

William Merritt Chase (1849–1916)

by Lisa Bush Hankin

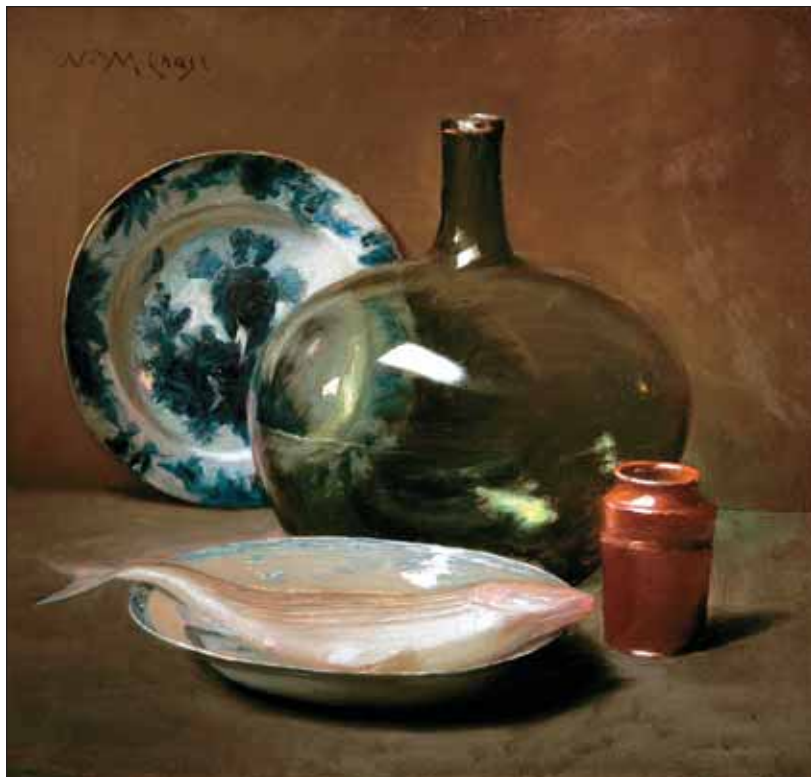
With their recognizable boldly-brushed style, works by William Merritt Chase continue to be strongly pursued by collectors and museums alike. A leading light among American impressionist painters, Chase's work is highly regarded for its technical virtuosity and its appealing subject matter. Viewed in financial terms, works by Chase are like blue-chip stocks—well-known to everyone and proof of the artist's track record in the marketplace.

Born in Indiana in 1849, Chase studied in Munich, Germany, where instructors encouraged his lively painting technique. The term “bravura brushwork” seems practically to have been invented to describe Chase's painting style, as well as that of his contemporary John Singer Sargent. Once Chase himself began to teach, which he did for virtually his entire career, he encouraged the same spontaneity among his students—who included Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, Marsden Hartley and Joseph Stella, to name a few—establishing a legacy that has influenced generations of artists.

Fig. 1 (above): *Prospect Park, Brooklyn*, William Merritt Chase (American, 1849–1916), ca. 1886. Oil on wood panel, 17¼ x 25¾ inches. Courtesy of Adelson Galleries, Inc., New York.

Fig. 2 (right): *Alice Dieudonne Chase, Shinnecock Hills*, William Merritt Chase (American, 1849–1916), ca. 1902. Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 inches. Courtesy of Adelson Galleries, Inc., New York.





Warren Adelson of New York's Adelson Galleries believes that Chase's most sought-after works may be his Shinnecock landscapes from the 1890s, painted on the eastern end of Long Island where Chase established America's first formal outdoor painting school in 1891. "Historically, these green, white, and blue breezy landscapes have commanded the highest prices, reaching seven and even eight figures," says Adelson. Chase also produced scenes of New York's Central Park

and Brooklyn's Prospect Park (Fig. 1), the subject of an exhibition at The Brooklyn Museum in 2000. "These intimate scenes have also had great appeal, although their generally smaller sizes have kept the prices below those of the Shinnecock paintings."

One of the prominent figures to invest in Chase's work in recent years is Microsoft chairman Bill Gates. In 2001

To examine price movement for Chase's works on a quantitative basis, we have taken the average price per square inch for oils and pastels sold at Christie's and Sotheby's for the five-year period of 1990–1995, and compared it with the five-year period 2000–2005. The results show a ten-year increase of 254%.

ArtNews reported that Gates — among the most important collectors of nineteenth and early twentieth-century American art — added a second major work by Chase to his collection when he paid \$10 million privately for *The Nursery* (circa 1890). That price far surpassed Chase's \$3.92 million record at auction, suggesting that dealers orchestrate the top-tier transactions for this artist's work.

A 2006 release of the catalogue raisonné of Chase's work by the late Ronald Pisano will draw attention to the breadth of Chase's subjects and

highlight some lesser-known aspects of his work. In addition to landscapes, Chase's subject matter includes portraits (Fig. 2), still lifes, figural drawings, and interior scenes. Adelson believes that there may be opportunities for new collectors in these subjects. "He painted fine still-life works and often they have been underrated," he explains. "At a moment in time he painted several dozen 'fish' paintings...[which are]...rather fabulous as pure paintings." New York dealer Deedee Wigmore of D. Wigmore Fine Art concurs. "Fish imagery (Fig. 3) is evocative of the artist," she explains, adding that other items used in the artist's still-life compositions often came from his personal collection. "Chase was a collector of old brass, glass, ceramics, and textiles, and many of his favorite objects make repeated appearances in his work." Handsome still lifes can range from \$100,000 to \$300,000 and have great appeal for collectors, she says, but "unfortunately, there is a very limited amount of Chase's still-life work available in the current art market."

Chase was also highly proficient in pastels (Fig. 4) and is viewed as one of the most accomplished artists in this medium. Though his pastel works bring very substantial prices, they represent another opportunity for the collector looking to invest in this highly regarded American impressionist's body of work. @

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Fig. 3 (left): *Still Life with Fish*, William Merritt Chase (American, 1849–1916). Oil on canvas, 24½ x 26½ inches. Signed upper left: W.M. Chase. Courtesy of D. Wigmore Fine Art, Inc., New York.

Fig. 4 (right): *Roses*, William Merritt Chase (American, 1849–1916), ca. 1888. Pastel on paper, 13 x 11½ inches. Courtesy of Adelson Galleries, Inc., New York.