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American Impressionism

Suzanne T. Wise
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

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RESOURCE/RESERVOIR
SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

Theodore Wendel *Girl with Turkeys, Giverny,* 1886, oil on canvas

American Impressionism

The term American Impressionism, when used in the context of stylistic analysis, implies a specific set of definable characteristics, and by extension, a traceable lineage that will fit comfortably in the historical narrative of American art. If one seeks to assert this notion when confronted with an exhibition of American Impressionist painters, the result will be confusion coupled with a healthy dose of skepticism. For unlike their French counterparts, who established a style in close proximity to one another, both geographically and philosophically, American artists arrived at Impressionism from a variety of viewpoints.

Early surveys of American art tend to focus only on those American painters who fit comfortably into the accepted perimeters of the French Impressionist style, specifically the light-suffused, intensely colored, and form dissolving canvases pioneered by Claude Monet. More recently, scholarship has recognized the pervasiveness of certain aspects of Impressionism contained in the work of many American artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that is too insistent to be ignored.

In reality, the term Impressionism, even when applied to the French, is only a label of convenience that encompasses a variety of individual styles. Originally it was meant as a derisive nickname applied by an indignant critic to works in the first group exhibition, *Societé anonyme des artistes peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, etc.* in 1874. "Impressioniste" was quickly adopted by the

RESOURCE SERIES

AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM

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French group as being far less unweildy than their original title, while also lending a certain notoriety to their subsequent exhibitions.

The new style had at its core two characteristics that appealed whole or in part to American artists, specifically, color and subject matter. Intense, highly-keyed color, often applied to the canvas without blending in short, choppy brushstrokes is an Impressionist hallmark. The technique of applying isolated, pure dabs of color next to one another (often referred to as "broken color") achieves a shimmering, vibrating effect best seen in the work of Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Alfred Sisley (Robert Hughes, in commenting about Monet's *Cathedral* series of the 1890s refers to them as "runny and pasty with colour, like gritty, melting ice cream."[1]). Other artists, such as Auguste Renoir, preferred to blend their colors more thoroughly, creating softer, more diffused canvases.

In subject matter, the Impressionists focused on what they saw around them—landscapes, cityscapes, genre scenes, and informally arranged portraits—all painted with a sense of spontaneity and intimacy. Their paintings have a relaxed air about them, often exploiting the festive atmosphere of the French petit bourgeosie on holiday. This focus on the less serious, minutinae-filled side of 19th century life ran counter to the notion espoused in more conservative circles that the subject matter of art should be approached with gravity, having some historical, social, or moral implication.

This new style of painting championed by the French Impressionists did not catch American artists totally unaware. During the later half of the 19th century, scores of young Americans studied at European academies, particularly in Paris, Munich and Dusseldorf. While these tradition-bound schools taught a watered-down version of neo-Classicism that was rapidly becoming tedious with a new generation of European painters, Americans were nevertheless exposed to the exciting countertrends happending outside the walls of the ateliers. Summer painting expeditions in the French countryside and frequenting café society contributed to awakening American artists to the developing revolution against accepted art standards.

An argument can also be made that that native styles of 19th century American art itself also contained the seeds of acceptance for Impressionist ideas. In his seminal work on American Impressionism[2], William Gerdts outlines the emphasis placed on the close observation of nature by the Hudson River School painters and the importance of light and atmosphere in the works of the Tonalists.

Perhaps the most important single event that capitulated an American response to French Impressionism was the 1886 exhibition of over 250 works by Impressionist masters brought to New York by the Parisian art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. With the exception of a few pioneering Impressionist efforts by Americans working in Europe prior to 1886, the Durand-Ruel exhibition marks the beginning of the almost overwhelming influence the Impressionist style was to have on American art for the next three decades, even after Impressionism had run its course as the prevailing avant garde style in Europe.

John H. Twachtman — *Bark & Schooner*, c. 1900, oil on canvas

Of the American pioneers in Impressionism, Mary Cassatt should be considered seperately, since she alone actually worked and exhibited in France side by side with the French masters, beginning in 1879. A Philadelphia expatriate who spent most of her career in Paris, Cassatt is associated most closely with Edgar Degas, himself a peripheral member of the Impressionist group due mostly to his prevailing talent as a draftsman and to his interest in the psychological aspects of his subjects. Cassatt's *Portrait of Mary Say Lawrence,* executed in 1898 during an extended return visit to the United States, demonstrates her mastery of that demanding medium and displays the sure draftsmanship she developed in concert with Degas.

More typically Impressionist in style is the work of Theodore Robinson, another early Impressionist who was working near Monet's home in Giverny by 1887. While Robinson was never a student of Monet's, the two men did develop a mutually satisfying friendship. After spending several years di-

viding his time between the United States and Europe, Robinson returned to America permanently at the end of 1892. *Port Ben, Delaware and Hudson Canal* was painted the following summer during Robinson's tenure as a summer school art instructor in Napanock, New York, near the Delaware and Hudson canal. One of three versions of that subject[3], the Sheldon's *Port Ben* is a richly worked impasto of lush greens, pinks, and lavender-blues that stubbornly refuses to be a slavish imitation of Monet. The painting shows Robinson's inherent concern for the retention of structure, which his French friend was in favor of systematically eliminating.

The earliest Impressionist work in the Sheldon's collections is Theodore Wendel's *Girl with Turkeys, Giverny,* painted there in 1886. It displays a wide range of heightened color and loose brushwork that differs markedly from Robinsons'. It should be noted here that the appearance of Robinson and Wendel at Giverny at this early date was not an isolated phenomenon. Other American artists painted there at the same time, just as Americans had congregated at other French art colonies (notably Pont-Aven in Brittany) during the second half of the 19th century[4]. It was at these colonies, rather than at the official academies, where Americans experimented with the new style and took it back with them to the United States.

The hugely successful World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago found the widest exposure yet for Impressionist painters, both European and American, in the United States. (Interestingly, the French Impressionists were not part of the official French exhibition, but were seen as part of a separate display, *Loan Collection of Foreign Works from Private Galleries in the United States.*[5])

Despite the ever-widening acceptance of Impressionism during the 1890s, American Impressionist painters found their work was unaccepted and largely ignored by the prevailing art organizations of the time: the National Academy of Design, and the Society of American Artists. To create a more congenial atmosphere for showing their work, a group of Boston and New York-based painters under the leadership of Childe Hassam, began a series of exhibitions beginning in 1898 that continued through 1917. Known as The Ten, a name taken from the title of their exhibitions, *The Ten American Painters,* the group included Frank W. Benson, Joseph De Camp, Thomas W. Dewing, Edmund C. Tarbell, Childe Hassam, Willard L. Metcalf, Rober Reid, E. E. Simmons, John Twachtman, and J. Alden Weir. (After Twachtman's death in 1902, William Merritt Chase was elected to take his place.)

Of the eleven artists involved in The Ten, Sheldon owns works by six: Chase's *Woman in Interior,* Hassam's *Gloucester Harbor* and *Fifth Avenue, April Morning,* Metcalf's *Birches in November,* Rober Reid's *Summer,* Twachtman's *Bark and Schooner* and *View of the Seine, Neuilly,* and Weir's *Sunlight, Connecticut.* The freshness and spontaneity of Impressionism in the hands of such masters as Hassam and Chase should not go unnoticed, but perhaps a more interesting comparison that illustrates the diversity of approach in American Impressionism can be seen in two works from this group that seem in direct opposition: Twachtman's *Bark and Schooner* and Reid's *Summer.*

Bark and Schooner, painted in Gloucester two years before his death, reflects Twachtman's concern with light and atmosphere without relying on an overworked Impressionist formula to achieve his aims. The almost monochromatic use of saturated blues is offset by bold slashes of black that form the ships' hulls, giving the painting a dramatic focus and tension which foreshadows the formalist concerns of 20th century abstraction. In contrast, the metaphorically-titled *Summer,* probably painted at approximately the same time as *Bark and Schooner,* exhibits Reid's prosaic interpretation of the Impressionist vocabulary. The subject—a dreamy young woman casually

Lilian Westcott Hale *Zeffy in Bed,* oil on canvas

Maurice Prendergast *Salem Park, Massachusetts,* 1918, watercolor on paper

holding a spray of freshly-cut garden flowers—is firmly planted in a 19th century aesthetic. The painting is saved from triviality by Reid's masterful selection of color and fluid handling of paint.

