

Eliza Greateorex and old New York, 1869

By Katherine E. Manthorne

In the spring of 1869 Eliza Greateorex was elected an associate of the National Academy of Design in New York. She was not, chronologically speaking, the first woman to be so honored, but her few antecedents had short and less remarkable careers,¹ so she is often known as the first woman elected to the academy. That year she showed five works, all depicting historic buildings that had been or were in the process of being razed in the old Bloomingdale neighborhood of New York. Four were pen and ink drawings (see Figs. 1, 4–6) and the fifth was an oil painting of Somerindyke House (see Fig. 8) loaned by Robert Hoe,² one of the leading collectors of rising American artists of the day.³ All five



pictures had sprung from Greateorex's interest in New York's disappearing landmarks, which she recorded on the spot, often as work crews were tearing them down. The evocative renderings of 1869 were part of a ten-year project that culminated in the publication of her book *Old New York from the Battery to Bloomingdale* (1875), which was displayed with related paintings and draw-



Fig. 1. *Old Bloomingdale Church, New York City, 1868*, after a pen-and-ink drawing by Eliza Greateorex (1819–1897), in Eliza Greateorex, *Old New York from the Battery to Bloomingdale* (New York, 1875), opp. p. 142. Etching, page size 13 3/16 by 10 1/4 inches.

Fig. 2. *Joseph Chaudlet House on the Bloomingdale Road* by Greateorex, c. 1868. Oil on canvas, 17 by 33 inches. The etching after Greateorex's drawing of the same site is opp. p. 177 in *Old New York*. Collection of Ronald and Carole Berg.

Fig. 3. *Portrait of Eliza Greateorex (1819–1897)* by Ferdinand Thomas Lee Boyle (1820–1906), 1869. Signed and dated "F. T. L. Boyle / 1869" at lower left. Oil on canvas, 30 by 25 1/4 inches. National Academy Museum, New York.

ings at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876.⁴ Born in Ireland, Greateorex was fifty years old in 1869, a widow and the mother of four children.⁵ In her diploma portrait by Ferdinand Thomas Lee Boyle she holds a quill pen and directs her gaze at the viewer, her handsome face framed by gray hair (Fig. 3). Her name is largely absent from our current tellings of the history of American art, but from the 1860s through the 1880s she exhibited and published her work to wide acclaim, and her activities were followed with interest in the newspapers and art press of the day. "Mrs. Greateorex has long been one of the foremost artists of her sex in America," one critic summarized her reputation in 1885.⁶ The recovery of her work and life is therefore central to our understanding of these key post-Civil War decades in American art, when women, like African Americans, briefly stepped out into the light before being pushed back into the shadows, where most have remained until recently.



Fig. 4. *Perrit Mansion at 76th St. in Bloomingdale*, after a drawing by Greateorex, in *Old New York*, opp. p. 192. Etching, page size 13 $\frac{5}{16}$ by 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches.



Fig. 5. *Lawrence Mansion in Bloomingdale*, after a drawing by Greateorex, in *Old New York*, opp. p. 198. Etching, page size 13 $\frac{5}{16}$ by 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches.

During Greateorex's lifetime she reinvented herself several times: as an Irish woman in the United States, a landscape painter, a visual preservationist, an international art figure in Munich and Paris, and a pioneer etcher.⁷ Since she regarded her renderings for *Old New York* as her magnum opus, however, a consideration of the works she showed at the National Academy in 1869 provides a fitting introduction to her career.

New York is a cannibal city. It consumes itself once a generation, leaving little trace of its previous incarnations. This process was at its most rapacious following the Civil War, when fortunes made from the spoils of war financed the Gilded Age mansions that replaced the modest structures left by the Dutch founding fathers in the lower sections of the city. The northern extent of the island,

called Bloemendael by the Dutch, had remained rural countryside, preserving the demarcations of the old estates with their wooden farmhouses. The name Bloomingdale came to refer to the area that is now known as Manhattan's Upper West Side, which was targeted by the Tweed Ring for the construction of a major north-south highway, called the Boulevard (and later, Broadway). The great new thoroughfare followed the general direction and bed of the old Bloomingdale Road, but not all of its windings. To pay for it, Boss Tweed levied assessments on the property owners contiguous to the existing road, which many of them could not afford, and they either lost their property or became heavily encumbered. With the downfall of Tammany Hall shortly after the opening of the Boulevard in 1868, funds disappeared and construction halted. So the road was left unpaved, muddy in winter, dry and dusty in summer, and stripped bare of its wonderful old architecture.

