Francis Augustus Silva

Francis Augusta Silva was born on October 4, 1835, in New York City to Francois John de Lapierre and an unknown woman from New York City. His great-grandfather, Francois Joseph de Lapierre, was a well-known French statesman during the mid-eighteenth century. The artist’s grandmother, also named Francois de Lapierre, grew up in France and became a friend of Napoleon, the famous French military and political leader of the French Revolution. Francois became a colonel in the French Army but his military career abruptly ended when the revolutionary government arrested him for conspiracy and sentenced him to serve a four year jail term. Francois was later exiled to Lisbon, Portugal, where he relinquished his French citizenship; eventually he moved to the nearby island of Madeira with his wife and two children where he died, ever having restored his family’s honor. His wife, son Francois Jean (Francis John), and daughter continued to live in Madeira.

As Francis John grew into a young adult he decided at age fourteen to join the merchant marines. Knowing the dishonor of his father and the potential for physical harm if his connection was known, Francis John’s mother encouraged him to change his name. Francis John de Lapierre became Francis John Silva, taking the name of his aunt, and kept the family secret for thirty-seven years. In June 1830, Francis John left Madeira for New York City and became a barber, married and had a son, Francis Augusta Silva.

Francis Silva’s artistic interest was apparent early in his life, although he never had formal training. He exhibited his amateur ink drawings at the 1848 American Institute of New York’s annual exhibition. His artistic interest was supported by his parents until a few years later when his father preferred he seek a practical trade. After trying his hand at a variety of options, Silva found work as a sign painter, lettering the sides of fire wagons and stagecoaches. The Civil War broke out in 1861 prompting Silva to volunteer for the New York Militia (National Guard). He had risen to the rank of captain when he fell ill with malaria and returned to New York to recover. In the meantime, his commander gave him a dishonorable discharge for desertion. Silva was reinstated in 1862, but he waited months for a new assignment. The entire ordeal reminded Silva of his grandfather’s disgrace.

Silva worked as a painter while waiting for his new military assignment, producing his earliest painting in 1863. In 1865, Silva was assigned to be an army hospital supervisor in Massachusetts. This was his last year of active duty which concluded with an honorable discharge. Seeing the New England land and seascapes inspired Silva. He set up a formal studio in New York but made frequent summer trips to sketch in New England for execution into watercolor or oil paintings. He was especially interested in the Hudson River School movement characterized by vast landscapes, aerial perspectives and extremely smooth, almost invisible, brushstrokes. The term, luminism, addresses the glowing or gleaming quality Silva also brought to his work. He favored a post-war romantic approach rather than the classic approach. His post-war, romantic content featured themes of rocky shorelines, lighthouses and the Hudson River. Other artists who painted in a similar style were Fitz Henry (1804-1865) and Edmund Darch Lewis (1835-1910).

Silva worked with three themes or series throughout his career that were clearly linked to his military experience and the aftermath of the Civil War. Themes of a rocky coastline had been used by many artists but Silva’s paintings of the rocky coastline were executed with such intensity, clarity, grand atmosphere and dramatic light that they set him apart from others. Working compositionally, he accentuated the rocky coast and created tension by placing ships near the dangerous coastline.

Another post-war theme included using coastal lighthouses that visually announced approaching danger yet offered light to show the way to safety. Broadening this theme, Silva similarly used the light of the sun or moon to make the same statement. Sunrise: Marine View (1873) is such an example.

The final theme represented in Silva’s paintings was the use of the Hudson River as a specific geographic image. The Hudson River was Silva’s most famous series and included such paintings as The Hudson River Looking Toward the Catskills (1871) and On the Hudson River, Nyack (1871).

In 1875, Silva painted more intentionally with watercolors and by 1880, his annual exhibition in the Brooklyn Art Association was exclusively watercolors. The lighter aesthetics, clarity and use of brilliant lights of watercolors were preparatory and later captured in oil paintings.

