

SHOPPING, COLLECTING, REMEMBERING: SOME TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY AMERICAN PICTURES

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Progress has played havoc with many an old hidebound proverb, among them, "Never buy anything you can do without."

Dry Goods Reporter, 1904¹

DURING THE FINAL DECADES OF THE NINETEENTH century, by all accounts a period of wrenching social and economic change, American 'spectator sports' ranged far beyond the race track and the boxing ring. *Looking* – at fine art, at displays of technology or consumer goods, at public performances, and, of course, at one another – had become an established practice.² Today, shoppers and collectors visiting the International Fine Art Fair and similarly lavish art expositions of our own times might be intrigued by a remembrance of how such enterprises were shaped by the popularization of the arts and the commercialization of leisure, two complex, interrelated phenomena that made urban life 'modern' more than a century ago. The International Fine Art Fair's orderly ranks of temporary booths within the vast reaches of the Seventh Regiment Armory Building recall miles of aisles set up in semipermanent glass and iron structures at the great world's expositions, where halls filled with paintings and sculpture jostled for ground space with others dedicated to new machinery or feats of agriculture or explorations of unfamiliar countries around the globe, allowing eager crowds to encounter the latest scientific, technological and industrial developments, along with the fine arts of their own and other cultures. A nation's fine art could become an important power tool in the establishment of international status as easy distinctions between fine art and frank commercialism gradually blurred in complex displays mounted at London's Crystal Palace (1851) and countless subsequent fairs in New York, Paris, Vienna, Philadelphia and elsewhere.

In American society, where the hazards of new fortunes were particularly perilous, owning artworks became a significant measure of social standing for the middle classes during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As that century gave way to the twentieth, many American artists of the period – some famous, others now relatively obscure – responded to changing social behavior and growing commercialism in their work.

In an illustration from the United States Centennial



Figure 1 "Character Sketches in Memorial Hall and the Annex: Visitors Taking Notes," from Frank H. Norton, ed., *Frank Leslie's Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition, 1876* (New York, 1877). Thomas J. Watson Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Exposition (Philadelphia, 1876), a dapper young man tips his straw boater, even as he treads upon the fashionable but impractical train of an attractive young woman's day dress (Fig. 1). We may assume that she does not know him, and that her official companion is the earnest bespectacled lady standing beside her. In taking advantage of a crowded exhibition hall to effect an introduction, the man's forward behaviour is sanctioned by the presence of art. Holding guidebooks, not unlike the publication in which this essay is printed, the young people jockey for position in front of an imposing vase set upon a pedestal. On both sides of the Atlantic, a new middle class audience hungered for the arts, promoted as an uplifting, even a moral force by theorists of the Aesthetic and the Arts-and-Crafts

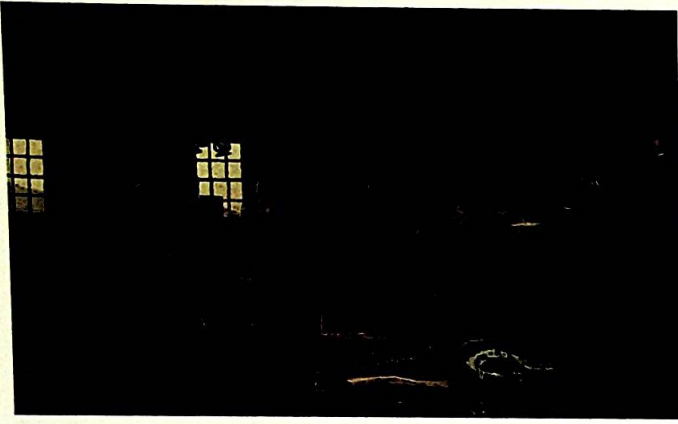


Figure 2 Winslow Homer, *The Country Store*, 1872. Oil on board 11½ x 18 in. Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966.

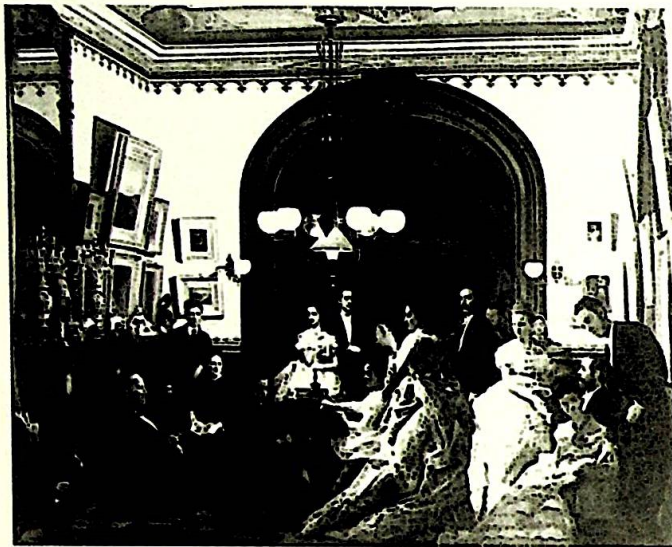


Figure 3 Seymour J. Guy, *The William H. Vanderbilt Family (Going to the Opera)*, Oil on canvas, 1873. 42¼ x 54 in. Biltmore House and Gardens, Ashville, N.C.

Movements.

The citified fair visitors are a far cry from the home-spun yeomen painted by Winslow Homer in 1873, only three years before the Centennial (*Fig. 2*). A New York critic described this

interior of a "country store," with three genuine American boys talking about the national store. A first-rate dog is stretched out all the chimney's length, and basks at the fire his hairy strength, and these four characters – with the store itself well enough painted to make a Vermonter stranded in our Babel homesick [comprise] happy portraiture of a wholesome, happy kind of life...³

Nothing is said of the ambiguous figure toiling behind the counter at the vanishing point of Homer's country image, although immigrant labor, unions, and employment for women would be controversial issues in the coming decades. Nonetheless, the city-bound journalist's positive response to the leisurely all-male

group around the stove as 'simple, abundant, hearty' and his sarcastic allusion to an already teeming New York as 'Babel' tells us that the post Civil-War 'national store' – the cultural state of the union as it were – was fragile and in flux.

