



**Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827)**  
***Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming, 1788***  
 Oil on canvas, 42 x 60 inches  
 Courtesy National Gallery of Art,  
 Washington, D.C.,  
 Gift of Morris Schapiro (1966.10.1)  
 Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees,  
 National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The ambition of early American portraitists to tell stories in their work was attractive to fashionable husbands and wives who, in an age of sensibility, wished to commemorate their domestic contentment. Peale's double portrait of the Baltimore merchant Benjamin Laming and his wife, Eleanor Ridgely, epitomizes this shared artist-client willingness to go beyond the rudiments of portraiture. Through the strategic use of props, such as Mr. Laming's telescope pointed suggestively toward the fruit on his wife's lap, and the couple's physical closeness, including Mrs. Laming's gentle touch, Peale implies the romantic and sexual nature of the couple's bond.

# AMERICAN STORIES

## PAINTINGS OF EVERYDAY LIFE, 1765-1915

*by H. Barbara Weinberg and Carrie Rebora Barratt*

**Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827)**  
***The Exhumation of the Mastodon, 1805-1808***  
 Oil on canvas, 50 x 62½ inches  
 Courtesy Maryland Historical Society  
 (BCLM-MA.5911)

In the summer of 1801, Peale found and excavated prehistoric mammoth bones in marshes near Newburgh, New York, a discovery that gave proof of prehistoric life on the North American continent. His painting of the event portrays an apparently ordinary day at the pit: Peale holds an enormous and accurate drawing of the mastodon bone, not only providing an illustration but also representing the critical role of the artist in producing scientific knowledge. He stands with his family, underscoring their devotion and service to his leadership. In fact, only his son Rembrandt was actually involved in the excavation, but Peale bends the truth in order to include his second and third wives, nine children, his brother James, various in-laws, unidentified kin, and other spectators. Peale organized his family and his composition according to a strict taxonomy, with the well-dressed relatives at right, the shirtless and sodden workers in the pit, and the rowdy hoi polloi in the background.



Between the decade before the American Revolution and the eve of World War I, a group of modest British colonies along the eastern coast of North America became states; new states pushed the frontier westward; and the nation—under an increasingly powerful federal government—emerged as a leading participant in world affairs. During this period, a rural and agricultural society became more urban and industrial and reacted to technological innovations that would alter the understanding of time and space.

Throughout this complicated, transformative era, artists responded to the forces that shaped American history and culture and to the shifting professional spheres that they themselves inhabited. Their paintings reveal how the character and events of each period affected what stories about everyday life artists chose to tell and how they told them in response to changing foreign prototypes, opportunities for travel and training, venues for display of art, and audience expectations.

During the late eighteenth century, portraits told discreet and private tales of life, love, and the constraints of colonial and early national society. Although most early American artists focused on individuals and particular relationships and locales, a talented few were able to go beyond mere likeness, introducing narrative content to their portraits through the use of gestures, settings, and carefully selected attributes. By the 1830s and through the 1850s, artists deliberately composed pictures of people engaged in familiar activities and sent them to public exhibition. In telling their stories, artists of this era almost invariably looked to precedents in European genre painting, preferring domestic scenes, lighthearted narratives, unambiguous settings,



**Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872)**

*Gallery of the Louvre, 1831-1833*

Oil on canvas, 73¾ x 108 inches

Courtesy Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection (1992.51)

Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago/Art Resource, N.Y.

During a sojourn in France, Morse began his painting of the Louvre's Salon Carré, which he completed and exhibited in his New York studio and subsequently sent on national tour. The work illustrates an imagined arrangement of Italian Old Masters from the collection in a gallery that actually displayed recent French paintings. At the center of the composition, Morse depicts himself assisting an American student, while fellow countrymen, including James Fenimore Cooper, discuss and copy the works on view. Morse's story features American artists—including himself at center—studying the correct models to achieve creative heights and, eventually, cultural independence.

