

GILBERT MUNGER ARTIST

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BY Myra Dowd Monroe

GILBERT MUNGER

ARTIST (1836-1903)

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Before we recount the great attainments of Gilbert Munger, Artist, whose birthplace - the Munger Homestead - is so nearby - a landmark familiar to many of us and lately the home of Mrs. Susan Hill Thompson of honored memory, a relative of the Munger family, we may well indulge in a bit of neighborhood talk about his family and early environment.

Among the youngsters scouting together in North Madison a hundred years ago and whose names I have heard most often were Daniel Hills' boys - Joel, Henry and Horace, and Sherman Munger's boys - Roger, Billy, Russ and Gilbert on Opening Hill Road, Harvey and Alpha Dowd's boys - Olney, Hill and Judson, and Russell Dowd's boys - Edgar (1836) and James (1839) over West Side on Race Hill Road. There was a greater or less degree of cousinship amongst them all.

The mother of the Munger boys and the mother of Russell Dowd's boys were sisters - Lucretia and Polly Benton - daughters of Deacon Noah Benton jr. whose home was on Twin Bridge Road - west of the Iron Stream and a half mile south of the East and West Turnpike on land now owned by the Philip Hathaways - once the Newell Norton place. In that section Noah Benton sr. had possessed a large tract of land extending north toward Genesee on which near Race Hill were the old Iron Works which he owned and operated.

Recently I made my way through underbrush to the cellar place of the old Noah Benton house - all that is left of the home of my great grandparents and their family. In that house my father - Edgar Dowd - their daughter Polly's first child - was born. That was why I went there and that is how it comes about I am making this record.

I never saw my Grandmother Polly - she went years before I came. Her sons and daughters always spoke of her with special warmth and affection. I have her small leatherbound Bible - dark brown with age - very narrow and very thick and spreading open as demanding more space for its great content. On the flyleaf is this inscription - "Polly Benton's Property - a present from her mother Phebe Benton - 1827" On the opposite leaf in dim pencilling is written "Once I read

it because it was my duty but now I love it." The few of her household treasures - now mine - are the kind I like - and we would have admired them together. And so somehow - there in the quiet of the woods and in the peace of October sunshine - near her lilacs and the old doorstone - there was a welcome and I felt at home. The Bentons, the Mungers and the Dowds had been all over this ground; in and out over that doorstep; had used the same chairs and Pink China that I know; had landed trout from the same fine stream near by; had known Genesee, and Nineveh with its trailing arbutus; and the White Church at the Center where in an old manual their names appear among its membership. I spent a rich hour in imagined rememiscing with the folks gone before.

Polly's sister Lucretia Benton married Sherman Munger and went out from this home to live in the Munger Homestead at Opening Hill. There their four sons and a daughter Mary were born and reared.



Then the family moved to New Haven, Conn., where the children completed their schooling. Gilbert's tutor - Mr. Lovell - impressed with the lad's talent for drawing, urged his parents to give him special training. At the age of thirteen he became the pupil of a natural

history and landscape engraver at Washington, D. C. At fourteen years of age he was a full fledged engraver, drawing a salary from the U. S. Government.

Thus early for him came the separation from his family. Replying to his mother's anxious inquiry as to how he spent his spare time he wrote, "Don't worry about me - Mother - I am always in the best of company and that is Gilbert Munger's."

The three other brothers - my father accompanying them, went out in 1856 to the Great New West - spending a year in Iowa - thence going to St. Paul, Minnesota - where the brothers - all of them musical - established "The Munger Brothers Music Store."

Roger S. Munger - who has an important part in this chronicle - left St. Paul for Duluth, Minnesota, in 1869 and with a prophetic sense of its importance on the Great Lakes became one of the twelve pioneer settlers and there spent the rest of his life - closely identified with the development of the city. He died there aged 83 - and was known as "Duluth's Grand Old Man." His obituary in the Duluth Herald - March 15, 1913, has the following in part: "----with an indomitable energy and business sagacity and an enthusiasm which knew no limits - he in-

stilled in others the spirit which builds great enterprises and lays with unerring hand the foundation stones of a great city. The imprint of Mr. Munger's guiding hand is to be found from one end of Duluth to the other upon the industries and manufacturing projects which have spelled progress and prosperity.