Late nineteenth-century America was a place where confidence and doubt, excitement and trepidation coexisted. The nation was changing from an agrarian economy to an industrialized, increasingly urban society marked by anonymity and competition. Tension was evident as Americans sensed the loss of a supposedly simpler past and embraced the heady excitement of the new. That Homer chose to stage his visual metaphor in a shop is significant for a nation often characterized as overtly materialistic.⁴

In another picture painted in 1873, Edward Lamson Henry used antique furniture and costumes from his own collections to stage *George Washington and General Rochambeau calling on Cornwallis at Nelson House, Yorktown* (Richmond, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts). Henry's little history painting is one of many in which he anticipates a fascinating aspect of the American art world after the nation's Centennial. In the ensuing decades, the sweep of the so-called Colonial Revival codified patterns of collecting 17th, 18th and early 19th-century Americana, establishing a marked bias towards New England with its strong historic ties to Great Britain. This memory-laden focus still obtains in many a collection of American art.⁵

Of course, rural living, as seen in Homer's country store, was not necessarily happy. And Henry's version of the colonial past takes its liberties – since no eighteenth-century householder would have put a tallcase clock on the stair landing, the Mssrs. Washington, Rochambeau and Cornwallis would never have encountered it there as they do in the painting. The implied soft ticking of Henry's 'grandfather' clock serves another purpose: it is a gentle reminder of the passage of time. As in many other cultures, at many other times, remembering – looking backward – reassures people living through a disturbing period of rapid change.

A third picture from 1873 depicts the family of William H. Vanderbilt at home in New York (*Fig. 3*). The sober dark clothes of Mrs. Vanderbilt senior, seated by the fire with a book, contrast with the festive evening dress of the young ladies. Like Homer's country store keeper, Seymour Guy's maid holding coats goes virtually unnoticed in a corner. The 'brown decades' interior, decorated in heavy umbers, yellows and reds enlivened by stencilling and stuffed with a profusion of furniture, objects and paintings, indicates prosperity. Essentially this is a new room. The furniture's style is Rococo Revival, the objects on the mantle might well be reproductions, the paintings do not seem to be old masters, but recent landscapes and portraits.

Models for such decorum, featuring the latest in fashionable appointments and furniture, are evident in

early American portraits, such as John Singleton Copley's *Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait* (Fig. 4). The concept of refinement stretches far back into European history, but after the American Revolution the ranks of the would-be genteel in the new republic expanded far beyond what earlier elites – courtiers, then landed gentry – might ever have anticipated. Gentility eventually encompassed merchants, doctors, lawyers, farmers, artisans, schoolteachers, officials, clerks, shopkeepers, industrial entrepreneurs and so on.⁶ As ever greater numbers of aspirants steeped themselves in codified strictures and patterns of social behavior, the art and artifacts of previous centuries gained in cultural and fiscal value. Gradually, the polished newness of Mrs. Goldthwaite's domestic arrangements in the eighteenth century and those of the Vanderbilts a hundred years later gave way to a love of old things. But it didn't happen over night. Celebrating the power of the machine to provide a wealth of brand-new ornament, a trade magazine warned:

It commonly leads to trouble when an American millionaire undertakes to vie in ready-made splendors of country houses, pictures and bric-a-brac with those of his noble acquaintances abroad whose forbears have been [collecting] for a dozen generations...⁷

It took several decades of shopping and collecting, and a few prominent, successful, highly publicized connoisseurs like Isabella Stewart Gardner and J. Pierpont Morgan, before collections of antique furniture and paintings from earlier centuries became a regularly encountered mark of distinction.⁸ At the turn of the twentieth century, a cartoon showing two women peering into a curiosity shop window was captioned, "We don't call them second-hand. We call them *antiques*."

As heretofore unprecedented commercialization brought art to new middle-class audiences, widespread interest in house decoration stimulated a boom in collecting both decorative and fine arts, fueled by material riches available through industrial progress and made urgent by a growing perception that tokens of America's historical past were both finite and fragile. The ownership of goods, including art, became a reliable means of creating what Clarence Cook termed *The House Beautiful* (New York, 1878), simultaneously expressing financial success, cultural literacy and all-important, reassuring links to the past.

Not only art, but also technology, is featured in the Vanderbilt parlor. The room is luridly lit by the latest gasolier and wall brackets. As Victorian gas-lit homes turned their backs on natural illumination, stopping up the windows with heavy draperies, shades and shutters, nature became a profitable commodity.¹⁰

American painters could hardly escape the commercialization of either art or nature. As status-conferring paintings reached an ever wider buying public, artists themselves participated to a degree in merchandising



Figure 4 John Singleton Copley, *Mrs. Ezekiel Goldthwait* (Elizabeth Lewis). 1771. Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 in. Bequest of John T. Bowen in memory of Eliza M. Bowen, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 5 Childe Hassam, *At the Florist*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 54 1/2 in. The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA. Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

and displaying their pictures. The legitimate and quite logical desire for new patronage – a market share – was a primary impetus for artists to band together into groups later seen as 'movements' such as the independent French artists dubbed Impressionists or the American artists known as 'The Ten' or 'The Eight'. Among the cast of characters occupying the art world's center stage were not only the highly publicized male artist-as-performer, best exemplified by James McNeill Whistler, but also an expanding group of professional women artists along with journalists, dealers, and a new clientele.

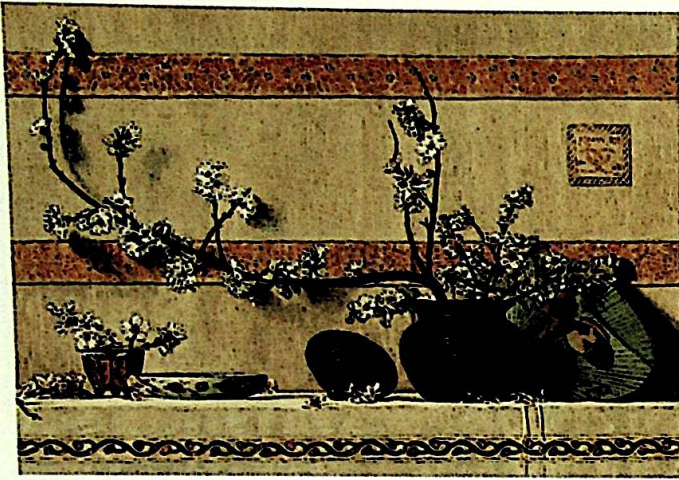


Figure 6. Charles Caryl Coleman, *Quince Blossoms*, 1878. Oil on canvas 31¼ x 43¾ in. The J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art.

Living in Paris during the late 1880s, Childe Hassam regularly experienced little urban dramas such as a shopping transaction between women of different classes (Fig. 5). Composed almost like a theater stage, the painting reminds us that pictures are, in essence, distillations of an artist's performance with pencil or brush. Hassam contrasts working and leisured women, using the sale of flowers in Montmartre as a visual metaphor for nature as a commodity retailed in the city. Not only was nature now for sale, it had become a luxury item, whether living – like the plants offered by the vendor – or artificial, like the flowers on the customer's fashionable hat.

Hassam's locale – the French capital – reminds us that American art underwent a brief period of self-conscious internationalism. It falls between the Hudson River and American Impressionist schools of painting, and coincides with the Aesthetic Movement in decorative art. During this interim the need for American subject matter was vigorously denied. A critic reviewing the National Academy of Design's 1879 spring annual asserted "We cannot expect from our painters that kind of Americanism in art which consists in finding subjects at home."¹¹ Another, exploring *Recent Ideals of American Art*, considered the European subjects painted by cosmopolitan expatriates to be

masterpieces...as truly American as the most cherished productions of our "Hudson River School."¹²

Perhaps journalists could detect American qualities in such pictures, but in 1889, the year Hassam painted his flower picture, visitors to the Paris world's fair needed a sign over the door – "Etats Unis" – to know that they were in the American section of the exhibition.

Meanwhile, large still life paintings captured snippets of nature crowded by man-made objects. In Elihu Vedder's *Japanese Still Life* (1879, Los Angeles County Museum of Art), a voluptuous pink shell is the central treasure in a heap of Japanese artifacts. Often, the wel-



Figure 7. Plant Stand, c.1880. Meriden, Connecticut. Cast brass, painted and glazed earthenware. 32½ in. high. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

ter of bric-a-brac had been collected by the artist himself, as in Charles Caryl Coleman's *Still Life With Quince Blossoms* (Fig. 6). Painted in Rome, the picture features a Japanese fan, Asian ceramics, and Near Eastern embroidered textiles, against which the delicate asymmetries of a flowering branch are gracefully silhouetted.¹³

International eclecticism in painting circles at this time is paralleled in the decorative arts – not only in high style furniture by New York firms like the Herter Brothers, but also in fractious commercial 'art furniture,' such as a metal and tile plant stand made in Connecticut (Fig. 7). Here, an ill-digested assemblage of parts, and a determinedly backward-looking, completely un-American set of design sources, results in an undeniably energetic object that celebrates technology's power to provide art.¹⁴ Spidery struts cage hard-edged solids, recalling the Corliss Engine, featured at the Philadelphia Centennial as a symbol of America's new-found industrial might (Fig. 8). Yet the stand's general form derives from a medieval column capital, pulled apart and made modern for the Gilded Age. Motifs impressed in the metal are borrowed from medieval tiles, similar to those illustrated in English design reformer Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (1856, London), an influential pattern book. The application of modern technology to revive the medieval craft of tile-making expresses conflicts about industrial progress that also concerned painters and writers. At the end of the century, Henry Adams, that connoisseur of world fairs as measures of civilization's progress, produced a

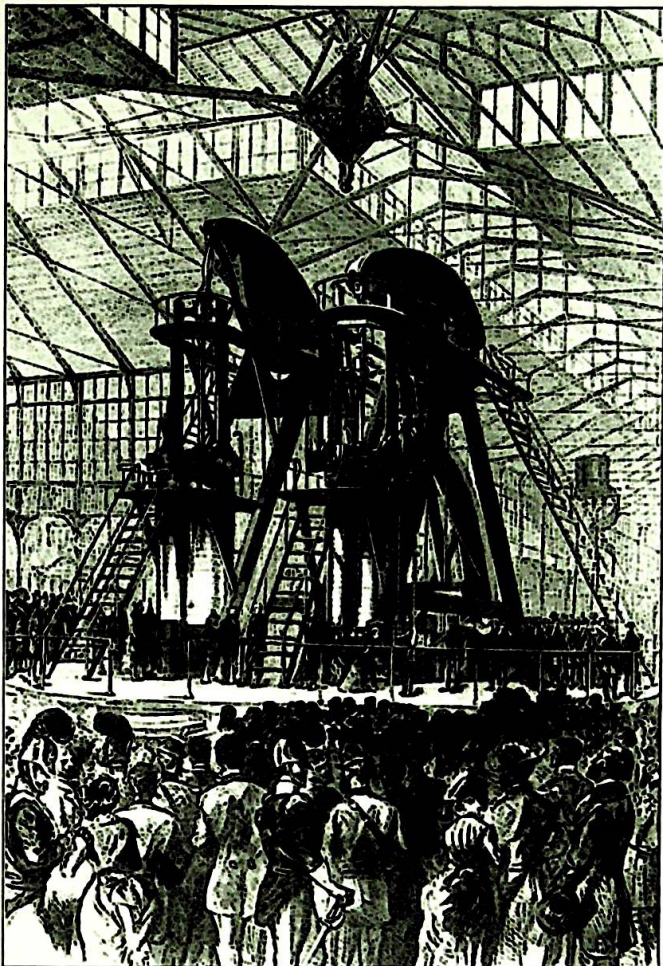


Figure 8. Theodore Russell Davis, 'Our Centennial: President Grant and Dom Pedro Starting the Corlis Engine,' *Harper's Weekly*, May 27, 1876, p.421. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

memorable metaphor in *The Education of Henry Adams*: the Dynamo and the Virgin. Through twin forces – modern mechanism and medieval mysticism – he hoped to come to terms with the radical change that characterized life as he had seen it.¹⁵

