



Maria A'Becket, *Wooded Mountainside*, c. 1890s. Collection of the Portland Museum of Art. Becket (or Beckett), a pioneer woman painter in the Barbizon style, grew up in Portland and exhibited in the windows of Portland art dealers before traveling to France to study with renowned landscapist Charles Daubigny. Beckett helped blaze a trail for women through the male-dominated world of professional painting.

MARIA J.C. A' BECKET: REDISCOVERING AN AMERICAN ARTIST

BY CHRISTOPHER VOLPE

Maria J.C. a' Becket (or Beckett, as she originally spelled her name) got her start as an artist in Portland, Maine, and moved on to new venues in Boston, New York, Bar Harbor, and St. Augustine. She studied in France with well-known Barbizon School landscape painters and returned to America to develop a distinctly personal and American version of the genre. Although her work and legacy are obscure today, Becket was a pioneer professional woman painter and arguably the first woman to build a career as a landscape painter by popularizing the Barbizon style in America. Christopher Volpe moved to New England from Long Island, earned a graduate degree in poetry at the University of New Hampshire, and worked as a professional writer and teacher before falling in love with American landscape painting while teaching a class in art history. His paintings are exhibited and sold through regional galleries and juried shows, and he teaches at the New Hampshire Institute of Art and Chester College of New England.

IN AN ODD side-street “bungalow” in turn-of-the-century Maine, a short, rather intense, middle-aged woman dabbed, stabbed, scraped, and swept a palette knife across her canvas. It was July 1897, high season in Bar Harbor, “the Queen of American summer resorts,” and the artist painting as if in a trance was the celebrated “Miss Maria a' Becket,” a highly successful American oil painter who today is, undeservedly, almost entirely unknown.¹

Born Maria Graves Beckett in Portland, Maine, on July 7, 1839, Maria Beckett devoted her entire life to painting. During her forty-year career, she exhibited at most of the major venues for professional American painters, including the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the American Art Union, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the National Academy of Design. In her mature work, she fully absorbed and personalized the French Barbizon style of painting, fusing it with her own sensibility and the then-radical techniques of Impressionism and American

Tonalism. It is a measure of her originality just how striking it is to see North American scenery handled with a Barbizon sensibility and executed in a “broken color” Impressionist palette.²

A daring individual in everything she did, Maria Beckett helped blaze a trail for women who wanted to enter the male-dominated world of professional painting in nineteenth-century America. This she did while bridging the avant-garde French ideas of Barbizon and its daughter movement, Impressionism, in a wholly American context. Without the benefit of influential (and exclusively male) artistic circles, and without a native movement of which she felt a part, she seized upon European methods but took a very American course of action: she reinvented herself. Early in her career, Maria Graves Beckett had signed her work simply “Maria Beckett” (as well as, curiously, “Maria Agnes Beckett”). But after studying painting in France in her mid- to-late-twenties, she began using “Maria a’ Becket” in numerous variations (“Maria J.C. a Becket” and even “Marie Cecilia a’ Becket”), complicating the process of reconstructing her life and career.

Maria J.C. a’ Becket cut a striking figure on the late nineteenth-century American art scene, celebrated as much for her independent spirit as for her highly individualized style. She was colorfully described as painting with a visionary’s fervor when she was not shooting rifles, mingling with financial barons, or navigating rapids in a canoe.³ Despite a prolific output (certainly well over the 100 paintings that auction, gallery, and other sale documents record), only about two dozen of her works are accounted for today. One of her landscapes is in the possession of the Portland Museum of Art, and two are held by the Maine Historical Society. Other than another two or three in storage at a number of small museums, the rest reside in private collections.

“The Strong Soul Qualities of Which She was Possessed”

Maria Beckett was the daughter of Charles E. Beckett (ca. 1813-1866), a Portland druggist who himself aspired to be a landscape painter. The self-taught Charles Beckett was the first native-born Portland artist to succeed in the landscape genre, although his paintings were heavily linear, contemporaries said — more like colored engravings than oils. He produced narrative paintings such as *Furbish’s Dash to Montreal* (now owned by the New York Historical Society), while operating the apothecary he opened in 1844. Earlier, as a druggist’s apprentice, he had exercised his untrained talent in producing illustrations for a guidebook written by his brother, Sylvester B. Beckett, titled *Guide Book of the Atlantic and St. Lawrence, and St. Lawrence and Atlantic Rail-Roads*, pub-

lished in Portland in 1853. This was a time when the expanding rail system was clearing the way for artists and tourists to explore the White Mountains — when the meadows and banks of the Saco River were “dotted all about” with artists trying to capture the views.⁴ Soon to be among them was Maria herself.

Maria worked with her father producing illustrations for her uncle's promotional railroad material. In 1859, Charles, then forty-six, and Maria, twenty, made sketches of the White Mountain region, possibly for William Willis's *Guidebook for Portland and Vicinity*, in which two views from the 1853 railroad guide were reproduced.⁵ Maria painted Mount Washington on the same trip, and had her first exhibition a few months later at the Maine Charitable Mechanic Exhibition held in Portland City Hall in 1860.

According to some accounts, in 1865 Beckett sketched in the Adirondacks and possibly the White Mountains with Homer Dodge Martin, then a rising star in the American landscape genre.⁶ Martin's



Charles E. Beckett, *Winter Scene Near Portland*, 46" x 59", oil on canvas, c. 1848. Collection of the Maine Historical Society. Charles Beckett, Maria's father, was a self-taught native-born Portland artist — perhaps the first to succeed in the landscape genre. He was best known for his heavily linear winter scenes, such as the narrative *Furbish's Dash to Montreal*, now owned by the New York Historical Society.

connections to art clubs in New York would eventually land more than one of his paintings in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Beckett's connections with Martin did little enough to help her career, but her friendship with Martin's wife later enhanced Maria's professional life in New York City. Throughout most of her twenties, Beckett appears to have lived quietly with her family, taking painting and sketching trips through the region and learning from painters like Martin and her father.

Everything changed for her, as for thousands of other Portland residents, on the first Fourth of July after the end of the Civil War. The Great Fire of Portland, the most destructive fire at that time in American history, consumed around 2,000 buildings and left almost 10,000 of the city's 13,000 citizens homeless. Only two people died in the blaze, but the fire annihilated the Beckett home and business, and Maria's father died two months later of related "paralytic shock."⁷

Beckett's White Mountain paintings were beginning to appear in the windows of Portland art dealers. At Schlotterbeck & Co. she exhibited a view of Dixville Notch, "the wild gorge . . . flooded with light, bringing its craggy walls into distinct relief." Another White Mountain scene showed several peaks "giving a striking view of their summits, with a quiet bit of water in the foreground," according to an 1867 notice in the *Portland Transcript*. A later *Transcript* article praised a painting titled "Near the Glenn" as "the best of her works." By the 1870s, Maria had joined several artists who had abandoned Maine for Boston in the wake of the fire, their work and possessions lost and their commissions repudiated or forgotten. Artists who stuck it out in Portland soon found themselves without clients or income, "nobody caring," as portrait sculptor Charles Aker reflected in 1897, "to dally with the fine arts in the fierce activity which sprang up to rebuild and restore" after the fire.⁸

Maria, her mother, and her brother John converted to Catholicism. Maria and John both dropped the second "t" from their last name and adopted "a' Becket," aligning themselves with the Medieval Catholic martyr St. Thomas a' Becket (now usually given by historians as "Thomas Becket"), the converted Catholic archbishop famously murdered for standing up for the church in defiance of the monarchy. Evidently Maria believed that she and her brother were descendants of St. Thomas; one contemporary later reported that hers was "an old Catholic family, with a long record of usefulness and eminence in society and the church," and another remarked that Beckett's illustrious Catholic lineage helped explain "the strong soul qualities of which [she was] possessed" — qualities beginning to attract favorable attention to her art.⁹



Maria J.C. a'Becket's *Trees Beside a Stream* (oil on canvas, c. 1875-1885. Collection of the Maine Historical Society). Beckett's White Mountain paintings began appearing in the windows of Portland art dealers at mid-century, but after the Portland Fire of 1866, she abandoned the city for Boston. John Neal, art critic and supporter of women's rights, noted at her father's death that Charles "left a daughter, by the way, with some of the properties [the elder painter] lacked."

