

The Art of Theodore F. Rose: Nineteenth Century Lithographer and Painter

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Abstract

Theodore F. Rose is a late-nineteenth century lithographer and painter, who is little-known, as an artist, among both the general public and among professional art historians in even the Philadelphia-New Jersey area. He was a competent commercial lithographer being most well-known for his black and white illustrations of the beautiful homes and street scenes of the resort towns of the New Jersey Coast in the 1870's. However, Rose was also an accomplished painter in oils, using a very dark palette, in almost exclusively outdoor settings, with the exception being at least one charming trompe l'oeil still life. I have been unable to link him to any of the early art training centers in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century. It is much more likely that he became apprenticed, or indentured, to a lithographer, working for one of the many printers or publishers in the city, where drawing and painting skills would have been developed as well. Rose had a very rough early life, losing family to disease, and serving in the United States Civil War. It is hypothesized that his melancholy background contributed to the somber, or threatening, atmosphere of his paintings.

Keywords: American Art History, American History, History of Lithography, Nineteenth Century Painting.

1. Introduction

It is always a pleasure to experience the introduction of previously unknown, and previously unanalyzed, works of art, by a painter and lithographer working in nineteenth century America. These are the works, such as I know them, by the lithographer and painter, Theodore F. Rose.

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At the same time, it is always a risky and grueling undertaking to try and do the necessary work to place the artists in their proper socio cultural contexts, and then to place the works of art themselves in the correct milieu of genre, emotion, and mastery of technique, for critique and analysis.

The difficult nature of this set of tasks is magnified even more in the case of Theodore F. Rose, presented here. He is my great-grandfather, and the works presented here, come from a small collection of long-held paintings in the family, which are attributed to him by oral tradition. He never signed any of his paintings, and he passed along this collection at his death in 1924, to his daughter, my grandmother, who was herself an untrained painter. She said that it was to keep the canvasses straight that she signed all of her paintings.

Indeed, when I take her signed paintings, and compare them to the unsigned ones attributed to her father, Theodore, several salient features stand out. First of all, the frames and stretchers of the unsigned paintings attributed to Theodore Rose, are all much more aged and weathered than her signed ones. Secondly, the advertising tags of the art supply shops on the stretchers of the unsigned paintings, are all from firms in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, long closed, while those of my grandmother's signed works are much crisper and newer in appearance. In fact, I can recall her showing me some of her yet unpainted canvasses after a shopping trip. Finally, the palettes of the two collections are clearly distinct, with the Theodore Rose pictures having a dark and somber choice of browns and greys, while my grandmother's paintings are clearly much brighter, lighter, and more lively in color selection, and more eclectic in subject matter.

I feel comfortable in using this set of distinctions, in a general sense, in dividing the two sets of works. However, there are a couple of instances where she has partially copied his original canvasses, along with using his more brooding palette, and her naïve eccentricities in detail are clearly visible in those later works.

In a different category are the lithographs of Theodore Rose. He illustrated a complete book with his black and white lithographic prints, *The Historical and Biographical Atlas of the New Jersey Coast*, published in 1879 and co-authored by Thomas Woolman, a cartographer. With Woolman producing the maps, and Theodore Rose producing the illustrations and writing the text, this book became a huge success in the late-nineteenth century New York/New Jersey area.

Typical of this genre, such a regional Atlas attracts the attention of shore-dwellers and shore-visitors. In general, these books are not approached as “art,” but they are rather viewed to be an example of the “craft” of illustration.

In this way, artistic merit is rarely discussed, and these lithographs were unknown to the art world of the nineteenth century and are still unknown to the art world today. Such an Atlas is rarely opened today, except by historians and archivists. We will not spend a great deal of time on individual prints, but instead will examine a few examples representative of the collection as a whole. Outside of the prints preserved in this Atlas, I know of no other prints by Theodore F. Rose extant today. His son, Theodore Rose, my great-uncle, apparently gained some of his father's artistic talent, and produced several color lithographs, perhaps in the nineteen-thirties or nineteen-forties, and those prints have been copyrighted more recently by others, but they have nothing to do with the works of Theodore F. Rose discussed here.

2. Biography

It is important to place Theodore F. Rose in his historical familial and social situation. He was born March 16, 1845 in Burlington, New Jersey, the oldest son of Henry W. Rose, a butcher by trade, and his wife, Sarah J. Rose. He had two younger siblings; John, born about 1847; and Sarah, born about 1849 (United States Federal Census, 1850). His father, Henry W. Rose himself, was born in Burlington, New Jersey as well. Henry's father was Ebenezer Rose, whose genealogy cannot be determined, except that he was born in New Jersey. Henry Rose died at age 40 on May 17, 1860 from Typhoid Fever, when Theodore was only 15 years old (National Archives and Records Administration, 1850-1880: mortality).

While there is no clear connection between Theodore F. Rose, his father, Henry, his grandfather, Ebenezer, and the earlier genealogy of the Rose family in New Jersey, the celebrated genealogist of the Southern New Jersey shore area, Leah Blackburn, is convinced that Theodore F. Rose is linked to the two earliest members of the Rose family, Samuel and William Rose. These two colonists came from England during the sixteen hundreds, to land on Eastern Long Island, in present-day Suffolk County, New York. They then sailed south to the area around Tuckerton and Parkertown, New Jersey, just north of present-day Atlantic City, and settled there (Blackburn, 1963).

In any case, his connection to the New Jersey Coast is fairly clear, as his wife, Mary Anna Mills, was from Barnegat, New Jersey, just north of Tuckerton and Parkertown, an ancient fishing, shipping, and ship-building center in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

She was one of the daughters of James Mills, who was the third in a line of James Mills's, stretching back to the seventeen-forties (Registry of Wills, New Jersey State Archives). Furthermore, of course, he chose to research, write about, and illustrate an Atlas of the New Jersey shore area, probably using some of his connections there to obtain interviews and, ultimately, subscriptions to the Atlas. Finally, he also painted seascapes of the dunes, beaches, and ocean of the New Jersey shore (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Theodore F. Rose, *Dunes and Sea, Long Beach*. Oil on canvas, 9 X 12 in.

2.1 Consequences of Biography

Because of his father's untimely death at age forty, when Theodore was only fifteen, he doubtless would have taken responsibility for his mother and family as the oldest male. This situation held for about four years, as the Civil War raged on. Then, in June, 1864, at age nineteen, Theodore enlisted in the 37th Regiment of New Jersey Volunteers as an infantryman, to fight for the Union in the United States Civil War.

With about 800 troops, the 37th Regiment marched south to join in the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia. They saw battle throughout September of 1864. His Company, Company H, was a very young group, and at age nineteen, he was a year or two older than most of his unit (National Park Service, 2007).

They remained quite close after the close of the Civil War, holding periodic reunions, with a large one in 1914, on the fiftieth anniversary of their service. They met at the Burlington, New Jersey, home of their commanding officer, Colonel E. Burd Grubb (later, General Grubb). Theodore F. Rose was the photographer of the group, so although his daughter, Jessie, and her husband were there and in the group photograph, Theodore was not because he was taking the picture. He died in 1926 at age 80 (New Jersey Deaths and Burials Index, 2011).

After the Civil War, Theodore tried to pull himself together and get on with his life. He had suffered a number of personal shocks in his first twenty years. Sometime between 1850 and 1860, he lost his youngest sister, Sarah. She was there in the 1850 Census, but in the 1860 Census, both she and their father, Henry, are no longer there, although three new sisters had been added: Mary A., age 8; Martha, age 6; and Hannah, age 3 (United States Federal Census, 1850; United States Federal Census, 1860). In addition, we do not know how the battlefield at Petersburg, Virginia may have affected him. The fact of participation in the brutal fighting of September, 1864, would have stayed with him for the rest of his life.

In any case, the fifteen years after the war ended were a rollercoaster for Theodore. In the 1870 Census (United States Federal Census, 1870) he is listed at age 24 as a carpenter, living in Bordentown, New Jersey, with an "Isabella," age 22, but not listed as his wife. She is noted only as "keeping house," and there are two young children listed, John H., age 2, and Franklin, age 1.

