

J. FRANCIS MURPHY

1888-1952

The MACBETH GALLERY

100 Fifth Avenue New York 11, N.Y.

THE MURPHY

THE MURPHY

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Loan Exhibition



Paintings

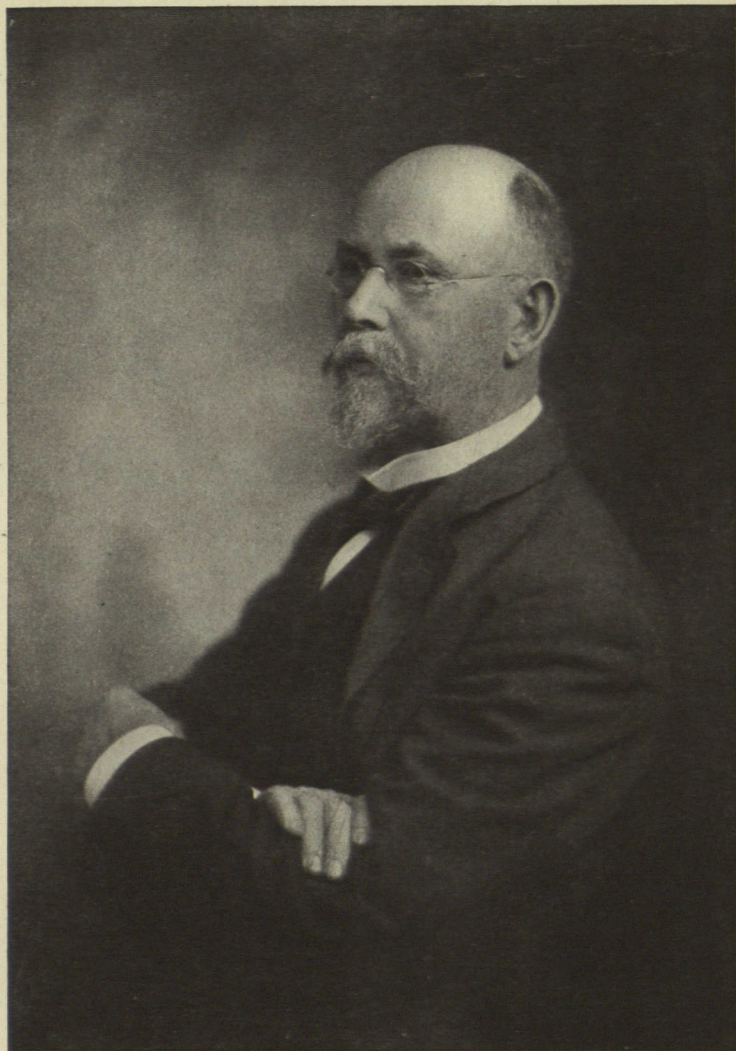
by

J. FRANCIS MURPHY

1853—1921

The MACBETH GALLERY
450 Fifth Avenue New York City

1921



J. FRANCIS MURPHY

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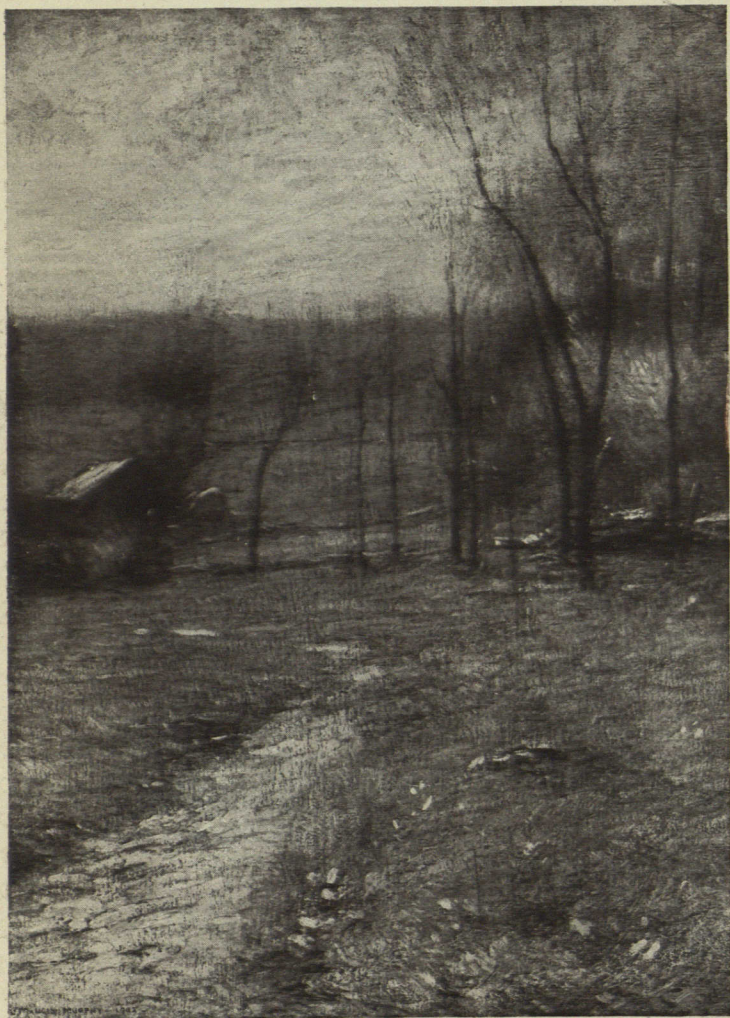
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Charles L. Buchanan, Esq.

