

**Fig. 1 (right):** *Winter Sundown*, Walter Launt Palmer (American, 1854–1932). Oil on canvas, 24½ x 21½ inches. Unsigned. Courtesy of Avery Galleries, Haverford, Pa.

**Fig. 2 (opposite page, left):** *The Hemlocks*, Walter Launt Palmer (American, 1854–1932). Oil on canvas, 28½ x 21 inches. Signed lower left. Courtesy of MME Fine Art, LLC, New York.

**Fig. 3 (opposite page, right):** *The Bridge*, Walter Launt Palmer (American, 1854–1932), ca. 1920. Gouache on paperboard, 16½ x 10½ inches. Signed lower left. Courtesy of MME Fine Art, LLC, New York.

# Walter Launt Palmer (1854–1932)

by Lisa Bush Hankin



Since one of this artist's atmospheric winter scenes sold for a record auction price of \$131,200 in December 2004, interest has escalated in the works of Walter Launt Palmer, "the painter of American winter." A recipient of prestigious prizes and laudatory reviews during his lifetime, the Albany, New York, born Palmer is enjoying renewed appreciation for his command of the technically challenging winter subject matter for which he is best known (Fig. 1).

The son of sculptor Erastus Dow Palmer (1817–1904), Walter Launt Palmer grew up in an artistic household and won early recognition for his work. In addition to studying in Paris under the esteemed Carolus-Duran, Palmer was one of the few artists to work with legendary landscape painter Frederic Church (1826–1900) with whom he later shared a space in New York's Tenth Street Studio Building. Though Palmer traveled frequently to New York and maintained close ties with

the city's art community, he lived and worked in Albany throughout his career. Palmer produced spring, summer, and fall landscapes, still-life works, and marine scenes, but Albany's often severe snowstorms provided Palmer with a lifetime's worth of wintry subject matter; his distinctive snow scenes convey his personal impressions rather than the exact conditions he encountered.

Mindy Moak, a principal of New York's MME Fine Art, LLC, points to Palmer as an example of a highly accomplished artist whose very best works are still available and affordable. "The nature of the marketplace now is that collectors should strive to find the best quality examples of an artist's work possible because, at the end of the day, these are the works that will not only retain their value, but provide the best opportunity to appreciate in value." For some artists, she says candidly, "it's over," explaining that so little supply remains of their finest works that



when examples do appear, prices are stratospheric. “But the supply of really first-rate pictures by someone like Palmer is still untapped,” she observes. “He was capable of being at the top of his game until the very

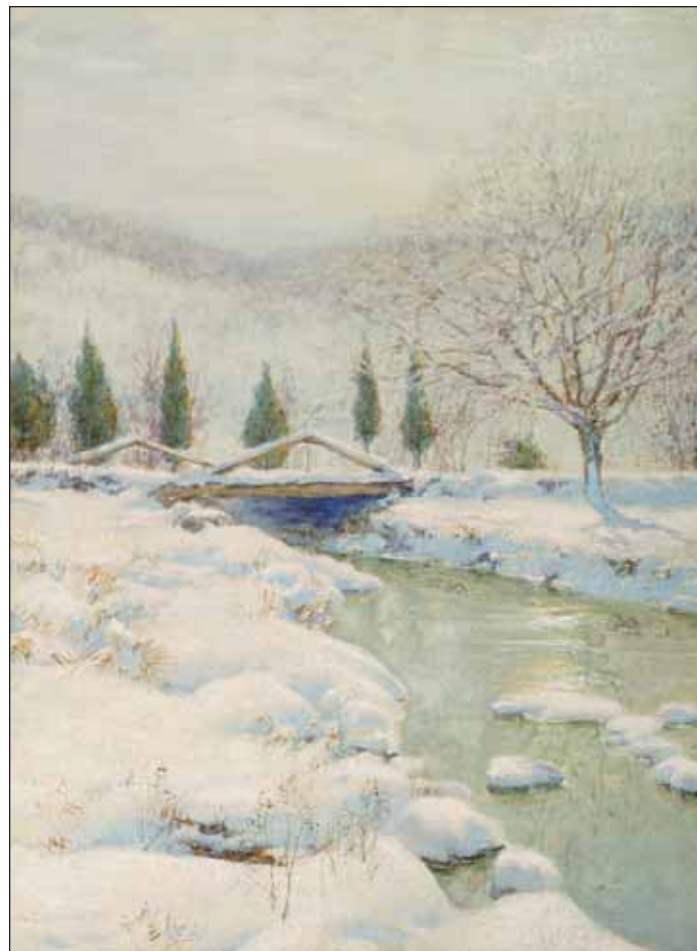
end of his life, so it’s absolutely still possible to acquire one of his important works.”

Palmer’s poetic winter scenes (Figs. 2–3) reveal his interest in passing weather conditions — the shifting balance between precipitation, mist, and sunlight — and the effects of light coming through trees and reflecting off the surface of

To examine price movement for Palmer’s works on a quantitative basis, we have taken the average price per square inch for oils sold through auction for the five-year period of 1990–1995, and compared it with the five-year period 2000–2005. The results show a ten-year increase of 173%.

water. He employed a wide range of colors to convey the mood of an explicit point in the season — late winter, for instance, or a specific time of day. In addition to his use of cool lavender, blue, and violet tones, Palmer often employed subtle gradations of more unusual shades such as coral, teal, salmon pink, and goldenrod to create the decorative patterning of his signature snows.

Not only have Palmer’s oils been hotly pursued recently, his works in other media have surged in price as well. Three winter scenes (a gouache and two mixed-media works) came up at auction at Christie’s New York in early 2005, estimated to sell within the \$10- to \$20,000 range. All



three shot far past these estimates, selling for \$42,000, \$42,000, and an impressive \$90,000, respectively, an indication that collectors and dealers are enthusiastic about the artist’s works in all media. He also created works in pastel and watercolor.

Palmer also painted some magnificently detailed interior scenes documenting the architectural and interior design tastes of his time. Because he sold a great number of paintings and watercolors over the course of his career, Palmer enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and was able to indulge in his love of travel. He often produced canvases of the places he visited, including vibrant scenes of Venice, to which he returned on a number of occasions. Palmer was one of the first American artists to visit Japan and China, then insular countries that had been closed off to the Western world for generations.

While a great painting by Frederic Church might not become available for decades, if ever, a reasonable supply of Palmer’s works still in private hands — with rising prices bound to bring some long-held works to the market — means that there’s still a possibility for collectors to acquire top-tier examples of this gifted artist’s work. “Palmer was Church’s prize pupil, one of only a handful he agreed to teach,” observes Mindy Moak. “His work presents an opportunity to tap into Church’s aesthetic at a far more accessible price point.”

*Lisa Bush Hankin is an independent art researcher and writer based in New York. She specializes in 19th- and 20th-century American fine art.*