Silva married Margaret A. Watts in October, 1868, in Keyport, New Jersey, and had two children. The family lived in New York until 1880 when Silva decided to move the family to Long...
Branch, New Jersey, where he focused his attention on the Jersey shore and neighboring sites. Here, he returned to his familiar themes of sunsets and shipwrecks, but with a twist. Now, lighthouses that once referenced pending danger were replaced with domestic scenes; houses along the shore, boats secured to their piers, fisherman relaxing, and children playing in the yard. These were the new images in Silva’s personal life in New Jersey as well as the look of Americanism. These domestic scenes captured the working class in its humble environment.

Silva kept his studio in New York during his residency in New Jersey. New York reminded Silva of the Impressionist movement with which he was at odds. Both the Impressionist and the Illuminist movements concentrated on the surface of the canvas but to Silva, a canvas void of brush strokes provided a preferred glassy surface that allowed the art to transcend the canvas. The Impressionists painted in a style which looked like the layers of paint collided with the image, according to Silva.

It wasn’t until the 1870’s when critics and collectors took notice of Silva’s work. By 1880, Silva’s work was purchased by John Gellately, a donor to what is now the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Silva’s art shifted from post–Civil War symbols of danger to stories of human resiliency and the building of a new America.

Silva died of double pneumonia in New York on March 31, 1886, at age fifty.

About the Art
The Schooner “Progress” Wrecked at Coney Island, July 4th, 1874 was painted, oil on canvas by Francis A. Silva in 1875. It measures 20 x 38 inches and is in the Manoogian Collection featured in the National Gallery of Art.

Directed Observation
Show students an image of The Schooner “Progress” Wrecked at Coney Island, July 4th, 1874. Tell them it was painted, oil on canvas, in 1875 by Francis A. Silva. Offer students biographical information about Silva. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. The Schooner “Progress” Wrecked at Coney Island, July 4th, 1874. “Progress” refers to the name of the wrecked ship. Silva spent a month sketching the wreckage from every angle and in various weather conditions. He also created four watercolor renderings of the scene. Like much of his work, Silva’s theme of post-war and reconstruction is evident in this painting. Discuss how this theme plays out in the painting’s imagery. Discuss how pain/death and pride/life are portrayed.
2. Study the composition of the painting. Where is the vantage point? Where does the viewer stand? With such a low perspective, the viewer can’t escape the skeleton of the ship both submerged and jetting upward.
3. Silva’s earlier works often included a rocky shore. Here is a wrecked ship with no narrative of its demise. What do you think happened to the ship?
4. Is the ship in the background the future or do you think it is the old schooner in its days of glory?
5. Silva chose not to include victims of wreckage in any of his paintings. Why do you think he made this decision? How does this decision strengthen his art?
6. Silva was involved in the Civil War and his paintings reflected its dangers and post-war reconstruction through the use of symbols. If you were to create a work of art based on a tragic historical event and the aftermath, what would you do and how would you symbolically tell your story?

Things to Do
1. View many of Silva’s works, especially to gain an appreciation of his art.
2. Research the Hudson River School art movement and relate it to Silva’s art.
3. Develop a narrative based on a type of boat or ship in a water environment. Create a drawing or painting to visually tell your story.
4. Read Run to the Lee by Kenneth F. Brooks. It’s a story about a young man who worked on a large schooner cargo ship in the Chesapeake Bay.
5. Create a drawing or painting of a sailboat in action. Use the reflective quality of the water. Sailboats need wind to move, so reference that in the surface of the water and in the billowing sails. Indicate the time of day and location to shore.
6. Create a set of paintings or drawings. One is your most perfect weather day on a boat and one your worst nightmare storm day.
7. Study Wassily Kandinsky’s abstract painting, Improvisation 32 (Sea Battle), Grade 3, October. Identify the sea battle in the painting. Create your own abstracted painting of ships at sea.
8. Visit a marina and sketch the sights.

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY