

Edwin Lord Weeks' *The Golden Temple at Amritsar*

by robert p. emlen



Edwin Lord Weeks
(1849–1903),
*The Golden Temple
at Amritsar*, ca. 1890.
Oil on canvas,
79½ x 117 inches;
frame measures
108 x 146 inches.
Courtesy of Annmary
Brown Memorial Collection,
Brown University,
Providence, Rhode Island.

Considered a major work when painted in circa 1890, Edwin Lord Weeks' (1849–1903) *The Golden Temple at Amritsar* had faded from public awareness as interest in Orientalist-themed paintings declined in twentieth-century America. Increasingly overlooked as its condition declined, Brown University recently conserved, restored, and reframed Weeks' monumental painting to a state much closer to its original appearance.

The Boston-born Weeks trained in circa 1874–1875 in the Paris atelier of Léon Bonnat (1833–1922), who taught him to paint with lush, intense colors. When the young American

artist traveled to exotic locales in search of people and places to picture in his genre scenes, he became fascinated with the spectral qualities of light he found in India. Over the course of eleven years he made three trips to the subcontinent, painting large oil sketches in preparation for the finished works he created in his Paris studio. During his second trip to India, in 1886–1887, he visited Amritsar, where the holiest of all Sikh temples was reputed to radiate light. There he found the white marble temple shimmering in the sunlight as if literally clad in gold. Weeks, who called himself a “colorist,” had found an ideal subject in this spectacular scene.

When he returned to his Paris studio in 1887, Weeks developed his sketches of costumed native figures and his studies of light on the temple building and its surroundings into a painting more than six feet tall and nine feet wide. He submitted the finished canvas to the Paris Salon of 1890 where, the previous year, he had won a bronze medal for his *The Hour of Prayer at Muti-Mushid (Pearl Mosque)*, Agra. Both *The Pearl Mosque* and *The Golden Temple* remained in Weeks' possession.

In March of 1905, the American Art Association mounted a two-day sale of the can-

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English Salt-Glaze Scratch Blue

1750–1770

Tea Caddy
5" high



Large mug
5½" high,
3" diameter



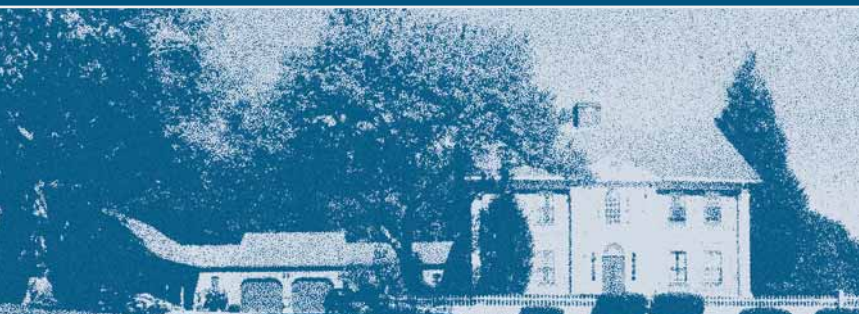
Large bowl
4½" high,
9" diameter



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discoveries from the field

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vases in Weeks' collection at the time of his death in 1903. At the auction in New York, Christopher Rush Hawkins, the American *Commissaire Expert des Beaux Arts* to the 1889 Paris Exposition and a fiercely traditional collector of realist paintings, purchased Weeks' *Caravan Crossing the Desert* and *The Golden Temple*.

They were acquired for an art gallery he was then creating as a memorial to his late wife, Annmary Brown, in Providence, Rhode Island, within sight of her ancestral home and the university named for her grandfather. When the Annmary Brown Memorial building was completed in 1907, Hawkins installed the couple's collections of incunabula and paintings and added several new pictures, including the two works by Weeks. *The Golden Temple* dominated one prominent wall, where it has hung ever since.

When Brown University acquired the Annmary Brown Memorial in 1948, its scarce funds for art conservation meant that the grand scale of *The Golden Temple* made even minimal conservation too costly to undertake. Furthermore, in the 1950s it was the custom at Brown for professors of art history to clean sections of paintings in the Memorial to demonstrate to students how a painting's surface can darken with age and atmospheric accretions. In addition to its increasingly grimy surface, interrupted by bright little cleaned patches, *The Golden Temple* was also without a frame. Whether Hawkins purchased and exhibited the work unframed, or whether the frame did not survive, the painting until now has been deprived of the kind of powerful visual border needed to complement and enhance its lush color and subject matter.

In 2007, when funding became available, conservators Lance Mayer and Gay Myers removed a heavy layer of grime, yellowed varnish, and some old crude retouchings, revealing the painting's colorful tonality for the first time in a century. In addition, New York picture-framer Eli Wilner designed a monumental new Orientalist-style frame based on period examples. When the restored *Golden Temple* was reinstalled in the Annmary Brown Memorial last year, its luminous colors and spectacular new frame transformed the gallery. @



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