“Touches of Vivid, Unusual Color”

In 1874, eight years after Charles E. Beckett’s death in the wake of the Portland fire, Portland art critic John Neal became the first to publicly note Maria’s talent. One of America’s first art critics and a tireless promoter of Portland artists, Neal had encouraged Maria’s father during his lifetime. In noting Charles’s passing, Neal wrote that the late landscapist had “left a daughter, by the way, with some of the properties he lacked. For she is really a fine colorist, and her drawings and paintings are full of promise.” Beginning in 1874 Beckett supplemented her Portland exhibitions by showing oils at the Boston Art Club. In Portland in 1878 she showed a painting representing a Scottish bag piper, but the majority of her titles, such as *Moonlight* (c.1870), *Woods Near the Glen* (c.1871), and *Marine* (c.1878), suggest that she painted pure landscapes and seascapes early on.¹⁰

The elder Beckett’s landscapes had reflected the early-to-mid-nineteenth-century celebration of expansiveness and grandeur in American scenery. Artists like him had worked to establish a truly “American” art independent of European models; in tune with the Emersonian transcendentalists and poets like Bryant and Longfellow, they sought distinctive North American scenery that fit Romantic conceptions of nature. But by the 1870s, when Maria Beckett was still in the beginning stages of her professional career, landscapists working in the Romantic “sublime” and “picturesque” modes had been pejoratively branded the “Hudson River School” because so many of them lived and worked in the Hudson River Valley and Catskill Mountains. During the latter years of the century, progressive landscapists looked again to European models for fresh ideas. It was not the mainstream art products of the ultra-conservative French Academy that provided them with inspiration, but the legacy of the French Barbizon School — a small “outlaw” band of independent artists that forged a fresh approach to landscape painting in the 1830s, decades before anyone in the United States was aware of it.

When it finally reached America in the 1860s, the French Barbizon style, as it was known, disrupted the studied refinement of the Hudson River painters. The insight of the Barbizon artists was that freer paint handling could capture a fresh appreciation of the spontaneous rhythms of natural scenery. Beckett immediately gravitated to the style, and between 1875 and 1878 she attended the Boston classes for women taught by Barbizon champion William Morris Hunt, the first artist to embrace and promote the Barbizon and Impressionist styles in America. In 1853 Hunt had been an art student in Paris searching for a less meticulous

and more spontaneous way of handling paint when he chanced upon one of Jean-Francois Millet's Barbizon masterpieces, *The Sower*, and purchased it for today's equivalent of sixty dollars.¹¹ Millet had in 1849 abandoned Paris during a cholera epidemic to settle in rural France near fellow artist Théodore Rousseau. Nourishing his sensibilities on the Bible, Homer, and Shakespeare, Millet painted nature and rustic life in noble, defiant terms. As their strikingly original paintings began appearing in Paris, Rousseau and Millet were joined by Paris exiles eager to devote themselves to a new approach to painting from life, and the Barbizon School was born. Upon his return to America, Hunt placed *The Sower* on public display at the Allston Club in Boston, planting the seed of French innovation in American art.

Hunt taught women exclusively but only by default; no men signed up for his classes when he announced them. These were the first Boston classes in painting to which women had access, but this does not explain why men were uninterested; perhaps Hunt's reputation as an exponent of the "decadent" French style kept male applicants away, since the French manner was considered not "manly" enough for Americans working in the shadows of Cole, Church, and Bierstadt. At any rate, Beckett rapidly went from Hunt to the source. Possibly at her teacher's urging, she sought out the famous French Barbizon painter Charles-Francois Daubigny, studying with him in the countryside north of Paris probably in the spring and summer of 1876.¹²

Beckett provides her own summary of these years of her development in one of her few extant letters, an autobiographical sketch she wrote for a catalogue entry in 1884:

Maria J.C. Becket was born in Portland, Maine, where the great fire destroyed their home and caused the death of her father, himself a distinguished amateur. Miss Becket removed at once to Boston and entered upon the study of art to which she has since devoted herself. She has studied with the best masters in this country and in Europe; enjoying the exceptional privilege of going out daily to paint with the great French artist Daubigny in his boat on the River Oise, and living in friendly intimacy with his family. She enjoyed also great advantages for study in Paris, Rome and Germany, and was for several years a pupil of William M. Hunt, Boston's great art light. Miss Becket's favorite subjects are woods and trees.

Intriguingly, she goes on to characterize her own work as follows: "there is a peculiar sadness about many of her pictures, where noble, old trees bear the marks of long, hard struggles with the elements; twisted

and wind tossed, rugged, gnarled, burying their great muscular roots in the earth or clinging to the rocks. These are what she best likes to paint.”¹³

Beckett’s description pays realist homage to non-idealized nature; her effusive terms reveal a kinship with Barbizon’s post-Romantic ethos. As Beckett’s contemporaries saw it, the French Barbizon style introduced a wilder, looser, and more vigorous handling of paint coupled with a warm, intimate portrayal of nature and down-to-earth rural life. Barbizon paintings testified to a hewn, workman-like approach that rejected sophisticated polish. Though it seemed shockingly unfinished to some, the style perfectly fitted the unpretentious rural subject matter. “Noble old trees” are indeed the subject of several of Beckett’s known works, including *Stream Beside a Stand of Trees*, *Forest Interior*, and *Path Through an Autumn Wood* (all of which are in private collections). If not actual depictions of the forest at Fontainebleau, these paintings strongly reflect the influence of French Barbizon painters Daubigny, Rousseau, Jules Dupre, and Narcisse Diaz de la Pena.

Early twentieth-century Americans considered Beckett’s French master, Charles Daubigny, a great and important artist, and period commentaries indicate that his fame was far more widespread in America then than it is now. Like Beckett herself, Daubigny was “a student of the simple loveliness of rural scenes,” as Charles H. Caffin recorded in 1903. Lorinda Munson Bryant’s 1922 *French Pictures and their Painters* celebrated Daubigny as “the man who saw in swampy, unclaimed land the poetry of light and atmosphere and lifted the humble tuck-garden’s home into regions of beauty and love.” To Beckett’s Catholic sensibilities as well as to Daubigny, who, Bryant tells us, “saw deeper than surface slime and weeds,” no subject in nature could be too lowly or too common, for “all God’s out-of-doors was for man to use and the blessings coming from proper use.”¹⁴

Beckett follows Daubigny in her liberated, sketch-like “painterly” brush strokes, her unusual color range, and her choice of patently ordinary “humble” natural scenery as subject matter. Even Daubigny’s oft-cited melancholy recalls the “peculiar sadness” Beckett identified in her own work. Most importantly perhaps, Daubigny’s credo, “I try to paint as directly and rapidly as possible what I see and feel” appears to match Beckett’s own improvisational method. It was rare for an American to be admitted into Daubigny’s inner circle, to live as Beckett did with the Daubigny family and accompany his daily painting excursions on the River Oise. Daubigny launched his floating studio, christened *Le Botin*,

in 1857 and painted on it up and down the rivers north of Paris until his death in 1878. It is likely that Beckett met Barbizon painter Jules Dupre at this time and saw paintings by Diaz. Additionally, master Barbizon landscapist Camille Corot, *Le Botin's* honorary admiral (he never actually sailed with Daubigny), was a familiar visitor to the Daubigny house at Auvers. Corot often appeared in time to send off or receive the motley lot of river-boat artists, generally taken for "gypsies, fortune-tellers or quack-doctors" in the rural French villages where they stopped.¹⁵ But in 1876, just two years after the first exhibition of the Impressionists, Daubigny would have seemed an out-of-the-way choice for a mentor. As historian Kirsten Swinth noted, by the late 1870s "most women chose the well-marked and easily available route of the established ateliers" in Paris.¹⁶ Daubigny was contentedly painting at his house in the country with little interest in artistic theory or political matters; he represented the antithesis of the academic, overly perspicacious techniques and painstakingly detailed painting that prevailed in Europe and America. Surely for Beckett, as for fellow American disciples Henry Ward Ranger and Dwight W. Tryon, Daubigny was "a happy antidote ... to the excessive earnestness of a typical New England character." Beckett's training ground was between 1870 and 1880, a place of inspiration for a whole generation of younger European painters, including Pissarro, Monet, Renoir, Van Gogh (who shot himself there), and Cezanne.¹⁷

Not long after Beckett started working with them, both Daubigny and Hunt died, in 1878 and 1879, respectively, and around 1880 Beckett moved away from Boston and the other power centers of art. A year earlier, in Hunt's classes, she had met art student Berha Von Hillern (b. 1857), a German immigrant and kindred spirit whose work she would champion for years. Beckett fired the youthful Von Hillern's desire to work in seclusion as the Barbizon masters in rural France had done. In an unusual move for any professional painter, the two women moved away from the city and into a cabin situated in the back-country "wilderness" of Virginia, and there they painted for three-quarters of each year for close to a decade.

"Pictures of the Most Original Conception and Wonderful Coloring"

Her apprenticeship over, Maria set to work. Von Hillern was a star of the nineteenth-century marathon sport known as "pedestrian walking" popular from the mid 1870s to the late 1880s. Von Hillern was a lithe and diminutive twenty-one-year-old when she became famous for performing and popularizing the contests, which often carried a sizeable

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Physical Culture, placard advertising the appearance in Portland of Maria Beckett's companion, Bertha Von Hillern. 1877. Courtesy of the Maine Historical Society. In 1879 while attending art classes in Boston, Maria met fellow art student Bertha Von Hillern, a German immigrant and kindred spirit who was also a marathon pedestrianist. Von Hillern used the winnings from her sport to support her artistic endeavors.

cash prize. She drew national attention for walking in place the equivalent of 100 miles in 28 hours; the *New York Times* reported it as "The Latest Sensation," and the *Washington Post*, a bit caught up in the moment perhaps, declared Von Hillern's display "one of the wonders of the nineteenth century." What Von Hillern's fans did not know was that this penniless student was doing it all for art.¹⁸ A flyer advertising Von Hillern's performance in Portland in 1877 promised "88 miles in 26 consecutive hours without sleep." Just one year later, Von Hillern quit pedestrianism at the peak of her fame, not long before the sport degenerated into a tavern amusement and began drawing condemnation from temperance leagues. Although no painting by Von Hillern is known to have survived, critics were favorable. Judging from their titles in catalogs and newspaper notices, Von Hillern's paintings appear to have been largely figurative, Christian, literary, and allegorical in theme.

Like their better-known peers in the Forest of Fontainebleau, Beckett and Bertha Von Hillern set up their studio close to nature: in the



Maria A'Becket, *Landscape with Oak and Path Beside Stream*, 18" x 24.5", oil on artist board, c. 1895. Private Collection. Beckett and Von Hillern set up a studio in the woods outside the tiny Blue Ridge town of Strasburg, Virginia. Maria was drawn to the stalwart oaks of the Virginia countryside, which she painted with lavish and perhaps eccentric strokes. The oak became a signature part of the work she displayed in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and St. Augustine.

woods outside the tiny Blue Ridge Mountain German-immigrant town of Strasburg. To Beckett and the younger painter whose work she promoted, it must have seemed a haven of committed artistic living. Maria painted the muscular hills and stalwart oaks of the Virginia countryside with ever more lavish, if not eccentric strokes. They shared this cabin from 1881 through 1888, trekking their paintings nine miles to the nearest post office and renting hotel rooms in various cities to oversee the exhibitions of their work. During these shows, Beckett roomed in Boston where she and Von Hillern set up a weekly "salon."¹⁹ "And where do you think these two strange, gifted creatures have spent some 10 years of their precious lives?" wrote a *Florida News Herald* reporter regarding Beckett and Von Hillern. "Down in the 'wilderness' of Virginia, where they had built a small hut in the midst of the solitude of the art-inspiring region. Here they carried their small belongings, turning their backs upon the great busy world, and settled down to commune with nature and paint her likeness undisturbed."²⁰

The move to Virginia's countryside yielded positive results. In 1881 Beckett traded the Boston Art Club for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts

that had opened just three years earlier, and she showed a large painting in 1882 in Portland, representing “a cluster of oaks on a sunny slope with a brook in the foreground.” According to the *Portland Transcript*, “the gnarled and massive trunks of the giant trees are shown to fine advantage.” In 1883 she stayed part of the year in New York, the main advantage being that it brought her closer to the studio cabin amid the Shenandoah Valley’s oak trees, brooks, and sunlit slopes.²¹

The inclusion of a painting titled *Wood Interior* in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Annual Exhibition for 1880 marked Beckett’s first definitive professional foray into the American art world outside Boston and Portland, though she continued to exhibit in the latter. Beckett exhibited paintings at the Pennsylvania Academy until 1883, while her paintings found buyers in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Beckett shipped *An Old Mill, Shenandoah Valley* to the Boston Art Club in 1881. To the Pennsylvania Academy in 1882 she sent *Young Housekeeper in Virginia* along with *Old Farm in the Shenandoah Valley, Twilight*. During the same year, she sent *Oaks and Sheep at Port Royal, Va.* and *Twilight, Va.* to the Museum of Fine Arts, which from then on replaced the Boston Art Club as her primary Boston venue. The year 1883 was a watershed, marking the first of Beckett’s showings at the National Academy of Design (*Late Afternoon in October*).

