

Painterly Controversy

William Merritt Chase
and Robert Henri



by KIMBERLY ORCUTT

In late November of 1907, New York newspapers trumpeted a controversy that had the art world in an uproar. Headlines exclaimed: “Artist Chase Leaves: Withdraws from the New York School of Art, Which He Founded”; and “Wm. M. Chase Forced Out of New York Art School: Triumph for the ‘New Movement’ Led by Robert Henri.” William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) and Robert Henri (1865–1929) were renowned teachers and two of the best known American artists at the turn of the twentieth century. But their relationship, which had begun in mutual admiration, ended in headlining animosity, as the two fought bitterly over the nature of art and its future direction in America. Enacting their differences on a national stage, they forced a generation of artists to address the same issues and to shape their own conclusions.

THIS PAGE:

Fig. 1: William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Untitled (Shinnecock Landscape)*, circa 1892. Oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches. The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York. Photography by Gary Mamay.

Fig. 2: Robert Henri (1865–1929), *At Far Rockaway, 1902*. Oil on canvas, 26 x 32 in. Private collection.



Chase was one of the country's foremost portraitists, with pupils numbering in the hundreds. In 1902, he invited Robert Henri to teach at the New York School of Art. Henri seemed a natural choice; he and Chase painted in similar styles and admired each other's work. Both proudly identified themselves with modernism, while also revering Old Masters Diego Velázquez and Frans Hals and their nineteenth-century disciples, Édouard Manet and James McNeill Whistler. The pair were considered the country's most influential art teachers. Never before had two American teachers claimed such a breadth of influence. But their paths quickly diverged. Differences soon divided them over two fundamental issues that have been debated throughout the history of

art—the importance of technique and what constitutes an appropriate subject.

Chase had come of age in the 1870s and 1880s, when his accomplished brushwork of upper-class urban life were considered avant-garde. He built his fame on his technical mastery, and by the 1900s had established himself as a master of sunny, genteel New York scenes and of elegant portraits of some of the most important men and women of his time. Henri, sixteen years younger than Chase, cared little for draftsmanship and technique, and took his themes from the harsher realities of city life, developing new ideas about modernism. At the New York School of Art, Henri increasingly advocated the gritty urban subjects

THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Fig. 3: William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Portrait of a Lady in Black (Anna Traquair Lang)*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 59½ x 47¾ in. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Alex Simpson Jr. Collection, 1928.

Fig. 4: Robert Henri (1865–1929), *The Art Student (Miss Josephine Nivison)*, 1906. Oil on canvas, 77¼ x 38½ inches. Milwaukee Art Museum, Purchase, M1965.34.

that would characterize the movement known as the Ashcan School; dour subjects that Chase found highly objectionable. Their debate was intensified by their diametrically opposed personalities. Henri's forthright earthiness clashed with Chase's fastidious elegance. As their mutual opposition mounted, it split the student body into warring factions whose altercations often required police intervention. The tensions between them escalated, until 1907, when Chase left—or was driven from—the school that he had founded in 1896. Since some of their students would go on to become important modernists—George Bellows, Stuart Davis, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Charles Sheeler, among them—their conflict holds a particular importance for twentieth-century American art.

Portraits by Chase and Henri reflect their stylistic parallels as well as the very different ways they approached such subjects as women, family members, and students. Chase was well-known for his paintings of the Shinnecock area of Long Island, where he opened a summer school in 1891. He transformed the flat Shinnecock landscape in idyllic scenes of women relaxing and children at play. In *Untitled (Shinnecock*



ABOVE:
Fig. 5: William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), *Carmencita*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 69 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 40 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Sir William Van Horne, 1906. (06.969). Photograph © 1978 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Landscape), circa 1892 (Fig. 1), Chase captured a moment of private domesticity as his children play among the bushes; his summer home is visible in the distance. Henri's depiction of a crowded urban resort in *At Far Rockaway* of 1902 (Fig. 2) shows his preference for public scenes from urban life. Just months after executing this painting, Henri began to exhort his students at the New York School of Art to seek out similar subjects.

Chase's 1911 portrait *Lady in Black* of his student Anna Traquair Lang (Fig. 3), portrays her not as an artist but as a sophisticated, cultured woman. This elegant grand manner portrait showcases Chase's loose, confident brushwork and his high impasto, and vividly illustrates his mastery of technique. In contrast, Henri's 1906 portrait of his student Josephine Nivison (Fig. 4) is a provocative statement of his ideas about subject matter. Nivison studied with Henri at the New York School of Art, where she met her future husband, Edward Hopper. In Henri's portrait she stands with brushes in hand, wearing a painting smock that slides down to show the shoulders of her red dress. The very title *The Art Student* transforms the painting from a portrait of a specific person into a universal statement. By the time Henri painted this portrait, he and Chase were severely at odds. With this painting, Henri sent his older colleague the message that this was his version of a portrait in the grand manner.

In spite of their differences, Chase and Henri often painted the same subjects, in some instances producing work that suggests a reversal of roles. When the Spanish dancer Carmencita toured the country in 1890, Chase hosted two of her performances in his Tenth Street studio, where some

THIS PAGE, LEFT:
Fig. 6: Robert Henri (1865–1929),
La Madrileña, 1910.
Oil on canvas, 73 x 37 inches.
Private collection.



THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
 Fig. 7: Stuart Davis (1892–1964),
Consumer Coal Co., 1912.
 Oil on linen, 29½ x 37½ inches.
 Clay Center for the Arts & Sciences of West Virginia,
 Gift of Amherst Coal Co., 1977.

Fig. 8: Stuart Davis (1892–1964),
The Terminal, 1937.
 Oil on canvas, 30¾ x 40¾ in.
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
 Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC; gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.
 Photography by Lee Stalworth.

disgruntled guests thought her vulgar and offensive. His iconic portrait of Carmencita (Fig. 5) shows her in motion, snapping her castanets with an alluring smile — a subject earthy enough for Henri. Chase’s painting is considered one of the most important precursors to Henri’s portraits of Spanish dancers, including his *La Madrileña* (little girl of Madrid) of 1910 (Fig. 6). Yet when Henri painted his subject, he showed her at rest, her gaze averted.

Among the generation of artists immediately affected by the competing arguments of Chase and Henri was Stuart Davis (1892–1964) who, under Henri’s tutelage, enthusiastically sought out urban scenes. His *Consumer Coal Co., 1912* (Fig. 7) shows workers delivering coal in bitter winter weather. Later, Davis developed a style of abstraction that departed from Henri’s realism, yet he remained interested in social issues, as in his 1937 painting *The Terminal* (Fig. 8). He used vibrant, flattened forms to render longshoremen hauling cargo from a dock; the man exiting at the right shows a sense of strain, even anxiety, which makes the painting surprisingly sympathetic.

The impact of Chase’s and Henri’s teaching was especially pronounced and enduring because of the nature of their conflict. The polarized quality of their dispute and arguments over the nature and future of American art affected an entire generation of young artists. Further pairings of the artists’ works, along with examples of some of their students’ early work, may be seen in the exhibition *Painterly Controversy: William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri*, on view through April 29, 2007 at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut. For exhibition information call 203.869.0376, or visit www.brucemuseum.org. @

Kimberly Orcutt is the associate curator of American art, New-York Historical Society. Previously, she was assistant curator of art at the Bruce Museum, where she curated the exhibition.