

Francis Augustus Silva - A Life

JOÃO JORGE COELHO PEREIRA

In a review in *The New York Times* of an exhibition of his work, Francis Augustus Silva (1835 – 1886) was termed a “capable minor league” artist (Johnson 36). Although his works are still respected by experts, his is not a household name with the more artistically-minded public. His paintings, however, exhibit careful attention to detail and his treatment of light was such that it was viewed as a “means of expressing feeling – or sentiment” (Baur 1018). This biographical essay does not expect to push Silva into the fine arts’ major league; it aims instead to probe into the circumstances and events surrounding his life and examine how they influenced the man and his art. Not much is known of him and his inner life; sources are few and often incomplete, gaps show for some periods of his life. There is no corpus of personal papers or written works, which means that the more subtle aspects of his character and work are open to conjecture. Consequently, his art may be our best guide to learning more about him and his personal convictions.

Born two years before Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *American Scholar* speech, his early life is set in the years following Emerson’s call for a distinctive American cultural identity free from European influence. This was to be rooted in the country’s vast natural setting, and emotion was to be the instrument to identify and reveal the universal Truths hidden in Nature, both of which transpire in Silva’s art. The Civil War crushed the optimism and cast doubts on the romantic certainties of the preceding age, but Silva did not wander in search of a new compass, demonstrating his commitment to the cause of a unique American perspective. In what were to be his final years, Silva witnessed with dismay the rise of a new generation of American painters again looking to Europe for inspiration, namely the French impressionists. But his art kept true to the influence of emotion and the search for harmony with Nature, not just as a manifestation of his convictions but also as an attempt to find a place of solace after the devastation the country suffered, and he himself witnessed, during the Civil War: for both, that distinct American identity was shaped by the effects of the war.

Francis Augustus Silva was born on October 4, 1835, in New York City (Wilson and Fiske 530), the son of Francis John Silva, an immigrant from the island of Madeira, Portugal. A private memorandum from 1867 traces the family's descent to a Frenchman, later identified in another family manuscript as François Joseph de Lapierre. An obscure artist of the same name (sometimes also François-Joseph de la Pierre or Joseph-François de la Pierre) is known to have lived around the middle of the 18th century. One surviving painting of his is located at the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri (Plax 55).

De Lapierre's son was said to have been a colonel in the French Army during the Revolutionary Wars. Banished from France for unspecified reasons sometime around 1796, he moved to Lisbon, Portugal, where he established himself as a painter. After marrying a woman whose portrait he was working on, he moved to the island of Madeira. It was here that Francis John Silva was born, around 1816, and from where he sailed to America in 1830 after dropping his father's family name as a safety precaution, adopting his mother's instead (Baur 1021). An 1879 directory of artists – whose biographical sketches were compiled by direct application to the artists themselves – follows this narrative, crediting Francis Augustus Silva's taste for art as coming from his grandfather, "Col. François Jean of the French Army," stating, however, that after the latter had moved to Lisbon he became "Painter to the Spanish Court" (Clement and Hutton 253).

Upon arrival in the United States, Silva settled in New York as a barber and raised a family. We find small traces of the family in a few official documents, namely population surveys. Unlike the 1840 United States Census, which only contained the name of the family head, the 1850 US Census collected more information and was the first to list the name of each person in the household together with their age. In it we find F. J. Silva, aged 35, registered as a 'hair dresser,' followed by Hester (née Walgrove, or Wolgrove) whose age is listed as 24; Francis, the eldest of four children, aged 14, raises the question of his mother's identity (US Census 1850).

Following in the steps of the many thousands that chose New York as their new home every year, Francis John Silva wouldn't have had too much trouble finding work. The city was experiencing a period of economic growth fueled by the rail boom that would change urban life and the country itself, acting as a magnet attracting workers from just about every corner. New York's population in 1830 was slightly over 200,000, and a fair number were outsiders, mostly European immigrants. In 1825, already over a fifth of its residents were foreign-born (Burrows and Wallace 478), and the greatest numbers were those of the Irish,

followed by the Germans. Ten years later the yearly average for Irish immigrants arriving at the city was 30,000 (Burrows and Wallace 543), the majority of which were from Ulster. As he came from a Catholic country, Francis John Silva would have probably been regarded with some misgivings in an overwhelmingly Protestant city. Only after 1845 did Catholics become the majority of Irish arriving in New York – running away from the famine caused by the potato blight in their native land – but nativist violence against Catholics was not uncommon before that date: in June 1835, fighting between the two groups broke out in Chatham Square (Burrows and Wallace 545), near the Seventh Ward, where Silva lived.¹ This general atmosphere of animosity may have contributed to his decision to anglicize his first and second names, which gave him an entirely new identity.

