The lives of so many artists are marked by a struggle for recognition and appreciation that one encounters only occasionally the career of a happy man completely untroubled by any trials of this sort. Such a happy man was Sanford R. Gifford.

His life was indeed so placid that sometimes in reviewing his days and works one is inclined to feel that perhaps some clouding note of conflict might have been beneficial to his art. It might have forced upon him a more insistent declaration of his artistic principles, which, though they always tended away from academic convention, were never quite crystalized into a firmly stated revolt. However, the seeds of heresy against the dead hand of the academy were well planted in him, and all his paintings show him to be in advance of his time and his fellow artists in the Hudson River School.

Isham, in his History of American Painting, accords Gifford the honor of being “the first [American artist] to base the whole interest of a picture on purely artistic problems” but then goes on to say that “this idealizing and poetizing temper . . . brings him into affinity with Cole.” No one can say that Cole was not an early influence in Gifford’s painting. But if we look at Gifford’s work keeping the French impressionists in mind, his affinity with them is strongly apparent, especially in those small sketches done out of doors in which atmosphere and light are the principal subjects rather than the minutely accurate topographical record of the kind one finds in the works of F. E. Church or Bierstadt. Gifford’s retort to critics who accused him of always painting the same subject was “paint what you like.” The philosophical intentions of this statement escaped them; they wanted slickly finished panoramas of Andes or icebergs or some definite scenic marvel like the Grand Canyon or Yosemite.

Gifford’s life was spent almost entirely in the pursuit of the happily combined arts of fishing and landscape painting. His history, like his paintings, seems to us bathed in the golden, smoky haze of a perpetual Indian summer afternoon. Considering his lifelong preoccupation with atmospheric effects of sunset, mist, and the extraordinarily rich color of autumnal woods in the Catskills and along the Hudson, it is surprising that the impressionist painters of the generation that followed him did not acknowledge him their predecessor, if not their master. Perhaps he was so well buried by his academic friends that he was immediately forgotten after his death.

His career appears from this vantage in time to have a perfect coherence and finished unity from the auspicious beginning to the end in 1880. Perhaps the only flaw in his peaceful chronicle would be his sudden death at the age of fifty-eight, when he was in his prime. This sad event was observed with all due ceremony by his friends, a memorial meeting was held at the Century Club, and the addresses and poems delivered on this occasion were published.

Gifford was also given the honor of a large memorial exhibition in this Museum during the winter of 1880-1881, at which a hundred and sixty of his paintings were shown. Shortly after this exhibition the Museum issued a catalogue listing all Gifford’s paintings—seven hundred and thirty-one works in chronological order—with a brief biography of the artist, written by John F. Weir. This book was the first scholarly publication issued by the Museum. Its completeness and accuracy are largely due to Waldo Selden Pratt, the compiler, who was then an assistant to General di Cesnola. This excellent book was so unusual at that time that a reviewer says of it:

“...that this catalogue will serve as a pattern for future occasions, and..."
that all our prominent artists—whatever their tendency, or school, or style—may have their memorial exhibitions and their memorial catalogues compiled with the assiduous care bestowed by Mr. Pratt on this prototype. It is pleasant to note also that the first undertaking of this kind is due to the initiative of one of our Museums, as these institutions are so frequently accused of taking no interest in American art.”

The Memorial Catalogue of the Paintings of Sanford Robinson Gifford, N. A., not only lists the paintings but gives their dates, sizes, and locations. The list of owners practically amounts to a who's who of American collectors of the 1860's and 1870's. The titles of the paintings record the itinerary of the artist in his extended European walking trips and his wanderings through the vast wildernesses of the American forest in search of the withdrawn secrecy of Adirondack trout pools.

Though Gifford was born in Greenfield, Saratoga County, New York, his early life was spent in Hudson, New York, where his father was the prosperous proprietor of an iron foundry. After two years at Brown University he decided to be an artist and came to New York to study portrait-painting with John R. Smith in 1845. He soon abandoned his teacher and portrait-painting in favor of landscape, which allowed him plenty of time to ramble through the Catskills and even further afield. He was a born woodsman and explorer as well as an accomplished fisherman, and he fell in naturally with the group of landscape painters of about his own age who lived in or near New York.

Throughout his career he was supported by his indulgent family, and so he never felt any particular compulsion to sell his paintings. The larger part of his work was small sketches, only a few of which were "worked up" into large finished landscapes. In 1851 he was elected an Associate of The National Academy of Design, and in 1854 an Academician. The following year he embarked for Europe, where he remained for two years. The first year he walked through England and wintered in Paris; the second year he walked through Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy and spent the winter in Rome. In the spring of 1857 he resumed his walking tour through Italy and part of Austria, returning to New York in the summer. Here he took studio number 19 in the Tenth Street Studio Building, which he occupied for the rest of his life.