whose generous cooperation in
lending their pictures has made
this exhibition possible.

Titles of the Paintings

1	Indian Summer	24X33
2	November Morning	24X36
3	Morning	16X22
4	Autumn	24X33
5	Summer Heat	24X36
6	Where the Sunlight Lingers	27X41
7	Autumn	14X19
8	Near a Clearing	14X19
9	Showers	24X36
10	Indian Summer	16X22
11	The River Bank	16X22
12	An Old Farm	25X37
13	October Afternoon	24X36
14	November Grays	24X36
15	A Clearing	14X19
16	Barn and Stubble	16X22
17	Indian Summer	16X22
18	Upland Farm	16X22
19	June	12X10
20	The Old Farm	14X19
21	The Pool	16X22
22	Misty Morning	16X22
23	Approach to the Old Farm	22X16
24	Upland Pastures, Morning	24X36
25	Showers	16X22
26	Rain	14X19
27	Morning	14X19
28	Late Afternoon	24X36
29	November	24X36
30	Hillside Farm	24X36
31	The Brook	22X16
32	On the Meadow	7X12
33	Edge of a Clearing	19X14



APPROACH TO THE OLD FARM. No. 23

The Art of J. Francis Murphy

An Appreciation by Charles L. Buchanan

THE plan of the present exhibition was conceived some years back and definitely decided upon in the fall of 1920. The original idea was something in the nature of a caprice on the part of a few persons who felt themselves impelled to give some concrete form of expression to their profound interest in the art of J. Francis Murphy. Their object was to gather together, in so far as they were able, a group of pictures that should be to the highest degree representative of the best of Murphy's art. Emphasis has been laid upon the pictures of Murphy's later period, as it is more than probable that his claim to originality rests upon the work he accomplished during the last twenty years of his life. The original plan of attempting to secure a discriminative rather than a comprehensive collection of pictures has been maintained, despite the fact that Murphy's death, on January 30, lends to the present exhibition a lamentable and wholly unanticipated significance.

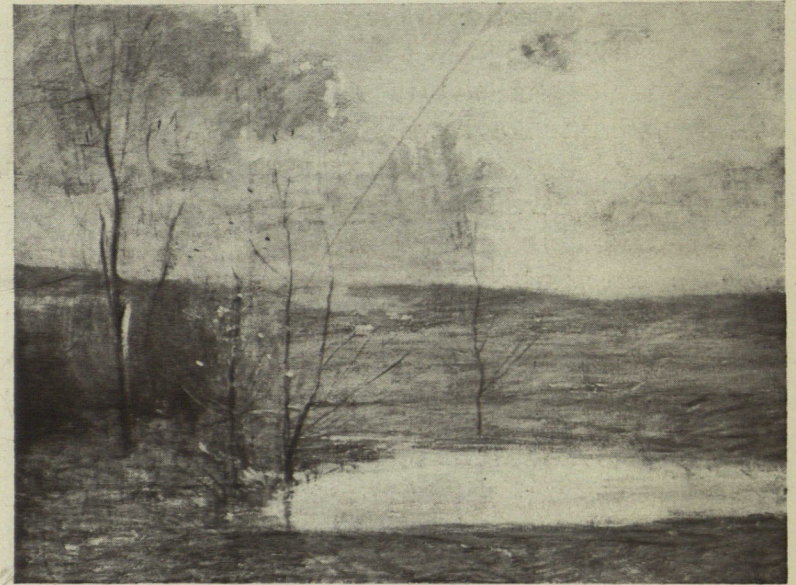
Murphy attained the highest degree of distinction that can come to the artist: he was depreciated by contemporary professional opinion. The conclusive significance of this fact will be at once apparent to any one at all familiar with the history of art. Curiously enough, he succeeded in pleasing neither the radicals nor the conservatives. He was graciously disparaged by complacent mediocrities; bitterly and sometimes scurrilously assailed by intemperate persons of cheap

J. Francis Murphy

and facile cultivations. He was "negligible". He couldn't "draw". He was "standardized". There lingered about his work the "faintest hint of a studio gesture". This was the sort of thing that was said of one of the loveliest, most inspired and absolutely the most original painter of landscape this country has produced.

