

Chloe Kembel

Dr. Egenolf

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### Americans, Impressed!

Upon entering the gallery, the tone was set perfectly by low lighting. The 13 paintings in this smaller collection were illuminated individually on cream walls; each work invited my attention without competing for it. The first wall I focused on bore the title of the exhibit, "Americans, Impressed!" in typewriter-style font. There was a single painting on the left, and a largely printed description on the right. The arrangement was simple and warmed by spotlight. In a matter of seconds my visual senses were colored by my sense of sound, as Ella Fitzgerald and Billy Holiday sang to me in rich velvety tones. I was whisked away from Texas A&M University in 2017, back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I saw the works of art before me from what felt like a more accurate view. The exhibit was an appropriate sample of the greater Impressionistic movement in America; each piece captured fleeting moments of daily experience utilizing color, texture, and light. These are classic elements of Impressionism, as stated in the information placard for this exhibit. The artwork in this exhibit felt like a depiction of or response to early-industrialized America. It also showcased a nostalgic perspective of an era that was slipping, or had already slipped, through America's fingers.

Starting at the initial wall and working my way counterclockwise, themes of nostalgia and ideal pastoral America were married surprisingly well with Guy

Carleton Wiggins's (1883-1962) portrayal of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century urban city. An entire wall was reserved for three pieces of his work, each a snapshot of a typical city scene in winter. They showed the hustle and bustle of city life tucked between the tall ominous buildings of New York City.

All three pieces were painted with muted darker tones, save a few vivid focal points such as the red wheel of a carriage, and red flags that contrasted with the white snow and dark buildings. This wall showed a different vein of American Impressionism. Instead of utilizing art as a means of escape from the urban industrialized America, as discussed in the exhibit information placard, Wiggins displayed the realities of harsh winter in the city. He did not show a warm pastoral scene, as contrasted with other the works surrounding. By including Wiggins's work, the exhibit aptly displayed the many facets of impressionism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. An arch to the left broke and encapsulated this theme.

Displayed on the following wall were Edward Henry Potthast's (1875-1927) "Beach Scene", John Henry Twatchman's (1853-1902) "Cloudy Afternoon" and Theodore Robinson's (1852-1896) "Apple Tree" that contrasted with one another in different ways. Potthast's "Beach Scene" was painted with oil on canvas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (information placard). It displays in vivid colors an idealistic all-American day at the beach.

The paint was applied with indistinct and textured strokes, giving the impression of waves crashing and washing up on the shore. The people were abstract, perhaps to suggest that this scene was a moment captured in time that will be recycled again at a new date and time. Generations change, but human nature

does not change, and the sea does not change. The day displayed in the piece was picturesque, and captured a common aspect of the human existence, pleasure. A pleasant scene with themes of rest, enjoyment, or peace will always be an idealistic one, in congruence with the consistency of human nature.

Shifting my gaze to Robinson's "Cloudy Afternoon," felt like taking a sip of coffee after drinking champagne. The change in temperature and flavor was very distinct. Drawn with pastel on paper in 1894, the pasture scene looked almost bare or incomplete, yet peaceful (information placard). This could have symbolized a fleeting era of simplicity that was being swept up and away by the industrial revolution and city migration of the 1890's.

To the proceeding left hung Robinson's "Apple Tree". This piece painted with oil on board in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was very classically beautiful (information placard). The colors of the apple tree positioned within the pasture were vivid greens and magentas. This work perhaps symbolized the beautiful nature of the country, an escape from harsh urban reality, or a dream of a lovelier place.

The single painting that hung on the wall beside the title, "Americans, Impressed!" was Childe Hassam's (1859-1935) "Spring in California, Pastoris" painted in oil on canvas in 1914 (information placard). As you approach, the painting framed in gold envelops you. The pastoral scene, about three feet tall and wide, depicts a large hill completely covered in green trees. These trees reach the full height of the canvas, save a small hint of light blue sky that peaks out from behind in the treetops in the left corner. Textured brush strokes communicate movement within the branches that is unmistakable. You could close your eyes and

imagine yourself there, feeling the same wind play with your hair that was playing among the branches in the depicted scene. The selection of this piece for the initial focal point of the exhibit was quite appropriate. I was immediately lost in the quintessential impressionistic tone and style. The work appeared nostalgic, full of air that is fresh and clean, in stark contrast to the polluted air of the cramped early 20<sup>th</sup> century city. This work sets the tone of the ideal, the dream, and the oasis.

On an adjacent wall hung another Hassam piece, "Le Louvre et le Pont Royal," painted with oil on canvas in 1897 (information placard). This work, about three feet tall and two feet wide, epitomized the esthetic beauty of a European city. The scene of Paris was truly lovely, working with pure white, soft blue, and light green tones. The thicker texture and broad-brush strokes gave movement to the water and stability to the architecture. This piece seemed to romanticize the European city as compared to its American counterpart.

The river looked clean, and the short, linear brush strokes made the water seem calm and reflective, shimmering with a blue-green hue. The steam rolling off the boat passing under the bridge looked white and pure, the sky was robins egg blue, and one easily perceived the air to be crisp as well. The choice of oil paint as a medium for this work was appropriate, adding to the essence of luxury, beauty, and status. To me, this was painted in stark contrast to a large American city in 1897. The piece seemed to have elevated the European city as the ideal cosmopolitan standard.

At the end the exhibit, I found myself standing in front a large painting of a young, beautiful mother holding her naked child. This oil painting on canvas was

smooth in texture, painted with broad visible brush strokes in 1909 (information placard). “Mother in Large Hat Holding her Nude Baby” by Mary Cassatt (1844-1896) struck me, bringing tears to my eyes. As a female, I connected to the work in a special way. The embrace seemed to capture so well the beauty of motherhood, the common overarching theme of a mother’s unconditional love for her child that spanned across generations and time.

Unlike many impressionistic paintings where the subject’s face is indistinct, the meticulous brush strokes Cassatt used to detail her face seemed to bring her story into focus. Her eyes made the most profound impression of all. She was looking not at her child, but off into the distance. Her mouth was softly set, not in a smile or a frown. In her eyes, I saw burden; like the weight of being a woman and a young mother had been borne on her shoulders. The look in her eyes was one that I am sure all mothers have had, one of being overwhelmed.

Her hat was painted with white, perhaps to represent the pure protective nature of motherhood. She holds her nude child close, beneath the wide brim of her hat. Nudity, in this context, could symbolize vulnerability, dependence, and innocence.

This painting provoked me to think about women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; the role of women was under much transformation. This painting aptly captured the beauty, reality, and responsibility of being a woman as well as a mother, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a woman, Cassatt added a crucial and uniquely female perspective to the Impressionism movement in America. Her work gave voice to the

female experience that would have otherwise been neglected, to the detriment of the art world and the world as a whole.