WALL TEXT

American Impressionism: Paintings from The Phillips Collection

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"It must not be assumed that American Impressionism and French Impressionism are identical. The American painter accepted the spirit, not the letter of the new doctrine."

— Christian Brinton, art critic, 1916

In 1886 the Paris art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel brought to New York a breathtaking display of nearly 300 paintings by the French impressionists Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Pierre-Au-guste Renoir, and others. At this time a select group of American artists, trained in the academies of Paris and Munich, were searching for a new expressive style. Impressionism proved to be the inspiration they needed to transform American painting.

The American impressionists increasingly painted outdoors in a variety of weather conditions ("en plein air"), working without preliminary sketches ("alla prima"). They adopted a brighter palette and substituted color for shadows, eliminating blacks and grays. They also used the impressionist technique of applying pure unmixed color on the canvas in dabs and broken brushstrokes to create a sense—an impression—of reflected light, air, and atmosphere. Like their French counterparts, they employed compositional elements borrowed from photography and Asian art, such as cropping, asymmetry, and multiple viewpoints. Even so, the American impressionists never completely lost their foundation in the realist tradition, always keeping three-dimensional volume in their forms.

These efforts to infuse American painting with a French impressionist aesthetic created a fresh interpretation of the national countryside and the city, which transformed the heroic American landscape of the Hudson River school and the genre scenes of rural America into a more modern idiom. Intimate landscapes rooted in the New England countryside became the norm, as did scenes of leisure activities in parks and at the beach, as well as urban views that captured the genteel character of the city.

Among the first American painters to assimilate the techniques and subject matter of French impressionism were William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), Childe Hassam (1859-1935), Theodore Robinson (1852-1896), John H. Twachtman (1853-1902) and J. Alden Weir (1852-1919). Robinson, an associate of Monet who lived and worked near the French painter in Giverny, France from 1888-1892, was instrumental in bringing the impressionist aesthetic to his close friends Twachtman and Weir. They, in turn, exhibited their "impressionist" landscapes alongside Monet at the American Art Galleries in New York in 1893. Hassam, too, brought home an understanding of impressionism after working in Paris in the late 1880s, where he briefly occupied a studio once used by Renoir.

Duncan Phillips (1886-1966) was one of the early collectors of American impressionism. Most of the paintings in this exhibition were acquired by him during the artists' lifetimes, giving Phillips a chance to meet many of them. To Phillips, impressionism was not the final manifestation of the realist tradition, but rather a fresh start. The American impressionist paintings in this 85th anniversary exhibition represent the foundation of the world-class collection that Phillips assembled.

American Impressionism's Landscape

The Intimate Landscape of Familiar Places

Twachtman and Weir, along with their friend William Lathrop, were passionate about an artist's need to be anchored to the rural countryside. It was a conviction that stood in contrast to their predecessors who had traveled extensively to paint remote and awe-inspiring views. While Lathrop settled along the Delaware canal in New Hope, north of Philadelphia, Twachtman and Weir acquired property in southwestern Connecticut that was easily reached by train from New York.

Weir's Connecticut farms at Branchville and Windham, and Twachtman's Greenwich property became enduring sources of inspiration for their landscape paintings. Like their French counterparts, Twachtman and Weir were committed plein air painters who worked in front of the motif and shared with Monet a strong sense of place. Weir passionately believed it was essential to "make a subject part of yourself before you can properly express it to others." As Edward Simmons wrote in his 1903 eulogy for Twachtman, "No man expresses well in any art what he does not know to the bottom. It is … necessary for him who wishes to paint landscape to live surrounded by what he loves…"

The experience of nature for these artists was as much an emotional response to the landscape as an optical record of it. Their love of nature and belief in its spiritual force forged their personal approach to the depiction of the natural world. They used the stylistic language of Monet and the techniques of French impressionism to explore nature's moods in their non-narrative landscape interpretations. Unlike the French, Twachtman, Weir, and Lathrop preferred to depict diffused daylight in their paintings rather than the bright effects of midday sunlight. This gave a silvery tone to their work that was in contrast to the high-keyed palette of Monet. Twachtman, in fact, favored misty, overcast days, writing to Weir "that a grey day is a fine and rare thing….There is greater delicacy in the atmosphere."

In harmony with their surroundings, Twachtman, Weir, and Lathrop discovered the many faces of the rural landscape that they knew intimately. Their depictions of the many moods of the countryside familiar to them in their own backyards were celebrations of the American landscape as pastoral respite from the modern world.