Such wholesale destruction of the city's heritage met little opposition in the days before the preservationist movement or the founding of major museums in the United States. In the face of this indifference, however, several artists took up their pencils to preserve at least the appearance of the city's old landmarks, including Henry Farrer (1843–1903) and Edward Lamson Henry (1841–1919).⁸

While Greateorex had for the previous fourteen years been painting and exhibiting landscapes in the Hudson River mode, these events shifted her attention to the cityscape. As she wrote, she and her younger sister Matilda Pratt Despard were both moved by a "reverence...for the beautiful things of the past in this city of our adoption, and the...earnest wish for their preservation from utter oblivion."⁹ Thus, at the same time that Thomas Nast (1840–1902) was creating his cartoons for *Harper's Weekly* to bring the actions of William Marcy Tweed (1823–1878) to the attention of his fellow New Yorkers, Greateorex headed to the old houses he had slated for destruction with her ink horn and quill pen.

How did her graphic images fare with the artgoing public? Surveying the 1869 exhibition, the reviewer for the New York weekly *Albion* observed "several admirable

specimens of landscape in pen and ink, by Mrs. Greateorex."¹⁰ *Watson's Art Journal* was more effusive, its critic writing: "Whilst mentioning Mrs. Greateorex, we must not forget to call the attention of our readers to the pen and ink drawings..., which are by [that]... talented lady, and are remarkable for their clear and decisive touch, surpassing a steel engraving in the amount of spirit expressed, and as artistic compositions are excellent." According to the writer, they proved "that the artiste is most accomplished in her art, and amongst women artists of America, is entitled to a foremost position....They are superb as artistic compositions, and it is with no little gratification that we make the acknowledgement, knowing that we are paying tribute to a woman's genius."¹¹ The "most pleasing," the writer continued, were those "named *Somerindyke Lane*, at 76th Street, *Bloomingdale*, in the *Summer of 1868* [see Fig. 6], and *The Old Dutch Church, Bloomingdale*, at 68th Street, as it stood in the *Fall of 1868* [see Fig. 1]."

Altogether, Greateorex's works conveyed the picturesque and antiquarian dimensions of their sites to an audience accustomed to the bustle and excitement of an increasingly modern city. One of her first Bloomingdale subjects was the Joseph Chaudlet House (Fig. 2), a historic house that had survived since the revolutionary era and was demolished soon after this picture was painted. Another was the Somerindyke House, which had stood since the eighteenth century at Seventy-fourth Street and the Bloomingdale Road. Though Greateorex's painting of it that Hoe exhibited in 1869—which she identified as "one of her best known works"¹²—is unlocated, the related etching made for *Old New York* is shown in Figure 8.¹³ Studying the picture, it is hard to believe that the site, today near the subway stop at Broadway and Seventy-second Street, ever looked anything like this. It was here, legend had it, that in the 1790s Louis Philippe, then duc de Chartres and afterwards king of France (r. 1830–1848) and his two brothers taught school while in exile from France. Although historians later debunked the myth, it was often repeated in Eliza's day. Recalling her first impressions of the house, she wrote: "the remembrance of it, as it then appeared to me, will always be fresh in my mind: rising on this beautiful green knoll, with the trees shading it perfectly from the heat and dust of the road, and no sign of the terrible uprooting which has been making such sad work with the freshness of Bloomingdale since that summer of 1868."¹⁴

One critic wrote that the painting was "very well composed, and contains a beautiful sky, besides a general pleasing tone of color throughout," concluding with the observation that "the foreground is not sufficiently made out, and looks unfinished."¹⁵ Given the debates then raging at the National Academy over issues of finish in relation to the works of Winslow Homer (1836–1910) and John La Farge (1835–1910), this suggests that Greateorex was experimenting with the Barbizon mode she had encountered while in France in the early 1860s. The hallmarks of her style and approach to her subject are revealed by comparing her rendering with a lithograph of the same site that appeared in *D. T. Valentine's Manual of the Corporation for the City of New York* in 1863 (Fig. 7). The latter features signs of technological progress and urban development, such as the telegraph

Fig. 6. *Somerindyke Lane in Bloomingdale*, after a drawing by Greateorex, in *Old New York*, opp. p. 191. Etching, page size 13 $\frac{5}{16}$ by 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches.

