

Summer Tour 2018

Mysteries

Procedures:

For each mystery that comprises one of the five stops on the tour, provide the students with the mystery first before providing any biographical information or “clues” and have them discuss their hypotheses regarding the mysteries. Once you’ve gone through the biographical information or “clues,” then ask the students if their initial hypotheses have changed and ask them why their initial theories changed if they did so.

Rotations:

Rotation 1	Rotation 2	Rotation 3
“The Finish”	“River Plantation”	“Candidates for the Horse Show”
“River Plantation”	“Candidates for the Horse Show”	“Young Girl in Interior”
“Candidates for the Horse Show”	“Young Girl in Interior”	“Constitution” Window Shade
“Young Girl in Interior”	“Constitution” Window Shade	“The Finish”
“Constitution” Window Shade	“The Finish”	“River Plantation”

Props:

Newspaper article regarding “The Start” and “The Finish”

Reproduction of “The Start”

Mystery #1:

“The Start” and “The Finish” are companion pieces that were painted by Louis Oscar Griffith and Robert Wadsworth Grafton. They would start paintings on opposite ends of the piece and would meet in the middle to finish the work. Both “The Start” and “The Finish” depict a horserace in 1917 on the oldest race track in America, known at that time as “Union Race Course.” The companion paintings were on view in the men’s grill in the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans. The hotel building burned down three times, and eventually, the St. Charles Hotel was demolished. After the demolition, the companion pieces were stored in a warehouse. However, one of the two paintings went missing from the warehouse. The painting could have been lost as a result of the flooding during Hurricane Katrina. In your opinion, is this painting depicting a horserace “The Start” or “The Finish”?

Biographical information on Louis Oscar Griffith (1875-1956) and Robert Wadsworth Grafton (1876-1936) and “The Start” and “The Finish” (1917-1918):

The Start (1917-1918)



“The Finish” (1917-1918)



Biographical information on Louis Oscar Griffith (1875-1956) and Robert Wadsworth Grafton (1876-1936) and “The Start” and “The Finish” (1917-1918):

The Midwestern artist Robert Wadsworth Grafton and Louis Oscar Griffith made an immediate and enduring impression on New Orleans. During the early twentieth century, the two artists wintered in the Crescent City and became active members of the artistic and literary community centered in the historic Vieux Carre. Grafton and Griffith’s collaborative mural “The Start” captured the cool crisp late afternoon at the New Orleans Fair Grounds and the exhilaration and anticipation as the race began. The artists set up a temporary studio in the lobby of the hotel where the two companion horse racing murals “The Start” and “The Finish” were viewed with delight by onlookers, tourists, fellow artists, and art students.

The New Orleans Fair Grounds, originally named the “Union Race Course,” is the oldest site of racing in America still in operation. In 1908, the Louisiana Legislature passed the Locke Law that prohibited pari-mutuel gambling, which directly resulted in the closing of Fair Grounds and all New Orleans racetracks. Seven years later, the law was repealed and the Fair Grounds reopened on January 1, 1915 under the auspices of the Business Men’s Racing Association. It seems likely that the commission of the mural by the St. Charles Hotel was set in motion by the excitement of the revitalization of horse racing in New Orleans and the reopening of the Fair Grounds.

As talented American Impressionist painters, the artists used a dazzling array of colors in “The Finish” while emphasizing the brilliant Louisiana sunlight reflecting off the muscular bodies of the horses as they bolt across the track, jockeying for position. The intensity of the race was clearly etched on the faces of the jockeys. Their silks identified the leading stables of the day including Belmont, Morris, and Keane. The mural is filled with details of pre-electronic workings of the fairgrounds in the early twentieth

century, including the time keeper in a wooden tower, a crescent-shaped moon clock announcing the time of the next race at 4:10 p.m. and the results board with two men readied to place the winning horses' numbers in their appropriate slots.

