Benson, Eugene (1 Nov. 1839-28 Feb. 1908), art critic, painter, and essayist, was born in Hyde Park, New York, the son of Benjamin Benson. His mother's name is not known. He went to New York City in 1856 to study painting at the National Academy of Design; he also learned portraiture in the studio of J. H. Wright. Taking up residence at the New York University Building, he formed close friendships with several other artists who lived there, most notably Winslow Homer. Desperately poor, Benson earned extra money by writing art criticism for the newspapers, particularly the New York Evening Post, for which he signed his name "Proteus." He quickly became known as a leading art critic. In 1862 he was elected an associate of the National Academy of Design, where he exhibited regularly from 1861 to 1871.

In the Book of the Artists Henry T. Tuckerman classified Benson as a genre painter, describing his motive as "poetical" and remarking that "the Fireside Reveries reminds us somewhat of [French artist Charles Theodore] Frere: a young girl sits by a stove, gazing in abstracted mood into the fire; the position and expression are full of the unconsciousness which betokens self-absorption." Benson's major contribution to American art, however, came through his criticism; as Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., observed, Benson's goal was to formulate the principles of "a modern, national, and democratic art, derived from native materials and formed in a native language of style" (Cikovsky, p. 42).

Benson wrote approvingly of those artists who, as he explained, had been "least influenced by foreign art." These included Homer and the painters Sanford Robinson Gifford, Frederic Edwin Church, and John Frederick Kensett. He did not hesitate to denounce what he considered the meretricious, such as the overly dramatic work of two popular Dusseldorf-trained painters, Albert Bierstadt and Emanuel Leutze. With the founding in May 1866 of the journal the Galaxy, Benson gained a forum for his wider observations of American life. Casting himself as a "literary frondeur"--a writer who "affronts, outrages, defies, or rails at something which time or custom has made respectable"--he charged editors with not realizing "how far the sense of conventional propriety is destructive of the literature of the people." He wrote approvingly of Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, and of Rebecca Harding Davis's realistic story of social protest, "Life in the Iron Mills."

Late in 1866 Benson and Homer held a joint sale of their paintings to raise funds for a trip to France, where Benson stayed for approximately a year. His articles, Lois Fink has written, "affirmed the sensuous quality in French art so often attacked in American criticism. Writing about Parisian life and art with knowledge and sensitivity, he made a major contribution to the maturing of art literature in this country" (Fink, p. 44). In February 1869 the Atlantic Monthly published his pioneering article, "Charles Baudelaire, Poet of the Malign." However, his exploration of French culture did not lessen his commitment to formulate a democratic aesthetic; on 2 January 1868 the Nation linked him with Whitman as the leading advocates of American literary nationalism.

Benson's outspokenness, however, irked even the Galaxy's tolerant editors, the brothers William C. and Francis P. Church, and Benson in turn was irked by what he saw as the Churches' editorial timidity. In 1869 he moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where he lived with Henriette Malan Fletcher, the wife of a prominent Presbyterian clergyman and missionary, James Cooley Fletcher of Newburyport, Massachusetts. By 1873 Benson and Mrs. Fletcher, whom he later married, had become permanent expatriates in Italy. The family included her son and daughter, Julia Constance Fletcher, who would gain fame as the author (under the pseudonym "George Fleming") of Kismet (1877) and other novels and several plays that were performed in London and New York.
They settled first in Florence, then Rome, and in 1888 in Venice, where their villa Palazzo Capello, Rio Marin, served as a model for the setting of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*. In 1881 Benson published *Gaspara Stampa*, which told the tragic love story of that Renaissance woman poet. In a series of travel letters for the *New York Post* Benson recorded his search for neglected masterpieces of Italian art, contrasting the aesthetic and spiritual unity of an idealized Italian past with the fragmentation of modern life. They were collected in 1882 as *Art and Nature in Italy*.

Benson now painted not the meditative American girl, but the *Interior of St. Mark's*, and, as Henry James wrote to the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, "refined and interesting little landscapes of the Venetian country." Benson's travels provided subjects for such paintings as *Hashish Smoker in Jerusalem* and *Bazaar at Cairo*. The *London Times* remarked that his *Strayed Maskers*, which he exhibited at the Royal Academy and at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, "shows judgment, command of technical procedures, and sound conception of effect, and is free from exaggeration. The artist is one of the few American painters who contribute to our Exhibitions."

Although Benson had some success in finding purchasers for his work, he remained poor. He reflected on his life in Italy in two volumes of poetry, *From the Asolan Hills*, published in London by E. Mathews in 1891, and *An Old Garden*, published in Venice in 1902 by M. Fontana. An artist and critic who had promoted a native American aesthetic in spite of long residencies in Europe, Benson long since had lost touch with America and was largely forgotten at his death in Venice.

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**Bibliography**


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