John Francis Murphy (1853-1921) was a quiet voice in American art that grew in importance over his fifty-year career. This small Landscape (Wright Museum of Art) is representative of his aesthetic. He did not intend to describe a single place in detail, but rather he created pictures that expressed a subdued appreciation of nature: the visual equivalent of a mood poem. Tonalism is the name sometimes ascribed to this style that relied on a minimal palette characterized by warm hues of brown, soft green, gauzy yellows, and muted greys. This brief essay explores how Murphy evolved as an artist to create a work like Landscape and what new information the conservation of the picture revealed.

Murphy’s love of nature derived from his formative years in Oswego, New York, on the southeastern shore of Lake Ontario. By the time the family moved to Chicago in 1868 he knew that he wanted to pursue art, an unusual choice given his humble beginnings. In 1873 he made a three-month sketching excursion in the Adirondack Mountains, when he met Winslow Homer and encountered the descriptive style of the Hudson River School. Determined to make his reputation in New York City, he lived there in near poverty as he struggled with his art. 1883 marked a turning point, when he married a fellow painter, Adah Clifford Smith (1859-1949) from Saratoga, N.Y. The newly-weds moved into the new Hotel Chelsea at 222 W. 23rd Street, which put them at midst of a lively artistic scene. They also traveled to France, where they found the naturalism of the Barbizon painters more congenial to their taste than the avant-garde Impressionists. Upon return, they established a country residence in Arkville, N.Y.¹

By 1885 Murphy exhibited a painting titled Tints of a Vanished Past at the National Academy of Design, where he won a prestigious award. The title of the painting is as suggestive as his painting style had become. The word “tint” indicates a wash or tinge of soft hues, and not a forceful color. Similarly, he seeks to escape the busy, modern present into a past that has all but vanished. His pictures are imbued with nostalgia for something that has been lost in the midst of the late 19th century’s rush to urban and industrial growth. They invite contemplation.

Many of his pictures are set at twilight, when day is just turning into night and the light softly caresses forms to creative more evocative shapes. They are often small in scale and create an intimate relation with the observer, who has to move near to the picture to enjoy its effects. Close-up, they manifest a complicated surface layering and loose handling of paint. Typically an artist prepares the canvas by applying a thin priming ground, letting it dry, and then laying in the composition with basic colors, over-painted with semi-transparent glazes and impastos to refine the effects. Murphy usually followed this basic procedure, but often manipulated the imprimatura and then added layers of thick impasto that he continued to rework. This led his early biographer Eliot Clark to conclude that Murphy’s art was conceptual, created completely in the studio. He even stated that Murphy never worked out-of-doors. ²

When the Wright picture was conserved, however, analysis showed that there was little reworking of surface or glazing. It was done “alla prima,” in the manner of an oil sketch executed outdoors. Furthermore there was no ground layer, reinforcing this idea that it was painted en plein air. These findings provide evidence that Murphy’s artistic practice was more complex than previously thought. They remind us that conservation is important not only to care for and preserve art for generations to come, but also because it reveals information about the works invisible to the naked eye.³ More work needs to be done, but these preliminary findings suggests that Murphy’s process was not based solely on poetic imaginings and pictorial manipulation, but in combination with direct observation of the natural world.

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¹ Information presented here is drawn from Emerson Crosby Kelly Research Materials on J. Francis Murphy, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (reels 4341-4361).
³ Communication from the conservator, January 2015.