

## CHILDE HASSAM: Docent Notes

The Childe Hassam oil painting in the Mint's holdings –“The Stone Cottage, Old Lyme”- has always been a favorite of our museum visitors, at least in my experience. This short survey and biographical note is followed by a brief timeline and some authoritative quotes from art historians.

Hassam (born in Boston in 1859, died at the summer home East Hampton NY 1935), is widely known as America's foremost Impressionist. He is often described as “the American Monet”, and his works were collected and admired during his life by major collectors such as Freer, Whitney, Frick, and White —no struggling, starving, misunderstood artist he!

“Stone Cottage, Old Lyme” is obviously painted outdoors (*en plein air* to use the French term), with a very pleasing impressionist palette – pastel and deep blues, greens, and yellows. Note that he used no blacks or greys. The sun is to the left and behind the cottage, casting a chimney shadow on the roof and shadow on the ground. While there is a wisp of smoke from the chimney, the people seem warmed by the sun. The adult walker is effectively silhouetted against the tree trunks.

Hassam used the quick, short brushstrokes of the impressionist –though he decried this term, and never acknowledged being influenced by the French Impressionists--to give the characteristic vibrant, shimmering light effect. Unlike the French, his works always had form and did not disintegrate into simply “vibrations of light”. The strokes seem loose but controlled. Note the different qualities of brushwork: quick vigorous horizontals for the roof, choppy impasto for the foliage, wide diagonals for the sky. He also has thoughtfully composed the picture so diagonal lines lead to the people. With its distinctive chimneys and gabled extension, the cottage seems to be a character in the painting. The round form of the tree makes a pleasing contrast to the angular shape of the house, and the cumulus clouds appear compatible with the tree form. The simply rounded trees are not as detailed as in many other of his paintings.

Garden flowers were an absolute favorite element in Hassam's work. He loved to paint the old houses and buildings, amid lush vegetation, in these New England villages. The landscape and studies of flourishing gardens were much appreciated by galleries and collectors. Hassam never had to teach or take commissions to supplement income from his paintings. Someone has said that he painted instinctively as breathing.

His oeuvre was enormous; a recent exhibit curator has said “There are certainly few American painters who can reflect half a century of overpowering, soul-searching, beautiful paintings”. (1) He produced 4000-plus paintings and works on paper, experimenting with a variety of media. Though his first exhibition, in 1882, was of watercolor works, he used pastel, gouache, and mixed media as well as oil, and in later years took up etching, dry point, and lithography. Peak years encompassed the first Ten American Painters (Hassam one of its founders) exhibit in 1898 to the Armory Show in 1913, which included twelve of his paintings.

Old Lyme, Connecticut, a scenic New England coastal village at the mouth of the Connecticut River, became a popular summer art colony in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century, drawing artists who found refuge from hectic New York and Boston in the village life, painting the sunlit land and water and the lovely old Federal-style buildings and homes. Childe Hassam was proud of his early New England ancestry. He was related on his mother's side to Nathaniel Hawthorne, and though he never met them, to Boston painter William Morris Hunt and his brother, architect Richard Hunt.

His energy and work ethic were enormous. Hassam wrote to artist friend J. Alden Weir, "We are up here in another old corner of Connecticut...there are some very large oaks and chestnuts and some very fine hedges...Lyme really is a pretty fine old town." (3) He and his wife, Kathleen Maud Doan, spent six or seven delightful summers here among artist friends: "I did work steadily and I like the place." (4). They stayed at the Florence Griswold mansion, now a museum and on the National Historic Register, but then the very center of the art colony. He called Old Lyme "just the place for high thinking and low living" (5). The Hassams were gregarious and very sociable throughout their life; his charm and easy manner made him a favorite of the owner, "Miss Florence", and he was given the best studio on the property, overlooking the gardens and river. Among other visiting families were the Woodrow Wilsons.

