



## Master Class

By Jerry N. Weiss

# The Give-and-Take of Buildings and Trees

A convert to American Impressionism, Julian Alden Weir painted industry mills in a pastoral setting.



GIFT OF MARGARET AND RAYMOND HOROWITZ, IN HONOR OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

ABOVE: **U.S. Thread Company Mills, Willimantic, Connecticut** (ca. 1893/1897; oil on canvas, 20x24) by Julian Alden Weir

**JULIAN ALDEN WEIR WAS AN ACCOMPLISHED FIGURE PAINTER** studying in Paris when he first encountered French Impressionism. “I never in my life,” he wrote, “saw more horrible things.” The vehemence of his reaction should have come as no surprise—his father and older brother both painted in the traditional manner of the Hudson River School. In due time Weir got over the initial abhorrence, lightened his palette,

adopted broken brushstrokes and became one of the most prominent impressionist painters in this country. Although he sometimes returned to a more academic approach, especially when painting portraits, his landscapes are steeped in the impressionist vernacular.

*U. S. Thread Company Mills, Willimantic, Connecticut* is included in the exhibition "A Good Summer's Work: J. Alden Weir, Connecticut Impressionist," at the Lyman Allyn Museum in New London, Conn., until September 11.

Weir was not, however, a quintessential plein air painter. Many of his paintings are heavily reworked, as if to transform an approach intended for the notation of transitory effects into something more permanent. Short on seductive flair, what he brought to the table was an understated sincerity.

Weir's signature pieces are muted summer pastorals. He found Elysian subjects in two Connecticut locales that offered respite from life in his New York City studio: the first in Branchville, where his home is now the state's only national park, then later in Windham. Of Windham he wrote, "This is really the first Connecticut village that I have really ever known, and now I feel that a charm is connected with all villages, such as I have read of but never appreciated."

For all its rural charms, by the late 1800s Windham had become best known for its role in the textile industry, as the home of the immense Willimantic Thread Company. The company was the world's foremost supplier of spool cotton and the largest employer in Connecticut. It was also considered a model of industrial enlightenment for its cultivated grounds and laborers' living quarters. Weir's very best paintings chronicled industrial encroachment on a bucolic environment, the give-and-take of architecture and foliage.

Over the course of a decade, Weir made six paintings of the factories in Willimantic. At some point between 1893 and 1897, he painted *U.S. Thread Company Mills, Willimantic, Connecticut*, from a nearby railroad embankment. *U.S. Thread Company Mills* is notable among his landscapes for its delicate

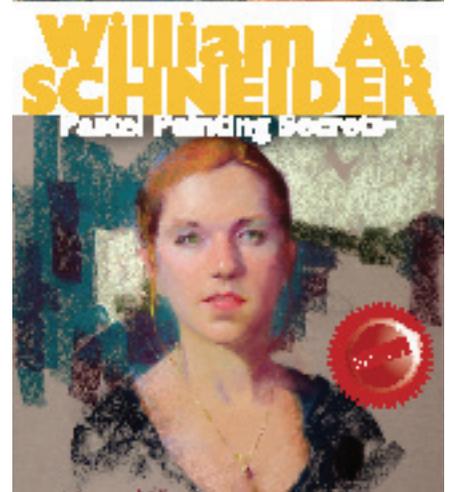
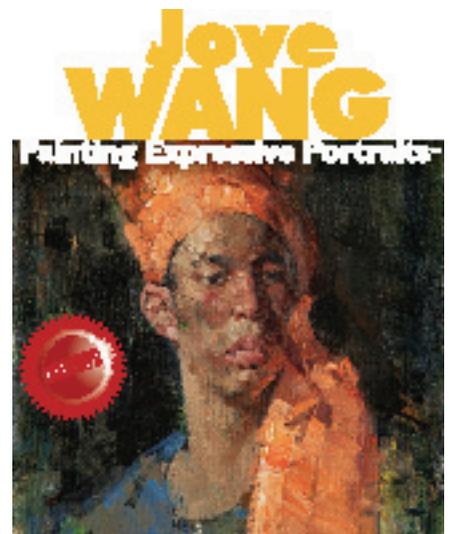
handling, subtle atmosphere and wide open space. It's a complex design, constructed on a multitude of fragmented forms; shapes overlap one another, and no single object is seen in its entirety. And yet, with its arched footbridge, repeated verticals of trees and smokestack, and glimpses of the Willimantic River, this is as serene an image as Weir ever composed.

At the same time Weir chose to paint the thread mills, the American factory became a lightning rod for nationalistic anxiety. Willimantic's workers were mostly young female immigrants, some of whom put down roots in the area, while others returned home with what money they'd saved. Amid much fulmination against the presence of foreigners in the labor force, in 1896 Henry Cabot Lodge proposed a bill in the Senate designed to restrict immigration to English-speaking peoples, so as to preserve the superiority of "kindred races."

Although he was surely aware of the rhetoric, Weir's factory paintings don't reference the political discourse. They neither glorify mechanization nor yearn nostalgically for a pre-industrial landscape. In *U.S. Thread Company Mills*, Weir envisioned a symbiotic relationship between material progress and nature. With a nod to the designs of Japanese prints, Weir found an aesthetic compromise. There was rich visual material at the intersection of rural and urban life, and he painted his best pictures at that junction. ■

**JERRY N. WEISS** is a contributing editor to *The Artist's Magazine*. He teaches at the Art Students League of New York. To see more of his work, visit [jerryneweiss.com](http://jerryneweiss.com).

**Further reading:** *American Impressionism: The Beauty of Work*, (2005; Frances Lincoln Publishers) by Susan G. Larkin, offers an overview of Weir's Willimantic factory paintings as well as background on contemporaneous labor and social issues.



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