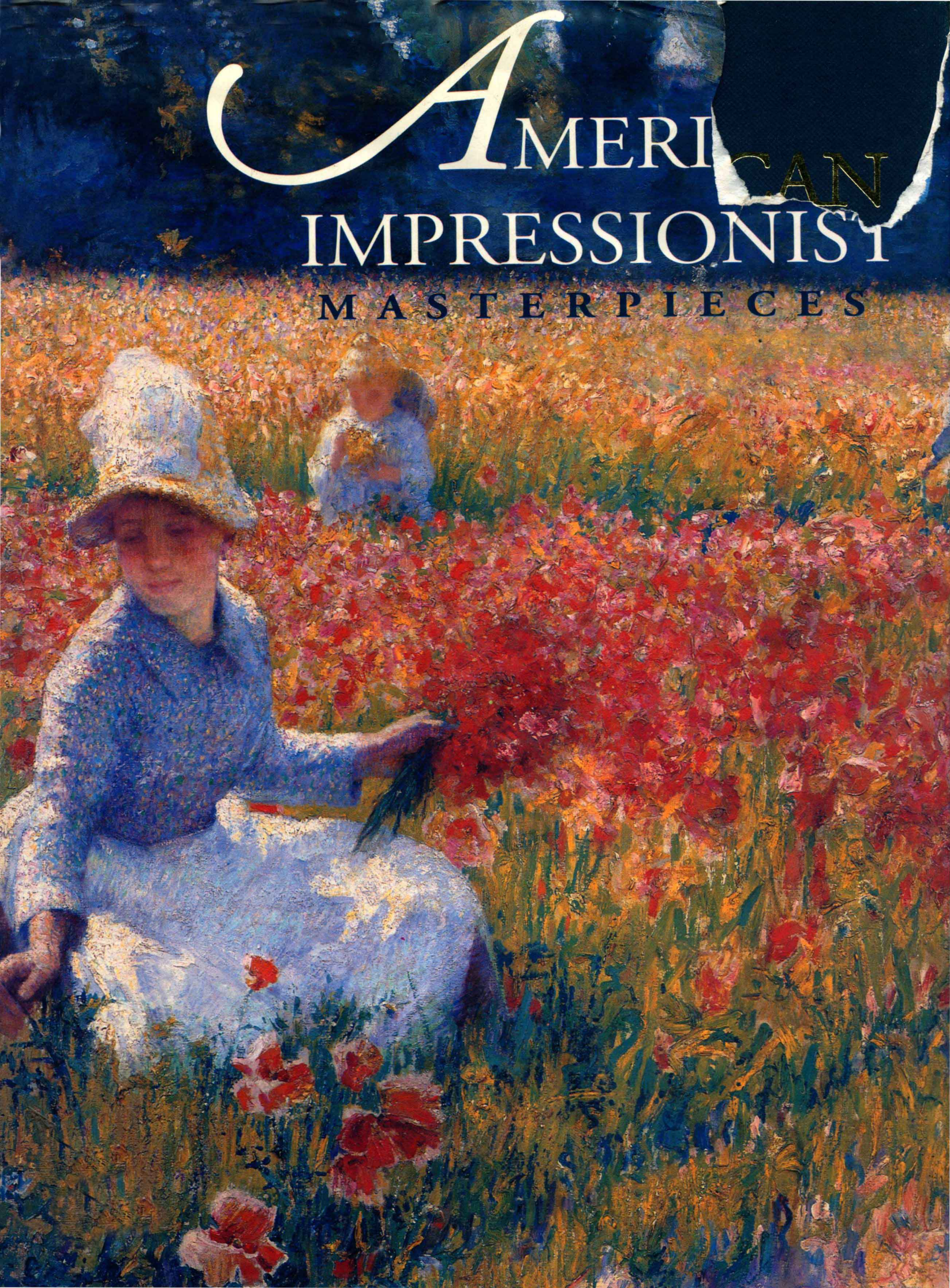
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IMPRESSIONIST
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Lisa N. Peters