Times-Picayune Newspaper's art reporter Flo Field expressed her excitement and enthusiasm for "The Start" and "The Finish" murals when they were placed on the walls of the Men's Café at the prestigious local St. Charles Hotel. She wrote in her February 18, 1917 article, "It isn't a picture. It moves! The horses are not painted. They are racing."

Topped by a gleaming white dome visible for miles, the first St. Charles Hotel was built in 1835 by acclaimed architects James Gallier Sr. and Charles Dakin. The hotel was situated in the heart of the central business district and directly on the St. Charles Avenue streetcar line. In 1851, the hotel was burned to the ground and the second St. Charles Hotel was rebuilt two years later. Forty-three years later, fire destroyed the hotel for a third time. In 1896, the third and last St. Charles was rebuilt on the same location. A favorite of locals, the grand hotel hosted Mardi Gras balls and society events, until it was demolished in 1974.

After the completion of the murals, the artist maintained an enduring relationship with the St. Charles Hotel. At this time, the hotel had a permanent collection of American and European paintings in the lobby and a gallery on the mezzanine floor for temporary exhibitions by contemporary artists. In 1922, the hotel held an impressive exhibition of Robert Grafton and Louis Oscar Griffith paintings of New Orleans. An illustrated catalogue and set of postcards were published in conjunction with the exhibition. A selection of these paintings had been exhibited in Chicago at the Thurber Art Galleries in 1917 to critical acclaim. Grafton and Griffith paintings of the historic vistas of the Vieux Carre, French Market, St. Charles Hotel, New Basin Canal, and the recently rediscovered New Orleans Fairgrounds mural "The Finish" are highly prized today.

Show the students the Tour Props (Newspaper article and Reprint of "The Start")

[While showing the students the newspaper article, say something along the lines of]: "This is the newspaper article about the "The Start" and "The Finish." It labels both paintings, and it labels the painting that we own as "The Start." Do you think that it labels the two pieces correctly? Why or why not?

[Then, show the reproduction of "The Start" and say something like]: "This is a reproduction of what the newspaper article labeled as "The Finish." Now, that you have all the clues and information, which painting should be "The Start" and which should be "The Finish"? What are your reasons? [The newspaper has most likely labeled the painting incorrectly because in "The Finish," only one of the horses is running, which would imply that it is the first horse to begin running at the start of the race. Also, there is a man with a whip behind the jockeys. The man who cracks the whip is the one who signals all of the jockeys to start the race. Likewise, in "The Start," the booth in the tower is where the judges would be watching to see which horse won the race. Likewise, a photo would be taken to figure out which horse won the race, and the photograph would have been used for newspapers and promotional displays. If you'd like, you can have the students check the title of the piece on the wall at the end]

Mystery #2: “Candidates for the Horse Show” is the last painting artist John Martin Tracy ever made, and it was still on his easel at the time of his death. Did the artist finish painting this piece? Why or why not?



Biographical information on John Martin Tracy and “Candidates for the Horse Show”:

He was best known for his paintings of trained gun dogs in the field and for his paintings of thoroughbred horses. Although under-aged, he served in the American Civil War. He made two trips to study in Paris. Then, he established himself as a portrait painter in St. Louis. After moving to Greenwich, CT in 1881, he focused on his hunting dog paintings.

J. M. Tracy was renowned in his lifetime as a painter of dogs, horses, and sporting scenes, but today he is one of the most elusive figures in American art. His obscurity is partially accounted for by the fact that his work seldom comes on the market. For reasons of pride and sentiment, his paintings have remained largely in the families and clubs of the sportsmen who commissioned them.

Tracy was born near Rochester, Ohio in 1843. His father, a preacher and abolitionist, was killed by mob violence in an anti-slavery uprising. His mother, Maria Conant Tracy, provided for her three children as a journalist. She was sent by her Cleveland paper to cover the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851. Tracy was a determined individual; he studied medicine in addition to art, pioneered on behalf of women’s suffrage, and was active in the Women’s Christian Temperance movement.

