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27-7 AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM

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Edmund C. Tarbell, Preparing for the Matinee, 1907, Indianapolis Museum

This is Section 27 on Impressionism and this talk, number 7, is on American Impressionism. American Impressionism was derived from French Impressionism but it had a distinct character, it was rooted in realism, a love of landscape, and middle-class domestic life. Unlike their French counterparts, American Impressionists often sought harmony and idealism rather than fleeting urban modernity.

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James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket, 1875, 60.3 × 46.4 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, 1875, 60.3 × 46.4 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts

- James Abbot McNeil Whistler was an **American artist** who lived and worked most of his life in England and travelled between Paris and London.
- In 1855, aged 21, he trained in Paris in the the studio of Marc-Charles-Gabriel Gleyre (1806-1874) whose students included Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir and Alfred Sisley and so Whistler was influenced by and knowledgeable of the work of these artists.
- Whistler settled in London in 1863 and his pupils included Walter Sickert and Philip Wilson Steer who both developed forms of impressionism that are called English Impressionism.
- In 1871 he painted his ailing mother, Arrangement on Grey and Black, No. 1 (colloquially called Whistler's Mother) having adopted musical descriptions in his titles such as Symphony and Arrangement. He was rejecting Realism for Aestheticism and he chose to go out on the Thames at night with Walter Greaves (1846-1930) and paint his Nocturnes. This is a picture of the firework display at Cremorne Gardens, an upmarket pleasure garden.
- Visitors could stroll through landscaped walks lit by thousands of coloured lamps, dine in pavilions, and watch open-air concerts, fireworks, balloon ascents, and acrobatic displays. There were lawns, fountains, and even a jetty for river arrivals — the Thames itself forming part of the spectacle.
- But its tone quickly shifted. By the 1850s, Cremorne had become synonymous

with bohemian and decadent nightlife, attracting artists, adventurers, courtesans, and thrill-seekers. It offered music halls, dance platforms, and late-night entertainments that outraged local moralists who succeeded in getting its licence revoked in 1877.

NOTES

- Whistler arrived in Paris in 1855, aged 21, and moved to London in 1859 which he adopted as his home.
- In 1866 Whistler decided to travel to Valparaiso, Chile to fight the Spanish. Scholars have puzzle over his motivation. Whistler stated he was asked by some South Americans as a 'West Point' man and he was very proud of his military training but, unlike his brother, he had never fought. He may have thought this the opportunity to display his military prowess as a swashbuckling Southern gentleman (even though he was born in New England). Whatever the reason Whistler's painted his first three night paintings while he was there. He later, thanks to the suggestion of his patron Frederick Leyland he re-titled them 'nocturnes'.
- On his return him contributed Symphony in White, No. 3 but critics in England and France were not sympathetic and between 1868 and 1870 he showed only a single painting at the Royal Academy and none in France. He experimented with classical nudes in drapes but criticized himself for his lack of formal training in the life class. He had lost his sense of artistic direction. He was short of money, despised the English and began a major family crisis by arguing with his brother-in-law and pushing him through a plate glass window. In 1869 his half-brother George died.
- In 1871 he painted his ailing mother, Arrangement on Grey and Black, No. 1 (colloquially called Whistler's Mother) and this to have been a turning point. At the same time he was rejecting Realism for Aestheticism and he chose to go out on the Thames at night with Walter Greaves (1846-1930) and paint his Nocturnes. Greaves was a neighbour who was a boat builder and waterman and his father had been the boatman for J. M. W. Turner.
- Whistler painted several more nocturnes over the next ten years, many of the River Thames and of Cremorne Gardens, a pleasure park famous for its frequent fireworks displays, which presented a novel challenge to paint. In his maritime nocturnes, Whistler used paint he had thinned with copal, turpentine and linseed oil, creating what he called a 'sauce', which he applied in thin, transparent layers, wiping it away until he was satisfied. To

- this ground he applied lightly flicked colour to suggest ships, lights, and shore line. Some of the Thames paintings also show compositional and thematic similarities with the Japanese prints of Hiroshige.
- Whistler was short and slim with a curling moustache and he often wore a monocle and dressed like a dandy. He was self-confident, arrogant and selfish and enjoyed shocking his friends. He had a biting wit and on one occasion, young Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) attended one of Whistler's dinners, and hearing his host make some brilliant remark, apparently said, "I wish I'd said that", to which Whistler riposted, "You will, Oscar, you will!" In fact, Wilde did repeat in public many witticisms created by Whistler.