BEAUX ARTS EDITIONS

A Harkavy Press Book
ISBN 0-88363-305-1
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Acknowledgments

No study of American Impressionism can be without a debt to Professor William H. Gerdts, as his 1984 book and his other publications are the basis for any explorations of the subject. The groundwork he has laid makes this volume possible, and his library was an invaluable source of information. I am also grateful to Ira Spanierman for his help with the selection of works in this book and the insights on American Impressionism that he has shared with me. In preparing the essays, I consulted the works of a considerable number of scholars. Although not all can be listed here, I would like to acknowledge the insight and information I received from the recent writings of Doreen Bolger, Richard J. Boyle, Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., David Park Curry, Elizabeth de Veer, Ilene Susan Fort, John Douglass Hale, Susan Hobbs, Sona Johnston, Nancy Mowll Mathews, Ronald G. Pisano, and H. Barbara Weinberg. I am additionally very appreciative to Dale Ramsey for his skillful and graceful editing, to Lucy Barber for organizing this book's photographic material, to Jeffrey R. Brown, Kathryn Corbin, David C. Henry, Richard H. Love, Meredith Long, Jenny Long Murphy, Anne Schmoll, and Robert C. Vose III, for assistance in obtaining reproductions, to Carol Lowrey for her consultation, and to the museum staff members and individuals who granted permission for the inclusion of works. Finally, I would like to express my thanks to my family for their constant encouragement and support.

LISA N. PETERS

Impressionism on the Rise in America

In May of 1893, the American Art Galleries in New York hosted two simultaneous exhibitions, one featuring works by American painters J. Alden Weir and John Henry Twachtman, and the other presenting paintings by Claude Monet. Although the shows were mounted separately, the critics considered them together in their reviews, concurring with the *New York Times* writer who noted that the display was "a treat for the apostles of light and air and the hot vibrations of sunlight in painting. . . . It is also a fine opportunity to compare with the works of Monet, the most conspicuous of Parisian impressionists, those of two of our own most advanced followers in his footsteps."

By the early 1890s, Impressionism had come to America, where it was embraced by artists, widely accepted by critics, and popular with collectors and the public. Its rise to prominence had been rapid; just a short time earlier the French movement had been either misunderstood or held in derision by Americans. Even Weir had become a convert only a couple of years before the 1893 show. In Paris in 1877, he had been a visitor to the third French Impressionist exhibition, an experience that repelled him. He wrote to his parents, "I never in my life saw more horrible things. . . . They do not observe drawing nor form, but give you an impression of what they call nature. It was worse than the Chamber of Horrors."

Weir was part of the wave of Americans who went to Europe to study art in the post–Civil War period, but Impressionism would not be on his agenda, or on that of most of his compatriots abroad or at home, until late in the nineteenth century. In the decades before the Civil War, artists had concentrated on defining the national identity in their art. After the war a new consciousness arose. The panoramic pastoral and wilderness scenes that had been rendered from the 1820s through the 1850s by Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Church, had conveyed a patriotic, even didactic, message. These works suddenly seemed outdated, as did the detailed, literal, transcriptive style practiced by this established old guard. Young painters, rebelling against what they saw as an insular aesthetic tradition, sought to create an art of international stature. While Americans had always derived inspiration from European art, they were now incited by a new cosmopolitan spirit to find a more direct link with international trends. Their goal was to assimilate the achievements of European artists and to establish an art that would equal and surpass theirs. For great numbers of Americans, France was the country to which they turned, and it was French art that would be the principal influence on American painting for the rest of the century.

The 1860s saw the beginning of the exodus of Americans seeking training abroad, particularly in Paris. While some, such as the Philadelphia painter Thomas Eakins, received a thoroughly traditional education in the French capital during that decade, others became proponents of the French Barbizon school, which had developed around the middle of the

century. Influenced by that movement, which included Jean-François Millet, Camille Corot, and Charles Daubigny, painters such as William Morris Hunt, George Inness, and Albert Pinkham Ryder executed intimate forest scenes that emphasized moody atmospheric qualities but omitted the social issues that had concerned the Barbizon group. By the 1870s, it was deemed mandatory for a young painter from the United States to have firsthand exposure to the art of Europe. Scores of Americans took up residence in Paris, enrolling in academies and ateliers where they could receive private instruction. It was during these same years that the French establishment was being challenged by the artists who became known as the Impressionists.

Edouard Manet had initiated the revolution in the 1860s, showing works that broke from the canons of acceptable subject matter and stylistic treatment. By the early 1870s the progressive painters Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Edgar Degas, and Auguste Renoir were following his lead, breaking the rules of pictorial representation. They rejected the idealized and archaic motifs rendered by academic artists and drew their inspiration from everyday life. They painted views of avenues and cafés and presumably taboo images of high- and low-life Paris, exposing a society caught up with leisure and glamour in a vortex of urban activity.

Rendering landscapes, they freed themselves from dark studios to work in the open air. Eschewing dramatic sites dotted with ruins—the favored subject of the eighteenth-century painters Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin—they often revealed signs of modern civilization intruding on the countryside. Their primary concern was the representation of sunlight. Whereas academic painters avoided strong luminous effects, the Impressionists welcomed them. Their new vision required a new technique. They eliminated black from their palettes and employed pure, unmixed colors to convey the impact of sunlight on natural forms. Instead of gradual shifts of tone, they juxtaposed strong colors to create jarring contrasts and shimmering optical results. Rejecting the traditional method of building up forms from dark to light, they captured the effects of shifting light upon forms by the layering of contrasting colors. Instead of creating highly polished picture surfaces like those of academic artists, they painted in vigorous, varied brushstrokes that conveyed the ephemerality of nature. When seen from a few yards away, their dabs of pigment appear to blend together; in their canvases the viewer finds rainbow-colored reflections as well as subtle color variations within shadows.

The Impressionists also established a new treatment of pictorial space. They abandoned the system of perspective established in the Renaissance, a diagrammatic plotting of the diminishing scale of objects receding in a picture's distance. Instead, they transcribed relations between forms as they directly perceived them and thus allowed odd juxtapositions. Instead of setting motifs within the pictorial depths, the Impressionists presented them in the foreground, often cropped or seeming to propel themselves into the viewer's arena. A resultant flattening of space, in and of itself, became a signature of Impressionist art; the new representation of pictorial space was expressive of the modern era, conveying its immediacy, its new urgency, tension, and rapid pace. To break from conventional formulas, the Impressionists turned to photography and Japanese art, finding in these sources innovative ways of arranging forms on canvas.

Seen as radicals, the French Impressionists were disdained when they displayed their work in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s. The artists held their first show in 1874, exhibiting as the "Société Anonyme." A critic coined the word "Impressionism" on seeing Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* in the display, and their art soon became widely identified by this term. At first, most of the countless American students in Paris either rejected Impressionism or were relatively unaffected by it. The one exception was Mary Cassatt, who belonged to the French Impressionists' milieu rather than to that of her compatriots. The only American to exhibit with the French Impressionists, Cassatt lived in France from 1872 on. She persuaded a number of important American patrons to purchase French works, and a few of her canvases were exhibited in the United States, but her art had little impact there. Winslow Homer is another artist who may have had early exposure to French Impressionism. In France from 1866 to 1867, Homer may have seen works by Manet and Degas, and the paintings he created on his return, such as his depictions of women playing croquet, pose questions of foreign influence.

However, Homer never became a proponent of the French style, and his symbolic art veered away from Impressionism as his career progressed. Others exposed to French Impressionism during the 1870s were opposed to the style. Though influenced by French Barbizon paintings, George Inness was one of the most outspoken adversaries of Impressionism, condemning the new movement as "sloth enrapt in its own eternal dullness." Weir's response, already mentioned, was typical of the stance of many Americans abroad and at home.