The year of Francis Augustus Silva's birth was remarkable for an event other than the riots, and much greater in its consequences for the city. On December 16, 1835, a fire broke out that raged for three days in spite of freezing temperatures, destroying more than 600 buildings in the financial area near Wall Street. As the water supply was inadequate, firemen had to dig holes in the ice-covered East River only to find that the water froze in the hoses before reaching the flames. As the fire intensified, its glow could be seen all the way to Philadelphia. The army was called to suppress looting and help in the fire-fighting efforts, eventually using explosives to blow up buildings to create a containment ring and starve the fire. In its wake, 23 of the city's 26 fire insurance companies went bankrupt and thousands of people lost their jobs (Burrows and Wallace 598). The reconstruction that followed recast the whole burned area and, among other developments, improved the general urban water supply and sanitation conditions, stimulating a wave of city-wide improvements that prepared the ground for its rapid expansion in the decades that followed. The city would attract (more) of the wealthy and powerful, and also the artists who usually follow them and whose patronage they seek. New York City grew to become the heart of the country's material and sensible dimensions, the perfect stage for any aspiring artist.

Did the riots and the urban transformation of the city influence Francis Augustus Silva, and does his art reflect that? If America needed a cultural consciousness of its own based on Nature, as Emerson argued, then the growing city would not be providing much in the way of inspiration. It would also demand that its inhabitants shed their European quarrels and allow the emergence of a new, common, identity. Although he lived and worked in New York City, Francis Augustus Silva

1. In the New York City directory for 1835, the address of Francis J Silva, "hairdresser," is 137 Division Street; Chatham Square is on the opposite end of that street (NY City Directory 594).

– whose original family name was French and whose first name, like that of his father before he changed it, should presumably have been François, or the Portuguese Francisco – looked to the coastal and isolated spaces in search of that unique America, without past, born of the peaceful merging of heaven and sea displayed in a number of his paintings.

The State of New York also took surveys of its population. A fire in the State Capitol in 1911 destroyed most of the archives for the previous dates, but we can find the Silva family in surviving 1855 NY Census records. Young Francis Augustus Silva is by then 19 years of age and listed as a painter (NY State Census 1855). According to the ‘official’ biographical accounts, his father opposed his artistic inclinations, but after he failed at different other trades, the father apparently yielded enough to allow him to be apprenticed to a commercial sign-painter, decorating signs and horse-drawn carriages, an occupation he maintained until the start of the Civil War (Wilson and Fiske 253). The father’s consent may have been obtained thanks to more than just the boy’s declared feelings: there is a possibility that he exhibited drawings at the American Institute of the City of New York to some acclaim, in a display of his natural talent. In the organization’s Report recording the prizes awarded in its 1849 Fair, there appears in the Fine Arts section the name of one “F. Silva” who won a diploma “for specimens of pen drawing” (American Institute of the City of New York 51). If this is our Francis Augustus Silva, he would have been 14 years old at the time, a precociousness that has prompted doubts regarding the identity (Baur 1031).

The start of the Civil War interrupted Francis Augustus Silva’s progress in his chosen occupation, and since his later art reflects much of the conflict’s effect upon him and the country, a close look at his involvement is justified. Events moved quite fast after the bombardment of Fort Sumter by Confederate forces on April 12, 1861. Three days later, President Abraham Lincoln issued a call for volunteers to put down the insurrection. On April 20, a popular rally in support of the Federal Union was organized in New York City, which saw more than 100,000 people gather in the aptly named Union Square, an occasion that inspired thousands to enlist in volunteer regiments to fight. By April 23, six regiments had already been raised and more would be created in the following weeks (Burrows and Wallace 869-870). According to the official registers, Francis A. Silva enrolled to serve for two years with the Ninth New York Volunteer Regiment of Infantry on May 13, 1861 (Adjutant-General of the State of New York *Annual Report for the Year 1899* 753; Phisterer 3:1835, 1842). By his own account,

however, his military career had begun a few years before as a member of the Seventh New York Militia Regiment (Mitchell 20-21), perhaps following the family's professed tradition of service as illustrated by his ancestor – an homage to his past after his father's change of name.

After the initial period of training drills at Riker's Island, the Ninth Regiment left New York on June 6 with orders to proceed to the Virginia Peninsula, and to participate there in the defense of Fort Monroe, the federal fortress still in Union hands. The regimental history continues with a detailed account of the first days of action in Virginia. The regiment arrived at Newport News, Virginia, on June 8, and two days later an attack was launched against the nearby Confederate positions at Big Bethel Church. The attack failed and the Ninth Regiment – which did not participate in the initial engagement because of its recent arrival – was hurriedly called up as reinforcement to cover the retreat of the main force. In the following days and weeks, the regiment was involved in several scouting operations and skirmishes with the enemy (Graham 71-72). These early actions may explain the rapid rise through the ranks of Francis Augustus Silva during this period. He was commissioned as First Lieutenant on July 4 – Independence Day – with rank backdated to May 13, his date of enrolment. Early in the war, volunteer junior officers were selected through one of two methods: by appointment, usually thanks to political patronage, or by election; in a demonstration of the republican character of their military service, volunteer soldiers chose by ballot their company officers from those among them who demonstrated merit or some natural leadership ability. A reasonable conclusion, therefore, may be drawn that Silva either knew someone of consequence, or that during those weeks of June his performance merited the approval of his comrades who sanctioned his elevation with their votes.