THE WHISTLER V. RUSKIN TRIAL

- This painting gave rise to one of the central artistic controversy of the Victorian period, known as the Whistler v. Ruskin trial. The trial tells us a lot about how the Victorians regarded art and the nature of the changes Whistler helped bring about.
- This painting and the next were exhibited in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, the year it opened. John Ruskin reviewed Whistler's work in his publication Fors Clavigera on July 2, 1877. Ruskin praised Burne-Jones, while he attacked Whistler:
- For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay [founder of the Grosvenor Gallery] ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.
- Critics by convention did not criticise paintings as they knew the artist had to make a living. If they did not like a painting they ignored it or made a critical comment alongside some positive points.
- Whistler, seeing the attack in the newspaper, replied to his friend George Boughton, "It is the most debased style of criticism I have had thrown at me yet." He then went to his solicitor and drew up a writ for libel which was served to Ruskin. Whistler hoped to recover £1,000 plus the costs of the action. The case came to trial the following year after delays caused by Ruskin's bouts of mental illness, while Whistler's financial condition continued to deteriorate. It was heard at the Queen's Bench of the High

Court on November 25 and 26 of 1878.

- Although, we do not have a transcript of the Whistler v. Ruskin trial sufficient reports were published to enable it to be reconstructed.
- When asked 'Are those figures on the top of the bridge intended for people?'
- · Whistler replied 'They are just what you like.'
- · When the judge asked if it was a barge beneath the bridge,
- Whistler replied 'Yes, I am very much flattered at your seeing that. The picture is simply a representation of moonlight. My whole scheme was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour.'
- Whistler stressed the colour rather than a harmony of form and the form is suppressed by the overall similarity in tone and hue; with the exception of the gold dots the painting is a wash of blue, in places a thin wash that allows the canvas to show. Whistler mixed large quantities of the predominant tone that he called his 'sauce', and although he started on an easel, he often had to throw the canvas on the floor to stop the sauce running off. The sky and water were rendered by 'great sweeps of the brush of exactly the right tone.'

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket



Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *The Cup of Tea*, c. 1880-81, 92.4 × 65.4 cm, The Met, New York

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), The Cup of Tea, c. 1880-81, 92.4 \times 65.4 cm, The Met, New York

- Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), The Cup of Tea is one of her finest explorations of modern womanhood. Painted in Paris during her most Impressionist phase, it depicts her sister Lydia seated in a richly furnished parlour, lifting a delicate porcelain cup. The scene, apparently simple, is a masterclass in compositional balance and tonal harmony: soft rose, lavender and cream tones interplay with the reflective surfaces of tea service and silk. Cassatt's brushwork is light and confident, capturing the shimmer of fabrics and the intimacy of a private moment.
- Cassatt, born into a prosperous Pennsylvania family, had come to Europe in the 1860s to study art seriously—something denied to most women in America. After years of academic training in Paris and copying Old Masters in the Louvre, her encounter with Edgar Degas in the late 1870s transformed her direction. Degas admired her draughtsmanship and invited her to exhibit with the Impressionists. The Cup of Tea belongs to this period, when she was investigating the domestic rituals of upper-class women—subjects she understood from within but treated with psychological depth rather than sentimentality.
- At the time, Lydia Cassatt was suffering from a chronic illness, and Mary painted her repeatedly with tenderness and restraint. The tea ritual symbolised refinement and social decorum, but in Mary's hands it became a modern emblem of female presence and self-possession. Exhibited in the 1881

Impressionist exhibition, the painting was praised for its **elegance and subtlety**, securing Cassatt's position as the leading American in the Impressionist circle.

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Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *The Child's Bath*, 1893, 100.3 × 66.1 cm, Art Institute of Chicago

Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), *The Child's Bath*, 1893, $100.3 \times 66.1 \text{ cm}$, Art Institute of Chicago

- The Child's Bath was painted a decade later and you can see how her brushwork has developed. It displays a new structural solidity and compositional discipline. The forms are clearly modelled, colours are more saturated, and patterned textiles—particularly the striped dress and floral rug—create a striking surface rhythm. Cassatt had studied Japanese woodblock prints shown at the 1890 exhibition of Japanese art in Paris, and their influence is unmistakable in the flattened perspective, high viewpoint and strong outlines.
- The scene shows a mother tenderly bathing her small daughter, an everyday act transformed into a sacred ritual of care. The models were thought to be one of Cassatt's favourite professional models, along with her niece Katherine, who often posed for the child. Yet the figures are deliberately universal rather than portrait-like; Cassatt sought to depict the dignity and quiet concentration of maternal love rather than individual identity.
- The elevated vantage point and cropped framing indeed recall the compositional daring of Edgar Degas, whose friendship and guidance had been crucial to Cassatt's earlier development. However, by the 1890s she had made these techniques her own, using them not to convey voyeuristic observation—as Degas sometimes did—but intimacy and empathy. Exhibited at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, The Child's Bath was immediately hailed as Cassatt's masterpiece, embodying her mature synthesis of Impressionist colour, Japanese design, and a profoundly human subject.

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John Singer Sargent (1856– 1925), Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, 1885–86, 174 × 153.7 cm, Tate Britain, London

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885–86, 174 × 153.7 cm, Tate Britain, London

- John Singer Sargent's father was an American eye surgeon but when Sargent's older sister died aged two his mother (Mary née Singer) had a breakdown and they travelled through Europe for the rest of their lives. Sargent was born in Florence in 1856. He had no official schooling but grew up speaking fluent English, French, Italian and German and accomplished in art, music and literature.
- He began his art studies with Carolus-Duran a French portrait painter with bold techniques and modern teaching methods. He taught painting alla prima or au premier coup (at the first touch) which involved working directly on the canvas with a loaded brush derived from Diego Velázquez.
- In 1874, he gained entry to the École des Beaux-Arts at his first attempt and won a silver prize. However, his Portrait of Madame X (1884, actually Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau) caused a scandal rather than the positive publicity he was expecting.
- Sargent moved to the **Cotswolds** to escape the scandal and decided to paint his **friend's daughters** in the garden. The two young girls who are lighting lanterns are 11-year-old **Dolly** [Barnard] on the **left** and 7-year-old **Polly** [Barnard] on the **right**. It is a masterly recreation of the subtle evening glow just before sunset. If you look closely you will see the painting consists of what look like **quick**, **effortless brushstrokes** but these were the result of **hard work**. To capture the right light, he painted outdoors between August and early

November over two years in the short period between 6:35 and 7:00 in the evening on the days when the light was just right. He would often scrape all the paint off the canvas after a day's painting. Over the months the flowers died as summer turned to autumn and he had to replace them with artificial flowers. Also, while working on it he changed the shape of the canvas by cutting two feet, about 60 cm, from the left side.

- Sargent described it later as a 'fearfully difficult subject ... Paints are not bright enough & then the effect only lasts ten minutes.' The seemingly effortless solution is the result of Sargent's alla prima technique and his willingness to scrape off and redo his efforts again and again. Cross-sectional analysis of the paint shows that he even painted wet paint directly on top of wet paint for the final touches on the faces, something few other artists would ever attempt. The painting also has an unusual perspective—are we looking down on the girls or are we at their eye level—it seems to be both.
- It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1887 and caused some controversy. Although Sargent was combining elements of Pre-Raphaelite painting, the popular fashion for aestheticism and beauty with French Impressionism many critics thought it was too French, too 'Frenchified' and it was painted by some 'clever foreigner'. Many critics and artists thought that Impressionism was a 'mistaken idea' and was 'shallow, pretentious and untrue'.
- One critic wrote 'Could we fancy anyone a hundred years hence caring to possess such a picture as this'. It is now, of course, one of the most popular paintings in the Tate. At the time many leading artists did realise its quality and it was controversially purchased by the Chantrey Bequest, which was administered by the Royal Academy, and later permanently placed in the Tate. Sargent had a natural talent and became the most successful portrait painter. After his death, he was largely ignored by art historians until recently when his reputation has continued to grow.

NOTES

 He was considered the 'leading portrait painter of his generation' specialising in Edwardian aristocracy. He was prolific and painted about 900 oil paintings and 2,000 watercolours. He was a master of drawing with the brush and his portraits were painted in the grand manner but his landscapes were influenced by Impressionism.

- Chantrey Bequest. On his death Sir Francis Legatt Chantrey (1781-1841) left £150,000 to the Royal Academy for the purchase of 'works of Fine Art ... executed in Great Britain'. The first purchase was made in 1877 following the death of Lady Chantrey. Although the Trustees of the RA still decide on the selection of the purchases, the exhibition and preservation of the collection has become the responsibility of the Tate Gallery.
- It divided opinion at the time and 'artists almost came to blows over this picture'. In 1887, The Pall Mall Gazette (a paper widely read by the middle classes) featured Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose in the category "Pictures You Would Least Like to Live With", as voted by the readers. However, in a write-up of the show in the Magazine of Art, the painting was praised as an 'extremely original and daring essay in decoration.'
- There have been many interpretations of the paintings meaning. It has been read as a botanical allegory of flower-maidens, with subtle sexual overtones of lighting a lantern (slang in French for vagina), and the taper as a symbolic paintbrush (also used to hand-pollinate flowers) used to illuminate the paper of the lantern in the same way that a painter uses a paintbrush to create an image on a canvas.
- The unusual title comes from a popular song 'Ye Shepherds Tell Me' (also called 'The Wreath') by Joseph Mazzinghi.

BIOGRAPHY SARGENT

• A natural talent who worked hard with concentration and stamina. He stood out with his fine manners, perfect French and consummate skill and had early success. When he gave up portrait painting, he said, 'Painting a portrait would be quite amusing if one were not forced to talk while working...What a nuisance having to entertain the sitter and to look happy when one feels wretched.' He was a lifelong bachelor and recent research shows he was a complex and passionate man, with his art being shaped by a sexual identity that included affairs with both men and women. His reputation declined towards the end of his life and he was dismissed as an anachronism. Camille Pissarro described him as 'an adroit performer', Walter Sickert talked about 'Sargentolatry'. This criticism of Sargent has been linked to his sympathy towards the Jews and he was criticised as 'the painter of the Jews' in the 1890s. Since the 1950s his reputation has steadily increased.

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John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), Simplon Pass: Reading, 1911, 71 × 91.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), Simplon Pass: Reading, 1911, 71 × 91.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- This is Sargent's Simplon Pass: Reading and it belongs to the later, freer phase of his career, when he had largely abandoned society portraiture—the field that had made him internationally famous. By 1907 Sargent had grown weary of the social demands and constraints of portrait commissions, declaring himself "sick of the tyranny of the pose." He turned instead to watercolours and landscapes painted during his travels across Europe, often featuring family and friends engaged in relaxed, everyday activities.
- The Simplon Pass series was produced during a summer expedition to the Swiss-Italian border, a favourite sketching ground. Two women rest in a sunlit Alpine meadow, one absorbed in a book, the other reclining against the grass. The figures are almost submerged within a blaze of light and colour—the impression of atmosphere and texture overtaking formal structure.
- The sitters are Sargent's niece Rose-Marie Ormond Michel and her companion, possibly her sister Reine, both of whom frequently accompanied him on painting excursions. The work was not commissioned; like most of Sargent's late works, it was made for his own pleasure and artistic exploration.
- Sargent's handling of paint is exuberant and fluid: broad, confident strokes
 evoke the flicker of sunlight and the tactile richness of the Alpine grass. Here
 the virtuoso society painter becomes a lyrical interpreter of natural light and
 leisure, transforming a simple moment of reading into a meditation on repose,
 perception, and the fleeting radiance of summer.

REFERENCES



William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), The Tenth Street Studio, 1880, 85.7 × 111.8 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art

William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *The Tenth Street Studio*, 1880, 85.7 × 111.8 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art

- William Merritt Chase's *The Tenth Street Studio* is both a **dazzling display of painterly bravura** and a declaration of artistic identity. Painted when **Chase was thirty-one**, it captures **his New York studio** at 51 West 10th Street—the epicentre of American art in the late nineteenth century. The picture is at once a portrait, a self-promotion, and a manifesto for modern American art.
- Chase had trained at the National Academy of Design in New York and then, crucially, at the Royal Academy in Munich from 1872 to 1878. In Munich he absorbed the dark, dramatic palette and loose brushwork of the Munich School, particularly from Wilhelm Leibl and Karl von Piloty.
- Returning to the United States in 1878, he brought with him a continental sophistication that impressed his contemporaries. His style, with its bravura handling and rich tonal harmonies, represented a bridge between European realism and the emerging American Impressionism.
- The model seated at the centre of the composition is thought to be a **professional model** or possibly one of Chase's friends, posed amid an extravagant clutter of exotic objects, paintings, and props. The opulent interior—with Turkish rugs, Japanese fans, and gleaming frames—was deliberately theatrical. Chase painted his studio because it embodied his artistic persona: cosmopolitan, cultivated, and modern.
- At the time, he was **already well known**, teaching at the Art Students League and admired for his wit, elegance, and technical mastery. The Tenth Street

