

*The Ascension (The Ascension of Our Lord)*, 1886-88

(Varied from Palma Vecchio and Raphael)

Encaustic on canvas

27 1/2 x 36 ft. (823 x 1117.6 cm.) (with frame: 32 x 36 ft.)

Signed, inscribed and dated at l.c. to l.r.: JOHN LA FARGE AND MARY WHITNEY CARRIED OUT THIS WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF GEO L ROSE AND GABRIEL CHENES. 1886 . 1888 // inscribed and dated at l.l.: COPYRIGHT 1889. JOHN LA FARGE

The Church of the Ascension in the City of New York, New York

PUBLICATIONS: Montezuma [pseudonym], "My Note Book," *Art Amateur*, vol. 13 (Nov. 1885), p. 110; "Architects & Decorators: Decoration Notes," *Art Age*, vol. 3 (Apr. 1886), p. 166; James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds., *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1887-1889), p. III: 586; "Concerning Art and Artists," *New York Daily Graphic*, 14 Jun. 1888, p. 792; "The Ascension," *New York Daily Graphic*, 30 Jul. 1888, p. 224; "Studio Notes," *Art Age*, vol. 8 (Aug. 1888), p. 27; "The Ascension by La Farge," *New York Times*, 27 Sept. 1888, p. 4; "A Painting by Mr. John La Farge," *Art Age*, vol. 8 (Oct. 1888), p. 56; "The Chancel Painting," *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 1888, p. 5; "Beautifying a Church," *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 1888, p. 5; "The Fine Arts. Mr. Lafarge's Painting of the Ascension," *Critic*, vol. 14 (12 Jan. 1889), p. 21; "An Important Decorative Painting," *Art Amateur*, vol. 20 (Feb. 1889), pp. 65-66; "John La Farge," *New York Daily Graphic*, 15 Feb. 1889, p. 789; "General Art Notes: The La Farge Collection," *New York Star*, 20 Apr. 1890, p. 15; "The Art of John La Farge," *Review of Reviews*, vol. 11 (May 1895), pp. 535-41; Royal Cortissoz, "Mural Decoration in America (First Paper)," *Century Magazine*, vol. 51 (Nov. 1895), pp. 110-13; Cecilia Waern, "John La Farge, Artist and Writer," *Portfolio (London)*, vol. 26 (Apr. 1896), p. 44; "Religious Painting in America," *Outlook*, vol. 54 (12 Dec. 1896), p. 1088; Russell Sturgis, "Mural Paintings in American Cities," *Scribner's Magazine*, vol. 25 (Jan. 1899), p. 128; John Rummell and E.M. Berlin, *Aims and Ideals of Representative American Painters* (Buffalo: E.M. Berlin, 1901), p. 102; "Art in American Churches. Second Paper," *New York Times*, 20 Jan. 1901, p. 4; "John La Farge: Many of his Paintings Now on Exhibition in New York City [from *New York Mail and Express*]," *Newport Journal and Weekly News*, 9 Feb. 1901, p. 6; C.A. C., "Brief Appreciation of Some American Painters: II. John La Farge," *New York Sun*, 27 Oct. 1901, p. sect. 2: 5; Sadaikichi Hartmann, *A History of American Art* (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1902), pp. 180-81, 185; Pauline King, *American Mural Painting* (Boston: Noyes, Platt and Company, 1902), pp. 35-37; Royal Cortissoz, "Some American Figure-Painters," *Cosmopolitan*, vol. 32 (Apr. 1902), p. 590; Charles H. Caffin, "Three Great American Painters," *Current Literature*, vol. 33 (Dec. 1902), p. 665; Rossitor Johnson and John Howard Brown, eds., *The Twentieth Century Biographical Dictionary of Notable Americans* (Boston: Biographical Society, 1904), p. IV: [n.p.]; Samuel Isham, *The History of American Painting* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1905), ill. 318; "La Farge's Works in New York," *New York World*, 10 Aug. 1905, p. 6; "La Farge's Works in New York [from the *New York World*]," *Newport Journal and Weekly News*, 19 Aug.