However, on July 31, shortly after this promotion, Silva was transferred to the First New York Volunteer Regiment of Infantry. If he felt the strain of the change and the need to adapt to his new leadership responsibilities, it apparently did not overwhelm him: he was commissioned Captain of Company A, on August 27, with rank backdated to July 31, the date of his transfer (Adjutant-General of the State of New York *Annual Report for the Year 1898* 133; Phisterer 2:1705). Silva's commissioning may have taken place in the context of a reorganization of the regiment's officers list following the court-martial of the Regiment's Commanding Officer, Colonel William H. Allen. One of the very few existing photographs of Silva, prob-

ably taken shortly after his promotion, shows him in his Captain's uniform, and reveals a young man of soft facial features and a composed, alert look; the caption underneath the photo reads "Cap't Francis A Silva 1st Inf'try N.Y. Vol's" (Metropolitan Museum of Art 66; Baur 1018).

From his post at the southern tip of the Virginia Peninsula, Francis Silva witnessed one of the most momentous and symbolic events of the war.² On March 9, 1862, two ironclad warships, the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack* (for the Union and the Confederacy, respectively; the latter had been rechristened the *Virginia* by the Confederacy) fought each other in the channel known as Hampton Roads, where the James River empties in the Atlantic Ocean, in full view of Newport News and Fort Monroe. The day before this battle, the Union troops had been under fire from the *Virginia* for several hours, including the First NY Volunteer Regiment (Bureau of Military Record of the State of New York 41), and the *Virginia* had also sunk two Union wooden frigates to the consternation of those watching on land. The next day the *Monitor* arrived to even the odds and confront the enemy. It was the first naval battle in history involving metal-armored ships, and although the awkward-looking combatants fought an indecisive duel, it was clear to all those watching that the age of sail and the romance surrounding naval warfare was coming to an end, and a different, metallic, and smoke-filled age had begun. The images of a dying world and the violent innovations in technological industrialization and its military products left a deep impression in Silva, which reflected in his future choice of subjects to paint, as we shall see.

The First NY Volunteer Regiment participated in the Peninsula Campaign that took place during the spring and summer of 1862. The operation was a major offensive against Richmond, the Confederate capital, starting from Fort Monroe and pressing up the Virginia Peninsula. Deferrals and dithering by General George McClellan, the architect of the campaign and the commander of the advancing Army of the Potomac, ensured successive Confederate successes, and Silva's regiment was called to reinforce the army of the Potomac on June 3rd. By then, Silva had fallen so sick that the regiment's surgeon recommended his absence from service to recuperate, a request denied by the regiment's commanding officer (Baur 1022). This could mean that Silva likely accompanied his regiment when it was placed in the front of the Union lines, where it became directly involved in the sequence of engagements known as the Seven Days Bat-

2. Julian Oliver Davidson painted one of the better-known paintings of the battle and acknowledged his debt to Francis Augustus Silva, who had sketched the battle from the shoreline near Newport News (Prang and Holzer 170).

ties (June 25th to July 1st), near Richmond, the strategic objective of the campaign. The confederates, led by Robert E. Lee, put a stop to the Union advance in a succession of bloody encounters that drained McClellan's reserves and determination, forcing him to retreat. The rest of the month of July was spent defending positions and preparing the general evacuation of the Army of the Potomac, which happened in August. The sanitary conditions endured by the Union troops during this final stage were appalling, and the records state that the First New York "suffered severely from the heat and from typhoid fever and dysentery" (Bureau of Military Record of the State of New York 43), which probably contributed to Francis Silva's worsening health, prompting him to leave without his superior officer's authorization.

Silva's absence was construed as desertion and his subsequent dismissal was dated July 24. Francis managed to explain himself satisfactorily to his superiors, as his dismissal was revoked and instead he was discharged honorably. This did not satisfy Silva though, and he appealed again to his superiors, and was recommissioned on January 16, 1863, although he was not reinstated, as his post had by then been filled (Adjutant-General of the State of New York, *Annual Report for the Year 1898* 133; Phisterer 1698, 1705). As a consequence, Silva sat out the next two years of the war, waiting to be mustered back into the lines. Finally, realizing that the war was approaching an end and that he would not be recalled, he registered as a US Army Hospital Steward in Massachusetts on January 30, 1865 (United States Registers of Enlistments). The register is interesting for the details we are given about Silva: he is described as having hazel eyes, brown hair, and a sallow complexion; his height is measured at 5 ft. 3 ½ in, or just about 1.60 m. Although the war ended in April 1865, his discharge took place on November 11, 1865, thus ending the martial interval in his life, the final part of which certainly impressed upon Silva a deeper insight into the ravages of war on men's bodies and minds.