The great grain elevators - thru which passed the millions of bushels from the vast prairies - the first sawmill (Note; His mills sawed lumber for the Northern Pacific Railroad) the first of the great modern coal docks - the first flour mill - the first Opera House - the first Theatre" (the planting of trees along the streets) "are a few of the enterprises thru which he and his associates under his initiative - builded the city." "No other man will live longer than he in the memories of all who hold in high regard such qualities as high integrity, stainless honor and enthusiastic optimism.

He was in truth a builder of the City but he was also a builder of character - and his personal influence goes side by side with the material evidence of his foresight and effort."

We have Roger Munger to thank for the story of his brother Gilbert's remarkable life. For he was the one who kept in touch with the friends in the east.

In his frequent business trips to New York - he found time now and then to run up to Connecticut and visit the old friends - Come in upon them with a breezy surprise and as glad as a child. He was fine! and we all loved him. I have been with him at a service in the North Madison Church - which he joined in 1843 - and noted his contentment as he sat there - the tall grey-haired man of many strenuous years - in whom was such a strong homing instinct. "I was along when he took his daughter and her children to see Nineveh Falls and saw the slight shadow that fell when these natives of the Great West after looking searchingly about from the old bridge said, very respectfully however, - "Is this all there is of it?"

I was with him when he called on William H. H. Murray - "Adirondack" Murray - one of the early friends and enjoyed as much as they did the good time they had. Upon leaving Mr. Murray grasped his hand and said, "You must come again - I Covenant with you." The expression pleased him - he referred to it several times afterward. With me there has been an aura surrounding Cousin Roger Munger - even around his name on the printed page - and it lingers about his last letters to me written with the unmanageable pen of age.

When he was in Washington, D. C., at the time of his brother Gilbert's death and afterward settling the estate - he was with us a great deal, and it was then he told us more than we had ever known before about the artist's life.

(I had seen Gilbert Munger but once and that on his only return to his native place - when I was very young. I am told that he suggested I be named "Minnehaha." Modesty forbids comment - but it is on record that at about that time he had done a painting of Minnehaha Falls which was the means of a commission from the Prussian Government to do a painting of Niagara Falls for which he received £ 1000 and later sold the picture to a California banker for a like sum.)

It seemed that this man's outstanding career should go on record in his native state. So with the wholehearted cooperation of Roger Munger - of Gilbert's artist friends - through correspondence and word of mouth - the material was collected and condensed into an article and sent to the Connecticut Quarterly Magazine, published in Hartford, Conn., in which, illustrated with a portrait of the artist and reproductions of six of his paintings, it appeared - June 1904.

No~~2~~ --- to return to the 14 year old engraver in Washington.

For several years he was steadily employed making large plates of birds - plants - fish - reptiles - portraits and landscapes published by the Government in connection with the exploring expedition of Commodore Wilkes - and for Professor Louis Agassiz' works and the works of the Smithsonian Institute.

This work - to him - was only a means to an end. He was determined to be a landscape painter. He read Ruskin's work and purchased a copy of J. D. Harding's drawing book - and rising at 4 o'clock - in the summer months he went into the woods and made studies of trees till 8 o'clock - then back to his engravers desk from 9 till 5. After that 3 more hours in the woods with pencil and paper.

During this period he visited the atelier of a sculptor from Rome and for the first time saw a sculptor at work on a statue. Taking home some clay he tried modelling portions of the human figure. These studies were received at the exhibition of the Metropolitan Institute of Science and Art and awarded first medal. This success did not curb his desire to paint. He got a box of colors and some brushes and for the first time tried to copy the hues as well as the forms of the Columbian Woods.

Then came the Civil War. Appropriations for Arts and Sciences had to be withdrawn and Mr. Munger was out of employment. He was offered and accepted a position as engineer in the Federal Army. The new work was not congenial. However he studied hard to fit himself for his new calling with such success that he became constructing engineer with rank of Major. During the four years war he was engaged upon the field fortifications around Washington.