Then, there is a marriage registered for Theodore F. Rose, date of birth, March 16th, 1845, parents Henry W. Rose and Sarah J. Rose, in Salem, New Jersey, 1875. The spouse listed is Isabella Camburn (National Archives and Records Administration, 1850-1880; New Jersey Marriages).

A number of events then occurred almost immediately after this marriage. Five years later, in the 1880 Census (United States Federal Census, 1880), Theodore was living in Camden, New Jersey at age 34, with spouse listed as Mary A. Rose, age 28. Children listed are: Harry, age 12; Frank, age 10; Martha, age 3; and Jennie, age 1.

Theodore lists his occupation as Artist. In the 1900 Census, he is listed as married; spouse is Mary A. Rose, married in 1875 (United States Federal Census, 1900).

3.0 Artistic Training

In any case, some trauma must have accompanied these events of 1875, and a dramatic shift in Theodore's self-definition occurred as well. In 1870 (United States Federal Census, 1870), he is a "carpenter," and within ten years (United States Federal Census, 1880), he has published the Woolman and Rose Atlas (1879) as its chief writer and illustrator, and now considers himself an "artist." What training or education must have intervened in that decade?

The premier art academy of the nineteenth century in Philadelphia was the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. It was thought, initially, that Theodore may have attended the Pennsylvania Academy, but research with the archivist there, shows that Theodore was never enrolled (Wang, 2016). This was a brilliant period in American painting, especially in the Philadelphia area, when the students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts included Harnett, Eakins, and Beaux (Novack, 2007). At the same time, the University of Pennsylvania had no such training, and the Philadelphia College of Art and the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, were not yet founded.

It would appear that Theodore's training most probably occurred in Philadelphia or New Jersey, as part of the commercial lithography training movement, thriving at this time, in the mid-to late- 1870's.

In particular, Philadelphia was a center for apprenticeships that were, anachronistically, almost identical to medieval craft guild training (Donnelly, 2016). While there is no firm evidence that Theodore worked in one of these shops, the unique combination of lithography with painting, Theodore's strengths, and the absence of Academy training, strongly suggest such training in Philadelphia as the source of his skills.

Michelle Donnelly (2016) has outlined the origin of the lithography/painting training system in Philadelphia. In 1831, a young Frenchman, Peter Duval, came to work for the Philadelphia publishing house of Cephas G. Childs. Active from 1831 until his death in 1886, Duval turned apprentice craftsmen into fine artists.

"His workshop also served as a training ground for a generation of printmakers, whose artistic ability, he believed, should match those of fine artists. Through on-the-job instruction, lithographers not only developed their technical skills, but also their drawing and painting skills" (Donnelly, 2016).

4.0 Artworks

From naming his occupation as "artist" in the 1880 Census, to his listing as himself as "publisher" in the 1899 Camden, New Jersey City Directory (United States City Directories, 1899), to his final census listing in 1920 as "newspaper publisher," Theodore F. Rose had achieved self-actualization. But how did his art reflect his life's struggles and achievements? Did his choice of style and subject mirror his experiences in any way?

4.1 Lithographs

As far as his lithographs are concerned, because they were, first and foremost illustrations, he was rather constrained in style and subject. Regional Atlases, such as Woolman and Rose (1879) depended primarily on subscriptions for success. Thus, wealthier and more prominent citizens would rate portraits for their contributions, and also full-page lithographs of their homes and/or businesses. The latter architectural structures were treated honestly and in a craftsman-like manner by Theodore, with very professional elevations that make us feel that, perhaps, an architect actually drew them.

In some cases, they were brutally honest, such as the Luyster House, and Home of Captain John Schenck (Woolman & Rose, 1879 p. 113). Here, the roofs of these venerable eighteenth-century structures were pictured with shingles decrepit or missing.

On the other hand, we consider the magnificent print of the Colonnade House in Atlantic City (Woolman & Rose, 1879 p. 327). Rose has depicted this stately four-story hotel, with its mansard roof and a colonnaded porch facing the street, on each of its four levels, with a true sense of the human side of the bustling street scene in front of the hotel. There are carriages moving in all directions, and a boy running along with one of the carriages in a kind of street game. Rose also has approached the subject of luminosity, so prevalent in nineteenth-century painting (Novack, 2007), in this lithograph.