Tracy grew up for the most part in the home of his grandmother, Orpha Conant, and was said to be a high-strung, hyper-sensitive, imaginative little boy. The school run by his Uncle John Lynch in Circleville prepared him for Oberlin College and Northwestern University, which he attended.

In 1861, he enlisted as a volunteer in the 19th Illinois Infantry, in which he attained the rank of lieutenant. The wartime stories he told his children in later years attest to a great amount of fraternizing between the Confederate and Union lines. In this way, Tracy formed lifelong friendships with many Southerners.

It seems that he made the decision to be an artist during the war. After he was discharged, he worked as a school teacher and a laborer in the orchards of southern Illinois until he had sufficient funds to go to

the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Upon his return to the United States, probably no more than a year later, he struck out for California and painted the scenery there. These subjects, according to his daughter, were in the grand style and on the grand scale which was then making the name of Albert Bierstadt a household name.

Between 1872 and 1873, Tracy had a studio in Chicago, but in his latter years, he went again to Paris. He studied at a school behind the Ecole which emphasized rigorous training in drawing from memory, which certainly proved to be a valuable skill when he later turned to painting field trial subjects. On this trip, he fell in love with and married Melanie Guillemin, sister of the sculptor Emile Guillemin. Tracy's full-length portrait of her was exhibited in the Salon of 1874. His interest seems to have changed at this time from landscape to portraiture. When he returned to the United States, he opened a portrait studio in St. Louis, but perhaps feeling the effects of the daguerreotype which hindered most portraitists at one time or another in the nineteenth century, he moved to Greenwich, Connecticut in 1881 and began to paint sporting subjects. He purchased an historic farmhouse and filled it with Revolutionary War relics as well as colonial furniture, becoming one of the first collectors of early American antiques. Tracy's immense popularity as a painter of sporting subjects is due in large part to his accuracy. He was often called upon to do portraits of dogs, two of which belong to the American Kennel Club.

Perhaps because he suffered from a lingering illness, he moved to the milder climate of Ocean Springs, Mississippi in the late 1880s or early 1890s. He died at Ocean Springs in his forty-ninth year, and he was survived by his wife and three children. When he died, Tracy left on his easel "Candidates for the Horse Show," an ambitious canvas measuring four by eleven feet. Impressionistic in mood, but realistic in details, it is an ambitious work which defies categorization as a mere "animal study." The vitality of the horses, the sense of movement and the scope of the scene are heroic, almost cinematic. It speaks well of Tracy's talent, but even more so of his ambitions to paint panoramic sporting scenes. At the time of his death, the critic Alfred Trumble spoke of the artist's achievement: "The late John Tracy was recognized at home and abroad as a painter of the first distinction in the field of higher class sports, to which his art gave their proper dignity in the pictures he produced. His dogs and horses were portraits imbued with life and were full of character and expression; his landscape scenes of actual nature, not mere background; and his sportsmen manly figures, taken from real life and with the action appropriate to their employment."

Further Discussion Questions to solve the mystery of whether the artist finished his painting:

Is the painting framed? [It is framed] If a picture is framed, does that mean that it's finished? [Not necessarily because the painting could have been framed after the artist passed away]

Is this painting signed? [The painting is signed] If a painting is signed, does that mean that it's finished? [Artists often sign their paintings once they're done with them, but that's not necessarily always the case]

Do some parts of the painting look like they're not as well-defined as others, which might imply that the artist didn't have enough time to work on them as he did the finished parts of the painting? If so, would that imply that the painting wasn't finished? [The white trees don't seem to be finished. Parts of the

white trees are green towards the bottom. The trees to the right of the canvas, however, are painted entirely green. The artists may have died before he painted the white trees completely green, and, thus, the painting is unfinished]

Mystery #3: “*Constitution*” window shade (circa 1861) was painted by an unknown artist on the inside of a window shade as a decoration. This painting was created around the time of the beginning of the American Civil War when the South was trying to succeed from the Union and to establish its independence from the North. The female figure in this painting along with the painting itself might mean that the South should have its own Constitution that is separate from that of the North’s. However, the painting could represent the notion that the South should not succeed and that the South should stick with the current American Constitution instead of trying to create its own. Do you think that this painting represents that the South should succeed from the Union or that the South should not succeed?



