Henry Mattson: Swedish-American Painter of the Seas

MARY TOWSLEY SWANSON

When Henry Mattson's painting *Moonlight on the Monhegan* was exhibited at the Tate Gallery in London during the summer of 1946 as a part of the exhibition of two hundred years of American painting, critic Peyton Boswell included it among the "star performances" of the group. Shown alongside such American icons as John Singleton Copley, Benjamin West, Charles Willson Peale, and Winslow Homer, Henry Mattson's canvas was in exemplary company. Its inclusion solidified Mattson's name in American art history up to this date. Boswell rhapsodized that "this is our best, and if the ship now conveying these treasures to England should sink, the nation would sustain an irreparable loss." The exhibition would answer French critics, Boswell concluded, who observed that "artistically America could be proud of Walt Disney and indoor plumbing."[1]

Henry Mattson established his place in American art as early as 1920, when his canvases were shown in recognized New York galleries and exhibitions. His status rose through the 1930s and 1940s, when the Rehn Gallery handled his paintings, and culminated in Mattson's capturing the first prize at the Corcoran Gallery's Biennial in 1943 and his inclusion in the Tate Gallery exhibition in 1946.

Critics throughout the 1930s and early 1940s viewed Mattson's paintings as minimally abstract in comparison to the prevailing tone of realist/regionalists, who painted scenery from their own view of

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North American rural areas. He painted ethereal trees and pounding oceans from his studio attic in Woodstock. American critics, aware that conservative painters had relied on their realistic vision long after the Armory Show (1913) had introduced a more cubistic structure and Matisse-like color to avant-garde American artists, saw in Mattson's seascapes, still lifes, and landscapes a comfortable combination of near-abstraction and mood-evoking color that would please reviewers, galleries, and the public.

Mattson's gallery connections assured him a comfortable, secure existence in Woodstock, New York, for over forty years. Judging the painter's career from his exhibition reviews reveals a strong commitment to American institutions and colleagues. A survey of friends, family, and unpublished interviews, however, indicates that Mattson had a strong feeling for Sweden and often acknowledged that views of the sea had influenced his paintings. Ties to two homelands were normal predicaments for many immigrant artists in the early to mid-twentieth century.

In December 1933 a headline in *The Art Digest* announced, "Foreign Born Americans Take All Prizes at Worcester Show." Its author quizzically commented—not searching for underlying reasons—that "a strange side light on American art is revealed in the fact that none of the prize winners is American born."[2] Mattson won second prize for his painting *Landscape* (see figure 1), while Nicolai Cikovsky, a Russian immigrant, won the first prize for *Girl Before Mirror*. Neither painting betrayed any hint of nationalistic bias. In fact, the article quoted *New York Times* critic Edward Alden Jewell, who, upon seeing the exhibition, optimistically declared that "the development of American art has reached a point where it is honestly and unpretentiously native."

The ascendance of immigrant artists to the ranks of museum prize winners was not unusual in the 1930s. Mattson was among numerous painters who had emigrated as children or young adults in the last great wave of immigration during the early 1920s, which the Immigration Act of 1924 effectively curtailed. Comfortable in their new homes, the newly arrived artists attended art schools, set up studios, and began to build reputations. By the early to mid-thirties, many artists sharing this common American heritage of immigration

Fig. 1. Henry Mattson, Landscape, *1933; Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts; 1933.164*

had been in their new homes for over a decade, had established their places, and had bodies of work from which to choose exhibition-quality canvases.

All of these artists carried some aspect of their former lives, whether because their memories had produced images or revived techniques from their earlier education. The longer they lived in the new land, moreover, the more exaggerated and selective those memories became. Mattson, more naïvely open than most, verbally admitted that "my Swedish inheritance probably has stimulated me to paint rocky landscapes and paintings of the sea."[3] When he took seaside vacations, the artist confessed, he could not paint from life, but had to complete canvases in his studio, stimulated by atavistic memories. Mattson's assertion that memories from Sweden influenced the content of his canvases can be seen as rhetoric for creating a mystique for reviewers and patrons. Yet, when events in the painter's life are placed in chronological order, it is apparent that Mattson's visual ties to his first home in Sweden were nurtured by journeys

back to visit family and, secondarily, museums. These events and Mattson's statements provide a background against which to place the canvases he created in America.

Mattson had a more cosmopolitan childhood than most immigrant artists. He was born on 7 August 1887 in Gothenburg into an established, secure family. Many of Mattson's ancestors had been sailors, and the family had lived in the city for several generations. His father designed and tested locomotives and had once been decorated for his work by the King of Sweden. It was, however, his mother who provided the stronger influence on his work. "She had a sense of proportion, of good taste." Mattson recalled that his home environment presented a kind of purified simplicity. "The windows had Nottingham curtains of very good quality," he wrote. "But there was only one plant and the mantelpiece had but one object on either side of the clock, not a clutter of things." Mattson explained that this simplicity formed his conception of ideal spaces, and he asserted that "I don't like a cluttered room, it makes me nervous. I like more space, less furniture and knickknacks. A plain room calms one. A simple room is like a clean slate."[4] Mattson's description of his home environment fit the pattern of Swedish interiors for the middle classes at the turn of the century. The centuries-old peasant tradition of simplifying forms influenced Swedish furnishings by 1900. Every piece had a useful function within restricted spatial limits, and manufacturers tailored furniture and textiles to that norm.