Although he was financially well off, this fact was never evident by any display; his whole career is marked by the simplicity and frugality of the woodsman who travels light. The only thing that accumulated in his studio (in a day when studios were filled to overflowing with bric-a-brac, peacock feathers, plaster casts, and plush draperies) were his own sketches. His financial security allowed him a boundless generosity to his fellow artists (who often needed assistance), freedom to
come and go as he pleased, and a few mild but marked eccentricities. In 1861 he joined the Seventh New York Regiment, and he served again with them in 1863 and 1864.

Each summer he spent some time in the Catskills or the Adirondacks and to him is largely due the fame of these mountains as summer resorts. He discovered secluded farmhouses in these regions where his artist friends could gather for the summer, but they traveled far in front of the first faint trickle of summer boarders who gradually took over the forests and farms near the city. The artists led the way and frequently Gifford led the artists. His particular friends in these years were the landscape painters Jervis McEntee, Worthington Whittredge, and John F. Kensett and the sculptor Henry Kirke Brown. It was Brown who went with him on his camping trips in the wild regions of Maine and upper New York in search of trout streams that had never been fished since the Indians were driven west.

In 1859 Gifford and his friend McEntee went on a two-year walking trip through Europe and the Near East, making their way through Italy, Sicily, Greece, Syria, Turkey, and Egypt. Gifford left New York for this extended venture in the most casual way, merely walking out of his studio one day, carrying with him only one small satchel slung over his shoulder and saying no word to anyone. He didn't even lock the door. Two years later he returned in the same manner, quietly, empty-handed, unannounced, to take up his work where he left off. In 1870 he went with Whittredge and Kensett on a trip to the Rocky Mountains. On this trip both of Gifford's friends were shocked that he never touched his sketching materials in the midst of this eminently paintable "scenery." He left them and their paints "in cold blood," Whittredge says, and dashed off to explore the really dangerous Indian country with Colonel Hayden.

Gifford was awarded a medal for excellence in landscape painting at the Centennial Exposition in 1876. The following year he married. In 1880 during a sketching trip in the region of Lake Superior he was suddenly taken ill, and he died shortly after his return to New York.

After the Gifford memorial exhibition at the Museum the contents of his studio (294 paintings) were sold at auction. The first sale (151 paintings) brought in $28,810 and presumably the second brought almost as much, although I have been able to find no record of the total. No less than nineteen paintings were bought at these sales by Professor O. C. Marsh,
Sanford R. Gifford in 1880, by Eastman Johnson. Gift of Richard Butler, 1888

the famous paleontologist at Yale. The great prize of the sale, however, was carried off by the Corcoran Gallery of Washington. They gave $5,100 for Gifford’s famous Ruins of the Parthenon.

The Metropolitan Museum’s collection contains three paintings by Gifford. All of these are large “finished” pictures done in the studio from smaller studies. They lack the spontaneity of his smaller sketches, but there was enough of the impressionist in him to prevent these works from being mere machines of accuracy. The earliest picture is Kaaterskill Clove, dated 1862. Both of the other works are paintings of European scenery—Lake Maggiore, dated 1871, and Tivoli, dated 1879. Tivoli was frequently singled out by his contemporaries as his best work. It is described by John F. Weir:

“His Tivoli is a miracle of tremulous atmosphere through which the eye pierces to illimitable distances. Wonderfully harmonious, its unity is perfect; and its luminous quality may almost lead one to fancy that he steeped his brush in sunlight. To my mind, Gifford’s principle aim in his art attained its consummation in this picture. It is a golden mean between extremes, in hue, in tone, in repose, or a sense of it under the endless activities of nature—and as a manifestation of power exercised seemingly without effort. Gifford loved the glories of the declining day, and the solemnities of twilight, but they did not absorb his powers, or limit his scope.”

In 1888 Gifford’s friend Richard Butler presented the Museum with a portrait of Gifford by Eastman Johnson, and in 1902 Mrs. Richard Butler presented an earlier portrait of him, a bronze bust made in 1871 by Launt Thompson.

Now that American art of the nineteenth century has attained a respectable status and the scholars are beginning to probe with increasing intensity into the subject, painters who have had an obscure if permanent place on the roster are brought forward again for our inspection. A search is made for their paintings, and when these are stripped of the accumulated grime of sixty or seventy years we look upon them with new eyes and often find unsuspected qualities in them. Some pictures provide us with a visual record that has in the intervening years acquired historical value, others are period pieces, pictorial bric-a-brac redolent of the recent past—prehistorically removed from the present though so near in actual count of years. But Gifford’s paintings have in them qualities beyond mere antiquarian topography or Victorian quaintness. These qualities place him in a special category as one of the American pioneers of the impressionist revolt against academic convention.

What Gifford discovered independently about light, color, and atmosphere by studying the forest and river landscape around his home at Hudson seems to have been overlooked by the young American artists of the following generation. To them the Hudson Valley seemed prosaic compared with the Bohemian delights to be found on the banks of the Seine.