Information on “Constitution” window shade:

“Constitution” window shade is an antebellum painting that is filled with symbols of the Southern states, and it is set in a mythical landscape. The central tree trunk is a Liberty Tree left over from the Revolutionary period and growing from the bedrock of Constitution. Each colony had a Liberty tree where the Liberty boys rallied and agitated for independence. Beside the tree is a mythical or symbolic female figure. Such figures are common to flags and state seals. The Virginia state flag and seal feature Virtue, a female figure with a sword, standing over a slain tyrant with the motto “thus always to tyrants.” Georgia also has a figure with a drawn sword, but it is George Washington who stands under the arch. North Carolina has two female figures, Liberty and Plenty. South Carolina has a female named “Hope,” and Florida has a female Indian. In the window shade, the figure is not Liberty since she is not wearing a liberty cap, but rather a Wonder Woman crown with a blue cockade, and has clearly unsheathed her sword in defense of country and ideals, so perhaps she is the South herself.

The red, white and blue shield is surmounted by a bust that looks like John C. Calhoun, the great champion of states’ rights and the Nullification theory. The eagle this time is not bearing an olive branch but is poised to strike. On the shield are a sheaf of wheat, a plow and a boat, elements that are found on the state seals of Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee. These symbols are typical of agrarian areas. They are also common to many other states: Kansas has a farmer plowing along with a steamboat. Nebraska has mountains, a boat, and a sheaf of wheat. Pennsylvania has a ship, a plow, and bundles of grain. Ohio has a sheaf of wheat, and Vermont has wheat. New Jersey has the figures of Liberty with a cap, Ceres, and three plows. The label on the bedrock, Constitution, appears on the seals of Georgia and North Carolina. On the right is South Carolina’s palmetto tree. Further back are rice paddies, laborers in the fields, a steamboat, the sea, and mountains in a very compressed landscape.

Window shade paintings, while relatively uncommon, were a form of interior domestic decoration. This one may well have been painted at about the time of secession for a Southern home, as it alludes to a “Constitution” that unites the Southern states. Its central shield combines emblematic motifs from the state seals of Tennessee, Virginia, and Louisiana, together with a burst that may be a portrait of Calhoun. The palm seems to denote the tropical landscape of Florida, while the riverboat clearly belongs on the Mississippi. The rice fields could be found in South Carolina, as could the wheat fields of the plateau region. The mountains, here exaggerated in scale, complete the spectrum of Southern geography. There is one glaring omission in the painting, however, and that is the absence of any reference to cotton, which was the dominant cash crop of the South. Since many secessionists believed that, because cotton was King, the South would prove self-sufficient after its separation from the Union, the absence of cotton in what otherwise seems to be an emblem of Southern unity is, at the very least, curious. Professor George Rogers suggests a quite different interpretation from that given above: “if the woman (Liberty) is unsheathing her sword to protect the Union – and the presence of the eagle may also intend to symbolize national unity under the Constitution – then the window shade may be read to convey a principle quite the opposite of secession, that is, that the South in all its variety is – and should be – harnessed to the Constitution!”

Is the painting anti-secession or pro-secession?

