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John Frederick Kensett's Point of View in *Lake George, 1869: A Correction*

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The point of view in *Lake George, 1869*, by John Frederick Kensett (American, 1818–1872), is from the west shore of New York State's Lake George, looking toward the northeast (Figure 1). Recent on-site research indicates that the artist's viewpoint was from Homer Point, not Crown Island, two miles up the lakeshore, as suggested in *American Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*.¹ From the east side of Homer Point, the view toward the picturesque, island-filled section of the lake called the Narrows contains the essential topographical features of that painting and of several closely related works. The location is noted on the map in Figure 2, and the elements of the view are indicated in the photograph in Figure 3. Based on a local historian's earlier incorrect identification of Kensett's viewpoint, Natalie Spassky, the author of the catalogue entry in *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum*, understandably concluded that Kensett "took considerable liberties with the topography."² Correct identification of the viewpoint reveals that in fact the handling of the topography is fundamentally accurate, although Kensett did seek to strengthen the composition by shortening the distance across the lake and exaggerating the heights and profiles of the mountains.

The visual drama of the Narrows of Lake George as seen across the lake from the area of Bolton Landing—with mountains on either side, the palisades of Shelving Rock, and a scattering of tiny islands—was a popular subject for artists to paint and tourists to contemplate in the nineteenth century. Kensett painted at least six compositions of the scene, including the Metropolitan's *Lake George*. Two of the paintings are based on the view from Clay and Recluse Islands, depicted in the Metropolitan's painting. One of these is presently unlocated; the other is the Adirondack Museum's *Lake George, 1856*, which includes the main

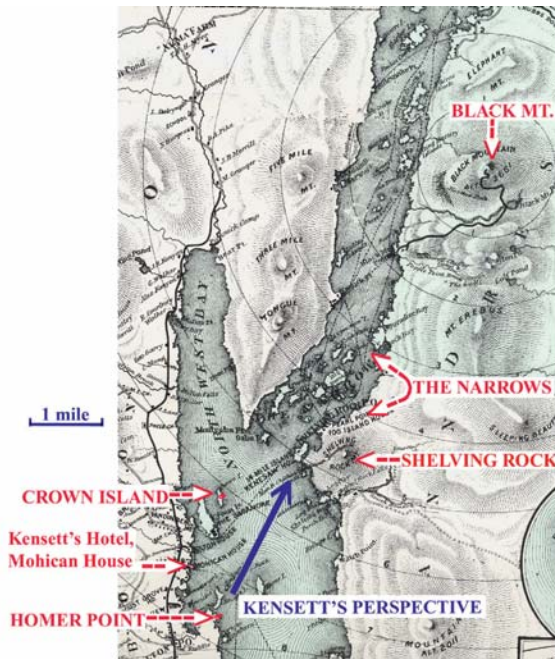
elements of the distant mountains in the Metropolitan painting but in a wider view that includes Tongue Mountain to the west of the Narrows.³ By moving his viewpoint slightly farther south to Homer Point for another three small works (Figures 4–6) and the large Metropolitan painting, Kensett took advantage of the added compositional elements of the nearby islands—Clay, Recluse, and Little Recluse. The islands enclose the space and block most of the view of Tongue Mountain, allowing Black Mountain to dominate the other elements.

In the background of the Metropolitan painting, the mountains on the eastern shore include, right to left, Erebus Mountain, Shelving Rock, Black Mountain, Elephant Mountain, and distant Spruce Mountain. The lower slope of Tongue Mountain appears between the two leftmost islands. Kensett introduced a foreground shore at right—composed of moss-covered stone slabs, reeds, and a fallen tree—that greatly shortens the distance across the lake seen in the on-site photograph (Figure 3). In most of his works at the lake, Kensett reduced the expanse of the water as he adjusted the placement and proportions of his features to fit conventional landscape picture proportions of about 2:3.⁴

