



REDISCOVERED: An Artistic Milestone for a Sport and a City

Excitement among scholars and connoisseurs is growing over what may well be the first American artwork depicting a rowing regatta. This is not just an attractive picture, but also emblematic of a tradition distinctive to the city of Philadelphia, where the country's first private clubs for rowing and racing boats propelled by oars were established in the early 1830s.

The site of this artwork's rediscovery is the Undine Barge Club, an amateur (though very dedicated) rowing club on the Schuylkill River headquartered in a magnificent 1882 boathouse designed by the great local architect Frank Furness. Now one of a dozen such clubs lining Boathouse Row, the Undine was founded in 1856 for "healthful exercise, relaxation from business ... and pleasure." The lead players in the rediscovery are the painter Joseph Sweeney (b. 1950), who is artist-in-residence at the club, and James H. Hill, a longtime Undinian. Sweeney has long encouraged its members to conserve some of the historic artworks hanging on the walls of their house; needless to say, its essential proximity to the river brings with it significant humidity issues. Firmly identified artworks have been receiving expert conservation treatment, but the particular picture under consideration here — an easel-sized gouache on paper — does not have a signature or label, so cleaning it was not a priority.

Still, as an artist himself, Sweeney could see that it was unusually well made. Hill was



approached by Dr. Lily Milroy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who was writing a book about the history of the Schuylkill River. She thought this image might have been painted by the Italian-born, American-based artist Nicolino Vicompte Calyo (1799–1884). She was encouraged by the

NICOLINO VICOMPTE CALYO (1799–1884), *First Schuylkill Regatta*, c. 1835, gouache on paper, 16 x 22 1/2 in., Debra Force Fine Art, New York City



JOSEPH SWEENEY (b. 1950), *Rowing Colors*, 2015, oil on board, 20 x 35 in., Gallery 71, New York City

fact that the museum owns a Calyo of the same kind depicting the neoclassical Waterworks complex located near the site depicted here.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

Finally armed with a specific artist's name, Sweeney and Hill pursued the Calyo possibility. Among the resources they consulted was Scharf and Westcott's oft-cited *History of Philadelphia*, first published in 1870–71.¹ Sure enough, the rowers' uniforms illustrated in this mystery picture match those worn during Philadelphia's first racing regatta, on November 12, 1835. On that auspicious day, the volume notes, many businesses closed so that their employees could stand on the riverbanks and watch the race; many spectators came on horseback or in wagons and coaches. Participating were two classes of "barges" (an archaic word) containing either six or eight oarsmen, each with its own coxswain to shout instructions and encouragement.

It soon became clear that this picture is Calyo's eyewitness account of that inaugural race, which makes sense as he was a seasoned view painter who liked working on location.² Born in Naples and trained at its Accademia di Belle Arti, Calyo fled Italy in 1821 after participating in an unsuccessful rebellion. He traveled to such places as Malta and Granada, and in 1833 headed for the Canary and Cape Verde Islands. In 1834, however, he arrived in Baltimore, where he exhibited several large European scenes. By 1835, he was living in Philadelphia, where he painted a portrait of a fireman and, more importantly, several views of the Waterworks, including the Philadelphia Museum's example.³ Later that same year, Calyo surfaced in New York City, where he created several scenes of the huge fire that destroyed much of lower Manhattan in

December; he stayed on to capture numerous views of the city, its workers and street people.⁴ Ultimately Calyo ventured as far afield as the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, Niagara Falls, Boston, and New Orleans, remaining professionally active into the 1850s. All of this means that his Philadelphia scenes are exceedingly rare, another reason this rediscovery is exciting to both connoisseurs and urban historians.

Calyo sought out visual drama; we can see this in his depictions of the New York fire and of Niagara Falls, and it certainly comes across in the Undine picture. The artist apparently set up his easel on high ground on the west side of the Schuylkill, looking northeast toward Sedgley hill. Calyo shows us the race at an early stage, focusing on seven of the eight-oared boats as they set off, ready to round a bend marked by a small hut at the water's edge. (This stretch would soon become Boathouse Row, where the Undine clubhouse stands today.) Among its many charms, this scene offers an invaluable record of how the Schuylkill's shores looked before more intensive development began.

On the near bank, we see small groups of well-dressed citizens; pencil lines here indicate that Calyo planned to include more figures, but ultimately changed his mind. Continuous lines of spectators can be seen on the hills to the east and along the western shore. We also see other barges carrying both spectators and judges.

It is worth stressing that other 19th-century artists depicted racing boats on the Schuylkill, but never an actual race; among them were Thomas Birch (1820s), John Bowen (1830s), and William H. Rease (1860s). Art historian Lisa N. Peters, Ph.D., brings the story forward: "The artist who would make the subject of rowing on the Schuylkill a major theme was Thomas Eakins [1844–1916], whose 19 rowing scenes created from 1871 to 1874 are well known." She observes that Eakins was proud of Philadelphia's pioneering role in boat racing, and keenly aware of the Schuylkill's prominent role in shaping the city's

identity, offering — as it still does — recreational opportunities that bring its citizens together. Calyo, then, laid the groundwork for a rich visual tradition that continues today in the art of — just for example — Joe Sweeney, whose luminous *Rowing Colors* (2015) is illustrated here.

FORTUNATE FATE

Lisa Peters discovered a 1905 article by John B. Thayer indicating that the Undine Barge Club's members bought the painting from the 1867 estate sale of Benjamin McMakin, a well-known Philadelphia steamboat captain.⁵ When Sweeney first saw it, it was hanging, quite ignored, in a dark hallway on the way to the restroom. Actually, this neglect saved it: had it been displayed in a front room for all to admire, it surely would have faded away, as works on paper are dangerously susceptible to sunlight. Wisely, Sweeney eventually contacted the New York City dealer Debra Force, whom he knew from her time in Philadelphia directing the CIGNA Museum and Art Collection, and who once headed the American art department at Christie's. She is now offering the Calyo for sale on behalf of the Undine, which, understandably, feels it can no longer care properly for such a rare and valuable artwork.

Beyond its visual appeal, Calyo's *First Schuylkill Regatta* marks a milestone in American art history, and is surely looking forward to even happier days in a private or public collection that treasures it.

Information: Debra Force Fine Art, 13 East 69th Street, Suite 4F, New York, NY 10021, 212.734.3636, debraforce.com

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Notes

1. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884*, 3 vol. (reprinted Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884), 1, 646.
2. Kevin J. Avery, *American Drawings and Watercolors in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Volume I—A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born before 1835* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art), 154–55.
3. Two gouache versions are of the same scene: *The Philadelphia Water Works* (c. 1835–36, location unknown); and *Schuylkill River and Waterworks* (c. 1835, Dietrich American Foundation, Philadelphia). Another gouache, *Fairmount Waterworks—Philadelphia* (c. 1835, White House Art Collection), portrays a view looking down directly on the Waterworks.
4. The Museum of the City of New York is especially rich in Calyo's New York scenes.
5. John B. Thayer, "The Early Years of the University Barge Club of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 29 (1905), 282.