The same year, sketches by both Beckett and Von Hillern were shown at the American Art Galleries in New York. The women exhibited work together at the Boston art gallery of Williams & Everett that year as well, where judging by a notice in the *Baltimore Sun*, figurative work, for a change, took center stage: “the three most important paintings in the collection are drawn from the legendary lore of the middle ages,” reported the *Sun*. These were probably works by Von Hillern, such as her Longfellow-inspired *The Monk Felix*, exhibited that same year at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The remaining works were *plein-air* depictions of the woods and streams of the Shenandoah Valley. It was during this period that the two women held their weekly “salons” in Boston, exhibiting during winter stays at the Hotel Vendome.²²

They exhibited together in Philadelphia’s prominent Haseltine Galleries in 1885, staying at that city’s expansive Colonnade Hotel. Newspaper notices in New York, Baltimore, Chicago, and Virginia tracked the doings of the well-known artists as they worked and traveled. They always returned to the seclusion of the Virginia mountains, seeking out such landmarks as Virginia’s Civil War battlefields, the Natural Bridge, and the Luray Caverns.²³ In 1885 *Manford’s Magazine* reprinted a notice earlier published in the *New York World*:

a woman of extraordinary quickness of perception and keenness of intellect, [Beckett] counts among her friends the most eminent French and American artists of the generation. She had traveled, lived in France and Italy, and studied art there before she entered the famous studio of William Hunt, in Boston. There she met Miss von Hillern, and discovered in her a congenial soul. Since then the ladies have lived and worked together, spending their winters in New York and Boston, in which latter city they hold a sort of aristocratic salon weekly, and their summers in a studio among the forests of Virginia. Their studio at Strasburg is one of the wonders of the Old Dominion. Miss Becket, like Miss von Hillern, is a landscape painter, with a fine feeling for the poetry of nature, and a leaning toward the grave and quiet color common to all pupils of the great Boston master. The sobriety of her art is by no means reflected in her social qualities, for she is one of the most brilliant and widely-instructed conversationalists in the western continent.”²⁴

The artwork that resulted from the Thoreau-like seclusion earned Maria a great deal of fame. “Imagine a delicate bit of a woman like her,” the *Florida Times Union* wrote, “with her friend, Bertha Von Hillern, burying themselves in the mountains of Virginia for eight months in the year for eight years, nine miles from a post office, to which they made nightly journeys on foot after their day’s labors at the easel.” Their method, according to the *Florida News Herald* “made a reputation that it would have taken much longer to secure by conventional methods, and more or less bank account.” The approach accorded with romantic ideas about the artistic temperament and recalled Rosa Bonheur’s years with her thirty-year artist-companion Nathalie Micas and her mother and later Anna Elizabeth Klumpke in Bonheur’s château near Fontainebleau. The results, reported the *Florida Times Union*, were “pictures of the most original conception and wonderful coloring, showing the effect of studying nature in all her varying moods.” In choosing the seclusion of the “wilderness,” Beckett “marked out for herself an ideal that has given the world pictures artistic in conception, full of feeling and expressing the high sentiments that animated the mind that conceived them and that placed her in the front rank of American artists.” The title of one of Von Hillern’s paintings, the 1887 *Live-Oak Forest in the Ojai Valley, California* (now lost), hints at a western sojourn, perhaps for both women. However, in 1888, the year of Beckett’s second showing at the National Academy (*Woods at the White Mountains*, aka *New Hampshire Woods*), Beckett and Von Hillern parted company. Von Hillern exhibited a number of paintings in Boston that year, yet she stayed on in the Virginia woods, “going back to her trees and her solitude.”²⁵ In 1888 Beckett

moved permanently to New York, renting studio space in the lively Sherwood studio building on 57th Street and reconnecting with old acquaintances, including the Dodge Martins.

“Miss a Becket is Just a Little Ahead of Her Time”

The Sherwood was a bustling, multi-storied high-rise overrun with artists, especially “Bohemians” and expatriates returning from study abroad. Literally hundreds of artists worked there, among them Ralph Albert Blakelock, Frederic Church, Jasper Francis Cropsey, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Samuel Isher, and Alexander Wyant, working amid exotic tapestries and “Oriental” fabrics, European paintings, and unusual objects acquired during travels. One critic called it “the up-town headquarters of art.” Beckett was a tenant from 1888 until 1893 and again from 1896 to 1900. When Lilian Whiting visited the building as a columnist for the *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean*, she singled out Beckett, whom she noted was “chums” with “Mlle. Dupre, a relative of the great artist by that name.” French Barbizon painter Julien Dupre (1811-1889) occupied the adjoining studio.²⁶ Of Beckett, the journalist wrote:

The landscape work she is now producing is of a character to leave its impress on American art. This is high praise, but not too high. A noted New York art critic predicts for her a very brilliant future in fortune as well as fame, because, as he says, “Miss a Becket is just a little ahead of her time.” A wild sea scene from Gloucester Bay, with the white foaming waves, driven by the winds, lashing the rocks, and the sense of a wild sweep of storm in the air, is very strong.”²⁷

Beckett’s paintings, along with her method of working, were very unlike the clichéd “woman’s work” her contemporaries expected. “Miss a Becket arranges to travel when the nights are bright and beautiful with softest moonlight, and while other travelers sleep her artist eye and busy brain gathers impressions of hills and dales, woods, seas and sky that materialize into exquisite pictures [that find] hosts of admirers, especially among the advocates of the impressional [sic] school, over which the artist grows enthusiastic.”²⁸

Evidently petite, Beckett is often described as “that brave little woman” or “quaint little woman.” In one example she was “one of those nervy women with mind and will altogether too strong for the slight frame in which they are inclosed [sic].” But the landscapes that lined her spacious Sherwood studio walls were “stamped with almost masculine strength and force — great, strong, stormy things, with color and life to them, born of the soul conflict of their maker.”²⁹

At this point, Beckett was wielding color with choppy, rapidly applied brush strokes, much as her French mentor Daubigny had employed to capture the quickly changing conditions of the light on the rivers he loved. Daubigny's innovative paint handling fascinated an entire generation of younger artists, including devoted admirer Claude Monet, who must have seen in Daubigny's visible brushstrokes a revelation of the future of Impressionism. After his initial contact with the Barbizon painters, Daubigny painted with lush dabs of broken color and a direct, improvisational hand, using a wider range of hues than any of his peers, earning him critical disdain for paintings that, as Gautier wrote in 1861, appeared to be "little more than a juxtaposition of spots of color." But as American Barbizon historian Peter Bermingham noted in his masterful 1973 study *American Art in the Barbizon Mood*, it was through Daubigny's "diminishing the distance between sketch and finished painting, that the battle for Impressionism was first engaged."³⁰

By 1890 Beckett had infused her Barbizon approach with the freer color handling of the French Impressionists whose works were just beginning to register on the American consciousness. Beckett traveled again to Europe around this time. She no doubt visited Paris and Rome, as she displayed pictures painted in these locations in her winter studio in 1893.³¹ Beckett probably did not regularly work from sketches, although about a dozen charcoal drawings have come to light depicting factories and rural figures. Judging by contemporary accounts and the character of her work, Beckett continued to favor an improvisational approach based as much on the application of paint as on the subject she painted. In this, her style anticipates the abstract expressionist work of the "action painters" in mid-twentieth-century New York. At the time, it seemed strikingly new:

Miss a-Becket represents the latest schools of painting and an original manner of using color that produces the most wonderful effects, not always pleasing at the first glance, but sure to gain favor if properly studied.... Many of her pictures are simply bits of nature idealized, or, as McDougall, the World's great cartoonist, said during a delightful morning spent there recently, "bits of Wagner." [In] one, recalling Walpurgis', great strong figures [are] formed by smoke as the artist flew along the elevated road in New York one moonlight night; others, dreamy and tender, recall bits of the Neibulguen Lied and again Bethoven's [sic] symphonies are suggested. But this versatile artist does not confine her work to this school of art entirely, but with strong color and drawing depicts nature in her best moods; storms at sea, wild and weird, jostle bits of shimmery moonlight, groups of birches