Silva's return to civilian life marks the beginning of a new phase. He married less than three years later, on October 3, 1868, to Margaret Watts, from New Jersey. The wedding was registered in Keyport, Monmouth, New Jersey (New Jersey Marriages). For the ensuing years until his death, Silva seems to have rotated his residence between New York and New Jersey, at least until 1880 when he moved permanently to live with his family in Long Branch, New Jersey. During the entire time, however, he kept a professional address in New York (Baur 1022, 1025). He also decided to devote himself to a career as an artist, painting marine subjects as a full-time occupation. He advertised himself proudly as "entirely self-taught" (Clement and Hutton 254), which could be regarded by some as amateurish. The experience of war may have added a new resoluteness to Silva, enabling him to

finally unload the weight of his father's earlier disapproval. He debuted in the 1868-69 Winter Exhibition of the National Academy of Design with a work called *Old Wreck at Newport* (National Academy of Design 13). Having no formal education in the arts could prove a handicap for any aspiring artist, as that would deprive the artist of specific training regarding techniques and resources, as well as limiting the artist's exposure to different styles. Advertising one's self-training could, of course, result in a predictably cold reception by some in the elite of the artistic establishment, who did not take kindly to the increasing number of so-called common people who tried their hand at the fine arts. In 1834, the playwright and historian William Dunlap derided Jeremiah Paul, also a former sign painter turned artist, as "one of those unfortunate individuals who, showing what is called genius in early life, by scratching the lame figures of God's creatures, on every thing[sic] that will receive chalk or ink, are induced to devote themselves to the fine arts, without the means of improvement or the education necessary, to fit them for a liberal profession" (Wood 572).

But times had changed since the 1830s, and Silva is not known to have met such scathing treatment. In 1872, he was elected to the American Society of Painters in Water Colors (later the American Watercolor Society), an organization dedicated to promoting watercolor painting in America. According to the organization's website, the members were classified as Active or Associate, the latter reserved for amateurs and those not residing in New York City; an amateur was anyone not deriving their main income from their artistic work. Furthermore, an Active member was dropped if they did not contribute paintings to the organization's exhibitions for three consecutive shows. Silva was an Active member until his death, and exhibited in every annual show. As the organization recognizes, its initial purpose had much to do with combatting "the feeling of many artists, as well as non-artists, that watercolor was only a sketching medium" ("History - The Beginning"), a view not independent from questions regarding the physical durability of watercolors, and the financial viability for artists of watercolor painting.

Despite this prejudice, Silva's acceptance by the general artistic milieu seems to have been uneventful. In 1873, he was elected to the Artists' Fund Society, a mutual aid organization that also held annual exhibitions. By 1875, his name was popping up in the newspaper columns devoted to art gossip ("Art Gossip"). One such episode bears mentioning. In 1885, after more than fifteen years as a settled artist, Silva was the object of a review from an anonymous critic who labelled one of his paintings as "utterly worthless" ("The Art Standard of Value"). To be fair, the reviewer - the painter and writer Kenyon Cox - had spread widely and

evenly his negative opinion about the winter show of the National Academy of Design where Silva had exhibited his painting, calling “the great mass” in display as “hopelessly and helplessly imbecile” (“The Academy Exhibition”). Born into a Midwestern family of affluence and influence (Cox’s father had been Ohio Governor and Secretary of the Interior in the Grant administration), Cox studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Trained, well-versed in the history of art, he set his standards according to the classical and Renaissance aristocratic traditions, in stark contrast to the more democratic American tastes.

Francis Silva took exception to the dismissive two-word review. In a reply to the editor of the newspaper, he defended his work by pointing to the amount that had been paid for it, and to the favorable opinions of his peers. He repudiated the criticism as abusive, which ill-suited the critic’s role, and as evidence that Cox had no right to judge Silva’s work anymore than he did clothing or groceries. He signaled his wounded pride: “I have won my way to the rank I hold in my profession, and I propose to maintain it.” The editor, however, distorted Silva’s words claiming that he (Silva) estimated his picture “as he estimates ready-made clothing or groceries,” while Cox “was estimating it as a piece of art, and we are sure that Mr. Silva, although he may consider himself a manufacturer, and may work simply as a manufacturer, knows enough of art to know that there are in the world tens of thousands of pictures, which from the strictly artistic point of view are ‘utterly worthless,’ and yet have been sold at good prices.” Calling Silva a manufacturer was a way of reducing his painting to mere shop work, done with great skill but without creative value, thus indicating that he was an outsider. The editor’s conclusion was equally unkind: “We wish Mr. Silva every success in his calling, but is it ‘a profession,’ as he regards it? The truth is that it is the large number of artists among us who take his view of art, which now makes our exhibitions such dismal affairs” (“The Art Standard of Value”). We may infer that the editor of the *Evening Post* viewed Silva’s talk of profession as a lowering of the fine arts to a trade, degrading its soul-enlarging power and reducing it to a medium for simply making money – evidence that he was not a true artist.