In fact, Weir's reaction in 1877 is understandable given that he was then a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts under the conservative Jean-Léon Gérôme. Americans studying in Paris may have initially felt a sense of betrayal upon encountering Impressionist works. In the academies, they were drawing from casts and gradually working their way up to rendering the figure from life, attaining skills in draftsmanship and perspective that would eventually allow them to create large-scale, multifigured compositions. They were learning how to model forms and to render atmosphere through a gradual shifting of tones. American students had come abroad to learn to paint as the Old Masters had, and the Impressionists broke the very rules that they were busily assimilating.

It was not until the mid-1880s that the attitudes of American artists changed, but a number of developments in the 1870s laid the groundwork for the broad acceptance of the French style in the United States. During this decade, as noted, more American art students than ever congregated in Paris; yet a large number went to Munich, an extremely vital art center. At the Munich Royal Academy, which offered a traditional curriculum, they came into contact with the innovations of Wilhelm Leibl, a German follower of Gustave Courbet. Frank Duveneck, the leading American exponent of Leibl's style, encouraged a large circle of colleagues to create works *alla prima*, rendering canvases all at once in a dark, dramatic, bravura style. In America, a showcase for the works of young artists trained in Munich, as well as in Paris, was provided by the Society of American Artists, established in 1877 by a group of progressives who broke away from the conservative National Academy of Design, the main exhibiting forum since the 1820s. When paintings by Duveneck, as well as other Munich-trained artists, such as William Merritt Chase, John Henry Twachtman, Joseph DeCamp, and Theodore Wendel, were shown in the society's exhibitions in the late 1870s, their novelty was duly noted. Indeed, it was at this time that American critics began to use the term "Impressionism," applying it, albeit mistakenly, to any canvases that revealed a sketchiness or freely expressive handling.

The works of Munich-trained artists represent the most obvious evidence of progressive trends in America in the post–Civil War period. Another arena for change was quietly developing as artists grew increasingly interested in secondary media. The American Watercolor Society was founded in 1866, and over the next two decades artists explored the potential of watercolor for a brilliant range of translucent effects. In the early 1880s, the interest in pastels, which had begun in France, spread to America. The pastel medium, comprising powdered pigments mixed with binding materials and molded into chalk sticks, offered artists an opportunity to capture fleeting color impressions and a variety of textures similar to those attainable in oils. Requiring few materials, which could be used with spontaneity and in the outdoors, pastels were perfectly suited to the methods and expressive concerns of Impressionism. Among the French, Degas, Manet, Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot used pastel extensively, delighting in its dual capacity for draftsmanship and painterly effects. In America, Chase led the pastel revival, conceiving the idea for the Society of Painters in Pastel, a group that exhibited from 1884 to 1890. The fresh color and directness of the medium encouraged Chase and others to adapt pastel techniques to oil painting, which led directly to the formulation of their Impressionist approaches.

Thus, when French Impressionist painting began to appear in America in the mid-1880s, artists and critics alike had been accustomed to novelties of the sort that spurred their appreciation of the movement. The seminal show of French Impressionist works in America was held in the spring of 1886, in New York, at the Durand-Ruel Galleries, whose owner was the proprietor of a Parisian gallery of the same name. That exhibition of almost three hundred canvases met with mixed responses. While a *New York Times* reviewer accused Monet, Renoir, and others of

indulging in "orgies of drawing and color" and of creating "dreadful examples of polychromatic dissipation," other, more positive critics made a sincere effort to understand the new movement. The *Studio* reported:

> The way to look at the true impressionists then, at Claude Monet, at Renoir, at Sisley, Pissarro, Degas, and the rest, is, to regard them as men who are honestly bent on seeing things with their own eyes, and are trying the experiment of painting them by any method that will give back the effects they see. . . . In the work of the true impressionist, not only must the thing be painted from life, and wholly out of doors, if it be a landscape, but it must be painted at once, and finished then and there. We cannot accept as an impressionist picture, one that has been worked over, or warmed over.

