

**Cite this article:** Annette Stott, review of *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France*, Denver Art Museum, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2022), DOI TK.

## ***Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France***

**Curated by:** Timothy J. Standring

**Exhibition schedule:** Denver Art Museum, November 14, 2021–March 13, 2022; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, April 16–July 31, 2022

**Exhibition catalogue:** Timothy J. Standring, ed., *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France*, exh. cat. Denver: Denver Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2021. 256 pp.; 185 color illus.; 4 b/w illus. Cloth: \$37.99 (9780300254457)

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Billed on the Denver Art Museum’s website as the “first comprehensive examination of France’s stylistic impact on American painting of the period,”<sup>1</sup> *Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France* covers the period 1855 to 1913, when it became de rigueur for American artists to travel to Paris. Despite the ostensible focus, this exhibition does not include any French paintings but relies on more than one hundred American paintings to tell the story of French influence. Only viewers who bring significant prior knowledge of French art with them will be able to consider how the paintings’ multiple styles might derive from French art. On the other hand, *Whistler to Cassatt* does a marvelous job of walking the viewer through the primary attractions and experiences for American artists in France, experiences that profoundly shaped the art they produced. This review will consider the exhibition as it was installed at the Denver Art Museum and the accompanying catalogue with its six essays and lavish illustrations.

In the lobby area before entering the exhibition, a large projection of historic film footage showing pedestrian and carriage traffic on the streets of Paris prepares the viewer to join the American painters in France. Once inside, Childe Hassam’s *Grand Prix Day* (1887), the first painting on view, echoes the film’s milieu and further sets the scene in Paris, the first place most artists went. From this entry gallery, the exhibition is organized thematically and traces a logical progression through succeeding galleries devoted to several common aspects of the French experience: art-school training, exhibition at the Paris salons, recognition by private collectors, summer excursions into the countryside, and return to the United States, as exemplified by the work of The Ten. This sequence is only interrupted by a gallery dedicated to Mary Cassatt.

Each gallery’s vivid wall color sets off its theme and perfectly supports its collection of paintings. For example, Cassatt’s intimate pictures of women and children are hung against royal-blue and navy stripes reminiscent of wallpaper that might appear in a Cassatt painting (fig. 1). The plein-air work in the “Countryside Excursions” gallery is set against sky-blue walls (see fig. 3), and the “Private Collecting” gallery is painted a medium shade of indigo

with violet wainscoting and door trim, suggesting a domestic interior. Such exceptional exhibition design promotes visitors' understanding of the themes, experiences, and artworks throughout the exhibition.



Figs. 1, 2. Top: Installation image of the Cassatt gallery; bottom: Installation image of “The Salon” gallery. *Whistler to Cassatt* exhibition at the Denver Art Museum. Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum

Since the majority of American artists went to Paris to study at one of the many ateliers and academies, the first gallery after the introductory space focuses on art training. It opens with a charcoal drawing after the antique by Julian Alden Weir and includes life drawings and decorative studies, as well as James McNeill Whistler’s oil copy after a painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres; it ends with the entrance to the gallery devoted to the Paris salon. This sequence recalls a typical Parisian art curriculum. Jefferson David Chalfant’s painting *Bouguereau’s Atelier at the Académie Julian, Paris* (1891) and Thomas Hovenden’s *Self-Portrait of the Artist in His Studio* (1875) help viewers envision the art-school experience, as does the gallery’s design, one section of which conjures an atelier with an overhead painting-storage area and skylight. The catalogue delves into the experience of Americans at the *École des Beaux-Arts* with an essay by Emmanuelle Bruegerolles.

The next gallery, called “The Salon,” is hung on orange walls in an approximation of the salon style (fig. 2). It presents an overview of the breadth of different subjects that American

artists pursued in France and subsequently exhibited. There is a costume piece by Robert Wylie, an urban view of Paris by Frank Myers Boggs, a male nude study by Julian Alden Weir, a history subject by Thomas Hovenden, a portrait by John Singer Sargent, a biblical scene by Henry Ossawa Tanner, and a self-portrait by Lilla Cabot Perry. An Alexander Harrison marine painting and a peasant picture by Walter Gay round out this preview of what the rest of the exhibition holds in store. Two essays in the catalogue support a deeper understanding of this gallery. Randall C. Griffin focuses on the paintings' subject matters in "Why Paris Became the Center of American Art in the Gilded Age," explicating the push and pull between continuing development of an American cultural identity, the wealth of French subjects entering American art, and the nationalistic backlash that demanded less European influence and more American subjects. In addition, Benjamin W. Colman develops the theme of Americans exhibiting in the Paris salons in his essay "The Great Annual Exhibition: American Painters and American Impressionism at the Paris Salon." He points out the initial aversion to French Impressionism expressed by Weir and others, who would later develop their own brand of American Impressionism as members of The Ten.

Proceeding through the galleries, one finds many old favorites, like Theodore Robinson's *The Wedding March* (1892), Frank Weston Benson's *The Sisters* (1899), and William Glackens's *Girl with Apple* (1909–10), as well as delightful unexpected gems. Winslow Homer's uncharacteristic little painting of a sightseer leaning on a stone balustrade next to gargoyles on the north tower of Notre Dame, overlooking the city, is a good reminder that American artists were as much tourists as professional artists and residents. Cecilia Beaux's *Twilight Confidences* (1888) is a notable study of Concarneau women by the sea.



