

Van Zandt, Thomas Kirby (1814-1886)

Gentleman's Ride, Outside Albany, 1858
signed "Van Zandt" and dated lower right
oil on canvas
39" x 55 1/2"

An Unknown Patronage

In 1876, the experimental photographer Eadweard Muybridge captured on film Leland Stanford's prized horse, Abe Edgington, at full gallop in an attempt to prove Stanford's theory of "unsupported transit", the idea that all four hooves of a horse at speed leave the ground. The plate itself was fuzzy and unsuitable for publication, so it was left to a little-known painter of horses to strengthen the image. Thomas Kirby Van Zandt reproduced the image twice, first as drawing of "crayon and ink wash" dated September 16, 1876, and again as the finished canvas, *Abe Edgington* (Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University), dated February 1877 (1).

Van Zandt's relationship with Stanford reached back to their shared antebellum days in Albany, New York, where Stanford began his legal career. Active since the mid-1840s, by about 1850 Van Zandt had established himself as a reasonably successful horse-and-carriage painter catering to Albany's wealthier citizens. Van Zandt's best-known painting, *Judge Van Arnam in His Sleigh* (Albany Institute of History and Art) is dated February 1855 and shows a rather dyspeptic middle-aged man being whisked over the snow by a chestnut horse, while other rigs run over a frozen river in the background. Van Zandt's modern reputation has cornered him as something of a mid-century limner, but the folk elements of his work aside, in *Judge Van Arnam*, and again in *Gentleman's Ride, Outside Albany* (illustrated here), Van Zandt demonstrates an accomplished sensitivity to the figure and a farrier's knowledge of a horse in motion.

Even from the faraway Los Altos Hills of California and across the span of several decades, Leland Stanford remembered Van Zandt. The artist most likely left his native Albany some time after 1870, the last year he is listed in the Albany directory, to join Stanford in California (2). In addition to employing the artist to assist Muybridge, Stanford continued to commission works by Van Zandt, including a portrait of his son, Leland Stanford, Jr., who died of typhoid in 1884 and is the namesake of Stanford University. Van Zandt's association with Muybridge's famous experiment and Stanford's inner circle should amplify his reputation. In Stanford's opinion, at least, Van Zandt was among the leading painters of his day.

Given this history, *Gentleman's Ride, Outside Albany* is almost certainly Van Zandt's masterpiece. The largest known picture by the artist, here Van Zandt displays anew his facility with the human figure and ability to create lively profiles of stately horses, rich with character and animation. While Van Zandt regularly included backgrounds that featured scenes of leisure within a detailed landscape, here that tendency is magnified dramatically. The small boat negotiating the great sweep of the river and the industrious husbandry both suggest the ambition and optimism of the pre-war nation. The subject himself must have been a man of great wealth, to commission a work physically large enough to adequately illustrate his dashing phaeton, his driver, and his pair of dapple grays.

-JFN

Provenance: From a private Connecticut collection to the gallery.

Presentation Notes: In a 6" period gilt cove frame with ornate floral detail and beaded liner. Expertly

cleaned, with some minor in-painting to old stretcher bar marks.

Bibliography:

1. Phillip Prodger, et al, *Time Stands Still* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 143.
2. *Rediscovered Painters of Upstate New York: 1700-1875* (Utica: Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, 1958) 71.