



The Portraits of William Merritt Chase

by D. Frederick Baker



Early in his career, William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) decided that the best way to achieve a high profile and derive financial reward in the art making business was to paint portraits, a skill at which he was quite accomplished. The first exhibition of the Society of American Artists held in 1878 included four of his portraits. He had exhibited several others in various venues that year, all of which was enough to create a buzz about this young artist. The portraits, including the masterful *Apprentice* (Fig. 1), had been painted while he was a student at the Munich Royal Academy from 1872 through 1877, and were described in reviews as bold and exciting.

One of the earliest published references to Chase was an article in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (March 1879), in which the author, discussing Chase's portrait work noted that "although [Chase] studied with Piloty [director of the Munich Royal Academy], the master whom he made his model of excellence was Velasquez."¹ No greater compliment could have been afforded the young artist. Two years later he was the subject of an article in *The American Art Review* (June 1881) by Marianna G. Van Rensselaer, who wrote "The most prominent characteristic of his style in portraiture is force. Vividness of conception, strength and rapidity of hand—these are its most striking qualities."² It was on the basis of such critical acclaim that Chase became one of the leading American portrait painters of his generation.

Upon his return from his studies in Munich in 1878, he had secured the most expensive space in New York's famous Tenth Street Studio building. It was a bold move for the young artist, but establishing a foothold in the free-for-all art business was not for the faint hearted. His skill at capturing likeness, his extraordinary brush work, and his self confident ways would serve him well.

Chase made it his business to attract high profile sitters—presidents, businessmen, actresses, and celebrities of all sorts—the kind of clientele that would lead to further commissions. But it is his portraits of friends and family members for which he is best known today. The portrait of his student Dora Wheeler (Fig. 2) was awarded Honorable Mention in the 1883 Paris Salon. That same year it was awarded the Gold Medal when shown at the Munich Crystal Palace Exhibition. A German critic praised the work by describing Miss Wheeler "as genuine an American as ever was, handsome moreover, and interesting also..."³ Two years later Chase met James McNeill Whistler in London. The two agreed to paint each other's portrait, but, alas, only Chase's portrait of Whistler



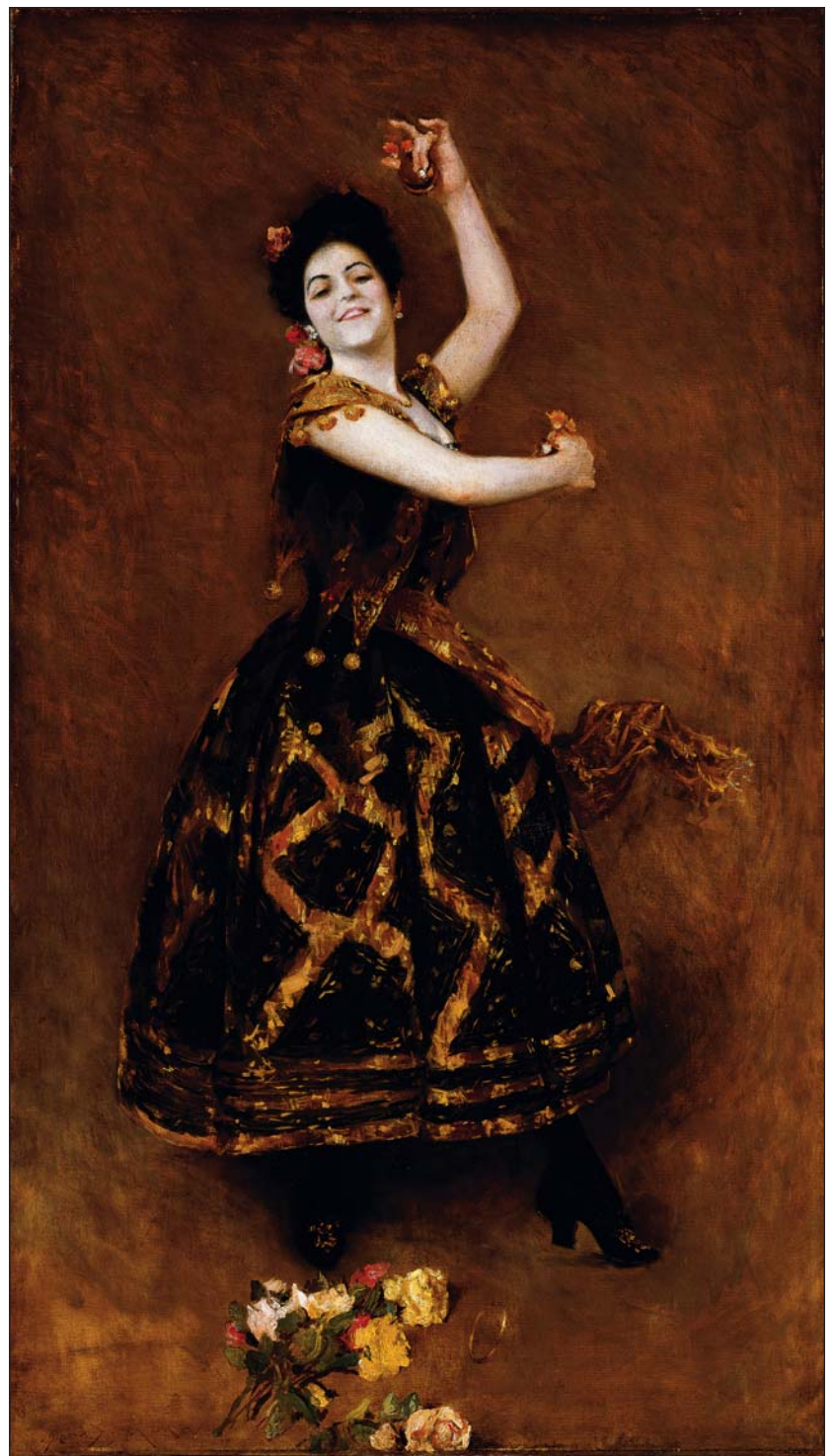
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Fig. 1: *Apprentice*, 1875. Signed "Will M. Chase" at upper left. Inscribed and dated "München 1875" at upper right. Oil on canvas, 37 x 23 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Lueck.

Fig. 2: *Portrait of Miss Dora Wheeler*, ca. 1883. Signed "W. M. Chase" at upper right. Oil on canvas, 62½ x 65½ inches. Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Boudinot Keith in Memory of Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Wade, November 17, 1921.



(Fig. 3) survives; it captured the indomitable dandy Whistler unlike any other portrait of the expatriate artist. In April, 1890, John Singer Sargent wrote asking Chase to provide his studio for a dance recital for the Spanish dancer, Carmencita, the pearl of Seville. Sargent had painted Carmencita's portrait in hopes of selling it to Isabella Stewart Gardner whom he had invited to the recital. Chase agreed, and went on to paint his own exuberant rendition (Fig. 4).



Chase often submitted commissioned portraits to exhibitions, knowing that the resulting media reviews would serve as a way of advertising his skills. Soon after completing his portrait of the socialite Angelica Hamilton Lawrence in 1892 (Fig. 5), Chase agreed to its inclusion in the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design. The portrait was acclaimed as "one of the best things [Chase] has done in years." Another critic stated it was "the best in the exhibition." While a similarly

laudatory review referenced the fact it was the portrait of an "American" girl. Indeed, throughout his career, Chase was praised for being able to capture the essence of what was considered American in his many portrait sitters; one critic describing the distinctly American character of Chase's art as "sane, unsentimental, truthful, and unpretentious... typical American traits."⁴

In early 1896, Chase gave up his Tenth Street studio, resigned from his teaching post



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Fig. 5: *Miss L*, 1892.
Signed "Wm. M. Chase" at lower right.
Oil on canvas,
51¾ x 32¾ inches.
Private collection.

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Fig. 3: *James McNeill Whistler*, 1885.
Inscribed, signed and dated "To my friend Whistler/Wm. M. Chase/London 1885" at upper left.
Oil on canvas,
74¾ x 36¼ inches.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of William H. Walker, 1918.

Fig. 4: *Carmencita*, 1890.
Signed "Wm. M. Chase" at lower right.
Oil on canvas,
69⅞ x 40⅞ inches.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Sir William Van Horne, 1906.