Studio thus celebrates both the artist's environment and his confident emergence as a leading figure in the new American art scene.

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William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), At The Seaside, c. 1892, 50.8 × 86.4 cm, The Met, New York

William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), At The Seaside, c. 1892, 50.8×86.4 cm, The Met, New York

- Ten years later Chase's palette has lightened and he is clearly more influenced by the French Impressionists. Much of this transformation occurred during the summers he spent teaching and painting at **Shinnecock** (pronounced "SHIN-acock") Hills, near Southampton, Long Island, where he founded the Shinnecock Summer School of Art in 1891.
- The beach depicted is Shinnecock itself—a windswept, sunlit stretch of sand that became central to Chase's late landscapes. Here he portrayed his wife,
 Alice Gerson Chase, and their young children, who frequently appeared in his domestic and outdoor scenes. Their elegant yet informal presence epitomised the genteel leisure of America's prosperous class in the 1890s.
- At the Seaside was not a commissioned work but part of Chase's exploration
 of modern life in a distinctly American setting. His rapid, confident brushwork
 and subtle control of tone evoke the shimmer of sunlight on sand and sea,
 capturing both the immediacy of observation and a sense of serene
 timelessness.
- By 1892 Chase was at the height of his fame—an influential teacher, a
 founding member of the Ten American Painters, and widely admired for his
 urbane charm and virtuosity. The Ten American Painters were a group of
 American Impressionists who broke away from the conservative art
 establishment in 1897 to exhibit independently. Their exhibitions ran from 1898
 to 1919, mostly in New York and Boston, and were crucial in establishing

American Impressionism as a distinct and respected movement.

NOTES

- The original Ten American Painters were:
 - · John Henry Twachtman
 - · J. Alden Weir
 - · Childe Hassam
 - · Willard Leroy Metcalf
 - · Robert Reid
 - · Thomas Wilmer Dewing
 - Edward Simmons
 - Edmund C. Tarbell
 - Joseph DeCamp
 - Frank Weston Benson
- Later members (after deaths or withdrawals) included William Merritt Chase, though the group kept its name "The Ten."
- Their exhibitions ran from 1898 to 1919, mostly in New York and Boston, and were crucial in establishing American Impressionism as a distinct and respected movement. They represented a refinement of Impressionism less radical than Monet's group, more harmonized and genteel, suited to upper-class American taste.

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John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902), Arques-la-Bataille, 1885, 152.4 × 200.3 cm, The Met, New York

John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902), Arques-la-Bataille, 1885, 152.4 × 200.3 cm, The Met, New York

- One of the original Ten American Painters was John Henry Twachtman and this painting was an important moment in his development. By 1885, Twachtman, born in Cincinnati in 1853, was completing his European training and beginning to define a uniquely American approach to Impressionism. He had studied at the National Academy of Design in New York, but it was his four years at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris under the academic painter Gustave Courtois, supplemented by intensive work in the studios of Parisian artists, that shaped his early technical skill and compositional understanding.
- Arques-la-Bataille (pronounced "ark lah bah-TIE-ee") shows a small Norman town in northern France, perched on the River Arques, with its château ruins visible in the distance. Twachtman was drawn to the region for its tranquil landscapes, historic architecture, and the quality of the northern light, which suited his sensitive palette. During his time in France, he painted en plein air, experimenting with loose brushwork and atmospheric effects, which would later inform his distinctive, lyrical landscapes in the United States.
- Although relatively unknown in America at this stage, Twachtman's European training gave him the credentials and confidence to emerge as a leading figure in the American Impressionist movement upon his return. He went back to New York in 1886, shortly after painting Arques-la-Bataille, and soon settled in Greenwich, Connecticut, where he joined other progressive artists exploring modern techniques and subjects. This painting thus captures the transitional

phase between Twachtman's European formation and his establishment as a major voice in American Impressionism, bridging formal training with a personal, emotive response to landscape.

