

**T**he astute observer and novelist Henry James noted in 1887 that, "it sounds like a paradox, but it is a very simple truth, that when to-day 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."<sup>1</sup> The Parisian experience transformed late-nineteenth-century American art, and *Americans in Paris, 1860–1900* is the first major exhibition to explore why the French capital was a

magnet for Americans, what they found there, how they responded to it, and what they retained of the experience on their return to the United States.

In the decades after the Civil War, Paris replaced Rome as the center of the Western art world, becoming an irresistible attraction for

# AMERICANS “AT HOME” IN *Paris*

by Erica  
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Fig. 2: John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925), *In the Luxembourg Gardens*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 36 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Lent by the Philadelphia Museum of Art; John G. Johnson Collection, 1917. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

American artists and art students, both men and women. Thousands of Americans traveled there to add polish and sophistication to the training they had begun at home. As the Boston painter May Alcott Nieriker remarked in her 1879 guide, *Studying Art Abroad and How To Do It Cheaply*, “Now that Boston, New York, and Philadelphia have their Fine Art Museums and life classes, there is no longer the same necessity for crossing the Atlantic for an education that existed some years ago . . . [but] there is no art world like Paris, no painters like the French, and no good work equal to that found in a Parisian atelier.”<sup>2</sup> The portraitist Cecilia Beaux explained it more simply—for the artist, she said, “everything” was in Paris.<sup>3</sup>

In the late nineteenth century thousands of aspiring American artists enrolled at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts or at one of several private studios, and immersed themselves in the vibrant artistic life of Paris. Many arrived without speaking a word of French, but their enthusiasm carried them along. Entranced with the romantic ideal of “la vie Bohème” made popular in contemporary fiction and theatre, American painters willingly put up with cold garrets and difficult landlords to live their dream (Fig. 1). Many stuck together, creating expatriate colonies along narrow streets like the rue Notre Dame des Champs. They helped each other navigate foreign customs, made the most of their frequently meager resources, and kept homesickness at bay with social events, including enthusiastic celebrations of July 4 and Thanksgiving. They

studied the Old Masters at the Louvre and were stimulated by the modern art they saw at the annual Salon and elsewhere. They also sought opportunities to show their own work in Paris, well aware of the professional advantages such displays could provide. As Nieriker described it, Paris was “one vast studio.”<sup>4</sup>

American artists often experienced a sense of homecoming when they arrived in Paris, a place where art was an integral part of everyday life. Art in America was often counted as an unnecessary frill, but in Paris, culture and beauty were fundamental. Aesthetics played a key role in the

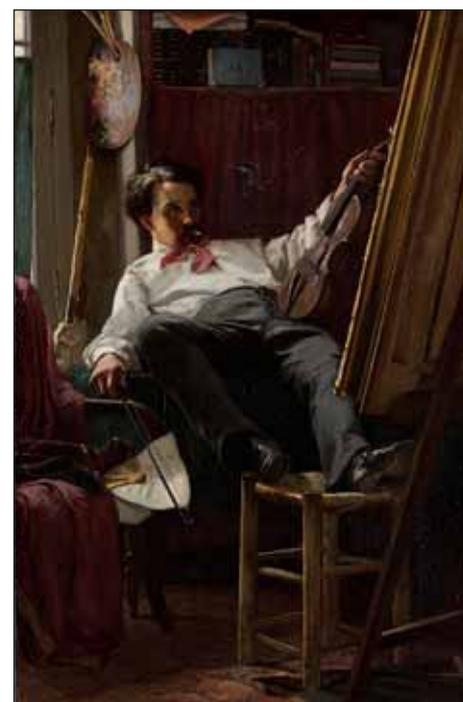


Fig. 1: Thomas Hovenden, American (1840–1895), *Self Portrait of the Artist in His Studio*, 1875. Oil on canvas. 26 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 17 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan and John H. Niemeyer Funds. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



**Fig. 3:** Childe Hassam (American, 1859–1935), *At the Florist*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 36¼ x 54¼ inches. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA; Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photography by Scott Wolf.