Although his parents provided art materials for their children, Mattson said that he never thought about becoming an artist as a young child. He admitted, however, "that I was always asking for a water color box for a present at Christmas time . . . so I did fool around with water colors as a kid, just like any other child does. As I grew up later on it [drawing] became less and less."[5]

Ironically, Mattson also had a regular diet of museum visits as a child and recognized the paintings of then-modern European and Swedish painters, even though his mature work in later life was viewed as somewhat primitive. He recalled that he saw the paintings of Swedish painters Carl Larsson, Bruno Liljefors, and Anders Zorn at the Gothenburg Museum. "[All the] Swedish artist desired after he'd graduated from an art school was to go to Paris. And they were very

much influenced by the French Impressionists." Mattson also saw the work of Monet, Manet, and Renoir, but added that "I don't recall any Cezannes but they had a great many of the French school there."[6] The young Mattson liked "the color . . . the pigment." He remembered that when he first saw a painting by Signac, his fingers "probed the surface of the work . . . and he . . . resolved that he was born to paint."[7]

Mattson's museum visits and home environment were parts of a culturally enriched childhood. He indicated a third source of influence, however, in an interview towards the end of his life, when he told Dorothy Seckler that his grandfather had been a sexton in the Queen Christina Church in Gothenburg, the same parish in which Mattson and his family were members. Years later he also talked about his confirmation in that Swedish church to his family in Woodstock, New York. Queen Christina Church, rich in stained glass windows, seventeenth-century sculpture, and paintings used for memorial gifts, provided a wealth of competently executed artwork for the young child to view while sitting quietly in church with his family.

Childhood ended, however, when the artist decided to emigrate to America at age eighteen. An older brother, who had left several years earlier, wrote to encourage Mattson to visit him in Boston. "And of course I wanted to see the world," Mattson said.[8] After six months in Boston, the young immigrant moved to Worcester, Massachusetts, where he worked in factories for the next seven years. Worcester was a comfortable location for Swedish immigrants by the time Mattson settled there. Swedes had first come to Worcester in 1868, and by the turn of the century many worked in local manufacturing companies. By 1910, after Mattson had lived there for four years, there were 8,036 Swedish-born and 6,311 second-generation Swedish Americans.[9]

In a curiously coincidental beginning for a painter, Mattson worked in a factory that produced chemical powder for paints, and he later recalled that workers were steeped in yellow dye. To his amazement, "on the first day I brought a pair of black overalls. In just a few minutes I was just as yellow as everybody else."[10] After a job at a second factory as a machinist, Mattson went to work at the Norton

Abrasives/Grinding factory for the next three years. His employment options were limited, but he chose a factory owned by another Swedish immigrant, John Jeppson, who had come to Worcester from Sweden in 1868, reorganized the Norton Grinding Company when it suffered financial losses, and directed it until his death in 1920. Jeppson supported cultural events and causes within the community, and his son, George, who succeeded him in the company, amassed one of the most extensive private collections of Swedish art in America in the 1920s and 1930s.[11] Whether he was encouraged by his employer or it was simply an unconscious need that surfaced because of happenstance, Mattson rekindled his interest in painting while in Worcester. One evening he passed a store window in Worcester that displayed a new mahogany paint box. "It looked so nice," he said, "that the next morning I went in and bought it. Then I started to paint. The first thing I did was a still life of a bottle of gin, a stein, and a pink blanket which happened to be on a chair."[12] Giving his first painting to a brother in Sweden, he confessed to Dorothy Seckler in 1963 that "to this day, I still like that painting."[13] The first still life inspired Mattson to continue. "I began to feel as if I must paint," he told Seckler. "You see . . . I was not very happy as a machinist."

Mattson continued to work his shift at the factory by day, but entered night classes at the school of the Worcester Art Museum in the winter of 1912. The school enrolled 147 students that year, and offered a minimal curriculum in drawing, design, painting, and bookbinding. Students gathered in the attic of Salisbury House, and Mattson reminisced that they drew from plaster casts of Minerva and Abraham Lincoln. "The teacher said he would have graduated me to life class," Mattson told Seckler, "but the trouble was that I didn't know enough." When Mattson went out on a sketching trip with his class in the fall of 1912, the instructor supposedly commented to another student about Mattson's sketches, "That work is really quite colorful. I'm amazed that he can paint so well; he doesn't draw so well."[14]

