

Americans in Paris

by Gail Leggio

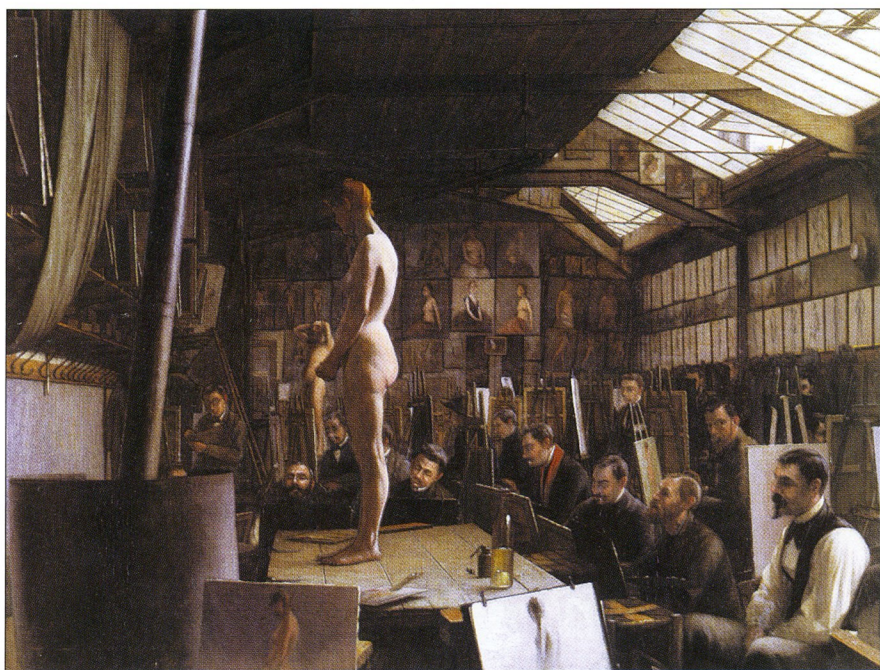
There is a paradox at the heart of “Americans in Paris, 1860–1900,” the lively exhibition that opened at the National Gallery, London, earlier this year before traveling to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The artists who left the United States after the Civil War to settle, briefly or long term, in Paris were doing more than pursuing individual careers; they were transforming American art itself. The process was hardly a simple one, and this survey points up how disparate their aims and experiences were. Other interesting exhibitions could be built around Rome, London and Munich, and many artists included here spent significant time in these European cities. But Paris offered both classical training and a cutting-edge contemporary art scene. Paris was self-consciously modern. Baron Haussmann’s grand scheme of wide boulevards and city parks was sweeping away the old city’s medieval past and making the old world look excitingly new. The atmosphere proved especially intoxicating to Americans; by the 1890s they constituted the largest and best-organized foreign artist community in the city.

Traveling to Europe was not a new phenomenon. The expatriate history painter Benjamin West replaced Sir Joshua Reynolds as president of the Royal Academy in London in 1792, and neoclassical sculptor Hiram Powers settled in Florence in 1837. While Europe, especially Italy, was sacred ground for some Americans, others—notably Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School painters—were wary of its corrupting influence and saw their destiny in depicting the American Eden. During the period covered by this exhibition, American artists saw their options differently: patriotism did not mandate isolationism, nor did embracing Europe mean adopting a subservient attitude toward the old master tradition. Rodolphe Rapetti writes in his catalogue essay that the “American artist was...faced with a choice between provincialism and internationalism, rather than between American art and French art.”¹ James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt and William Merritt Chase all developed career strategies that balanced American identity with international success, and all became truly cosmopolitan.

Sargent (1856–1925) is crucial to any examination of this subject. Born of American parents in Florence, he arrived in Paris at age 18 and began studying under Carolus-Duran. He visited the United States for the first time in 1876, spurred by a requirement that he do so to retain his American citizenship. After the scandal of *Madame X* (1883–84) he moved to England to restart his career and remained there, although he painted many Americans and promoted his work aggressively in the United States. His friend Vernon Lee called him “a sort of completely accentless mongrel” with “rather French, faubourg sort of

manners.”² In his appreciation of Sargent, Henry James begins by asking: “Is Mr. Sargent in very fact an American painter?” Answering with a characteristic circumlocution, the novelist adds: “when today we look for ‘American art’ we find it mainly in Paris. When we find it out of Paris, we at least find a great deal of Paris in it.”³ One could also ask the question how French Sargent is. The eight paintings in the exhibition offer some clues.