Francis Silva’s main subjects were marine and coastal landscapes. He travelled regularly along the coast, from New Jersey to the shores of New England – the ones he remembered from his time as a hospital steward in Massachusetts during the war – in search of inspiration and locations to portray. Many of his paintings focus on the natural setting: there are barely any people present, and those that show up go about their lives unaware of the painter’s gaze. Above is usually a wide and open sky whose endlessness is made more poignant by the way the

light is manipulated to create an atmosphere of peacefulness and harmony. This characteristic approach to light and its key role in framing the landscape earned him an inclusion in the category of luminist painters, a term created by art writer and curator John Ireland Howe Baur in 1954. The precise definition of luminism is somewhat troublesome despite attempts at clarification. Barbara Novak laid down some useful guidelines, but concluded by saying that “there are few pure luminist artists” although there are “pure luminist works” so that, in her final assessment, luminism cannot be regarded “as a movement but as a mode to which artists had recourse whenever it was formally and philosophically viable” (Novak 29). Philosophically, the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideas prompted one art historian to label luminism as “the visual paradigm of transcendentalism” (Powell 72).

There is no explicit evidence that Francis Silva had any conception of what is today called luminism, that he followed transcendentalist principles, or that he had read Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays, although his paintings do match luminism’s main tenets. While his paintings can perhaps be studied to discern philosophical meaning, a better perspective might be to approach his work in the context of his times and his experience. Clearly the most disturbing experience of Silva’s life was the Civil War, and we can see how the conflict shaped other painters too. Robert Slifkin has offered an analysis of the ways in which Fitz Hugh Lane’s work reflect the anxieties dominating the United States, especially its northern section, in the years leading up to the Civil War. In Lane’s paintings the contrast between man’s activities and Nature’s regularity is balanced in an effort of conciliation, a halfway meeting of two worlds to create a middle landscape. Slifkin detects in Lane’s tension between civilization and Nature a more subtle mirroring of the political strains of the antebellum period: “Considering the broader political instability in which these paintings were produced and to which they responded, it may be argued that Lane depicted not so much the middle landscape as the compromised landscape” (Slifkin 67).

In Francis Silva’s paintings we might similarly argue for a more subtle understanding of his post-Civil War work as an attempt to deal with the effects of the conflict and the violence of the Reconstruction period. Many of his paintings depict peaceful settings. The Hudson Valley provided him inspiration for a number of paintings, including *Kingston Point, Hudson River* (1873) and *The Hudson at the Tappan Zee* (1876), where clear placid waters and open skies prevail. The sharpness of these contrasts with a grainier *Boats on the Hudson* (1878), but even here one can feel the quiet serenity of the scene. Although the Hudson River had by then become a vital artery in the industrial and commercial network of

the region, linking manufacturing centers and allowing for the transportation of people and goods, Silva's depiction belies the noise and disturbance normally attending such a busy thoroughfare. He places the sailboats center stage, relegating the steamboats to the distant background: the silent gliding soothing the effect of the clatter and smoke over the landscape. This preference for the more old-fashioned over the mechanically innovative can be seen as expressing a longing for tranquility, the search for inner peace in the face of lingering memories of violent disruption rekindled by the industrial forces invading his formerly tranquil scenes. His paintings feel like an end in themselves, not a means to an end: they aim to placate the painter's traumas and anxieties as well as the Furies unleashed on the country since the war. As such, one can regard this period of creativity as a search for a reconciled landscape, to paraphrase Slifkin's expression. This he managed by relying mostly on emotion, rather than attempting to reflect nature as objectively as possible, discarding any personal interpretations, as in the works of Fitz Hugh Lane or the naturalism of Thomas Cole's landscape paintings.

Memories of the Civil War and its impacts expressed themselves in more ominous paintings too. Mark D. Mitchell has scrutinized Silva's use of shipwreck scenes and their symbolism in expressing the war's effects on the country and the painter himself, most notably in his work depicting the wreck of the schooner *Progress*. This disaster captured his mind to such a degree that he prepared a number of studies of the scene which resulted in two distinct full-scale works. What Mitchell terms a "nearly obsessive examination" (Mitchell 35) of the event was stimulated by the boat's name and the date of the wreck: July 4, 1874. The imagery is too obvious to be mistaken for anything other than as a metaphor for the crashing of the nation in the war years, followed by disillusionment with Reconstruction and industrialized development.

