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Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), *The Last Red Canoe*. Oil on panel, 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., signed lower right in arrowhead: 'R.A Blakelock'.

Ralph Albert Blakelock: The Mad Genius Returns at Questroyal Fine Art

OPUS *in* FIRE *and* DARKNESS

by James D. Balestrieri

Blakelock, Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), the twin of whose genius is always—in museums, galleries and monographs—madness, Blakelock, Ralph Albert Blakelock, Greenwich Village son of a carpenter turned policeman turned homeopath, with a homeopath's faith, layers color atop color knowing, praying, that something of those buried layers will come

through, that the essence of earlier, lower hues will influence the surface that meets his eye, and the world's. Blakelock, perhaps the first painter to hide his painting, hides everything but the light, hides every tree and cloud and ripple of water in the stipple between darknesses, scintillating in his applied art, in his application of paint, starlight and moonlight and the light of dawns and dusks shot through with

dark matter and dark energy.

Upfront it must be said (no, not passively, I must say it, own and own up to it) this: if you're looking for a straight ahead, by the numbers rendering of Blakelock's life and work, consult the excellent essays in the catalog that accompanies Questroyal Fine Art's heroic exhibition of 125 of Blakelock's paintings, *Ralph Albert Blakelock: The Mad Genius Returns*.

Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), *Eternal Orb*. Oil on board, 5 ⁵/₁₆ x 3 ⁹/₁₆ in.





Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), *Indian Encampment at Sunset*. Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 in.

Owner Louis Salerno's passion for Blakelock nearly matches my own and his essay reflects this; the art history and biographical angles are neatly covered by Dr. Mark Mitchell and Nina Sangimino, and playwright and director Myra Platt, Blakelock's great-great-granddaughter, describes and channels his ancestor's energy, pulse, blood. If that isn't enough, I urge you to read Glyn Vincent's 2003 book, *The Unknown Night: The Genius and Madness of R. A. Blakelock, an American Painter...*

...Because what you get from me when I think about, talk about, write about Blakelock cannot be straight ahead. To do justice to him and his work and how I feel about his work, I have to riff, improvise, calligraph some free verse onto his painting.

To do it justice.

At one time, during his lifetime, he was perhaps the most talked about, written about, debated, vaunted and derided American artist. That he has fallen somewhat from the public eye is

not so much a consequence of changing tastes as of his having been assimilated into American art in the years since his death. The prototypical American modernist, Blakelock's bold, fearless approach to art making informs and underpins all who come after him. Would it surprise you to learn that Blakelock was Franz Kline's favorite painter? That Arthur Dove considered him essential to American modernism? Is Blakelock's method, his expressive, anti-line, anti-finish approach to art making so radically different from Pollock's?

Blakelock's early work shares qualities with both the Hudson River School and the Barbizon painters: an emphasis on scale in nature—nature vast, humankind small—from the former; an interest in the countryside, in the dwellings of ordinary folk and moments of labor and repose in their lives from the latter.

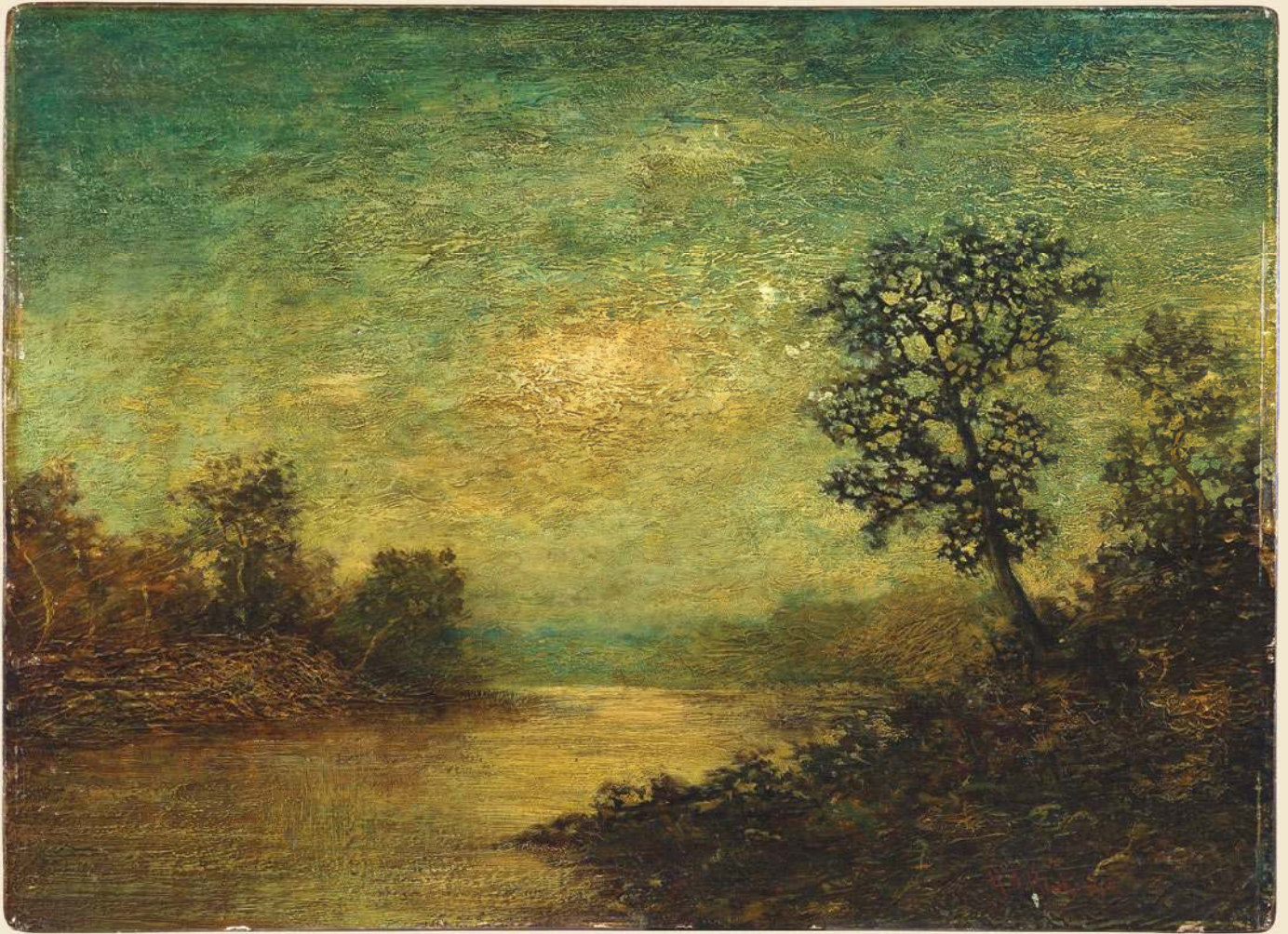
But his life, what happened to him, how he ended it, as the "mad genius" in a sanitarium, also has a great deal to do

with his reputation and legacy.

In the art world, madness sells. It has done so since the early 19th century, when the alliance between madness, inspiration, obsession and genius was formed in all its brooding, visionary, Gothic glory in Goethe, Poe, Goya, Fuseli and, of course, Van Gogh.

Obsession, the price of vision, adds cachet to the price of a picture. Would a dull, ordinary, workmanlike Vincent Van Gogh be the stuff of books and plays, films and auction records that exceed the GNP of small countries? Let's not leave that a rhetorical question: no. If Blakelock were European, French perhaps, what space would he occupy in Western culture? Let's leave that one rhetorical.

That Blakelock was institutionalized is history. That he suffered from delusions is documented. That he was, perhaps, schizophrenic or bipolar—our fraught and freighted terms, not the terms of his world—is possible. That he was mad is debatable. As his fortunes and reputation fell, providing for his



Above:
Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), *Solitude (The River)*, 1889. Oil on panel, 11¼ x 16⅞ in., signed lower right: 'R.A. Blakelock'; on verso: 'Solitude by R.A. Blakelock 1889'.



Left:
Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), *Indian Hunters*. Oil on panel, 11½ x 15⅞ in., signed lower right in arrowhead: 'R.A. Blakelock'.



Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), *Dream Within a Dream*. Oil on panel, 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ in.

family became first a concern, then a mania. We know that he would leave his home in New Jersey with new paintings and not return home until he had sold them; even if he only earned a fraction of what he felt they were worth.

We know that he supplemented his income—happily, it should be noted—playing the piano for vaudeville acts. We

know that he and his family were always impoverished and frequently on the verge of ruin. What husband and father, painter or plumber, might not break down under that burden? Had patrons like Benjamin Altman (B. Altman, yes, of the department stores) taken just a bit more care of Blakelock, would he have recovered, pressed on, thrived? Then as

now, mental illness fascinates, but it also frightens.