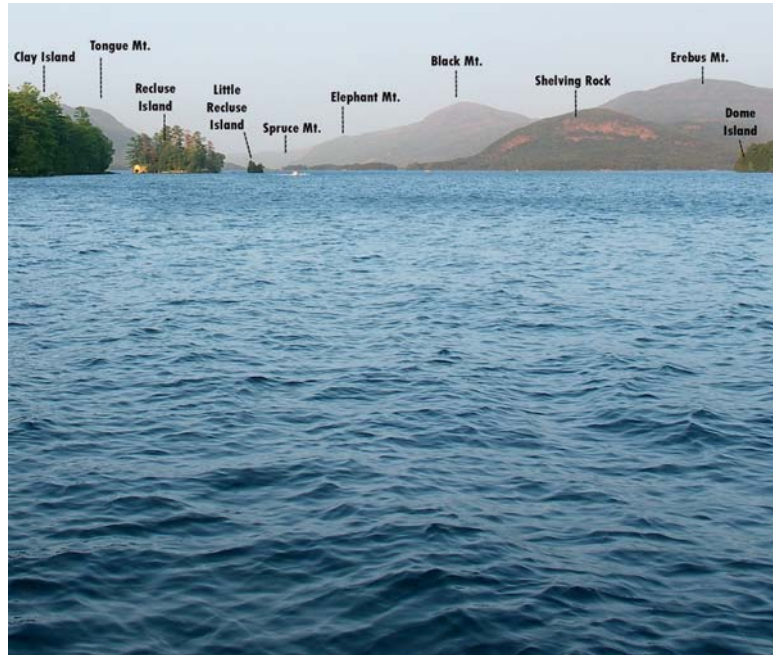
One of the smaller paintings from Homer Point, *Lake George, 1872* (Figure 4), is dated three years after the Metropolitan's *Lake George* of 1869, while the other two, both undated, may be preliminary studies for the Metropolitan painting. Of these two, the earlier is probably *Black Mountain, Lake George* (Figure 5), with its wider format, framing trees at left, and in general, features that more closely resemble the actual location than the features in the other undated painting. The other one (Figure 6)⁵ appears to be an unfinished study that established the basic composition and tonal relationships for the much larger Metropolitan painting. In all four of these paintings, Kensett enhanced the expression of the mass of the mountains by increasing their height—an approach he took in most of his Lake George works, as he consistently increased the apparent heights of the mountains by 30 to 50 percent.⁶ In the



1. John Frederick Kensett. *Lake George*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 66 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (112.1 x 168.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Maria DeWitt Jesup, from the collection of her husband, Morris K. Jesup, 1914 (15.30.61)



2. Detail of *Map of Lake George*. From Stoddard 1897



3. Perspective of Lake George from the east side of Homer Point looking to the northeast. Photograph: Anne Diggory

Metropolitan painting, Kensett made Black Mountain appear even more imposing: he introduced an element of the Sublime by suggesting a tremendous vertical drop from the peak in place of the mountain's actual leftward sloping ridges and slight concavity at the top.

While working on the Metropolitan Museum *Lake George*, Kensett made aesthetic adjustments that distinguish the larger painting from the three smaller works. The proportions and details of the sky closely resemble those of *Black Mountain, Lake George*, but Kensett eliminated that canvas's low-lying clouds and slightly subdued the towering cumuli. He darkened the sky at the top of the Metropolitan painting and balanced it with a much more substantial foreground, and he further manipulated geological details without radically distorting the essential topography. For example, on the left Kensett pushed Clay Island back in space and added cliffs to it. He created a version of Recluse Island with a rock face twisting to the right, a change from

its depiction in *Black Mountain, Lake George* with no rock face, and in the unlocated *Lake George*, with the cliff twisting in the opposite direction. Instead of the birds and recreational boats seen in most of his paintings of Lake George, Kensett introduced a figure in an Indian canoe, suggesting depth of historical time as well as space.

During his lifetime Kensett earned a reputation as an artist who recorded landscapes with "truth and definite character in his outline . . . loyal to natural peculiarities."⁷ The correction of our understanding of the viewpoint from which he composed the Metropolitan painting—the perspective is clearly from Homer Point rather than Crown Island—confirms his careful use of the topography and supports that reputation. Kensett's attention to the details of actual mountain arrangements is important for understanding his process of creation, yet the power felt in viewing the painting comes from his handling of those forms combined with the unusually large scale of the work.



