

Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823 - 1900)

Sailing, 1853

signed "JFC" and dated "1853" lower right

oil on panel

9" x 14"

Jasper Francis Cropsey was both a practicing architect and an exhibitor at the National Academy of Design by the age of twenty. His first submission, entitled *Landscape Composition* from 1843 “created some surprise among the artists. It was so much beyond their inferior works that they hung it in a very favorable place, with [Thomas] Cole and [Asher B.] Durand for its companions” (1). His talents developed during his five-year apprenticeship under New York architect Joseph Trench, where he received instruction in painting landscapes as backgrounds to the firm’s architectural designs (2). He returned to his family on Staten Island in 1842 and, unable to secure any architectural commissions, he turned to painting landscape subjects of his native New York, and nearby New Jersey.

Cropsey began experimenting with marine painting in the Italian coastal towns of Amalfi and Capri during a two-year European sojourn from 1847-1849. As noted by William S. Talbot, Cropsey was naturally attracted to coastal scenes. The artist’s hometown of Rossville, New York, “an old settlement on Staten Island, was one of the main landing places for the harbor boats running between New York City and South Amboy, and was a business center for a large territory. Thus, it was natural for seafaring to be part of the Cropsey family heritage” (3). Cropsey, living in New York City when he painted *Sailing*, most likely looked towards the Long Island Sound for the subject matter of this artwork.

It is difficult to say whether *Sailing* was created as a preliminary study for a larger work of art. The bold massing, deep space, and brilliant lighting is characteristic of a finished work, and the oval shape of the scene implies that the artist’s intention was for the painting to be framed. Bold brushstrokes give substance and weight to the Yacht Eleanor and the rolling waves, establishing the space of the composition with a substantial foreground. The distant shoreline is hinted at with a series of delicate forms along the horizon. His varying brushstrokes convey the textures of nature and create a beautifully executed contrast between sea, land, and sky. His admiration of Thomas Cole reveals itself in his expressive brushwork and dramatic cloud formations. In Cropsey’s essay “Up Among the Clouds”, published in *The Crayon*, he writes,

Of all the gifts of the Creator -- few are more beautiful and less heeded, than the sky... Here we have first the canopy of blue; not opaque, hard and flat, as many artists conceive it and picture patrons accept it; but a luminous palpitating air, in which the eye can penetrate infinitely deep, and yet find depth (4).

Cropsey is most popularly known for his keenly observed and panoramic views of America, imbued with a sense of serenity and drenched in sun, but he exhibited a rich diversity of styles and subject matter over the course of his career. From intimate botanical studies to crisply rendered allegorical scenes, his accuracy in the description of nature and interest in architectural form remained constant. Even as younger artists began to popularize Tonalism and Impressionism towards the end of the century, Cropsey’s work remained consistent with the canons of the Hudson River School. He died at his home in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York in 1900.

Provenance: From a private Connecticut collection to the gallery.

Bibliography:

1. Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Reminiscences of My Own Time*, 1846. Unpublished manuscript.
2. William S. Talbot, *Jasper Francis Cropsey: 1823-1900* (New York and London: Garland, 1977), 21.
3. *Ibid.*, 18.

4. *The Crayon*, 1855, as quoted in *The Hudson River and its Painters* by John Howat (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 178-9.