J. Alden Weir
and his circle

Throughout his life Weir gathered around him a diverse group of friends. After he bought his farm in Branchville, Connecticut in 1883, Weir's country home became the favored retreat of many important American painters, including Childe Hassam, William L. Lathrop, Theodore Robinson, and John H. Twachtman, as well as John Singer Sargent and Albert Pinkham Ryder. Weir welcomed all of them to his farm for painting, conversation, and relaxation. Robinson, a bachelor who treasured his friendship with Weir, often enjoyed Sunday dinners with Weir and his family. The Hassams, Weirs, and Twachtmans, meanwhile, saw each other frequently both in New York and in Connecticut. The exhibition society of American painters known as The Ten was an outgrowth of their personal and artistic friendship. Organized in the winter of 1897-1898, The Ten held annual exhibitions for twenty years. Although considered old-fashioned by the final exhibition, held in 1919 in Washington, D.C. at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, contemporary critics acknowledged the beauty of the pictures and gave the organization credit for improving the quality of American painting.

After the turn of the century, Weir and Hassam became identified as the grand masters of American impressionist painting. Weir, in particular, was sympathetic to younger artists, many of whom sought his support for their fledgling artistic organizations. Even the group of artists who mounted the radical Armory Show in 1913 turned to Weir for credibility, electing him president of their sponsoring organization, a position he resigned as unacceptable for himself.

In his last few years Weir became a close friend and mentor to Duncan Phillips, a young collector and art critic who had begun to acquire his work. Phillips came to know Weir more intimately after joining the Century Club in 1917 where the artist was a longstanding member. Weir's significant position in Phillips' nascent museum was always assured as he believed Weir to be the most important landscape painter of his generation..

"Spiritualized Naturalism" and the Impressionist Landscape

At the turn of the century many American artists not specifically associated with impressionism had a preference for landscapes of mood that valued nuance and ambiguity over bright color and clarity. Such depictions of nature were not painted outdoors, but in the studio. Set at the transitional times of the day—dawn and dusk—these tonalist pictures featured the gauzy appearance of scenery seen through mist, fog, or falling snow. George Inness (1825-1894) and James MacNeill Whistler (1834-1903) were among the first to embrace this new evocative style that depended upon a rarified sense of color and light that was independent of realism. Their highly personalized responses to nature favored pictorial unity over detail in atmospheric landscapes usually dominated by a single color.

Of the American impressionists, Twachtman's suggestive and atmospheric works were sometimes close in style to Whistler's landscape interpretations. Twachtman's use of abstract patterning and, as Hassam described, "changing envelopes of subtle gradation" reveal him as a master of nuance who preferred the diffused light of a gray day with its more delicate atmosphere, as well as shorter days which produced more "early morning effects." Like the tonalists, Twachtman was profoundly attracted to these marginal or transitional moments of the day. In a December, 1891 letter to Weir, he wrote:

> "To-night is full moon, a cloudy sky to make it mysterious and a fog to increase mystery. Just imagine how suggestive things are…."

Duncan Phillips described Twachtman's approach to nature as "spiritualized naturalism" and compared the painter's winterscapes filled with atmospheres of translucency and pearl to Whistler's "Nocturnes." In both artists Phillips found a "genius for nuance and the lyrical suggestion," along with an interest in simplified abstract design and pattern that anticipated contemporary art trends.

A similar approach to nature is evident in the early landscapes of Augustus Vincent Tack, who favored moody and atmospheric views set in the light of dawn or dusk and in the seasons of winter or spring. Tack's subjective explorations of nature, set in rural northwestern Massachusetts (near Deerfield), reveal not only the influence of Inness, but also that of Twachtman, his teacher. Phillips's emotional response to Tack's landscapes of "individual mood" made for his deepening enthusiasm for a form of impressionist landscape predicated on what an artist felt in response to what was seen

A New Generation of American Impressionists

The teaching role assumed by many of the pioneers of American impressionism helped to spread the impressionist aesthetic to a new generation of American impressionist painters. Childe Hassam, William Merritt Chase, John H. Twachtman, and J. Alden Weir all taught at the Art Students League in New York where students like Ernest Lawson, William L. Lathrop, Allen Tucker, and Augustus Vincent Tack took their classes. Chase also taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia and at the New York School of Art where Robert Spencer was one of his students. At the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which Lilian Westcott Hale attended, impressionist painting centered on the figure.

