

AN ARTIST OF THE

*American
Renaissance*



The Letters of

Kenyon Cox,

1883–1919

EDITED BY H. WAYNE MORGAN

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IN MEMORIAM

The children of Louise and Kenyon Cox

Leonard

Allyn

Caroline

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PREFACE

KENYON COX was born in Warren, Ohio, in 1856 and died in New York in 1919. In these years he developed a career as a painter and art critic that made him a national cultural figure. Both sides of his family played prominent roles in the history of his state and nation. His mother was the daughter of the famous evangelist and founder-leader of Oberlin College, Charles Grandison Finney. Cox's father first studied for the ministry, then switched to politics as a liberal Republican when the great sectional crisis of the 1850s prepared to divide the Union. He emerged from the Civil War as a major general, was governor of Ohio in the postwar term, served as secretary of the interior for President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869–70, and was a member of the national House of Representatives for the 1877–79 term. He spent the rest of his life as a lawyer, legal educator, and university administrator at the Cincinnati Law School and the University of Cincinnati. Whatever their roles, the family valued intellectual achievement and supported their son Kenyon's desire to be an artist at a time when such a career choice was both unusual and financially hazardous.

Kenyon studied as an adolescent at the McMicken Art School in Cincinnati, for one year at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1876–77, then for five years between 1877 and 1882 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He returned to Ohio in the winter of 1882 and moved to New York, the country's art center, in the fall of 1883. Once there, he made a living as an illustrator for magazines and books, showed easelworks in exhibitions, and then became a mural painter, using a personal classical style derived from Renaissance models. He decorated some of the country's major buildings, including state capitols at St. Paul, Des Moines, and Madison; courthouses in New York City, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and Newark, New Jersey; the Library of Congress; and other important structures that, with few exceptions, remain in place today. He reached the height of his prestige and influence in the art world in the decade before World War I as a supporter of a modified classical ideal and an opponent of modernism. He left a large body of critical writing and an equally interesting and important quantity of private correspondence.

Good letters have at least three large attributes. They show the development of a

personality in an interesting human drama. Cox was an excellent letter writer, who described his own feelings, fears, anxieties, and hopes candidly and well. In them, one senses a real personality doing real things. Letters should also describe developments within an important and interesting enterprise. These letters cover years of great excitement in the American art world. They begin when a new generation of painters studied abroad and then returned home to display their talents at drawing and painting, which they hoped would revolutionize American art and make it and the new country's culture in general an important part of world affairs. And they hoped to broaden the coverage of this new art to include a freshly examined idealism as well as landscape, genre, and portraiture, all drawn from an era that seemed to be on the march to progress in most sectors of human affairs. In short, they hoped to make their art interesting, expansive, and central to the society. Cox's letters comment on many of these developments, on the inner workings of the art scene, and on how artists lived and earned incomes. And last, good letters should show how both the personality and the milieu fitted into the large scheme of things, as Cox's do.

Cox focused on the immediate art scene. He described how artists worked as illustrators in the booming commercial world of the 1880s and 1890s. He dealt with criticism and the politics of art associations. The letters touch on how and why many artists divided their careers between studio and informal works, and the rewards and perils of each. Cox discussed the appeals of new styles and the dangers, as he saw them, of embracing untried ideas. In a more personal, yet generally important manner, his courtship and marriage showed how many people of his class and circumstance entered into matrimony. In the largest sense, his private writing delineated long-term developments in the art world of the time, how one style or idea yielded to or resisted others, and why artists and critics held the views they defended. Above all, his pithy, often acerbic, always interesting style made human many otherwise abstract ideas and events. This selection of Cox's surviving correspondence is a companion volume to my edition of his letters written from Paris, *An American Art Student in Paris: The Letters of Kenyon Cox 1877–1882* (1986). I hope that the two together illuminate not only his life and work, but also the spirit and deeds of the art world in which he lived.

A word about editing is in order. I have provided a general introduction, dealing chiefly with Cox's life as background, but have allowed the letters to speak for themselves wherever possible. Notes for each letter explain internal references. Added or illegible words are noted in brackets. I have changed spelling and punctuation to conform to modern usage, since this did not alter the meaning of the texts. I have given information on Cox's own works but have only noted dates for others, where these were available. I have not identified groups of works, such as those in museums, which Cox merely mentioned. The source of each letter is indicated at its conclusion with abbreviations, which are keyed to a list of depositories. I have used three dots to indicate where some of Cox's material has been eliminated.

Librarians and archivists are among the most overworked people in academic life, but the staffs of every collection I contacted met my requests with a spirit of good cheer and cooperation. I am deeply grateful to them all but owe a special debt to the following people: Angela Ghiral, librarian of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library of Columbia University, and Janet Parks, curator of prints at the same institu-

tion, who efficiently answered many requests; Roland Baumann, archivist of the Oberlin College Archives, who helped me both to find documents and to understand the Cox family; Lydia Dufour of the Frick Art Reference Library; Mary Beth Betts of the Architectural Collections, New-York Historical Society; James H. Hutson, chief, and his excellent staff at the Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress; Emily Clark, Chicago Historical Society; and Susan Brady, Yale University Library.

I wish to thank the following depositories for permission to use manuscript material: McKinney Library, Albany Institute of History and Art (Will H. Low Papers); American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (Kenyon Cox file); Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Papers of Claude Buck, Allyn Cox, Kenyon Cox, and of James Henry Moser, with the consent of his heirs, David G. Griggs, Robert M. Griggs, Ralph Fetherolf, Samuel Fetherolf, and Margaret Longwell); Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York (Kenyon Cox Papers); Bowdoin College, Walker Art Museum Archives (Walker Papers); Dartmouth College Library (Winston Churchill Collection); Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Gardner Papers); Houghton Library, Harvard University (Miscellaneous Manuscripts); Library of Congress (Central Services Division files, Papers of Grover Cleveland, Cass Gilbert, John Sherman, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson); Massachusetts Historical Society (Norcross Autograph Collection); Metropolitan Museum Archives (Kenyon Cox file); New-York Historical Society (Papers of Edwin H. Blashfield and Cass Gilbert); Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations (Century Company records); Oberlin College Archives (Henry Churchill King Papers); Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries (Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Papers, Scribner Archives); Yale University Library (John Ferguson Weir Papers); Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Yale Collection of American Literature (James B. Carrington Papers).

ABBREVIATIONS

AAA-AC	Archives of American Art, Allyn Cox Papers, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
AAA-CB	Archives of American Art, Claude Buck Papers
AAA-JHM	Archives of American Art, James Henry Moser Papers
AAA-MMS	Archives of American Art, miscellaneous manuscripts
AAFAL-KC	Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Kenyon Cox Papers, Columbia University, New York City
AAIAL-KC	American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Kenyon Cox file, New York City
AIHA-WHL	Albany Institute of History and Art, Will Hicock Low Papers, Albany, New York
BL-JBC	Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, James B. Carrington Papers, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
DCL-WC	Dartmouth College Library, Winston Churchill Papers, Hanover, New Hampshire
HL-MMS	Houghton Library, miscellaneous manuscripts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
ISGM-GP	Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Gardner Papers, Boston, Massachusetts
LC-CG	Library of Congress, Cass Gilbert Papers, manuscripts division, Washington, D.C.
LC-CSDF	Library of Congress, Central Services Division Files, manuscripts division
LC-GC	Library of Congress, Grover Cleveland Papers, manuscripts division

LC-JS	Library of Congress, John Sherman Papers, manuscripts division
LC-WHT	Library of Congress, William Howard Taft Papers, manuscripts division
LC-WW	Library of Congress, Woodrow Wilson Papers, manuscripts division
MHS-GHNAC	Massachusetts Historical Society, Grenville H. Norcross Autograph Collection, Boston, Massachusetts
MMA-KC	Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kenyon Cox file, New York City
NYHS-CG	New-York Historical Society, Cass Gilbert Papers, New York City
NYHS-EHB	New-York Historical Society, Edwin H. Blashfield Papers
NYPL-CC	New York Public Library, Century Collection, manuscripts division
OCA-HCK	Oberlin College Archives, Henry Churchill King Papers, Oberlin, Ohio
PUL-FJM	Princeton University Library, Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Papers manuscripts division
PUL-SA	Princeton University Library, Scribner Archives, manuscripts division
WAM-BC	Walker Art Museum, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine
YUL-JFW	Yale University Library, John Ferguson Weir Papers, manuscripts division

AN ARTIST OF THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

INTRODUCTION

IN THE FALL of 1882, a young art student named Kenyon Cox prepared to return to the United States after five years of study in Paris. He was among the hundreds of eager, energetic young people of that generation who sought the training and the cultural life of the acknowledged art capital of the world. Like most students, he was eager to master the technical skills of painting and drawing, and studied with outstanding teachers. He worked first with the modernist Carolus-Duran, then with the academician Alexandre Cabanel, and finally with the reknown painter who became a mentor, Jean-Léon Gérôme. He labored hard, especially at drawing and painting the figure, something the Parisian masters emphasized. Though not a brilliant or facile stylist, Cox was a noted draftsman by the time he returned home. And he had shown creditable canvases at each of the prestigious annual Salons between 1879 and 1882. He enjoyed serious studio work but also painted and sketched outdoors in more informal modes, and spent many summer months in the artists' colony of Grez-sur-Loing, south of Paris. He saw the region's famous sites and also traveled several weeks in northern Italy in 1878, for a firsthand encounter with some of that culture's old masters. He was not a mere student grind, however hard he worked in the atelier. He absorbed impressions as well as skills for a lifetime as an artist, which he considered almost a calling.¹

By December 1882, Cox had packed his clothes and books and shipped drawings and paintings home. By early 1883, he was back in Cincinnati, ready for the next steps in an artistic career. The family that welcomed him was well known. His father had fought for the Union in the Civil War, rising to the rank of major general. He was then governor of Ohio from 1866 to 1868, was secretary of the interior for President Ulysses S. Grant from 1869 to 1870, and served a single term in the House of Representatives

¹ The basic biography of Cox is H. Wayne Morgan, *Kenyon Cox, 1856–1919: A Life in American Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994). The same author edited Cox's student letters in *An American Art Student in Paris: The Letters of Kenyon Cox, 1877–1882* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986), and analyzed his ideas in *Keepers of Culture: The Art-Thought of Kenyon Cox, Royal Cortissoz, and Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1989).

from 1877 to 1879. A noted lawyer, he was dean of the Cincinnati Law School from 1880 to 1897, with a concurrent term as president of the University of Cincinnati from 1885 to 1889. The elder Cox was a well-rounded man, who combined public service and a flourishing law practice with an interest in education, science, and letters. Kenyon's mother, Helen Finney Cox, was the daughter of Charles Grandison Finney, the famous evangelist who was a founding father of Oberlin College. Both parents typified the sober, high-minded, industrious bourgeois who valued probity and ideals in all sectors of life. They imbued their children with a sense of being special and of being responsible for something beyond material success. Kenyon adopted this serious mien and, like the other family members, was outspoken about a wide range of issues. As a young man, he was intellectually precocious and emotionally immature. He was always somewhat prickly in demeanor and was more easy to admire than to like.

Cox had mixed feelings about returning home. He had been born in Warren, Ohio, in 1856, lived in Columbus as a child while his father was governor, and spent his adolescence in Cincinnati. Ohio was developing but was hardly on the edge of cultural innovation. Five years in Paris had made Cox a modern in both artistic approaches and in sensibilities. He was hardly radical, but at that point liked a personally interpreted realism that reflected and added to traditional methods and ideas. He belonged in New York, the country's cultural capital, where he could hope to earn at least a modest living as a member of a vital art community, with access to significant collections and the latest news from Europe. Cox considered himself thoroughly American and had no desire to be an expatriate.

Despite some hesitation and ambivalence, Cox saw himself as part of the new generation of artists who were determined to change their country's taste and level of aesthetic consciousness. There were grounds for both optimism and pessimism on that score. Americans generally had little apparent interest in the fine arts, yet they usually welcomed or at least examined innovation in all walks of life. Industrialism had begun to produce the wealth and consciousness among certain groups necessary to support new endeavors in the arts. The levels of education and income were rising, and communications systems allowed interested persons to become aware of changes in the world's arts.

