

## Benjamin Champney's Drawings of the White Mountains

By Brook Prestowitz  
Assistant Conservator of Paper

*"Many, many days and hours have I passed, painting and singing an accompaniment to its silvery music, and I know almost every nook and transparent pool in its three-mile course from its birth in the depths at Black Mountain to where it loses itself in the Saco. Many a day I have shouldered my trap, with a lunch in my pocket, and followed its course for a couple of miles, and settled down to work in some secluded, solitary point, with no voice but the brook to cheer me or urge me on to the struggle of solving Nature's mysteries of light and shade and color."*

—Benjamin Champney<sup>1</sup>

A collection of 105 drawings and sketches by Benjamin Champney (1817-1907) brought to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center paper department for treatment in 2017 presented an exciting opportunity to study a nineteenth-century master admired for his depictions of the White Mountains in his native New Hampshire.

The portfolio was acquired by the New Hampshire Historical Society (NHHS) in 2014. The drawings, made on a variety of papers in various media, depict the landscape of the Conway, New Hampshire, region from 1850 to 1863; scenes from Champney's 1853 trip to Vermont and New York; and scenery of Europe from his travels in 1865.<sup>2</sup> The collection arrived in poor condition caused by rough use, exposure to poor storage conditions, and contact with acidic boards and other secondary materials. The goal of the conservation treatment was to stabilize the drawings to make them accessible for scholarly study and exhibition.

Champney was born in New Ipswich, New Hampshire, near the Massachusetts border, and began his career apprenticing for William S. Pendleton's lithography business in Boston. In 1838, while still an apprentice, he would make his first documented visit to the White Mountains of New Hampshire to practice sketching *en plein-air*.<sup>3</sup> In 1841, Champney moved to Paris to train as an artist and did not return to New Hampshire until 1853, after marrying Mary Caroline Brooks. The couple settled in North Conway, in the heart of the White Mountains.<sup>4</sup>

Champney was an active member in the artist communities of North Conway and Boston. He regularly exhibited his works in Boston and became a founder of the Boston Art Club, which sought to promote the fine arts and provide a platform for artists to sell their work.<sup>5</sup> He later worked with Boston-based Louis Prang & Co. to make chromolithograph prints of his paintings as affordable options for tourists.<sup>6</sup> Champney worked until he died in 1907, at age 90. The beauty of



Figure 1. Benjamin Champney, *Ripley Falls*, September 21, 1858.

his works helped to popularize the White Mountains region, while his charisma drew tourists and artists to his North Conway studio.

The large cache of Champney's sketches provides a valuable record of the landscape art of nineteenth-century New Hampshire. The large number and chronology of the NHHS collection also provides a useful view of the artist community active in the White Mountains during a dynamic era of American landscape painting.

### Technique and Media

The treatment allowed for a thorough examination of Champney's materials and working methods. The majority of Champney's drawings in the NHHS collection were executed with linear drawing techniques using graphite pencils of various "hardness," building shape and volume with hatching and crosshatching. Other works are made with different types of soft drawing media, including charcoal, conté crayon, and chalks. In these drawings, Champney used a combination of linear draftsmanship, broad application of soft media, and shading with a paper stump (an artist's implement made from tightly rolled paper that tapers to a point at one end) and/or his fingers. Champney made notations about color and other visual details on the field drawings as references for his studio paintings. [Fig. 1]

Opaque white watercolor and white chalk were used in many of the NHHS drawings to enhance the tonal range. Identification of the white media in ten representative drawings was conducted using ultraviolet radiation and x-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometry by WACC's Christine Puza.<sup>7</sup> Analysis was necessary to ensure that drawings with white media could be treated safely with aqueous methods. Some white media, especially calcium-based whites, are sensitive to aqueous treatment and may dissolve, become transparent, or yellow as the paper releases acidity and discoloration during aqueous treatments. The white chalk was identified as a calcium-based pigment. The opaque whites were identified as lead white and zinc oxide. Lead white was foreseen, as some of the whites had darkened to a brownish pink or gray color, a form of deterioration characteristic when this pigment is exposed to pollutants.

Zinc oxide was also considered likely because it was a popular watercolor pigment in the nineteenth century. Analysis revealed that Champney used more lead white than was originally suspected. In several drawings, he combined the zinc oxide and lead white in larger, more thickly applied areas using zinc white as a base and lead white for additional heightening of the white area. (See Fig. 1, above.)

Champney's choice of media and technique reflect the practices of his time. Even though charcoal has been used as a drawing material since antiquity and the pencil was invented in 1795 by Nicolas-Jacques Conté, they were not extensively used by artists until the 1800s. Nineteenth-century artists chose charcoal and pencils because their availability and ease of portability facilitated working in the field. Drawing as a finished art form had also become more elevated, encouraging use of such media.<sup>8,9</sup> Zinc oxide was first introduced as a watercolor pigment called "Chinese White" in 1835 by Winsor & Newton.<sup>10</sup> This white was widely used by artists in the nineteenth century as a replacement for lead white, which was known to darken over time.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2. Top: *Unidentified meadow scene with trees* (1860–1870) by Benjamin Champney, before treatment. White chalk and black friable media on light weight, blue-laid paper with Lalanne watermark. Bottom: *Unidentified meadow scene with trees*, after treatment.

Even so, Champney and other artists continued to use lead white, most likely because of its visual characteristics, working properties, and affordability.

