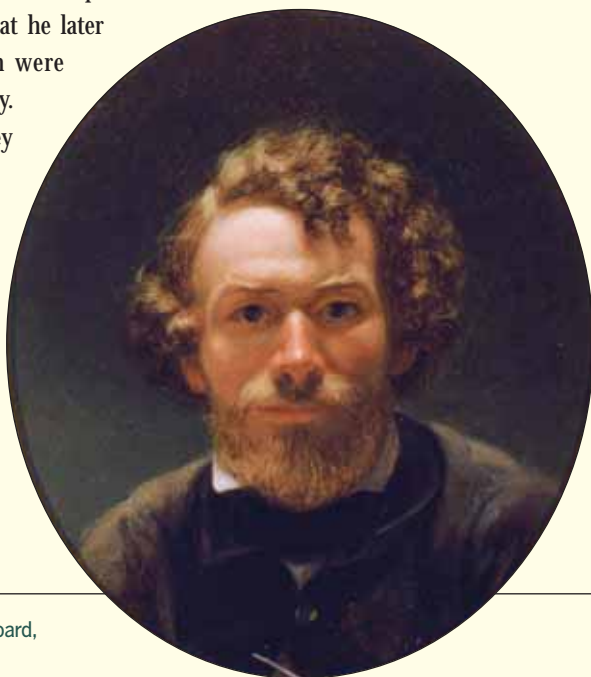


For much of the twentieth century, William Ranney (1813–1857) was primarily known for his realistic depictions of the West. Stamping horses, wild mustangs, *vagueros*, trappers, and emigrating families were popular themes acquired by collectors. Although many of his works were lost — of the over 230 works Ranney is known to have painted, only about eighty have been located — it is known that his western works represent only a fraction of his output. In his brief life, Ranney demonstrated his protean talent in portraiture, genre and sporting scenes, history and animal subjects, land and seascapes, and even an occasional still life.

Born in Middletown, Connecticut, the eldest of four children, Ranney spent his teen years in Fayetteville, North Carolina, a prosperous commercial hub based along the Cape Fear River. Here, from about 1827 to 1835, he was apprenticed to his Yankee uncle, William Nott, who owned a successful dry goods store. Many of the images and themes that would later appear in Ranney's work have strong associations with this region — covered wagons, ferry crossings, and local revolutionary and pioneering heroes like Francis Marion and Daniel Boone.

Unlike many artists of his generation who painted western subjects, Ranney had experienced the West firsthand. In 1836, with patriotism ignited by the massacre at the Alamo, he joined the Texas Army. In the six or so months he spent in Texas, he made many drawings that he later translated into paintings, which were admired for their aura of authenticity.

Between 1838 and 1843 Ranney traveled between New York City and Fayetteville, until finally settling in New York City. Ranney did not travel abroad and little has been discovered to suggest who his mentors were. No inventories or letters have survived that list his work or might offer clues to his thoughts or influences. In the brief thirteen or fourteen years



Self-Portrait, ca. 1855. Oil on academy board, 8½ x 7¼ inches. Private collection.

Here Ranney portrays himself as a middle-aged man with an intensely direct, almost confrontational gaze, which engages the viewer. Barely visible at the bottom edge of the picture is the wooden end of a paintbrush, emblematic of the painter's profession. In the last years of his life, Ranney was stricken with tuberculosis: his wan appearance and austere expression project the suffering he was known to have experienced.



# WILLIAM RANNEY

## REDISCOVERED

BY LINDA BANTEL



*Hunting Wild Horses*, 1846. Oil on canvas, 36 x 54¼ inches. Museum of the American West, Autry National Center, Los Angeles.

In this large and animated canvas, Ranney depicts a common site on the western plains, the interplay of hunter and hunted, which he may well have witnessed when in was in the Texas Army a decade earlier. A great white steed, encircled by a wild-eyed herd, has been lassoed and brought down by the *vaquero*. This scene may symbolize, among other things, the ongoing deliberations of Americans about the nation's expansion into western states at the onset of the Mexican War. According to Peter H. Hassrick: "The securing of wild horses provided the promise of a new life in the West's mythic Eden, where freedom, once surrendered by nature, is perceived of as transferring that freedom to the vanquisher."





*Study of a Ledge*, ca. 1855. Oil on paper mounted on hardboard, 8¾ x 11¼ inches. Private collection.

The survival of this small oil study is evidence that Ranney, like many of the leading landscape painters of the period, painted directly from nature.

*Spaniel with Woodcock*, ca. 1855. Oil on canvas, 34 x 27 inches. The Merestead Painting Collection, Westchester County Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation, New York.

Ranney's almost life-size portrayal of this popular game dog is one of at least two pictures of this type recently discovered. Characteristically, Ranney expertly captures the intimate relationship between the hunter and his dog, and illustrates one of the sportsman's cardinal rules: After collecting the dead bird, the dog must be trained to deliver it directly into the hunter's hand.