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Fig. 6: *The Golden Lady*, 1896.
Signed, inscribed
and dated "Wm. M. Chase
Madrid 1896" at upper right.
Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 32 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.
Littlejohn Collection,
Parrish Art Museum,
Southampton, Long Island, NY.

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Fig. 7: *The Feather Fan*, ca. 1895.
Signed "Chase" at lower right.
Oil on canvas, 54 x 36 inches.
Musée D'Orsay, Paris,
Gift of Roland Knoedler.

Fig. 8: *Alice on Sunday*, 1896.
Inscribed, dated, and signed
"To my friend Dr. Fisher
from his friend/ Xmas, 1896/
Wm. M. Chase" at lower right.
Oil on panel, 24 x 12 inches.
Private collection.



at the Art Students League, and took a class of students to Madrid. Discouraged by the dismal results of an auction of his paintings in New York, he planned to move permanently to Spain and establish an American art school. Though his pique with the art-buying public was understandable; emotionally, he could never permanently distance himself from New York, and the school never materialized. But the spring break allowed Chase to immerse himself in the glories of Spanish painting. Some Spanish artists observing Chase copying Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, are reported to have exclaimed "Velázquez lives again!"⁵ The trip

also produced one of Chase's finest portraits, *The Golden Lady* (Fig. 6), likely one of his pupils attending his Spanish class that spring.

Chase's favorite sitter was Alice Dieudonné Chase, his first-born child. Asked why he painted so many portraits of her, he said it was because she so reminded him of his wife. *The Feather Fan* (Fig. 7), his portrait of Alice perched on a fancy pillow and holding a fan, is one of the glories of American art. It was purchased at the Chase estate sale in 1917 by Chase's friend Roland Knoedler who gave it to the French government. In *Alice on Sunday* (Fig. 8), his daughter is caught in mid-step,

turning ever so slightly to acknowledge the presence of her father. The same subtlety of pose is found in his portrait of another of his daughters, Koto Robertine Chase (Fig. 9). Her head is fractionally tilted back as she turns cautiously to the viewer. It is in his rendition of this kind of sensitive cant of the figure that Chase's genius lay.

In 1908, Chase, who had spent several summers teaching American students in Italy, was asked to donate a self-portrait to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Fig. 10). Only artists of the highest order were asked to donate work to the gallery. The first Americans to do so



were George Peter Alexander Healy (1813–1894), John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), and Chase. It was a singular achievement to be asked to join such an august assemblage, and a very special honor for Chase who, by then, had been spending most of his summers teaching American students in Italy. It also spurred Chase on to make a series of similar self-portraits. News of the accolade no doubt also contributed to his flourishing portrait business in Philadelphia where he had been teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts on and off from 1896 until 1909. In Philadelphia he had set up a studio to attract

sitters. The troubling reputation of his friend Thomas Eakins, with respect to his behavior involving female students and his oft times unflattering portraits, likely discouraged potential clients who looked, instead, to Chase, who turned out a plethora of portraits—in one case, eight portraits of various members of the Earle family of Philadelphia.

While other American artists around the turn of the last century also painted portraits, none of them attained quite the prominence of Chase in the field. A 1913 article in the *New York Times* referred to Chase as the “foremost American portrait painter.”⁶ No

doubt he was flattered by such encomiums, but he was equally proud of his role as teacher to new generations of American artists—many of whom studied the art of portrait painting with him. Alas, the modernist movement that began to surface around the same year, notably the 1913 Armory Show in New York, seemed to lessen the interest of emerging artists in becoming portrait painters.

