



RALPH ALBERT BLAKELOCK (1847–1919), *Indian Encampment at Sunset*, c. 1880–85, oil on canvas, 20 x 30 in

AMERICA'S MAD GENIUS

RALPH ALBERT BLAKELOCK: THE GREAT MAD GENIUS RETURNS

For scholars, Questroyal Fine Art's new exhibition devoted to Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847– 1919) conjures memories of what happened a century ago, in 1916, when his *Brook by Moon- light* was purchased for \$20,000, the highest price ever paid for a painting to that time.

Wildly curious to see this treasure, more than 2,500 people attended the first two days of the Blakelock show at New York City's Reinhardt Gallery. In fact, all of the pictures sent in by the artist — then hailed by the *New York Times* as “the greatest American painter” — were purchased on opening night. Will history repeat itself this November?

Blakelock attended his 1916 opening thanks to its sponsor, the self-serving Beatrice Van Rensselaer Adams. Groomed and dressed in a Brooks Brothers suit she had bought for him, Blakelock was picked up and returned by her to the Middletown State Hospital for the Insane, where he had resided since 1901 diagnosed as schizophrenic. Despite, or perhaps because of, Adams's guardianship, Blakelock never actually enjoyed the fruits of his fame: he, his estranged wife, and their nine children lived and died in extreme poverty.

The biography of Blakelock — America's least-known famous artist — is so dramatic that it can accidentally distract modern-day viewers from the virtuosity so evident in the new exhibition's 125 paintings. It has been said that the line between insanity and genius is sometimes imperceptible. Yet Blakelock insisted that his paintings be judged "on their merits alone," and so they should be.

He was so strongly committed to the idea that "the laws of the art of painting are the laws of the creator" that, after only two years at the Free Academy of the City of New York, Blakelock set out on his own. He traveled west alone, depicting the lives of the Indians he met and struggling to see, feel, and paint primeval landscapes. In the wilderness, finally, Blakelock broke free from accepted ways of thinking.

Picasso said, "Artists lie in order to tell the truth." Blakelock's paintings do not attempt to duplicate reality, but create their own. They emerge from rough textured surfaces through layers of scraping, transparent color, raw pigment, oil, and varnish applied with brushstrokes that moved to the beats of his mind's melodies. They are mystical, musical nocturnes of silence, ones that glow. They are truly a gift — once seen, never forgotten.

Whether you make it to Manhattan this season or not, consider acquiring the exhibition's 72-page catalogue, which contains essays by Questroyal's Louis M. Salerno and Nina Sangimino, Yale University Art Gallery curator Mark D. Mitchell, and the artist-playwright Myra Platt, who is also Blakelock's great-great-granddaughter.

Eleven years in the making, the show opens on November 10 with a ticketed reception; its proceeds will benefit a charity supporting individuals with Alzheimer's.

Text by Sherry Camhy, a New York City artist whose own work has been profoundly inspired by Blakelock's