**Fig. 4:** Mary Stevenson Cassatt (American, 1844–1926), *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 32 x 23½ inches. Lent by the Philadelphia Museum of Art; bequest of Charlotte Dorrance Wright, 1978. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photography by Lynn Rosenthal.

dramatic changes the city experienced during the second half of the nineteenth century. Paris grew very fast, doubling in area and in population each decade. The medieval capital was ruthlessly rebuilt, beginning under the rule of Emperor Napoleon III, who, after coming to power in 1852, ordered city administrator Baron Haussmann to transform Paris. Haussman commissioned a new metropolis of wide boulevards and public parks, anchored by important new buildings like the Opéra. The Franco-Prussian War in 1870–71 and the violent public uprising that followed (which caused considerable damage that remained visible for years) interrupted Haussman's plan, but the program was finally completed during the Third Republic.

Few references to current events made their way into the work of American artists. They recorded the city's elegant boulevards, parks, and gardens without social commentary, perhaps revealing their position as outsiders looking in. J. Alden Weir, a painter from New York who studied with French academician Jean-Léon

Gérôme in the 1870s, described the attractions of the Luxembourg Gardens in a letter to his father, "...at sunset one gets as beautiful sights as could be wished for. Last night was grand, the moon was nearly full, the atmosphere clear, and the sky cloudless."<sup>5</sup> His description predicted the romantic view of the park that his compatriot John Singer Sargent made six years later, in which elegant couples stroll through the pearly twilight, a full moon reflected in the quiet fountain pool behind them (Fig. 2). In subject, the painting recalls the stylish glimpses of Parisian streets and parks by Jean Béraud, but Sargent omitted the French artist's blunt specificity. Instead, he concerned himself with art-making, carefully positioning his figures in an almost blank foreground and using their vertical forms to balance the density of anecdotal details that he included in the middle ground — a man reading the newspaper, a boy with a toy sailboat, nursemaids with their distinctive round caps.

The American painter most devoted to recording the urban scene was Childe Hassam,

who made a number of images of the city's boulevards. Hassam had already earned his reputation with pictures of Boston in the rain and snow, and in Paris he continued his fascination with the subject of weather. Like many visitors, Hassam was also impressed with the consciously artistic arrangement of goods for sale in the small shops that spilled open onto the sidewalks. In *At the Florist* (Fig. 3), he depicted the vibrant display and careful arrangement characteristic of a French flower shop. Without comment, Hassam recorded the distinctions of social class between the elegantly dressed woman in a black cape and hat who buys the flowers and the young women in white aprons and caps who attend her. Each figure is as elegantly wrapped as the surrounding bouquets.

While Hassam devoted himself to the streets of Paris, Mary Cassatt concentrated on its interiors, both public and private. Cassatt had first trained as a painter in Philadelphia, but settled permanently in Paris in 1874, where she felt she was taken seriously as a professional, a position still difficult for women to achieve in America. Cassatt also sought artistic freedom, and Paris, with its wealth of studios and exhibition opportunities, was large enough to support a variety of approaches to art. She allied herself with the avant-garde, and became the only American invited to join the group shows organized by the French Impressionists. In their fourth exhibition in 1879, she displayed a series of interiors of Paris theaters, among them *Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge* (Fig. 4). Her young red-headed model, probably American rather than French, betrays her excitement at attending one of the many evening entertainments available in Paris. From the vantage point of the audience, Cassatt explored the spectacle of the theater, depicting the elegant crowd in surrounding loges reflected in the mirror behind her sitter.

While Cassatt's model is suitably attired for an evening event, dressed in a pink gown with generous décolletage and bare shoulders, Sargent's *Mrs. Henry White* (Fig. 5) poses more modestly, with a delicate fichu and three-quarter-length sleeves adorning her



Fig. 5: John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925), *Mrs. Henry White* (Margaret Stuyvesant Rutherford), 1883. Oil on canvas, 87 x 55 inches. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; gift of John Campbell White. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

eighteenth-century style silk gown. She too, holds a fan, as well as opera glasses, and likewise seems ready to attend a performance. Unlike Cassatt's anonymous model (once mistakenly identified as the artist's sister Lydia), Daisy White was a well-known American in Paris. The wife of a diplomat and a prominent member of the American expatriate colony, she was one of the first Americans outside his immediate circle of friends to commission a

portrait from the young Sargent, who had rapidly earned a reputation in Paris for his vivid likenesses and painterly acumen. When her husband, Henry White, was transferred to London in 1884, the portrait traveled with them, and there it helped to secure Sargent's standing as a painter in England.