The late Mr. Dwight Williams of Cazenovia, N.Y., artist and art critic and close friend of Gilbert Munger - wrote me, in connection with this period, the following: "He (Gilbert) served the Government well and faithfully and was called Major in those days and had men under him both as construction chief and in the department of lithography - which department he fathered and saved the Government much money. He simplified the department of mapmaking during the war. He has frequently told me about it." (Note: These maps were used by the Generals in Sherman's campaign. After the war the Government offered Munger a permanent position in this field with a large salary but he chose to study art) "Really he knew a lot of unwritten war history which I have often tried to have him write out - but he never had time - he would rather paint. General Early of the Confederacy rode through his headquarters and they stole horses and mules and many other things. This was out in the Maryland side - very near Silver Spring - where Frank Blair lived and of Lincoln's Cabinet. It was his niece whom Gilbert is supposed to have been in love with and who may possibly be Madelaine Marston in his play which was given in London in 1886. I have often heard him relate the experience there and also speak of this lovely young woman who played the piano so well. The play opens - as you know - by a beautiful girl playing the piano - and a young artist enters and begins to assist her in turning over the leaves of the music. I wish I could talk with you and I would tell you a lot of interesting things concerning our pleasant relation. We have so often painted <sup>together</sup> in the field. He was lovely good fun at times. We have often sat up all night painting and talking art matters."

After the war Gilbert Munger took a studio in New York. During the winter he painted two pictures which were exhibited in the National Academy of Design - favorably noticed by the press and sold.

Later he went to St. Paul, Minnesota and established a studio in Munger Brothers' Music Store building. At that time subjects he chose were interesting Minnesota scenes - notably the Red River Oxbow which

brought furs down from the Canadian Border and were sufficiently picturesque to attract attention.

Then out to the Rockies. Munger was for some years associated with Government Geological Surveys and was allowed to travel with them as artist and guest in connection with the first geological survey ever organized by the U. S. Government, under Clarence King. He and King were warm friends. In Clarence King's book "Mountaineering in the Sierras" - (P. 282) King makes this reference, "--but best we liked to sit at evening near Munger's easel - watching the great lava cone glow with light almost as wild and lurid as if its crater still streamed."

In regard to Munger's work at this period - Mr. Walter Paris, artist and friend of Gilbert's wrote me (Jan. 5, 1904) "It was then that he (Munger) devoted himself to the close study of Nature's grand effects and scenery.

I met him for the first time in San Francisco in 1875, where he was then established in his studio as an artist, and the work he was doing at that time was the most careful and conscientious interpretation from nature - fine in color and strong in artistic values. His work of those days I consider the most interesting period of his life - as it was absolutely sincere and not influenced by the art of any other country. It was spontaneous and full of the most careful feeling for truth and for Nature."

This strong work amid the extinct volcanoes of Oregon, Washington and California and the Yosemite brought enthusiastic response and he received a commission from the U.S. Government to paint a series of pictures illustrating the scenery of that wild region. He received also commissions for paintings from some English gentlemen whom he met there and who earnestly advised him to go to England with his studies. This he did.

In London he found his work much appreciated - but the great city was stifling to him after his long free life in mountains - and he soon made his escape - painting in the Highlands of Scotland with Sir John Millais - on the Cornish Coast - and for weeks at a time from his houseboat moored at a picturesque bend on the River Thames.

After the second season he sent 8 pictures to various exhibitions. -- To the Royal Academy - to Manchester - to New Castle and to Liverpool. Seven of them were sold. His sale of pictures was always phenomenal bringing flattering sums a few as high as \$5000. He exhibited comparatively little - his paintings being sent directly to their owners - and many of his best and most important works are scattered about the world in private galleries.

After ten years spent in England - he went to Paris and was soon recognized as the most talented landscape

artist in the American Colony.

Munger spent many years in the Forest of Fontainebleau that he said he felt quite at home there. And the country around was better known to him than to most of the natives. He painted many interesting scenes from his houseboat on the Seine and the Oise (Goose) River. He was familiar with every part of France - and this together with his perfect knowledge of the language often caused him to be mistaken for a Frenchman.

He travelled extensively throughout Europe and gained a thorough understanding of the English - French - German and Italian languages - "taught" - as he said, "by a private instructor" - meaning himself.

Urged by Ruskin he went to Venice and painted 50 pictures which were exhibited in London producing a sensation and establishing his fame in England.

His paintings have been purchased for the Luxembourg - the Royal Academy, London - at the Museums at Berlin - Munich - Schwerin - Meningen and Coburg. Decorations awarded for merit alone and not by influence were conferred upon him by France - Germany - Russia - Italy - Belgium and other countries. (See Memoir Madison Hist. Society)

To quote further from Mr. Walter Paris' letter; "-- I next saw Munger in London about the year 1882 - and he was then occupying a fine studio close to New Bond St. He had a great display of pictures on the spacious walls and on easels and he appeared to be full of work and in a most prosperous condition of life. He in those days - was one of the best dressed men who walked Bond St. and Piccadilly and at the same time was an extremely distinguished looking man.