The 1886 exhibition was an immediate success, and many of the works were quickly purchased by American patrons. Durand-Ruel reported later that "without America, I was lost, ruined, through having bought so many Monets and Renoirs. . . . The American public does not laugh, it buys." In the years following the exhibition, Impressionism spread rapidly in America. The *New York Times* reported:

> The growth of what are called in France the Impressionists would be sufficiently interesting of itself, though art in America remained absolutely unaffected by the movement. But it happens that we are assailed by them from two directions. Certain dealers in the fine arts . . . have been importing the works of the chiefs of the new school . . . while many of our young painters who have studied their profession in Paris have returned to this country inspired by the belief that in Impressionism art has wrested from nature a great many aspects hardly suspected by the old and later masters of the craft.

The American movement was indeed fueled by a number of artists who had come into direct contact with Claude Monet. In the summer of 1887, a small band of Americans came upon the village of Giverny in Normandy. According to their later recollections, they did not know at first of the presence of Monet, a resident since 1883. But soon the American *Givernois* were using the bright palette and animated brushwork of the Frenchman. The *Art Amateur* reported in October, 1887: "Quite an American colony has gathered . . . at Giverny . . . these men . . . have got the blue-green color of Monet's Impressionism and 'got it bad.'" Their works were seen in Boston and New York, and soon they too had followers among their colleagues at home. The *Art Amateur* stated in 1891 that

> curious paintings by young Bostonian disciples of Monet, or Manet, with unconventional, prismatic reddish hues for fields and trees, and streets and houses in pinks and yellows respectively, have appeared from time to time for a year or two. . . . Mr. Foxcroft Cole imports a number of Monets for collectors of authority [and] Mr. Vonnoh returns imbued with the new style, and backs it with earnest work and intelligent reasons.

The appreciation of the movement now extended to young artists coming to the fore as well as to artists who had previously resisted the style, such as Weir. Not all American artists became instant Impressionist converts, but colorful, vibrant canvases soon held a primary position in important annual exhibitions throughout the country. At the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, American Impressionist works, though only a part of the display of native art, commanded the attention of the crowds and were the focus of critics' bulletins. As the writer Hamlin Garland noted on attending the Exposition:

> Every competent observer who passed through the art palace at the exposition was probably made aware of the immense growth of impressionistic or open-air painting. If the Exposition had been held five years ago, scarcely a trace of blue shadow idea would have been seen outside the work of Claude Monet, Pissarro, and a few others.

By the mid-1890s, articles on Impressionist technique began to appear in American art journals. *Scribner's* carried a commentary in 1896 on the principle that colored light casts its complementary color in shadow, explaining, "A yellow sunset will throw blue shadows upon snow, but a red sunset will throw green shadows, and a greenish-yellow sunset violet shadows."

The founding of the Ten American Painters in 1897 was a milestone in the acceptance of Impressionism in America. The artists who formed this group had become increasingly dissatisfied with the twenty-year-old Society of American Artists; they felt it had become too conservative, losing the characteristics that had distinguished it from the National Academy of Design. Made up of prominent American Impressionists from New York and Boston, the Ten were Frank Benson, Joseph DeCamp, Thomas Dewing, Childe Hassam, Willard Metcalf, Robert Reid, Edward Simmons, Edmund Tarbell, John Henry Twachtman, and J. Alden Weir. (William Merritt Chase joined the group in 1906, replacing Twachtman, who had died in 1902.) Countering the Society's crowded displays of works mounted floor to ceiling, the Ten organized small shows in which all paintings were hung "on the line" (at eye level). During their two decades of activity, the Ten represented an academy of Impressionism in America.