Before Mattson left Worcester to return to Sweden, it is quite possible that he saw the well-publicized exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum, *Paintings and Sculpture by Scandinavian and Scandinavian-American Artists*. Mattson never indicated whether this exhibition, dating from 13 April to 11 May 1913, was the initial inspiration

to enter the Valand Art School in Gothenburg. What we do know is that he took a trip back to Sweden, "thinking that maybe I'd stay in Sweden and paint, stay at home in Gothenburg." He told interviewer Seckler that at Valand, "the headmaster of the school interviewed me . . . and suggested that I . . . go out and make charcoal sketches of trees, branches of trees. He said to try to draw all the intricate little lines that you find in leaves and that sort of thing." Mattson recalled that the headmaster told him, "You need drawing to be able to draw." Instead of heeding the master's advice, Mattson spent the summer painting, apparently following his own inner directions. When he returned to be judged for entrance in the fall, the instructor "almost swore," telling Mattson angrily, "I've refused entrance to the academy of a young man that is infinitely more talented than you are."[15] "Give up painting and go back to America and a good trade."[16]

Rather than go back to Worcester, however, Mattson went to Chicago in the late fall and painted throughout the winter of 1914, living on his savings. According to Richard Hillstrom, a collector of Swedish-American and American paintings, Mattson boarded with a Swedish Lutheran family in Chicago.[17] This connection was not unusual, because at that time Chicago was still a center for Swedish immigration, and Mattson may have sought the security of a substantial Swedish-speaking population as well as the reputation of Chicago's museums and art schools.

By necessity, Mattson found work in factories, and eventually became a foreman at International Harvester Company. Since the painter had a strong interest in art previously, it can be assumed that he viewed exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and also possibly saw the *Swedish-American Artists Exhibition*, which was held 25 April to 2 May 1915 at the Swedish Club in downtown Chicago. This exhibition prominently featured eight seascapes by Charles E. Hallberg, a former sailor and self-taught painter, whose work had supposedly been praised by the American Impressionist painter Alexander Harrison and the Swedish painter Anders Zorn.[18] Hallberg swathed his paintings in variants of cool cobalt blues, and he divided his compositions into half sky and half water, as can be seen in *Impending Storm* (see figure 2). When Mattson began to paint the sea almost fifteen years later, he used similar proportions, although he

drenched his canvases in warmer blends of Prussian blue.

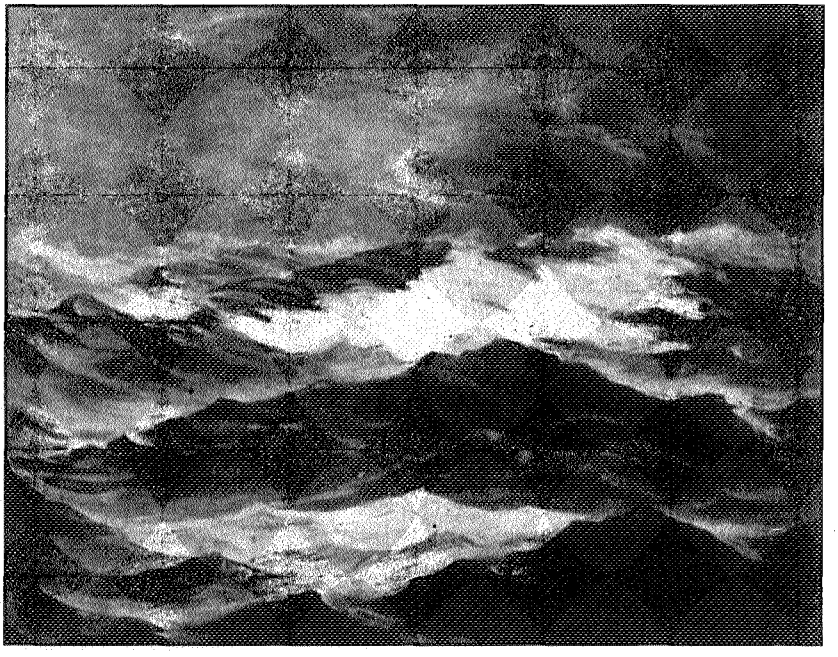

Fig. 2. Charles Hallberg, Impending Storm; *unknown location*

Mattson's ties to Hallberg are only visual and hypothetical. More tangible is the network of cultural connections that existed within the Swedish-American community. The Swedish-American family with whom Mattson boarded had close relationships to the Swedish Lutheran church. Normally, within an immigrant community, the clergy held positions of influence and several became collectors of art. Paintings by Hallberg, Arvid Nyholm, and Birger Sandzén, for example, were part of the collection of Chicago clergyman Dr. Oscar N. Olson, who had purchased work in the first years of the century. Olson's son recalled that "many of our parishioners had occasion to view the interior of our home and to admire the paintings that hung on the walls of the entrance hall, parlor and living room. . . . Father was pleased to act as a promoter or sales agent for these artists."[19] Within that small enclave of educated leaders, a number of the clergy probably influenced laymen to collect the art of their country-

men, and it is likely that Mattson viewed Hallberg's work either at the Swedish-American Artists Exhibition or in a private collection.