Most potential art patrons had matured on various kinds of realism in painting, which seemed fitting in a democratic society that prized the tangible and practical. Patrons were familiar with various kinds of landscape painting, whether it treated calm scenes in the Hudson River Valley or the more romanticized and awesome West. They generally expected a portrait to be an accurate likeness, genre to be a fair record as well as an expression of a painter's taste and talent, and heroic painting to depict people and events in understandable ways. Cox and his peers understood these general emphases but rejected any literal realism. They thought it time to focus on motion, rich but harmonious color, accurate and energetic drawing, and a sense of change through the act of painting, all of course within prescribed rules.

By the late 1870s, many American patrons and critics had accepted the Munich style, which emphasized rich coloration, attention to building masses instead of literal drawing, and energy and expression in the artist's gesture. The look and emotional mood of these works recalled old masters yet seemed modern in emphasizing change, richness, and sometimes a sense of the unfinished aspects of both art and life. A school of luminists

used sky and water to depict the effects of light in carefully modulated tones that helped interpret but did not overwhelm objective reality. There was also some interest in heroic or allegorical works, chiefly those treating American history.

Impressionism had fractured the art scene everywhere by the late 1880s and provoked lengthy debates about both the forms and meanings of painting. Cox had not commented much on this new approach while a student in Paris but clearly disliked the impressionists' rejection of traditional drawing and academic methods. Above all, it was to him a perceptual rather than a conceptual approach, based on transitory rather than enduring effects and often on odd personal interpretations. And he simply disliked the style's apparent lack of finish and cohesion. Yet he sympathized with the desire to let light and color into art; he only feared that they would overwhelm the scene. Although he accepted many impressionist works, he always thought the Barbizon painters had interpreted light and color best because of their attention to fine painting and to creating a reflective mood.

Any new way of painting usually appealed to some new painters and patrons because it matched their suspicion of or weariness with received wisdom. Yet in all the disorder of the art world there was always some interest in traditional ideals and the symbolic among both artists and collectors. Painters as diverse as Albert Pinkham Ryder, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, John La Farge, and Cox himself desired to move beyond the observable and mundane to what they considered a higher plane of depiction and interpretation that joined them with the great tradition of western European art. They thought these forms and interpretations perfectly applicable to the United States, which was now part of that ongoing cultural order. The audience for an ideal nude or an allegorical scene was always smaller than for a realistic landscape or a genre study, but it was there, feeding Cox's hopes that he could gain attention for such work.

Above all, the often bewildering, dynamic, eclectic American art scene offered greater possibilities for success than did the one in Europe. The energy and curiosity of both painter and patron fed the growing belief that American culture was coming of age and would produce an art suitable to the nation's experience, yet be part of a world order. The new generation of artists did not wish to alter the variety in American art but to insist that works be well conceived and technically skillful within the reigning canons of modern training and taste. Cox did not yet analyze these ideals or ambitions in any formal way, yet such aspirations were part and parcel of any young artist's cultural baggage. He had the training and the ideas to create a niche for himself in the art world. Would hard work and good fortune bring success?

The prospect of going to New York was alternately exciting and unnerving. Cox, who had never earned a living, wanted to be independent from the family, to use his new skills and fulfill his ambitions, yet shrank from the ruthless competition of art life. So he drifted for a year in Ohio, studying with a group of pleasant young people in Cleveland, sketching and painting while visiting various relatives, reading and practicing draftsmanship at home. His parents realized that he needed to become independent and urged him to go east. By the fall of 1883, they provided a small loan and introductions to some of their friends in New York. Cox's close friend Theodore Robinson, who had studied in Paris and who had toured Italy with him in 1878, was making a precarious living assisting building decorators at several eastern sites. He urged Cox to strike out, come east, and make a living as best he could at similar work

and at illustrating for magazines. Cox also apparently had met the fledgling painter Will Hicock Low while both were in Paris. The genial, outgoing Low was something of an operator and came to know almost everyone in the new generation of American and French painters. He was working at illustration in New York while trying to attract attention in exhibitions. He knew only too well how hard it was to get started in the art world and offered to help. At the end of September, Cox accepted. "You may be called upon very soon to fulfill rash promises," he warned Low, and left Cincinnati on October 3.²