Some members of the Ten were more committed to

Impressionism than others, and those who were considered confirmed Impressionists often created works that fell outside Impressionist bounds. Hassam was the most consistent Impressionist among the Ten, producing works that were closest to French examples, yet in the 1900s he painted a number of idealized female subjects that relied for inspiration on Greek art and the murals of the French artist Puvis de Chavannes. Twachtman adopted Monet's spontaneous methods but rarely painted sunlit scenes saturated with color. He preferred gray days and misty snow scenes. Even Weir, a proclaimed Impressionist in the 1890s, created landscapes after the turn of the century, in which a decidedly romantic spirit emerged, and portraits that were conservative, similar to those he had painted in the 1870s. Metcalf joined Impressionist methods with a realistic landscape style that recalled the art of the Hudson River School. Reid united Impressionism with a decorative approach, combining plein-air color and handling with a concern for the graphic placement of forms on canvas.

Chase never actually affiliated himself with Impressionism; instead he appropriated its techniques to bring an expressivity to his well-crafted and veristic art. Dewing borrowed minimally from Impressionism and Tarbell and DeCamp turned away from Impressionism after 1900, adopting styles strongly influenced by the Old Masters. Benson held to a not-unusual pattern of going back and forth between brilliant outdoor Impressionist scenes and dark, quiet interiors. Many other American artists, such as Robert Vonnoh and Dennis Miller Bunker, fell into a similar category of the "vacation Impressionist," painting bright open-air landscapes and figural works during summer holidays and traditional portraits during winters in their studios.

In general, then, Americans took individual approaches to Impressionism. Unlike their French counterparts, they were not breaking from a bureaucratic art establishment, so they were less concerned with creating an extremist or rebellious art, and they did not feel it was contradictory to combine approaches. Many Americans, in fact, adopted Impressionism without completely abandoning the lessons learned in the academies. While they painted landscapes with a freedom and animation inspired by Monet, they did not dissolve objects in light and atmosphere as he did. They rendered human forms with the modeling techniques instilled during life drawing sessions, and they arranged their sitters carefully within well-defined spaces, as they had been taught by instructors who were preparing them to execute large-scale scenes drawn from history and mythology.

Thus, the freedom to experiment and to merge seeming disparities characterizes American Impressionism. For this reason, the style quickly pervaded the country. Impressionism came to be seen as democratic, open to variation and interpretation. Hamlin Garland noted in 1894 that dependence on foreign traditions was likely to be "fatal to fresh, individual art," and he urged artists to develop divergent and unique responses to Impressionism. The style was viewed not as a radical importation but as particularly suited to the expression of the beautiful and enduring aspects of American life.

American Impressionism was of a gentler sort than French. In subject matter, American Impressionists avoided the kinds of urban scenes that had caused controversy in the art of Manet and Degas. Instead they painted luxurious interiors inhabited by contemplative women—quiet refuges from the pressures of modern life. Landscape was the preferred subject for Americans, probably because of the importance landscape had long held in the nation's art. Impressionist paintings of remote, refreshing outdoor scenes continued the tradition, established by the Hudson River School, of revealing the untouched splendor of the New World. Other landscapes show signs of civilization merging harmoniously with the countryside. In their rarer, urban scenes, American painters focused on picturesque squares and parks, avoiding crowded streets and tenement districts.

In 1913, American art was changed irreparably by the Armory Show, held in Chicago and New York. It was in this landmark exhibition that the works of Picasso, Duchamp, Cézanne, and Matisse were initially seen by a broad American audience. The outraged response to their radical new art echoes in many ways the earlier reaction to French Impressionism. After initial scorn and mockery, Americans took up the modernist banner and thrust themselves into an exploration of abstract modes of representation. Weir again shifted allegiances and yielded to yet another wave of change. Elected president, in 1911, of the Association of Painters and Sculptors, which organized the Armory Show, he now represented the establishment, but his support of modernism made him an important link between old and new. Impressionism had become staid and respectable and was being overshadowed by abstract painting and overlooked by critics and scholars.