



## **Beyond Native Shores, A Widening View of American Art, 1850 to 1975**

By Jay Cantor

This exhibition begins and ends with harbor scenes, Fitz Hugh Lane's *Ships in Boston Harbor* and Malcolm Morley's *Statue of Liberty*, which effectively frame many issues that confronted American artists from the mid-nineteenth century until contemporary times. These views document the transformation of America from an ambitious and newly minted democracy, tied by trade and manufactures to Europe but seeking economic as well as artistic independence, to an international economy and an art center that embraced a wide sphere of sources and influences. Lane's magically still painting evokes the dynamic maritime might of New England's halcyon days. In contrast, Morley's breezy recent view of New York Harbor not only reminds one of the decline of maritime commerce as the core of America's economic power but also underscores the magnetic role that New York achieved after World War II as the international artistic center. By including the Statue of Liberty, a gift of friendship from France to America in the mid-nineteenth century, in his image, Morley (an English immigrant to the U.S.) provides an apt leitmotif for this exhibition, for France, above all other foreign artistic centers, became the aesthetic school ground for many of the artists featured here. Paris served as the source of the most important stylistic innovations that define the progress and development of modern art from realism to impressionism, post-impressionism and cubism, providing successive waves of American artists at home and abroad with a stylistic and intellectual agenda that they, in turn, incorporated and adapted, morphing these influences into a distinctly American product.

Commentators on and critics of American art had decried dependence on European tradition from the earliest days of the new American nation and urged the development of a distinctly American school. Following these exhortations, painters and sculptors searched enthusiastically for a subject matter and a style that would be recognizable for their distinct attributes and would appeal to a recalcitrant buying public. The plea for an art that was uniquely American became such an overwhelming mantra that it obscured a fertile interrelationship that often existed between the home product and foreign works, between American values and European

influences. While artists in the first half of the nineteenth century succeeded, especially with their landscape painting, in rendering a compelling national view, European sources and training were not far below the nativist surface. This relationship with Europe would develop substantially in the second half of the nineteenth century as prosperity and institutional support made foreign travel and study more accessible and internationalism more desirable. In the end, what emerged as the American character in its art was not a unique style or subject matter, but rather the elevation of the individual vision over the tyranny of academic convention and official patronage.

The artists in this exhibition all had a romance with Europe or more distant and exotic climes, but each drew upon individual experiences as well as their artistic ambition in the pursuit of a personally expressive style. Most preferred to work independently rather than becoming members of the artists' colonies that sprang up in numerous European villages. At times their works are moody and introspective and at other moments they are nearly operatic in the bravura manipulation of paint. The overarching element that ultimately links these works and their creators is the artists' unerring commitment to observation and their modulation of poetry with pragmatism. While they struggled with aesthetic concerns similar to those of their European cousins, they pursued an individuality of expression that makes it hard to place them soundly in any particular camp.

Rendering the American scene was a significant concern of native artists, establishing a tradition that continued unabated until the ultimate dominance of abstraction in the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps it was the sense of the vastness of the continent that turned American painters into wanderers, ever seeking newer and more picturesque or spectacular scenes while still adhering to an overarching cultural nationalism. The earliest landscape artists found in the untrammled nature of New England and the upper reaches of the Hudson River both the exhilaration of discovery and the reverberation of history. The landscape was America's sole claim to antiquity as well as an open window on divine handiwork. Traveling painters soon pressed westward, as seen in Albert Bierstadt's *California setting for Indian Camp* and Henry Farny's later western view *Apache Indians in the Mountains*. Their artistic quests took them beyond the native shores, to the Arctic and South America, in search of increasingly dramatic

and informing vistas. Those who traveled abroad would find in the ruins of the antique world a resonant model for American political values as well as an historically sanctioned cultural ethos that fostered their aesthetic daydreaming in response to and, sometimes, in spite of the pragmatic demands of their American cousins. Haseltine's views such as *Castle at Ostia, Lazio, Italy* and *Morning Light, Roman Campagna* are but a sampling of the myriad works American artists produced for patrons at home who shared their enthusiasm for the antique world.