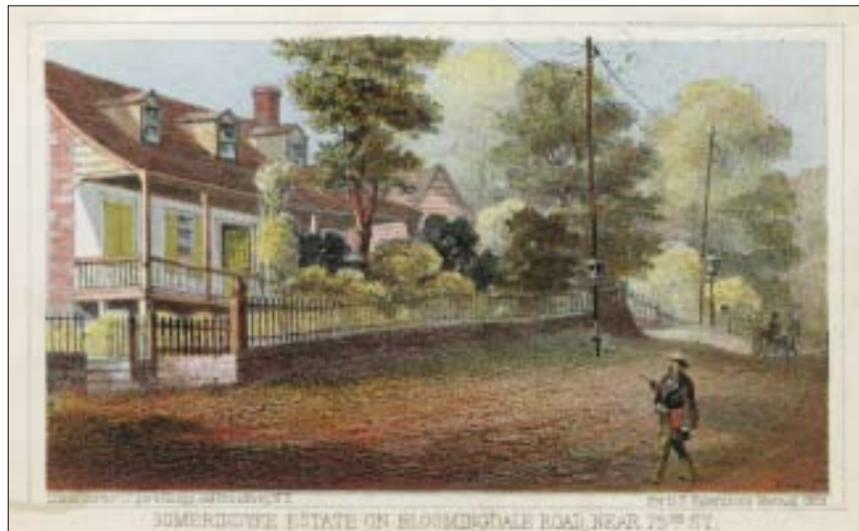


lines and street lamps, which Greatorex avoided by positioning herself on the northeast corner of the property. Her picture derives some of its interest from the tension between the reality she confronted and the ideal she wanted to convey. She aimed, as she put it, “to make each picture faithful and literal,” but she achieved this by “ignoring...their inharmonious surroundings.”¹⁶ Scrutinizing her pictures some years later, the print specialist Sylvester Rosa Koehler (1837–1900) explained how Greatorex achieved her effect:

The apparent carelessness in drawing, and the use of all manner of crooked lines in it, which increase the tumble-down aspect of the place, is not only an excusable, but even an admirable piece of artistic calculation. It calls up the spirit of the scene much more vividly to those who were accustomed to its bustle and excitement, than if all the lines of the architecture had been faultlessly drawn with the ruler.¹⁷

Greatorex later returned to the site, as was her habit, and wrote in her notebook: “November.— Going this morning with my picture to look once more at the Somerindyke House, I find the last beam of the roof is just being lifted away. The walls are still left, but inside there is only a confusion of brick and plaster, fragments of wood, and at the hearth a heap of broken tiles: I cannot find one which approaches the shape and pattern of a complete one, so I lift up some of the pieces to bring away.”¹⁸ In fact, some of Greatorex’s most original works resulted from this practice of removing tiles or other remnants from an old house. She is known to have painted a number of rescued shingles with images—three were shown at the Centennial Exhibition—forming a sort of material link to the life of old New Amsterdam.

Fig. 7. Somerindyke Estate on Bloomingdale Road, Near 75th St., published by Sarony, Major, and Knapp for D. T. Valentine’s *Manual of the Corporation for the City of New York* for 1863. Lithograph, image 3 3/4 by 6 inches. Collection of the author.



For the most part Greatorex eschewed renowned civic and military monuments in favor of homesteads and early hospitals and houses of worship: structures of everyday life. In her day this focus was deemed part of the domestic realm, and thus reflective of the woman’s sphere of influence. In addition to preserving tiles and shingles from the old houses, she and her sister, who wrote the text for *Old New York*, sought out descendants of the original owners for reminiscences and drew on their own personal immigrant experiences to return life to the mute structures.

September 24, 1869, went down in history as Black Friday, with the collapse of the United States gold market setting off a massive financial panic. Its impact on artists generally, and especially on a widow trying to support her family with her art, was devastating. But always one to soldier on in the face of adversity, Greatorex continued to create and show her work, including at an exhibition in December at the Brooklyn Art Association. While the death of her beloved father, the Reverend James Calcott Pratt, at the age of ninety in March 1870 added further emotional strain, it also broke one of the ties that kept her in New York, where the cost of running a household and educating her children was high. In May 1870 Greatorex and her sister and several of their children set sail for Germany. She returned to New York in late October 1872, having completed a series of paintings in Munich and Nuremberg and an illustrated book on her experiences of the Passion Play in Oberammergau.¹⁹ She would subsequently realize many other accomplishments, but as a reviewer for the *Galaxy* wrote when *Old New York* was published, her visual record would never be matched:

She has stepped in just as the era of demolition was closing, and preserved in this series of beautiful pictures the remembrance and the remains of time when there was naturalness and natural beauty in the streets which are now as hard as bricks and as somber as brown stone can make them. One thing is certain. This is the last picto-



rial work of its kind which can be accomplished for New York. The old city has completely passed away.²⁰

¹ Margaret Bogardus (nee McClay; 1804–1878), a miniaturist and portrait painter, was elected an associate in 1843 but apparently ceased professional painting by the later 1840s. ² Maria Naylor, *National Academy of Design Exhibition Record, 1861–1900* (Kennedy Galleries, New York, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 360–361. The whereabouts of the drawings and the painting are unknown today. ³ Robert Hoe’s support of the visual arts was financed by the family printing press manufactory. See *Catalogue of Choice Oil Paintings. The Entire Collection of the Hon. Levi P. Morton and a Portion of the Collection of Mr. Robert Hoe...* George A. Leavitt and Company, New York, February 28 to March 1, 1882. The text clarifies that the paintings from “the well-known collection of Mr. Robert Hoe” were “mostly by American artists, nearly all painted to his order, and some of which are considered the best efforts of their authors. Among the most valuable are the companion pictures by Mr. Frederick [sic] Church, and the late Mr. John F. Kensett.” *Tropical Scenery and Italy—A Reminiscence*, Greatorex’s painting, was not included in the sale. ⁴ U.S. Centennial Commission, *Official Catalogue. Part III. Machinery Hall, Annexes, and Special Buildings (including the Women’s Pavilion)*, 2nd rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1876), pp. 93, 96–97. ⁵ What few biographical accounts exist mention two daughters, Kathleen Honora Greatorex (b. 1851) and Eleanor Elizabeth Greatorex (1854–1897), both of whom became artists. My extensive genealogical research now confirms that Eliza Greatorex also had a son and a stepson, respectively Thomas Walter Greatorex and Francis Henry Greatorex. ⁶ [Margaret] [Bertha] [Wright], “Eleanor and Kathleen Greatorex,” *Art Amateur*, vol. 13 (September 1885), p. 69. ⁷ Sylves-

ter Rosa Koehler, “The Works of the American Etchers: XXII. Mrs. Eliza Greatorex,” *American Art Review*, vol. 2, pt. 2 (1881), p. 12. ⁸ Amy Kurtz Lansing, *Historical Fictions: Edward Lamson Henry’s Paintings of Past and Present* (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 2005); Stephanie Wiles, “Between England and America: The Art of Thomas Charles Farrer and Henry Farrer,” Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2001. ⁹ Eliza Greatorex, “Prospectus,” signed March 10, 1875, archives, Museum of the City of New York. ¹⁰ “Fine Arts: The National Academy of Design,” *New York Albion*, May 1, 1869, pp. 243, 244. ¹¹ “National Academy of Design. I,” *Watson’s Art Journal*, vol. 10, no. 26 (April 24, 1869), p. 307. ¹² Eliza Greatorex to John S. Champlin, February 13, 1874, Ferdinand Julius Dreer Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; microfilm reel P 20, Archives of American Art. The letter was apparently written in response to a query for information about her career. ¹³ The book illustration is inscribed “Somerindyke House... house of Louis Philippe. In Bloomingdale. The summer of 1868” at lower left. ¹⁴ *Old New York from the Battery to Bloomingdale* (New York, 1875), p. 184. ¹⁵ “National Academy of Design. I,” p. 307. ¹⁶ Greatorex, “Prospectus.” ¹⁷ Koehler, “Works of the American Etchers: XXII,” p. 12. ¹⁸ *Old New York*, p. 184. ¹⁹ Eliza Greatorex, *Homes of Oberammergau* (Munich, 1872). ²⁰ *Galaxy*, vol. 21 (February 1876), p. 285.

KATHERINE E. MANTHORNE, who is currently completing her book *New York Art Women in the Age of Promise* (1863–1883): Eliza Pratt Greatorex and Her Sisterhood, is a professor in the doctoral program in art history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Fig. 8. Somerindyke House in Bloomingdale, New York City, after a drawing by Greatorex, in *Old New York*, opp. p. 184. Etching, page size 13 3/16 by 10 1/4 inches. The original drawing was after a painting by Greatorex loaned by Robert Hoe (1815–1884) to the spring exhibition at the National Academy of Design in 1869.