Sargent’s *Portrait of Carolus-Duran* (1879) is an already assured portrait of an elegant bohemian, his beautifully tapered hands emerging from ruffled cuffs, the black hair and beard framing a sensitive face. Carolus-Duran kept this picture by his most successful pupil throughout his life. Sargent’s teacher was relatively uninterested in drawing and taught his students to think in paint, to capture what Carter Ratcliff calls “delicate inflections in the flow of light.”⁴ Sargent learned this lesson well and followed Carolus-Duran in his idolatry of Velázquez. The vogue in nineteenth-century France for the Spanish old masters was the subject of an illuminating 2003 exhibition at the Metropolitan,⁵ which included a lavish American coda featuring Sargent’s homage to Velázquez’s 1656 *Las Meninas*. Sargent had copied the Spanish work at the Prado and used it as a model for *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882). Sargent depicts a dark interior, the Paris apartment of the American lawyer-turned-artist, with the four girls scattered around the space. The youngest



Jefferson David Chalfant, *Bouguereau's Atelier at the Académie Julian, Paris, 1891*

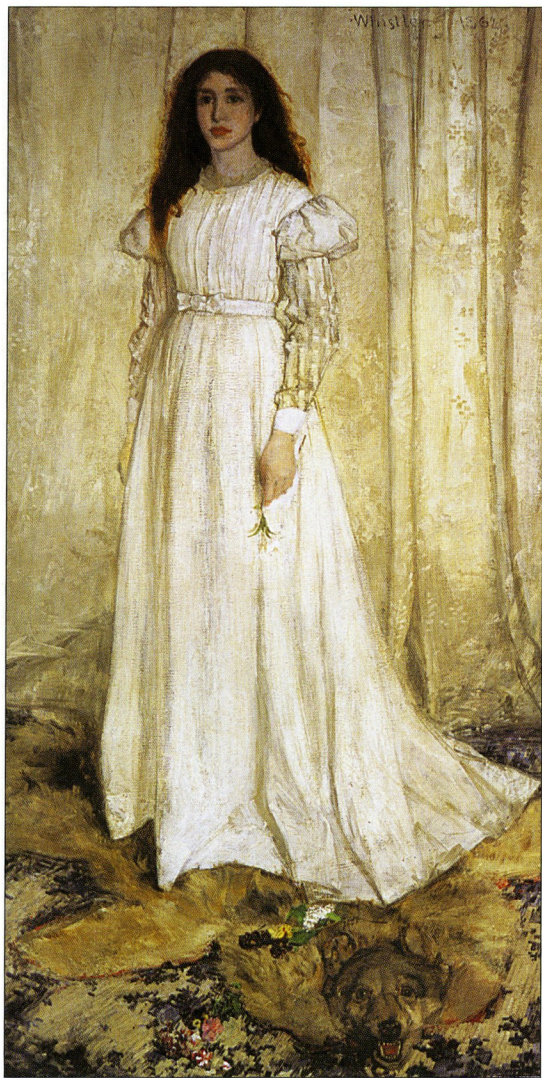
FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

plays on the rich carpet, and the two eldest hover on the threshold of the shadowy far room, next to a towering Asian vase. It's a daring, off-kilter composition, and some critics raised objections. James praised it, perhaps attracted by muted hints of a narrative. Sargent's last great Parisian picture, *Madame X* (*Madame Pierre Gautreau*), sparked a scandal that drove him to resettle in England. Sargent's portrait of the Louisiana-born beauty, initially painted with one strap slipping off the shoulder of her slinky black evening dress, still has an aura of decadence. Virginie Gautreau emphasized the pallor of her skin

with a lavender-tinted powder.

The painting was received with hostility, and the Salon's influence was enough to alter Sargent's career trajectory. But within just a few years, the catalogue authors note, the situation had become more open. By 1887 there were sixty-five independent exhibitions offering artists alternative venues.