4. John Frederick Kensett. *Lake George*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 12 x 24 in. (30.5 x 61 cm). Private collection. Photograph: Adams Davidson Galleries, Washington, D.C.



5. John Frederick Kensett. *Black Mountain, Lake George*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 24 in. (35.9 x 61 cm). Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Gift of Jesse H. Metcalf (20.029). Photograph: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design



6. John Frederick Kensett. *Lake George*, n.d., 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (34.9 x 60.3 cm). Location unknown. From Kensett Estate Sale Album 1873, pl. 5

NOTES

1. Natalie Spassky in Spassky et al. 1985, pp. 34–36.
I initially researched Kensett's perspectives based on my experience as a painter for a lecture, "Artistic Choices," at the Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, N.Y., during its 2005 exhibition "Painting Lake George: 1774–1900." The Kensett section of the appendix to that exhibition's catalogue (Coe and Owens 2005, pp. 81–83) lists ninety-two paintings of Lake George. My ongoing research of painting perspectives, which is available in the census of Lake George paintings maintained by the Hyde Collection, updates that list by eliminating misidentifications and duplications as well as by adding new works to create a revised list of eighty-six paintings. I have been continuing this research and analysis at Lake George, Skidmore College, and with Kevin J. Avery, senior research scholar at the Metropolitan Museum.
This study depends partly on the catalogue of the posthumous sale of Kensett's works (Kensett Estate Sale 1873) and the photographic record of that sale (Kensett Estate Sale Album 1873), which is bound without title page or text. The estate sale lists thirty-eight paintings with titles referencing Lake George or its features, and an additional three paintings are visually identifiable as Lake George scenes. The aforementioned census at the Hyde Collection includes my page-by-page analysis of the photographic album with the Lake George paintings identified.
2. Spassky in Spassky et al. 1985, p. 35. Spassky went on to say that "certain distinctive features [of the view] have been identified by Peter L. Fisher of the Glens Falls Historical Association." The identification supplied by Fisher is in the Kensett files in the Department of American Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum and includes a diagram that mislabels most of the mountains and islands in the painting, owing to the assumption that Kensett manipulated the elements of a Crown Island perspective.
3. The *Lake George* of 1856 at the Adirondack Museum, Blue Mountain Lake, N.Y. (65.79.1 [112]), is oil on canvas, 26 x 42 in. (66 x 106.7 cm). For an illustration, see Mandel 1990, p. 78. The unlocated painting is *Lake George, from Clay Island*, n.d., 13 x 23 in. (33 x 58.4 cm), Kensett Estate Sale 1873, lot 280, and pl. 20, top row, third from right, in the Kensett Estate Sale Album 1873. Additionally, there exists a rare Kensett drawing of the Narrows, *Lake George*, 1853, which was a basis for the Adirondack Museum painting; it is pencil and white on buff paper, 10 x 14 in. (25.4 x 35.6 cm), and in a private collection. For an illustration, see Driscoll and Howatt 1985, p. 96, fig. 59.
4. The consistent approach can be seen in the comparisons of the reproductions and location photographs connected with the Kensett section of the census of Lake George paintings maintained by the Hyde Collection mentioned in note 1 above.
5. The painting was part of the Kensett Estate Sale 1873, lot 50.
6. The increases in height were probably both a deliberate effort to dramatize the topography and an intuitive effort to solve the inherent limitations of two-dimensional representation of large, distant landforms. On location, the vertical dimension of a far-off mountain will be minimal, but we sense its true height because we simultaneously experience its great distance from us. Because the sensation of space in a drawing or painting cannot completely match the experience of deep three-dimensional space, a literal transcription of the proportions of distant mountains makes them seem too slight; small increases in the depicted height compensate for the unavoidably shallower illusionistic space.
7. Tuckerman 1867, p. 513.

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