Like many artists, Blakelock went West. His American West isn't Bierstadt's or Moran's. He didn't accompany, with manifest destiny fanfare, the great expeditions that would grid the wilderness for progress. Blakelock's West is of a piece with his Adirondacks, a world on fire, a world about to be snuffed out, about to go dark. Yes, there are the great, magnificent early Western scenes or mountains and Indian encampments that slide right into the Hudson River School and the luminists who followed. Looking at these, one gets the sense that he could have beat them all at their own game had he wished, had that been the limit of his vision. But these paintings, great as they are, are Blakelock following Bierstadt and Moran, Blakelock not yet Blakelock, finding himself but not yet found.

Paired with Ryder, Albert Pinkham Ryder (another artist in need of reappraisal), in their interest in darkness and light and color without line, Blakelock ventured even further,



Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919), *Autumn Landscape*. Oil on canvas, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{16}$ in., signed lower right: 'R.A. Blakelock'.

pulling back, zooming out, shrinking himself, even in the small paintings, paintings done under duress inside the institutions, in response to Mrs. Beatrice Adams's seductions, Mrs. Adams and her "Blakelock Fund," seductions that became beatings—physical and emotional—and abject neglect of Blakelock the man later on, when the First World War distracted affluence from art and ground art, the old art—as well as artists old and new—into corpses that resisted all attempts at revivification.

In a recent essay in these pages, I wrote that there were no villains among artists—with one exception. He appears now, in this story, Blakelock's story—H.M. (Hudson Mindell) Kitchell.

As poverty nipped at Blakelock's heels, he took a job churning out landscapes for the E. C. Meeker Art Novelty Shop in Newark. Beside him, Kitchell, who would befriend Blakelock, watched and learned to parrot him (Google him, hit images, you'll see it in an instant). Later, when Blakelocks began to fetch big prices at auction, the market was flooded with fakes, many of them coming from the Young Gallery in Chicago. Mrs. Adams, protecting her golden goose tucked away in the sanitarium, accused Kitchell, who denied everything, except that he had "touched up" a Blakelock. After Blakelock's death, Robert Vose, of Vose Galleries in Boston, felt that Blakelock's widow, Cora, had been authenticating Kitchells as Blakelocks.

Between Mrs. Adams and Kitchell, thieves at cross-purposes, pot-calling kettle, there is scant hard evidence. Who signed Blakelock's name to what were certainly Kitchell's works is a mystery. But I've long convicted him in the court of my own humble opinion.

Fast forward. Beginning in the late 1960s, Nebraska art critic and director Norman Geske, who passed away in 2014, began to investigate Blakelock's work, assigning Roman numerals, I, II and III to delineate works beyond doubt from probable and possible paintings. Of the thousands of paintings signed "Blakelock" that Geske examined, he identified many spurious



Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919),
Indian Madonna.
Oil on panel,
8¹/₈ x 6¹/₈ in.,
signed in
arrowhead
lower right: 'R.A.
Blakelock'.
Images courtesy
Questroyal Fine
Art, LLC, New York,
New York.

works and brought some clarity to the deep murk that had done damage to Blakelock's reputation and market.

The following is not a new idea; indeed, it was current in Blakelock's later life, when his works shattered auction records for American art, even as the man himself languished in sanitariums, suffering what might best be called exploitation by committee: Blakelock is to American art what Walt Whitman is to American poetry and letters—both seek to democratize their embrace of the world. Look at the image of *Eternal Orb*, one of Blakelock's inimitable moon-bathed scenes. The light: blue, green, gray, black, with who knows how many other pigments beneath it, laces through the branches. The moon, round and pale, sheds its concentric light in gossamer layers. Still as the scene seems, everything in it seems to shimmer, to glow, to reflect some mystical, unwritten, unutterable poem. The painting invites you in, saying, at first, "Anyone can look at the moon." Then it asks to include you, saying,

"Why aren't you looking at the moon?" Then, ultimately, it exhorts you, crying out, "Look! The moon! The moon is a vision! Look, look at the moon!"

I hate lists. The click bait "bests of" click that plague my Facebook feed—"Top 22 Behind the Scenes Things You Didn't Know About Gilligan's Island." But if you hold my feet to the fire and ask me, "Who, to you, are the 10 best, most important, most influential American artists?" Ralph Albert Blakelock would instantly spring to my mind and lips.

125 Blakelocks.

Go! Look!

But first, look at the moon. ■

November 11-December 10

**Ralph Albert Blakelock:
The Great Mad Genius Returns**

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