A new awareness of the American landscape as an expression of "a painter's intimate personal reaction to the land" saw artists leave the city for summer retreats in rural communities. The techniques of plein air painting were passed along in outdoor summer art classes held in various parts of New England. The most prominent ones were located on Long Island at Southampton (Shinnecock Hills) and in Connecticut at Cos Cob (outside Greenwich) and Old Lyme (farther east along the Connecticut coast). Some locales, such as the ones at Cos Cob and Old Lyme, as well as at Cornish (New Hampshire), New Hope (Pennsylvania), and Gloucester (Massachusetts), were established art colonies.

William Merritt Chase demonstrating outdoors before the Shinnecock Summer School of Art class, ca. 1892. Albumen print. The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York, William Merritt Chase Archives, Gift of Jackson Chase Storm.

The classes held every summer in the 1890s by Chase at Shinnecock Hills trained hundreds of students, including Gifford Beal and Lilian Westcott Hale, while his summer classes in Florence, Italy, which began in 1907, were important to Helen Turner. At Cos Cob in the 1890s, Twachtman, Weir, Robinson, and later Hassam were the key teachers, with Lawson and Tucker their most famous students. Old Lyme, a quiet art colony of Barbizon-style painters, was transformed into a lively impressionist art spot when Hassam arrived in the summer of 1903. Beal, already a veteran of Chase's Shinnecock classes, was one of those fresh new faces who began painting in Old Lyme during Hassam's tenure.

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Pennsylvania Impressionists
"the democrats of the new style"

After 1899, New Hope, Pennsylvania, developed into a year-round artists' colony centered around the painter William Lathrop (1859-1938) and his colleagues. They inspired a generation of artists who settled in this small village along the Delaware canal, including Robert Spencer and John Folinsbee. Lathrop, who briefly studied with William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League in New York, was a very close friend of Twachtman and Weir, having come to know both men while in New York in the mid-1880s. For a time in 1886 Lathrop shared a studio with Twachtman and in 1889-1890, Lathrop lived at Weir's farm in Branchville, Connecticut. He maintained an especially personal relationship with Weir, even naming one of his sons Julian after him. Although Lathrop preferred working in the studio, creating paintings that were about his emotional response to the land, he also painted outdoors. Like Twachtman and Weir, Lathrop's colors were muted, his empty spaces filled with mood and atmosphere and his subjects the intimate, gentle views of the rural Pennsylvania countryside near his home.

From the collections of the Spruance Library of the Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania

The New Hope impressionists enjoyed their greatest success and popularity in the second decade of the twentieth century when they came to the attention of Duncan Phillips. Critics like Guy Pène du Bois believed paintings by the New Hope artists embodied the populist spirit of America. This assessment struck a chord with Phillips who especially admired the poetic, Barbizon-inspired interpretations in Lathrop's work. He recognized that Lathrop's best landscapes had an emotional sensitiveness to them that was similar to the work of Twachtman and Weir. Phillips never knew Lathrop, but he became very good friends with his younger colleague Robert Spencer, seeing in his work an "unconscious wistfulness" of mood combined with an impressionist technique that relished delicate color harmonies.

Maurice Prendergast
"modern in mind"

Noted for his colorful, decorative scenes of outdoor leisure life in Europe and North America, Maurice Prendergast (1859-1924), a Bostonian, studied in Paris in the early 1890s, absorbing influences from French impressionist and post-impressionist art. Upon his return to Boston in 1895 he shared a studio with his brother Charles, a decorator and frame-maker, achieving initial success in Boston and New York with his watercolors. In order to familiarize himself with the most current trends in the art world Prendergast returned to Europe frequently until World War I. His renderings of affluent people in park and promenade scenes or at the beach relied on individual measured brushstrokes of bright color, applied in a tapestry-like manner that reflected his personal assimilation of the styles of Cézanne and Matisse particularly. In the second decade of the twentieth century Prendergast was considered by the critics to be a "modernist" thoroughly familiar with the newer trends in the art world.

Prendergast moved to New York in 1914 where he enjoyed commercial success among collectors like Duncan Phillips, who recognized in his work a playful, romantic original who was "modern in mind." Phillips wrote passionately about the artist and became a lifelong friend of the Prendergast family, acquiring a significant group of watercolors and oils by the artist. He championed Prendergast's work for its synthesis of the decorative and the representative through simplified and colorful pictorial patterns, often installing his Prendergasts alongside paintings by Pierre Bonnard, Cézanne and Monet.