Mattson's move from Chicago to Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1915 remains unexplained. Although the painter worked for the International Plainfield Motor company from 1915 through 1916, he continued to associate with people who had some interest in art. Stephen Haff, Mattson's colleague at the company, reminisced that he and Mattson spent noon hours talking about painting. In 1935 Haff told Mattson that he still retained contact with the Norwegian-American painter Jonas Lie, who lived in Plainfield, and with the Swedish-American painter John F. Carlson, "who married a Plainfield girl."[20]

Factory work was Mattson's sole means of support in Chicago and Plainfield. He explained to an interviewer that when he returned from Sweden, "I had different jobs. Five or six years passed before I was able to support myself painting." He stated that "I lived in a manufacturing town, so eventually I got a job as a machinist." In this vein Mattson traced his path to independence, typical of most immigrants in the early twentieth century, when he said, "You come to this country. The first place you land you get a job. I worked in a machine shop and I had a weekly salary. I used to think maybe I'll quit and go to California. Then I'd think, but after a while my money will be gone and then I'll be a bum." In 1916 Mattson finally had the courage to quit his factory job, explaining, "But then I did quit so that I could paint. I took a chance. I wasn't scared anymore. If you don't do something like that you may have a rotten, dull subdued life."[21]

Gathering courage after leaving his job in Plainfield, Mattson enrolled in summer classes at the Art Students League in Woodstock, New York. Fellow Swedish-American landscape painter John F. Carlson headed the League's school there. Mattson dourly recalled that "I didn't get along awfully well. . . . It was more of a school to render what you saw, your visual impression, and that was far from what I was thinking about in relation to art in those days." In his evaluation of that summer, Mattson criticized students and instructor, complaining that "the only desire was to paint something that looked like the place that they were looking at. . . . Anyone . . . who is a little bit careful can eventually acquire that." He went on to say that the

process did not suit his methods of working because "the picture in itself would have no bearing on any individuality or thoughts, or feeling, or desire to express them. In fact, I painted better before I came here than I did later."[22] Mattson quit the school after three months, but decided to continue working on his own. Like most Woodstock painters, he returned to paint in the summers but lived elsewhere in the winter. Sometime between 1925 and 1927 he settled permanently in the area, renting a small, white house near the Rock City crossroads, about a mile from Woodstock.

Mattson's decision to become a painter yielded unusually quick returns. By 1920 he was a regular part of the Whitney Studio Club exhibitions, showing canvases in that New York establishment for more avant-garde artists alongside a number of well-known American painters throughout the decade. The painter's first one-man exhibition at the established Montross Gallery in 1921 placed him with other promising artists. Exhibiting in group shows at the Dudensing Galleries in 1924 and the more avant-garde Arts Club of Chicago, Mattson was counted among the "more advanced" artists showing at that gallery along with Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, Eugene Speicher, and Charles Sheeler.[23]

Mattson's career reached its peak in the late 1920s, continuing on a high plateau in the 1930s and 1940s, when he won top prizes in national exhibitions, and extending on through the late 1950s, when his output dwindled. His success with museums and galleries resulted from the popularity of his paintings, whose forms verged on the cutting edge of abstraction, yet whose colors pleased the viewing public. Mattson's approach to painting was naïvely honest. Painting out of an inner compulsion to put pigment onto canvas, he translated memories of sounds and feelings into monumental shapes and bluish tints.

Between 1928 and 1959 Mattson's dealer, the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery, featured his work in a succession of ten one-man exhibitions, whose successful sales enabled Mattson to concentrate solely on painting. Although records from the Frank K. M. Rehn files at the Archives of American Art hold only exhibition brochures, two letters from the Mattson archives indicate the dealer's involvement with the artist in the 1930s. Because the Rehn Gallery managed the sales and

publicity of his paintings, Mattson was linked professionally to some of the most important painters of American life in the thirties and forties. In March 1935 Frank Rehn sent out a publicity release stating that his gallery carried the works of Kenneth Hayes Miller, Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, Reginald Marsh, Henry Mattson, and Morris Kantor. Rehn boasted that Mattson had only recently shown in the Corcoran Biennial and that his gallery was "a unique source. We have the entire production of the artists named above."[24] That same month Rehn wrote an optimistic letter to Mattson, praising his work and telling him that the gallery had sold a self-portrait for $450, explaining items on his account, and reassuring him that after having won the Third Clark Prize at the Corcoran Biennial, "there ought to be some movement in Mattsons."[25]

Mattson made a comfortable living through his gallery sales. Although his involvement with government-sponsored art projects in the 1930s was minimal, he participated in the PWAP (Public Works of Art Project) in the spring of 1934, recalling that "we submitted one painting every two weeks or something of that sort, as far as I can remember. And I made a number of landscapes and paintings at that time." Mattson also nostalgically recalled that "it seems that somehow during the Depression, I had a better time than I had after the Depression."[26] Mattson received a substantial mural commission for the post office in Portland, Maine, to depict the local waterfront. Commissioned in April, it was installed in November 1937.[27]