Sargent may have taken the scandal hard because he cultivated an air of respectability in his personal life; when he moved to England, he focused on children's portraits.⁶ James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), on the other hand, threw himself into bohemian life with glee. He, too, painted a scandalous portrait of a beautiful woman, but he reveled in the controversy. *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862) was initially presented to the Royal Academy in London and rejected, although the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais admired it. Whistler was very involved in the Rossetti circle and may have been aware of what might be considered the first “white picture,” Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1849). Whistler's mistress,



James McNeill Whistler

Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl, 1862

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Jo Hiffernan, the model for *The White Girl*, was welcome among the Pre-Raphaelites. When Whistler showed the picture at a London gallery, it was labeled *The Woman in White*, prompting an erroneous identification with Wilkie Collins's popular novel. (By 1867 Whistler was referring to it as *Symphony in White*, picking up on the suggestion of a French critic.) Whistler submitted the picture to the French Salon in 1863, unsuccessfully, but it appeared in the Salon des Refusés established by Napoleon III in response to protests over the official Salon's sweeping rejections. One French critic commented on Jo's disheveled red hair and "eyes swimming in ecstasy," hinting at a post-coital scenario.⁷ Today, we respond to it perhaps as Whistler would have preferred, as both an homage to the Irish girl he loved and a tour-de-force of whites, in the brown-tinged fur of the rug, the cambric of the model's dress and the soft sheen of the embossed curtain behind her.

Jo accompanied Whistler to Trouville in 1865, where she captivated Gustave Courbet, who painted her portrait as *La Belle Irlandaise (Woman with a Mirror)*. Whistler was working alongside Courbet, and two pictures from that trip are in the exhibition. *The Sea* (1865) is the more realistic, with a rough tumble of clouds and waves; *Harmony in Blue and Silver: Trouville* (1865) is calmer, more diaphanously painted and more abstract. The earlier *Coast of Brittany (Alone with the Tide)* from 1861 represents the height of Whistler's admiration for Courbet, with craggy rocks, dark water and a sleeping peasant girl. Born in Massachusetts but reared in Russia, Whistler studied in France and spent most of his life in England. In spite of a combative personality, he was a charismatic figure. He was accorded a prominent place in Henri Fantin-Latour's group portrait of the avant-garde, *Homage à Delacroix* (1864), among artists and writers including Baudelaire. Unfortunately, Whistler's most famous work, *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871), which appeared in London and Boston, was called back by the Musée d'Orsay before it reached the Metropolitan. Whistler's genuine affection for his strait-laced mother, Anna, adds a dimension to our understanding of this complex man, and the painting remains an icon of American art. The seated figure in profile against a muted, geometric background proved a useful compositional strategy, even more effectively employed in the artist's portrait of Thomas Carlyle.

Like Sargent and Whistler, Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), who settled in Paris in 1874, spoke fluent French and was an insider from the beginning. She largely ignored the American colony and exhibited, at her friend Edgar Degas's invitation, with the Impressionists. Cassatt had spent her childhood traveling through Europe and, after studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, began exhibiting in Paris. Her parents and sister joined her in 1877, and the family provided subjects for her pictures, which combine cozy domesticity—without a hint of sentimentality—and avant-garde compositional strategies. This exhibition features *Reading "Le Figaro" (Portrait of a Lady)* from

1878, depicting her mother leafing through the fashionable newspaper; *The Tea* (1880), with her sister Lydia, a visitor and a family heirloom tea service; and *Portrait of Alexander J. Cassatt and His Son Robert Kelso Cassatt* (1884–85). The artist's eldest brother and his son are seated together, the black mass of their clothes in contrast to their fresh, rosy faces. Alexander became one of the earliest American collectors of the Impressionists, owning works by Pissaro, Monet and Degas. In the catalogue chapter on American painters as cultural intermediaries, by Christopher Riopelle, Cassatt plays a crucial role. She had a fifty-year relationship with Louisine and Henry O. Havemeyer of New York and advised them on the acquisition of 500, largely Impressionist, works. Many of those went to the Metropolitan Museum, influencing the development of American taste. The exhibition's contingent of Cassatts is strong, although not every picture appears at every venue. The standouts among those that do: *In the Loge* (1878), with a woman in black using opera glasses in the Théâtre Français, a picture about looking with considerable conceptual heft as well as a marvelous use of black; and *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878), its subject sprawled with charming informality, her dog in an adjacent chair, and the composition demonstrating a thorough understanding of Japanese prints.