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Theodore Robinson (1852–1896), *La Débâcle*, 1892, 45.7×55.9 cm, Scripps College, Claremont, California

Theodore Robinson (1852–1896), *La Débâcle*, 1892, 45.7×55.9 cm, Scripps College, Claremont, California

- Theodore Robinson's La Débâcle (pronounced lah day-BAHKL") represents a
 mature stage in the artist's career, when he had fully embraced the ideas of
 French Impressionism while developing a distinctly personal approach to
 landscape.
- He was born in 1852 in upstate New York and trained initially at the National
 Academy of Design in New York before travelling to Paris in 1876 to study at
 the École des Beaux-Arts under Carolus-Duran, and later with other French
 masters. During this period, he became closely associated with the
 Impressionists, particularly Claude Monet, whose work profoundly influenced
 him.
- La Débâcle was painted in Vétheuil, along the Seine near Monet's home, where Robinson spent summers in the early 1890s. The title, can be translated as the break-up or the thaw and refers to the breaking up of ice on the river in early spring. Robinson loose brushwork, delicate colour harmonies, and rhythmic composition reflect his absorption of French Impressionism techniques. The woman his favourite model Marie.
- At the time, Robinson was moderately well known, exhibiting in Paris and occasionally in New York, but he had not yet achieved wide recognition. His connection with Monet and his innovative handling of light and water would later earn him a reputation as one of the foremost American Impressionists.

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Childe Hassam (1859–1935), Rainy Day, Fifth Avenue, 1893, 94.1 × 50.8 cm, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA

Childe Hassam (1859–1935), *Rainy Day, Fifth Avenue*, 1893, 94.1 × 50.8 cm, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA

- Childe Hassam was another of the Ten American Painters. Rainy Day, Fifth
 Avenue belongs to the period when he was establishing himself as a leading
 interpreter of modern urban life in the United States.
- Born in 1859 in Dorchester, Massachusetts, Hassam had trained briefly at the
 Lowell Institute in Boston and then with local painters, but he was largely selftaught. A formative period came during his trips to Europe in the late 1880s,
 especially Paris and London, where he absorbed the techniques of the French
 Impressionists, particularly their attention to light, atmosphere, and fleeting
 effects of weather.
- This painting depicts New York's Fifth Avenue, one of the city's busiest streets, under a soft rain, with pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages reflected on wet pavement. Hassam painted it from life, capturing the dynamism and transitory moods of the urban environment, a subject that would define much of his career. The location of Fifth Avenue in the 1890s symbolised both the elegance and the modernity of New York, and Hassam was drawn to its visual and social vibrancy.
- By 1893, Hassam was moderately known in artistic circles, exhibiting with the Society of American Artists, but he had yet to achieve the acclaim that would come later. His synthesis of European Impressionist technique with American subjects helped him gain recognition in the 1900s, particularly after he joined the Ten American Painters in 1898. Rainy Day, Fifth Avenue exemplifies his

mature urban Impressionism: observant, atmospheric, and infused with a subtle lyricism that celebrates the rhythm and energy of modern city life.

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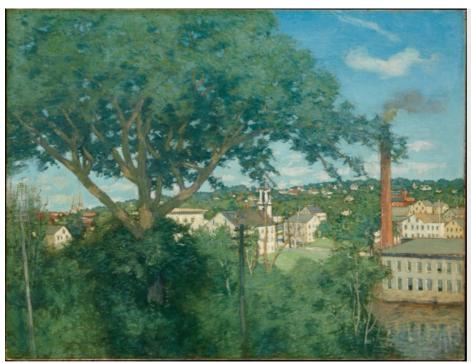
Childe Hassam (1859–1935), Allies Day, May 1917, 1917, 167.6 × 76.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

Childe Hassam (1859–1935), Allies Day, May 1917, 1917, 167.6 \times 76.2 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

