Beauty’s Legacy: Gilded Age Portraits in America

Beauty’s Legacy: Gilded Age Portraits in America examines the remarkable resurgence of society portraiture that occurred in the United States during the Gilded Age—the period bounded by the close of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I. Marked by unprecedented industrial expansion yielding vast personal fortunes, the Gilded Age conjures visions of material opulence and personal excess. All of the portraits on view here were selected from the outstanding holdings of the New-York Historical Society. They portray sitters ranging from famous society beauties to powerful titans of business and industry, most of whom contributed to the cultural and economic growth of the nation. In this context, the elusive element of “beauty” comes into play, oscillating between such variables as the physical appearance of a specific person, matters of artistic technique and temperament, and the ethical and moral conduct of the sitter.

Revealed here, too, is the highly competitive nature of the portrait market, as American portraitists found themselves in fierce rivalry with their European counterparts for patronage. This international contest for commissions signals the complexities of the Gilded Age, as the demand for portraiture reflected the heightened desire to establish and assert personal identity—an unending process of self-definition that is manifested here in the legacy of generations of New York’s founding families and the artists they commissioned to portray them.

The Portrait Loan Exhibitions of the 1890s

This section of the exhibition—consisting of works from different times and by European and American artists—is modeled after three large and historically important exhibitions of portraits held at the National Academy of Design in New York City in 1894, 1895, and 1898 (the Portrait Loan Exhibitions). Organized for charitable causes by the city's social elite (known as the Four Hundred), the displays included hundreds of privately owned portraits by European old masters, colonial and early American painters, and contemporary artists from both sides of the Atlantic. The 1894 exhibition included 650 portraits of women; portraits of children and men were added in 1895 and 1898. The Portrait Loan Exhibitions were as much social events as they were about the art on view. The fashionable society patronesses (whose names appeared in the exhibition catalogues and who often served tea in the elegantly decorated galleries) were aware that their quasi-celebrity status would attract the general (and paying) public, if only to satisfy curiosity about the "other half" and to rub shoulders with some of the same women whose portraits were on view.

On a more serious level, the inclusion of works portraying members of the same family over several generations or notable figures from the colonial past introduced the notion that the young nation did, indeed, enjoy a cultural legacy that was sustained by an American "aristocracy" of long standing. The exhibitions also demonstrated that although American portraiture had a distinguished history, portraits by European artists continued to emphasize the privileged status of sitters and functioned as emblems of sophisticated taste. At the root of the Portrait Loan Exhibitions were the interrelated factors of art, beauty, celebrity, and exclusivity, all of which were tempered by the underlying justification that the exhibitions were held for philanthropic purposes.

Peter Marié’s *Gallery of Beauty*

Peter Marié (ca. 1825–1903) was a well-known and eccentric member of New York high society. His hobby of commissioning miniature portraits of “Gotham’s most beautiful matrons and maidens” caught the attention of the public in 1894, when 160 portraits from his collection were shown at the first Portrait Loan Exhibition. Marié had entered the family shipping business and retired a wealthy man at the age of forty. About 1889 the longtime bachelor arrived at the idea of forming a collection of miniatures that he called his “Gallery of Beauty.” At first he commissioned the Paris-based French artist Fernand Paillet to execute the portraits, from either sittings or photographs, but he eventually opted for the convenience of using such New York artists as Carl Weidner. The collection became a chief attraction at Marié’s frequent evening “entertainments,” and he augmented its popularity by giving duplicate miniatures to his favorite sitters along with a copy of his privately printed *Book of Beauty*, in which some of the portraits were reproduced.

The largely positive press reception the miniatures received in 1894 intersected with the surging celebrity culture surrounding the women of America’s privileged families (see illustration here, for example). The Platonic veneration of feminine loveliness is key to Marié’s collecting passion. His possession of the miniatures implied his warm relationship with the women, and the requisite close examination of the tiny paintings introduced to the viewing experience a frisson of intimacy. In this respect he represented a modern version of the chivalrous courtier, whose love for women was in the abstract and never consummated. Marié’s collection, totaling 275 miniatures, is now held by the New-York Historical Society, where it endures as a vital reflection of Gilded Age culture in which ideas of beauty, art, celebrity, and social hierarchy merge.

<caption for photograph>

Peter Marié, ca. 1890. Marié Family Album, New-York Historical Society, Department of Prints, Photographs, and Architectural Collections

<caption for illustration of page from newspaper>

"Mr. Marié's Miniatures," *(New York) Sun*, November 4, 1894, 7

The American Portrait Market and the “Invasion” of European Painters

High society’s demand for portraits during the Gilded Age arguably reached its height in the 1890s; as one reporter proclaimed in 1894, “The fashionable world has gone mad over portraiture.” This upsurge was stimulated by the increased ease and frequency of transatlantic travel in the decades after the Civil War, conditions that enabled wealthy Americans to examine and avail themselves of the talents of renowned European portraitists. They returned home with paintings that not only preserved personal likeness but also functioned as symbols of sophisticated, cosmopolitan taste, and elevated social status. The period also saw the building of palatial homes, whose cavernous interiors required luxurious furnishings and art. This in itself spurred the market for paintings by European masters, many of which were ancestral portraits that could be bought by the carload from cash-poor but noble families from across the Atlantic. Eager to reinforce their own sense of familial or cultural continuity, many Americans commissioned portraits that would complement works that had been inherited or purchased.

By the 1890s a generation of American artists—including John Singer Sargent, J. Carroll Beckwith, and William Thorne—had trained with some of the very same European artists who had enjoyed American patronage. Although Sargent was the unchallenged leader among American portrait painters, the careers of other Americans, including Beckwith and Thorne, suffered—particularly with the influx of foreign artists who, attracted by lucrative commissions, spent part of the year in the United States. Thus, when Sargent’s and Beckwith’s former instructor, Carolus-Duran, was in New York in 1898, Beckwith lamented that Carolus had done seven portraits at $4,000 to $8,000 each, whereas he had only one commission for $1,500.

The Allure of Masculine Power

Although beauty per se rarely enters into discussions of men's portraits, likenesses of Gilded Age business moguls are nonetheless permeated with the nearly irresistible allure of power and money. As one critic pointed out in 1907, it was "worth notice that where psychological insight appears in an American portrait, the subject will usually be a man." In many ways, men such as those whose portraits are on display here were the new heroes (or antiheroes) of the age because their aggressive entrepreneurial energies could be equated with the manly characteristics identified with military action. In the aftermath of the Civil War, however, the national desire to erase the vestiges of warfare from collective memory essentially deleted the soldier-hero from pictorial imagery. The industrial boom in the postbellum decades saw the dramatic rise of self-made millionaires and the colossal increase in inherited fortunes, all of which were controlled by men whose grit, determination, and ferocity served them well in boardroom battles.

Of the artists represented here, Eastman Johnson and Anders Zorn were generally singled out for their particular talents in portraying men. Certainly, creating an aesthetically satisfying portrait of a man was a greater challenge than that of painting a woman; the splendid gowns and jewels worn by female sitters surpassed the visual interest afforded by the decidedly sober male attire.