

FOCUS EXHIBITION
LOCKWOOD DE FOREST'S
THE WRECK

GALLERY GUIDE



LOCKWOOD DE FOREST'S *The Wreck* is about the tragic nature of life. It portrays life and death—life represented by travelers and their camels and death by the skeleton of a camel. But much of the emotional resonance of de Forest's work is generated by its setting—the desert. The power of this setting comes not only from de Forest's artistic technique—color, light, brushstroke, and composition—but also from the viewer's own imagination. For the audience of *The Wreck*, in both de Forest's time and our own, the image of a desert unleashes potent thoughts and feelings deeply embedded in both the conscious and unconscious mind.

Above: THE WRECK, 1880. Oil on canvas, Lockwood de Forest, 1850–1932, gift of Lisa de Forest (2010-007).

Above left: LOCKWOOD DE FOREST, c. 1900. Photograph, gift of Henry V. Taves and Lisa de Forest (2008-016:2).

Conservation



This pre-conservation detail from *The Wreck* shows an area of paint loss that required inpainting.

The Wreck is a 2010 bequest from the estate of Lockwood de Forest's great-granddaughter, Lisa de Forest. The painting, more than a century old, had suffered paint loss and water damage and needed conservation badly. A significant project, the treatment included cleaning, inpainting, and the removal of candle wax and old, discolored varnish. Today, the Morse is pleased to make this captivating work accessible to the public for the first time in many years.

Left: Veronica Romero-Gianoli of Rustin Levenson Art Conservation Associates carefully repairs an area of *The Wreck* using a technique known as inpainting.

Symbolism

The camel carcass is the principal dramatic element in this painting, but the camel riders heading into the sunlight give the story perspective. Light is the universal symbol of good—of knowledge, enlightenment, salvation, and the promise of Heaven. Is the theatrical orange glow on the horizon a sunrise or sunset? De Forest seems to have left the answer to this question intentionally ambiguous. The viewer must decide if this is a story of life, death, and salvation, one of thin hope and the pursuit of a mirage, or the finality of death. The artist combines brushstroke,



color, and composition with a story of the greatest simplicity to evoke a world resonant with universal human feelings and profound concerns.

THE DESERT AS METAPHOR

As a subject of art, the desert simplifies the conditions of existence, reducing experience to its tragic essence—challenge, sacrifice, suffering, purification, revelation, and, finally, death. As in de Forest's day, virtually everybody knows something of the many Bible stories in which the desert plays a central role. We are familiar too with the *National Geographic*-style photography of the Saharan sands—images that beckon with their calm stillness and which belie the desert's true dangers.

In literature, ranging from *One Thousand and One Nights* to “bodice rippers,” the desert evokes romance and exotic adventure. Finally, the desert has acquired other important associations, even a mythical status, with such figures as T.E. Lawrence, aka Lawrence of Arabia.

SOURCES AND CONTEXT

By the late 1870s, many artists—including even the Impressionists, whose work defined the avant-garde in this period—were finding useful sources, images, and inspiration in what was then called the Orient. This broad geographical region included North Africa, the Middle East, as well as India, Japan, China, and the Far East generally.

De Forest and others in Europe and America painted pictures of Oriental sights that now constitute a major aspect of art of the period:

Sources and Context



In the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*, actor Peter O'Toole helped transform the historical figure T.E. Lawrence into a romantic hero of mythological status.

Orientalism. De Forest explained his interest in North Africa and the East in terms of the specific qualities of light that were unique in those areas. It was on one his trips to Egypt that de Forest doubtless came upon the scene that inspired *The Wreck*.

De Forest made a fine oil sketch at the time, perhaps on site. In 1880, he developed his study into a large oil-on-canvas work, refining light, color, and most dramatically, the composition of the scene. In 1867, the French artist Gustave Guillaumet (1840–87) had produced a similar canvas with a dead camel. But for his picture, de Forest moved in closer to the subject, seducing the viewer into the scene and creating a more direct experience.

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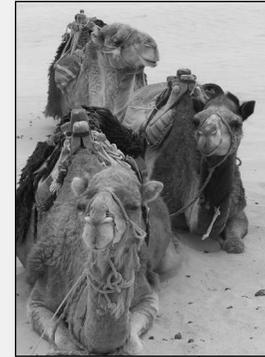


ST. FRANCIS IN THE DESERT, c. 1475–78. Oil on poplar panel, Giovanni Bellini, c. 1430–1516.

and St. Francis in the desert, were widely recognized art historical references among American audiences. Also crucial for de Forest in conceiving this painting was the popular use of the sea as a setting for the great life-and-death themes of human existence. Well-known sea scenes included the 1819 painting *Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) and American illustrations from the 1851 novel *Moby Dick* of Ahab's struggle with the great white whale.