In one painting in particular one can make out a more subtle representation, conceivably a combination of both of the elements above. In *View near New London, Connecticut* (1877), Silva divides the scene in multiple, and contrasting, themes. The viewer is set on the left bank of the Thames River, in Groton, close to Fort Griswold, the site of a Revolutionary War battle, and facing New London across the water. We do not see the Fort, a symbol of conflict, but strewn along the shore are the marks of disaster, including a broken mast. In the unruffled waters are Silva's preferred sailboats, floating calmly. In the distance, New London appears indistinctly except for two church steeples and one quadrangular tower, the only discernible buildings, emblems of religious diversity. The latter reminds one of the catholic church of St. Mary Star of the Sea; the other two are likely the congregational churches still standing in the city and dating from the mid-nineteenth cen-

ture. This promise of harmony and reconciliation, however, looks too distant to be attainable, and the man fishing in the foreground is apparently oblivious both to the wreckage around him and the promise of urbanity on the other side. Perhaps he is aware of the darkening clouds approaching the city on the right of the painting.

Most of Silva's paintings do not have so many diverse components; his Hudson River valley paintings are usually more uniform and convey a more even note. The choice of composition in *View near New London, Connecticut* is less continuous and thus more interesting. The year 1877, of course, was the year of the political compromise that put an end to Reconstruction in the South and sunk the hopes of all those who had fought to rid the country of the southern aristocracy's power. It is tempting to see the painting as a fitting description of the army veteran's distress regarding the country's troubles: the remains of the storm lying around the veteran, the hopes of lasting compromise threatened by the returning storm. The painting's sense of insecurity would have been heightened by the choice of medium: watercolors were viewed with undisguised suspicion by most people who feared they were more fragile, lacking permanence.

We get a glimpse of what his ideas were regarding art from an article he wrote in 1884, prompted by the arrival of a new generation of American painters trained in Europe and under the influence of impressionism. Silva's article takes aim at these avant-garde enthusiasts who tended to look down on the quaint naturalism of the older generation of American painters. In his opinion, these sons of well-to-do families "are not *born* artists, they have been schooled to apply paint skillfully to canvas [*italics in the original*]." Silva did not have a formal education in the arts, and we may surmise that he considered himself one such example of a born artist, giving him the advantage over these younger men. They could certainly "use the brush, the palette knife and the fingers to perfection;" however, "their pictures are full of *technique*, but without art, for they do not *feel* that a picture should be a poem, a story, a tragedy or a comedy – that it should awaken in the human breast some interest besides admiration for mere mechanical skill and dexterity [*italics in the original*]." Some things cannot be taught, they have to be learned from experience and – as in Silva's case – from natural sensitivity, which abounded in his case. The self-confidence he exhibited at the start of his career is here better understood: far from being intimidated because of his lack of training, he considered himself vindicated as an artist because for him art was not about, or not merely about, processes and routine training; the highest qualification should be feeling, the self-effacement of the artist necessary to create a deeper bond between him and his subject than would be possible through mere

skill. His was a more real, genuine, art, leading him to judge that “there are too many painters – not enough artists” (Silva 130), a reproach that would be levelled against him the following year in the pages of the *New York Evening Post*, as we saw.

His repeated mentions to feeling indicate that his style and theory of representation were a product of that romantic sensibility which was dominant during his early years; he likely painted in obedience to his inward nature or, to use his own word, feeling, rather than in obedience to any specific philosophy. Nonetheless, he was convinced that his art was closer to truth than the mere “impressions” of the younger artists. He likened the manipulation of color and texture to capture the fleeting effects of light to “artists’ tricks” but “with no idea of the deeper meaning of art.” He was not concerned with displaying artifices of color and handling but with verity, hence his fidelity to realism. “Truth is powerful and will prevail” (Silva 131), he wrote, a belief reminiscent of transcendentalism and its interpretation of Nature as the manifestation of the divine.

If impressionism concerned itself with the transient and relative, Silva was concerned with the eternal and the absolute. His article is a small echo of a bigger revolution taking place, as an era of certainties and permanence, of a perception of truth which is as much of the mind as it is of the soul, gave way to a more rationalist and skeptical age when steel and the machine removed Nature from its position of predominance. The Battle of Hampton Roads was a harbinger of that change, and we may speculate that he declined to paint such an impressive event despite having carefully sketched it because he understood what it meant and how at odds it was with the world he upheld until his last. His paintings are a reminder, a defense, that there is more to life than merely what our senses capture or science can explain. There is a whole world of perception arrived at from within, supported by the mind and feeling, what Emerson called the transparent eyeball.

