



***Niagara***  
1889

**George Inness**

Born: Newburgh, New York  
1825

Died: Bridge of Allan,  
Scotland 1894

oil on canvas

29 7/8 x 45 in. (76 x 114.3  
cm)

Smithsonian American Art  
Museum

Gift of William T. Evans  
1909.7.31

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

***When you look at this painting, do your eyes concentrate on the mists rising from the bottom of the falls or, perhaps, do they focus on the billowing smoke coming from the smokestack in the background? Scholars have argued over George Inness' reason for including this smokestack in this painting. Some believe that he included it as commentary in order to suggest the negative effects of increased industrialization on Niagara Falls. Others counter that Inness was simply interested in the atmospheric effects of the smoke. In the course of her investigation, researcher Laura discovered historical facts that lent credibility to one of the preceding theories.***

When viewing this artwork, it is clear that George Inness made a conscious decision to include the smokestack so prominently in his composition. Was Inness using this artwork to comment on the increased industrialization of Niagara Falls and the surrounding area? Was he concerned with the conservation and preservation of the natural wonder of Niagara Falls and the surrounding area? Or was this inclusion perhaps a mere compositional choice?

We know from contemporary accounts that Inness was completely smitten with the natural wonder of the Falls when he first visited in 1881. “[He] arrived without his painting materials but was so impressed by the scene that he was inspired “to get [his] impression of the falls down right away” and rushed to the Buffalo studio of an old friend where he demanded brushes, paints,

and canvas.” (Adamson, 1985) Inness would eventually go on to paint multiple depictions of Niagara Falls from 1881 until 1893, a year before his death.

After I viewed the files the museum had regarding this work, I began my research by delving into scholarly interpretations of the work. As Inness never wrote explicitly about his intent in the painting, nor his feelings in regards to conservation, scholars are left to speculate. They have long debated over George Inness' intention of including the smokestack from the Bath Island paper mill in this 1889 depiction of Niagara. Author Alfred Werner presented Inness' 1861-1863 work [“On the Delaware River”](#) as evidence that Inness could have cared less about the negative effects of industrialization in his work. Werner writes: “. . . the busy life of Yankee enterprise is introduced by the barges carrying goods and by the locomotive and its train at the left. . . Inness . . . seems to have been unaware of, or at least unconcerned with, what was to be called “pollution.” (Werner, 1973) Author Jeremy Adamson, writing in a Corcoran Gallery of Art exhibition catalogue, states: “. . . the pictures of Niagara . . . are marvelous tour-de-forces of color and painterly technique, but they are not at all concerned with conveying the contours of the scene, much less any meaning it might hold.” (Adamson, 1985)

Author Adrienne Baxter Bell disagreed with Werner and Adamson's arguments and cited Inness' early work, [“The Lackawanna” Valley \(1855\)](#) as proof that he was concerned about the increased industrialization of the American wilderness: “Although it was painted for commercial purposes . . . Inness's *The Lackawanna Valley* encapsulated the conflicting responses from Americana artists to industry's growing assault on God's wilderness. Here, a lone figure . . . blithely contemplates how the construction of a new railroad station has reduced the surrounding Edenic fields to patches of unsightly tree stumps.” (Bell, 2003)

I continued my research by looking into the history of Niagara Falls. I was particularly interested in the period of time Inness spent visiting and painting the Falls; a period of roughly 12 years. I was hoping to find some sort of historical impetus that would help me to understand why Inness chose the smokestack as a focal point. What I discovered in books dedicated to the history of Niagara Falls, was that in the midst of Inness painting his Niagara works there came an effort to completely change the face of the Falls. Led by the American artist Frederic Edwin Church and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, critics argued that the once beautiful natural wonder was turning into an industrialized tourist attraction. Shops, large mills and factories grew up all around the Falls like weeds. One critic in 1872 called Niagara Falls “a superb diamond set in lead.” (Adamson, 1985) The tourist attractions were creating an eyesore and the industries, like the paper mill situated in the middle of the Niagara River, were polluting both the environment and the scenic view. The smokestack from the Bath Island paper mill is the one that can be seen in Inness' painting.

Olmsted proposed that the area surrounding Niagara Falls be converted into public parks with free access and that new legislation be passed to protect the space from future “incursions . . . and desecrations.” The proposal was enacted in 1883 and final plans for the parks were

submitted in 1887. The Bath Island paper mill complex, built by Peter A. Porter after 1815, housed the Niagara Falls Paper Manufacturing Company. Bath Island, today known as Green Island, was situated between the mainland and Goat Island. A bath house was built on the island, as well as a toll collecting booth for tourists to pay to see the Falls from Goat Island. I discovered [a very helpful and detailed map from 1882 depicting all the industrial sites around the Falls](#), which helped me to zoom in on exactly what Inness and his contemporaries would have seen Niagara Falls look like in 1882. By the 1880s Bath Island became so completely built up that even Porter admitted that it had become a “desecration.” Indeed, by 1825 the first paper mill had been built; “a three storey structure which became one of the largest mills in the nation.” (NiagaraFallsInfo.com)

When I investigated further, I found out that the mill was destroyed by a fire in 1858. It had been rebuilt, but again was destroyed in 1882. Now, the museum’s depiction of *Niagara* was created in 1889. The paper mill shown in Inness’s painting burned down in 1882. So if Inness was not concerned with conservation and industry, why then did he include the smokestack deliberately and repeatedly in his Niagara works post-1882? It is my opinion that he did recognize the rise of industry and how it was encroaching upon nature and chose to include the billowing smokestack in a number of later Niagara works as commentary on the dilapidated state of the environment around Niagara Falls.

In order to further the research on the historical context for this artwork, it would be beneficial to use the following question as a starting point:

- **How did Olmsted get the legislation passed to turn the industrial sights and tourist attractions around Niagara Falls into public parks? Didn’t he encounter any opposition from those who owned those industries and attractions?**

### **Selected Bibliography:**

Adamson, Jeremy Elwell. "Niagara: Two Centuries of Changing Attitudes, 1697-1901". exhibition catalogue. Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1985.

Bell, Adrienne Baxter. *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape*. New York, NY: George Braziller Publishers Inc. for the National Academy of Design, 2003.

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Werner, Alfred. *Inness Landscapes*. New York, NY: Watson-Guption Publications, 1973.