- This is Hassam's Allies Day, May 1917 showing his late, mature phase, when he
 embraced this luminous, patriotic Impressionism that reflected both his
 technical mastery and his engagement with contemporary events.
- By 1917, Hassam was based in New York City, having established himself as one of the foremost American painters of urban life and landscapes.
- Unlike his earlier works of the 1890s, like the one we have just seen *Rainy Day*, *Fifth Avenue*, this is **monumental in scale and celebratory in tone**, commemorating the **First World War** and the patriotic parades that filled Manhattan.
- By this time his style wass bolder, with more vibrant colours and a freer handling of paint, while retaining his characteristic attention to light and weather effects.
- Flags and banners dominate the composition, fluttering across the canvas in rhythmic, almost abstract patterns. Hassam's brushwork is confident and energetic, conveying the movement and excitement of the parade while maintaining clarity of form and narrative.
- Hassam was by then very well known, a founding member of the Ten American Painters, and widely admired for his contributions to American Impressionism. Anecdotally, he was known for his urbane charm, meticulous dress, and devotion to walking the streets of New York to observe everyday life, habits he maintained even when documenting grand patriotic events.

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J. Alden Weir (1852–1919), The Factory Village, 1897, 73.7 × 96.6 cm, The Met, New York

J. Alden Weir (1852–1919), *The Factory Village*, 1897, 73.7 \times 96.6 cm, The Met, New York

- J. Alden Weir's was another founder of the Ten American Painters. This is *The Factory Village*, painted during the mature stage.
- He was born in 1852 in Connecticut and trained at the National Academy of Design in New York before travelling to Paris in 1874 to study at the École des Beaux-Arts under Jean-Léon Gérôme and, more importantly, to paint en plein air in the Barbizon School style. Very similar to Theodore Robinson but two years later. By the mid-1890s, Weir had returned to the United States, teaching and painting in Connecticut and New York, and was increasingly drawn to rural New England scenes, including small industrial towns.
- The Factory Village depicts a modest mill town—thought to be somewhere along the Housatonic River in Connecticut or Massachusetts—where the factory and surrounding houses are integrated into the landscape, softened by the atmospheric effects of early morning or late afternoon light. The inclusion of the factory is significant: Weir sought to document the changing face of rural America, where industry and nature coexisted, and to explore how human activity could be harmonised within a natural setting.
- By 1897, Weir was moderately well known through exhibitions with the Society of American Artists and the National Academy of Design, though his reputation would grow significantly in the following decade as he became a founding member of the Ten American Painters and a key figure in the American Impressionist movement.

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Willard Metcalf (1858–1925), May Night, 1906, 99.5 × 91.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

Willard Metcalf (1858–1925), May Night, 1906, 99.5 \times 91.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

- Willard Metcalf's May Night was a high point in his career as one of America's foremost Impressionists.
- · He born in 1858 in Lowell, Massachusetts,
- He trained at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, studying under Carolus-Duran like John Singer Sargent and Theodore Robinson.
- By 1906, Metcalf had **returned to the United States** and was living and working in the **Cornish Art Colony in New Hampshire**, a hub for artists seeking both natural beauty and the camaraderie of like-minded painters.
- May Night shows the Fiske House in Cornish, illuminated by the soft glow of lanterns under a tranquil spring evening sky. The choice of a night scene was unusual for American Impressionists, but Metcalf was fascinated by the subtle effects of twilight and artificial light on architecture and landscape. The painting captures both the serenity of rural New England and the quiet drama of evening light, highlighting his mastery of mood and atmosphere.
- At this stage, Metcalf was well known within artistic circles and had begun to achieve national recognition. He exhibited frequently with the Society of American Artists and the National Academy of Design, and by the early 1900s he had become a leading figure in American Impressionism. May Night is in his mature style: luminous, atmospheric, and intimate, combining the

naturalistic observation of light with a poetic sensitivity to place and moment. This painting **helped solidify his reputation** as a master of landscape and nocturnal scenes in the United States.