[Arguably, the woman's sword is pointing to the red stripe, and because the Confederate color was red while conversely the Union color was blue, she could be pointing to the Confederate color and, therefore, to the Confederacy instead of to the blue color that indicates the Union. By this logic, the painting could be construed as pro-secession. The owners would have had it on their window shade as a means of showing their Southern pride and allegiance during the time of succession]

Mystery #4: In the painting "Young Girl in Interior" (undated) by William Gilbert Gaul (1855 – 1919), there is a girl in a rocking chair and an animal by her feet. Is the animal a cat or a dog? The animal looks invisible, so is the animal supposed to a ghost? If it's a ghost, why would an artist paint a ghost animal?



Biographical information on William Gilbert Gaul (1855-1919):

William Gilbert Gaul was born on March 31, 1855 in Jersey City, New Jersey. He attended public school and the Claverack Military Academy before beginning his art studies. Gaul studied under L. E. Wilmarth and John G. Brown, both genre painters, at the National Academy of Design and later attended classes at the Art Students' League, both in New York City.

Gaul exhibited at the National Academy and the Brooklyn Art Association throughout his career. He received medals for work shown at the Paris Exposition (1889), Pan-American Exposition (Buffalo, 1901), and the Appalachian Exposition (Knoxville, 1910). He also received a medal at the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago, 1893) where he exhibited twelve drawings illustrating a trip to Mexico, Central America, and Jamaica. Gaul was elected to be an associate member of the National Academy in 1879, and he became a full academician in 1882.

Gaul had close ties to the South. His mother was from Van Buren County, Tennessee, and in 1881 Gaul inherited a farm in that country from his uncle. Gavin lived on the farm for four years to fulfill the terms of the will and eventually spent much of the next thirty years on the land. In 1904, Gaul taught classes at his studio on his farm. Between 1907 and 1910, Gaul and his second wife, Marian Halstead Witten, stayed in Charleston, South Carolina in December 1921. The paintings in her collection, left to her by the artist, were displayed at a memorial exhibition held at Braus Galleries in New York.

Gaul was known best for his pictures of military subjects as well as western scenes. His military paintings were considered "remarkable for energy of action, actuality, truth to conditions such as place and period, and, above all, their spirit of belligerency." Figures in such works are highly finished while the landscape, of secondary importance, is sketchily painted. In his landscape paintings, however, Gaul displayed his affinity with impressionist techniques, such as broken brushstrokes and a concern for the effects of light on color. His work of the South Carolina Low Country best demonstrates his understanding of the peculiar light of the area and the lighting's effects on colors.

William Gilbert Gaul is best known for his late depictions of military topics, particularly scenes of the American Civil War. Born in Jersey City, New Jersey, he entered the National Academy of Design in New York City at age 17 and emerged as one of the era's leading illustrators. Gaul moved to Tennessee and established a studio on property he inherited near Fall Creek Falls in Van Buren County.

Gaul published illustrations in *Harper's* and *Century Magazine*. His Civil War paintings depicted both Union and Confederate soldiers, portraying a variety of experiences from fierce battles to quiet moments in camp. Works such as *Holding the Line at all Hazards* and *Charging the Battery* captured the war's severity and brought him awards from the American Art Association and the 1889 Paris Exposition. The height of his career came in 1893, when he received numerous awards at the World's Exposition in Chicago. Gaul also produced several landscape paintings, including *Rafting on the Cumberland River*, which is in the Tennessee State Museum.

Gaul's popularity eventually began to wane, and by 1904, he had accepted a teaching position at Cumberland Female College in McMinnville. He soon opened a studio in Nashville and published the first

in what was to be a series of paintings titled “With the Confederate Colors” in 1907. The project, however, was met with little success, and subsequent paintings were canceled. Gaul, then, left Tennessee and eventually returned to his native New Jersey, where he produced paintings of World War I before his death.