Examining the works of The Ten is by no means a comprehensive view of American Impressionist painting. The popularity of the style in New York and Boston extended to the rural areas surrounding those cities and beyond to the Midwest and California. Recent attention to these lesser-known "regionalists" has brought to light a number of interesting artists working under the Impressionist influence.

Perhaps one of the most charming paintings in the Sheldon collections is *Zeffy in Bed* by Lilian Westcott Hale, wife of the better known Boston Impressionist Philip Leslie Hale. The painting, a delightful combination of intimacy and directness, is of Hale's friend and favorite model, Rose Zeffler (nicknamed Zeffy). Loosely brushed and filled with light, *Zeffy* is executed with assurance and clarity.

A more strict disciple of orthodox Impressionist style is Robert Spencer, who was born in Harvard, Nebraska, but spent most of his career in rural Pennsylvania. The short, choppy brushwork and rural theme of his *Crossroads* is reminiscent of the French master, Camille Pissarro.

Impressionism continued to be an important influence on American painting well into the 20th century despite more radical developments in Europe that made French Impressionism obsolete as an avant garde style by the 1880s[6]. In the United States, there was also rebellion brewing, and the formation of The Eight in 1908 by Robert Henri signalled an even wider gap with the American art establishment than had the appearance of The Ten a decade earlier.

While Henri's group is thought of as the genesis of the Ashcan School—portrayers of slums, immigrants and bustling city life in dark, brooding colors—many of The Eight actually worked in a high key Impressionist-based style, particularly William Glackens, Ernest Lawson, and Maurice Prendergast. Even Robert Henri had briefly flirted with Impressionism early in his career, and the bright tonalities and sylvan theme of his 1918 pastel, *Light in the Woods* recalls this interest.

Maurice Prendergast in particular developed a highly personal style based on Impressionism that has more in common with post-Impressionist concerns than the work of his immediate contemporaries. As seen in the Sheldon's two watercolors and oil painting, Prendergast favored beach or park scenes full of congregated or promenading figures. A formalist more than a realist, his compositions became increasingly abstract, with his later works such as *Salem Park, Massachusetts* becoming flattened arrangements of shape and line punctuated with color.

As with Robert Henri, the work of Marsden Hartley and Joseph Stella is not thought of as being Impressionist, yet each of these

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early Modernists experimented initially with the style, the influence for both coming, coincidentally, from Italy. Hartley's *Autumn Lake and Hills* 1907, is done in a "stitch" brushwork he gleaned form the Italian painter Giovanni Segantini. Stella's *Mediterranean Landscape* was probably painted during a 1909-10 visit to Italy. In Rome, he encountered Antionio Mancini, who like Segantini, worked in an Impressionist style. *Mediterranean Landscape,* probably a portrait of Stella's native village Muro Lucano, displays a sun-drenched landscape done in separate brushstrokes of heavy impasto.

While American Impressionism continued well into the third decade of the 20th century with perfectly acceptable works such as Frederick Carl Frieseke's *Lady in Pink* 1923, and Willard Metcalf's *Birches in November* 1924, the powerful forces of modernism were inevitable and unavoidable. As the United States progressed into a preeminent position in the international art world, the distinct vocabulary of the Impressionist style became an almost forgotten, but persistent memory.

Suzanne T. Wise

CHECKLIST

Edward H. Barnard, *Blue Haze,* oil on canvas, 25⅛″ × 36″, F. M. Hall Collection, *Summer Rain,* oil on canvas, 25″ × 36⅛″, F. M. Hall Collection

John F. Carlson, *Winter Dream Days,* 1916, oil on canvas, 48⅛″ × 59¼″, Nebraska Art Association

Mary Cassatt, *Portrait of Mary Say Lawrence,* c. 1897, pastel on paper, 20¾″ × 17¼″, Nebraska Art Association, Gift of Mary Riepma Ross

William M. Chase, *Woman in Interior,* oil on panel, 15¼″ × 18¾″, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection

Bruce Crane, *Gray December Day,* 1918, oil on canvas, 12″ × 16″, F. M. Hall Collection

Arthur B. Davies, *Landscape,* 1887, oil on canvas, 8¼″ × 12″, Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

Charles Davis, *First Touch of Autumn,* oil on canvas, 20″ × 27″, F. M. Hall Collection

Edwin Dickinson, *Day's Lumber Yard in Winter,* 1915, oil on canvas mounted on board, 24⅜″ × 20⅜″, Nebraska Art Association, Gift of Mrs. Harold D. LeMar

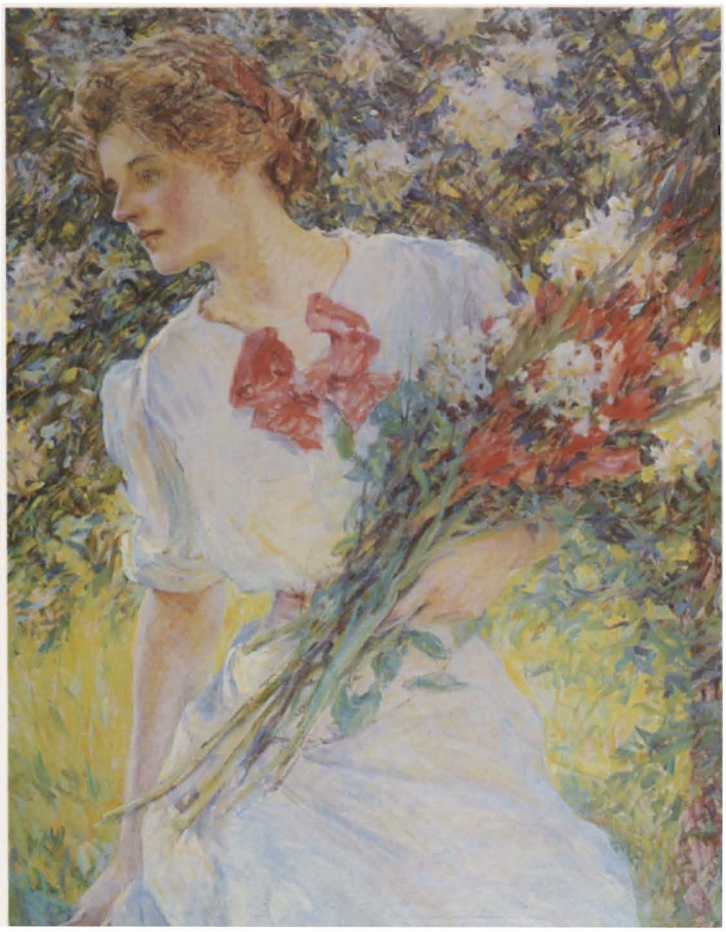
Frederick Carl Frieseke, *Lady in Pink,* 1923, oil on canvas, 31½″ × 32″, Nebraska Art Association, Gift of Charles H. Morrill, *Summer,* 1919, oil on canvas, 32″ × 32″, F. M. Hall Collection

William Glackens, *Mahone Bay,* 1910, oil on canvas, 26¼″ × 31¾″, F. M. Hall Collection

Lilian Westcott Hale, *Zeffy in Bed,* oil on canvas, 30⅛″ × 22″, Nebraska Art Association, Beatrice D. Rohman Fund

George O. Hart, *Coney Island,* 1915, watercolor on paper, 14″ × 20″, Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

Marsden Hartley, *Autumn Lake & Hills,* 1907, oil on canvas, 30″ × 25″, F. M. Hall Collection



Robert Reid *Summer,* c. 1900, oil on canvas

Theodore Robinson *Port Ben. Delaware & Hudson Canal,* 1893, oil on canvas

Robert Spencer *Crossroads,* oil on canvas

F. Childe Hassam, *Fifth Avenue, April Morning,* 1917, watercolor on paper, 11½″ × 10¾″, F. M. Hall Collection, *Gloucester Harbor,* c. 1894, oil on canvas, 13⅜″ × 25¼″, Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Collection

Robert Henri, *Light in the Woods,* 1919, pastel on paper, 12½″ × 20″, Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

George Inness, *The Farmhouse,* c. 1894, oil on canvas, 25¼″ × 30¼″, Nebraska Art Association, in Honor of Lorraine LeMar Rohman