His treatment of sun and shade is used to great effect, with sun strong on the street-side façade of the hotel, and shadows clearly softening the side of the hotel and the nearside street scene. This is perhaps his best treatment of light and shade in the collection of lithographs.

This type of introducing the natural world into an otherwise sterile print, is also present in "Cottages of W.C. Hamilton, Spring Lake, New Jersey," where he includes two dogs playing in the street, near one of the cottages, with a sense of realism (Woolman & Rose, 1879 p. 223). Lithography can be a very difficult medium in which to depict natural animal forms. Theodore F. Rose is quite successful in most cases. His rendering of prize horses and prize cattle are quite accurate, anatomically fine representations of their species. On the other hand, his representations of pigs look to be actual sausages, completely stuffed ovals with scarcely a snout or legs. It is true that these prints are made after the time of the "Fat animal craze" (Lemon, 1976). Under this breeding plan, the goal was to produce immense, fat hogs in the one-quarter ton range. Therefore, it may be that the pig prints are not some simple stock depictions, but a result of actual observation and representation.

Theodore Rose's treatment of the sea is one of ambivalence. The Atlas discusses the ocean in rather unsettling terms; The grandest spectacle, the mightiest wonder to be witnessed at the seaside is the ocean itself. Uneasy in its scalloped bed, it chafes the slanting shores and murmurs it's low complaints. Sometimes more quite, but never still, it invites the beholder to calm and profound meditation.

When we look far away where the sky and ocean meet, we seem to be alone in the illimitable universe... at other times, aroused to fury by tempestuous winds, it lashes it's sandy barriers with threatening rage, and inspires awe and dread... (Woolman & Rose, 1879 p. 61).

On the other hand, his rendering of the waves through lithography presents pleasant beach scenes with scarcely waste-high curls that appear to almost be hair curls, with ladies and gentlemen properly clad, floating and diving into these soft waves. Theodore also has shown himself to be very adept at the depiction of open-water sailing scenes, with the prints of "The Pilot Boat Whillin off Cape May, and The Pilot Boat E. C. Knight off Cape May" (Woolman & Rose, 1879 p. 359). Here again, the waves are depicted as not excessive, despite the fresh wind at the pennants. There is nothing threatening here at all.

5.0 The Paintings

Quite the opposite is true of the paintings of Theodore F. Rose. He uses a brooding, dark palette for trompe l'oeil interior still lifes, beach and dunes seascapes, and landscapes alike. In addition, there are no human subjects in his paintings, nor live animals themselves, for that matter. The exception to this is the two dead woodcocks in the painting, *A Brace of Woodcocks*.

There are probably two forces operating in the choice of subject, palette, and style in Theodore's paintings. The first is his training. Wherever he learned his painting technique, he was taught this dark and somber palette, which is actually a relic of earlier realism both in Europe and America (Novack, 2007; Richardson, 1963). Thus, in America, he is patterning his dark palette and realism on works by such masters as Ryder, Church, Bierstadt, and Durand. On the other hand, I feel that once he has called himself "artist," in 1880, he is producing a troubled and worried art that is shaped by his tragic background as much as it is by any training.

5.1 Dunes and Sea Long Beach

Figure 1, *Dunes and Sea, Long Beach*, certainly uses his dark palette, even when painting sand outdoors. The composition of this piece is divided into three essentially equal triangles of ground: the sea; the sky; and the land.

The land itself, then, is divided into thirds, consisting of: the beach; the seaweed wrack; and the dunes. In the sky, he manages to collect enough clouds to cover the sun, even though in a close analysis, there are tints of pink and blue amid the off-white and grey of the completely dominant cloud wrack. To be fair, this is a familiar situation meteorologically on the central New Jersey shore, with a sea mist of varying heights and thickness greying-out the sky, with a clammy dampness. The sky is produced with a series of brush strokes curling down and to the left with the lighter white clouds in choppy strokes.

