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ART REVIEW | THOMAS CHAMBERS

Setting Full Sail Toward the 20th Century

By ROBERTA SMITH

In the late 1930s the New York art dealers Albert Duveen and Norman Hirschl started turning up some intriguing paintings in upstate New York. These works depicted conventional subjects of 19th-century American painting — Hudson River landscapes and marine views of ships, harbors and naval battles — but in an entrancing, slightly demonic style unlike anything the dealers had seen before. Neither strictly realist nor naïve, they packed a formal, even decorative punch. The works felt ahead of their time, as if the artist had grasped that reality was, in the end, a geometry-based situation, much as early 20th-century painters would. Unfortunately none of the canvases were signed.

Then one day the pair came across a large and ambitious painting in this style that had both a title and signature. It depicted the American warship Constitution defeating the British vessel Guerrière in the War of 1812. It was signed T. Chambers. In 1942 Hirschl and Duveen organized an exhibition of their finds at the Macbeth Gallery in New York. They titled it “T. Chambers, Active 1820-1840: First American Modern.”

Since then T. Chambers has acquired the first name of Thomas, a slim biography and a working life that dated from 1834 to 1866. His exuberant paintings are admired by scholars and collectors of 19th-century American painting. They can be found in museums along the Eastern seaboard, and inland, too. Almost everywhere I would guess they jump off the walls at you — the first Chambers I saw, at the Brooklyn Museum, sure did.

But have there been any major Chambers exhibitions? Not one, at least not until now, with the extraordinary survey of nearly 50 paintings at the American Folk Art Museum. Organized last year at the Philadelphia Museum of Art by Kathleen A. Foster, its curator of American art, “Thomas Chambers (1808-1869)” confirms that there is nothing quite like the starchy hybrid that Chambers devised.

He aimed to please. His images are like chorus lines singing and dancing their hearts out, ever so slightly off-key and out of step. Every part contributes vocally and vigorously to the whole. The trilling patterns of ocean waves, rounded trees or riverside hedgerows; the sharp-edged mountains and shorelines, overemphatic clouds, glossy rivers and almost lurid sunsets — they all lock arms, and do a little more than their bit. The slight awkwardness amplifies. You see them perform and you see their performance, gaining a greater understanding of the visual appetite by having it thoroughly satisfied.

The desire to please is also explicit in the way Chambers’s compositions sometimes repeat with slight variations — views of West Point, Niagara Falls, Lake George and Mount Vesuvius (which Chambers never saw). It was as if he were reproducing a successful formula because of customer demand, which he was. Art

was Chambers's ambition and his means of survival, and he painted as many as 10 copies of a popular scene.

Chambers was born in Whitby, England, into a poor seafaring family, where artistic talent literally saved or at least prolonged lives. His older brother George, sent to sea at age 10, revealed such a knack for painting and decorating the ship's gear that, at 18, he was released from his indentures and sent to art school. Four years later he was in London, where he became a successful marine painter. Even William IV, the Sailor King, commissioned a work. But George died in 1840; his early years at sea had ruined his health.

Thomas followed George to London, picking up artistic skills from him and probably first working, as George had, as a painter of theater scenery and panoramas. Ms. Foster surmises that Chambers was an impatient, restless sort who decided to try his luck across the Atlantic. On March 1, 1832, he was in New Orleans — at the courthouse, to be precise — filing a declaration of intention to become an American citizen. After that, census reports, directories and newspaper advertisements show him moving every few years: New York City, Baltimore, Boston, Albany and back to New York City. He listed himself variously as a landscape painter, marine painter and occasionally as a "fancy" painter, which indicated skills at ornamental painting that may have included the decoration of furniture, mirrors and tinware.

Twice he consigned groups of paintings to auction, a common practice by which artists publicized themselves and raised money in a time when galleries and dealers were virtually unheard of. But Chambers seems mostly to have just scraped by. In his lifetime he never gained the acclaim of contemporaries like Thomas Cole, and suddenly he dropped from sight in New York in 1866, two years after the death of his wife, Harriet. He had returned to Whitby, where he died in the poorhouse, unknown and alone. Ms. Foster finally closed the circle by locating his death certificate, although this is the least bit of the new information that she lays out in her phenomenal catalog.

Chambers the man is as dim as his paintings are vivid. They do communicate impatience. Maybe Chambers didn't have time for the delicacies of one-point perspective and atmospheric; it was easier to fit the image together in a series of flattish planes, letting mountains upholstered in trees meet a river's mirrored surface with a nearly straight line and small jolt. It also made a stronger impression more quickly.

Chambers knew that his clients — members of the nascent middle class, not the elite — didn't have much time for artistic diversions or much experience buying paintings. His abbreviations also had the boldness of the folk art and painted furniture that was more familiar to them.

He synthesized and formulized. He executed images that would appeal to local pride, like "Packet Ship Passing Castle Williams, New York Harbor," in which the waves are indicated by parallel rows of matching whitecaps. Staten Island is seen against a sky streaked with pink and the ship is at nearly full sail, racing toward the picture's right edge like a bustling courtier in a large, fancy wig.

Often he painted from engravings of other artists' work, sometimes depicting places, like Vesuvius, he never visited, including Waterloo and the Rhine, where there's a castle on every carapace. His scenes of frigates tossed by immense, S-curve waves were based on scenes in popular pirate novels, and he painted contemporary events, like the wreck of the ship Bristol, washed up on Far Rockaway Beach. The curving bay recurs in the magnificent, incisively pink "View of Nahant (Sunset)," where crescents of ruddy beach and

sky alternate with the dark foreground, the semicircle of ocean and ships and a flirtatious ring of lavender clouds.

This exhibition includes landscapes by other artists, including Cole, Thomas Doughty and William Matthew Prior, but don't be surprised if you pass them by. Chambers's work may lack the historic pedigree and national symbolism, say, of Cole's paintings, but on the wall, it's no contest.

There are also a few tables and a chest of drawers patterned in the fancy style. Of particular interest is a small black box with a scene of a steamship stippled in white on its inside lid and a band of flowers stenciled in gold and silver around its exterior. Chambers slipped between these two approaches, took what he needed and sped on, toward 20th-century painting. Knocking together his planes of water, sky and land, he found a new wholeness that jumps toward you, before you expect it.

"Thomas Chambers (1808-1869): American Marine and Landscape Painter" is on view through March 7 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040, folkartmuseum.org.