Hugh Bolton Jones, *Meadow & Brook in June,* 1908, oil on canvas, 14″ × 20″, F. M. Hall Collection

Ernest Lawson, *Seacoast, Cape Cod,* 1915, oil on canvas, 25⅛″ × 30¼″, Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

Homer Dodge Martin, *Clam Diggers,* oil on canvas, 14½″ × 24″, F. M. Hall Collection

Gari Melchers, *Maternity,* c. 1896, oil on canvas, 30½″ × 27″, Nebraska Art Association, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Hirschl

Willard L. Metcalf, *Birches in November,* 1924, oil on canvas, 29¼″ × 33¼″, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection

Richard E. Miller, *Day Dreams,* oil on canvas, 34″ × 36″, F. M. Hall Collection

Elizabeth Nourse, *Meditation,* 1902, oil on canvas, 26½″ × 27½″, F. M. Hall Collection

Maurice Prendergast, *Beach at St. Malo,* watercolor on paper, 14½″ × 20⅝″, Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Collection, *Neponset Bay,* c. 1914, oil on canvas, 24½″ × 32¼″, F. M. Hall Collection, *Salem Park, Massachusetts,* 1918, watercolor on paper, 14″ × 19¾″, Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Collection

Edward Redfield, *Early March, Point Pleasant, Pennsylvania,* c. 1919, oil on canvas, 50″ × 56″, Nebraska Art Association, *Point Pleasant, Pennsylvania,* oil on canvas, 32″ × 40″, F. M. Hall Collection

Robert Reid, *Summer,* oil on canvas, 33⅞″ × 25⅞″, F. M. Hall Collection

Theodore Robinson, *Port Ben, Delaware & Hudson Canal,* 1893, oil on canvas, 18¼″ × 22¼″, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection

Morton Schamberg, *The Regatti,* 1907, oil on canvas, 10″ × 15″, F. M. Hall Collection

Everett Shinn, *Rue de l'école de medecine,* 1908, pastel on paper, 18″ × 28¼″, F. M. Hall Collection

Robert Spencer, *Crossroads,* oil on canvas, 25⅛″ × 30″, F. M. Hall Collection

Joseph Stella, *Mediterranean Landscape,* c. 1910, oil on canvas, 27⅞″ × 38¼″, Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

Louis C. Tiffany, *At Irvington on Hudson,* oil on cardboard, 18½″ × 24½″, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection

John H. Twachtman, *Bark & Schooner,* c. 1900, oil on canvas, 25″ × 25″, F. M. Hall Collection, *View of the Seine, Neuilly,* oil on panel, 13¼″ × 15 7/16″, Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

E. Ambrose Webster, *Street Scene,* 1906, oil on canvas, 17 7/16″ × 19¾″, Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection

J. Alden Weir, *Sunlight, Connecticut,* 1894, oil on canvas, 27″ × 34″, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection

Theodore Wendel, *Girl with Turkeys, Giverny,* 1886, oil on canvas, 23½″ × 29″, Nebraska Art Association, Gift of Beatrice D. Rohman Fund

Guy Wiggins, *December Blizzard on Fifth Avenue,* 1921, oil on canvas, 12″ × 16″, F. M. Hall Collection

Footnotes:

1. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, p. 121

2. William Gerdts, *American Impressionism,* New York: Abbeyville Press, 1984, pp. 11-21

3. It is unclear at this date which of the three paintings was in the 1894 exhibition of the Haydon Art Club (the forerunner of the Nebraska Art Association) held on the University of Nebraska campus. Willa Cather's exhibition review, published in the January 6, 1895 issue of the *Nebraska State Journal* singles out Robinson's "Scene on the Delaware and Hudson Canal" for particular praise. The review is published in its entirety in William M. Curtin, ed., *The World and the Parish, Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews 1893-1902. Vol. I,* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970, pp. 123-127

4. For the most complete account of Americans working in art colonies outside of Paris or Barbizon, see David Sellin, *Americans in Brittany and Normandy 1860-1910* (exhibition catalogue), Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1982

5. Gerdts, p. 142

6. The exception being Monet's late works at Giverny, particularly the extraordinary water-lily series, which he worked on until his death in 1926.

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