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ARCHIVAL SOURCES: LC Copyright Registrations, General Index 1870-1897, Copyright Card no. 873 (1889)  
CORRESPONDENCE: Yale University, La Farge Family Papers III: fr. 140, Letterpress Book [1895-1896], 131, BLF to Benjamin Curtis, 10 Jun. 1896

David Maitland Armstrong once called New York's Episcopal Church of the Ascension "one of the ugliest churches inside that were to be found in New York, which is saying a good deal." Built in 1841 on the corner of Fifth Avenue and West Tenth Street after designs of Richard Upjohn, the church was by the 1880s, according to Armstrong, "extremely shabby" and a virtual museum of the "ugly," ranging from a sham chancel window to cheap stained glass to a box-like pulpit. This all changed when the Rev. Dr. E. Winchester Donald became rector in 1882 and set out to transform the interior into a setting worthy of its wealthy Fifth Avenue congregation. Soon after taking the pulpit, Winchester hired Stanford White to renovate the church, and White in turn brought in artists to provide stained glass, relief decoration, and murals. As early as 1884, La Farge had been consulted and began to ponder the solution to the church's most serious architectural shortcoming, the chancel.

The church lacked a conventional chancel, with its western wall terminating abruptly against the exterior wall of the adjoining rectory. This resulted from the wishes of rector at the time of initial construction that there "be no room for high church doings." At first, White hoped to expand the church through the wall, constructing an actual chancel that would have featured a window by La Farge



in its apse.<4> Largely for reasons of cost, the vestry rejected this idea. La Farge then suggested that he design a bas-relief to be sculpted by Louis Saint-Gaudens.<5> This then gave way to the concept of attaining an illusion of depth and space through a trompe-l'oeil mural that would make the offensive west wall seem to dematerialize.

For the design, La Farge drew upon a sepia drawing (Mount Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Maryland) for a never-executed window intended for a memorial chapel built in 1883 by Cincinnati millionaire Henry Probasco (1820-1902). La Farge had loosely based this design upon an *Assumption of the Virgin* by Palma Vecchio (Academia, Venice), substituting for the Virgin a figure of Christ taken from Raphael's celebrated *Transfiguration* (Vatican, Rome).<6> According to La Farge, Dr. Donald spotted the drawing one day at La Farge's Tenth Street Studio, just a few doors away from the church.<7> Donald immediately thought the design would be perfect for a window in the projected new chancel. When then the chancel was not built, Donald asked La Farge to adapt the design to a chancel mural.

La Farge set his fee at a hefty \$30,000, and by June 1885, the church had \$29,000 in hand by subscriptions.<8> \$20,000 of this sum came from the three Rhinelander sisters: Serena (1829-1914), Julia (1830-1890), and Mary Rogers (Mrs. Lispenard Stewart, d. 1893). As a result, the chancel became a memorial to their parents, William Christopher Rhinelander (1790-1878) and his wife Mary Rogers.<9> By November 1885, plans for the mural were solidifying when the *Art Amateur* noted that in "the Church of the Ascension, McKim, Meade [*sic*] & White are putting in a Gothic reredos of Sienna marble, and Mr. La Farge is to supply the altar picture, which decorative feature, by the way, serves in many churches now in place of the big east window."<10> La Farge however seems not to have begun serious work on his final design until 1886, the starting date noted in the inscription beneath the mural. In April 1886, a critic who viewed drawings of the proposed mural spoke words of praise for them, even while disparaging the architectural setting for which the picture was destined:

It seems unfortunate that if the church undertakes a painting of this importance that it has not been duly considered before the refitting of the church was undertaken. At present, on the back wall of the chancel has been newly placed a wainscoting of rich marble, a handsome and costly piece of work. Above this band the picture is to be placed, but it leaves a panel of bad proportions and entirely without the projections that such a picture should have, and what is even more fortunate not enough space to properly enclose such a design.<11>