We would like to know more about Silva’s inner world, his anxieties, expectations, fears and joys, all the things that would give us a more complete human portrait. We know that within Silva there were some strong emotions, despite the tranquility of many of his paintings. His reply to the criticism by Kenyon Cox reveals a man who could not, or would not, silence his hurt pride and indignation. His article betrays a sense of anxiety at the emergence of a group of younger rivals and, again, a certain resentment at having his art questioned. In the same article he charges his targets with being unpatriotic for neglecting to paint American subjects and for disparaging their own country. This defense of America and Ameri-

can art is not surprising from a man who volunteered to fight and risk death for his country, but it is still significant that he would commit them to paper in so explicit a manner, another sign of strong inner feelings that burst out now and then. This view is confirmed by two obituaries describing him as “a good man, full of fire... determined... honest, stubborn in his opinions” which he always expressed “in earnest and vigorous fashion” (Baur 1022). Contrast this with his paintings: their salient feature is contemplative tranquility. For a man experiencing such strong feelings, the light and the silence highlighting the beauty of America’s natural landscapes worked perhaps as a form of assuaging of his passions, a therapeutic process of sorts. After his experiences in the Civil War, the process would also act as a form of spiritual regeneration; it might allow the country to come to terms with itself, proving that it was more than just a land of bloodied battlefields.

As regards his marriage to Margaret Watts, we know he had two children, named Antoinette and Valentine. Little is known about the family’s private life, but given his many travels along the coast and his business address in New York City, we may presume that Silva was not always present. In fact, according to the US Census of 1880, Francis Silva was living in New York City, sharing a household with one Gustav Lange from Germany and a Louis Hansen from Denmark. His wife Margaret and the two children were registered in Shrewsbury, New Jersey (US Census 1880). The length and frequency of these periods of separation is not known, and there are hints that Silva may have travelled abroad, to Venice for instance, in search of new settings for his paintings, although no new information was found to substantiate this hypothesis (Baur 1025). What seems evident is that Silva’s artistic calling was strong enough to take him away from his family, travelling long distances for extended periods of time.

What would turn out to be his final years, however, were spent together with his family in Long Branch, New Jersey. The location was popular with the eastern elite, and a number of Presidents had their summer houses there, most notably Ulysses Grant, commander of the Union Armies in the Civil War. Silva spent his summers there until his death. Other temporary residents included Frederick Douglass and Winslow Homer, who in his early career drew inspiration from the area for one of his paintings. It was here, in this comforting setting and with his family, that Silva painted what many consider his masterpiece, in 1885: *A Summer Afternoon at Long Branch*. The idyll was of short duration, however. He died on March 31, 1886, of a suspected pneumonia. According to the obituary in *The New York Times*, the illness struck him unexpectedly and acted quickly. The news shocked the family: Silva’s father died June 1, 1886, two months after

his son (New York Municipal Deaths). Francis Augustus Silva was first buried in Greenwood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, but his remains later were moved to Greenwood Cemetery in Long Branch, New Jersey, where he rests next to his wife and his daughter, Antoinette (Nettie) Silva.

As he himself intimated, Silva's work relied on his ability to capture and communicate emotional depth. Thus, his art was an expression of his temperament, which in turn was colored by the revolutions he experienced during his life, most notably his involvement in the Civil War. The tranquility and the peace he displayed on his canvases show how emotions can be channeled to good use without succumbing to excesses or overindulgence; that may be Silva's lasting legacy. Although he is remembered by few, his serenity can appeal to a contemporary audience in search of emotional balance. He did not live to see the advances made by the artists he criticized, and how they relegated his style to the category of charming, but outmoded. He was a painter who worked his talents to the best of his abilities; and although he will never join the ancients, he is a testament to our democratic age.

Works Cited

- Adjutant-General of the State of New York. *Annual Report for the Year 1898. Registers of the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Fifth Veteran Infantry*. Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1899.
- . *Annual Report for the Year 1899. Registers of the Sixth, Seventh, Seventh Veteran, Eighth, Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh Regiments of Infantry*. James B. Lyon, State Printer, 1900.
- American Institute of the City of New York. *Eighth Annual Report*. Weed Parsons & Co., 1850.
- "Art Gossip." *New York Herald*, October 25, 1875, p. 5. *Library of Congress, loc.gov/resource/sn83030313/1875-10-25/ed-1/?sp=5&r=0.373,-0.034,0.771,0.337,0*
- Baur, John I. H. "Francis A. Silva: Beyond Luminism," *The Magazine Antiques* 118, November 1980, pp. 1018-1031.
- Bureau of Military Record of the State of New York. *Third Annual Report*. G. Wendell, 1866.
- Burrows, Edwin G., and Mike Wallace. *Gotham – A History of New York City to 1898*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Clement, Clara Erskine, and Laurence Hutton. *Artists of the Nineteenth Century and their Works*. Volume 2. Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1879.