New York was threatening in its rush and impersonality, but Cox had coped with Paris and other European cities and understood urban ways. He lived briefly in a room in lower Manhattan, then moved to new studio space at 145 West Fifty-fifth Street in proximity to the city's cultural centers. He showed considerable self-reliance and quickly made the rounds of publishers' offices and art dealers, portfolio under one arm, eager to sell himself as a promising newcomer, equipped with suitable ambition as well as impressive foreign training.

The expansive industrial growth that was transforming nearly all of America was as evident in the world of art as in that of business and commerce. A new affluent, educated middle class supported numerous quality magazines that used artwork to illustrate fiction, travel writing, biographical studies, and topical reports. Editors were style conscious, eager for unusual modern design, and wished to make their magazines part of the higher art scene. They paid close attention to covers, to story illustrations, and to designs for colophons and ornaments. Publications such as *Scribner's Monthly* and *Century Magazine* graced the bookshelves and parlor tables of thousands of households whose members wanted to keep abreast of cultural as well as political and economic issues. Since photography was expensive and technically difficult, publishers generally commissioned artists to produce drawings or sketches, which were then engraved on metal or wood plates for reproduction.³

Public interest in and patronage of the arts were at an all time high, but most artists lived on the edge of poverty. Major collectors still patronized dealers in foreign works, and it was always hard to tell what current American work would become fashionable and salable. Most artists struggled both for esteem among compatriots and for financial security, winning more of the former than the latter. Cox knew that his family would not let him starve, yet he was determined not only to do quality illustration but also to "make a living this winter," as he wrote home.⁴

Cox's energy and talent paid dividends. He quickly became a noted illustrator, whose signature was familiar to readers well into the 1890s. Like any other artist, he had to produce what publishers wanted but never knowingly altered his aesthetic or technical standards, however slight the job. A small numeral or a device separating paragraphs in a story were as important to him as a full-page illustration. He worked hard and gained a welcome reputation among publishers for meeting deadlines. There was a

² Robinson to Cox, December 19, 1882, February 26, April 15, May 1, June 20, 1883, AAFAL-KC; and Cox to Low, September 30, 1883, AIHA-WHL.

³ See Arthur John, *The Best Years of the Century: Richard Watson Gilder, Scribner's Monthly, and the Century Magazine, 1870–1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 76–91; and H. Wayne Morgan, *New Muses: Art In American Culture, 1865–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 23–25.

⁴ Cox to Jacob D. Cox, October 19, 1883, AAFAL-KC.

great deal of illustrative work, and Cox's bore comparison to anyone else's, given the medium's limitations.

Cox treated a wide array of subjects. In an early commission, he drew Chinese actors in elaborate costumes. He could be amusing or whimsical, as in drawing allegorical female figures and Old Man Winter for a poem on the changing seasons. A few illustrations resembled studio work, as in his drawings of some of the pieces of the famous French sculptor of animals, Antoine-Louis Barye. He was good at doing faces and busts, for which he relied on strong lines, hatching, and contrasting backgrounds. He could also produce a sense of the somber and half-expressed, as in illustrations for an article on frontier Illinois. In all such work he aimed to enliven and supplement but not dominate the written text. The resulting illustrations were modern in their sense of realism and action, and academic in their form and logic.⁵

This illustrative work naturally reflected Cox's training and exacting personality. Where appropriate, he preferred to draw from nature. "It was my general habit to sign my drawings 'after photo,' when such was the case, not 'to acknowledge the source of my inspiration,' as someone once put it, but to avoid responsibility," he wrote a friend late in life, "for I always believed I could do much better work from nature." He was also an accomplished studio painter and relied on models and accoutrements, a kind of indoor nature that ensured fidelity to observable fact as well as attachment to the larger art tradition. Cox was also interested in the character and personality of his human subjects. On a freezing January day in 1886, he sketched Houdon's famous bust of Benjamin Franklin at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the *Century*. In the changing light, amid historical associations, he thought for a moment that Franklin, or at least his own idea of Franklin's persona, came to life. It "seemed to me that old Ben had a very tantalizing and malicious smile upon his face. He impresses me as having been all of his life laughing at the foolishness of everybody else," Cox wrote his mother. "A shrewd old boy who used everyone to gain his own ends and let them take the credit. As his ends were good ones, it was all right, but if he had been a rascal, what a tremendous one he would have been!"⁶

