

## **Paradise Lost: John La Farge and the Art of Longing**

A review of the exhibition: *John La Farge's Second Paradise*, at the Yale Art Gallery, October 2010 to January 2011

By Geoffrey Detrani

Some artists are like pilgrims – they travel to exotic locales to make a connection or garner inspiration. Often the settings are primitive or illustrative of a simpler life – one unsullied by the encroachments of modernity. John La Farge was one such adventuresome American artist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exhibition *John La Farge's Second Paradise*, at the Yale Art Gallery, is a compelling presentation of the fruits of his restless seeking.

In 1890, La Farge set out to find “paradise” in the then sparsely explored and economically undeveloped south pacific islands. At the time of his travels, La Farge was an established “plein air” painter, known for his work with landscapes (one of his previous sources of inspirations was Paradise Valley, Rhode Island).

This was the period when the United States was blossoming in its bid for economic and political hegemony in the Pacific Rim. Though not unique in his undertaking – the French painter Paul Gauguin’s work in Tahiti commenced one year later - La Farge is said to have been one of the first Americans to travel as a “tourist” to this region. This makes La Farge’s project as interesting as history as it does as art.

So, what did he make from his travels? The exhibition is filled with modest genre scenes of natives regaled in traditional garb, and soft-focus landscapes conjuring Nature as a sublime but hospitable force. The landscapes are brushy and loose impressions of place - essays on what the artist saw and the ideology behind his looking. In Crater of Kilauea, Sunrise, we see the formidable subject in mottled, stippled greens and earth browns in a context of hazy, atmospheric first light. Conceptually it’s of a piece with characteristics of romantic landscape painting prevalent earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet it evidences a very modern trait of impatient looking - as if the artist were eager to pack up the field easel and get to the marvels that awaited in the next valley or on the next, distant island.

La Farge’s other clear concern was to depict the native people he encountered. Here we see his ethnographic bent coupled with a propensity for the romantic ideal. Some works depict a natural scene with one or two figures, caught in the act of their everyday lives and oblivious to the presence of the painter. In others the figures look directly at the viewer. In one sense we see the artist as omniscient narrator giving us entrée onto an undisturbed world. In another, La Farge causes the viewer to confront the fixed outward gaze of the ostensible subject. In these works, the natives come across as strong and self possessed.

Many of the paintings show scenes of significant cultural events. La Farge was a fan of the “Siva” dances of Samoa and depicts these dances in several paintings and drawings. Here, the Samoans are portrayed with a resonant confidence and poise – a people occupying a well-ordered world lacking in societal blight.

It seems clear that La Farge was looking for an imagined idyll – a locale of transparent authenticity. Having inferred this, one can find in his work an overly didactic quality – as if he is saying to the westerners that he temporarily left behind and who were his clear audience - this is the way it should be.

It would be easy to look on La Farge’s project, whatever its aesthetic quality, as being the paternalistic notations of a vanguard of cultural colonialism. But I think that this would be too glib a conclusion.

Like any artifact of cultural collision, these paintings show us not only the look of the landscape and peoples encountered, but also the canyon-wide space between the looker and the looked at. While the power of representation is forever ripe for critique, with La Farge’s work, representation does not come at the cost of beauty.