Whistler, Sargent and Cassatt, the big three of the exhibition, offer distinct models of the expatriate life. But other artists made a big splash and look very good here. John White Alexander (1856–1915) studied at the Royal Academy in Munich, spent time with Whistler and James in Venice and returned to New York to paint some of the fin-de-siècle's most striking American portraits. He moved to Paris in 1891 and spent a decade exhibiting at the Salons and socializing with Mallarmé, Rodin, Mirbeau and Gide. While other Americans were following Velázquez or the Impressionists, Alexander was flirting with Art Nouveau's sinuous lines. *Repose* (1895) is a brilliant example. The dark-haired siren with the provocatively parted lips stretches out languidly on a sofa, the twists in her body accentuated by the black stripes on her billowing white dress. Her lassitude has a serpentine energy, and even the sofa seems to sway like a ship at sea. *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1897), based on an 1820 poem by John Keats reinterpreting a tale from *The Decameron*, is a true *symboliste* painting, with a macabre literary theme, an unearthly palette of pearl, gray and black, and an elongated figure. Isabella, who kept her murdered lover's head in a large vase, has affinities with that other fin-de-siècle heroine Salome, and Alexander's proto-film noir lighting dramatizes their sisterhood. Alexander's range is remarkable. The model for Isabella, Juliette Véry, appears as a chic contemporary parisienne in *In the Café* (1898), a lively bit of coolly observed city life and a strong composition.

William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) was another citizen of the world who happened to be an American, and he, too, was comfortable in Paris. Unfortunately, only one of his paintings is in the exhibition, although it's a fine one. *Portrait of Dora Wheeler* (1883) takes the Whistler trope of a seated figure



John White Alexander, *Repose*, 1895 THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY

against a modernist space (see *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*) and revs it up with a vibrant yellow and blue palette, and luxurious, fashionable Asian décor. The subject was Chase's pupil, who had studied at the Académie Julian in Paris and was a designer for Associated Artists, the firm established by her mother, Candace Wheeler. The portrait won a medal in Munich and was exhibited at the 1883 Paris Salon, where it won an honorable mention. Yet it was criticized in the United States as too decorative. One critic wrote that, while "Mr. Chase is one of the ablest and readiest painters that we have...he is hardly to be regarded as a native product....how little of his work has soul."⁸

As travel became accessible to a wider range of Americans, more students went to Paris, not all of them as privileged as the artists already discussed. Perhaps a third of them were women, such as the talented Cecilia Beaux (1855–1942), represented here by three important pictures: *Les derniers jours d'enfance* (1885), *Sita and Sarita* (1893–94) and *Ernesta (Child with Nurse)* from 1894. Rodolphe Julian ran nine studios, five for men and four for women. Ellen Day Hale (1855–1940), from a prominent Boston family, studied with Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and in Paris with Carolus-Duran. She was a correspondent for the *Boston Traveller*, commenting

on the Paris art scene. Her *Self-Portrait* (1885) reveals a strong, independent woman with a sinewy hand and rather androgynous face. The bold black of her dress, hat and muff contrasts effectively with the loosely painted decorative backdrop. Portraits of artists make up an interesting group here, as the Americans adopt various personae to signal their new, more cosmopolitan status. Frank Benson's (1862–1951) *Portrait of Joseph Lindon Smith* (1884) is set in what looks like the typical bohemian garret, the young artist strumming a banjo amidst pinned-up drawings and canvas stretchers. Both Benson and Smith were studying at the Académie Julian. Charles Sprague Pearce (1851–1914) depicts the sculptor *Paul Wayland Bartlett* (c. 1890) as the perfect flâneur, the man-about-town who dressed more elegantly than the bohemian. Bartlett's crisp profile and beautiful grey coat are given insouciance by his informal gestures; one hand is shoved into a pocket, the other languidly dangles a cigarette. Pearce was in poor health and traveled south during the winters, sometimes painting exotic scenes in North Africa, and lived out his last decades painting in a glass-enclosed studio in the French countryside. He is an interesting artist with a playful imagination, seen here in two charming pictures, *Reading by the Shore* (c. 1883–85), with a fashionable girl under a gorgeous Japanese parasol, and *Fantasie* (c. 1883), depicting a young European man in a splendid Japanese garment traditionally worn by women, albeit brandishing a sword. Among the works of principally documentary interest, *Bouguereau's Atelier at the Académie Julian, Paris* (1891), by Jefferson David Chalfant (1856–1931), gives us an idea of how congested the sky-lighted rooms were. One student wrote that she had to be “deaf to voices, learn to reef in her elbows, to wait without fretting for the model to sway back in to the chosen pose, and to keep in mind the first effect of light.”⁹