Of course, Cox was seldom satisfied with the results of his labor and was sure he could do better with more time and care. He knew that few illustrations even approximated high art and at best could intrigue a reader or enhance a point in a text. The technical limitations of engraving also made many illustrations seem lifeless and without depth or nuance. He welcomed the new photogravure processes, which promised

⁵ Cox's numerous illustrations are scattered throughout the era's leading periodicals but are best sampled in: G. W. Prothero, "A Greek Play at Cambridge," *Century Magazine* 28 (July 1884): 411–17; Henry Burden McDowell, "The Chinese Theater," *ibid.* 29 (November 1884): 27–44; Ernest Whitney, "The Glory of the Year," *ibid.* 30 (August 1885): 550–52; Henry Eckford, "Antoine-Louis Barye," *ibid.* 31 (February 1886): 483–500; *idem*, "Olin Warner, Sculptor," *ibid.* 37 (January 1889): 392–401; Joel Benton, "Christmas Carol," *Harper's Weekly* 33 (December 28, 1889): 1036–37; William F. Apthorp, "Paris Theaters and Concerts: The Comédie-Française and the Odéon," *Scribner's Magazine* 11 (January 1892): 3–25; *idem*, part 2, "The Opéra, The Opéra-Comique, and the Conservatoire," *ibid.* 11 (March 1892): 359–65; *idem*, part 3, "The Unsubventioned Theaters," *ibid.* 11 (April 1892): 482–96; and Mary Hartwell Catherwood, "The Little Renault: An Episode of Life in the Illinois Country," *Century Magazine* 42 (August 1892): 557–66.

⁶ Cox to Robert Underwood Johnson, February 21, 1917, AAIAL-KC, on photographs; Cox to Helen Finney Cox, January 12, 1886, AAFAL-KC, on Franklin.

to make reproductions both more accurate and more like painting. Publishers were always in a hurry, talking of deadlines, never allowing enough time for fine touches or careful thought. Even so, authors sometimes thanked him for his illustrations. "I don't take them very seriously myself," he wrote his mother in 1885 of one set. "They are as good as I could make them for the money, but if the Century Co. paid for more time it would get better work." The grinding labor furnished a modest living but took time and energy away from painting, his true love. And he could not help noting that the public seemed to like best the work he thought "rather commonplace."⁷

Within weeks of moving to New York, Cox was earning a respectable living and gaining notice among peers. He came with a reputation for draftsmanship and figure painting learned at the world's best art school, but his hard work and enterprise also counted. The illustrating grind was tiring, but it kept him among the promising new talents who were engaged in the same labor, and whose painting and standards would affect his future career. He regularly reported home on his progress, and though grateful for parental support, noted his own abilities and initiatives. He was idealistic about art as personal expression and social statement but could be hard-minded and realistic about developing a career. "I think on the whole that I have every reason to congratulate myself on my good fortune in getting into work so soon," he wrote home in November 1883. "You see that an acquaintance and a certain reputation among the artists does count for something after all. I might have stayed a year longer in Cincinnati without getting as much work to do."⁸

These same talented young artists also served a growing market for well-designed and specially illustrated books. In 1883, the Boston firm of Estes and Lariat asked a group of illustrators, including Cox, to make a special edition of *Lalla Rookh* (1817), a grandiose, often erotic oriental fantasy of the Irish poet Thomas Moore. They promised quality photogravure reproductions and allowed each artist to work in his own style. Cox chose to accompany his assigned text with small-scale allegorical figures, often set against dramatic skies and landscapes. He worked over them carefully, but the publishers delayed production and in the end the pictures were indistinct and not his best work. But they did reveal Cox's continued interest in nonrealistic and allegorical work.

