

McGlothlin Collection

For anyone interested in the history and critical fortunes of American art, “Capturing Beauty: American Impressionist and Realist Paintings from the McGlothlin Collection,” at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, is an intriguing exhibition. In one short decade Virginia natives Mr. and Mrs. James W. McGlothlin, now of Austin, Texas, have brought together a choice group of works that illuminate a dynamic era. The thirty-five works in the exhibition range chronologically from Winslow Homer’s *By the Shore* (1868–72), with its carefully arranged casual vacationers, to Robert Henri’s *Listening Boy* (1924), a bold, high-color portrait of an Irish child and the first picture to enter the collection. As Fogg Museum curator Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., writes in the insightful introduction to the catalogue, “we have come to realize the limitations” of terms such as “Impressionism” and “Realism” over the last half century, just as the “old prejudice” against European-trained and expatriate American artists has faded. This evolution in taste among both art historians and connoisseurs is reflected in the McGlothlin collection.

Certain subjects recur, however, such as the sea and the seaside. Homer’s *The Watch, Eastern Shore Prout’s Neck* (1894) has the wind-whipped practicality of those who make their living by the sea. The solitary figure of the local fisherman mimics Homer’s own isolation on the Maine coast, according to Virginia Museum curator David Park Curry in the catalogue. The ocean, while



Martin Johnson Heade, *Two Magnolias and a Bud on Teal Velvet*, c. 1885–95

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visually reduced to a tiny corner of the watercolor, remains an omnipresent force, its sense of menace reinforced by the ragged grey of clouds and the spindly grotesque of bony branches clinging to the rock face. Cosmopolitan sophisticate James McNeill Whistler takes a very different view in *Green and Silver—The Bright Sea, Dieppe* (1883–85), which has the high-angle perspective and modernist flatness of a Japanese print. Whistler trisects his vertical composition: an absolutely flat line divides pale sky from darker water; the sand is marked off by a bold diagonal swoop. Ships and beachgoers—many as tiny as texture dots in a Chinese scroll painting—are expertly abbreviated. In contrast, Maurice Prendergast's *Handkerchief Point* (c. 1896–97) is aswarm with human life, even if the holiday crowd is depicted through dashes of color, like the sun-splashed rocks, sky and sea. The ladies under their red parasols gazing out at the Windex-blue sea and the little girls in white scampering across the rocky shore are recognizable Impressionist favorites, but Prendergast has his own American cloisonné approach to broken color. Curry quotes an 1899 art reviewer who observes that “Mr. Prendergast...carries a whole Fourth of July in his color-box.”

With a confidence buoyed by the expanded role of the United States on the world stage, as well as the superior formal training available, American artists participated fully in the international art scene. Labels such as “conservative” and “avant-garde” can be convenient, but many different types of painters found acceptance with contemporary mainstream audiences. Compare, for example, two head-and-shoulders portraits of attractive women, one by superstar John Singer Sargent, the other by the now largely forgotten Seymour Joseph Guy. The subject of Sargent's *Madame Errazuriz*, c. 1883–84 (cover), was a Chilean beauty, married to a diplomat and practicing artist. After separating from her husband, she went on to keep a London salon frequented by Serge Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky, among others, and she was painted by Giovanni Boldini, Augustus John and Pablo Picasso. Sargent captures her vivacity with madcap paint handling. In a palette of browns and golds, he sketches tousled, glossy curls, a fur collar and the pheasant-feather trim on her dress. In three-quarter profile, she seems to be turning her head in mid-conversation. In contrast, Guy's *At the Opera* (1887) is as smooth as lacquer. The British-born Guy was a master of glazing techniques and became a great success in America, a full member of the National Academy of Design who worked in the Tenth Street Studio Building in New York City. Despite the title of Guy's picture, no theater setting is visible, just a satiny gold studio drape. The fashionable young woman holds opera glasses and directs her gaze out-of-frame, as if watching a performance, but this is not social commentary. In this marvelously painted image, the girl's skin is as luminous as the multi-strand pearls at her throat.

The theater was often a subject in itself, of course, and became a near-obsession with artists such as Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec. The McGlothlin

collection includes a terrific theater-theme pastel by Ashcan School realist Everett Shinn. In *Back Row, Folies-Bergère* (1900) a row of patrons, viewed from the back, are roughed in as a sooty silhouette of shapes against the artificial sunrise of the garishly lit stage far away. *Back Row* would appear to be squarely in the modernist camp, but it was admired by Stanford White and purchased initially by the wife of J. Pierpont Morgan. Shinn makes a strong showing in the exhibition. Another pastel, *Horsedrawn Bus* (1899), is a gritty urban snowscape. Most of the paper is devoted to snow enveloping a nearly deserted street, conveyed through white scribbles raked across a dark ground. Human activity is reduced to a strip at the top, where the horses push forward, hunched against an icy blast, and a woman struggles with her umbrella. According to the usual categories, Childe Hassam's *Winter Nightfall in the City* (1889) should be a more serene Impressionist counterpart to Shinn's Realist squall. And Hassam does manage to find warmth in the orange glow of carriage lamps and shop windows, amid an overall slushy-snow palette of whites, grays and ochers. Yet the two artists do not seem to be stylistic adversaries but fellow artists exploring a modern subject with a circumscribed palette. They both also handle compositional space well, Shinn with his frieze of activity, Hassam using a central cab to define the curving street cutting through the city's canyon walls.

The McGlothlins are less interested in the still-life genre, but the examples of Martin Johnson Heade's work here are knockouts. The great Luminist landscape painter shifted his focus to still lifes when he moved to Florida in 1883, and the results are as mysterious as Odilon Redon's bouquets and as sensual as Ingres's odalisques. *Two Magnolias and a Bud on Teal Velvet* (c. 1885–95) suggests a ripe sexuality. The magnolia gradiflora symbolized both feminine charm and hospitality in the Victorian language of flowers. Heade achieves synesthesia: you can almost feel the coolness of the curvaceous petals and the plush of the velvet, and the flow of line is musical. The McGlothlins have promised their collection to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and pledged \$10 million toward its expansion, scheduled to open in 2008.

"Capturing Beauty: American Impressionist and Realist Paintings from the McGlothlin Collection" remains on view through September 18, 2005, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 200 North Boulevard, Richmond, Virginia 23220. Telephone (800) 943-8632. On the Web at www.vmf.state.va.us. The catalogue by David Park Curry is distributed by the University of Virginia Press (softcover, \$21.95).

—Gail Leggio