**William Sidney Mount (1807-1868)**

*Eel Spearing at Setauket, 1845*

Oil on canvas, 28½ x 36 inches

Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N. Y. (N-395.55)

More than any other artist of his day, Mount revealed the contradictions and difficulties inherent in the position of blacks in American society. Although considerations of race trumped familial and neighborly ties in urban centers, divisions tended to be more subtle in rural areas. Mount illustrates this phenomenon in his painting of a country fishing scene, in which a black woman teaches a young white boy to spear for eels. The artist endows the figure of the woman with unusual importance in the scene, depicting her in control of the activity. The dominance of an African American over a white person—even a child—was at odds with the realities that governed much of America in the era.







**George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879)**  
***The Jolly Flatboatmen, 1846***  
 Oil on canvas, 38½ x 48½ inches  
 Courtesy Manoogian Collection

Despite the presence of Native Americans, French trappers, Hispanic ranchers, and other peoples in the West, Bingham represses any suggestion of racial and ethnic conflict in his image of carefree white riverboat men engaged in a moment of merriment and relaxation. Atop the floating barge, one man dances exuberantly while another fiddles and a third sets the rhythm by beating on a cooking pan. Through the calm setting, smooth brushwork, and controlled, pyramidal composition, the artist elevates the tone and mood of the scene, providing a fantasy of an Arcadian West that would appeal to East Coast urban audiences, who would see this painting at exhibition.

stereotyped characters, and obvious gestures and details that allowed new audiences for art to read their pictures easily and to recognize themselves in the people and situations depicted.

Some American painters responded directly to the Civil War, but were more

inclined to emphasize the participation of ordinary citizens than the heroic events. In the wake of the cataclysm of the war, most painters generally avoided politics and other painful subjects, focusing instead on domestic and leisure-time themes. As women's options for work outside the home increased, especially

after the loss of so many men in combat, artists portrayed them in their new personal and professional capacities. Painters of everyday life also depicted children at play, thereby signaling the nation's collective yearning for the simplicity of an earlier era. And, as industrialization and a shift to cities increasingly erased



**Eastman Johnson (1824-1906)**  
***Negro Life at the South, 1859***  
 Oil on canvas, 36 x 45¼ inches  
 Courtesy the New-York Historical Society,  
 the Robert L. Stuart Collection,  
 on permanent loan from the  
 New York Public Library (S-225)

As tensions over slavery and abolition grew more extreme in the 1850s, artists found it increasingly challenging, from a political standpoint, to depict the lives of African Americans. However, in one of the most complex paintings produced just prior to the Civil War, Johnson presents an image of African Americans in a Washington, D.C., backyard in a socially convincing, sophisticated way. The scene incorporates virtually every available trope of family life, including courtship and marriage, motherhood, training of the young, and respect for elders. Partisans of both abolition and the status quo could consider the painting as an emblem of their cause.





**Seymour Joseph Guy (1824–1910)**  
***Making a Train*, 1867**  
 Oil on canvas, 18⅞ x 24⅞ inches  
 Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art,  
 The George W. Elkins Collection, 1924  
 (E1924-4-14)  
 Photograph by Graydon Wood

Guy's sentimental depictions of children were popular in the wake of the Civil War and during the Reconstruction period, as audiences sought subjects that suggested normalcy and promoted national values. In his painting of a young girl who interrupts her bedtime preparations to imagine herself in the womanly splendor of a long dress with a train, Guy evokes the concept of vanishing childhood, akin to the lost innocence of postwar America. The red, white, and blue color scheme seen in the quilt—an early American craft born out of communities of women—and in the triad of the girl's dress, chemise, and headband, signals the subject's national implications.

America's agricultural economy, artists produced nostalgic depictions of fast-fading rural pastimes.