One of his best known pictures made there is "Bridge at Old Lyme". (The bridge now is long gone, and I-95 spans the river. The stone cottage is also gone, according to the present Old Lyme Historical Society.) Other places he painted are Cos Cob, CT; the Gloucester, MA, harbor; Appledore of the Isles of Shoals, NH; and East Hampton, NY, where he and his wife, Maud, bought an old home. He painted a series of seven oils of the white frame Congregational Church of Lyme. New Englanders were in a colonial revival period and had great interest in preservation of early Republic architecture, both elegant and rustic vernacular. Always a patriot and very supportive of the World War I effort, Hassam painted a well-known series of the flags and patriotic parades on Fifth Avenue during that period (1916-1919). One of this series is on display in the White House.

There are three main subjects which sustained him throughout his career: pastoral countrysides, of which our Stone Cottage is one; intimate domestic life, and modern (for his time) cityscapes, particularly Boston, New York, Paris, and London. *Three Cities* (6), published 1899, comprises 49 views of the latter three. In his cityscapes and townscapes, Childe Hassam was a forerunner of *The Eight* and their American street life scenes.

Though not necessary to share with museum visitors, the provenance and some details about our Hassam painting interests us as docents. It is signed in the lower right and dated 1903. (It is documented that their summer visits to Old Lyme were in 1903-04-05-06-08-09 and '15). "Stone Cottage, Old Lyme" was given to the Mint in 1942, so it is one of the oldest acquisitions. Anna and Archer Huntington, the donors, are the couple that bought an old hunting lodge and over 9000 acres at Murrells Inlet, S. C. in the 1920's, developing an estate there. (They later gave some of this to S.C. for Huntington Beach State Park). She was an artist in her own right and he was heir to the Southern Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads and the Newport News Shipbuilding Co. The Moorish style castle they built is now on the National Register, and Brookgreen Gardens was their property also. I do not know their specific connection to Charlotte, if there was one.

The Mint sent this canvas to Tuscon in 1972 for a Hassam retrospective at the University of Arizona and to the Santa Barbara, CA, art museum. It has also been on loan in Chattanooga, Memphis, Providence, Miami, Winston-Salem, and Raleigh. In 2005, through the generosity of Hugh McColl, a new frame was made, copying an autographed frame Hassam designed.

In our Mint library at present there are at least six volumes on Childe Hassam alone, as well as many catalogs and art histories including his work. Some of these focus on just one aspect, such as his New York cityscapes or his iconic flag paintings. American museums holding Hassam's works include the Metropolitan, the Boston MFA, Smithsonian American Art, and the Art Inst. of Chicago. There were hundreds of Hassam exhibits during his lifetime. His most recent retrospective seems to have been at the Metropolitan in summer 2004. (7)

## Timeline:

- Frederick Childe Hassam born 1859 to Rosa Hawthorne and Frederick Fitch Hassam, both descendants of 17<sup>th</sup> c. Massachusetts stock; neither were artists.
- Attends Dorchester High School 1875-78; art student at Lowell School (connected with MIT). First exhibition 1882; illustrator with his own studio by '83
- Meets early mentor, poet Celia Thaxter 1883; discards first name at her suggestion. Paints outdoors, continues work as an illustrator, a "draughtsman".
- 1883 first visits Appledore, Thaxter's art colony at Isles of Shoals, NH. First Europe trip, with painter friend Garrett.
- 1884 marries Maud Doan of Montreal. They met in Dorchester, now a Boston suburb, where Hassam spent his childhood.
- 1886-89 Hassam and Maud in Europe. Palette changes after seeing French impressionists; probably sees the last big Paris exhibit of their work in 1886. (8) Exhibits in galleries and salons; awards.
- 1887-88 studies drawing at the Academie Julian in Paris, where hundreds of other American artists trained, including Robert Henri. Leaves because he finds it repetitious. He never met Monet or Renoir but admired the latter, and coincidentally leased a studio Renoir had vacated. He also admired Vermeer, Millet, Turner, Constable, Sisley, Whistler, and John Singer Sargent. Except for the brief schoolings abovementioned, Hassam was virtually self-trained
- 1897 resigns from Society of American Artists, with nine other painters, to form "Ten American Painters" who exhibit together starting 1898. (Others include good friend John Twachtman, and J. Alden Weir and William Merritt Chase).
- Early decades of 1900s: Many travels, exhibitions, and international awards. Hassam at the peak of his reputation, dealers pester him for paintings; jury work. First acquisition by Metropolitan 1908.
- 1911: Fifth and final trip to Europe
- 1913: Exhibits 12 works at the milestone NY Armory Show. He is among those extremely critical of the new Cubism and Futurism.(8)
- 1925 travels to Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, always painting.
- 1932: Is subject of film made by Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 1934: Awarded Gold Medal for Distinguished Service to Fine Art, by Am. Art Dealers Assn. He always loved his country, focusing on developing the American artistic style and aesthetic sense, not looking to Europe.
- 1935: After long illness, probably respiratory, dies at the Hassam home (purchased in 1919) at East Hampton NY. His will bequeaths all remaining works to be sold to establish a fund for buying pictures by living American artists, thus supporting art of his country. ("The Hassam Fund" is still administered by the American Academy of Arts and Letters). Art in the estate is appraised at what would be over 2.7 million in 2002 funds. (9)

