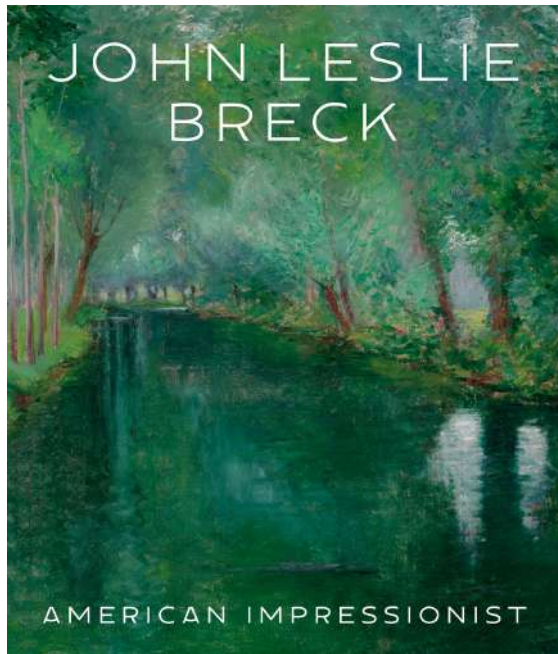


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**Major new volume on the life  
and work of 19th-century  
artist John Leslie Breck**

# (1860–1899), the founder of American Impressionism

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Born at sea off Hong Kong in 1860, John Leslie Breck studied in Germany and in Paris. In the summer of 1887 he and some of his fellow American artists visited Giverny, where they met and befriended Claude Monet and subsequently explored the new approach to painting that Monet had helped to pioneer. After returning to the USA from France Breck created a large body of particularly beautiful paintings of New England, some of the earliest Impressionist views of California, and what may be the first extended series of American Impressionist paintings of Venice. Many of these paintings are published here for the first time.

This volume includes approximately 70 of Breck's finest works, drawn from public and private collections. In addition it features more than 70 additional comparative images, including details, unpublished historic photographs, and paintings by Monet and by leading American impressionists including Joseph Rodefer

DeCamp, Arthur Wesley Dow, Willard Metcalf, Lilla Cabot Perry, and Theodore Robinson, a chronology and appendices. Essays chart Breck's life and career, examine the influence on his work of his stay in Giverny, explore his Venetian paintings, and place him in context within both the US and European art worlds of his time.

"This is the book every artist deserves. It is exemplary in the way it illustrates all of Breck's outstanding works, gives us a much-needed, detailed account of his life in Giverny including his relationship to Monet and his step-daughters, explains his family and his ties to Boston, expands our knowledge by illustrating his work in Venice, Santa Barbara, and Gloucester, and forthrightly examines his good times and his troubled ones."—Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., formerly curator of American Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Harvard Art Museums.

*"John Leslie Breck: American Impressionist* is a revelation. Never before have so many of Breck's finest paintings been seen together. It's a must for anyone who loves Impressionism." —George T.M. Shackelford, deputy director, Kimbell Art Museum.

Published in conjunction the exhibition *John Leslie Breck: American Impressionist*, Mint Museum Uptown, Charlotte, NC: September 18, 2021– January 2, 2022; Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, TN: January 22–March 27, 2022;

Figge Art Museum, Davenport, IA: May 28–August 28, 2022.

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PLATE 18  
John Leslie Breck  
Middieva in Middievaer (The Mill Stream, Limetz) ca. 1881  
Private Collection, Courtesy of Martha Richardson Fine Art, Boston



Fig. 20  
Photograph of Breck and his wife  
Henry Fitch Taylor with the Monet  
family. Private collection.



Fig. 21  
John Leslie Breck,  
A Maritime Headset, 1888.  
Oil on canvas, 17½ x 10 inches.  
Private collection.

high-keyed palette. In making his view of the mill from across the Bras de l'Épte, Breck, like Monet, divided his composition into foreground trees drooping from the riverbank where they were painting, a shimmering middle ground of water, and the distant mill and old bridge, with just a small corner of sky in the upper right. Breck built up the canvas to simultaneously create an illusion of movement and depth, while also attracting the viewer's eye to the painting's surface. The distant mill is simply a brilliant reflection of light, with minimal modeling to describe the arches of the bridge. The highly visible, vibrating brushstrokes draw attention to the painting process itself.

In Monet's own painting, he employed a vertical format, rather than Breck's horizontal, used much more blue than Breck's predominantly and characteristically green palette, and achieved a more convincing illusion of depth. In a second depiction of the same subject (plate 19), painted around 1891, Breck adhered to

the horizontal format that he favored throughout his career, but otherwise emulated Monet's approach more closely. The later painting again frames the subject through tree branches but with a closer point of view, to the right of the earlier work, that makes the building and bridge and their individual features more distinct.

A photograph of Monet, Alice Hoschede, three of her daughters, and Breck, also illustrates Breck's intimate relationship with the Monet household (figure 20).<sup>67</sup> The photograph includes Henry Fitch Taylor, who later gave a similar account of his relationship with Monet: "when [Taylor] first called on Monet the master told him he would not accept him as a pupil, pupils were a nuisance. But the American painter might if he cared to accompany him on his daily rounds, Taylor jumped at the offer."<sup>68</sup> Taylor exhibited *Bridge at Limetz, Normandy* (unlocated) at the American Art Galleries in April 1889, suggesting that he too may have accompanied Breck and Monet when they painted the Limetz mill and the



PLATE 22  
Lila Cabot Perry  
*Landscape in Normandy, 1891*  
Renwick Museum



PLATE 24  
Theodore Rousseau  
*Afternoon Shadow, 1891*  
Sanford P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida



PLATE 23  
John Leslie Beck  
*Grasslands ca. 1891*  
Metis Collection

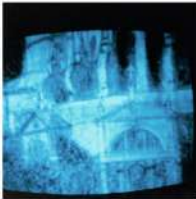


Fig. 40  
Infrared photograph of *Solitude by Moonlight*

a sea of azure" (plate 44), possibly foreshadowing "the turning of a new leaf, the beginning of a new chapter."<sup>208</sup> Arthur Chamberlain, correspondent for *The Art Interchange*, singled out the painting as an unusual example that illustrated how "impressionism is often at its best when not dealing with the garish day."<sup>208</sup> The moonlit view, one of only three large canvases in Beck's Venetian series, marked the last of the nocturnal scenes that were a feature of his early Greeny days; his 1897-98 Salon painting had been a moonlight scene, and his 1893 Chase exhibition contained several smaller moonlit pictures, about which a critic commented that such "studies in full moonlight ... are connected with Mr. Beck's name alone. Not even M. Monet has ever painted en pleine lune."<sup>209</sup> In contrast to the spontaneity of his French work, however, x-ray analysis of this painting has revealed a meticulous pencil sketch of the church's architectural details, which Beck took pains to articulate (figure 40). This remarkable painting remains one of Beck's best known and most celebrated works, at once highly romantic while also tinged with

melancholy, the great structure surrounded by the flares of gondolas waiting at its stairs beneath stars that seem to mock the enormous dome's substance.

**Last works**  
Following his return from Venice, Beck lived for less than two more years. On September 16, he returned to Ironbound, where he spent two weeks with his friends the Blancys, joined shortly after his arrival by his faithful fiancée Nellie Plummer.<sup>210</sup> There he began the austere and beautiful *Ironbound Cliffs* (plate 45), one of his last completed works, a variation on his *At the Foot of the Cliffs* (plate 46) painted a few summers earlier. The following month, Beck committed an act of "serious misconduct" at the St. Botolph Club, when he refused to leave the premises after closing time and then broke into the Club's supply of cigarettes, for which he was subsequently "admonished," just one step short of losing his membership.<sup>209</sup> Many of Beck's patrons as well as his closest friends were Club members, and such rash behavior risked more than mere embarrassment, suggesting a self-destructive streak exacerbated by alcoholism.

During the winter of 1897-98, many of Beck's close friends banded together to form the Ten American Painters without inviting him to join them. Realizing, perhaps, that his career had stalled, Beck finally moved to New York City, where he rented studio space at 146 W. 52nd Street.<sup>210</sup> He remained there for four months.<sup>211</sup> During that period he exhibited work at the National Academy of Design for the first time and, following a three-year hiatus, at the Society of American Artists, but his paintings attracted neither buyers nor attention in the press. Though he returned to familiar subjects in these exhibitions, including Boston's North Shore and Ironbound Island's rugged cliffs, lonely forest scenes and winter landscapes dominated his subsequent work (figure 50). A characteristic example is *The Dragons in Winter, Essex* (plate 47), a desolate view of the Ipswich Bay marshes better known from



PLATE 44  
John Leslie Beck  
*Solitude by Moonlight, 1897*  
Collection of Geoffrey Lewis



PLATE 67  
John Leslie Breck  
*The Dragon's Winter Even, ca. 1908*  
Collection of Stephen Langer and Margaret Mahwood

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PLATE 68  
Arthur Wesley Dow  
*The Blue Dragon, ca. 1904*  
Breck Museum

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PLATE 69  
John Leslie Breck  
*Giudecca Canal, Venice, 1897*  
Private Collection, Courtesy of Martha Richardson Fine Art, Boston

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Fig. 61  
John Leslie Breck, *Giudecca Canal*, 1897.  
Oil on canvas, 18 x 12 inches. Private collection.

Fig. 62  
John Leslie Breck, *Giudecca Canal*, 1897.  
Oil on canvas, 18 x 21 inches. Auction  
Collection, Garo Spangher, Ltd.

Royal W. Leith

in the Rutland, Massachusetts home of Breck's aunt and uncle, foreshadowing Breck's later visit (see p. 35).  
Despite years of abuse, the fresco has survived and bears a striking similarity to Breck's *Bay at Venice* (plate 68), his largest Venetian painting. Following the practice he established in the four solo exhibitions he held during his lifetime, this would have been the first painting listed in his planned exhibition of Venetian works and the exhibit's focus. Breck arranged the panoramic composition to include the entrances to Venice's two major canals, the Giudecca and Grand Canals, and some of their principal buildings: Palladio's Redentore church; Santa Maria della Salute; and the Doge's Palace. The result is a comprehensive view that justified its title, simply "Venice," in the earlier memorial exhibition.  
Santa Maria della Salute is the sole subject of the next largest Venetian painting in the memorial exhibitions, "Santa Maria by Mocenigo" (see plate 44, p. 113).

Whereas he filtered his view of the bay through hazy sunlight, his painting of the Salute is a nocturne, a type of painting for which Breck became famous early in his career.

Neither of these two paintings, the largest and most ambitious works included in the memorial exhibitions, is signed.<sup>6</sup> Since Breck's mother accompanied him on his trip to Venice, she must have understood their importance and realized as well that she should add neither a signature nor any finishing touches. The absence of a signature suggests that Breck did not yet consider them done, but there are no obvious indications that this is the case.

Little information about Breck's activities during the last years of his life remains, and the only traces of his actual activities in Venice are the pictures themselves. Many of the works were painted either from or of the Giudecca island, where Breck probably spent most, if not all, of his time living (plate 69; figures 61 and 62). Less frequented by tourists and home to much of Venice's working class, this location led Breck to

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