Manufactured in Gien, a French center for making faience, the stand's tile top directly copies a plate from Jones's *Examples of Chinese Ornament Selected from Objects in the South Kensington Museum and other Collections* (1867, London).¹⁶ However, the factory renamed the pattern 'Japon.' So. We have a French tile inspired by an English design reformer's pattern book, rendering a Chinese image but calling it Japanese, the whole exported to an American manufacturer to be encased in pseudo-medieval metalwork, creating a modern piece of art furniture intended to function as a plant stand, bringing nature indoors. Contemporaneous objects like the Coleman still life and the Meridan plant stand exhibit the same omniverous will to gather, to collect. This interrelationship between fine art and popular culture helps clarify the parameters of art-as-commodity.



Figure 9. Mary Cassatt, *Baby Reaching for an Apple*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 39½ x 25¼ in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

In the 1890s art market, American Impressionists were giving more academic painters stiff competition. Whether they spent most of their careers abroad or limited their time in Europe to student days and the occasional brief return, these artists gradually modified their academic training with its emphasis on highly finished techniques and the study of old master painting. But America's turn-of-the-century modern artists didn't reinvent the wheel. Tradition continued to play a major role in their work. Mary Cassatt's *Baby Reaching for an Apple*, with its rich, light palette, reveals the impact of French Impressionism (Fig. 9). But the solid modeling of the figures relates to a mural created by the artist for the Women's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago, 1893). Cassatt titled her mural, surely one of the most traditional art forms, *Modern Woman*. A contemporary writer found in her figures the 'grandeur and simplicity of a young priestess in an antique procession.'¹⁷

Engaged as they were by 'the new painting,' Americans also tempered their use of French Impressionism with a renewed emphasis upon speci-

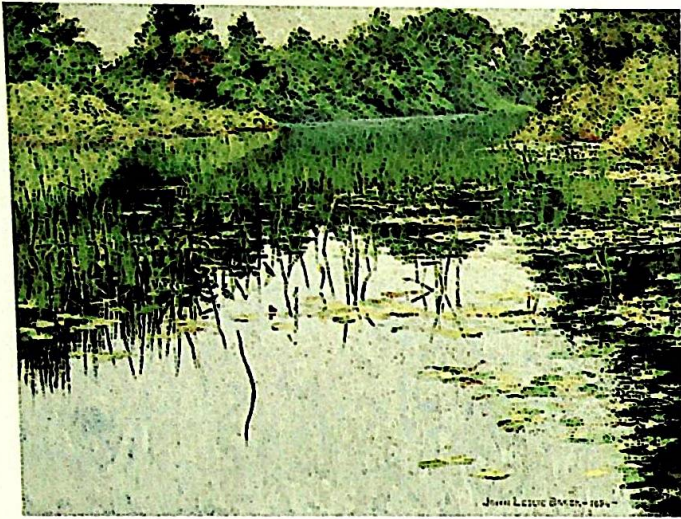


Figure 10. John Leslie Breck, *Grey Day on the Charles*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 18 x 22 in. The J. Harwood and Louise B. Cochrane Fund for American Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

cally American subject matter. 'Art, to be vital, must be local in its subject,' wrote novelist Hamlin Garland in 1894, the year John Leslie Breck painted *Grey Day on the Charles* (Fig. 10).¹⁸ In this lightly brushed, brightly colored work, we find the hallmarks of American Impressionism – the disdain for an elevated subject, the avoidance of clear narrative, the focus on seemingly

spontaneous incident. The canvas records a fragment of Breck's familiar experience, yet it is as interesting for what he left out as what he put in. Who would guess from this idyllic scene that urban sprawl was already destroying the landscape nearby? Breck has limited our view to a quiet spot on the Charles River as it passes through Medfield, a town about fifteen miles southwest of Boston. He emphasized the river's natural beauty, giving no hint of the cultivated farmland, factories, and mills that punctuated the river's banks between its marshy source and its entrance to the estuary at Boston Harbor.

Although they were considerably more interested in the dark urban scenes of Manet and Degas than the refreshing country air of Monet and Pissarro, the American Realists of the next generation also accommodated new approaches to painting espoused in France after 1860, at the same time altering European influences to suit their own circumstances.

In Samuel Woolf's brilliantly lit subway car, assorted urban types travel at high speed on an underground electric railway somewhere below the crowded streets of Manhattan (Fig. 11). The Interborough Rapid Transit Company opened its first line, between City Hall and 145th Street, in 1904.¹⁹ By 1908, two years before

Figure 11. Samuel J. Woolf, *The Under World*, c.1910. Oil on canvas 22 1/2 x 30 1/2. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.



Woelf painted his lively image, the I.R.T. lines reached beyond the confines of Manhattan Island, encouraging the development of suburban Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. Considered one of the great engineering achievements of the age, the New York subway quickened the pace of urban life, making it even more hectic than the Babel that Winslow Homer's critic complained of in 1873. Rapid transit brought New Yorkers of varying ethnicity, class and gender together. Here Woolf examines the anonymity that only a city crowd can provide, using details of costume and activity to help separate the various characters.