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Edmund C. Tarbell (1862–1938), Preparing for the Matinee, 1907, 115.5 × 90.1 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art

Edmund C. Tarbell (1862–1938), Preparing for the Matinee, 1907, 115.5 \times 90.1 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art

- Edmund C. Tarbell's Preparing for the Matinee is in his mature style as the leading figure of the Boston School of American Impressionism. He was born in 1862 in West Groton, Massachusetts and trained at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, under Otto Grundmann, and later at the Académie Julian in Paris, where he absorbed both academic discipline and the freer brushwork of the French Impressionists. By 1907, he was a respected teacher at the Boston Museum School and had established himself as a prominent portraitist and painter of elegant domestic interiors.
- The painting shows a young woman, dressed in a stylish gown, adjusting her hat and preparing to attend the matinee at a Boston theatre. She is believed to be one of Tarbell's frequent models or a member of the Boston social set he often portrayed, though her precise identity is uncertain. Tarbell chose such subjects deliberately: he was fascinated by the refinement, poise, and quiet grace of women in private, everyday moments, seeing them as both a vehicle for exploring light, colour, and texture, and as a reflection of the cultivated society around him.
- Tarbell used **Impressionist brushwork** to lend texture to the model's feathered hat and elegant blouse, but showed off his fine drawing skills in the softer approach to her hands and face. By Impressionist brushwork I mean the use of short, visible, and often thick strokes of paint applied in a loose and spontaneous manner to capture the essence of a subject rather than its fine

details.

- The picture at the upper right of the canvas reveals one of Tarbell's major influences. It is the corner of a painting by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan Vermeer, who was renowned for quiet interior scenes.
 Rediscovered by artists in the early twentieth century, Vermeer had a significant influence on the Boston School painters.
- He was one of the founding Ten American Painters as was the next artist...

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preparing for the Matinee



Robert Reid (1862–1929), The Mirror, c. 1910, 94.9 × 77.2 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.

Robert Reid (1862–1929), *The Mirror*, c. 1910, 94.9 \times 77.2 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.

- Robert Reid.
- This is *The Mirror* showing his mature approach to elegant, intimate interiors. Born in 1862 in Philadelphia, he trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under Thomas Anshutz and later studied in Paris at the Académie Julian, like Edmund Tarbell. By 1910, he had returned to the United States, living primarily in New York and he became known for his refined portraiture and interiors capturing women in contemplative or domestic moments.
- The Mirror shows a young woman holding a mirror and standing in front of a fashionable screen. We don't know who she is but she represents the fashionable, cultivated women of new York.
- The composition is deliberately stylised: the inclusion of fans, textiles, and the screen behind her hints at Japanese design motifs, reflecting the continuing popularity of Japonisme among American and European artists of the period. Reid's interest in such decorative elements also allowed him to explore colour harmonies, pattern, and the interplay of reflected light.

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robert Reid - The Mirror - Google Art Project.jpg

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Eadweard Muybridge, Woman Walking Downstairs from The Human Figure in Motion, 1887

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Nude Descending a Staircase*, *No. 2*, 1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2,* 1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art

- By 1910, Post-Impressionism had begun to influence American artists, though its full impact arrived with the 1913 Armory Show, which introduced modern European art on a large scale.
- The most controversial work in the show was Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2, famously described by a critic as an "explosion in a shingle factory". The painting depicted a fragmented, machine-like figure in motion, which confused and outraged many visitors who could not see a traditional "nude" and struggled to interpret the abstract composition. Some interpreted it as a sign of the artist having a "brain malfunction".
- The painting combined elements of Cubism and Futurism to show a figure in motion through a series of overlapping, abstract panels.
- (CLICK) Duchamp also recognised the influence of Eadweard Muybridge's
 Woman Walking Downstairs from his 1887 picture series, published as The
 Human Figure in Motion. By 1913, the picture world was changing fast, movies
 were developing rapidly from Nickelodeons to movie palaces.
- Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 became a symbol of the radical nature of modern art and sparked intense debate about what art should be and it signalled the end of Impressionism in America..

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2



27-07 AMERICAN IMPRESSIONISM

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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Mary Cassatt, The Cup of Tea, c. 1880-81, The Met, New York

- I end with Cassatt's *The Cup of Tea*: immediately recognisable, distinctly American and quintessentially Impressionist.
- But what happened next? I said Duchamp's work signalled the end but American Impressionism influenced American visual culture well into the 1930s.
- European Post-Impressionism, **Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism** began to dominate American avant-garde circles in the 1910s and 1920s, but American Impressionism didn't vanish entirely. Instead, it evolved alongside these movements and influencing artists who wanted to balance modernist experimentation with familiar representation.
- At the same time, uniquely American developments emerged, such as the **Ashcan School**, which captured urban grit and social realism, reflecting the **dynamism of New York** and other cities. But that is a talk for another day.
- That brings me to the end and thank you once agin for your time and attention.