Winning nine national awards over the course of his career enhanced Mattson's reputation and aided gallery sales. The painter earned the first silver prize for *Pine Trees* at the Art Institute of Chicago in the *44th Annual Exhibition of American Artists* in 1931; the second purchase prize for *Landscape* (see figure 1 above) in 1933 at the Worcester (Massachusetts) Art Museum; the third prize at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh in 1935 for *Deep Water*; the Third Clark Prize for *The Beacon* at the Corcoran Biennial in Washington, D.C., in 1935; the first prize at the Corcoran Biennial in 1937 for *Wings of the Morning*; and again the Third Clark Prize and Corcoran gold medal for *Rocks* at the Corcoran Biennial in 1943. Mattson won his last awards in 1949 and 1950, receiving the anonymous prize of

$700 at the *124th Annual Autumn Exhibition* of the National Academy of Design in 1949; the second prize for *Marine Scene* at the Salmagundi Club in 1950; and the Carol H. Beck gold medal for portraiture in the Pennsylvania Academy's *145th Annual Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture* for his *Self-Portrait*.

By 1920 Mattson, primarily self-taught, had worked out his method of painting. Frustrated with his inability to paint the scene directly before him, Mattson's early still life scenes were distillations of memory. He recalled one of the first times he attempted to paint a still life of red onions and eggs. Unable to transfer the image before him to canvas, he set the painting aside, only to see the composition each time he closed his eyes. "Relieved from the subject matter," Mattson took out the canvas and painted the eggs and onions from memory, a practice he continued throughout his life. Not only did he paint still lifes from memory, but he also allowed their forms to dictate or change the content of the compositions. He told an interviewer that "some years ago, I painted a knoll in winter time covered with snow, with bare patches of yellow grass, a few apples on top." Mattson continued, "It so happened that we had a yellow cat at home. This cat came in while I was painting and jumped on a chair and went to sleep. During the time of painting I saw the cat and recognized that the cat's fur was precisely the color of grass, and not having any determined idea of what this landscape was going to be, I immediately chose to change the landscape into a cat because the grass and the fur were the same."[28] Process dictated his compositions throughout his career. He told interviewer Joseph Trovato late in 1964 that "I don't have any preconceived idea of what I'm going to paint. I wait until something happens on the canvas and if I feel that something happens there; I can develop that and if I am successful, it usually comes out better that way."[29]

For over thirty years, Mattson painted from his own inner vision. Instead of putting his easel in front of a land- or seascape, then transferring the image onto canvas, he sought inspiration from memories triggered by the process of mental association. Interviewed in 1935 after winning the third prize in the Carnegie Biennial, a reputable exhibition held every two years at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Mattson continued to use his technique of letting the painting

create itself, regardless of the subject. When a radio interviewer asked him if the picture emerged on canvas rather than from Mattson's sketches of the sea, the announcer exclaimed in astonishment, "In other words, you started to work on the canvas and the picture came out?" Mattson's answer prefigured the abstract expressionists' credo of process before image: "It has always been my wish to keep the painting in a state of becoming, in order not to close myself in. It is the process of my painting. It actually grows only on the canvas as I am doing it. It is not especially related to the subject in any other way."[30]

The majority of Mattson's scenes from the 1920s, however, were rural views, which a reporter covering the exhibition at the Whitney Studio Club in 1924 described as Mattson's "churches among trees, country roads, telegraph poles and bare trees in the snow."[31] Often Mattson's shapes of buildings and trees stood at odd angles to landscape forms, possibly influenced by the skewed perspective of cubism.

Unifying the canvas with one dominant color and simplified shapes, Mattson blended the edges of his brush strokes. Reviewers immediately criticized "the fuzzy surface and blurred contours which obscured the strength of his design."[32] Even at the height of his career in 1945, writer Margaret Bruening noted that "many of Mattson's landscapes . . . are often flooded with a misty color that obscures shapes and contours."[33] Although the technique was undoubtedly Mattson's own, it was used by a number of Woodstock painters in the twenties, thirties, and forties, and critics referred to it as the Woodstock "fuzz" technique.[34]

Although Mattson's technique was undoubtedly similar to that of other Woodstock painters of his era, critics variously compared his style to the Regionalists, then to abstract painters, to Chinese calligraphers, and finally to Albert Pinkham Ryder. After Mattson had won the second purchase prize at the Worcester Art Museum for *Landscape* in 1933, critics viewing works in the exhibition *American Painting of Today* declared that "these episodes are recognizable and localized, they are genuinely American." Using even stronger Regionalist rhetoric, New York reviewer Edward Alden Jewell declared that American art was growing increasingly independent of European art, cautioning, "It isn't by building discriminatory tariff

walls, or by blatantly proclaiming American artists are by divine right the best artists in the world, that progress can be made." Instead, Jewell noted that American art had developed to a place where it was "honestly and unpretentiously native."[35]