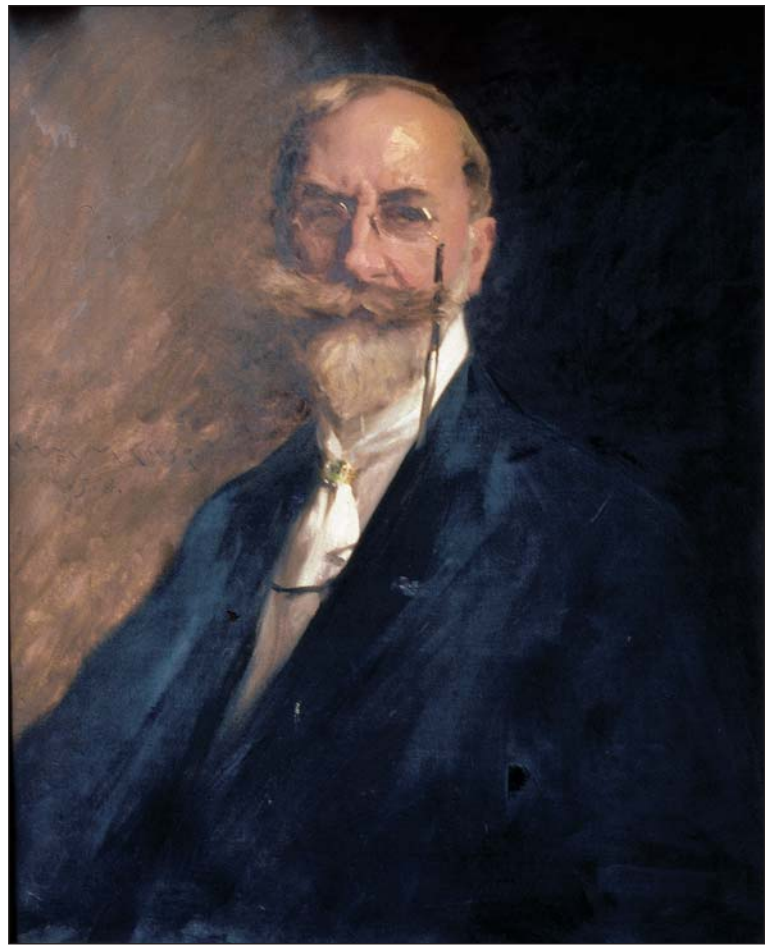
No personal logbook of Chase’s portrait commissions is known to survive. When art historian Ron Pisano (1948–2000) began work on the William Merritt Chase catalogue



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Fig. 9: Koto, 1899.
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25½ inches.
Private collection.

Fig. 10: Self Portrait, 1908.
Signed and dated "Wm. M.
Chase/1908" at center left.
Oil on canvas, 29 x 23 inches.
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.



raisonné in 1975, one of the main challenges was reconstructing the list of portrait sitters. While some Chase portraits were exhibited and sitters identified by name, most went directly from Chase's studio to the sitter's home or place of business. Although more and more of his portraits have been appearing in auctions, retrieved from attics, or found in yard sales—two of the five portraits Chase painted in Munich in 1877 of the children of his teacher Piloty recently resurfaced in Germany, their whereabouts unknown for over 125 years—ultimately it was deemed impossible to construct a catalogue of every Chase portrait without the artist's records. The authors recognize there will be errors and omissions that will have to be addressed by future scholars, *The Complete Catalogue of Known and Documented Work by William Merritt Chase (1849–1916)* Vol. II (Yale University Press, 2007), completed by Carolyn K. Lane and the author of this article, covers Chase's work in portraiture from his earliest known portrait, that of his

maternal grandfather, Moses Swaim (1869), to his last recorded painting, a portrait of A. B. Gwathmey (1916). The catalogue reconstructs the extraordinary career of one of America's most gifted portrait painters. @

D. Frederick Baker is a director of the Pisanol Chase Catalogue Raisonné Project, Inc. In 2006 he completed volume 1, which includes Chase's work in pastel, watercolor, monotypes, tiles, and prints (Yale University Press).

1. "Present Tendencies in American Art," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 58 (March, 1879): 494.
2. "William Merritt Chase," *American Art Review*, 2 (January, 1881): 97.
3. Fr. Pecht, "A German Critic on American Art," *Art Amateur* (September, 1884): 78.
4. Quotes from "National Academy of Design," *Art Amateur* (May, 1892): 141; *New York Times* (April 1892); "Monthly Record of American Art," *Magazine of Art*, 15 (December 1891–November 1892): xxii; and William H Downes, "William Merritt Chase, A Typical American Artist," *The International Studio* (December, 1909): xxix, respectively.
5. Katherine M. Roof, *The Life and Art of William Merritt Chase* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 169.
6. *The New York Times* (January 6, 1913): 9