I saw considerable of Munger at that time and found great pleasure in his acquaintance as a friend and as an artist.

His work was somewhat changed at this period - as he had been studying the great galleries of Europe and England. Altogether I should say that his best work was painted from 1880 to 1890. But after this I am not sure - as I saw nothing of his work after I left him in London in 1882 - I believe - until I met him again in Washington - some 7 or 8 years ago (1896-7) and by this time I found he was painting greatly under the influence of the great landscape school of France - Corot, Diaz, etc. and this feeling he indulged in more or less everything he did from that period till the time of his death. Munger was a most indefatigable worker and his whole mind and soul were given to his love of Art.

The fascination was so strong that of late years, he was not satisfied to work the whole day but he too frequently toiled the whole evening and frequently the whole night as well. This naturally affected his health as he no longer took meals at regular hours - only when he felt like it."

Munger was a man of unusual character and in everything



and in everything a born artist. Personally he was full of idiosyncrasies which developed more especially toward the end of his career and drove him in a measure to becoming a recluse to the outside world. This condition of things was brought about - doubtless - by the losses he sustained in investing his lifelong savings in speculative schemes and companies which paid no dividends and so deprived him of the income which he had relied on for his old age. Every man he had dealing with seemed to take a mean advantage of his confidence in his fellowmen.

Munger was a man of refined tastes and high artistic culture - a great student - and a man of high ambitions and to those whose privilege it was to know him thoroly he was always a dear friend and always a gentleman.--"

"Yours very truly

WALTER PARIS "

Mr. Dwight Williams sent me a letter he had received from the wellknown painter, the late Arthur B. Davies - an early pupil of his in which Mr. Davies gives his reaction to an exhibition of Gilbert Munger's paintings at the Noe Galleries, N.Y., after Munger's death. I quote-- as a whole the impression I got of the room was a most pleasant sunny one and more akin to the older Hudson River school than to the Barbizon men - without much of the later influence - as has been said so frequently. That shows more in the subjects than in the way of working. I believe as you do that if he (Noe) had shown some of those paintings made at Cazenovia under the genial home influence of D. W., we should have got at the man - and after all, that cannot be insisted upon too much.

It is to be hoped that the "Standard" things (which are without hope) will not cloud over those more special art features about which there will be numberless differing opinions, but that give a higher value to life. It would be idle for me to make preferences in the pictures shown at the exhibition. They all had sweetness and light - and a sense of proportion - and an inward sense of the realities.

There is no such thing as correct drawing or an outside standard of truth for works of Art." "Ye are Gods."  
(Arthur B. Davies 1904)

Mr. Dwight Williams dwells on the charm of Gilbert Munger's personality. "His sparkle, inspiration and 'go' and enthusiasm which fairly thrilled one to do ones best. He impressed one as having much nervous energy and strength. - Forceful - of the lean lank type-with much manner. He was such delightful fun at times. He would entertain a bevy of girls in the most refined and charming way. He was a rare story teller possessed of an exquisite 'light touch' in the matter of polite small talk and a much sought after dinner party man. He took a live interest in politics and affairs. He was a mild user of tobacco. He - like Turner - would

accept one glass of wine and refuse the second. Mr. Munger liked to know men of affairs and men of action - and he was fond of little children."

"I wish I could see you and talk with you," writes Mr. Williams. "Perhaps I would say: that Gilbert Munger was careful in the selection of his subjects. He looked upon landscape as the environment of man - and tried to paint the qualities of nature which suggest and appeal to the mind. He succeeded in converging in his art the emotions he experiences himself before nature. -- To me his art was a philosophy."

In an interview in Paris, 1892, Munger was asked why our artists live abroad and said in reply:

"If you insist upon a categorical answer to the question I cannot give it; but one of the reasons for my own stay, now prolonged since 1873, and the reason with which I am fond of appeasing my own patriotism whenever it urges my return to the blue skies of my native country - it is the increase of knowledge and the sure means of growth in art everywhere at hand in these old lands.

"Furthermore it is in Europe rather than America that the indefinable and singular charm in painting which men call style is most readily attained. Perhaps the ample survey of the whole field of art offered in Europe better enables a man to 'strike his personal note' as the French say - to find out his failings and avoid them - I should say.

The gratifying measure of success which has greeted my efforts in these latter years is due, I am sure, to having found a way to my own style through a number of experiments and a series of careful observations which I should not have been able to make if settled at home.