Soon other European capitals were vying with Rome and Florence and a new generation of painters was drawn to central Europe at mid-century. Eastman Johnson was a student in both Holland and Germany, working in Dusseldorf in the 1850s, when that city was a magnet for many American art students. But other artists who were to be celebrated for their special American voice found the studios of Germany appealing in these years, including George Caleb Bingham, Worthington Whittredge, William Stanley Haseltine and Albert Bierstadt. Frank Duveneck traveled to Munich, where a powerful and painterly realist tradition flourished in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. German rationalism was counterpointed by Mediterranean emotion when American seekers of light were increasingly attracted to Venice, as works by Robert Blum, Childe Hassam and Ralph Curtis amply illustrate. The paintings of these artists demonstrate lessons in composition, paint handling and the dramatic use of light that they had learned from their European teachers and the work of their fellow artists. Each has brought a seriousness and dignity to his subjects, avoiding anecdote in favor of a broader evocation of the sense of place and the emotive response it engendered. Edward Emerson Simmons's poignant rendering of an apple seller in the Brittany village of Concarneau, *A Corner of the Market*, approaches the naturalist work of French contemporaries such as Jules Bastien-Lepage and rejects easy characterization in favor of the rendering of human dignity. Painted from a favored model, it is ultimately a composition in light and human form. This work finds its American analogue in Dennis Bunker's delightful rendering *The Fisher Girl, Nantucket*. Other American artists, such as Frank Duveneck, working in the figurative tradition of Europe, became some of our most accomplished painters, which is evident in works like *Siesta, Number Two*.

Winslow Homer was one of these outstanding American painters of the figure in the decades following the Civil War. Although Homer's art education derived largely from his training as an

illustrator for popular magazines, he traveled in Europe from 1866 through 1867. He was not only in pursuit of recognition and meaningful themes, but was, more importantly, in the process of liberating himself from the illustrators craft and developing his extraordinary talents as a painter. He was surely influenced by the work he saw at the Paris Worlds Fair of 1867, where he received great notices for his sober and monumental Civil War scene, *Prisoners from the Front* (Metropolitan Museum of Art). It was at this very moment in Paris that Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet challenged the conventions of French academic painting through their own independent pavilions at the Fair. Homer, by instinct or intent, understood Manet's approach to rendering modern life through a brightened palette and strong brushwork applied in a flat and non-descriptive manner. Those lessons are clearly manifest in the charming evocation of outdoor recreation on the beaches of Marshfield, Massachusetts, in *The Sand Dune*.

Winslow Homer was one of these outstanding American painters of the figure in the decades following the Civil War. Although Homer's art education derived largely from his training as an illustrator for popular magazines, he traveled in Europe from 1866 through 1867. He was not only in pursuit of recognition and meaningful themes, but was, more importantly, in the process of liberating himself from the illustrators craft and developing his extraordinary talents as a painter. He was surely influenced by the work he saw at the Paris Worlds Fair of 1867, where he received great notices for his sober and monumental Civil War scene, *Prisoners from the Front* (Metropolitan Museum of Art). It was at this very moment in Paris that Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet challenged the conventions of French academic painting through their own independent pavilions at the Fair. Homer, by instinct or intent, understood Manet's approach to rendering modern life through a brightened palette and strong brushwork applied in a flat and non-descriptive manner. Those lessons are clearly manifest in the charming evocation of outdoor recreation on the beaches of Marshfield, Massachusetts, in *The Sand Dune*.

Many of the nineteenth-century paintings in this exhibition are landscapes, ranging from tenderly rendered intimate scenes to panoramic vistas. These works generally depart from more conventional landscape images which emphasize tightly organized views and coherent spatial progression from foreground into the distance. Such paintings were the typical product of the first generation of landscape painters in America. Working before the Civil War, those artists

acknowledged the influence of landscape poetry and transcendental philosophy. Through their work, the early landscapists created a celebratory embrace of the American continent. They had traveled through the American hinterland in search of powerful and often unique landscape subjects. Their work was, by and large, dependent on drawing and design. Highly detailed studies made on these trips documented the specifics of a locale in great detail. Colors, textures, and atmospheric conditions were all recorded in studies that became the basis for large compositions created in the studio. This early landscape manner, with its detailed rendering of identifiable scenes, suggests a narrative approach to the landscape consistent with the moral and religious fervor these artists brought to their interpretations of the American scene. For them as well as for their viewers and critics, the universal was seen to reside in the specific.

**By** contrast, post-Civil War work presents a romance with light, atmosphere and mood. Detail is often subsumed in a radiant glow, a chromatic restructuring or a total surrender to freewheeling brushwork. For this new generation of artists, color often becomes the expression of light. Painters now turned to scenes which suggested a tender or more poetic landscape experience. They emphasized the perceptions of both the artist and the viewer in the process. Landscape paintings, no longer tied to the specifics of place, conveyed instead the sensation of the landscape experience. Lyricism and contemplative harmony are the benchmark attributes which parallel without precisely reproducing the contemporaneous infatuation with light in the work of the French Impressionists. American painters drew from multiple sources, as they always had done, and conjured a style that had personal meaning and local appeal.