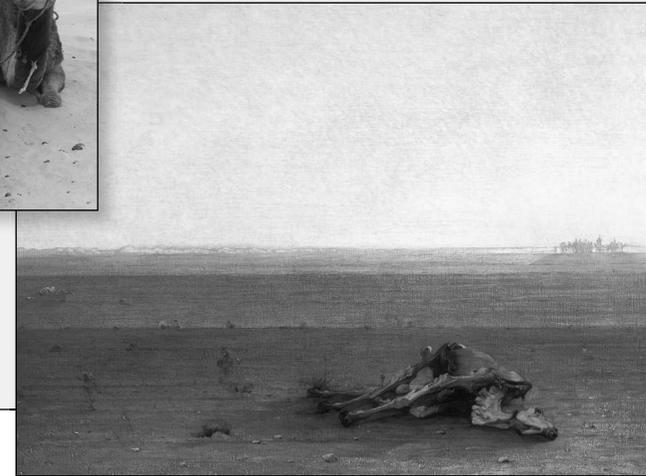
THE ARTIST

From a wealthy family, de Forest (1850–1932) was taught and mentored by his great uncle Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), the Hudson River painter and Oriental enthusiast. In Rome, de Forest also



Camels, often called the ships of the desert, were necessary for survival in the Sahara. This painting (below) was likely known to de Forest before he painted *The Wreck*.

THE SAHARA, 1867. Oil on canvas, Gustave Guillaumet, 1840–87.



studied with the Italian Orientalist painter Hermann Corrodi (1844–1905).

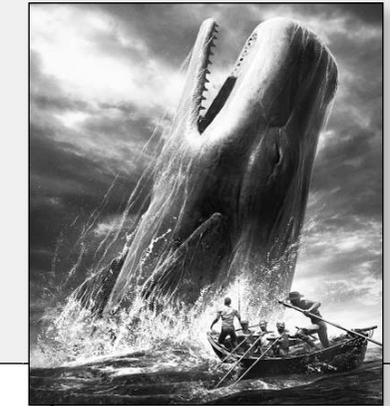
De Forest was a friend of Louis Comfort Tiffany's (1848–1933) and played an important role along with the American painter Samuel Colman (1832–1920) and textile artist Candace Wheeler (1827–1923) in Tiffany's decorating firm Associated Artists (1881–83). While in India, de Forest supplied Tiffany with carvings, jewelry, and other objects. When Tiffany closed Associated Artists in 1883, de Forest continued in his own decorating business, opening lavish Eastern-themed showrooms in New York City.

The Wreck was among de Forest's most widely exhibited and best-known paintings. It was exhibited three times in 1880: at the National

Academy of Design and The Century Association in New York City and at the Louisville Industrial Exhibition in Kentucky. In 1883, the painting was shown at the International Art Exhibition in Munich, Germany, and in 1891, The Century Association exhibited the painting again. De Forest hung *The Wreck* in the parlor of his Indian-style home at 7 East Tenth Street in New York City's Washington Square. In 1915, de Forest moved to Santa Barbara, California, where he built another Indian-style house and pursued landscape painting. He continued to take on decorating commissions, wrote about his theories on art, art collectors, and collecting, and made at least one more trip to India before his death at age eighty-two.

At the time de Forest conceived his painting, the sea was a popular setting for the great life-and-death themes of human existence.

DEPICTION OF THE GREAT WHITE WHALE FROM THE 1851 NOVEL *Moby Dick* BY HERMAN MELVILLE (1819–91).



All the paintings in this gallery are by Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932).

1) Top to bottom:

Lockwood de Forest, c. 1900
Photograph
Gift of Henry V. Taves and Lisa de Forest
(2008-016:2)

Lockwood de Forest's palette, c. 1900
Wood
Gift of Henry V. Taves
(2009-015:02)

2) Top to bottom:

Egyptian Settlement, 1878
Oil on paperboard
Signed lower left: *L de F Apr 3 / 78*
(2008-015:07)

Date Palm, 1878

Oil on paperboard
Signed lower left:
L de F May 11 / 78
(2008-015:05)



3) *The Wreck, 1880*

Oil on canvas
Signed lower right: *L de Forest 1880*
Gift of Lisa de Forest
(2010-007)

**4) Actual-size photo reproduction of
1879 oil sketch for Lockwood de
Forest's *The Wreck, 2012***

Mark Corliss, photographer

5) *Top to bottom:*

Study, Man on Camel, 1881

Oil on paperboard
Inscribed lower right: *Mar 2 / 81*
(2008-015:08)

**Camel Studies, Egypt,
1878**

Oil on paperboard
Signed lower left:
L de F Apr 6 / 78
(2008-015:03, 04)



6) *Top to bottom:*

Brittany, 1911

Oil on paperboard
Inscribed on reverse: *Brittany 1911*
(2008-015:19)

Waves Crashing on Rocks, c. 1906

Oil on paperboard
(2008-015:13)

7) *Top to bottom:*

Full Moon in Blue-black Sky, 1907

Oil on paperboard
Signed lower left: *L de F Feb 17 / 07*
(2008-015:22)

Beach Nocturne, c. 1907

Oil on paperboard
(2008-015:24)

8) *Top to bottom:*

Moon with Green-blue Water, 1907

Oil on paperboard
(2008-015:25)

Moonlight on Water, 1905

Oil on paperboard
Signed lower left: *L de F*
[illegible] / 05
(2008-015:20)



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