### Papers

Champney used a large variety of blue and off-white laid papers and white, off-white, cream, tan, brown, blue, and light blue-green wove papers.<sup>12,13</sup> Several smaller sheets would be made from a single large sheet. Some of the tan, blue, and blue-green papers have the same surface texture and weight and may have come from a large sketchbook with different colored papers bound into a single volume by a stationer or art supplier. Several identifying marks in the papers were discovered, including Whatman, Lalanne, and Frères watermarks and two distinct blind stamps.

Whatman paper was a high-quality artist watercolor paper often used in the nineteenth century. It would have been a likely choice for Champney. He also specifically chose to use laid, off-white or blue Lalanne papers and blue papers with dyed-wool fiber inclusions for work with black conté crayon, charcoal, or chalks. These papers have more surface texture to hold the soft, friable media. Lalanne papers were designed for Maxime Lalanne (French, 1827-1886), who worked extensively in charcoal. Lalanne used laid papers for the interruptions the paper surface texture would make in a charcoal line, creating a sense of fleeting, dappled light in a landscape.<sup>14</sup> The Frenchman also wrote the first artist's manual on charcoal drawing. Given Champney's training in Paris and his specific use of papers with this watermark for soft, friable media, it is likely that he knew of Lalanne's techniques and applied them to his own drawings. [Fig. 2]

The other types of colored papers were used for drawings made in pencil and often had opaque white watercolor applied to capture the effects of light and increase the depth of tone. There were also several examples of thick paper cards with a printed, solid rectangle of a tan color. [Fig. 3] This may indicate that Champney was thinking of compositions to be made into prints that he planned to sell to tourists.

### Treatment

Written and photographic documentation of the drawings were made before and after treatment as a record, following conservation ethics. All drawings were dry surface cleaned. Tears in the papers were mended and creases reinforced with Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste. Papers with losses had shaped fills made from papers of similar weights and surface textures and toned with watercolors to match the original paper. The more severely discolored and embrittled drawings that did not have friable media or susceptible white media were washed in appropriate bath solutions. Prior to washing, preliminary spot testing of all media was carefully executed to ensure the media could withstand aqueous treatment. Judicious cosmetic treatment was also applied, including reduction of disfiguring stains and inpainting of small, distracting



Figure 3. Benjamin Champney, *Lake or river scene (ice skating?)*, 1850-60. Graphite on heavyweight, white wove paper with tan printed rectangle. Champney's choice of paper may suggest that he was thinking about compositions for prints.

media losses. Darkened lead white was brightened by conversion to lead sulfate using a methylcellulose poultice of a pH-adjusted oxidizing agent. All the drawings were mounted into window mats made from cotton-rag mat board with activated carbon traps, and secured with Japanese tissue hinges and wheat starch paste. The matted drawings were stored in conservation-grade boxes. The conservation matting and housing will preserve the drawings, facilitate handling and accessibility, and protect NHHS's investment in conservation.

The careful examination of the collection revealed Champney's mastery of drawing technique and choice of materials, and offered insight into artistic works and practices of his era. It was a privilege to preserve the Champney drawings so that they may be appreciated by interested visitors. WACC and NHHS extend their gratitude to the Stockman Family Foundation for making possible the examination, treatment, and preservation of these drawings.

1. Charles O. Vogel, "Wanderings after the Wild and Beautiful: The Life and Career of Benjamin Champney," in *Beauty Caught and Kept: Benjamin Champney in the White Mountains*, Historical New Hampshire, Vol. 51, Nos. 3 & 4, Fall/Winter, 1996, 80.
2. Wesley Balla, e-mail sent to author, January 3, 2018.
3. Ibid
4. Vogel, 71.
5. Ibid, 72.
6. Ibid, 82-84.
7. A Niton XL3t XRF Analyzer was used in soil mode for approximately 120 seconds using the main, high, and low shutter combinations each at twenty-second intervals to identify inorganic compounds used in the watercolor pigments.
8. Thea Burns, "Nineteenth-Century Charcoal Drawing: The Evidence of the Technical Literature and the Works of Art," in the *Proceedings of Conference Symposium 88—Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works on Paper*, Ottawa, 3-7, October 1988, 121.
9. James Watrous, *The Craft of Old-Master Drawings*. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 142.
10. Robert L. Feller ed. *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of their History and Characteristics*. Readings in vol. 6. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 170-172.
11. Zinc oxide was first recommended as a white pigment for paint in the 1780s as a response to the issue of lead white manufacturers eventually suffering from lead poisoning, however, efforts failed because zinc oxide was more expensive to manufacture. Rutherford J. Gettens and George L. Stout, *Painting Materials: A Short Encyclopedia*. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1966), 176-177.
12. Laid paper has a ribbed appearance imprinted by the type of paper mold it was made with. The ribs are made by the horizontal, closely spaced laid lines and by vertical chain lines that are spaced further apart. John Krill, *English Artists' Paper: Renaissance to Regency*. (Newcastle: Oak Knoll Press & Winterthur Museum, 2002), 14.
13. Wove paper has a smooth surface because it is made on a mold with a wire, woven cloth. Krill, 14.
14. Burns, 121-123.



Rebecca Johnston

**Brook Prestowitz** is Assistant Conservator of Paper at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. She received her Masters Degree in the Conservation of Works of Art on Paper from Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK, in 2015. Prior to joining WACC in 2017, she held a two-year fellowship at the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) from 2015 to 2017 and a graduate placement at the British Museum in the Hirayama Studio in 2014.