This is a generalization to be sure, but one that does effectively characterize the work of the younger generation of artists who were concerned with cosmopolitan values and were more clearly indebted to their European training and experience than their predecessors. Many of the older generation continued to work successfully and artists such as Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church produced some of their largest and most ambitious canvases in the post-War period, but in a manner that seemed increasingly pass.

The new men and women, products of the French ateliers and the Munich studios, turned increasingly to a painterly and personalized style and, in the process, assumed the mantle of the "artistic personality". Their studios were often filled with exotic objects collected on their travels and their activities became the subject of popular fascination.

Artists found support in their experimentation and search for personal styles through exhibitions in new art museums and commercial art galleries. The popular and critical press brought their work into a prominence unknown to earlier generations. Private collections burgeoned and many artists developed an impassioned following. Nationalism now took the form of a claim of parity between American artists and their European confreres rather than the boosterism and nativist isolation of previous decades.

The landscapes in this exhibition divide roughly into two groups: the light infused tonal images of men such as Martin Johnson Heade, William Stanley Haseltine, George Inness, and Dwight Tryon, and the more painterly works by artists under the general influence of modernist tendencies, especially impressionism, which liberated color as the co-efficient of light, with Weir, Chase, Sargent and Hassam as premier exemplars of a loose and painterly style laced with impressionist overtones. The distinctions between the two styles are not hard and precise, especially when novel mediums such as pastel are involved. Childe Hassam's lyric *On the Balcony* is inflected with color harmonies that blend in subtle gradients, a hallmark of this special medium as well as the basic vocabulary of tonalism. His contemporaneous oils are rendered with flickering brushwork more closely associated with the impressionist experiment. In his choice of the nocturne, Hassam has consolidated a style and a subject which are both evocative and moody. This pastel provides an extraordinary balance between flat pattern, reflecting the contemporary European enthusiasm for Japanese prints, and three-dimensional space that extends, almost literally, into infinity. Whistlerian in its eccentric, elongated composition, it is also indebted to that American expatriate's extraordinary vision in its subtle treatment of the figure and the costume, illuminated by a blend of soft interior and moonlit exterior light. Thomas Wilmer Dewing's elegant oil *The Lute* is equally impressive for its range of mood, atmosphere and emotion. The limited palette and subtle juxtapositions of tactile forms

and broad spatial planes imbue the work with a sonority recalling the lush compositional experiments of contemporary composers Debussy and Ravel.

This musical analogy reminds us that painters also often produced works that were explorations of theme and variation. Hassam's early career as a watercolor painter had an important influence on his ability to capture atmosphere, time of day and other momentary sensations. Not surprisingly, he was drawn regularly to specific locations, producing inspired work over many years, in clusters of pictures that parallel the notion of serial imagery perfected by Claude Monet. Hassam's multiple views of Appledore Island off the New Hampshire coast can easily be viewed in light of musical ideas but they also demonstrate the power that this extraordinary landscape held in his mind and memory. His monumental paean to the Appledore experience, *The Sea*, not only won great acclaim in the artist's lifetime but became the slate on which he demonstrated his increasing enthusiasm for newer ideas such as the post-impressionist experiment. He constructed the canvas to suggest meaning beyond the Impressionist's concern with optical sensation. He is here exploring issues of time and memory rather than simply dwelling on observation and the translation of the momentary.

Impressionist influenced American painting ranges from the brushy dexterity of artists like Hassam to the muted rendering of light and color harmony as the dramatic focus and the messenger of inner meaning. Tonalism, in turn, had grown out of an earlier artistic formula now known as luminism. The luminists produced simplified compositions, reducing incident and narrative detail while emphasizing an overall radiant light. Martin Johnson Heade was in certain ways one of the inventors of this kind of light-infused landscape which eschews detail in favor of evocative simplification. Heade's *Sunset: A Scene in Brazil* not only illustrates the far-flung wanderings of American painters in search of retreat and spiritual regeneration but also reminds us profoundly of the current sectional struggle in America. It suggests the overwhelming desire for peace, tranquility and regeneration. Light in Heade's work becomes an emblem of harmony.