Finally, two quotes speak to Child Hassam's legacy:

From his first major retrospective in 1910, critic Anna Seaton-Schmidt

wrote: "It is true that he studied his technique in France, where his personal vision was much enlarged, but he remains himself always, and his poet's soul receives its inspiration solely from nature." (10)

From the University of Arizona 1972 retrospective catalog: "Hassam's was a well-rounded human personality, gracious but not subservient; ...He never rejected the new because of its newness alone. His many revolts from the established order show his open-mindedness and his careful weighing of every new movement ...Even though the tragedies of human existence are absent from Hassam's canvases, human feelings are always present. The sordid and the vulgar did not appeal to his

brush, and he took delight in showing the beauty that lives among us and in inviting us to find it for ourselves...He adapted Impressionism to his own personality, departing whenever he saw fit. His way of life was to seek light and find it, to seek joy and share it." (11)

#### Notes

- (1) *Childe Hassam 1859-1935*. University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tuscon, 1972. p.9. Introduction by William E. Steadman.
- (2) quoted from the artist's "Twenty-five Years of American Painting", *Art News* 26 (Apr 14, 1928) as in Hiesinger p.182.
- (3) letter to Weir quoted on website of the Florence Griswold Museum, [www.flogris.org](http://www.flogris.org).
- (4) *ibid.*
- (5) *ibid.*
- (6) Childe Hassam, *Three Cities*. New York, 1899.
- (7) the catalogue is Weinberg, H. Barbara. *Childe Hassam, American Impressionist*. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004.
- (8) Bullock, p. 1.
- (9) Hiesinger, p. 153.
- (10) in "L'Arte et l'Artistes 6, no. 67 (Oct. 1910)p.45, quoted in Hiesinger p.9.
- (11) U. Ariz. Museum of Art, p. 22.

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1. Adelson, Warren, et al. *Childe Hassam, Impressionist*. New York, Abbeville Press, 1997.
2. Bullock, Margaret E. *Childe Hassam: Impressionist in the West*. Portland, Portland Art Museum, 2005.
3. Fort, Ilene. *Flag Paintings of Childe Hassam*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. 1988
4. Fort, Ilene. *Childe Hassam's New York*. San Francisco Pomegranate Art Books. 1993.
5. Hiesinger, Ulrich W. *Childe Hassam, American Impressionist*. New York, Prestel, 1994.
6. Park Curry, David. *Childe Hassam, an Island Garden Revisited*. New York, W. W. Norton, 1990.
7. University of Arizona Museum of Art. *Childe Hassam 1859-1935*. Tuscon, 1972. Introduction by William E. Steadman.
8. Weinberg, H. Barbara. *Childe Hassam, American Impressionist*. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004.

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