Maria A'Becket, *Oaks* (probably *Oaks at Newburyport, Massachusetts*), oil on canvas, 15" x 20", c. 1883. Private Collection. By the 1890s, Beckett was a recognized innovator in the field of landscape art. Her range of subjects, one art historian writes, "embraces all zones and atmospheric phenomena," but her "strongest pictures" were those of the live oaks, "spreading their vast arms like groined arches of Gothic cathedrals, festooned with the mystically trailing folds of the Spanish moss."

by running water with strong reflections; rich, strong woodland scenes and bits of interior all are familiar to Miss a' Becket, who paints with amazing rapidity, not always doing herself or her pictures justice.³²

When in New York, Beckett attended the church of the Paulist Fathers, headquarters for a new, ecumenical addition to the Christian faith. Elizabeth Gilbert Martin, wife of Homer Dodge Martin and a member of the same church, also lived nearby. Like Marie, Elizabeth Martin had converted to Catholicism, and the two women became friends, attending gallery shows and other events together.³³

"A Delightful Raconteur"

Beckett maintained her year-round residence and studio in New York while following the migrations of the Gilded Age patrons to fashionable locations such as Bar Harbor, Newport, and St. Augustine. She

regularly wintered at the latter in the early 1890s. Standard Oil millionaire Henry Morrison Flagler built the first of Florida's grand hotels in St. Augustine in 1886: the resplendent 450-room Ponce de Leon, with windows by Louis Comfort Tiffany and murals by Martin Johnson Heade. A lively artistic scene developed as additional hotels with artists-in-residence sprang up alongside it. Heade lived in St. Augustine year-round, and among the snowbirds coming and going were White Mountain artists Benjamin Champney, Thomas Moran, Frank Shapleigh, and George M. Seavey, as well as, briefly, Albert Bierstadt, who made careful "artotype" reproductions of the Flagler Hotel's ornate ceilings painted by Roman artist Virgillio Tojetti.³⁴ Beckett stayed at the Hotel Alcazar in 1891, and during this period completed an oil painting of Christ's head for the Altar of the Sacred Heart in the Catholic church at DeLand, Florida. This rare "portrait" has since been lost. "The face is an exquisite one," commented a *Florida Times Union* writer, "showing strength, patience and love, in a wonderful way — a picture that alone will some day make the artist who conceived it famous."³⁵

In summer 1892 Beckett was in breezy Bar Harbor, another seasonable retreat, where she sold paintings to visiting New York and Boston elites.³⁶ When the winter came, she had the good fortune to occupy one of seven Ponce de Leon studios in St. Augustine, as she would for the next several years. As "Marie Cecilia a' Becket," she distinguished herself in the St. Augustine colony. According to the city's society tabloid, *The Tatler*, she held court with her wit as well as her artistic talent. The Ponce de Leon artists entertained potential patrons and sold their works at weekend gala receptions where Beckett shone as a "brilliant conversationalist, a delightful raconteur" whose social success at times kept her from opening her studio. *The Tatler* wrote about her in characteristically effusive terms, praising her work and remarking upon the speed at which she produced.³⁷ "Miss a Becket paints so rapidly that to see her or hear of the number she adds to her collection sounds like a fairy tale. . . . Miss a Becket has a number of beautiful pictures on exhibition that are constantly changing, that is, are passing into the hands of purchasers and new ones supplying their place." *The Florida Times Union* applauded her success "in showing the world what a woman can do despite difficulties that would have driven most men to despair," and claimed that her success "has encouraged thousands of her weaker sisters in their struggles to make places for themselves, who should rise up and call her blessed."³⁸

A similar sentiment informed an 1893 newspaper description of Beckett's physical appearance and temperament:

Marie a Becket is a veritable “character,” as near a typical genius as any I know. She has no life, no care, no plans outside her art. All has been sacrificed for this, and “would be were it to do over again.” . . . She is a little woman with a face that shows the sentiment of “triumph through trial,” the result of hard work, hard thinking, hard blows from fate and a perfect understanding (now) of the way to meet and bear them. She is perfectly unconventional in dress and manners, both of which are governed by taste, not fashion. Her hair is worn loosely coiled and unornamented. Her eyes are a blue-gray mixture of humor and pathos, and her mouth has a droll little pucker when telling a good story. She trots about her big rug-covered studio in a plain black skirt that is short and trim, and a little jacket into whose side pockets the small hands find their way when free from brush and palet [sic]. . . . She talks in a deep, earnest, controlled way on all the best topics in a low, genuine voice, full of feeling and frequently of sadness.³⁹

With Bohemian charms so freely on display, Beckett found herself swept up into the glamorous social scene, constantly in demand for repartee. The *Tatler* good-naturedly complained that because she was becoming such a “social favorite,” her studio was locked more often than not.⁴⁰

Beckett’s Union League painting, *The Storm*, or *The Storm at Sea* (c. 1890) “was made in a fit of genuine inspiration, on the shore, out doors, exposed to all of the fury of the elements.” This she proposed to keep for herself, explaining that it was the “special work of the soul [that] could not be duplicated.”⁴¹ *The Storm* drew special attention at the Woman’s Building of the Museum of Fine Arts, and by this time the artist’s travels were also drawing attention:

Miss a Becket is herself as marked — of course one does not say as great — but as marked a figure in American life as Rosa Bonheur in France. She was a Maine girl who, when over 20 years of age, became a convert to Catholicism and made a pilgrimage to Rome in order to personally receive the blessing of the holy father. She studied art and has gone all over the world, almost, being equally at home in a fishing village of the Hebrides, or in some remote hamlet — dear to the hearts of artists — on the coast of France. She has studied under several of the great French artists and has of late years become the most head-long of enthusiasts over Impressionism.⁴²

Maria spent part of 1893 in the company of her brother John J. Beckett, painting and sketching while visiting George W. Vanderbilt’s enormous Biltmore estate under construction in Asheville, North Carolina. Beckett’s brother also lived in New York City and had some success

launching a literary career. In North Carolina they stayed in the Kenilworth Inn, a luxurious Victorian-style hotel built three years earlier. Her brother recorded in his journal a visit to Caesar's Head, 2,000 feet of exposed granite with a commanding view of Asheville and beyond, on October 28, 1893: "this was one of the most enjoyable excursions I ever made in my life. I never expected to feel anything again as keenly as I have done this. My sister enjoyed it as much as I did. The intoxication of that October sunshine, 'Cleveland's' splendid swing, the wayside lunch, the savory supper at the Inn where everybody was so gay, the Arctic chill of the rooms and the ice-like sheets despite the roaring fire in the rough open stone fireplace."⁴³ John elaborated upon his impressions of the off-season visit in a short story titled "Caesar's Head" in 1895, highlighting the "alluring isolation in the place" that would certainly have appealed equally to Maria: "The long horseback ride up the wild mountain road through an air of effervescent purity; the grim, aching barrenness of this deserted annex to a summer hotel on the heights; the exorcism of its bald discomfort by huge wood fires on the sepulchral hearths, and the most savory of suppers in the one-storied cottage where the hotel man lived."⁴⁴