Possibly as an antidote to being labeled a Regionalist, Mattson began to include seascapes in exhibitions after 1933. He explained this motif as an extension of his vision from Sweden. "I lived by the West Coast . . . the Kattegat . . . in Sweden. Most people I knew had relatives that had gone to sea and I loved the sea."[36] Critics welcomed the change from a predominance of landscapes to seascapes. Lewis Mumford, certain that Mattson had found his niche, pointed to Mattson's exhibition at the Rehn in 1934 as the high point of the season. Mumford declared that Mattson painted from the heart to produce strong and richly colored images.[37] Seascapes—like the landscapes—were distillations of memory, unheeded by the obstacle of direct vision. Mattson's wife, Daphne, recalled that when they vacationed near the sea, "Henry told me he couldn't paint here. There was too much rock and sea around him."[38]

Mattson described the process of painting from memory: "So I stand there before a fine, clean white canvas. It is impervious, it does not argue with me but I argue with myself and eventually with it." He explained, "I have no plan, not a thing to go on, but I begin. So I put a stroke here, a deeper blend of color there and gradually some form takes place and I say, 'Oh yes! Maybe that's a bit of land jutting out—that looks like an angry sky up there'—thus almost subconsciously a picture insists upon its own creating."[39]

Searching for the reasons why Mattson conveyed the mysterious power of the sea from his attic studio in Woodstock, critics compared him to ancient Chinese landscape painters. Reacting to the comparisons, he reflected that the Chinese used "magnificent line." A painting's execution should not be labored; it "should be [done] quickly—like the Chinese drew."[40] Explaining that his technique drew upon facility of brush strokes, similar to Chinese calligraphy, Mattson told Dorothy Seckler that "the whole thing is one piece. The brush is only an extension of the fingers. . . . You can [paint] with your whole arm, with your mind. It just goes from your mind down to the pen and you write, you see. And you don't know why you

wrote so well."

Even before the seascapes, critic Perry C. Cott viewed the landscape in the Worcester exhibition in 1933 as "akin in spirit to the philosophical landscape painting of the Far East."[41] In her book on modern art in America, published in 1939, Martha Cheney drew on the oriental interpretation of Mattson's work as well, comparing his landscape *Green Seas*, 1938 (see figure 3), to the painters of the Sung period because "all this order is concerned with the reality of a fresh experience that is spiritual in the oldest sense of the word and it is most flawless when spontaneously communicated and shown with fewest contrived features."[42]

Fig. 3. Henry Mattson, Green Seas, *1938; The Brooklyn Museum of Art, John B. Woodward Memorial Fund; 40.303*

The rhetoric of romanticism in American art heightened as the Depression wore on and peaked at the mid- to end point of the Second World War in numerous articles found in American art periodicals. Mattson's paintings were some of the first to be viewed from

this perspective. As early as 1934, after a second one-man exhibition at the Rehn Gallery, critic Ernest Brace pointed to Mattson's affinity with Albert Pinkham Ryder "because of their gentleness and their dreamy withdrawal from the world of rugged strife; and, finally, there is a similarity in their subject matter, particularly in its mysterious and moonlit aspects."[43]

The developing romantic tendencies in American art satisfied the need for escapism—or "dreamy withdrawal"—during the Depression and the war. At the same time, comparisons to Albert Pinkham Ryder provided indigenous roots for American painters during a decade of emphasis on regionalist tendencies. In the late 1930s, for example, Marsden Hartley attributed his monumentality and simplicity of forms to the influence of Ryder in a letter to art historian Elizabeth McCausland. Although Mattson never directly commented on parallels between his work and Ryder's, he did not discourage comparisons. Author Martha Cheney saw resemblances between the two painters in "the similarity of conception of moonlight effects and weirdly suggestive writing."[44] But critic Martha Bruening observed that Mattson's paintings displayed "the delicacy of poetic interpretation . . . a heightening of the joy and beauty of the visible world," while "something demonic drives his [Ryder's] frail ships across strange seas . . . things that no mortal eye can look on lie behind his sinister clouds."[45]

Noted American romantic painter Louis M. Eilshemius detected a kindred spirit in Mattson. He wrote Mattson in 1937, extending an invitation to visit him in his New York studio. "Your oils are true to the romantic spirit. I've seen quite a few lately. I think we are of the same mind."[46]

Mattson's romantic label reached its climax in 1943, when the painter garnered top honors at the Corcoran Biennial, was invited to exhibit in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Annual Exhibition, and participated in the Museum of Modern Art's inclusive survey *Romantic Painting in America*. Described as a "veteran collector of honors," Mattson captured the W. A. Clark Prize and the Corcoran gold medal for "his characteristic and powerfully-conceived *Rocks*" in March of that year.[47] In November his painting *Round Rock* "took care of the dream side of painting," according to reviewers at the