Absorbed in a newspaper, a uniformed bell hop or messenger boy is on his way to or from work. His reading material signals an upward mobility celebrated in American painting of the era, but absent from European counterparts that Woolf and other American Realists would have known. Another uniformed newspaper reader, his head cut off by the picture frame, again provides an emblem of public service. Together, these men form a barrier, separating two contrasting couples. Like the huddled figure in the far corner of the car, a self-involved married pair with two small children seems unaware of the mustaschioed dandy and his

Figure 12. William Merritt Chase, *In the Studio*, c.1880. Oil on canvas, 71½ x 101½. Gift of Mrs. Carl H. DeSilver in memory of her husband. The Brooklyn Museum.

resplendent companion, awash in a tide of expensive feather-trimmed evening clothes. Such couples also populate novels of the period. Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) lovingly records 'the white shirt fronts of the gentlemen, the bright costumes of the ladies, diamonds, jewels, fine feathers...' Woolf's picture makes a pointed contrast between work and play in a great metropolis, whose endless urban dramas provided a nonstop performance by and for its inhabitants.

Not surprisingly, artists felt the need to stage themselves in such an environment. Elaborate specialized studios reflected not only the growing professionalization of American artists by the late nineteenth century, but also the efficacy of art and antiques as proof of culture and refinement in the process of self-invention for publicity purposes. William Merritt Chase's *In The Studio*, one of many images that record the successful New Yorker's opulent quarters in the Tenth Street Studio Building, demonstrates that the studios of the most commercially successful artists rivaled the comforts of bourgeois drawing rooms (Fig. 12).²¹ Potential customers might or might not encounter the artist at work; but they would see his art in the context of:

bric-a-brac, splendid and lavish...expanses of Persian loom-work, great faded fragments of tapestry; copies of the old masters...done by his own hand in the period of his wanderjahre; carvings, old





Figure 13. George Luks. *The Chapman Gallery*. Early 20th century. Oil on canvas 16 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Courtesy, Nancy Lake-Benson.

brasses, pearl-inlaid long-necked stringed instruments, and even the glittering ebon countenances of prognathous Peruvian mummies suspended by their long black hair.²²

Although the shrunken head recalls the insensitive nature of cultural tourism in the late nineteenth century, the presence of a young girl, alone on a wooden bench in Chase's studio, can be read as symbolic of the crumbling distinction between domestic spaces (the home) and public ones (the studio) in a period of changing opportunities for women. Chase's model pages through a large-format illustrated book that subtly states the importance of the art press in making American art available to wider audiences.

Gradually, dealerships replaced artists' studios as the primary point of purchase. In *The Chapman Gallery*, by George Luks, pictures for sale are hung in the type of display Whistler introduced during the late 1870s and 1880s (Fig. 13).²³ Like communicants at an altar rail, the artist himself (in profile) discusses the artworks with a newspaper critic. By 1900, journalists played an ever-larger role in a successful artist's career, attracting pub-

lic attention and interpreting modern art to help viewers understand what they were seeing. The reverently lit, carefully hung paintings suggest the growing importance of art galleries and salesrooms, like the American Art Association in New York, not to mention the appearance of commercial art dealers, some of whom specialized in American art, by now a major commodity.

By the turn of the twentieth century, shopping and collecting intersect in a number of institutions concerned with visual display and with private or public ownership of art.²⁴ The charters of many large American museums followed the lead of what is now the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where the initials of Art and Science intertwine on the staircase tiles. In 1870, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, was founded to exhibit industrially applied art, while the Metropolitan Museum of Art, founded in New York the same year, was chartered to encourage art in industry.²⁵ Museums and department stores, two building types of the mid-1800s that are closely linked to commercialized leisure and entertainment, regularly employed display techniques that are still evident here at the International Fine Arts Fair.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the great department stores were quick to exploit the lessons of the fairs, fea-



Figure 14. Frank W. Benson, *The Black Hat*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 40 x 32 in. Gift of Walter Callender, Henry D. Sharpe, Howard L. Clark, William Gammell and Isaac C. Bates. Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

turing fine art with other forms of merchandise.²⁶ Adjoining 'the most luxurious and beautiful department devoted to the comforts of ladies to be found in a mercantile establishment,' Macy's set up an art gallery with an extensive display of oil paintings.²⁷ Wanamaker's provided art education to shoppers in both Philadelphia and New York by exhibiting French pictures:

There is probably no other store in the world that has gone into the Paris salons and purchased the pictures best worth having to decorate its walls. It is largely these paintings and this kind of artistic exhibition, open to all for the coming, that have helped to convert the Wanamaker stores into vast public museums, quickening the interest of thousands of visitors, and reaching a larger number than many museums owned and controlled by the city and the state.²⁸

Again following the lead of the great exhibitions, department stores created fanciful, often exotic environments as a means of romanticizing the act of purchasing, making it more a tempting entertainment than a chore. A commercial cathedral like Alexander Turney Stewart's eight-story skyscraper with a cast-iron facade and windows of French plate glass offered New Yorkers 'the treasures of the world...the commerce of Europe, Asia, America and far-off Africa.'²⁹ Similarly, today's art

fairs gather together, under a single roof, a dense concentration of diverse objects, making elusive and widely-scattered treasures conveniently accessible to a host of curators, collectors, connoisseurs, and casual passers-by.

Most images of shopping and collecting in American art have to do with women. Art's close link to fashion is recorded in numerous paintings of the Boston School, including Frank Weston Benson's luscious *Lady Trying on A Hat* (Fig. 14). She does so in a gridwork of artistic material possessions that bespeak a refined domestic environment but at the same time acknowledge commercialism – in this case, Boston's historic links with the China trade. Another well-known picture, Paxton's *The New Necklace* (1910, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), glorifies the joys of consumption as two women, surrounded by antiques, lovingly handle a piece of jewelry.

Less subtle, but equally to the point are genre scenes from what one critic dubbed 'the furniture school.'³⁰ In James Wells Champney's *Wedding Presents* (c.1888, Museum of the City of New York) a crowd around the gift table is dominated by an old woman scrutinizing the quality of a blue and white teapot, and presumably, the marriage itself. In Louis Charles Moeller's *The Will*



Figure 15. Astley David Montague Cooper, *Mrs. Stanford's Jewel Collection*, 1898. Oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in. Gift of Jane Lathrop Stanford, Stanford University Museum of Art.

of the Deceased (c.1900, Arden Collection) a similar crowd sorts through a rich tangle of artworks, furniture and decorations, all that is left of a recently departed relative. Among the most unusual pictures relating to American shopping and collecting is the large and arresting still life portrait of Mrs. Leyland Stanford's jewels, one of the outstanding collections of its day (Fig. 15).

