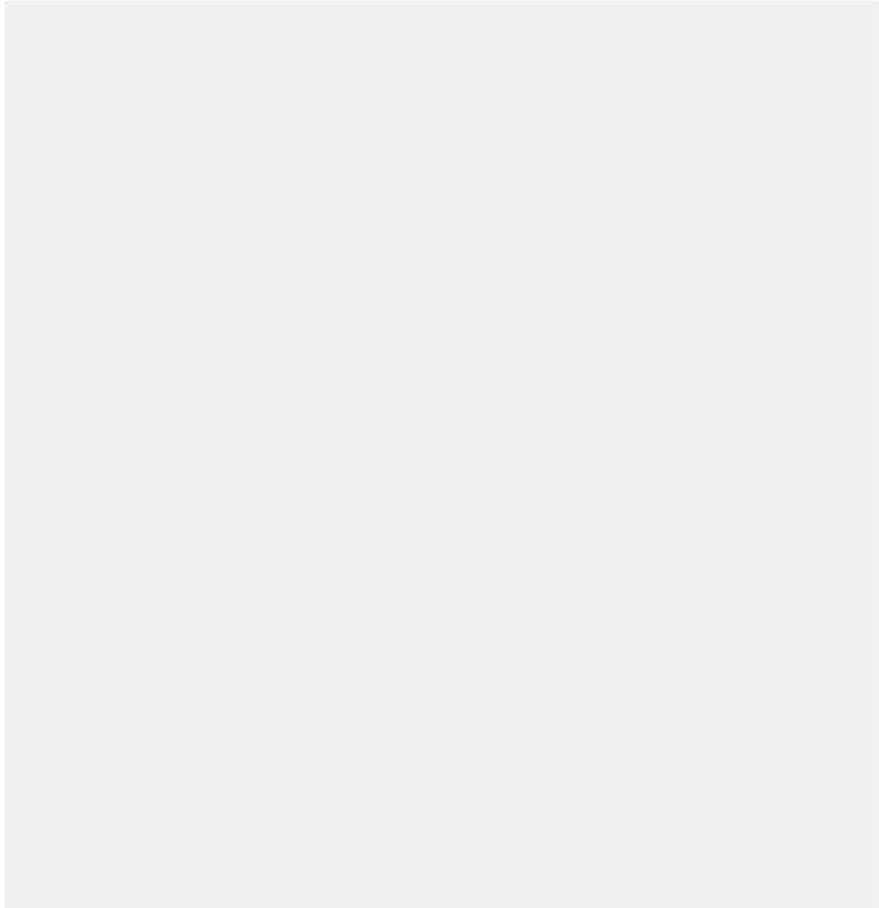


William Trost Richards [starts below]



William Trost Richards

“Seascapes by William Trost Richards,” at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, presents forty works—drawings, watercolors and oils—by a fine artist best known for his marine images. Thanks in large part to a gift from the artist’s granddaughter, Edith Ballinger Price, the Chrysler has an in-depth collection of more than one hundred works by Richards (1833–1905).

Richards admired the work of Hudson River School painters Thomas Cole (1801–48) and his near contemporary Frederic Church (1826–1900), and he joined the American Pre-Raphaelite group, the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art, founded on the ideas of John Ruskin. Richards allied himself formally with the Association for only a few years, producing some lovely forest interiors with special attention to rocks, but he never aban-



William Trost Richards, *Tower on the Cornish Coast*, after 1878
COURTESY CHRYSLER MUSEUM OF ART, NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

doned Ruskin's dictum of fidelity to Nature. His interest in geology underlies his coastal pictures. As he became increasingly devoted to the marine genre, the dynamic of rock-meets-water became paramount. His contemporaries sometimes thought him mad, his daughter reported, because he would spend hours standing in surf and sketching the waves.

The Chrysler exhibition gives viewers an opportunity to observe Richards's process in various mediums. An undated *Seascape with Signature* captures the movement of waves curling up and then dissipating on the shore. No special features pinpoint a location, but Richard's fluid pen lines convey with economical strokes the diagonal sweep of the clouds, the serpentine advance of the water on the beach and—through some spirited crosshatching—the curl of the whitecaps. This drawing is less an image of a place and more a diagnosis of elemental forces, reminiscent of Leonardo's notebook studies of natural phenomena.

Another ink-on-paper work, *Conanicut* (c. 1890s), is much more elaborate and specific. Richards often depicted the distinctive topography of his summer home, Conanicut Island, off the coast of Rhode Island. In this dramatic work, waves crash against the steep, angular rock face; the formation's stepped-pyramid-eroded-by-time monumentality has a primordial gravitas. The whole sheet is covered with energetic lines, buoyant in the rhythmic peaks of the waves, densely crosshatched in the shadows. But he lets the white of the paper, unadorned, sparkle through as foam, bright highlights and the clearing sky above, where a spare and effective pictogram of the sun announces better weather. A couple of two-stroke birds wheel high above. This is a knockout

William Trost Richards
Conanicut, c. 1890s

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drawing. Although it looks like the work of neither Victor Hugo nor Vincent van Gogh, Richards's image conveys similar intimations of pantheistic sublimity.

Richards's paintings, while not as theatrical as J.M.W. Turner's or as flamboyant in color as Church's, belong to a broadly defined school of Romantic landscape. Richards traveled extensively in Europe and

felt especially drawn to Cornwall in Great Britain, the legendary home of Tristan and Isolde and the Arthurian saga. *Tower on the Cornish Coast* (after 1878) places the eponymous medieval structure in the background, glimpsed across a soft green field dotted with trees. The bulk of the composition belongs to the rocky promontory, dark grey against the pale, scudding clouds, and the foreground waves. The artist conveys the restless undulation of the blue-green-grey water with power and grace.

Another British subject is *La Gaufre—Guernsey* (1903). Here the view is from the top of the cliff on a sunny day. Richards pays close attention to the texture of the rock and the spongy lichen that clings to it. The vertiginous view down to the rocky islets and churning surf is exhilarating. The artist leaves a bit of the canvas bare, adding to the sense of spontaneity. *La Gaufre* fits comfortably with the Pre-Raphaelite landscape aesthetic, but some of Richards's work has a kind of roughness that suggests Winslow Homer's Maine shorescapes. *Seascape* (n.d.) puts us in the middle of the water—no land in sight, and Richards loads his brush with white for the surging whitecaps, which seem to snag the light from the brightest area of the cloud-banked sky.



In preparation for the exhibition, the museum's conservator treated a dozen works, including one untitled seascape, a previously unstretched and unvarnished oil on canvas. It is a dramatic, almost archetypal composition of waves pounding against massive, pillar-like cliffs. Uncleaned, the image is arresting, but the surface is spotty and dingy. Conservation brought out the whites—misty and atmospheric, sharp-edged on the rock, exuberant on the surf—and reveal the glassy green translucency of the swells. "Seascapes by William Trost Richards" is on view January 9–May 1, 2016, at the Chrysler Museum of Art, One Memorial Place, Norfolk, Virginia 23510. Telephone (757) 664-6200. info@chrysler.org

—Gail Leggio