During the late nineteenth century, the nation's visual culture burgeoned as Americans traveled and studied abroad, took advantage of more and better reproductions of

paintings, and viewed art in the expanding public venues in major cities. American painters embraced internationally inspired subjects and styles, including Impressionism. About 1900, some painters became newly committed to depicting the world around them more honestly than American academics

or Impressionists had done. This approach was evident in the efforts of the Ashcan artists, who grappled with gritty urban realities at a time when the modernists' deliberately anti-narrative efforts were gaining ground and as movies were supplanting paintings as vehicles for storytelling.



**Winslow Homer (1836–1910)**  
***Dressing for the Carnival*, 1877**  
 Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 inches  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,  
 Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1922 (22.220)  
 Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 New York

Like many of his contemporaries, Homer was committed to investigating concepts of national identity in his post-Civil War works. From a series of paintings of African Americans that he began in 1875 is this image of figures donning colorful costumes in preparation for a carnival. Unlike earlier depictions of African Americans, the canvas relies on suggested rather than explicit narrative. In the late nineteenth century, American painters, influenced by their European contemporaries, chronicled everyday life with a new subtlety and candor. Although Homer didn't study in Europe, his approach to storytelling and his loose brushwork signal his understanding of the international artistic standards that altered American painting and reflected the country's newly global outlook.





**John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), *A Street in Venice*, ca. 1880–1882**

**Oil on canvas, 29½ x 20½ inches**

**Courtesy Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass. (1955.575)**

**© Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.**

As American painters after the Centennial were increasingly drawn to Europe, so too were they drawn to the anti-narrative impulses of the French Impressionists, whom they emulated by offering candid, uninflected, and often vague stories derived from everyday life. This modern emphasis on direct accounts of mundane experience is exemplified in Sargent's painting of two figures from the Venetian demimonde standing outside a wine shop in a narrow lane. The inconsequential setting of the scene, which shows no major monuments, and the ambiguous relationship between the man and woman invite the viewer to participate in completing the pictorial story that is told only obliquely.



**Mary Cassatt (1844–1926)**

***A Woman and a Girl Driving, 1881***

**Oil on canvas, 35¼ x 51⅝ inches**

**Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art**

**Purchased with the W. P. Wiltach Fund, 1921 (W1921-1-1)**

**Photograph by Graydon Wood**

After the Civil War, women assumed many roles in American stories and engaged the interest of many painters, both at home and abroad. Cassatt, who specialized in portraying women's activities in Paris, her adopted home, signals her support of female empowerment and the changing social order in her painting of a woman navigating a carriage through the Bois de Boulogne. The driver, who is Cassatt's sister, Lydia, takes charge of her own path, both actually and symbolically. Her independence and determined concentration are in contrast to the passive young groom, who observes from the backward-facing seat only where the carriage has been, not where it is going.



More than one hundred works portraying ordinary people engaged in commonplace tasks and pleasures, at home and abroad, are on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from October 12, 2009 through January 24, 2010 in the exhibition *American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765–1915*. The

exhibition is organized by H. Barbara Weinberg and Carrie Rebora Barratt of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. They collaborated with Bruce Robertson, professor of art history, University of California, Santa Barbara, and consulting curator, department of American Art, Los Angeles County

Museum of Art. Margaret C. Conrads, Samuel Sosland Curator of American Art, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, also contributed to planning the exhibition and to the catalogue. The exhibition is made possible at the Metropolitan by Alamo Rent A Car, the Marguerite and Frank A. Cosgrove

**Thomas Eakins (1844–1916)**

***Swimming, 1885***

**Oil on canvas, 27⅝ x 36⅝ inches**

**Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas**

**Purchased by the Friends of Art, Fort Worth Art Association, 1925; acquired by the Amon Carter Museum, 1990, from the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth through grants and donations from the Amon G. Carter Foundation, the Sid W. Richardson Foundation, the Anne Burnett and Charles Tandy Foundation, Capital Cities/ABC Foundation, Fort Worth Star-Telegram, the R. D. and Joan Dale Hubbard Foundation, and the people of Fort Worth (1990.19.1)**

