‘A Wild Note of Longing: Albert Pinkham Ryder and a Century of American Art’ Review: An Enigmatic Painter Comes Into Focus

An exhibition at the New Bedford Whaling Museum examines the visionary artist’s work and traces his influence on Jackson Pollock and others.

By Karen Wilkin
July 31, 2021 7:00 am ET

New Bedford, Mass.

First, the obvious question: Why is “A Wild Note of Longing: Albert Pinkham Ryder and a Century of American Art,” the first major survey of the enigmatic painter’s work in more than 30 years, at the New Bedford Whaling Museum? Because in 1847 Ryder was born in New Bedford, then one of the wealthiest
whaling ports in New England, and lived there until he moved with his family to New York in 1867 or 1868. (Except for trips to Europe and North Africa, he never left New York after that, dying there in 1917.)

A Wild Note of Longing: Albert Pinkham Ryder and a Century of American Art
New Bedford Whaling Museum, through Oct. 31

“A Wild Note of Longing”—the title comes from a poem by Ryder—was organized by Christina Connett Brophy, chief curator of the museum at the time, and the distinguished historians of American art Elizabeth Broun and William C. Agee. They present Ryder as prophetic visionary, pioneering modernist, and influential original who, Ms. Brophy writes, was “at the center of a cultural shift . . . to a powerful and uniquely American voice.” These claims are supported by an impressive mini-retrospective of significant paintings and an account of his still vital legacy. We walk past immense, high-flown cetacean skeletons, down a corridor, to galleries with dark wainscoting, exchanging the brutal world of “Moby-Dick”—published when Ryder was 3 years old—for a fantastic realm of lush pigment and supercharged images. The downside? Less than ideal lighting on admittedly hard-to-light and hard-to-see works, most of them under glass and hung too high.

Ryder’s years by the sea may have been formative, but his education and life as a painter were urban. He studied at New York’s National Academy of Design and exhibited regularly in the city from 1873 on, attracting critical acclaim and devoted collectors, and gaining a reputation as an eccentric iconoclast. Yet Ryder’s most powerful, celebrated works, such as the exhibition’s dazzlers “Flying Dutchman” (completed by 1887) and “Jonah” (c. 1885-95), are eerily lighted, swirling, all-over equivalents for roiling mid-ocean, with terrifying waves transubstantiated into scrolling patterns of coruscated pigment across the surface. Next stop, Jackson Pollock, who, in fact, called Ryder the only American master who interested him.
Interestingly, many of the exhibited works are landlocked. Witness “Landscape” (c. 1870) and related paintings, such as “Weir’s Orchard” (c. 1885-90), typically small, minimally indicated scenes, some bathed in golden light, some with cool skies and dark foliage that teeters between animation and abstraction. The graphic “Pastoral Study” (1897) sets confrontational cattle against a clearly defined, luminous landscape with a distant tiny windmill that pulls us deep into fictive space until the fact of dense paint returns us to the surface.

These modest, domestic paintings announce Ryder’s deliberate distance from the grandiloquent theatricality of such 19th-century Americans as Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt, known for their vast, meticulously detailed, European-accented canvases of exotic, dramatic places. The physicality of even Ryder’s earliest work points to the experimental mature artist, who could spend years adding and removing paint, building clotted surfaces that often deteriorated. He is said to have welcomed signs of the passage of time; the rest of us are grateful for the exhibited paintings still in reasonable condition.
There are surprises. The author of the heaving, full-throttle “Jonah” turns out to have also painted shepherdesses, sheep, dancing dryads, and orientalist themes. But the exhibition fully celebrates the way Ryder’s vision turned increasingly inward over the years, with prime examples of the passionate, moonlit, dizzying seascapes that his name conjures up, plus some wonderful white horses, one transformed into Pegasus. These intense images, some radiant, most dark and brooding, still startle; their structure and paint-handling seem almost contemporary. Small wonder that a generation of young American modernists admired the 10 Ryders included in the so-called Armory Show, the vast exhibition that essentially introduced European modernism to the U.S. in 1913.

The persistence of that admiration is persuasively documented in a section of the show devoted to modern and contemporary heirs to Ryder’s example. Selected by Mr. Agee, the artists range from Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Thomas Hart Benton and Pollock to Albert York, Bill Jensen, Lois Dodd and Katherine Bradford, among many others—established and emerging, figurative and abstract, early 20th century and contemporary—all of whose work shares Ryder’s intensity, economy, deceptive modesty, and sometimes his mystical ferocity.
Albert Pinkham Ryder’s ‘Landscape’ (c. 1870)
PHOTO: NEW BEDFORD WHALING MUSEUM

Standouts? The Pollock—a tiny seascape (c. 1934) that threatens to turn into a Ryder-esque abstraction. A curvilinear, tough Jensen abstraction from the 1980s, Ms. Dodd’s group of little moonlit skies, Ms. Bradford’s wonky four-masted ship, and more. Mr. Agee’s selection is tantalizing. His catalog essay, a provocative discussion of many more artists than are exhibited, raises hopes of a full-scale exhibition exploring Ryder’s enduring influence and the amazing variety of responses he elicited.

—Ms. Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.