



Van Dearing Perrine

First Decade on the Palisades (1902-1912)

1869 *Van Dearing Perrine* 1955

First Decade on the Palisades (1902-1912)

March 19-May 17, 1986 / Second Floor

Graham Gallery represents the Estate of Van Dearing Perrine and,
except where designated as a loan, all paintings are for sale.



GRAHAM

1014 Madison Avenue (at 78th Street) New York, New York 10021 • (212) 535-5767

Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; closed March 29-31

Van Dearing Perrine: The Palisades Paintings

April Kingsley

"Does not the history of the whole world repeat itself anew each day? . . . Contention, always contention . . . Life is contention . . . This much has been beaten into me by the wind and the rain and to it I have said amen." When Van Dearing Perrine painted his Palisades landscapes he was literally living on the edge of the geological cataract they define. A wind-twisted tree driving its roots ever deeper into a rock crevice expresses the precarious character of its environment through its form. In the same way, Perrine's tenacious hold on bare-bones existence in a rude shack perched on the side of that sheer rocky ridge enabled him to express the elemental grandeur of the Palisades, and to transform a geological fault into a profound metaphor for life, for "an eternal vital principle," as he termed it.

Largely self-taught, though he did attend art schools sporadically, Perrine translated his life experiences into paintings with the poignant directness of a primitive. *Getting Firewood* (undoubtedly an important part of his daily routine) affects the viewer both physically, from the cold, and psychologically, because of the awesome grandeur of the massive rock silhouetted against the drama being played out in the sky. Downriver just a few miles the only other painter of such marvelous nocturnal skies, Albert Pinkham Ryder, walked the Hudson's opposite shoreline at night, watching the clouds scud toward him over the Palisades. But Ryder walked on pavement, safe within the bounds of a big city, and escaped into the clouds like a visionary, never painting the brutal realities of life around him. Another contemporary, Winslow Homer, painted the harsh truth of a hermit's existence close to Mother Nature at her meanest very much the way Perrine did, because he also painted directly from experience. The relationship is obvious in *Coasting Firewood Down*.

Perrine's *Palisades Snow*, 1907, its glowing central fan of light feathered out into a golden gray curtain of storm, plays father to Arthur Dove's late twenties metallic abstractions on

the weather. Dove, in a houseboat on the treacherous Long Island Sound, was just as poor in those years, and just as closely in touch with the elements, as Perrine had been during the opening decade of the century. The reality of their literally marginal existences pervades their paintings. The Palisades are much more spectacular than any other nearby location though, and when you are standing on them you are intensely conscious of the mass of land at your back and of the air moving overhead. The scene is set by Perrine in the following passage:

When Darkness compels me to lay aside the day's work and with supper over, I ascend the little road beneath the great forehead of rock, now dark and mysterious against the great starry dome where it intersects the milky way almost at the zenith. How tiny the road seems as it winds suddenly around some dark shadow, then as suddenly out again into the starlight . . . And now a neighboring planet moves in and out behind the rocks at the head of my path and all the earth seems to sink beneath me . . . I leave the road for a shorter cut to the top through a steep dark pass from which I emerge as from a cave in the earth and oh wonder! all of the stars from the east to the west, from the north to the south! . . . almost with fear . . . I watch the mighty night roll westward . . .

Perrine's snow scenes are saturated with cold dampness. Green or blue grays predominate, not the warm browns of the old masters. The hues are Tonalist, but the music they make is profoundly elegiac, not just moody. Charles Skinner, who was an early appreciator of Perrine's work, spoke of its "great sad music" and its "tragedy" and asked, "Why does this melancholy pertain to us free, prospering Americans?" Skinner's answer to his own question was that people were feeling a need to escape from the speed of progress, the burdens of political involvement, and the austerities of over-civilization and to be themselves. "If it is sad," Skinner concludes, "Perrine's art is not morbid: it is of Beethoven,

not Chopin." Humanity is depicted as earnest, intensely hard-working, but not broken by the burdens of life. Instead, like Sisyphus endlessly hopeful about getting the stone up the hill, Perrine's human subjects (not unlike Gustave Courbet's) seem committed to hard work as a necessary concomitant of life. It's not a matter of drudgery but of survival. And being out of doors, living the rugged, pioneering life as Perrine did, had the advantage of keeping him in touch with what was important, with the earth and with God—even though he lived within sight of a city growing faster than Calcutta and with no better moral standards.

Skinner describes Perrine as a reserved mystic who takes us to a high place at midnight "and there leaves us, poised under the cold stars and above the river with its floes shining eerily, its shore line an emblem of repose, the staggering uprush of rock forms preordaining creative force; and in the snowy silence we stand at the confine of eternity and cry into the night the old human questions of whence and why?" This sort of description might seem overly rhetorical were it not for the fact that when you are actually confronting one of these pictures, peering into the darkness, trying to make out the river's far shore, you suddenly become aware of your own shadow looming large in—and even blacker than—the painted landscape. An involuntary shiver runs through you on finding yourself in this bleak dead land. You cling to signs of life—smoke, a few twigs in the snow, a broken branch or tree stump even though they seem like charred remains of life once lived. When Skinner tells his readers that "these pictures are dark and solemn, yet creation stirs in them . . . that never ceases, for the dead feed life and matter aspires," he is speaking of the universal spiritual concept of the regenerating life cycle.

Road Round the Cliff and *Ring of the Moon*, two of Perrine's most nearly religious paintings of this period, share something with Oriental art, particularly Chinese paintings of mountains. Huge rocky prominences piercing the mists or looming against the abyss are experienced close-up rather than at a great distance as they are in Chinese painting, but they are powerfully graphic in the Oriental manner in their stark contrasts of black and white. Arthur Wesley Dow's book, *Composition*, which was published in 1899 when Perrine was a student, included a great deal of information

about Japanese brush and inkstick technique and examples of *notan*. Discussions with fellow artists about Dow's controversial ideas and perhaps even with Dow's students at the Art Student's League and Pratt in Brooklyn, might also have had a significant influence on Perrine's developing style at this time. Dow's own paintings were quite decorative then and not of much interest, but his later paintings of the Grand Canyon or the view from Gay Head with their dramatic juxtapositions of rocky forms and deep empty chasms seem fascinatingly close to Perrine's post-1902 paintings in form as well as content.

Even though Perrine seemed to share the Oriental and the "primitive" artist's tendency to flatten forms so that they become one with the picture plane, he didn't paint in their tightly linear, detailed manner. In fact he was a delightfully liquid and painterly painter, even in those first years of his maturity. Flashes of bravura paint handling worthy of William Merritt Chase or Robert Henri abound. A branch is formed out of a single twist of the loaded brush; a clump of snow or a cloud may be only a swipe of the palette knife. His vibrant facture seems eminently human and one feels profoundly grateful for these evidences of the hand, given the emotional effectiveness of his bleak imagery. The material pleasures to be derived from his handling of pigment seem to counterbalance the spirituality of the content. In later paintings, particularly the more Impressionist, higher-key canvases of the 'teens like *Hudson River* and *View of the Hudson River with Steamboats*, the lively facture and brilliant light very nearly become the pictures' content. Once he became more interested in color than in tonality, Perrine was a natural Impressionist; he had never been interested in delineating flora and fauna precisely in any case. "If you could tell what kind of tree it was," he once said, "you would think you knew its secret, but I want you to feel that the tree is a great green mystery pushing up through the soil—as great a mystery as you or I."

Perhaps it's because you are literally so high up, so close to the sky when you are on the Palisades that you feel so acutely conscious of the light as it sweeps across the Hudson or down along the opposing shore. Nature seems to be constantly putting on a spectacular light show for your benefit. Perrine's Palisades paintings are, among other things, about

the transitoriness of light. "At first," he said, "I had been accustomed to look for an escape from the literal through the mystery of darkness—of shadow," but after watching brilliant sunlight swallow up a tugboat and barge on the river one day it dawned on him that beyond a certain point light was just as effective as darkness at dissolving and obliterating objects and their detail. He came to feel that brightness and darkness were the "vanishing points where the invisible triumphed over the visible, where fancy was built . . . in the true playground of the imagination." Perrine prized these transitional moments in nature when a door opens, as he put it,

"into the world of the wondrous." Even in his later paintings when he is completely enraptured by the spectrum, "the multi-colored symphony in the snow" that seems to speak to him "with the voice of God," he continued to focus much of the viewer's attention on a glowing white radiance at or near the center of his paintings. He described this whiteness, which is often present in his Palisades paintings of the early years as well, as a "serene effulgence—like Brahma, without passion, without parts."*

© April Kingsley

*With the exception of Perrine's description of a nighttime walk on the Palisades at the beginning of this piece which appeared in Alan Gussow's *A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land*, all of Perrine's quotes are from Claude Bragdon's article, "Van Dearing Perrine, A Painter of Light," which appeared in *Arts and Decoration*, May 1924.