Eakins portrays a group of his Pennsylvania Academy students enjoying a summer's afternoon swim at Dove Lake in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. The painting's stylistic references are obvious, including stock academic poses, which Eakins learned in Paris and taught at the Academy, and Eadweard Muybridge's experiments in motion photography. The narrative is more elusive. Eakins's reticence as a storyteller, which amplified even that of his contemporaries, has invited many different readings of *Swimming*. Among other interpretations, the painting might recount a break from work on a hot afternoon for men who customarily saw and studied naked bodies, including one another's; translate into mundane terms the Arcadian theme that preoccupied Eakins in the 1880s; or encode aspects of Eakins's own sexuality.





**William Merritt Chase (1849–1916)**

***Ring Toss*, 1896**

**Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 35 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches**

**Courtesy Marie and Hugh Halff**

Chase most likely painted three of his daughters engaged in an indoor game of ring toss—a popular activity requiring players to throw colored cloth rings over a target post—in response to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656, Museo del Prado), which he saw during an 1896 visit to Spain, and which also shows a studio setting. Chase employs an informal composition, compressed space, sketch-like rendering, and dispersed focus, underscoring his reliance on the French Impressionists' technique and their preference for minimal anecdote. In addition, the artist's appreciation for candor and trifling narrative is well suited to conveying the ordinary, passing episodes in children's lives.

**Frederic Remington (1861–1909)**

***Fight for the Water Hole*, 1903**

**Oil on canvas, 27 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches**

**Courtesy the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Hogg Brothers Collection gift of Miss Ima Hogg (43.25)**

At the turn of the twentieth century, the saturation of American culture with genteel domesticity, sentiment, and feminine taste inspired a yearning for masculine heroes, including cowboys and cavalymen who met their foes in dangerous western lands. Remington appealed to this escapist, macho fantasy in one of his most celebrated canvases, which depicts cowboys defending a shrinking waterhole against marauding Indians. Recently, art historians have detected a xenophobic undercurrent in Remington's works in response to mass immigration. In view of Remington's own nativist sentiments, the painting can be read as a metaphorical "last stand," in which Anglo-Saxon gunmen defend their country against waves of foreign invaders.





**John Sloan (1871–1951)**  
***Chinese Restaurant*, 1909**  
 Oil on canvas, 26 x 32¼ inches  
 Courtesy Memorial Art Gallery  
 of the University of Rochester,  
 Marion Stratton Gould Fund (51.12)

Rejecting the American Impressionists' preference for sunny rural settings and positive accounts of modern life, the Ashcan artists concentrated on portraying the gritty vitality of New York. In so doing, they expanded the canon of everyday scenes to include new venues for dining, shopping, and entertainment. Sloan's painting of a woman offering a morsel to a cat in a Chinese restaurant exemplifies his interest in rendering seamy urban spaces. While Chinese restaurants developed a reputation for attracting a dubious clientele, Sloan presents the garishly attired woman—probably a prostitute—in a matter-of-fact, noncritical way, as was characteristic of the Ashcan artists.



**George Bellows (1882–1925)**  
***Cliff Dwellers*, 1913**  
 Oil on canvas, 40¼ x 42½ inches  
 Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art,  
 Los Angeles County Fund (16.4)  
 Photograph © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Although the Ashcan artists immersed themselves in mundane, disorderly, and even sordid subjects of modern life, their paintings usually lack the unsettling qualities of the European realists' works, which aimed at social reform. Even in his depiction of a slum in Manhattan's Lower East Side, Bellows mitigates the dreariness of the scene through his use of bright colors and inclusion of pleasant details, such as the laundry flapping in the gentle breeze and the children playing leapfrog in the left foreground. In this way, Bellows conveys the aesthetic appeal of a place where such pleasures were actually overshadowed by hardship.



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[www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org) after October 5, 2009, to participate in the *American Stories* blog, learn more about the exhibition, and purchase the catalogue. The exhibition will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where it will be on view from February 28 through May 23, 2010. [AEA](#)

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