

## ROBERT HENRI

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1865, Robert Henri, an American painter, died in 1929 at the age of 64. His real name was Robert Henry Cozad. Brought up in Nebraska where his father, John Cozad owned and farmed a substantial tract of land. The family found life in the plains one brutal battle after another, with harsh weather, grasshoppers invading the fields, Indians raiding the farms, and cowboys constantly harassing the farmers. John Cozad persevered until he killed a cattleman in a fist fight in 1882. To avoid prosecution he fled east with his family, first to New York, and later to Atlantic City, where he ran a hotel. To protect his father, Robert changed his last name to "Henri" (pronounced Henrye).

At the age of 21, Henri enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy where his strong penchant for realistic art was encouraged by his instructor, Thomas Anshutz, who was a disciple of Thomas Eakins, whom Henri greatly admired. In 1888 Henri studied in Paris where he could examine firsthand the works of Edward Manet, whose vigorous, vibrant brand of realism he found appealing. He then shared a studio with William Glackens in Italy and Spain. Returning to downtown Philadelphia, he rented a studio at 806 Walnut Street.

In no time a group of gifted and enterprising artists that included William Glackens, George Luks, John Sloan and Everett Shinn gathered at Henri's studio every Tuesday evening and painted slum residents, coal miners and assembly line workers, subjects that academicians seemed to believe did not exist in America, or were not worthy of depiction. These meetings were invariably dominated by Henri, whose manner as well as his art were completely winning. A born teacher, Henri could always inspire his listeners with his observations about style, craft, and subject matter. He maintained that anything could be a subject for a painting, and that the work itself, regardless of how ugly the subject, could become beautiful in and of itself.

Henri's studio was more than a lecture hall – it was a club as well. Beer, poker, and indoor scrimmages took place there, as well as the slightly more organized chaos of theatricals written and staged by the artists, the men dressing for women's roles as well.

Away from the parties, Glackens, Luks and Shinn were newspaper artists rushing to the scenes of accidents, fires, and other newsworthy events, and returning with drawings for reproduction in the next editions. A quick and efficient way of reproducing photographs had yet to be perfected, but the sketches of fast-drawing artist-reporters could be transposed to newsprint easily. All of this experience carried over into their more mature work in later years. Their work roused the disdain of the academicians who nicknamed the group "The Ashcan School." But they were not interested in painting ashcans; they wished to portray people in every walk of life, with the paintings as vehicles to express life in this country.

Henri established a school on Broadway, near what is now Lincoln Center. At it gathered the other members of the old Philadelphia crowd who had moved to New York City, as well as newcomers such as George Bellows, Glenn Coleman, and Reginald Marsh who formed the second generation of the Realist School.

Henri was named to the New York Academy of Design in 1906, and was accepted in the

Art Institute of Chicago with a portrait called "Lady in Black." Despite the acceptance of Henri, the other members of the Ashcan School were thrown only a few minor prizes. Henri was determined to seek full recognition for the movement and his fellow artists. He, Sloan, and Glackens staged a show of their own. They enlisted the support of Shinn and Luks and were then joined by kindred spirits Ernest Lawson and Arthur B. Davies. They also invited Prendergast from Boston to join them. Calling themselves "The Eight." Each artist contributed \$50 to rent gallery space, and the show opened February 3, 1908. The crowds poured in, and incredibly nearly \$4000 worth of paintings were sold. Overnight "The Eight" became the most energetic force in American art. The artists went their separate ways, painting what they wanted, and encouraging other artists to do the same. Today, the works of these artists bring at least six figures at galleries or auctions.

Despite an extremely active life as a painter, especially renowned for his portraits, Henri always found time to teach. For more than thirty years he helped shape the destinies of thousands of young artists. He taught at the Chase School, the Art Students League, and eventually his own school. He championed juryless exhibitions, and traveled widely. The group "The Eight" was instrumental in bringing the renowned Armory Show in 1913, which introduced modern European art to America. Painting his subjects quickly, oftentimes in only one sitting, Henri is known for his warm vibrant portraits, particularly of children, and for his robust free brushwork as is found in the Mint Museum's painting "My Friend Brian." His paintings are represented in The Carnegie Art Institute, Chicago Art Institute, The Metropolitan Museum, The Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. and many other venues.

#### SOURCES:

"Contemporary American Painting" Duell, Sloan and Pearce

Microsoft 98 Encyclopedia

American Painting 1900-1907; Time Life Library of Art

Respectfully Submitted,

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