Completed in 1883, *Mrs. Henry White* was one of several depictions of Americans in Paris that Sargent submitted to the annual French



Salon. The same year, Sargent completed his portrait of Madame Pierre Gautreau, another American in Paris (Fig. 6). Virginie Avegno Gautreau, a native of New Orleans whose family had taken refuge in Paris after her father died in the Civil War, was a celebrated and self-conscious belle. Edward Simmons, an American student at the Académie Julian, described her in 1879–80: “I remember seeing Madame De Gautrot [*sic*], the noted beauty of the day, and could not help stalking her as one does a deer. Representing a type that never has appealed to me (black as spades and white as milk), she thrilled me by the very movement of her body. She walked as Vergil speaks of goddesses — sliding — and seemed to take no steps. Her head and neck undulated like that of a young doe, and something about her gave you the impression of infinite proportion, infinite grace, and infinite balance.”<sup>6</sup> Sargent recorded Mme. Gautreau as she wanted to be seen — as a quintessential *parisienne*, sophisticated, perfectly groomed, elegantly dressed, urban and independent. The type was well known, from fashion magazines to fine art. But what was one to make of a *parisienne* who was not French? Society observers likely could not wait to say of Mme. Gautreau’s portrait what they would never say to her face. Sargent’s friend Vernon Lee described the painting at the Salon as “surrounded by shoals of astonished and jibing women.”<sup>7</sup> The painting was harshly criticized in the press for the boldness and audacity of both the sitter and the way she was represented, taking Sargent by surprise. He and Mme. Gautreau had had similar aims — they both wanted to excel, not only in the American colony, but in Paris. To a great extent they both succeeded, but there was one obstacle they never conquered — they could never be French.

James McNeill Whistler was one American painter who was thoroughly embraced by the French. In the 1890s the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro* described him as a

**Fig. 6:** John Singer Sargent (American, 1856–1925), *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1883–1884. Oil on canvas, 82½ x 43¼ inches. Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916 (16.53). © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photography 1997. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



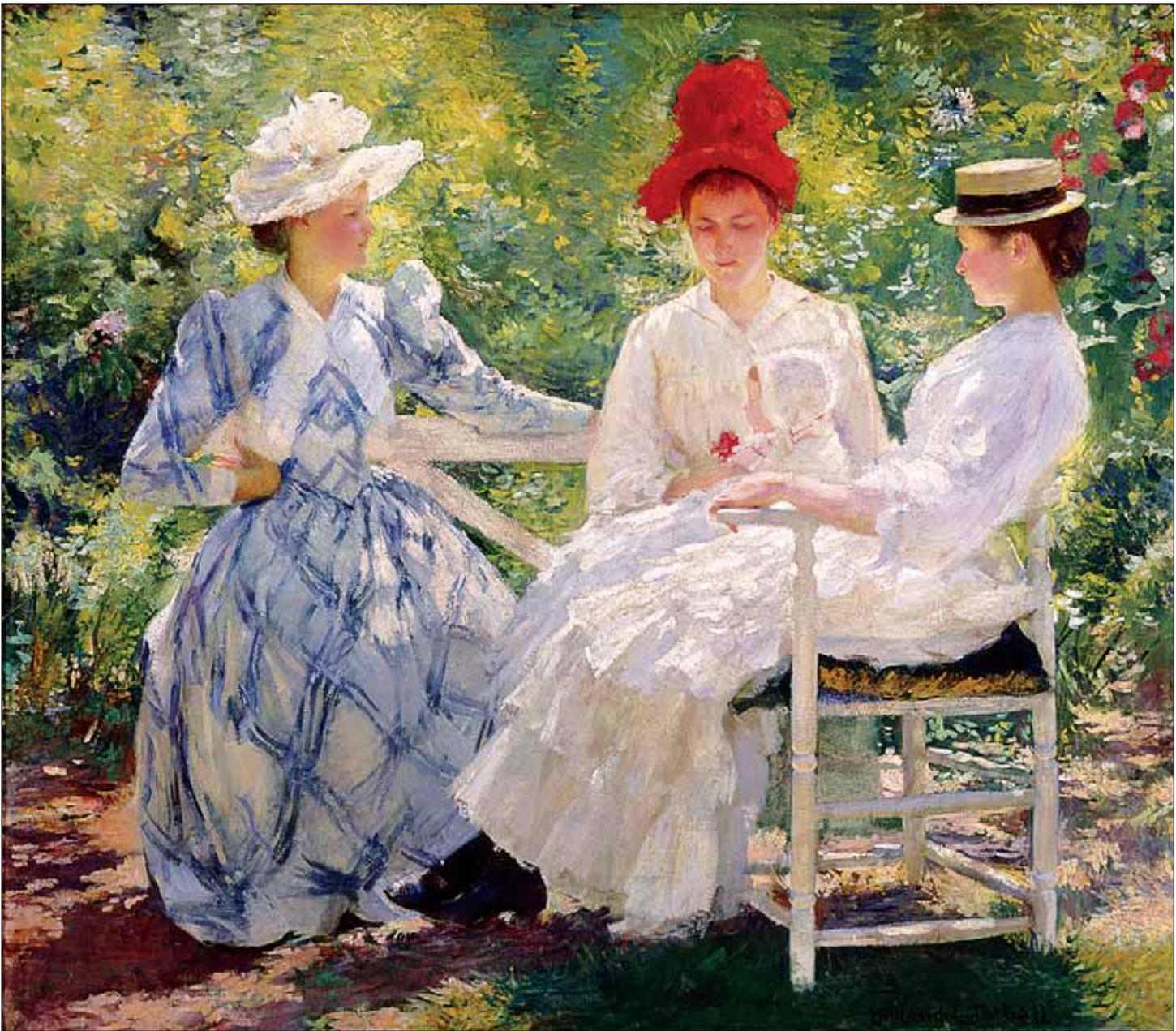
“naturalized Parisian,” Fluent in French, Whistler lived in Paris for extended periods twice, at the beginning and again at the end of his career, and despite his long residence in London, according to the art dealer Edward Guthrie Kennedy, Whistler’s “favorite theme” was “the superiority of the French in every thing.”<sup>8</sup> His *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1, The Artist’s Mother* (Fig. 7) was purchased by the French government for the Musée du Luxembourg in 1891. It was not the first American painting to find a home there, but it received the most publicity, with a front-page notice in *Le Figaro*. For the artist, the purchase served as a decisive endorsement