Earlier that month, an exhibition of six of Maria's landscapes had opened at the prestigious Holbein Company gallery on New York's Fifth Avenue. A haven for avant-garde artists, the Fifth Avenue galleries were infamous for what conservatives considered the unseemly indulgences of "brutal" Impressionism and other innovative and disruptive styles.⁴⁵ Beckett displayed works she painted on the Florida, Maine, and Massachusetts coasts. A *New York Times* reviewer commented: "Miss a Becket has come under the spell of the modern movement toward light tones and vivid effects, but she keeps a certain air of convention through it all."⁴⁶

In 1894, Beckett joined the Manhattan-based Woman's Art Club, which was founded in 1889 by five artists barred from full participation in the Society of American Artists and The National Academy of Design because they were women. The Art Club followed the Ladies Art Association founded in 1867 in trying to counter the bias against female artists. Five years after its founding, the Woman's Art Club was a hundred members strong, and today it is known as the National Association of Women Artists, the oldest professional women's fine arts organization in the United States. In what the *New York Times* dutifully, if condescendingly, called a "creditable display" of artwork, the reviewer of the annual exhibition for 1894 noted that "Miss Maria a Becket" had "two brightly colored landscapes in oils."⁴⁷



Maria A'Becket, *Seascape*, 12.25" x 18.5", oil on artist board, c. 1890. Collection of Doug and Karin Nelson. Maria died on September 7, 1904, in Greenwich Village, and quickly passed into undeserved obscurity. Her work is best known for its vibrant, jewel-like surfaces and her thick application of broken color, applied with loose, confident strokes. Beckett's ability to set the surfaces of her paintings into motion stands out among nineteenth-century American painters.

In the winter of that year Beckett opened her St. Augustine gallery in the Ponce de Leon in early February, eliciting typical fanfare in the *Tatler*: "her brush is as rapid as versatile, and side by side with wild mountain scenery are shimmery marines and quiet interiors full of homely beauty, the countenances of the occupants betraying every emotion felt." Though apparently struggling with "physical weakness and pain," Beckett managed to remain productive, turning out a score of woodlands, marines, and riverscapes. The *Tatler* called her "a brave little woman whose artistic genius and desire to aid others, who like herself are struggling to support themselves with the work of hands and brain, is all too strong for the body containing them."⁴⁸ It was to be her final season at the glittering Ponce de Leon.

Following a stay in Bar Harbor in August of 1895, she wintered at the Kenilworth Inn near the Biltmore estate. Fellow Kenilworth guest Lady Winifred Howard, passing through during a "grand tour" of the United States, delighted in happening upon "Miss A' Becket, one of the finest landscape painters in America, who kindly invited me to look at her beautiful paintings (of which she had an immense collection) in the

delightful 'Sun-parlour' which she permanently retains as 'studio'" in one of the hotel's towers. Lady Howard wrote of spending "two delightful hours" on New Year's Day 1896 visiting Beckett in this "large circular room almost entirely of glass, so bright and sunny that no fire was needed."⁴⁹

A society column on women artists working the seasonal society in Bar Harbor places Beckett in Maine again in the summer of 1897, but ill health seems to have caught up with her shortly after. In December 1899 Beckett took part in an exhibition that included a who's who list of American landscape artists, among them George Inness, Ralph Albert Blakelock, Homer Dodge Martin, Frederick William, Dwight Tryon, Alexander Wyant, Francis W. Kost, and John Francis Murphy at the woman- and Tonalist-friendly Lotos Club of New York. The *New York Times* remarked that Beckett's offering, a New England coast scene, represented "a long step forward for this woman painter."⁵⁰ A few weeks after this notice appeared, Beckett sailed to Europe one last time. According to New York City census data, she still had a residence on 57th Street and was still downplaying her age, reporting that she was forty-six when actually she was sixty-one.

Beckett caught the notice of "Bohemian" art critic Sadikichi Hartmann, who praised her as a talented original artist, with "the vigorous touch of a man."⁵¹ Singling out her marine work, he wrote that she had "rendered some of the wildest and grandest scenes of the ocean, and there are few about whose works there is more of the raciness and flavour of water."⁵² Hartmann rightly classed Beckett not with the Francophiles of Hunt's circle but with a more unruly crew that included Winslow Homer, Dwight D. Tryon, Abbot Thayer, and Albert Pinkham Ryder, the innovators and mold-breakers of American art. Recognized today as something of a "visionary," Ryder in particular was a forerunner of gestural painting and abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock. Beckett, Hartmann wrote, surpassed Ryder so far into "anchorite" monasticism that "like [Saint] Simeon Stylites, they sit on a column, worshipping art, indifferent to the rest of the world." Hartmann saw Beckett as "a peculiar phenomenon in our art":

in moods of religious ecstasy, with so intense an energy as to raise blisters at her finger-tips, [she] paints impressionistic sketches which would have gained her a reputation in Europe long ago. After having associated with men like Homer Martin, W.M. Hunt, and Daubigny, she invented a pallet-knife style of her own, in which she slaps on pure colours in a wild improvisatore fashion. Her range of subjects em-

braces all zones and atmospheric phenomena. Her strongest pictures, however, depict live-oaks spreading their vast arms like groined arches of Gothic cathedrals, festooned with the mystically trailing folds of the Spanish moss, along the lagoons of the South, with water so truly realistic in its effect that one is tempted to dip one's finger into it. She seldom exhibits, but various art lovers and critics have been attracted by her work.⁵³

By the 1890s, Beckett had been recognized as a singularly focused innovator who won fame with seeming indifference and sold paintings almost as quickly as she created them. More than one critic remarked that she was ahead of her time.⁵⁴ During a period in which studied calculation underpinned artistic composition, she favored a spontaneous and very physical approach that anticipated the gestural methods of abstract expressionism by nearly 100 years.

Toward the end of her life, Beckett devoted her remaining time and attention to charity and reform work. Her name appears on the roster of founder-directors of the Guild of the Infant Savior of New York City, which was incorporated in 1901 to care for "destitute mothers and infants and to supervise the placing out of children." One of her last exhibitions was held in 1902 at Knoedler's, another prominent Fifth Avenue gallery, featuring landscapes completed in her Florida and North Carolina retreats. The *New York Tribune* published a reproduction of *On the Swannanoa*, which the *New York Times* had in 1897 rather condescendingly called "a clever bit of impressionism."⁵⁵ She died two years later of heart disease, on September 7, 1904, at St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village. Her brother John, living humbly as a chronicler of the Catholic Church, wrote to George Vanderbilt requesting financial assistance in getting her paintings ready for sale. He reminded Vanderbilt that he owned one of her paintings and reminisced about the memorable visit with his sister to Caesar's Head that crisp autumn day a dozen years earlier.⁵⁶

Beckett's *New York Times* obituary described her as "an artist whose work is widely and favorably known." Meanwhile, fellow landscapist Homer Martin, far better known today than she, died without notice. In 1905, Beckett was eulogized by the *New York Times* in a special New Year's Day feature on "Famous Women Whose Careers Ended in 1904." Despite her widely noticed passing, Beckett began to fade from memory after the 1911 auction at New York's Clarke's Art Rooms of the 225 paintings in her estate.⁵⁷ Her last living relative, John Beckett, died a few months later, the victim of a defective gas stove. By then, pure landscape

painting was passé in America, giving way to a variety of alternative styles and, after 1913, to the vogue of modern and then abstract and conceptual art. The American Barbizon movement, of which Beckett should be counted as an important figure, was shunted aside. As happened with many other women, especially those without spouses or descendants to champion their causes, Beckett all but vanished from public consciousness, her work dispersed among dealers and collectors.

