

Maurice Prendergast  
1858-1924

“The love you liberate in your work is the only love you keep.” Maurice Prendergast, 1905.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of Maurice Prendergast's life was painting and perfecting his craft. The watercolor “Promenade” was painted during the years 1914 -1915, a time of change not only in the art world, but also in the social structure of America. Prendergast, by this time was a mature artist. Though he had not entered his chosen field until he was in his thirties, according to his brother Charles, he had always wanted to be a painter and spent every available moment sketching.<sup>2</sup>

Prendergast was born in 1858 in Newfoundland to a working class family. They moved to Boston in 1868. His father was listed as a “grocer” in Newfoundland and a “laborer” in Boston. Like most boys of the time with his social status, Prendergast attended public school and at the age of 14 he completed his formal education. His first job was as a packager at a dry goods store. In 1886 he and his brother Charles worked their way to England on a cattle boat. When he later returned to America he worked as a show card designer. By 1891 he had saved \$1000 and left the United States for Paris. There he studied art at Colarossi studio and then at Academie Julian. He returned to Boston after 3 years abroad determined to be a painter.

The period in Paris from 1891-1894 was the only formal training he ever had, but it was the beginning of his personal style. Charles Hovey Pepper, another student at Julian's and life long friend said, “The afternoons Prendergast spent with notebook in the cafes and the gardens, in the river, in the Bois, constantly sketching....Drawing moving life. Developing keen observation and memory of form and movement. He had found it of great value. It is, in fact, one of the bases of his art”.<sup>3</sup> His art was popular with his classmates; they bought all that he could do, buying sketches for 25 francs and up, he could hardly keep up with the demand.<sup>4</sup> Upon returning to Boston he spent a brief period as an illustrator. However, during that time, he was also entering his watercolors and monotypes in shows in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. The first documented exhibit he participated in was in 1895 at the Boston Art Club and by 1896 he was a regular in many prestigious exhibitions. He wanted his art seen. His first one man show was in 1900 at William Macbeth's Gallery in New York.

Prendergast made many trips to Europe. There, he loved to study the works of other artists and became absorbed by exhibitions while he traveled. It was during his trip in 1907 that he became enamored with Paul Cezanne. This love of Cezanne's work had an effect on Prendergast's paintings the remainder of his life. Before he left for this trip he had been ask to exhibit with a group of painters which later became known as “The Eight”. The group of artist included Prendergast, Arthur B. Davies, Ernest Lawson, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, Robert Henri, John French Sloan, and George Luks. In 1908 they exhibited at Macbeth Gallery in New York. The show received criticism from

the established art world, but the public loved it. They exhibited only once as a group, but created a lasting change in the way America thought about art.<sup>5</sup>

In 1913 he not only exhibited, but also helped organize the "International Exhibition of Modern Art" (known as the Armory Show), which was comprised of both European and American modernist art. The exhibition was put on by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. Prendergast's experience and knowledge of modern art, and his willingness to foster young talent, made his advice invaluable. He also was on good terms with both dealers and collectors, and was respected and admired by his peers. A year after the show he was elected president of the association.

In 1914 Maurice took his last trip abroad. It is not known whether he started home before the outbreak of World War I. By November he had returned; he and his brother had moved to New York to their new studio on Washington Square. Around this time "Promenade" was painted. The world at large was at war, but neither this painting nor any of his others showed any indication of world turmoil. His favorite subjects were promenades, beach scenes and parks.

His scenes of leisure were influenced by the changing social status of the day. Leisure for the working class was a new way of thinking. "Social activist and labor movements joined in extolling the virtues of leisure for the working population and the necessity of establishing a 40-hour workweek. Great civic parks were created in and around metropolitan areas for healthful recreation; resort hotels and seaside parks were built in conjunction with new modes of mass transportation; foreign travel came within the reach of working Americans thanks to inexpensive organized tours. Art itself was considered an important example of the uplifting leisure activities available to an enlightened society. Self-expression in making art and attendance at massive exhibitions of modern art became part of the new, 20<sup>th</sup> -century culture."<sup>6</sup>

At the time of "Promenade," Prendergast was working mostly in oils. Many of his watercolors were often used as preliminaries for his larger oils. "Promenade" may look unfinished because of areas without paint and areas where one can see pencil marks. However, both techniques he used on a regular basis and are not necessarily indications that the painting is unfinished.

Maurice Prendergast the man is best described by those who knew him. In Richard J Wattenmaker's book Maurice Prendergast, he includes the following from letters and quotes from fellow artist, critics, family and friends:

In 1910 Charles Hovey Pepper, colleague and oldest acquaintance described him as "short, white-haired, slight man, shut into his own world in a measure by his deafness, wiry enthusiastic, strong in his likes and dislikes, indefatigable worker..."

From a friend in Boston, Daphne Dunbar, "Mr. Maurice painted every day.... We had such good times. They were odd and wonderful people, Mr. Maurice and Charlie." Also, "Maurice read and thought a great deal. He read French easily ... He knew the work of the Russian novelists"

In 1912 Max Weber recounting about a conversation with Maurice, "We talked about modern art, about Cezanne, the great instigator and prophet, the great ancients and the primitives. Conversation on art on this level or plane was rare and far between in those days. Mr. Prendergast was a lovable and unusually gentle and sensitive man"

Jerome Myers stated, "Maurice Prendergast....had no envy, only a deep interest in what others did".<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the above testifies as to why he was admired and genuinely liked by his fellow artist and collectors. His painting and love of art consumed his life. He never married. He was most likely completely deaf by 1914. Except for his periods abroad, he had lived and worked with his brother Charles his entire life. Maurice Prendergast was a leader in the Post-impressionist and Modernist art movement in America in the early part of the 20th century. Development of his own style was paramount to him. The eminent Critic and old friend of Prendergast, Van Wyck Brooks, wrote in "Anecdotes of Maurice Prendergast," "Nothing amused his eyes more than a pretty dress, blue, green, yellow or old rose, as one saw in all his pictures to the end of his life, the beach parties and fairytale picnics with their charming wind-blown figures and little girls with parasols and flying skirts."<sup>8</sup> His brilliant colors and abstract style brought sharp criticism at the 1908 show of "The Eight," but it is what has made him popular even today.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ashton, Dore. Twentieth-Century Artists on Art. New York: Pantheon Books. 1985  
<<http://www.noteaccess.com/APPROACHES/Ashton2.htm>>

<sup>2</sup> National Gallery of Art. "Biography: Maurice Prendergast, 1858-1924"  
<[http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/horo\\_prendergast.shtm](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/horo_prendergast.shtm)>

<sup>3</sup> Wattermaker, Richard J.. Maurice Prendergast. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: 22

<sup>4</sup> Wattermaker, Richard J.. Maurice Prendergast New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.:29

<sup>5</sup> Wattermaker, Richard J.. Maurice Prendergast. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.:111

<sup>6</sup> "The Art of Leisure: Maurice and Charles Prendergast in the Williams College Museum of Art, July 1-August, 2001." Williams College Museum of Art. Traditional Fine Arts Organization.  
<<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/1aa/1aa651.htm>>

<sup>7</sup> Wattermaker, Richard J.. Maurice Prendergast. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.:11-12

<sup>8</sup> "Bostonians at Andover." Time Magazine October 17, 1938.  
<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,848347,00.htm>>

<sup>9</sup> National Gallery of Art. "Biography: Maurice Prendergast, 1858-1924"  
<[http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/horo\\_prendergast.shtm](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/horo_prendergast.shtm)>

Unless noted, information is from:

Wattermaker, Richard J.. Maurice Prendergast. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc