

**“The Fact of the Indefinable”:  
George Inness in the 1860s**

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George Inness, *Clearing Up*, 1860, oil on canvas, George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, Springfield, Mass.



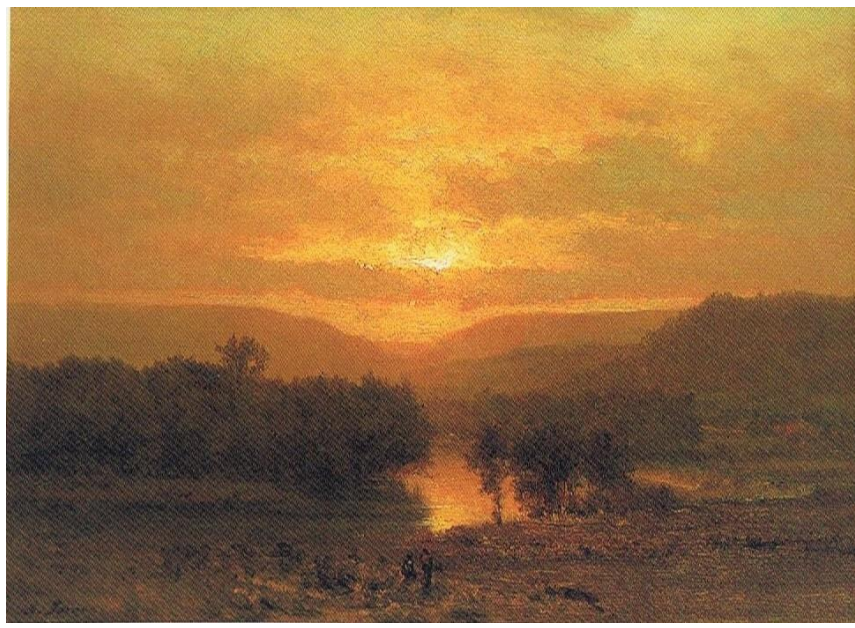
George Inness, *A Winter Sky*, 1866, oil on canvas, Cleveland Museum of Art



George Inness, *On the Delaware River*, 1861-1863,  
oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum



George Inness, *Sunset*, 1860-65,  
oil on canvas, private collection



Above right: George Inness, *Christmas Eve (Winter Moonlight)*,  
1866, Montclair Art Museum

Below right: George Inness, *A Winter Sky*, 1866,  
Cleveland Museum of Art

Below: George Inness, *Peace and Plenty*, 1865,  
oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art



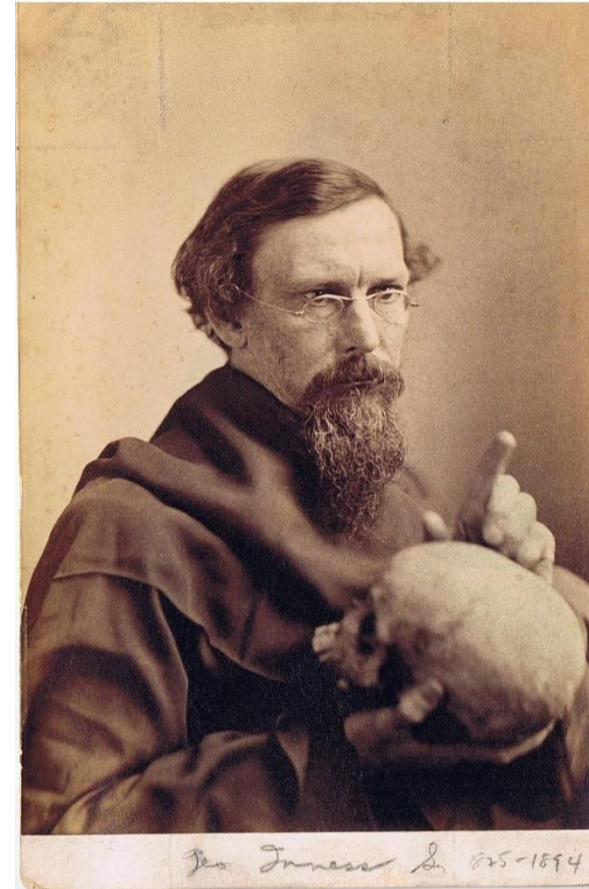
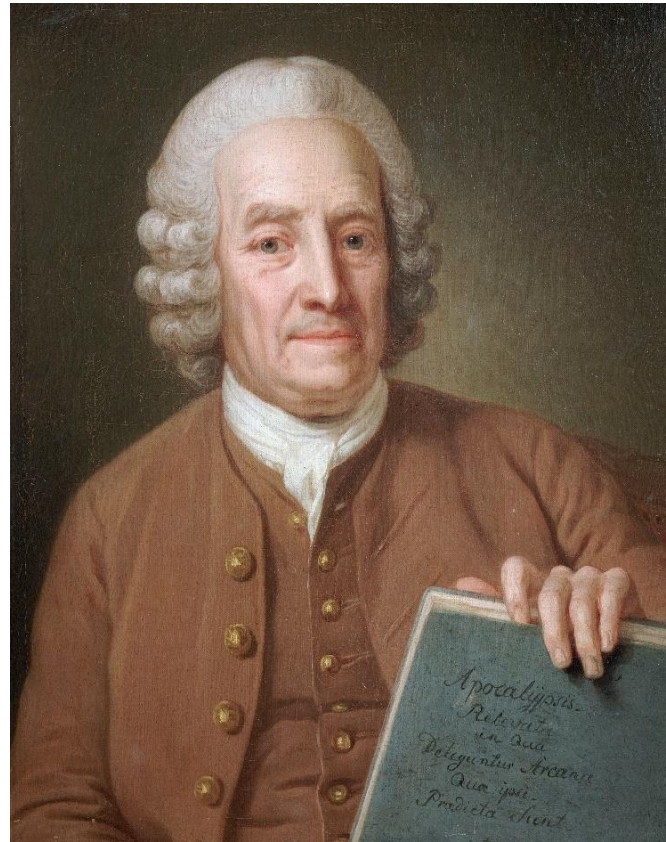
Thomas Cole, *The Subsiding of the Waters of the Deluge*,  
1829, Smithsonian American Art Museum



Thomas Moran, *Mountain of the Holy Cross*, 1875,  
oil on canvas, Autry Museum of the American West,  
Los Angeles



Ralph Waldo Emerson (left), Emanuel Swedenborg (center), George Inness (right)



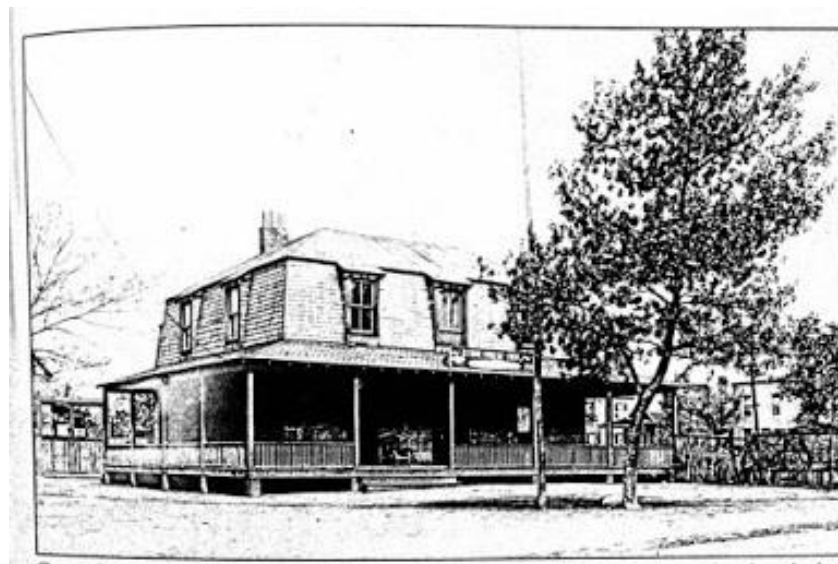
Mathew Brady, *George Inness*,  
1862, photograph



William Page, *Self-Portrait*,  
1860-61, oil on canvas,  
Detroit Institute of the Arts



Inness's house (above) at  
Eagleswood Military Academy (below)





George Inness, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1867, oil on canvas, Frances Lehman Loeb Art Gallery, Vassar College



Süßkind der Jode von Trimberg. C.



LEFT: The Jewish poet Süßkind von Trimberg (ca. 1230-1300) at right, Codex Manesse, 1304-1340, Heidelberg University Library

BELOW: Marc Chagall, *The Praying Jew (Rabbi of Vitebsk)*, 1914, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago



George Inness, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1867, oil on canvas, Frances Lehman Loeb Art Gallery, Vassar College





J.M.W. Turner, *The Slave Ship*, 1840, oil on canvas,  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



George Inness, *A June Day*, 1881, oil on canvas,  
Courtesy of Thomas Colville, LLC



George Inness, *A June Day*, 1881, oil on canvas, Courtesy of Thomas Colville, LLC



Mathew Brady, *George Inness*, 1862, photograph



William Page, *Self-Portrait*, 1860-61, oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of the Arts



William Page, manuscript pages from "On Color Theory," undated, Archives of American Art

LEFT: grey scale

RIGHT: primary color scale

... convey a more & less definite idea according to the ~~prevalence~~ <sup>prevalence</sup> of the knowledge of him who uses them or he who hears them rather - as more is in music by one possessed of "ear" the difference between two octaves is at once felt & understood - as also all intermediate differences - so to one who has what painters call an "eye for color" whose means an eye to discern gradations, whether in natural objects, or in pigments - these degrees which I have named will be exact and real differences - but to him who has neither faculty, the pursuit of the art of painting must necessarily be as really fruitless as the pursuit of music to the man who cannot distinguish between sounds.



However imperfectly painting will seem to render this scale not being susceptible of this nice distinction, which side colors alone can not serve to illustrate in some degree our meaning - This scale as much as before you is four feet high, earth against the white page, and the eye which is here has no emphasis but is lost in the surrounding paper - while the black however has a force proportionally greater.

This scale represents, crudely as it is here placed, the picture as hung upon a white wall, we mean an oil painting when we lay picture down, and is printed on a white ground - <sup>having a white margin</sup> a picture <sup>which</sup> is wholly transposed as it were, or translated, for the art of engraving is a distinct art, and entirely separate from that of painting - indeed the best engraving of a great picture is such an image of the picture, as that is an image of nature, and it is no more.

If now we transfer the above scale of five to a page of the book and in middle tint as here we shall at once receive the difference - the white & the black will then become of equal value & the <sup>square</sup> <sup>of the</sup> scale will be one with the surface of tint - and the half light and white will both appear as <sup>light</sup> <sup>and</sup> the half dark & black will both take on dark - You may take this as a picture properly hung upon the wall, if the horizon from which the light comes be at such an angle as to represent about 45 degrees with the picture's surface - <sup>may be on a darkness equal to a mid tint</sup> <sup>of whatever color it may be</sup>

To do otherwise is a dangerous, as it would be to place an artist's picture in his shop with him in hopes to have it well seen <sup>here</sup> and argues an

5. White remains there beyond all question supposing the gradations to be perfect all the way between these two extreme points - just midway between them a equidistant from each there must be a mid tint, or what we have endeavored to describe and bring to your recognition, for this mid tint the great ~~error~~ <sup>error</sup> must seem to the eye, being on which the broad floor of tint must stand - or else prove that which being open no man can shut, or being shut no man can open - This mid tint then is that which cannot be called either light or darkness but that equidistant balance of both from which all above is called light and all below ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> called darkness.

This is the legitimate abstract principle of a division which is as absolute on the palette of the painter as it is in the great Creation itself - let no one violate the principle and think to do it with impunity, it may not be done.

Here follows another diagram of color scale, the yellow & blue these are the primary - all colors and repetitions of these simple <sup>primary</sup> <sup>colors</sup> being a mixture of Red & Blue and its opposite being yellow, the remaining primitive, each of these compound colors will have the opposite of the remaining primitive - as thus, Red is the opposite of Green - Blue & yellow make green - Blue is the remaining primitive.

Yellow is the opposite of Purple Purple is Blue & Red mixed together yellow the remaining primitive - and Blue is the opposite of Orange, the being Red and yellow mixed together and Blue the remaining primitive - but the above diagram of color will make this familiar - where it will be found that each overlapping or compound color is placed in that part of the circle most distant from the color to which it is opposed - These are <sup>the</sup> <sup>principal</sup> <sup>contrasts</sup> of color, and although perfect in their opposition, not discordant, when brought against each other, but ~~rather~~ <sup>rather</sup> the reverse serving rather to add value to each other - whereas any two of the primary colors made to touch dash a harsh discord.

Now in like manner as we have supposed White & Black to be graduated from two given points toward each other and overlapping midway producing a mid tint line - so do we now suppose these opposites of color Red & Green - to be placed towards each other until overlapping and neutralizing through the other intermediate between these extremes of light & green we shall find a like equal point of color when the red has neutralized the green and the green has neutralized the red - and to give a like equilibrium of color as we had of Black & White in their mid tint line or equal stream - and this will be the case with all opposites of color, if they be so graduated toward each other as we have described - so that ~~when~~ <sup>when</sup> they have in their equal stream it will be neither red or yellow nor blue but equally removed from each of these as the centre is from the circumference - and in short it will be just what Sir Isaac Newton meant when he said that the seven prismatic colors when painted on a wheel and whirled round with such velocity as to prevent the eye from distinguishing



George Inness, *Hazy Morning, Montclair*, 1893, oil on canvas, Butler Institute of American Art





George Inness, *Hazy Morning, Montclair*,  
*New Jersey*, 1893, oil on canvas,  
Butler Institute of American Art

Detail: below



George Inness, *Autumn in Montclair*, 1893, oil on canvas, Clark Art Institute



George Inness, *Autumn in Montclair*,  
1893, oil on canvas, Clark Art Institute



František Kupka, *Composition*,  
ca. 1910-13, oil on canvas, Joslyn Art Museum



George Inness, *A June Day*, 1881, oil on canvas, Courtesy of Thomas Colville, LLC

