

Bowers, George Newell (1849-1909)

Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard, circa 1905

Signed "G. N. Bowers" lower right

oil on canvas

36" x 64"

Details from the beginning and end of George Newell Bowers' life (1849-1909) were never recorded. Nothing is known until he becomes a drug store clerk in Springfield, Massachusetts at the age of twenty-three besides that he was a Connecticut native. When Bowers relocated to Springfield, the town was in the midst of a rapid post-war urbanization that gave rise to a golden era, earning the city a nationally renowned reputation for its appreciation and patronage of the arts. Bowers, active 1872-1906, was eventually famed as the most gifted artist who resided and worked in the city during this period.

His formal artistic training took place at the Art Student's League in New York and in Paris. By 1879 he had established a studio in Springfield and began to teach classes at the Springfield Art Association, which he helped to found. His second experience with the Art Student's League in 1890 marks a conversion from sentimental, realistic genre scenes to a lyrical type of landscape painting. The earlier period of his work reveal a delight in the meticulous depiction of small details with an inclination towards romanticism, like many of the genre painters from his generation. This tradition is represented by a few oils, the best date to 1889, and a reproduction of a drawing from 1884. As his career progressed, Bowers separated himself from his contemporaries who followed the Germanic tradition of an untiring thoroughness by attempting to create "a greater sense of reality through the subordination of detail to the atmosphere of the whole scene" (Robinson).

The aesthetics of character and atmosphere translated into Bowers' modernized landscapes after 1890 like *Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard*. He abandons the linear precision of genre painting and adopts a more painterly manner and delicate color palette reminiscent of Impressionism. A glimpse of this change in style and subject matter can be observed in two paintings dated to 1895 entitled *Birthplace of Paine* and *April* in which the foregrounds are carefully executed, but the middle and backgrounds offer a manner that places dominance of color over form.

Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard is a large and lyrical landscape that provides a rare and ambitious example of Bowers oeuvre, one that fully embraces "the personal application of impressionistic mannerisms with forms being used solely for the poetry of their color." (Robinson) However, one can see influences from his previous training in the fine detailing of the seaside vegetation, the restrained handling of colors, and his fluid treatment of the Gay Head Cliffs. The craggy amalgamation of yellow, white, red, and green clays, with its sharply painted edges and varicolored surface, is the dominant feature in a highly competent painting that embodies the career of a significant American artist.

Provenance: From the artist, to the Springfield Museum of Natural History, to auction, to trade, to the gallery.

Exhibitions:

National Academy of Design

Bibliography:

Jenny Carson, *American Art from the Springfield Museums* (Springfield: Quadrangle, 1999), 26-27.

Frederick B. Robinson, "George Newell Bowers", *Art In America* (July 1948), 141-147.