This notion of light as the informing element of a painting was well understood by George Inness, who found deep spirituality in the landscape and the creation of evanescent renderings that push his work to the boundaries of abstraction. Beginning his career with work in more conventional landscape modes, seen in *The Palisades* of circa 1884, or in his luminous view *Twilight in Venice*, Inness moved increasingly towards a suggestive art of a reverberant and spiritual intensity. Simplification and tonal harmony become the benchmarks of Inness's mature style. He generally favored closed views of intimate scenes, such as pastures with grazing animals or woodland corners with massive trees whose insistent rectilinearity reinforces the abstract essence of the paint surface. *Along the Jersey Shore*, a rare coastal view, shows an especially nuanced manipulation of paint that seems to saturate the canvas, melding nature and art. The evocative qualities of the paint surface and the subtle balances of the composition recall the manner of James McNeill Whistler, the American expatriate painter, who, while based in London, established an international reputation and significant notoriety. Inness dwells within the world of nature while Whistler's universe is ultimately the studio and the personality imposed by the artist. Inness's painting is both searching and assured. The reality of the scene emerges through focused rather than casual contemplation. Small squiggles of paint, little more than daubs and dashes, suffice to describe the subject and to animate the scene. The artist has achieved a delicate balance between detail and allusion, qualities that make this one of the most daring and successful paintings of this highly admired artist.

It is interesting to muse on the difference in meaning and impact between Inness's work and Whistler's, despite the superficial similarities between the two. Whistler was the apostle of art for its own sake and exploited a personal and professional aestheticism that frequently subsumed the impact of his art into a reflection of his own highly eccentric personality. Inness by contrast was absorbed in a religious mysticism that pushed his art to become an expression of inner meaning and harmony. His paintings delve into the visual essence of the scene. Unlike Whistler's work, there is nothing "precious" about Inness's canvases. But intensity of focus does not interfere with elegance of execution and his work is a masterful balance of the articulate and the implied.



William Merritt Chase also looked to Whistler amongst the other contemporary painters who helped this Munich-trained painter to forge a personal style. In some ways Chase, who produced a major portrait of Whistler, became the American equivalent of that flamboyant personality. His studio was filled with "artistic" trappings and he pursued an artful lifestyle that made him the subject of popular legend. We can perhaps glimpse a bit of homage to Whistler in Chase's pastel *Bit of Sunlight*, which depends on the kind of suggestive handling and eccentric spatial construction pioneered by Whistler. Chase's own energetic and skillful strokes confirm the artist's imaginative presence as do his abilities to transform a mundane view into an inspired image.

If Whistler fostered the cult of personality and the sometimes reckless pursuit of the aesthetic in his highly visible career in London during the later nineteenth century, John Singer Sargent, the other major American expatriate painter working in the English capital during this period, conveyed all the dash and swagger of the fin de siècle with a polish and élan that captivated his contemporaries and made his work synonymous with Edwardian glamour. His highly successful career as a portraitist of the aristocracy and the artistic elite long overshadowed his brilliant work as a landscape painter as well as his mastery of figurative painting. Schooled in the studios of Paris just as the modern experiment was breaking ground and liberating artists from the stifling conventions of academic style and subject matter, Sargent easily absorbed the lessons of painterly dexterity and expressive color, molding them into a brilliant personal style. He had the uncanny ability to translate the qualities of light and the moody sensuality of a landscape scene into a bravura display of paint handling. Always disciplined, however, he didn't allow his brushwork to go too far. His sense of form and compositional unity keeps the freedom of his brushwork in check and gives a depth of expression and a genuine energy to his work that is missing in the more superficial handling of such contemporaries as Giovanni Boldini. Like earlier painters, Sargent traveled widely in search of exotic subjects and, more importantly, of visually stimulating scenes that the sometimes hermetic climate of England could not provide. Escaping the hothouse atmosphere and the stifling social rituals of London, he sought relaxation and the opportunity to paint for pleasure in the English countryside and on far-flung expeditions to the Alps, Italy, Spain and the Holy Land. Several landscapes in this exhibition convey Sargent's rapturous pleasure in the light and atmosphere of these exotic locations. From the

suggestive half-light of *Alhambra, Patio de la Reja* to the richly saturated tones of *Bedouin Encampment*, Sargent creates a tapestry of color and light that was stimulated by the locale and the scene but that only comes to life on the canvas. His deft stroke leaves much to the imagination of the viewer while underscoring his talent at creating dazzling pictorial effects.