of his work. It also made Whistler’s artistic presence in Paris into a permanent one. Even today, Whistler’s mother is the most famous American in Paris.

In a variety of ways, Americans also brought Paris home with them. Upon their return, some painters, among them Thomas Eakins, applied their traditional academic training, honed in the art schools of Paris, to distinctly American subjects. For others, like Childe Hassam, Paris gave them exposure to a new way of art-making that emphasized light, color, and subjects drawn from everyday life. For an artist like Edmund Tarbell, it was both. In his innovative works of the 1890s, Tarbell created

**Fig. 7:** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, (American active in England, 1834–1903), *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Artist’s Mother*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 56<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 64 inches. Paris, Musée d’Orsay, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

a distinctly American style by combining the firm modeling of the human form he had studied in Paris with the innovative subjects and brilliant color of the French Impressionists (Fig. 8). Tarbell would soon become one of the leading painters and teachers in the United States, heralded for his quintessentially American art. Behind all his achievements was Paris, an experience he shared with most American painters of his age.



*Americans in Paris* was organized by the National Gallery, London, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in association with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities. It makes its American debut in Boston on June 25 and runs through September 24, 2006. It is on view at The Metropolitan

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**Fig. 8:** Edmund Charles Tarbell (American, 1862–1938), *Three Sisters—A Study in June Sunlight*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 35½ x 40½ inches. Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. J. Montgomery Sears M1925.1. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

orated with the National Gallery, London, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art on *Americans in Paris, 1860–1900*, for which she has written the catalogue essay “*At Home in Paris.*”

1 Henry James, “John Singer Sargent,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 75 (October 1887), 683.

2 May Alcott Nieriker, *Studying Art Abroad and How To Do It Cheaply* (Boston, 1879), 6.

3 Cecilia Beaux, *Background with Figures* (Boston, 1930), 174.

4 Nieriker, 43.

5 Julian Alden Weir to his father, November 2, 1873; Weir Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

6 Edward Simmons, *From Seven to Seventy: Memoirs of a Painter and a Yankee* (New York, 1922), 126–7.

7 Vernon Lee [Violet Paget] to her mother, June 8, 1884, Vernon Lee’s Letters (privately printed, 1937), 143.

8 Edward Guthrie Kennedy, June 7, 1897, Edward Guthrie Kennedy Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. See also Geneviève Lacambre, “Whistler and France,” in Richard Dorment and Margaret F. Macdonald, *James McNeill Whistler* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994), 39–48.