Such American pictures evoke Mme. Merle's remarks to Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James:

I've a great respect for things! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's

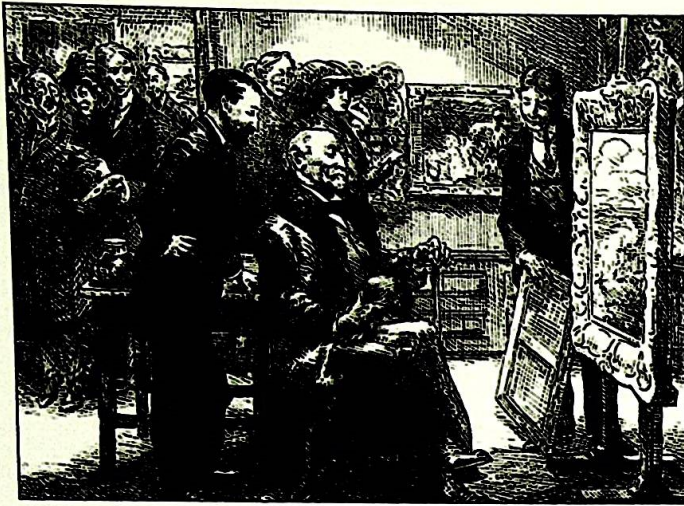


Figure 16. John Sloan, *The Picture Buyer*. Etching, 51/4 x 7 in. Bequest of George Otis Hamlin, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.

house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.³¹

In *The House in Good Taste* (1913) actress-turned-interior decorator Elsie de Wolfe chirped, 'It is the personality of the mistress that the home expresses.'³²

Unfortunately for men and women working as artists, the topic least likely to surface on the printed pages of novels and self-help books alike was any serious discussion of painting – how to collect, what to look for, what to pay. Beauty remains firmly ensconced in the eye of the beholder, and entrepreneurial advisors on the arts were subject to ironic treatment by artists themselves. Taking his cue from Honore Daumier, John Sloan etched *The Picture Buyer*, a sardonic scene set in the Macbeth Galleries (Fig. 16). Cloaked in self-importance, the seated patron is set off from the standing crowd. As shop personnel hover eagerly, other gallery visitors look on with varying expressions to see what the haughty customer might select. William Macbeth, hand on hip, is shown 'purring in the ear of the victim' as Sloan himself put it.³³ The dealer's assistant balances one painting on an easel behind a palatial frame, while holding a second work, unframed, with its back toward the buyer. We have the impression that the helper is about to slide the next painting behind the opulent frame for viewing if the picture now on the easel is rejected. Hat in hand, a rather anxious young man in the background might represent an artist eager for new patronage. Affirming that the frame could be as important as its pictorial contents when the audience was unsophisticated, Sloan records a practice common on both sides of the Atlantic. Artists and dealers housed modern pictures in eighteenth-century-style frames, aggrandizing contemporary art by linking it to the past for prospective owners.³⁴

The commercial state of the arts remained topical for decades, and mixed feelings are evident in pictures that

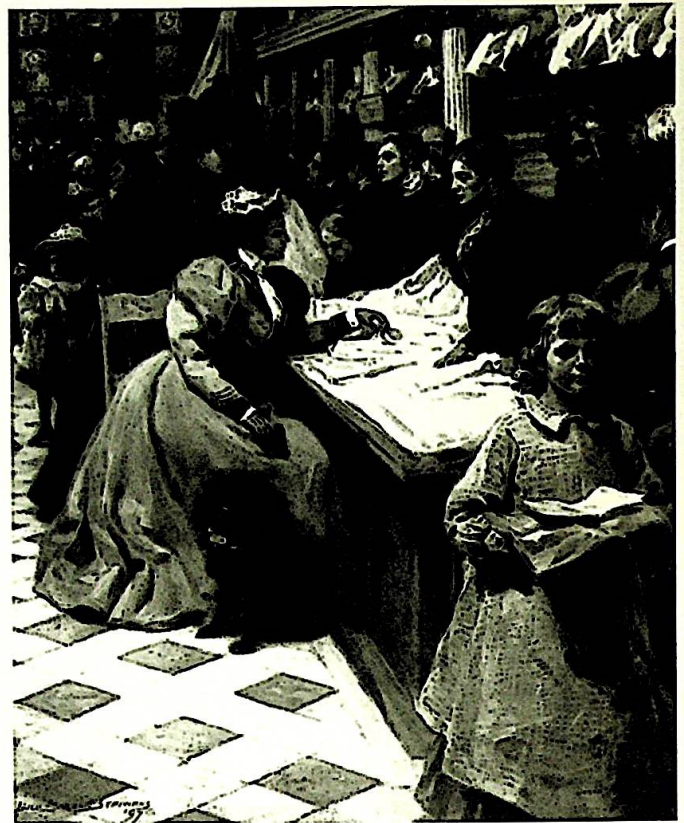


Figure 17. Alice Barber Stephens, *The Woman in Business*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 25 x 18 in. Cover illustration for *Ladies' Home Journal*, September 1897. Collection of the Brandywine River Museum.

address it. During the 1880s, when Whistler created tiny, elegant oils and watercolors of old-fashioned shops in Chelsea, along the banks of the Thames, he was depicting the urban equivalent of Homer's country store. Chelsea was an old village gradually being engulfed by metropolitan London, a pattern of economic development that was quickly repeated in many American cities.