Whitney's American annual.[48] But the high point of the year came with Peyton Boswell's acknowledgment that Mattson's canvases were among the "true romantics of the show."[49] Similarly, Edward Alden Jewell of the *Times* commented that "everybody is a romantic painter these days. Except Mondrian, and he's not in the show." Jewell viewed Martin J. Heade's nineteenth-century painting *Storm Approaching Larchmont Bay* (1868) as the last romantic painting of its century, adding that "since that time, Henry Mattson has said about all there is to say. . . . *Stars and the Sea* [see figure 4] is perhaps the most thoroughly romantic painting in the whole show."[50]

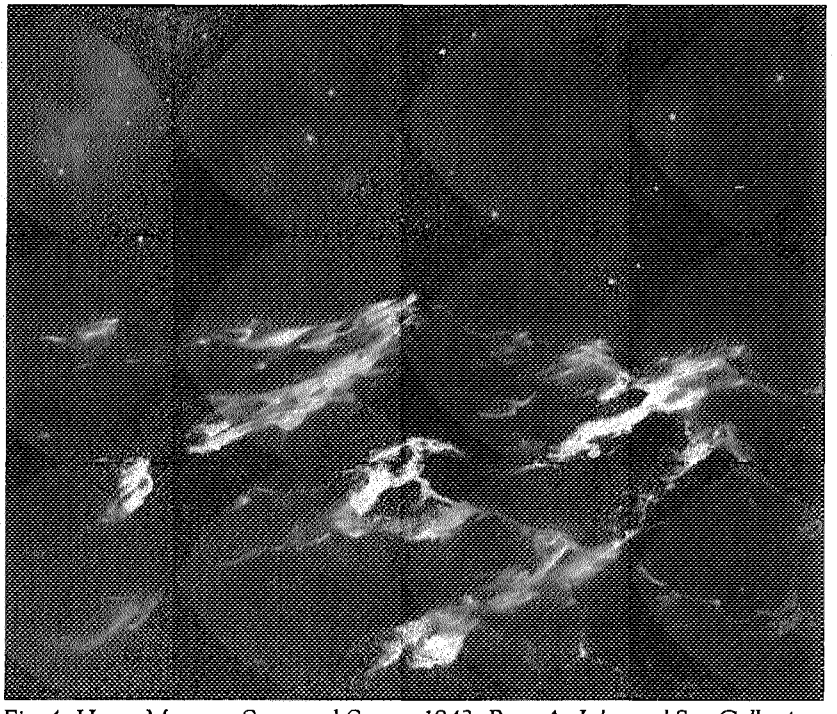

Fig. 4. Henry Mattson, Stars and Sea, *c. 1943; Peter A. Juley and Son Collection, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; PPJ95541*

Mattson admitted to reporter Louise Jonas in 1942 that "moments of sheerest ecstasy" inspired him to paint. The painter described these moments as "highly keyed, tense moments when his consciousness rises to new height and he sees or feels things which

others do not see or feel and which he crystallizes and eventually sets forth on canvas so that others may experience it." Mattson told Jonas that he usually painted best in the late afternoon. "When I was younger," he said, "I painted from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. I thought that was the way to do. Now I paint only two to three hours at the end of the day. I like to paint in the late afternoon. I like the close of day. The light is beautiful," Mattson declared. "Whistler liked the close of day too." The painter explained that "the element of speed is important in transferring an emotion to canvas." He complained that the "vitality of the thought or emotion can be lost in fatigue. But when I work later in the afternoon I know I must crystallize my thought in the shorter time. I must do so before it becomes too dark to see."[51] Mattson would often leave a room full of company in late afternoon to go up into his studio, turn on his blue light—perhaps a stimulant to the blue tonality of his canvases—and paint. If he did not complete a painting to his satisfaction, he would wash the image off the canvas with his shirt tail or a handy rag.[52]

Mattson's inspiration possibly stemmed from "maybe physical well-being," he told interviewer Jonas. But the painter also admitted that his images could have evolved from "some stimulation from a childhood association." His ties to Sweden had been reinvigorated just seven years earlier when he returned to visit family in 1935, and again in 1937 on a Guggenheim fellowship. Although he did not refer specifically to the sea, he told a reporter that he had seen the work of three romantic fantasy painters from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "I then had the privilege of seeing some of the contemporary Swedish artists' work at the Gothenburg Museum and it impressed me as being very vital. I was particularly impressed by the work of Ivar Arosenius and [Ernst] Josephson and not to forget Marcus Larson. I used to go there as a boy; visiting the Furstenbergska Galleriet."[53] Although Mattson's assertions of a childhood association with images of the sea are vague, he admitted that his growing fascination with the sea had stemmed from early years: "I am always more interested in the elemental forces of nature concerning weight and contrast than the pictorial side," he wrote. "I love and fear the everlasting pounding of the sea."[54]