It is obvious that Murphy's case runs parallel with the records of all artists that have brought into art a new and peculiarly individual way of seeing and feeling. The charges that have been brought against Murphy—some of them utterly preposterous—are the sort of thing that has been said from time immemorial against any artist that has worked within a restricted range of expression, or has expressed himself through a sharply defined idiom. Identical instances may be cited in the cases of Grieg, Chopin, Debussy, Swinburne, Yeats, Corot, Whistler, and a dozen others. One cannot help suspecting that professional criticism is utterly incapable of correctly estimating original work. In fact, one is led to the belief that the critic and the artist are the last persons to appreciate the essential significance of the work of art. Possibly the explanation of this lies in the fact that the professional critic and the artist are the victims of their prepossessions: they are limited, quite unconsciously no doubt, to an appreciation of those works of art that represent for them a tangible embodiment of the peculiar theories and criteria they have formulated. They are still obsessed by the impossible ideal of a fixed standard of artistic excellence (as though art could be prescribed), whereas

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THE POOL, No. 21

every sane person knows that you can no more set arbitrary definitions upon art than you can explain the mystery of personal magnetism.

It is perfectly apparent why Murphy should have proved a hard nut for stereotyped and sophisticated criticism to crack. One could, of course, hardly expect our "modernists" to consider him, for these superlative exquisites, who have transcended our human frailties and sentimentalities, are implacably opposed to any art that is not exclusively occult, complex and fantastic. These persons are consistent, however one believes that their premises are false, shallow and infirm. Consider, on the other hand, what the academic critics had to run up against when they found themselves confronted by the uncongenial task of con-

J. Francis Murphy

templating a Murphy. Here was a man so peculiarly, strangely different from the sort of thing they were accustomed to that they were faced by the necessity of formulating a whole new set of criterions through which to estimate him. It was perfectly apparent to them that a Tryon, a Hassam, or an Alden Weir was a delightful and accomplished artist: the essential and obvious preoccupation of these painters was to achieve a decorative beauty. Murphy, to the contrary, was engaged in placing a simple statement of plain fact before us. Other painters subjected nature to exquisite re-adjustments and transpositions; to a sort of refining process, as it were, wherein nature is shown us as a decorously charming thing quite divested of its inherent identity. Murphy took a bald, stark, actual nature and put it on canvas, retaining and revealing, with consummate and inspired felicity, its native characteristics. His art rose out of the soil with something about it of that peculiar quality of dry, strange pathos one finds in a song of Stephen Foster's or a poem of Robert Burns'. It was a veritable dialect of painting. It held the very bite and tang of nature. It was quite unprecedentedly real, and, as in the case of Inness, though less comprehensively, it penetrated to the core of our recollections.

The present writer has never had a doubt as to what the ultimate verdict on Murphy will be. There may always be a difference of opinion as to his point of view—this is a matter of personal taste. There can be absolutely no question as to his workmanship. It is simply incomparable. It is not too much to contend

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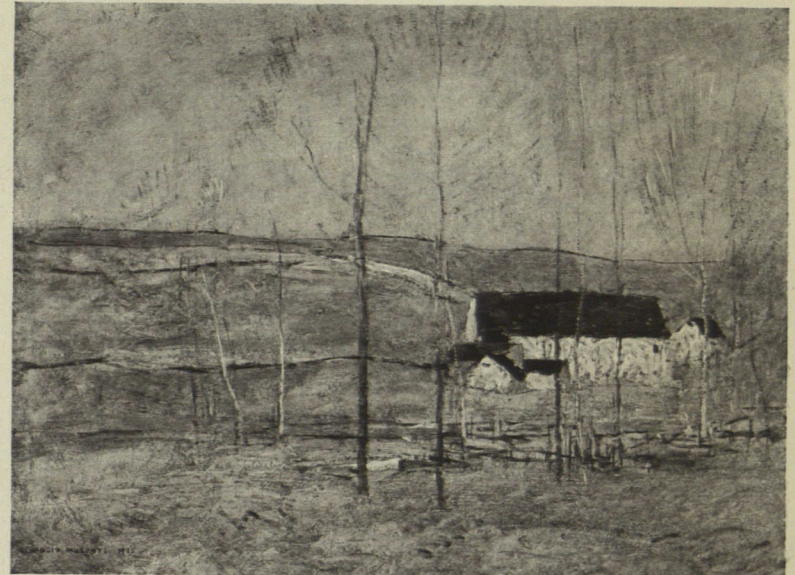
OCTOBER AFTERNOON. No. 13

that, technically, Murphy was the greatest painter of landscape this or any other country has produced. Had he come to us from abroad, heralded by press-agent and propaganda, he would have been accepted at something like his true worth. The fundamental humanness of his appeal and his deplorable mistake of achieving a commercial notoriety, deceived his critics. They did not see that back of the apparent and very deceptive simplicity of Murphy there was an impeccable and unique craftsmanship that transcended a mere obvious artifice. No one has ever interpreted with so affectionate and adroit a divination the inarticulate pathos of naked and neglected areas, of desolate lands, of the wet earth, soggy and disconsolate from persistent rains. Compared to the sheer, stark reality of these frugal and aboriginal representations, a