Is the animal in the painting a cat or a dog? The animal looks invisible, so is the animal supposed to be a ghost? (Perhaps, the animal is supposed to be phantasm, and, thus, the painting is meant to be figurative and surreal. The painting might represent the grief that comes with losing a pet along with the pleasant fond memories one has of their lost pet. Such memories might appear in a pet owner’s dreams. However, it’s also possible that the painting has possibly degraded overtime. The type of pigment has something to do with if the color is likely to fade or not. White paint, for example, is more likely to fade than any other color)

Mystery #5: In the painting *River Plantation* by Thomas Addison Richards, on the other side of the river, there’s a white, vertical, nondescript line; what is the white thing in the background of the painting?. Is it geological? It is manmade? Is it something else entirely? Could the artist have started to paint something, but for some reason, he didn’t finish it? Could the white mark be a mistake?



Biographical information on Thomas Addison Richards (1820-1900):

Born in London, England, Thomas Addison Richards came to Hudson, New York at age 11 and spent the remainder of his youth in Penfield, Georgia. He became one of the first artists to bring the beauty of the natural landscape of the South to the widespread attention of Americans through numerous paintings, illustrated travel guides, and magazine articles.

His early talent was shown in his 150 pages of watercolor sketches about his trip from England. At age 18, a book of his flower paintings was published, and it was followed by an illustrated book on Georgia, which is credited with having some of the earliest pictures of the state of Georgia. He also did portraits and landscapes, and in 1845, he went to New York City to study at the National Academy of Design, where he became corresponding secretary for forty years during its greatest growth and influence. He also organized the first class of women at Cooper Union and was professor of art at New York University from 1867 to 1887. He traveled widely in the United States and Europe, and in 1857, he did handbooks of American travel that became a model of their kind.

Thomas Addison Richards was an early promotor of the Southern landscape. English by birth and raised in New York State, where his family had immigrated to in 1831, he set out with his brother William Carey Richards for the South when he was little more than twenty years of age.

In Penfield, Georgia, the two brothers published and illustrated a small book, which celebrated in words and pictures such scenic wonders as "Tallulah Falls," "The Lover's Leap on the Chattahoochee," and "Falls of Tawaliga." Addison provided the original artwork from which fine steel engravings of these subjects were made.

The brothers were so encouraged by the success of their first venture that they quickly followed it up with the first number of *The Orion*, a monthly literary magazine. As the new editor, William introduced Addison thusly: "Our brother is permanently connected with the work as artist, and we are happy to add, as a contributor. He will travel from Louisiana...we will furnish one splendid original Southern landscape every number."

Addison Richards was not only engraved in providing the original artwork but in turning it into lithographs and engravings as well. His fame as painter and printer preceded him to Charleston where he located himself at the end of 1843. A review that appeared in the "Rambler" of December 30 hailed the arrival of the creator of the plates in "Georgia Illustrated" and advised the Charleston public: "those who desire to ornament their parlors with exquisite home views will do well to commission some from his easel."

One of Addison Richard's motives in residing in Charleston was to find a public that would perhaps be interested in taking painting lessons. In this same regard, he received the endorsement of the *Rambler* editor who wrote: "His mode of teaching is thoroughly practical, making nature the model and the imitation of nature, the end."

Within a year Addison Richards had abandoned Charleston to seek further training for himself in New York City. He enrolled at the National Academy of Design, and in four years, he was made an Associate of that institution, which was a great honor. He participated in New York's most prestigious art exhibitions by his regular submission of Southern material.

Through the 1850s, he showed nothing but Southern landscapes at the Academy's annual exhibitions, while his *Valley of Jocassee, South Carolina, Southern Landscape Scenery* and *Valley of Nacoochee, Georgia* all found buyers at the American Art Union's show and sale of 1845 and quickly established a reputation for the young artist.

He reached a broad audience, continuing to publish his artwork as book illustrations as well as taking up writing on Southern subjects. Literature did not escape his interest, for he came out with *Tallulah and Jocassee or Romances of Southern Landscape and Other Tales*, in 1852. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* published his article entitled "The Landscape of the South," in which Addison extolled the beauties of the Southern mountains, rivers, waterfalls, and the growing number of springs as desirable vacation spots.