Although reporters often identified him as Swedish-born, the

news media did not attach Mattson's ethnicity to his images until after the war, after Mattson had already made his reputation in American art. Attributing his predilection for blue tweeds and paint to his Swedish birth, one reporter explained that "he comes from that part of Europe which bred both Viking and the brooding elemental qualities of Ibsen."[55] Another critic described his painting as a "Norse poem of limpid water over moonlit rocks."[56] The Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, on the other hand, proudly proclaimed that he was "The Swedish-American Painter, Henry Mattson, Born in Gothenburg," when he won the top prize at the Corcoran Biennial in 1943. A Gothenburg paper, however, noted that Mattson was unknown in Sweden but had created a name for himself in America.[57]

After the honor of being included in a major retrospective covering two centuries of American paintings at the Tate Gallery in London during the summer of 1946, Mattson seemingly retreated to his studio. The growing influence of abstract expressionism in New York art circles by the mid-forties cut short his ascendance. Its emphasis on process rather than recognizable visual content made even Mattson's semi-realistic images seem old-fashioned. Although critics viewed his paintings as "simplicity, almost to the point of abstraction," they still belonged to the group of expressionist/realists whose work was prominently featured by galleries from the late thirties through the mid-forties.[58] Their careers, however, were eclipsed by the New York art world's rising fascination with abstract expressionism.

Mattson did not exhibit at the Rehn until 1952. Then his vigorous seascapes again dominated the gallery and inspired Carlyle Burrows, art critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, to write that "the quality of his portraits, still lifes and landscapes justify his reputation as a pioneer." Burrows noted that Mattson had "long been linked with our more romantic, modern painters." The critic detected that "sustained throughout his new work is a poetic distillation of natural form, a simplicity almost to the point of abstraction." Burrows suggested that this simplification seemed a response to "the sudden shifts of taste which the rapid and changing course of art seems to impose upon many of its practitioners, which has affected artists at or near the peak of their careers." Indicating that Mattson was among a group responding to modern movements, he wrote that these paint-

ers had "subtly modified their essential viewpoint, retaining a large part of the ground they formerly held."[59]

By the time Mattson showed canvases in his last two one-man exhibitions at the Rehn Gallery in 1956 and 1959, his work was viewed as more static than innovative. He had outlived the popularity of his style, a common situation for many romantic and expressionist painters after the introduction of the new movement of abstract expressionism in post-war years. Although he continued to paint, his dealer at the Rehn noted that Mattson became bitter about the change in public taste. First hospitalized in 1968, Henry Mattson died in a hospital in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1971 of pneumonia, far from the sea he loved to paint.

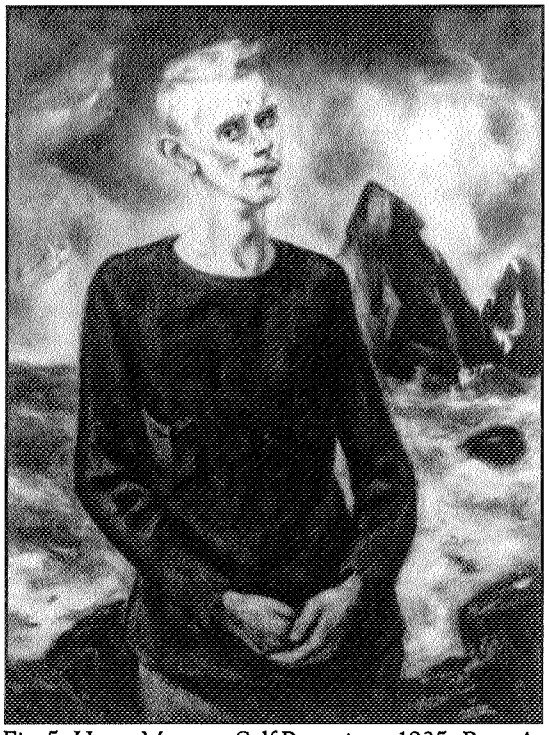

Fig. 5. Henry Mattson, Self Portrait, *c. 1935; Peter A. Juley and Son Collection, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; PPJ95539*

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6. Ibid., 7.

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16. "Upon a Painted Ocean," 24.

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24. Publicity release, Rehn Gallery, Mattson archives, 1935.

25. Letter to Henry Mattson, Woodstock, New York, from Frank K. M. Rehn, 20 March 1935. Mattson archives.

26. Interview of Henry Mattson by Joseph Trovato, 4 November 1964, Woodstock, New York. Archives of American Art.

27. The 5' 6" high by 9' 6" wide mural was commissioned by Edward Rowan, Superintendent of the Section of Painting and Sculpture, Treasury Department, Procurement Division, Washington, D.C., 23 April 1937. Mattson archives.

28. "Henry Mattson (For Swedish Desk)."

29. Interview with Henry Mattson, 4 November 1964, Woodstock, New York. Archives of American Art.

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32. "Mattson Walks Alone," *The Art Digest* 9 (15 March 1933): 14.

33. Margaret Breuning, "The Imaginative Charm of Henry Mattson," *The Art Digest* 20 (1 April 1945): 54.

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36. Seckler, 10.

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