- Graham, Matthew J. *The Ninth Regiment New York Volunteers (Hawkins' Zouaves), Being a History of the Regiment and Veteran Association from 1860 to 1900*. K. P. Coby & Co., 1900.
- "History – The Beginning." *American Watercolor Society*, americanwatercolorociety.org/a_the_beginning.php
- Johnson, Ken. "Art in Review; Francis A. Silva – 'In His Own Light.'" *The New York Times*, June 7, 2002, Section E, p. 36. nytimes.com/2002/06/07/arts/art-in-review-francis-a-silva-in-his-own-light.html
- Metropolitan Museum of Art. *American Paradise – The World of the Hudson River School*. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987.
- Mitchell, Mark D. *Francis A. Silva (1835-1886): In His Own Light*. New York, Berry-Hill Galleries, 2002.
- National Academy of Design. *Catalogue of the Second Winter Exhibition*. Sackett & Mackay, 1869.
- "New Jersey Marriages, 1678-1985 - Francis A. Silva, 1868." *FamilySearch*, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:FZP7-HB7
- "New York City Directory, 1835/36." *New York Public Library Digital Collections*, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/3fa26ea0-4734-0136-76cf-00233a29858e
- "New York City Municipal Deaths, 1795-1949 - Francis John Silva, 1 Jun 1886." New York, New York Municipal Archives. *FamilySearch* familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:2WJY-3V7
- "New York State Census, 1855 - Francis Silva in household of Francis Silva, E.D. 2, Ward 7, New York City, New York, United States." County Clerk offices, New York. *FamilySearch*, familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:K6QY-Y11
- Novak, Barbara. "On Defining Luminism." *American Light – The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875*, edited by John Wilmerding, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art, 1980, pp. 23-30.
- Phisterer, Frederick, ed. *New York in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1865*, 3rd ed., J. B. Lyon Company, State Printers, 1912.
- Plax, Julie Ann. "The Departure of the *Commedia dell'Arte* from Paris in 1697 - A Copy of a Lost Watteau." *Muse*, vol. 52, 2018, pp. 52-74.
- Powell, Earl A. "Luminism and the American Sublime." *American Light – The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875*, edited by John Wilmerding, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art, 1980.
- Prang, Louis and Harold Holzer, ed. *Prang's Civil War Pictures: The Complete Battle Chromos of Louis Prang with the Full 'Descriptive Texts.'* Fordham University Press, 2001.

Silva, Francis A. "American vs. Foreign-American Art," *The Art Union*, Vol. 1, No. 6/7, Jun. - Jul., 1884, pp. 130-131. [jstor.org/stable/20442930](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20442930).

Slifkin Robert. "Fitz Henry Lane and the Compromised Landscape, 1848-1865." *American Art*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Fall 2013, pp.65-83. [jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674929](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674929).

"The Academy Exhibition." *The New York Evening Post*, November 30, 1885, p. 3. NYS Historic Newspapers, [nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83030384/1885-11-30/ed-1/seq-3/](https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83030384/1885-11-30/ed-1/seq-3/)

"The Art Standard of Value." *The New York Evening Post*, December 4, 1885, p. 2. NYS Historic Newspapers, [nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83030384/1885-12-04/ed-1/seq-2/](https://www.nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn83030384/1885-12-04/ed-1/seq-2/)

"United States Census, 1850 - F J Silva, New York City, ward 7, New York, United States; citing family 416." Washington, D.C., National Archives and Records Administration. *FamilySearch*, [familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MCTZ-3ZT](https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MCTZ-3ZT)

"United States Census, 1880 - Francis Silva in household of Gustav Lange, New York, United States." Washington, D.C., National Archives and Records Administration. *Family Search*, [familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MZ6S-1PL](https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MZ6S-1PL)

"United States Census, 1880 - Maggie Silva, Shrewsbury, Monmouth, New Jersey, United States." Washington, D.C.; National Archives and Records Administration. *FamilySearch*, [familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MN8L-LL3](https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MN8L-LL3)

"United States Registers of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798-1914 - Francis A Silva, 30 Jan 1865." Washington D.C., National Archives and Records Administration. *FamilySearch*, [familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VRQ8-JPL](https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VRQ8-JPL)

Wilson, James Grant, and John Fiske, editors. *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. Volume 5. D. Appleton and Company, 1900.

Wood, Gordon S. *Empire of Liberty - A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

About the Author

Jorge C. Pereira is a Guest Professor at the Department of English and North-American Studies at the Universidade do Minho (Braga, Portugal). He holds a PhD in American Culture (2016) and has published two books related with his area of studies. Subjects of interest include eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture and thought. He is currently preparing a Portuguese translation of Ulysses Grant's Memoirs to be published next year.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).