Fig. 3. Installation image of the "Countryside Excursions" gallery in the *Whistler to Cassatt* exhibition at the Denver Art Museum. Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum

Summers spent working in rural France provided the theme for another gallery, although some of the pictures, such as Dennis Miller Bunker's *Wild Asters* (1889), which was painted in Massachusetts, are probably meant to evoke plein-air landscape painting more generally and remind us of the continued impact of this period in artists' later careers. This gallery includes the aforementioned *Twilight Confidences* and a special section highlighting Elizabeth Nourse, which features a single painting of two peasant women, *Étude* (1891; fig. 3). In another highlighted section called "Around the Table," Willard Leroy Metcalf's *The Ten Cent Breakfast* (1887) depicts four artists lost in thought, yet it evokes the camaraderie among artists who networked in summer colonies like Giverny, where this painting was

completed. An inn hospitable to artists was a major feature of each successful art colony. Next in this long gallery, Sargent's *Fishing for Oysters at Cancale* (1878) is set beside four seaside figure studies, encouraging consideration of the way that artists used summer sketching time to plan the exhibition pictures they would make that year. Sargent sent this finished sketch to a New York exhibition, his first American showing, and then developed a more finished version for the Paris salon.

Finally, Henry Ossawa Tanner is highlighted with a special panel that features his large salon painting *The Young Sabot Maker* (1895), flanked by a charcoal *Study of a Negro Man* (about 1891) and a small oil painting titled *Christ and His Disciples on the Sea of Galilee* (about 1910). France provided a different experience for African American artists because of its relative lack of anti-Black racial prejudice, and Tanner was not alone in making it his permanent home. He does seem to be the lone African American represented in exhibitions of nineteenth-century American artists in Paris, however. The inclusion of others, such as Charles Ethan Porter (c. 1847–1923) of Hartford, Connecticut, who spent 1881–84 in France and produced so many paintings that he held an auction of one hundred landscapes and still lifes on his return to the United States, would have had the merit of challenging a common misperception about Tanner's exceptionalism.

The large final gallery focuses on The Ten, a group of American Impressionists who began exhibiting together in 1898, and it includes such iconic paintings as Thomas Hart Benton's *Sunlight* (1909), Childe Hassam's *Bowl of Goldfish* (1912), and Edmund Charles Tarbell's *In the Orchard* (1891). Although one side of this gallery is tightly hung with a mixture of fourteen American and French subjects, the other side opens up into a spacious area, sparsely populated with pictures and a timeline that suggests further modernist trends in the early twentieth century. A positive aspect of this exhibition taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic was the abundance of space designed for social distancing and the controlled number of visitors, which allowed greater access to each work than is typically the case.

In addition to its diverse subject matter and in consideration of its stated focus on style, *Whistler to Cassatt* embraces the diversity of artistic styles in vogue during this period, ranging from tonalism and realism to naturalism and aestheticism, as well as the principal public draw today, Impressionism. Curator emeritus Dr. Timothy Standring has a connoisseur's sensitivity to the aesthetic quality of the paintings he chose. His opening essay in the exhibition catalogue takes up the great variety of academic and modernistic formal approaches that were exciting Paris in the Belle Epoque. He points to complex "permutations of style, technique, and other factors that still befuddle scholars of this period's overall history" (18). Indeed, the juxtaposition of different painting styles throughout the exhibition reveals the wide range of experimentation in which American artists were engaged.

The exhibition also pays pointed attention to women artists, as the presence of Cassatt in the title foretells. As scholars have long since demonstrated, women made up an increasingly large proportion of American painters in France as the century progressed; they gained access to some of the best French artists and teachers, were juried into the salons and other exhibitions, won medals and honors, and created their own professional associations. It is unfortunate that of the forty-two artists represented in this exhibition, apart from Cassatt, only four are women, and most of those are represented by a single work of art. In her catalogue essay, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Franco-

American Experience, 1871–1914,” Susan J. Rawles makes the most of these excellent paintings by Elizabeth Gardner, Elizabeth Nourse, Lilla Cabot Perry, and Cecilia Beaux to tell the familiar story of the challenges and triumphs women artists faced in Paris.

Cassatt dominates the exhibition with nineteen works of art, the greatest quantity by any individual. She is the only artist with a dedicated gallery. In comparison, Whistler is represented with seven works. Even Sargent, with fifteen paintings, has a greater presence than Whistler, although Suzanne Singletary’s catalogue essay on Whistler makes a good point in discussing him as a conduit between French and American art. Given the exhibition’s heavy emphasis on Cassatt’s work and her deep and enduring relationship with France (particularly in comparison to Whistler’s peripatetic life, mainly based in England), it is surprising that Cassatt did not get top billing in this exhibition. “Cassatt to Whistler” would also have provided the logic of alphabetical order. Eileen Boxer seems to have had the same idea when she placed a Cassatt mother-and-child painting on the front cover of the catalogue and Whistler’s Brittany beach scene on the back. It is true that Whistler was the first artist of those chosen for this exhibition to go to France, but Cassatt arrived only a few years later and was succeeded by many others. Whistler’s premier place in the title is, perhaps, an outdated impulse to foreground “masters” and “masterpieces.”

Beyond the conundrum of the title, though, this is an excellent exhibition about a very important aspect of late nineteenth-century American art. Its particular selection of paintings by some of the hundreds of American artists in France at the end of the nineteenth century offers another chance to evaluate the impact of the French experience on the development of American art.

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<sup>1</sup> “Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France,” Denver Art Museum website, captured March 2, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220302204024/https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/exhibitions/whistler-cassatt>.