*The Sleigh Ride*, 1852. Oil on canvas, 30⅞ x 40⅞ inches. Manooagian Collection, Washington, D.C.

Many of Ranney's genre, western, and sporting subjects are composed in a traditional pyramidal arrangement — the figures individualized, the accessories well described, the narrative content clearly delineated — placing him firmly within America's mid-century genre tradition. Critics praised the "admirable" triangular composition of this image, its bright colors, and the "unusual care in the finishing;" all qualities associated with the popular German artists whose works were on display in the 1850s in New York's Düsseldorf Gallery.





*First Fish of the Season*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 27 x 40 inches. Private collection.

This painting, only located in 1980, was likely commissioned by the important Philadelphia collector Joseph Harrison Jr., whose collection it was in throughout the nineteenth century. Ranney's skill as a portrait painter is revealed in the highly individualized features of the fisherman with spectacles and salt and pepper hair. The locale was likely inspired by the Hoboken marshes near Ranney's New Jersey home. The knife embedded in the cutting board and the remnants of bait inform the viewer that the hook has been baited. The tension experienced by the fisherman as he waits for his catch is expressed by his tight grasp on the bamboo fishing pole and the concentration of both man and dog as they stare at the bobber eagerly anticipating the strike of the fish. The picture's simple horizontal format and the delicate pink atmospheric effects of light are characteristics of mid-nineteenth century landscape painting.

that remained to him—Ranney died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-four—he rapidly matured artistically. Many of his canvases were exhibited at the National Academy of Design, where he was made an associate in 1850, or sold to the influential American Art-Union before its dissolution in 1852.

During his years in New York City, he successfully established himself as a portrait painter. Yet, other than two self-portraits and four family portraits, only two signed formal portraits have so far turned up. These likenesses are generally well-drawn and well composed; the sitters presented against neutral

backgrounds, holding a standard ennobling attribute such as a book, following a fashion epitomized by the leading portraitist of the day Henry Inman (1801–1846).

In 1848, Ranney, newly married, moved to New Jersey, eventually settling in West Hoboken (now Union City), across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Near his house, he built a large open studio, designed to accommodate animals, particularly cattle, which he would use as models for his paintings. A neighbor's stables gave him easy access to horses. Ranney had an impressive talent for capturing the essence of an animal's character,

and they play a prominent role in his paintings.

Ranney prided himself on drawing not only from models but from nature as well, and the New Jersey landscape offered him the Hudson River, with its tall ships, to the east; the picturesque cliffs of the Palisades nearby; and to the west, the New Jersey marshes, which were popular haunts of hunters and fishermen like himself, and the inspiration for his many sporting scenes.

For the most part, Ranney eschewed the more dramatic statements associated with the grand manner style of painting, best exemplified by the revered contemporary history






*Virginia Wedding*, 1854. Oil on canvas, 54¼ x 82¼ inches. R. W. North Art Gallery, Shreveport, Louisiana.

Ranney created this unusual historical genre scene in which the figures are dressed in late-eighteenth-century costumes. Because it was privately commissioned, it is likely that the patron specified the particulars of the subject, either based on family stories or drawn from a literary source. Leading the revelers on horseback, are the bride, prominently displaying her wedding band, and the groom. They are warmly greeted by the elderly gentleman who is formally attired. The nostalgic scene captures the festive mood of the wedding party and the ambience of the modest Southern plantation.



*Marion Crossing the Pedee*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 50¼ x 74¾ inches. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

Painted for the American Art-Union about the same time that Emanuel Leutze was in Düsseldorf working on his *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Metropolitan Museum of Art), this was probably Ranney's most celebrated picture, larger and more complex figuratively than anything he had yet attempted. Francis Marion (1732–1795) was the South's most famous revolutionary war hero; his legendary escapades were chronicled in many biographies and histories published during the first half of the 1800s, an era of intense interest in America's formative years. Named the Swamp Fox, Marion was famous for his ability to disappear with his ragtag band of guerrilla warriors into the swamps and bogs of the Pedee River in North Carolina, successfully eluding and frustrating British with his hit and run tactics. Here, Ranney represents Marion and his men traversing the river. Both the American Art-Union and later, Currier and Ives produced prints after it. The popularity of this image has inspired many copies, which even today occasionally turn up in the marketplace.

painter Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868). Ranney typically created generalized historical events, set in a particular time frame and populated with ordinary, yet distinctive individuals involved in everyday activities. They are the heroes in Ranney's egalitarian world. 

*Forging an American Identity: The Art of William Ranney* is on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from June 26 through August 19; this is the last of four venues. Organized by the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, it is the first comprehensive

museum retrospective of Ranney since the 1962 Corcoran Gallery of Art exhibit. It is accompanied by an updated catalogue raisonné (Buffalo Bill Historical Center, 2006) by Linda Bantel and Peter H. Hassrick and edited by Kathleen Luhrs, with additional essays by Sarah E. Boehme and Mark F. Bockrath.

*Linda Bantel is an independent curator and former director of the Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She is currently director of the William Ranney Catalogue Raisonné Project.*