The sea itself is a dark grey line offshore to the horizon, of the same color as the wet sand in the foreground. In the surf, the breaking waves are white, and the shallow water in between the breakers is a light grey with a touch of green and blue mirroring the sky. Theodore's perception in painting the activity of the foam of the spent wave, shows that he is very familiar with this subject. The foam is white, with a well-defined leading edge, perhaps an inch or two high.

As it dissipates in its ride up the beach, the water resolves itself into a stretch of darker sand, and then into a number of darker sand finger, which clear the seaweed wrack and then sink into the higher beach.

The seaweed wrack is very difficult to reproduce, and it is clear that Theodore has been here before. The final water of the wave moves landward, over the seaweed ridge, leaving long, trailing seaweed tails pointing inland, up the beach toward the dunes. The spume that blows off of the foam, typically has pieces that break off in the direction of the wind, which Theodore illustrates as a number of very light white dots in the detail of the seaweed wrack in the foreground.

The upper beach, the dry sand, is rendered in a light brown paint, with alternating horizontal hollows of lower sand much darker grey, perhaps indicating water. In the upper beach, the brush strokes are detectable as long, horizontal lines which actually form the horizon line of sea and lower sky at the right, and then continue on land to define the base of the rugged dunes. The effect is to suggest that a light sea mist is moving in from right to left, partially obscuring the base of the dunes. The dunes are of an older type, fully covered with mature vegetation, all rendered in choppy, very dark grey to black strokes, indicating their rugged aspect. Like the sea in the paragraph quoted in the Atlas (above), this body of water is, if not threatening, at least not inviting.

Gone are the happy bathers and swimmers of his lithographs of the beach; there are no humans here, not even a set of footprints in the sand. And if the land, then, is to provide solace as an escape from the sea, these dank, dark, dunes seem to be the last place one would want to go.

A seascape, very nicely painted with realism and faithfulness to nature, but emotionally we get chills looking at it.

5.2 Fading Full Moon

In *The Fading Full Moon* (figure 2.), we see even a darker palette than the beach scene. There are a set of dark trees forming a stark frame around the focus of the work; a pale glowing moon, with horizontal, misty cloud lines crossing its surface. The composition is, again, tripartite: the earth in the foreground; the trees framing the scene; the dark sky and fading moon.



Figure 2: Theodore F. Rose, *Fading Full Moon*. Oil on canvas, 12 X 15 in.

The trees are rendered with a real appreciation of their stark graphic lines, which a lithographic artist would pay attention to. Theodore does a wonderful job of using super-thin brush strokes to work out the fine patterns of twigs and branches that fade into the barely-lit night sky. The choice here for Theodore would have been a very fine brush called a "rigger," with a number of 0 or 1. These rigger brushes have rather long, soft bristles, with only a few bristles to a brush, which are so named because they are used to paint the detail of the rigging in pictures of sailing ships. They, of course, are also excellent for delicate twigs and fine branches. There are no leaves, so we believe it to be a winter scene.

The earth in the foreground provides us the entryway into the night clearing where the moon is visible; not quite inviting, and perhaps even threatening. The foreground earth, some scraggly bushes, and the bases of the tree trunks there, provide us another clue as to the season.

There is an uneven, thin coating of either snow or hoarfrost on the tree trunks, the bushes and the ground, indicating the chill of a winter scene. But, once again, there is no sign of humans or animals; only the frigid night air, and a failing moonlight.

Section 5.3 A Brace of Woodcocks

A Brace of Woodcocks (figure 3) is a charming trompe l'oeil still life of fruits of the hunt, in the tradition of William Harnette's photographic realism, but of course, much simpler than the elaborate and brimming canvasses of Harnette. It is, I believe, the only interior painting that Theodore F. Rose produced, although it is certainly the only one in the collection of the family. Even among the lithographs of the Atlas, there is only one interior scene, which is inside the Arlington Hotel in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, with many human subjects relaxing and chatting at tables, or promenading around the sumptuous colonnaded atrium (Woolman & Rose, 1879).



Figure 3: Theodore F. Rose, *A Brace of Woodcocks*. Oil on Artboard, 12 X 18 in.

The palette of *A Brace of Woodcocks* is earthy, with browns and tans of various shades to represent the features of the back, wings or breast, and the wooden wall on which the birds are displayed.