Summer in the country was considered part of the French experience. Corot and company's Barbizon, Monet's Giverny and the Nabis' Pont-Aven were among the more celebrated art colonies. Americans were especially attracted to Giverny, often to Monet's annoyance. Monet was close to Sargent, whose charming experiment with Impressionism *Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of a Wood* (1885) is in the exhibition. Monet was also friendly with Theodore Robinson (1852–96), whose work looks somewhat bland here. Willard Metcalf (1858–1925) is represented by *Poppy Field (Landscape at Giverny)* from 1886 and *The Ten Cent Breakfast* (1887), a casual group portrait of painters and writers. Childe Hassam looks good with atmospheric studies of urban streets—*Along the Seine, Winter* (1887) and *April Showers, Champs Elysées, Paris* (1888)—and a brilliant flower study, *Geraniums* (1888). But there are a good many pictures of American scenes done in the Impressionist style, and their inclusion seems to strain the premise a bit. Cincinnati-born John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902) is represented by two pictures, the Connecticut farm scene *Brook in Winter* (c. 1892) and the marvelous *Arques-la-Bataille* (1884), a tonalist sketch of a small town in Normandy. The Munich-trained Twachtman

spent a limited amount of time in France, from 1883 to 1885, but his classes at the Académie Julian and time spent in the countryside lightened his palette and helped define his style. Tonalism also looks strong in *Brittany Town Morning, Larmor* (1884), a haunting composition of dark stone buildings in pearly light, by Dennis Miller Bunker (1861–90).

When American artists returned home, they brought with them new techniques and stylistic fashions, which they shared with colleagues and students in New York, Boston and Philadelphia, among other cities. But they also brought new, more modern attitudes—toward nature, city life and the role of the artist. Henry James, who spent his life analyzing the effect of the European experience on the American psyche, wrote in *The Art of Fiction*: “We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donné*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it.” This exhibition does not—and cannot—definitively answer the question “What did these artists make of their Parisian experience?” But it provides a good deal of evidence that should stimulate further exploration of the topic. The exhibition catalogue, *Americans in Paris, 1860–1900*, by curators Kathleen Adler (National Gallery, London), Erica E. Hirshler (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and H. Barbara Weinberg (Metropolitan Museum), with contributions by other scholars, is published by the National Gallery Company (hard-cover, \$65, paperback, \$45). The exhibition runs through January 28, 2007, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York. Telephone (212) 879–5500. On the Web at www.metmuseum.org

NOTES

1. Rodolphe Rapetti, “Assimilation and Resistance 1880–1900,” in Kathleen Adler, et al., *Americans in Paris 1860–1900* (London: National Gallery, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), p. 185.
2. Cited, Carter Ratcliff, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), p. 65.
3. Henry James, “John S. Sargent,” *Harper’s Magazine* (October 1887), pp. 683–91.
4. Ratcliff, *John Singer Sargent*. The portrait of Carolus-Duran was shown only in London and New York.
5. See Garry Tinterow and Geneviève Lacambre, *Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003).
6. See Barbara Dayer Gallati, *Great Expectations: John Singer Sargent Painting Children* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, in association with Bulfinch, 2005).
7. Cited, *Americans in Paris*, p. 42.
8. Barbara Dayer Gallati, *William Merritt Chase: Modern American Landscapes 1886–1890* (Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2000), p. 46.
9. Cited, *Americans in Paris*, p. 30.