Cox's success as an illustrator culminated in an important commission early in 1886, less than three years after he struck out on his own. The prestigious firm of Dodd, Mead and Company asked for an elaborate set of plates to illustrate a special Christmas edition of the famous poem *The Blessed Damozel* (1850) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This was an invitation at a handsome fee to illustrate specific parts of the text with independent works of art. Several better-established artists turned down the offer for lack of time but recommended him because of his reputation in figure work as well as his reliability. The poem was idealistic, and Cox quickly decided to make a series of allegorical figures. Many of them were nudes, something that might not be popular with either his family or the public. But the commission reinforced his idealistic views

⁷ Cox to Helen Finney Cox, November 22, 1883, notes the problems of engraving; Cox to Helen Finney Cox, August 9, 1885, has the quotation on time; Cox to Leonard Opdycke, June 3, 1886, notes popular taste; all AAFAL-KC.

⁸ Cox to Helen Finney Cox, November 22, 1883, AAFAL-KC.

of art, and he felt vindicated. “This is a proof of what I have always believed,” he wrote home, “that the way to real success in art or anything else is to do the highest one knows and wait for those who can recognize its merits to inform the rest of the world.” The work would be hard, the fall deadline remorseless, but success would establish him as a promising newcomer and, more to the point, as the figure painter he aspired to be.⁹

The resulting book gained Cox a good deal of critical attention. He had produced a dozen small pictures to accompany stanzas in the text as well as others for dedication, title and signature pages, headpieces, and tailpieces. Most involved nude or semidraped figures. He painted in a grey monotone, or *grisaille*, with subtle modulations of tone and shading, which became sepia in quality photogravure reproductions. The compositions were formal but not static, the figures well realized with a careful modeling, and some involved small background landscapes, which Cox always painted with great skill. Even those critics who thought that the plates did not match the poem’s ethereal tone noted that they were superb examples of modern figure painting. In the end, most thoughtful critics saw the works for what they were, a bridge between his early realism and a steadily developing interest in allegorical figure work that culminated in mural painting.¹⁰

Cox was known among friends for an impressive knowledge of art history and for pithy comments on a range of current European and American work. He read steadily and wrote in a concise style. The letters he sent home while a student in Paris offered a vital discussion of French art affairs as well as of his own personal progress. He had briefly proposed to do articles on the elaborate art exhibitions at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1878 but found it easier to think and talk about the pictures than to use the right words. But in 1879 he wrote three essays on the annual Paris Salon for his hometown newspaper in which he dutifully examined many noted works and commented on the technical skills of various artists. He also tried to place the works and the painters in the mainstream of current art, which required analysis as well as description. He was not especially fond of the usual Salon piece derived from mythology or history, which won honors and state purchase, and believed that many noted artists were living on past reputations. He then thought of himself as a modernist, both in liking current subject matter done with academic skill and in thinking that art should be a natural part of life rather than something to decorate palace walls or public galleries. He was candid by nature and never shrank from controversy, even though it made him uneasy. He hoped the articles appeared unsigned, as he did not want to alienate people who might return the favor when his time came in the future. As it turned out, the articles bore only his initials, yet those who cared knew he wrote them. The articles caused no great stir but marked the beginnings of his critical career.¹¹

Although Cox naturally saw himself as a painter rather than as a writer, he found criticism intriguing. Such writing had improved as major newspapers and magazines reached more educated readers and covered art events regularly and in some depth.

⁹ Cox to Helen Finney Cox, February 20, 1886, AAFAL-KC.

¹⁰ The book was widely reviewed. Cox particularly liked a thoughtful, if critical, unsigned review in the major, influential journal, *Nation* (“Holiday Books. III,” *Nation* 43 [December 9, 1886]: 481–82). See also his letter to Helen Finney Cox, December 15, 1886, AAFAL-KC.

¹¹ Cox to Jacob D. Cox, June 26, 1879, and Cox to Helen Finney Cox, July 9, 1879, both in Morgan, ed., *An American Art Student*, 163–66. The articles were in the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, June 11, July 5, 9, 1879.