It is, in any case, brighter than his other painting subjects, and he even seems to have a good time working with the effect of light and shadow in producing the almost photographic realism, depth, and rounding of the birds' bodies. Novack (2007) stresses the importance of attention to Luminism in American painting in the nineteenth century. Theodore certainly has done that in this painting, although amidst the yellowish browns and tans of the illuminated portions of the subject, it is difficult to say what the source of light may have been. With no clear date or provenance, it could be natural light through a window in an outer shed, or an artificial light from an early electric bulb, or a late oil lamp. It seems unlikely that it is the former, because we would think that natural light would have demanded more of a blue and white color treatment.

On the other hand, late in an autumn or winter day after the gunning is done in New Jersey, even the natural light from a sun low on the horizon, may produce more of the golden glow that is presented here, than would a bright mid-summer sun.

Theodore was an enthusiastic hunter according to family tradition, often going into the uplands east of the Delaware River to hunt Woodcock, Quail, and Pheasant. In the Atlas (Woolman and Rose, 1879. p. 64) they include a list of gamebirds with the entry under woodcock, "...a wary, strong bird. The choice gamebird of sportsmen."

Whatever the light source, it is a raking light from the left center of the subject. The bird on the left, facing the light, is fully illuminated, while the bird on the right is immersed in darker shadow, but without losing detail of the structure and color of the wing feathers. The heads of both birds cast shadows off to the lower right. When the painting is viewed walking in front of it, from right to left and left to right, rich, deep, reds and yellows among the feathers become visible, as they are not when viewed from the front in a stationary position.

The composition is disarming. The two birds are clearly the central subject, but with the play of light, we have one dark and one bright, offering the possibility of interpretation of further sets of binary opposites: dark and light, earth and sky, cold and hot, good and evil. But it is the attention to the light and color of the darker bird arranged partially on top of the bird on the left, that makes it stand out from the lighter bird, and clearly appears to be well off of the planked wall by inches. And while the board structure could have been treated as just background, in a cursory fashion, we see that great time and effort are lavished on these four painted planks.

The wooden wall of the shed on which the birds hang, is painted in long, linear vertical strokes, with the spaces between each plank drawn with architectural exactness. More than that, the grain of the wood is treated with great realism, and each knot hole is painted with great detail. Even the square-headed, cut nails of the period are painted in a three dimensional aspect, that seems to make it possible to reach out and feel them. The details of the nail heads, the knots, and the layered and colored feathers of the birds, are all painted with a heavier application of paint, in choppy, short strokes with a fine brush. All of the techniques applied to this work contribute to its status as a wonderful example of trompe l'oeil realism in late-nineteenth century America.

6.0 Conclusion

It is clear that Theodore F. Rose made a fine contribution to the body of late-nineteenth century lithographic and painting works of art.

Through a very rough childhood, culminating in battlefield experience at war before his twentieth birthday, Theodore was able to make sense of, and use of, his life as an artist and publisher. He apparently made a good living at this as well, as he was able to raise seven children successfully in the proper Victorian environment of late-nineteenth century Camden, New Jersey.

While his life experiences may have, on the one hand, toughened him to the task of learning, growing and living, they may have contributed, on the other hand, to his production of rather somber, and somewhat threatening paintings. His dark palette, and cloudy skies and cold, fading moonlight, tend to arouse discomfort or even fear, especially in the absence of any human presence in the scene who might offer solace. The places in these scenes seem to be chilly, damp and dark places.

In this way, some of his training, and the examples presented to him, may account for some of these artistic choices. In his lithographs, the beaches are full of happy, gregarious Victorian people, but not in his paintings. His models were certainly not the sunny beach paintings of Winslow Homer (Gerdt, 1964), but rather, the feel is more like Ryder or Durand (Glasgow, 1971) or Cole (Richardson, 1963) in America or, perhaps, Courbet in France. Ultimately, it is a combination of the two influences, his life and his training, that have created these stimulating works.

It is enough for us that they do elicit such emotion, and then we have the opportunity to relax, and enjoy wandering around each composition, and wondering at the masterful brushstroke techniques that create for us the experience of three-dimensional space on an otherwise flat surface. This is what is at the root of these works.

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