Legacy

A century after her death, Maria Beckett's storm-threatened seascapes and wind-swept oak trees surface occasionally in auctions and circulate quietly among dealers and collectors. She was arguably the first woman to build a career as a landscape painter by popularizing the French Barbizon style in America. She was certainly one of a handful of women who succeeded professionally as artists at a time when it was anything but the norm.

As historian Kirsten Swinth demonstrated in her *Painting Professionals: Women Artists & the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930*, it is a revisionist misconception to assume that women were all but excluded from the world of nineteenth-century American art. According to Swinth, after the Civil War, women poured into the profession in droves. Approximately 11,000 female artists, sculptors, and art teachers listed a position in the arts as their professions on the 1890 census, up exponentially from the 414 that did so in 1870; and whereas women had made up only 10 percent of American artists in 1870, by 1890 they represented nearly half of the number counted, their numbers swelling by 1900 to make up fully one third of the painters listed in directories and exhibition catalogues.⁵⁸ Entering the profession during the early 1870s, Beckett arrived in advance of this surge.

Beckett stands out from other successful, formally trained nineteenth-century female artists for her distinctive individual style, her concentration on the expressive landscape, and her spontaneous, improvisational approach to handling paint. Having absorbed the Barbizon from Daubigny, Hunt, and others, she replaced Barbizon's earthy pastoral palette with experimental Impressionistic color and, finally, an American sense of the wildness and vitality in the encounter with the landscape. Her best work possesses a vibrant jewel-like surface that must be viewed firsthand to be appreciated. She achieved freshness and originality in paintings lush with the thick application of pure, broken color applied with loose, confident brushstrokes. Her deliberate dispersal of

color and her “improvisatore” approach progressed toward an “over-all” abstract style that still looks modern over a century later. These are paintings that obviously explore the painterly process as much as their subjects, and Beckett stands out among nineteenth-century American painters in her ability to set the surfaces of her paintings into motion.

Neither Barbizon nor Impressionism gained easy acceptance in America. Paintings such as Beckett’s appeared disengaged from national themes and America’s “elevating optimism”; they were initially thought unnecessarily “sad and heavy” or simply in “the morbid manner so popular in France.”⁵⁹ But acceptance eventually came in spades, due in no small part to Hunt’s early efforts. During the late 1880s, French Barbizon art became “the most consistently sought after item at galleries and auction blocks,” and for a short while, during the last years of the century, every gallery in New York seemed laden with Barbizon. But these were not American paintings; most all of them had been imported from France.⁶⁰

Paradoxically, by the time the iconoclastic French trends had overcome the widespread (except in Boston) resistance of American patrons, critics, and artists, Barbizon already seemed to some nostalgically quaint and sentimental.⁶¹ By the turn of the century, Impressionism, not Barbizon, stood for “radical” French art, and that not for long. Beginning in the 1870s, the Hudson River style had been dethroned; American painters such as Homer, Inness, Tryon, and Leonard Twachtman absorbed the Barbizon/Impressionist aesthetic into their own mystic, visionary mode, later to be called Tonalism, which spanned the beginning of the twentieth century. With these innovators — and Maria Beckett should be counted among them — landscape painting leaned toward the ethereal and abstract, serving as a powerful visual analogue of experience, “closely attuned to the living vibrancy of nature,” as Inness put it.⁶² For Innes, as for the Tonalists and Beckett, “the true end of art is not to imitate a fixed material condition, but to represent a living motion . . . The intelligence to be conveyed by it is not of an outer fact, but of an inner life.”⁶³ With her direct appropriation of Impressionist brush and color techniques, Beckett does not typically exhibit the Inness-influenced Tonalist manner, though some of the later paintings, notably her seascapes, certainly demonstrate key visual elements of the aesthetic. The Tonalists’ mental attitude continued to influence American painting through figures such as Edwin Dickinson, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Alfred Steiglitz and Georgia O’Keefe. Certainly, the arrival of European modernism aggressively challenged representational artists. The

years after World War I largely relegated "pure" landscape painting to the previous century.

So lately arrived, what would have been Beckett's "time" just as quickly passed. Today, except for the one landscape owned by the Portland Museum of Art, another owned by the Flagler Museum in St. Augustine, another in the collection of the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, two paintings owned by the Sellars collection of art by American women, and a painting and early sketch owned by the Maine Historical Society, the majority of Beckett's work is either unaccounted for or hidden from sight in private collections.

Hartmann placed Beckett among a very few women, including Mariah Oakey, Mary Cassatt, Cecilia Beaux, and Violet Oakley, whose "superior talents" raised them to distinction.⁶⁴ But perhaps Beckett left us the best clue as to how her paintings should be understood when she wrote of the "peculiar sadness" she felt many of them conveyed. In making this claim, Beckett was connecting her work not only with Daubigny but with the Tonalists of the 1880s and 1890s, whose work is now being rediscovered. She was also perhaps distancing herself from the perceived French tendency toward originality for its own sake that American critics identified as "morbid" and detected in the work of many European-trained Americans. But Beckett's most striking work brings both Impressionist and Tonalist tendencies to bear on a basically Barbizon approach to American scenery, all of which she fused in a radical freedom with the medium and a sense of energy and color all her own. She merits rediscovery in the context of Hartmann's characterization of her as an artist of high quality and something of a mystic or visionary, applying paint with a palette knife in an improvisational "trance." Since Hartmann's 1901 *History*, the idea of art as performance, improvisation, and record of "religious ecstasy" has become commonplace in American art, at least since Jackson Pollock's ritual dances around his canvases. Beckett's "shimmering" semi-abstract marine works in particular prefigure abstract expressionism in their decentralized "all-over" broken-color composition, their engagement with the active gesture, and their foregrounding of the medium itself through unblended color and surface impasto.

But what now seems most "peculiar" in considering Beckett's achievement is not so much her work but how early she created it, how successful she became, and against what odds. Few women ventured outside of the accepted genres and mainstream styles of the day, and those who did often enjoyed the double springboard of independent

means and influential male support to sustain them, as was the case with Cassatt. With Cassatt it became possible to imagine the contributions of women to the development of art in America, but unlike Cassatt, Beckett made her name on American soil and on her own terms. She was an original. Seeking out the most radical masters, living three-quarters of the year for nearly a decade in nature, she rejected her peers' prevalent aesthetic theories and artistic trends, and became one of the first American painters to wholeheartedly adopt the entire raft of what were then quite radical techniques associated with the European avant-garde. And for all this she was rewarded with fame during her lifetime and, unfortunately, obscurity after her death. No doubt, her fate was shared by numerous nineteenth-century women, many just as talented, whose lives and works still wait to be recovered.