There is a crystallization of style in painting as in literature. It is of course a slow process, and in my case - is the fruit of long seasons of painting in the foothills of my own Rocky Mountains - in the shadow of El Capitan in the Yosemite and of St. Paul's Cathedral in London; of work in the open in Scotland with Sir John Millais; of solitary toil in the lagoons of Venice and finally - of the long and thoughtful season of severe effort in Fontainebleau Forest in the track of the masters. It is following successively such widely differing phases of Nature and Art that I have at last come to a final phase of my own painting about the recent general recognition of which the Journal kindly asks. Could I have reached this stage at home? Frankly, no; but mainly for the reason that Art is, as yet, comparatively undeveloped in America and not because of any special limitations in the Country itself."

"After a long absence in Europe Gilbert Munger returned to his native land to find that many of his old friends had passed away and that he was a stranger almost, in the land of his birth. More assiduously than ever he applied himself to his work. Taking a studio in New York - for a few years - he led the life most congenial to him - a recluse among his pictures having accumulated in addition to his own quite a large number of the Old Masters. He spent an autumn season with his friend Dwight Williams in Cazenovia, N. Y., doing some fine work characteristic of the scenery of that locality. His health failing him in 1901, he was advised to try the somewhat milder climate of Washington, but the change made little difference in his general health - and he passed quietly away January 27, 1903, in his studio in that city where he had painted his first picture nearly half a century before. Yet he still lives upon the canvases into which he wrought his Personality - his reverence for nature - his keen sense of truth and by which his spirit stands revealed."

In connection with Gilbert Munger's character we have this interesting incident through the late Mrs. William T. Foote (Emma Munger Foote) of Guilford. In her reading one day she came across mention of Gilbert Munger Wright - son of the novelist Harold Bell Wright. Her curiosity was aroused and she wrote to Mr. Wright. She received from him this letter which she showed me and allowed me to copy and I am sure she would like to have it read to you.

(Note: the novelist devotes a few pages to Gilbert Munger in his book entitled "To My Sons.")

(Copy)

1189 Speedway,  
Tucson, Arizona  
April 7, 1918.

Mrs. William T. Foote,  
102 Church St.,  
Guilford, Conn.,

Dear Madam:

My oldest son was named Gilbert Munger Wright because Sir Gilbert Munger, when I was a young man, was my most intimate and dearest friend and because to him and to my association with him more than to any other cause - perhaps - I owe whatever measure of success I have attained in life.

It was Gilbert Munger who first opened for me, by his intimate comradeship, advice and inspiration, the doors into the World of Art. I was a penniless nobody, a wanderer with no one even to bid me look in the right direction. But Sir Gilbert for some reason or other took me into his inner life and while the association and this close companion-

ship was not of years standing, it still left such an impression on me that my whole life was shaped from that time.

There are some things, Madam, that are too big to write about; some things that we cannot put into words. This - my young man friendship with Sir Gilbert Munger, has always been one of those things to me.

It may interest you to know that I submitted to him my first efforts and many times he would say to me in his studio, while we ate lunch in some little out of the way eating house, or during our evening walks - "You'll do it some day, lad, you'll do it."

He wished me to go abroad with him but for many reasons it seemed best for me to, as we say in the vernacular, go on my own. I left him then, one afternoon, to begin anew my wanderings and have never seen him since.

Do you wonder, Madam, that I named my firstborn, Gilbert Munger Wright?

I am writing Mr. George B. Munger today for a copy of the Munger book.

Thanking you for your letter, I am,  
Yours very sincerely,

Harold Bell Wright

In this vicinity there are a few Munger paintings - more than twenty of them in the collection of the late Hon. Lyman A. Mills of Middlefield, Conn., one entitled "Franchard near Fontainebleau" was given by Mr. Mills to Hartford Atheneum for its permanent collection.

Yale Art Museum has one Munger, relating to which is the following press notice:- "A collection of eight important canvases of the Barbizon School by such leading mid-nineteenth century Frenchmen as Jacques, Diaz, Daubigny, Corot, Boudin, Munger, Michel and Schreyer, is a gift to Yale of Miss Jessie Mason Tilney of New York in memory of her grandparents - John William Mason and Hannah Maria Mason who collected them."

The Mungers I have were given me by Roger S. Munger after his brother Gilbert's death in 1903.

April 1945

*Myra Dowd Munger*

(Note; Nicholas Munger born England 1623 - arrived New Haven 1639 - died 1668. Roger Munger said "All Mungers around here are descended from the Old Nick.")