

## Elliot Daingerfield

Elliott Daingerfield was born March 26, 1859, on the eve of the Civil War, in what was then Harper's Ferry, Virginia. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry occurred on October 15, 1859; the year of Daingerfield's birth. His father was Captain John Elliott Parker Daingerfield and his mother was Mathilda Wicham DeBrua. Siding with the Confederate States, Capt. Daingerfield was sent by General Robert E. Lee to command the arsenal in Fayetteville, NC in 1861. Elliott Daingerfield was, according to his own words, deeply influenced by his early life in the South.

Daingerfield first began to paint while living in Fayetteville; according to a widely quoted story, his older brother, Archie, gave Elliott a box of watercolors for Christmas. Even his earliest attempts were said to be "exquisite paintings" (Hobbs, 12). Daingerfield began his first formal study of painting with a local china painter, Mrs. William McKay. Later, he apprenticed himself to a photographer and learned to take and tint pictures.

Feeling that he had exhausted the avenues of instruction in Fayetteville, he decided to relocate. He briefly studied with an unknown artist in Norfolk, Virginia, and two months shy of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, he arrived in New York on January 20, 1880. During this year he was apprentice to the artist, Walter Satterlee. It was also during this year that he first exhibited his work at the National Academy of Design. From time to time, he studied at the Art Students' League.

1884 was a highly significant year in the life of the young artist. First, he moved to the Holbein Studios where he met artists such as Childe Hassam, John Singer Sargent, and eventually, George Inness, whose interest in "...the spiritual aspects of art remained an abiding influence." Daingerfield believed that the greatest essential in painting was "spiritual vision" which he defined as: "...a message imparted to a man of genius who if he has the technical ability, may pass it on to the observer.... It is the light of the spirit, the presence of the something which has no material or objective expression" (Daingerfield, 2).

He was further fascinated by the involvement of Inness in the "theories and philosophies of Emmanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth century Swedish theologian who enjoyed a notable revival in America after the Civil War" (Pennington, et. al., 21). Inness helped Daingerfield in many ways. It was Inness who taught the young Elliot "to glaze his canvases by applying layers of colors over other layers and inserting thin layers of varnish between them" (Hobbs, 14). Inness also bought some of Daingerfield's paintings for his own collection and often would send his own collectors to buy from the aspiring young artist with the admonition, "Why pay such exorbitant prices for my paintings when you can acquire works by this young artist for a fraction of the cost?" (Howlett and Plyler quoted in Hobbs, 14).

The second major event was on September 25, 1884, Elliott Daingerfield married Roberta Strange French, the daughter of Judge Robert Strange French of Wilmington NC, which strengthened his already strong ties to North Carolina, the place he had always considered his home. He would be returning to that home he loved sooner than he anticipated—an

unfortunate attack of diphtheria in the winter of 1885-6 caused him to spend the summer in Blowing Rock in order to regain his strength.

He eventually would build a total of three summer homes in Blowing Rock and would frequently paint the scenes of tranquility he found there. His beloved wife, Rebecca, did not live long enough to enjoy his success as an artist or the respite found in Blowing Rock, due to her death in 1891 from childbirth. Daingerfield was able to find some solace through painting in the aftermath of her death.

In 1892 he painted *The Harvest*, portraying a young woman with bundles of hay under each arm; studies of rural life were among his favorites. The artist was putting his life back together, perhaps strengthened by the notion of "spiritual vision." By 1893 he was being called "the American Millet" (Hobbs, 20). He combined his spiritual and rural themes. In 1893 he painted *The Mystic Brim*, which put him in the category of the symbolists: "Symbolist painters sought to move beyond the surface of their reality, focusing upon an inward vision which reflected their interest in portraying ideas and emotions transcending the world of physical experiences" (Pennington, et. al., 27).

Then in 1894 he suffered yet another loss with the death of his friend and staunch supporter, George Inness. The year of 1895 found Daingerfield in New York once again. While there he would paint within the newly completed chapel of the Church of Saint Mary Virgin, on a commission from Haley Fiske in 1902.

On December 30, 1895, he married Anna Grainger, the daughter of Leander Kaye Grainger of Louisville Kentucky, who would become his favorite model. In fact, it is said that hers was the ethereal face in the painting of the Virgin that Daingerfield donated to the St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Main Street in Blowing Rock, NC. This painting, *The Madonna of the Hills*, was presented in 1918 and hangs over the altar. One of the three homes he owned in Blowing Rock was directly across the street from the Episcopal Church. The second was *Windwood*, located on a hill and now owned by an antique dealer from Greensboro. The third home was *Westglow*.

During the year of 1897 Daingerfield studied in Paris. He subsequently became a professor of painting and composition at the Philadelphia School of Design. In 1906 Daingerfield was elected to the national Academy of Design.

Often, his paintings would include moonlight; *Moonlight* (circa 1915), is in fact the title of this particular painting in the American collection of the Mint Museum of Art. An earlier painting entitled *Mysterious Night* (1895), another painting which effectively demonstrates his ability to portray moonlight, was exhibited at the New York Watercolor Club Exhibition of 1895. In order to get the texture he desired he used sanding to allow color to sink into the paper. In the end he would use a dry brush to apply accents. Joseph Daingerfield Dulaney, the grandson of the artist, was an active member of the Mint Museum at the time of this writing (April, 1998); he provided invaluable assistance regarding information about this painting. The scene depicted, as identified by Mr. Dulaney, is on the grounds of *Westglow*, which was the third Daingerfield

home in Blowing Rock, NC. The background is the Mayview Ridge line, looking east from the south side of the garden. In this painting Daingerfield used the technique he had learned from Inness—layering colors between coats of varnish. “*Moonlight* is...suffused with his spiritual attitudes towards nature,” (Mo, 73). Daingerfield once wrote: “the scene of my greatest inspiration has been the mountains of North Carolina” (Blowing Rocket, 6/19/92). This confession is all the more remarkable when one knows that he painted the Grand Canyon on a commission of the Santa Fe Railroad (1911-1916).

The third Blowing Rock home, *Westglow*, was completed in 1916. In 1924 the Daingerfields began a tour of Europe at which time the artist began to paint Venetian scenes. Tragically, while on the trip, Daingerfield suffered a physical breakdown (an embolism) which arrested his artistic activities. He died on October 22, 1932, in his Gainsborough Studios on Central Park in New York. He was buried in Fayetteville, NC in the Cross Creek Cemetery. However, the legacy of Daingerfield lives on in his paintings.

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-Sarah Leak, Ph. D., 1998