The Wanda Hollensteiner Conservation Fund has brought Alexander Helwig Wyant’s *The Meadows* (1882-88) back to its fresh, vibrant, original state. As a result, the Wright Museum of Art at Beloit College has become home to a prime example of American Tonalism, one of the most important art movements of the nineteenth century.

While Tonalism may not have broad, public recognition, it nevertheless advanced certain core modernist principles. Its artists—Wyant, George Inness, John Francis Murphy, Dwight Tryon, George Fuller, Birge Harrison, and others—helped to shift the focus from the more meticulous, conservative approach of the earlier Hudson River School to a personal, emotional direction in American art.

After studying briefly in Germany with Hans Fredrik Gude, a Norwegian romanticist of the Düsseldorf school of painting, Wyant visited London, where he saw paintings by the British artist John Constable. At this time, he also gained exposure to the art of the French Barbizon School. Inness, the Barbizon painters, and Constable reconsidered the established artistic vocabulary of academic painting and featured everyday scenes with free, expressive brushwork. Their techniques and emotionalism helped to shape Wyant’s approach to painting from the 1860s on.

Within a decade, critics began to celebrate Wyant’s gentle nuances of light, generalized forms, and restrained palette. Charles Caffin, an especially powerful critic, described Wyant’s work of this period as “pregnant with suggestion” and representing a “search for the spiritual, poetic side of nature through an expressive simplification of composition and tone.”

Wyant’s health unexpectedly began to fail around 1873. During a trip to Arizona and New Mexico, he suffered paralysis. While he lost the use of the right side of his body, he learned to paint with his less-dominant left hand.

In the 1880s, Wyant produced works later referred to as the “marshy pastureland” scenes; *The Meadows* exemplifies this facet of his late landscape painting style. The forms are deliberately blurry and indistinct, so as to evoke the essence rather than the prosaic details of nature. They are also atmospheric and often feature a predominant tone, much like the sense of harmony that James McNeill Whistler made famous in his paintings.

By the end of the nineteenth century, critics acknowledged Wyant as one of America’s greatest champions of progressive painting. His works entered major museum collections, including the National Gallery of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The White House.

Just as Inness had inspired Wyant, Wyant inspired Bruce Crane (1857-1937) and other “second-generation” Tonalists. Wyant remains an inspiration to many contemporary artists, including Jane Bloodgood-Abrams, who remarked on her kinship with Wyant and other Tonalists: “I believe the visceral effect that sky, light, and nature has on us is in many ways universal and has not changed over centuries. It only makes sense to me that artists today like myself would be just as responsive now as [Tonalists] were then, to what seem to be certain stirring ‘universal truths’ of nature.”

2 Conversation with the author, 20 January 2014.