In his book *The Romance of American Landscape* (1855), which he illustrated with such Southern scenes as Birthplace of Washington, Va., and Cascade of Toccoa, Ga., he offered an apology for the relative death of the Southern landscape as a deterrent to artists working there as well as the "mosquitos and Miasmas" with which artists had to contend.

At the beginning of the sixties, responding no doubt to a sudden distaste for southern landscape material on the part of New York art collectors, Addison took up still-life painting. Though his fame today rests on his landscapes, his still-lives are beautifully composed, and they deserve more attention.

Addison made New York City his home for the rest of his life. He took on the duties of Corresponding Secretary for the National Academy of Design in 1852, a post he filled for forty years, and he taught at New York University from 1867 until 1887.

He traveled in the Far West, from whence he brought back glowing pictures of the Grand Canyon, but to the connoisseur of Southern art, T. Addison Richards will best be remembered for his landscapes of the Southland done in the early decades of his long and distinguished career.

Biographical information on *River Plantation* (1855-1850):

Oil on canvas 20 ¼ X 30 inches

This painting of a plantation scene on a river is a very languid scene people are either strolling down the road or lazily standing by the river bank. There is very little indication of the busy hard-working places most plantations actually were. Richards wrote in an article on the Rice lands of the South which is accompanied by a painting which is very similar to *River Plantation*, about the "habits of life which may be traced to the air of chivalry of the Southern plantation owner" (*Chambers Art and Artists of the South*). The same idealistic interpretation of the subject might be what Richards had in mind when he wrote "The Landscape of the South" which appeared in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in 1853. In that

article he makes a distinction between the North and the South: “For the verdant meadows of the North, dotted with cottages and grazing herds, the South has her broad savannas, calm in the shadow of the palmetto and the magnolia; for the magnificence of the Hudson, the Delaware, are her mystical lagunes. In whose stately arcades of cypress, fancy floats at will through the wilds of past and future.” Just upstream from the Morris Museum are the ruins of a former rice plantation. The Savannah River at this area looks very much today like the river in the painting.

In Appleton’s Illustrated Hand-Book of American Travel (1857), Richards described Augusta in most favorable terms: “Augusta, one of the most beautiful cities in Georgia, and the second in population and importance, is on the eastern boundary of the State, upon the banks of the Savannah River, and at the head of its navigable waters, 120 miles north-northwest from Savannah, and 136 northwest from Charleston, with both of which cities it has long been connected by railroad. Augusta now has a population of over 12,000, and it is every year greatly increasing...There are delightful drives along the banks of the Savannah, particularly below the city...”

The focal point of the painting is a large oak tree laden with moss; in 1859 Richards wrote and illustrated an article for Harper’s entitled “The Rice Lands of the South” in which he described the oak tree as the “most remarkable” of Southern trees: “Its foliage falls in drooping masses, more luxuriant and more graceful than those of the elm, while its branches have the magnificent proportions and the vigorous strength of the old English oak. It is frequently of immense size, overshadowing, between its trunk and its outer limbs, space and verge enough for a mass meeting...[N]o tree is so richly draped as is the live oak in the festoons of the wondrous moss of the vicinage. It is often seen...looking down from the crown of some sandy bluff into the floods of the quiet rivers.

John Michael Vlach, American studies professor at George Washington University, believes this painting was produced in a style typical of plantation portraits dating to the period immediately preceding the American Civil War; in this style, the artist emphasized a picturesque landscape rather than a plantation house.

What is the thing in the background of the painting? Is it geological? Is it manmade? Is it something else entirely? Could the artist have started to paint something, but for some reason, he didn’t finish it? Could the white mark be a mistake? (The abstract white line could possibly be an abstract waterfall among an abstracted landscape. The white mark doesn’t seem like it’s a mistake because there’s a similar white line in the water to the right. Likewise, the inexplicit white line in question has a reflection in the water directly below it which would imply that the white line was intentionally created by the artist.