Scaffolding erected in early 1886 was useless until the church vestry finally voted to approve La Farge's contract for the mural on June 4, 1886.<12> On the same day, La Farge departed on a tour of Japan with Henry Adams that took him away from New York until December 1886. Whether the church acted in the hope of preventing this trip in order to hasten the mural's production is unknown. For his part, La Farge viewed an opportunity to go to Japan as timely for a variety of personal and professional reasons. After he returned from Japan, La Farge began to work on the mural but ran immediately into a major problem. After the wall had been prepared to hold the massive canvas, miscalculations caused the weight of the frame to pull part of the wall down.<13> Repairs took several months and work did not



get seriously underway again until the summer of 1887. Clarence King noted in late July that he had just been to La Farge's studio, where the artist told him that, "to use his own words, he 'whacked in a whole Apostle' in the Church of the Ascension. The big picture is all in charcoal on the wall, and I really believe he will finish it."<14>

Progress was again impeded when La Farge received another major mural commission around July 1887. Through the agency of Stanford White, he was retained to provide two large decorative lunettes for the house of Whitelaw Reid on Madison Avenue (now in the restaurant of the New York Palace Hotel). Pressure from the new client apparently outweighed that coming from the church, and La Farge worked furiously on Reid's lunettes for the next six months, finishing the first in October 1887 and the second in February 1888. It was not until then that La Farge began working again in earnest on the Ascension mural. He wrote to Edward Hooper on February 1, 1888: "I plunge tomorrow into the big church picture, which you are to see when you come back."<15>

Work on the mural must have engrossed La Farge for the next ten months leading up to the ceremonial unveiling at the end of December. La Farge was uncharacteristically silent during this period, seldom writing to his usual correspondents. He detailed his problems with the mural at length just once in a letter to Henry Adams written in August:

But every day for sometime I have been very blue about my big picture, and when I thought that I should have to mention it, I put off writing, with the idea that tomorrow I should have good news to tell about it.

I have been very hard at work naturally at the infernal thing. It should have been done by this date. Unfortunately, a technical trouble has occurred from my paint mixer's having not done his duty according to my lights, and I have had & shall have to repaint a good deal. I could not find this out, until some weeks after painting, & the disappointment & aggravation have plunged me into a desperation which no am[oun]t of cursing would relieve. I find indeed that a certain blankness may never be fully overcome for it would entail many weeks of repainting. That is my bad news--otherwise the thing has gone on fairly well & I am about through.<16>

Part of the problem was that La Farge's design was complex and ambitious, far more like a monstrously oversized easel painting than the simpler designs typical of most of his decorative work. Never a facile figure painter, La Farge here tackled over a dozen life-size figures, many incorporating portraits of colleagues or family. The artist's son, John La Farge S.J., recalled "the circumstance that when the painting was first sketched there was in it no figure of the Blessed Virgin. Mother pointed out this unhistoric absence and Father immediately planned to supply the deficiency. As a result Mother posed for the figure of Our Lady, and there is always a reminiscence of her presence in that joyous, but wistful figure."<17>

La Farge's complicated composition also included an aureole of angels for which he "studied what I could of the people who are swung in ropes and other arrangements across theatres and circuses."<18> Many of these bear the features of his favorite model and then-mistress, Mary Whitney Lawrence. La Farge's sons also recalled posing for some of the angelic figures.<19> La Farge reused



many of these angels in different compositions for windows and murals for the rest of his career. To John La Farge S.J., the angels exuded a particularly academic air reminiscent of "the old studio at 51 West 10th Street. I find my veneration of those angels singularly mingled with the haunting memories of that historic building, with its ironical ugliness housing workshops of beauty, its mystifying corridors that led nowhere and breathed an ageless odor of Newman's paints and linseed oil."<20>

The dado below was decorated with chalice-bearing angels sculpted in relief by Louis Saint-Gaudens, and mosaics of kneeling angels at either side by David Maitland Armstrong.<25> As in the Italian Renaissance, the collaboration of leading architects, sculptors, and painters produced a dazzling and impressive church decoration. The contrast with its "ugly church inside" prior to 1882 could not be more stark.