At the same time, shopping and collecting created many opportunities for women. By installing lounges, writing rooms, tea rooms, and other frankly domestic amenities, department stores appropriated the atmosphere of the middle-class home, breaking down barriers between public and private spaces. Commercial enterprise gave advantaged women an interesting and socially acceptable destination in the modern city, but also provided others with avenues for fiscal independence, as recorded by Alice Barber Stephens in 1897 (Fig. 17).³⁵ The woman seated at the counter may represent what one recent analyst has termed 'an extraordinary market for the creators of department stores, the grand couturier...the antique dealer and sellers of bric-a-brac' but other characters in the picture, including the austere clad sales women behind the counter and the prominently featured little cash girl in the foreground, are involved in new economic opportunity as emphasized by Stephens's pointed title, *Woman in Business*.



Figure 18. John Sloan. *Picture Shop Window*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25½ in. Gift of Mrs. Felix Fuld, 1925. Collection of Newark Museum, NJ.

Business.

Similar issues are examined more subtly in works such as William Glackens's *The Shoppers* (1907, The Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia). The customers at a lingerie counter, probably at Wanamaker's department store, include the wives of artist Glackens and his colleague Everett Shinn, whose fur coats and prominently displayed purses signal the middle class status of the artist himself. A shop girl behind the counter wears a small piece of jewelry, emblematic of rising fortunes, while a shadowy figure of a woman in the background may signify the waning of a centuries-old system of close bargaining between buyer and seller. This woman, veiled and of indeterminate age, wears a subdued outfit that is eclipsed by the splendid hats and cloaks of the Mmes. Glackens and Shinn. Holding one gloved hand to her chin, she seems to contemplate a parallel eclipse of the old way of doing business, which gave way to vast impersonal department stores staffed by thousands of shopgirls and huge cadres of support personnel unseen by the consumer.

Although sales work was arduous and the wages were often lower than what could be earned in service to a family, employment in a respectable department store had advantages, among them greater personal independence than was possible in private service, exposure to a wider range of people and ideas, and even – in the

best cases – improved living standards.³⁶

One would like to think, in attending an event such as the International Fine Art Fair, that an aspect of improved living standards might be the privilege of living with works of art. John Sloan's *Picture Shop Window* frankly addresses art-as-commodity, but does so in a positive spirit (Fig. 18). Several young women, perhaps shop girls earning their own wages, press their noses to the glittering glass, behind which lies a tempting array of pictures. Years later, Sloan looked back on this particular painting:

West Twenty-third Street supplied me with many subjects... I suppose that this unusual interest in pictorial art on the part of the group here shown gave the painter hope for the future of art in America.³⁷

By 1910, the cut-off date for artworks displayed in the current International Fine Arts Fair, opportunities to drop in on a luxurious exhibition at a museum or art gallery, or to complete mundane shopping errands amid the theatrical fantasies of a large department store, were firmly established among the myriad entertainment options available to modern city dwellers. Less evident at the time was a firm understanding that the fanciful environments in which such entertaining activities took place were purposefully created with merchandising in mind: something to do and something to buy went hand in glove.

Certain turn-of-the-century behavior patterns are still to be found in artistic circles. Andy Warhol 'shopped for two or three hours a day for as many years as I can remember,' recalled Jed Johnson when the deceased artist's wide ranging collections were auctioned in 1988. Warhol's accumulation of American and European paintings, drawings and prints; Native American arts, American and European furniture, decorations, and jewelry filled six catalogues and took eight days to sell. The artist's tendency to accumulate provoked varied reactions. 'With an artist as self-conscious as Andy Warhol, the acquisition of a work of art counted almost as much as the making of one,' wrote Henry Geldzahler. 'Andy never bought art to hang it or display it any more than Hearst or Lorenzo de Medici did before him,' said Stuart Pivar.³⁸ 'Shopping is not collecting!' raged an irate reader responding to journalistic coverage of the sales. But sometimes it is. As scholars address issues of patronage and the marketplace, asking questions that were considered somewhat distasteful only a generation ago, plenty of evidence argues that shopping, collecting and remembering are inextricably intertwined.

NOTES

1. *Dry Goods Reporter*, 6 February 1904, p. 55, cited Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go a-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York, 1989), p. 33.
2. I first explored issues of shopping and collecting in H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger and David Park Curry, *American*

- Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915* (New York, 1994). See especially 'Paying and Playing: Some Urban Amusements', pp. 201-45; 'The Consumer and the Consumed,' pp. 267-79; 'Artful Commodities,' pp. 279-86. I am grateful to my colleagues whose thinking has helped to shape my own.
3. 'Gossip in a Gallery: A Visit to the Academy of Design,' *New York World*, 21 April 1872, cited Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer* (exhibition catalogue), Washington, The National Gallery of Art, 1995, p. 93.
 4. For example, letters from George W. Stevens to the *Daily Mail* were republished in several printings as *The Land of the Dollar* in Edinburgh, London, and New York in 1897, 1898 and 1900.
 5. For more on this topic see Alan Axelrod, ed., *The Colonial Revival In America* (New York, 1985).
 6. Richard L. Bushman's recent study follows gentility after it spread from Renaissance Italy through the courts of Europe to the new world in *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992).
 7. 'Tiles in Furnishings,' *Crockery and Glass Journal*, 18 July 1878, p. 14.
 8. Baroque tables like the carved and gilt pier table in Copley's portrait of *Jeremiah Lee* (1769, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford) did not exist in the Colonies. See Carrie Reborá et al., *John Singleton Copley in America* (exhibition catalogue), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995, p. 259. However, such artifacts would later be at home with collectors such as Mrs. Gardener and Mr. Morgan.
 9. For illustration, see David Park Curry, *Fabergé: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*, (Richmond, 1995), p. 26. For a study of early collectors of Americana, see Elizabeth Stillinger, *The Antiquers*, (New York, 1980).
 10. Artificial illumination was a big business in mid-nineteenth-century America. Manufactured coal gas lit the first streets - in London - by 1810. Baltimore had the first American street lights by 1817. Boston, New York, and Philadelphia followed. Originally used to light streets, factories, and public buildings, gas lighting eventually entered the home, reinforcing a general pattern of collapse between distinct public and private spaces.
 11. 'America in Pictures,' *New York Times*, 16 April 1879, p. 6.
 12. George William Sheldon, *Recent Ideals of American Art: One Hundred and Seventy-five Oil Paintings and Water Colors in the Galleries of Private Collectors, Reproduced in Paris on Copper Plates by the Goupil Photogravure and Typogravure Processes* (New York and London, 1888-90), reprint, New York, 1977, p. 38.
 13. For Coleman's activities as a collector, see *Decorator and Furnisher*, December 1884, pp. 86-87.
 14. A recent study points out 'few if any trade catalogues announce that they deal with middle-class goods, but the fact is that trade catalogues ... are tools for ... mass distribution.' 'Goods' included machine-made artworks. Deborah Anne Federhen, Bradley C. Brooks and Lynn A. Brocklebank, *Accumulation and Display: Mass Marketing Household Goods in America, 1880-1920* (exhibition catalogue), Winterthur, Del., Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1986, pp. 8, 97-107.
 15. Adams wrote this essay after having taken rooms near the Paris Exposition of 1900. See Adams, 'The Dynamo and the Virgin' in Perry Miller et al, eds., *Major Writers of America*, II, (New York, 1962), pp. 360-65.
 16. See Plate XCII, 'From a painted china Vase. A bold composition on the continuous-stem principle.'
 17. Andre Mellerio, catalogue for 1893 exhibition, cited Nancy Mowll Mathews, Mary Cassatt (New York, 1987), p. 89.
 18. Hamlin Garland, 'Impressionism,' in his *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting, and the Drama*, (1894), new ed., ed. Jane Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 104.
 19. For a recent study, see Clifton Hood, *722 Miles: The Building Of The Subways And How They Transformed New York*, (Baltimore, 1993).
 20. Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900; reprint, New York, 1982), pp. 253-54.
 21. See Sarah Burns, 'The Price of Beauty: Art, Commerce, and the Late Nineteenth-Century American Studio Interior,' *American Iconology*, ed. David C. Miller, New Haven, 1993, pp. 209-28 and *American Impressionism and Realism*, pp. 42 ff. For the link to Victorian studio-houses, see Giles Walkley, *Artists' Houses in London 1764-1914*, (Aldershot, Hants., England, 1995).
 22. Elizabeth Bisland, 'The Studios of New York,' *Cosmopolitan* 7 (May 1889), pp. 5-6.
 23. David Park Curry, 'Total Control: James McNeill Whistler as an Exhibition Designer,' in *James McNeill Whistler: A Reexamination*, ed. Ruth E. Fine, (Vol. 19, Studies in the History of Art), Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1987, pp. 67-82.
 24. Neil Harris, 'Museums, Merchandizing, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence,' in Ian Quimby, ed., *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York, 1979), pp. 140-174.
 25. David Park Curry, 'Time Line,' in *An American Sampler: Folk Art from the Shelburne Museum* (exhibition catalogue), Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1987, pp. 184, 186.
 26. Aristide Boucicault's *Au Bon Marche*, which means well-marketed, that is, a bargain, opened in Paris in 1852. For a discussion of the American stores that followed, see William Leach, 'The Bee and the Butterfly: Fashion and the Dress Reform Critique of Fashion,' in his *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, 1989, pp. 213-62). For a recent study of related developments in England, see Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London, 1995). I am grateful to Sir Geoffrey de Bellaigue for bringing this source to my attention.
 27. Ralph M. Hower, *History of Macy's of New York, 1858-191*, (Cambridge, Mass, 1943), p. 284, cited in Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Practices, 1870 to the Present* (New York, 1978), p. 20.
 28. John Wanamaker Firm, *The Golden Book of Wanamaker Stores* (1911), p. 249, quoted in Remy G. Saisselen, *The Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1984), pp. 45-46.
 29. See 'Shopping at Stewart's,' and 'Reflections of a Fashionable Girl,' *Hearth and Home* (January 9, 1869; May 15, 1869), cited Leach, *True Love*, chapter 9, footnotes 50, 51.
 30. 'Art Notes and News,' *The Art Interchange*, 14 (May, 1885), cited in William Gerdtts, *Louis Moeller, N.A., 1855-1930: A Victorian Man's World*, (exhibition catalogue), Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, 1984, p. 9.
 31. Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, 2 vols. (1881; reprint, Boston and New York, 1909), Vol. I, pp. 287-88.
 32. Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York, 1913), p. 5.
 33. Sloan said the onlookers in the print were 'awed by the presence of purchasing power.' Helen Farr Sloan, ed., *John Sloan: New York Etchings (1905-1949)*, New York, 1978, no. 16.
 34. Mary Cassatt's mother reported that the artist herself was willing to attempt such packaging for her portrait of Mrs. Riddle, *Lady at the Tea Table* (1885, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art): 'The picture is nearly done but Mary is waiting for a very handsome Louis seize [frame] to be cut down before showing it to [the Riddles]...they are not very artistic in their likes and dislikes of pictures.' Mrs. Robert R. Cassatt, letter to Alexander J. Cassatt, Nov. 30, 1883, quoted in Frederick A. Sweet, *Miss Mary Cassatt, Impressionist from Pennsylvania* (Norman, Ok., 1966), pp. 85-86.
 35. For a study of various types in the modern department store, see Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana, Ill., 1986).
 36. For detailed discussion, see *Painting of Modern Life*, pp. 276-79.
 37. Sloan, *Gist of Art* (1939) cited in Rowland Elzca, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings*, (Newark, Delaware, 1991), Vol. I, p. 83.
 38. Jed Johnson, 'Inconspicuous Consumption,' Vol. V; Henry Geldzahler, 'Andy Warhol: Artist and Collector,' Vol. VI; Stuart Pivar, 'Shopping with Andy,' Vol. V, *The Andy Warhol Collection*, Sotheby's Sale No. 6000, New York, April 23 - May 3 1988.