible, would be felt underneath. Thus a few ornaments — a bird, a flower — on one side of this page would be made, by an almost intellectual influence, to balance the large unadorned space remaining.²⁴

La Farge's dining-room panels are composed according to just these Japanese principles: the objects float freely and asymmetrically in front of the gold surface, held in place by an occult balance of compositional forces.

when the Japanese painter Takahashi Yuichi sought, in the 1870's, to combine traditional Japanese subject matter with Western modes of painting, he likewise turned to hanging still life. His masterpiece, *Salmon*, is remarkably similar to La Farge's *Fish* (Minoru Harada, *Meiji Western Painting*, New York and Tokyo, 1975, 26, pl. 12).

²⁴ John La Farge, "Japanese Art," in Raphael Pumpelly's *Across America and Asia*, New York, 1870, 197. La Farge was clearly aware of Ernest Chesneau's essay "L'Art Japonais" (Paris, 1868) which had appeared in the pamphlet *Les Nations rivales dans l'art*, and he closely follows Chesneau on many points. Unlike Chesneau, however, La Farge avoids long digressions on racial and cultural questions, and he is generally more perceptive than Chesneau in his analysis of the visual traits of Japanese art. Thus, in his discussion of Japanese principles of design, Chesneau (following Diderot) simply notes that the Japanese delight in asymmetry, whereas La Farge observes a logical system of arrangement, that of "equal gravities." John J. Walsh, Jr., has noted of La Farge's essay that "in every way it is the most sensitive and acute treatment of Japanese design written in this period, in Europe as well as the United States" ("Winslow Homer and the Japanese Print," thesis, Columbia University, 1965, 8-9).

La Farge was a close friend of Winslow Homer, and may well have introduced him to Japanese prints. La Farge's *Fish* may have partly inspired Homer's watercolors of fish, of which the earliest (and the closest to La Farge's painting) is apparently the one in the I.B.M. collection (repro. in Gerds and Burke, 121, pl. xiv).



24 Ogata Korin, *Hollyhocks*, gold-leaf screen (detail), section shown ca. 14 × 11". Japan, private collection

I have tried to show that the unbalanced composition of La Farge's *Fish* is due both to its decorative role, and to its use of Japanese principles. These two aspects of the painting are, in fact, related, for La Farge's involvement with decorative work was doubtless a central factor in his appreciation of Japanese art.

Decoration was of paramount significance to La Farge: he once remarked to his young friend John C. Van Dyke, "when I say decorative, I am saying about the best thing I can about a picture."²⁵ It was the ornamentation of his father's house by Italian artisans that led La Farge, as a child of six, first to wish to become a painter²⁶; and his enthusiasm for decoration was encouraged by the special position awarded to decorative work in nineteenth-century theories of the arts.

²⁵ John C. Van Dyke, *American Painting and Its Tradition*, New York, 1919, p. 132.

²⁶ La Farge's autobiographical memoranda, p. 68, Royal Cortissoz



25 Ando Hiroshige, *Large-Scaled Barbel*, color print from series *Fish and Marine Animals*, image ca. 12 × 7", ca. 1830



26 Detail of Fig. 12



27 La Farge, *Fish*.

Charles Blanc, for example, maintained that all painting stemmed from architectural decoration, and used this mythological-historical claim as a basis for the contention that painting was, in its most essential respects, not a mere act of imitation and representation, but rather was based on an intellectual structure provided by the principles of design.²⁷ La Farge certainly knew Blanc's theories, for in the 1850's, while staying in Paris with his mother's first cousin, the literary critic Paul Bins, Comte de Saint-Victor, he not only met Blanc (with whom he later corresponded), but other figures concerned about the issue of "decoration," including Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, who would

Correspondence, Beinecke Library, Yale University (this passage was omitted in Cortissoz's monograph).

²⁷ Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, Paris, 1867, 509.

later become the most famous French decorator of his time.²⁸

Many of the unusual qualities of La Farge's paintings of the 1860's seem to have been the result of his desire not merely to represent, but to decorate. This intention is evinced not only by several abortive attempts (such as the *Fish*) to fulfill decorative commissions, but by the formal qualities of his easel paintings — their odd areas of flatness, their strangely schematized compositions, their use of unusual background supports (such as bare wood, tea-trays, or gold leaf), and by their self-conscious arrangement of complementary colors, which, in paintings like the *Wreath*, are distributed as intellectually as in one of Chevreul's scientific color diagrams.

Decoration was in advance of easel painting in exploring the issues of abstract design: indeed, in this period it was a well-established aesthetic principle that decorative

work became degraded when it passed into a direct imitation of natural objects.²⁹ For this reason, Japanese artistic items were immediately admired for their decorative qualities, even by those who disliked Japanese representational art because of its lack of Western perspective and illusionistic shading.³⁰ It is noteworthy that La Farge's *Fish*, which is so early in its use of Japanese principles of composition, exists equivocally, both as a decorative element and as an individual picture. For La Farge's special contribution — one of altogether radical insight — is that he was the first to transfer the appreciation of Japanese principles of design from the decorative arts into the realm of easel painting.

National Collection of Fine Arts,
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC 20560

²⁸ Waern, 1896, 11, 12; Cortissoz, 1911, 93. La Farge later wrote an appreciation of Puvis in *Scribner's Magazine*, xxviii, Dec., 1900, 672-684.

²⁹ Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, London, 1868, 60.

³⁰ Japanese porcelain, textiles, and lacquerware were imitated in the West from the 17th century on, and even before the British envoy arrived in Japan in 1859 a British textile firm had begun printing designs based on Japanese prints (Aslin, 782). The writings of Sir Rutherford Alcock, first

English Ambassador to Japan, reveal the immediate appeal of Japanese decoration. An English chauvinist, whose account of Japan is filled with laments over the unavailability of roast beef, Alcock thought that Japanese representational art was crude, and in need of improvement through Western influence, but he greatly admired their decorative work. His enthusiasm is apparent in his *Catalogue of Works of Industry and Art Sent from Japan, International Exhibition*, London, 1862.

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