NOTES

1. W. H. Sherman, *The Queen of American Summer-Resorts: Bar Harbor, Maine* (Bar Harbor: by the author, 1897).
2. Portland Vital Records #13, Record of Birth, Vol. 4. Credit goes to William Barry of the Maine Historical Society for settling the question of Maria Beckett's birth date. For a general survey of women's contributions to Maine art in the nineteenth century, see William David Barry and Gael May McKibben., *Women Pioneers in Maine Painting* (Norway, Maine: Peter C. Allen, 1981).
3. Glenn Chesney Quiett, *They Built the West: An Epic of Rails and Cities* (N.Y.: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), p. 516.
4. William David Barry and John Mayer, "A City Awakes — Arts Flourish in Portland," Maine Historical Society Web exhibit, accessed July 18, 2007 (<http://www.mainememory.net/bin/Features?fn=243&fmt=list&n=1&supst=E&exhibits&mr=all>); Benjamin Champney, *Sixty Years' Memories of Art and Artists* (Woburn, Massachusetts: Wallace & Andrews, 1900), pp. 105-106.
5. Catherine Campbell, *New Hampshire Scenery* (Canaan, New Hampshire: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1985); Earle G. Shettleworth, "Druggist Charles E. Beckett Was Accomplished Artist," *Portland Evening Express*, July 20, 1968, p. 55.
6. Although many primary sources omit mention of it, Beckett probably painted with Homer Dodge Martin in 1865 in the Adirondack Mountains of New York.
7. John Neal, *Account of the Great Conflagration in Portland* (Portland: Starbird & Twitchell, 1866), p. 17; Maria J.C. a' Becket to Charles M. Kurtz, July 1884, Charles M. Kurtz Papers, 1843-1900, Smithsonian Archive of American Art, Washington, D.C.

8. *Portland Transcript*, February 16, 1867; May 13, 1871; Charles Akers, "Personal Glimpses of Our New England Poets from an Artist's Autobiography," *New England Magazine*, 17 (December 1897): 447 (thanks to William Barry, Maine Historical Society).
9. H. B. Manford, "Eternal Hope," *Manford's Magazine* 29 (1885), p. 567; Louise Decatur Castleden, *The Early Years of the Ponce De Leon: Clippings from an Old Scrap Book of Those Days Kept by the First Manager of This 'Prince of Hotels'* (St. Augustine: privately printed, n.d.), p. 90 (probably the *Florida News Herald*).
10. John Neal, *Portland Illustrated* (Portland: W. S. Jones, 1874), p. 74 (again, thanks to William Barry); *Portland Transcript*, May 25, 1878.
11. For the women in Hunt's classes, see Martha J. Hoppin, "Women Artists in Boston, 1870-1900: The Pupils of William Morris Hunt," *American Art Journal* 13 (Winter 1981): 17-46; Helen Knowlton, "William Morris Hunt," *New England Magazine* 16 (August 1894): 685.
12. Ellen Day Hale, "My Lecture on William Morris Hunt," cited in Hoppin, "Women Artists in Boston"; *Portland Transcript*, May 13, 1876 (thanks to Earle Shettleworth for identifying the notices of Beckett appearing in the *Portland Transcript* between 1867 and 1885).
13. Maria J. C. Becket to Charles M. Kurtz, July 21-25 1884, Kurtz Papers.
14. Charles H. Caffin, *American Painters* (New York: Doubleday, 1903), p. 158; Lorinda Munson Bryant, *French Pictures and their Painters* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1922), p. 161.
15. Arthur Hoeber, "The Barbizon Painters," *The Mentor* (New York: Mentor Association, February 2, 1914); Robert J. Wickenden, "Charles-Francois Daubigny," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 59 (no. 4, 1892): 44/329.
16. Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists & the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 27.
17. David Croal Thomson, *The Barbizon School of Painters* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1891), p. 284; Caffin, *American Painters*; Douglas Cooper, "The Painters of Auvers-sur-Oise," *Burlington Magazine* 97 (April 1955): 100, 102-106.
18. *Washington Post*, January 29, 1878, p. 2, cited by Dahn Shaulis, "Pedestriennes: Newsworthy but Controversial Women in Sporting Entertainment," *Journal of Sport History* 5 (Spring 1999): 34; Isaac Frederick Marcossou, *'Marse Henry': A Biography of Henry Watterson* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1951), p. 116. This is corroborated by the caption of a newspaper engraving of Von Hillern taken from the *New York World* and preserved in the archives of the New York Public Library.
19. *Brooklyn Eagle*, May 3, 1885.
20. *Florida News Herald* clipping, 1891, in Castleden, *Early Years of the Ponce de Leon*.
21. *Portland Transcript*, April 22, 1882.

22. "A Display of Sketches," *New York Times*, November. 11, 1883, p. 6; *Baltimore Sun*, February 6, 1883, p. 4.
23. "Man's Better Half," *Wheeling [West Virginia] Sunday Register* 22 (no. 87, 1885), p. 5.
24. Manford, "Eternal Hope," p 567.
25. *Florida Times Union* (1891); *Florida News Herald* (1893), in Castleden, *Early Years of the Ponce De Leon*.
26. For more on the Sherwood, see John Davis, "Our United Happy Family: Artists in the Sherwood Studio Building, 1880-1900," *Archives of American Art Journal* 36 (nos. 3-4, 1996), p 2.
27. Davis, "Our United Happy Family."
28. *Tatler* (St. Augustine), January 14, 1893; February 4, 1893.
29. *Tatler* in Castleden, *Early Years of the Ponce De Leon*, p. 90.
30. Peter Bermingham, *American Art in the Barbizon Mood* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975), p. 12; Robert L. Herbert, *Barbizon Revisited* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1962), pp. 47-48, 56.
31. "Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1820-1897," 1890; Arrival, New York, United States, Microfilm serial M237, M556, line 16, list number 1480, National Archives Microfilm Publication M237, Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *Tatler*, Jan. 14, 1893, p. 9.
32. *Tatler*, March 4, 1893.
33. Elizabeth Gilbert Martin, *Homer Martin: A Reminiscence* (New York: William MacBeth, 1904), p. 44.
34. Sandra Barghini, "A Society of Painters," Flagler's St. Augustine Art Colony exhibition catalogue, January 15-May 3, 1998 (Palm Beach, Florida, 1998).
35. Barghini, "Society of Painters; "A Wonderful Woman Artist and Her Work — Maria Cecelia a Becket," *Florida Times Union*, May 3, 1891, p. 3 (officials at Saint Peter, the only Catholic church in DeLand, know nothing of such a painting); Quiett, *They Built the West*, p. 516; *Boston Globe*, September 2, 1894, p. 26.
36. "Bar Harbor Rapidly Filling: The Hotels Giving Way to the Pleasanter Cottage Life," *New York Times*, July 4, 1892.
37. Barghini, "Society of Painters"; *Tatler*, February 3, 1894, cited in *ibid.*; *New York Times*, February 14, 1892, p 10; *Tatler*, January 9, 1892, p. 7; February 20, 1892, p. 12.
38. *Tatler*, February. 6, 1892, p.12; *Florida Times Union*, May 3, 1891, p. 3.
39. *Florida News Herald* (1893), in Castleden, *Early Years of the Ponce De Leon*.
40. *Tatler*, February 18, 1893, March 18, 1893.
41. Castleden, *Early Years of the Ponce De Leon*, p. 90.
42. *Florida News Herald* (1893), in Castleden, *Early Years of the Ponce De Leon*.

43. John J. a' Becket (Beckett) to George W. Vanderbilt, 1898, Biltmore Estate Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, courtesy of Lori Gast.
44. John J. a' Becket (Beckett), "Caesar's Head," *Catholic World* 61 (April-September 1895): 604-605.
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60. Bermingham, *American Art in the Barbizon Mood*, p. 17.
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