Anticipation about the mural grew in late September 1888 when a reporter for the *New York Times* wrote about the "last touches...being placed upon a very great painting by John La Farge in the Church of the Ascension,...on which the artist has worked for several years." After giving a detailed description of the ensemble, the reporter concluded that "La Farge has never before been able to show his full powers as a decorator of great wall spaces," and "has shown that we possess at least one artist, the peer, if not the superior of the best workmen in France, of such artists as those to whom the French Government gives commissions to decorate the most important wall spaces in public buildings."<26> The same reporter later admitted that this preview set off some controversy given that no one else was permitted to see the mural until its unveiling on Sunday, December 30, 1888: "It seemed hard that the world should hear about the picture yet the generous donors and the congregation should not see it. Now that it is unveiled the most skeptical is likely to admit that the eulogy it received in this paper was merited."<27>

The final word on the mural project in church vestry minutes appeared two months after the formal dedication when "the Rector was requested to express to Misses Rhineland the grateful appreciation the Vestry have of the completed gift to the Church of the Reredos and of the Painting of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it was resolved that the same be spread upon the Minutes."<28>

#### NOTES:

1. David Maitland Armstrong and Margaret Armstrong, ed., *Day Before Yesterday* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), p. 308.
2. Charles C. Baldwin, *Stanford White* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1931), p. 179.
3. James W. Kennedy, *The Unknown Worshipper* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1964), p. 25.
4. H. Barbara Weinberg, *The Decorative Work of John La Farge* (New York: Garland Press, 1977), p. 176, citing church records.
5. Royal Cortissoz, "Mural Decoration in America (First Paper)," *Century Magazine*, vol. 51 (Nov. 1895), p. 111.
6. Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, p. 179. Albert Boime, *Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 572 proposes that the aureole of angels was



inspired by Thomas Couture's central panel for the Church of Saint-Eustache in Paris. This mural was being completed during John La Farge's youthful studies in Couture's atelier in 1856.

7. Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, pp. 177-78, citing church records.
8. Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, pp. 175-76, citing church records.
9. James W. Kennedy, *The Unknown Worshipper* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1964), pp. 70-71; the Rhinelander sisters inherited an estimated \$60,000,000 from their father in 1878. Church of the Ascension Archives, *Minutes* III: 218 announced the gift of Julia and Serena Rhinelander on 2 Jun. 1885. Church of the Ascension Archives, *Minutes* III: 232 announced on 4 Jun. 1886 that they made a "generous addition to the sum already given to the Church for the adornment of its Chancel."
10. Montezuma [pseud.], "My Note Book," *Art Amateur*, vol. 13 (Nov. 1885), pp. 110-11.
11. "Architects & Decorators: Decoration Notes," *Art Age*, vol. 3 (Apr. 1886), pp. 166-67.
12. Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, p. 177, citing church records.
13. Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge, A Memoir and a Study* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), pp. 165-66.
14. John Hay Correspondence, Clarence King to John Hay, 28 Jul. 1887.
15. Yale University, La Farge Family Papers, reel I: fr. 578, John La Farge to Edward William Hooper, 1 Feb. 1888.
16. Yale University, La Farge Family Papers, reel I: fr. 56-57, John La Farge to Henry Adams, 14 Aug. 1888.
17. New-York Historical Society, La Farge Family Papers, John La Farge S.J. to "Doctor Aldrich," 15 Nov. 1940.
18. Royal Cortissoz, *John La Farge, A Memoir and a Study* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), p. 164.
19. Margaret La Farge Hamill, *The Gold Rush of 1898 and Other Reminiscences by O.H.P. La Farge (1869-1936)* (Princeton, New Jersey: Privately Printed, 1990), p. 93.
20. New-York Historical Society, La Farge Family Papers, John La Farge S.J. to "Doctor Aldrich," 15 Nov. 1940.
21. Cortissoz, *John La Farge*, p. 164.
22. Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, p. 186.
23. Weinberg, *Decorative Work*, p. 186.
24. Kennedy, *Unknown Worshipper*, p. 68, quoting letter from Sargent B. Child.
25. Armstrong, *Day Before Yesterday*, p. 308.
26. "The Ascension by La Farge," *New York Times*, 27 Sept. 1888, p. 4.
27. "The Chancel Painting," *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 1888, p. 5.
28. Church of the Ascension Archives, *Minutes* III: 247, 21 Feb. 1889 meeting.