Mary Cassatt shared with her fellow expatriates Whistler and Sargent an infatuation with the most advanced artistic ideas, an innovative approach to composition and a love of the figure. Her focus on a compact range of subjects has often clouded a complex artistic evolution from her earliest modern essays, beautifully evidenced by her circa 1880 *Lady with a Fan*, which defies academic conventions in its powerful rendering of a "modern woman", to the creation of complex multi-figural works such as the circa 1901 *Sara and Her Mother with the Baby*. Here she incorporates compositional lessons learned from Japanese prints tempered by equally sophisticated western handling with its emphasis on three-dimensional figuration. The resulting work is at once both tender and edgy, melding new modernist ideas with long-sanctioned notions of figure drawing. The artist's spontaneity of vision and rendering is buttressed by the close study of her subject and the frequent revisiting of this theme within her work.

Family and intimate interior scenes characterized works of European trained artists Edmund Tarbell and Frank Weston Benson, ultimate apostles of the genteel tradition, who returned to America to assume leadership of the Boston school. Tarbell's *Mother and Child in a Boat*, a smaller version of one of his most important paintings (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), and Benson's *Four Children at North Haven* render family members and intimate landscapes in an impressionist influenced manner while focusing on the figure, a hallmark of the Boston school. Their works resonate with a sophisticated modernity while also demonstrating a cultured conservatism that began in New England with the marvelous achievement of John Singleton Copley and continued for the next century and a half. The gritty naturalism and realism of painting in New York as well as that centers enthusiastic embrace of modernist ideas stand in stark contrast to the ample achievement of Boston's best artists.

In assuming the mantle of economic power as well as the role of melting pot of America, New York would become the battle ground for a new round of skirmishes between nativist tendencies and European incursion. The Ashcan artists, in rejecting the genteel tradition and European modernist ideas, produced works of untrammelled power and personality. The leading light of this school was George Bellows, whose *Summer City* of 1909 represents the quintessence of urban energy and optimism. Colorful and complex, this work captures the enormous energy of the city and its occupants, hardscrabble denizens who emerge, like the artists and writers who described them, in uncompromising terms as compelling personalities and heroic emblems. Building on this tradition Edward Hopper incorporated influences from his European sojourn with the best of Ashcan realism to produce images of powerful solemnity. His *Moonlight Interior* is both suggestive and articulate, a haunting early exploration of the values that would suffuse his subsequent work. Usually rendering taciturn and self-contained figures or isolated buildings divested of sentimentality, Hopper achieves a compellingly honest rendering of everyman as urban hero.

Simultaneously, European ideas infiltrated American painting through the achievement of the American modernists. The encounter with foreign ideas did not stifle the American imagination but rather freed its artists to boldly confront radical changes in American life and culture. Despite the claims of conservative critics who saw little of value in advanced painting, artists like Marsden Hartley chose wisely amongst foreign ideas, uniting them with bold practicality and muscular energy that are the touchstones of the American personality. Hartley incorporated a variety of advanced ideas including cubism and fauvism to produce powerful and iconic images while conducting a life-long search for a truly expressive and personal style. In his pursuit of an American expression of modernism, Hartley was encouraged by support from the prescient and often dogmatic photographer/dealer Alfred Stieglitz, who gave Hartley his first New York exhibition in 1909 and acquired *Hall of the Mountain King* from that show. Hartley's understanding of the power of the painted surface and the effect of boldly patterned forms and vibrant colors is amply seen in this painting and make it as significantly modern today as it was when it was created nearly a century ago. It is especially exciting new evidence of Hartley's accomplishment since the painting, considered the best of its series, remained in Stieglitz's collection until his death and was only recently re-discovered.

Georgia O'Keeffe in many ways summarizes the dichotomies and confluences of quintessentially American subjects and themes with European influenced modernist values. While her European travels were largely the adult wanderings of a tourist, she was exposed to advanced European modernism through the exhibitions and ensuing debates at the various New York galleries of her husband Alfred Stieglitz. And while O'Keeffe's images are generally associated with her activities and ultimate sojourn in the West, many of her signature abstractions of flowers were done at the Stieglitz family farm at Lake George, New York. Her brilliant 1945 pastel *Pink Camellia* well demonstrates her ability to meld observation and abstraction into perfectly realized pictorial compositions.

In their discovery of Europe, Americans found something both exotic and familiar. For those whose country had little artistic tradition, European tradition became a liberating force, granting them a license to experiment and explore that was the ultimate souvenir of their journeys. These travels into distant places and the art of an earlier time as well as toward the emerging boundaries of the modern world enabled them to bring a new assurance and conviction to their own art and a ready eye to the future. In the process they did much to assure American arts rightful place within the larger history of Western art.

*This essay appeared in the catalogue published on the occasion of Beyond Native Shores, A Widening View of American Art 1850 to 1975, April 1<sup>st</sup> through May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003.*