J. Francis Murphy

Corot would seem cursive and unreal, a Monet essentially artificial, an Alden Weir experimental and unconvincing, a Tryon plausibly and fluently insincere. But the essential and quite extraordinary significance of Murphy's art is the fact that this homely, primitive point of view is fused miraculously with a degree of sheer beauty for which, with the exception of Corot, there is no equal in all landscape painting. It is perfectly obvious that other painters have achieved infinitely higher reaches of imagination; no painter represents so peculiar an equilibrium maintained between an elementary and literal point of view and a decorative and classical kind of loveliness. It was Murphy's unique accomplishment to achieve an absolute realism without a loss of that mystic, indefinable quality which transfigures realism. A tree trunk of Murphy's has bulk, weight, circumference; his foreground is solid earth. His paint is not an approximation of nature: it *is* nature, and yet it remains beautiful as paint. Whether in handling the black of a tangle of branches thrown against the sky, the peculiarly brownish yellows of a clump of bushes, the rank, soaking browns of a dead earth, Murphy achieves a degree of veracity positively clairvoyant in its inspired divination. Note, again, the range of his expression. Take, for instance, the glorious *Indian Summer*, the strange, gray, dry austerity of the *November Morning*, the gracefulness of the little green *Morning*. For imaginative conception, one asks where in all American landscape painting is there a more original picture than the unique *Showers*, a picture with a kind of Oriental grotesqueness about it almost repulsive at first glance. Note the large

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BARN AND STUBBLE, No. 16

green picture lent by the Butler Art Institute. If this picture had been painted by Cézanne, we should have heard no end of talk of "organization" (whatever, precisely, this may mean). Painted by J. Francis Murphy—!

Murphy is a peg on which one could hang an interminable discussion of artistic principles. This, of course, is not the place for such a discussion. Murphy's age was an age of unprecedented upheaval in all branches of human thought and endeavor. It is quite possible that the standards we are accustomed to apply to the work of art are outmoded and insufficient. We can argue about this, but we can arrive at no satisfactory conclusion, one way or the other. All we know is that, judged by the standards that have come down

J. Francis Murphy

to us from the past, Murphy was a superlatively beautiful painter. In that remarkable development of his art that dates from about 1901 to a few days before his death, he supplies us with a unique something at once so strangely lovely and deceptively simple that it is safe to say we have not yet scratched the surface of its significance. The present writer is free to confess that, for him, Murphy's art is unique. No one of our time, with the possible exception of Emil Carlsen in his later still life work, exhibits quite so magical a manipulation of material. To those susceptible to the peculiar, ineffable penetrativeness of its appeal, its charm eludes definition. Persons of shallow and sophisticated sensibilities will continue to ignore and disparage its reticent exquisiteness. We need not take them seriously. The authentic capacity for artistic appreciation reveals itself in the ability to estimate, each for its particular degree of intrinsic significance, things widely, even totally, dissimilar.

Limitations are not deficiencies, and Murphy's alleged limitations are no more clearly marked than are the limitations of Corot, Daubigny, Mauve, Tryon (note the latter's inevitable middle-distance line of trees), Dewing and a dozen others. The absurd habit still persists of emphasizing what an artist is not: it would appear the more equitable attitude to accept, whole-heartedly, whatever degree of peculiar charm each individual artist has to give us. Perhaps one wishes, sometimes, that Murphy's inclination towards the evolving of new and fanciful patterns had been more assiduously cultivated; that he had been a trifle more

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SHOWERS. No. 25

consciously desirous of achieving a novelty of design. But when all is said and done, one knows that his reputation will grow incalculably with the years, for his work stands four-square upon the impregnable foundation of a human expression, nobly plain, transfigured by that kind of clairvoyant, magic touch which we recognize as of direct kinship with the royal line of the world's wonder-workers of lovely things. He has been elected, as every authentic artist is, by the People; the People, who have stubbornly refused to be distracted or demoralized by the spurious and sophistical extremities of "modernism". One does not doubt that his position is secure so long as human nature retains its capacity for the appreciation of fundamental truth and genuine beauty.

